



universität  
wien

# MASTERARBEIT / MASTER'S THESIS

Titel der Masterarbeit / Title of the Master's Thesis

**“Sino-Saudi relations under the prism of the Belt  
and Road Initiative. The missing cultural aspect”**

verfasst von / submitted by

**Abu Yandiiev**

angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**Master of Arts (MA)**

Wien, 2023 / Vienna 2023

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt /  
degree programme code as it appears on  
the student record sheet:

A 066 589

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt /  
degree programme as it appears on  
the student record sheet:

Internationale Entwicklung

Betreut von / Supervisor:

Dr. Johannes Knierzinger



# Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to express my sincere appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Johannes Knierzinger. His unwavering support and guidance have been instrumental in shaping my research. I am immensely grateful for his encouragement to apply for a research grant that enabled me to travel to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and gain firsthand experience and insights into the cultural aspect of Sino-Saudi relations. This experience has been invaluable to my research and personal growth.

I also want to extend my heartfelt thanks to my friend Oleksei for his invaluable assistance and advice throughout my studies. His support and encouragement have been indispensable, and I am grateful for his constant presence whenever I needed help.

Lastly, I want to express my deep appreciation to my parents for their support and encouragement. Their sacrifices have been immeasurable, and I am forever grateful for the opportunities they have provided me with.

# Contents

|                                                   |             |
|---------------------------------------------------|-------------|
| <b>Abstract</b>                                   | <b>vi</b>   |
| <b>Zusammenfassung</b>                            | <b>vii</b>  |
| <b>List of Tables</b>                             | <b>viii</b> |
| <b>List of Figures</b>                            | <b>ix</b>   |
| <b>1 Introduction</b>                             | <b>1</b>    |
| 1.1 Problem area and research questions . . . . . | 2           |
| 1.2 Overview of the document . . . . .            | 3           |
| <b>2 Literature review</b>                        | <b>4</b>    |
| 2.1 Geopolitical aspects . . . . .                | 5           |
| 2.2 Economic aspects . . . . .                    | 7           |
| 2.2.1 Energy . . . . .                            | 8           |
| 2.3 Cultural dimension of the BRI . . . . .       | 9           |
| 2.3.1 Education . . . . .                         | 9           |
| 2.3.2 Media and global entertainment . . . . .    | 12          |
| 2.3.3 Other cultural ties . . . . .               | 15          |
| <b>3 Theoretical Framework</b>                    | <b>17</b>   |
| 3.1 Rostow's stages of growth . . . . .           | 17          |
| 3.2 Public and Cultural Diplomacy . . . . .       | 18          |
| 3.3 Cultural Imperialism . . . . .                | 20          |
| 3.4 Soft Power . . . . .                          | 20          |
| <b>4 Methodology</b>                              | <b>25</b>   |
| <b>5 History</b>                                  | <b>28</b>   |
| 5.1 Sino-Saudi relations before 1990 . . . . .    | 28          |
| 5.2 Sino-Saudi relations after 1990 . . . . .     | 29          |

|          |                                                                                                               |           |
|----------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>6</b> | <b>Analysis of Quantitative data</b>                                                                          | <b>34</b> |
| 6.1      | Economic analysis . . . . .                                                                                   | 34        |
| 6.2      | Cultural analysis . . . . .                                                                                   | 39        |
| <b>7</b> | <b>Analysis of Qualitative data</b>                                                                           | <b>44</b> |
| 7.1      | Education . . . . .                                                                                           | 44        |
| 7.1.1    | Confucius Institute of Jeddah University . . . . .                                                            | 45        |
| 7.1.2    | Chinese culture and art exchange center and Chinese language degree at<br>King Abdulaziz University . . . . . | 48        |
| 7.2      | Chinas image in Saudi Arabia . . . . .                                                                        | 52        |
| 7.2.1    | China’s image in shopping malls . . . . .                                                                     | 52        |
| 7.2.2    | Jeddah Seasons . . . . .                                                                                      | 57        |
| <b>8</b> | <b>Conclusion</b>                                                                                             | <b>63</b> |
|          | <b>Bibliography</b>                                                                                           | <b>67</b> |

# Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative is the flagship of Chinese foreign policy. Through this project, China attempts to rebuild the ancient Silk Road and connect with the rest of the world. Saudi Arabia, in turn, plays an important role for China in the Middle East due to its strategic geographic location, energy resources, and Islamic influence. While much research has focused on the economic and energy aspects of the Sino-Saudi relationship, there is a significant gap in understanding the cultural dimension of Sino-Saudi cooperation.

The thesis argues that cultural cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia plays a crucial role in the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative. The purpose of the thesis is to determine how cultural relations between China and Saudi Arabia are developing since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 and to compare China's cultural influence with another prominent player, the United States.

Although cultural development was heavily emphasized in the foundation of the Belt and Road Initiative, there is minimal visibility of cultural cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia. While there has been an increase in Chinese cultural initiatives since the launch of the One Belt and Road Initiative, there is a lack of interest among the population and the end result is often superficial in nature. In turn, the United States continues to lead in terms of cultural influence, despite the growing discourse about deteriorating relations between the Saudi Arabia and United States.

Given the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, many cultural initiatives have been put on hold, and further research is needed to evaluate cultural development in the post-pandemic era.

# Zusammenfassung

Die Belt and Road Initiative ist das Herzstück der chinesischen Außenpolitik, da sie versucht, die antike Seidenstraße wiederzubeleben und mit dem Rest der Welt zu verbinden. Saudi-Arabien spielt aufgrund seiner strategischen geografischen Lage, Energiequellen und islamischen Einflusses eine wichtige Rolle für China im Nahen Osten. Obwohl viel Wert auf die wirtschaftlichen und energiepolitischen Aspekte der sino-saudischen Beziehungen gelegt wurde, besteht eine bedeutende Lücke im Verständnis der kulturellen Dimension der Zusammenarbeit zwischen China und Saudi-Arabien.

In dieser Arbeit wird argumentiert, dass die kulturelle Zusammenarbeit zwischen China und Saudi-Arabien eine entscheidende Rolle bei der Umsetzung der Belt and Road Initiative spielt. Ziel ist es, zu bestimmen, wie sich die kulturellen Beziehungen zwischen China und Saudi-Arabien seit dem Start der Initiative entwickelt haben und den kulturellen Einfluss Chinas mit einem anderen prominenten Akteur, den USA, zu vergleichen.

Trotz der Betonung der kulturellen Entwicklung bei der Bildung der Belt and Road Initiative und dem Wachstum von "kulturellen" Abkommen zwischen Ländern ist die Sichtbarkeit der kulturellen Zusammenarbeit zwischen China und Saudi-Arabien minimal. Obwohl es seit dem Start der Initiative eine Zunahme chinesischer kultureller Initiativen gegeben hat, besteht kein ausreichendes Interesse in der Bevölkerung und das Ergebnis ist oft oberflächlich. Im Vergleich dazu führen die USA weiterhin in Bezug auf kulturellen Einfluss, trotz der wachsenden Diskussion über verschlechterte Beziehungen zwischen Saudi-Arabien und den USA.

Aufgrund der Covid-19-Pandemie wurden viele kulturelle Initiativen ausgesetzt, und weitere Forschung ist erforderlich, um die kulturelle Entwicklung in der Post-Pandemie-Ära zu bewerten.

# List of Tables

|     |                                                                             |    |
|-----|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 4.1 | Data collection methods . . . . .                                           | 26 |
| 5.1 | High-level interactions between China and Saudi Arabia since 1990 . . . . . | 33 |
| 6.1 | Number of incoming students between 2016 and 2020 . . . . .                 | 39 |

# List of Figures

|      |                                                               |    |
|------|---------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| 4.1  | PRISMA flow diagram . . . . .                                 | 27 |
| 6.1  | FDI flows outwards to Saudi Arabia . . . . .                  | 35 |
| 6.2  | China's investments in Saudi Arabia by sector. . . . .        | 35 |
| 6.3  | China exports to Saudi Arabia by product 2020. . . . .        | 37 |
| 6.4  | Saudi-Arabia exports to China by product 2020. . . . .        | 37 |
| 6.5  | China car exports to Saudi Arabia and the U.S. . . . .        | 38 |
| 6.6  | McDonald's Systemwide Restaurants - 2021 . . . . .            | 40 |
| 6.7  | Number of incoming students - 2016 . . . . .                  | 40 |
| 6.8  | Number of incoming students - 2020 . . . . .                  | 41 |
| 6.9  | International Students in USA for 2018/2019 (Top 15). . . . . | 42 |
| 6.10 | International Students in China for 2018 (Top 15). . . . .    | 43 |
| 7.1  | Translated sign at the university of Jeddah. . . . .          | 46 |
| 7.2  | Korean shop in Al Salaam Mall. . . . .                        | 54 |
| 7.3  | Japanese shop in Red Sea Mall. . . . .                        | 54 |
| 7.4  | American steakhouse in Red Sea Mall. . . . .                  | 55 |
| 7.5  | Closed Chinese store in Jamjoom Center . . . . .              | 56 |
| 7.6  | Jeddah Seasons Festival 2022 . . . . .                        | 58 |
| 7.7  | Anime Festival, Jeddah Seasons 2022 . . . . .                 | 59 |
| 7.8  | K-POP concert, Jeddah Seasons 2022 . . . . .                  | 61 |
| 7.9  | Korean Food Court, Jeddah Seasons 2022 . . . . .              | 62 |

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1990, the relations between China and Saudi Arabia have increased significantly. The fact that China became a large oil-importing nation in 1990 indicates the main reason behind the increase in diplomatic relations between the two countries. The rapid industrialization and urbanization processes that took place in China in the last 40 years resulted in an increased appetite for energy resources (H. Wang et al., [2021](#)). Saudi Arabia is perceived as an oil superpower, accounting for 18 percent of global oil reserves (Selim & Zaki, [2016](#)). Today Saudi Arabia is one of the top sources of crude oil imports to China, and even during the Covid-19 pandemic, crude oil imports remained on an impressive level (Fulton, [2020a](#)). However, this relationship has evolved into other areas as well. Trade between China and Saudi Arabia rose from 296 million USD in 1990 to 73 billion USD in 2012 (Lopez, [2020](#)). Since the introduction of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, the diversity of interests between countries has gone far beyond the oil buyer-seller relationship.

The Belt and Road Initiative is China's attempt to revive the ancient Silk Road and to connect China with the rest of the world through a network of substantial infrastructural projects. Saudi Arabia, in turn, will play a key role for China in the Middle East. Besides the energy aspect, Saudi Arabia provides an important geostrategic location that is exceptionally well-positioned to meet the needs of maritime and land connectivity. Additionally, there is a religious aspect, which increases the importance of Saudi Arabia to China. Considering the allegations of oppression against the Uighurs, a predominantly Muslim ethnic minority in China, forging an alliance with Saudi Arabia may potentially aid in shaping perceptions of China among Muslim communities, and consequently, impact their inclination to collaborate with China.

From Saudi Arabia's perspective, China is perceived as a long-term export market for energy needs. Additionally, China's BRI synergizes perfectly with Saudi Arabia's Saudi Vision 2030, which aims to diversify the Saudi-Arabia economy and move away from an oil dependency

model. To implement this project, Saudi Arabia needs huge investments, which China is willing to provide (Al-Kibsi et al., 2015). Finally, Saudi Arabia is trying to reduce their dependence on the U.S. and diversify its great-power relationships (Fulton, 2020b). The U.S. is still a central pillar of Saudi defense and foreign policy. However, after Biden entered the White House, the US-Saudi relations have been relatively stagnant (Guzansky & Shavit, 2020). Such uncertainties are creating a vacuum for China to step in and allowing Saudi Arabia to diversify their strategic options in case of a further decline in U.S.-Saudi relations.

Thus, the BRI can potentially lead the Sino-Saudi bilateral relationship to a new level, meeting a range of interests for both states. Besides, the successful implementation of the BRI can dramatically shift the geopolitical landscape of the region (C. Zhang & Xiao, 2021).

## 1.1 Problem area and research questions

Despite the fact that the One Belt and Road Initiative has received significant attention in academia, its impact on the Middle East has often been understood purely in energy and economic terms (Foley, 2018), thereby ignoring the equally important cultural aspect. Cultural ties are not something that could be built at the same pace as pipelines, ports, railways, and roads. Moreover, given the depth of U.S. cultural influence in Saudi Arabia (Foley, 2018), the Sino-Saudi cultural integration has become even more difficult.

The thesis suggests a different approach, which argues that the effectiveness of the BRI in Saudi Arabia will not only rely on economic indicators like trade growth, job creation, investment flows, and infrastructure development, but also on how well China and Saudi Arabia integrate culturally.

One of the critical goals of the Belt and Road Initiative is to build closer people-to-people ties with participating countries. According to China's policy papers by "people-to-people ties", China is referring to "diplomatic activities and cultural exchanges of various forms in wide fields, enhancing mutual understanding and recognition and laying a solid cultural foundation for furthering the initiative" (Foreign Languages Press, 2019). However, the definition is rather vague and can be applied to almost every cultural activity, be it educational exchanges, tourism, films, tv-projects, seminars, etc.

Considering the above, the main research question of this thesis is:

*How visible is the "people-to-people" aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative in Saudi Arabia?*

To answer this question, the following sub-questions are introduced:

*How have cultural and economic ties between China and Saudi Arabia developed historically?*

*How sustainable is the cultural cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia?*

*How visible is China's cultural presence in comparison with the U.S.?*

## **1.2 Overview of the document**

This thesis offers a comprehensive analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the context of Sino-Saudi relations, with a particular focus on the cultural and economic dimensions. Chapter 2 provides a critical review of the existing literature on the geopolitical, economic, and cultural dimensions of Sino-Saudi cooperation, highlighting the gaps and limitations of previous studies. Chapter 3 of this study presents a theoretical framework that draws on the theories of soft power, cultural diplomacy, and cultural imperialism to provide a conceptual framework for analyzing the cultural aspect of Sino-Saudi relations. This chapter establishes the foundation for the analysis by explaining the relevance of these theories in understanding the dynamics of cultural exchange between China and Saudi Arabia. Chapter 4 details the methodology employed in the study, including the data collection and analysis methods. Chapter 5 provides a historical overview of Sino-Saudi relations before and after 1990. Chapter 6 presents a quantitative analysis of the economic and cultural dimensions of the BRI, providing insights into the patterns and trends of Chinese investment and cultural exchange in Saudi Arabia. Chapter 7 offers a qualitative analysis of primary sources, including interviews and field observations. Finally, Chapter 8 concludes the study by discussing the current state of China's cultural presence in Saudi Arabia, reflecting on the implications of the findings for future research and policy.

## Chapter 2

# Literature review

Compared to China's diplomatic engagement with other nations in the Middle Eastern region, the development of diplomatic relations between China and Saudi Arabia is a relatively recent phenomenon. The same can be said of the academic attention to the Sino-Saudi bilateral relationship, which has been mainly focused on the energy partnership between the countries. However, since the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative, there has been a noticeable increase in academic attention towards the geopolitical aspects of Sino-Saudi relations.

According to the Garlick and Havlová (2020), the BRI is aimed at achieving three goals:

- 1) to promote regional integration by developing transport infrastructure and trade channels. Al-Tamimi (2017) adds that China deliberately builds supply chains through its less developed regions, thereby promoting regional development and strengthening the security of its borders.
- 2) to strengthen China's "comprehensive national security". It is important to understand that national security implies the traditional military aspect and, more importantly, such critical elements as energy, food, and economic security.
- 3) to strengthen geopolitical and economic influence through tools such as investments, loans, infrastructure, trade, and the creation of financial institutions. Al-Tamimi (2017) adds that countering U.S. geopolitical pressure is also China's priority. Thus, through the BRI, China is aiming to establish an alternative international security system.

Additionally, Al-Tamimi (2017) highlights that China views combating terrorism, extremism, and separatism both domestically and internationally as a significant objective. Nevertheless, China intends to achieve this objective primarily through economic development and the equitable distribution of wealth, as per their official stance.

If we apply the case of Saudi Arabia to China's goals, we can clearly observe that China is trying to achieve similar goals. However, in Saudi Arabia's context, the goals are more focused on strengthening energy security, combating terrorism and extremism, and increasing geopolitical

influence.

Based on the conducted literature review, the analyses of Sino-Saudi relations in the light of the Belt and Road Initiative primarily focus on economic and geopolitical aspects.

## 2.1 Geopolitical aspects

Many foreign scholars cautiously emphasize China's growing role in the Middle East and predict tangible changes in the geopolitical landscape of the region (C. Zhang & Xiao, 2021).

As the Kucukcan (2017) points out, the combination of enormous energy resources and the rapid development of trade and industry made Saudi Arabia a crucial point in world trade, politics, and security. Notably, Saudi Arabia is a country with a very young and fast-growing population (Chen et al., 2018).

According to Evron (2019), the Middle East region became strategically important to China in the mid-2000s, just as China began to seek a world power position. China's transformation into a net oil importer forced the country to find long-term oil suppliers. Therefore, since the 2000s, China has constantly increased its regional diplomatic presence in Saudi Arabia. According to Dorraj (2020), King Salman's trip to China in 2017 culminated in the signing of 64 billion U.S. dollars worth of economic and trade deals between the two countries. In a similar way, China has fought with the presence of other superpowers in the region, most notably with the U.S.

Dorraj (2020) highlights that in the last decade, the Middle East has become a strategically important target for China because of its rich natural resources, growing market, and geographic location. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Saudi Arabia in 1990, a significant advancement has been observed in a multitude of areas of cooperation between the two nations. Sino-Arab relations go back more than 2,000 years when the ancient land and sea Silk Roads linked the Chinese and Arab regions. Notably, throughout the history of their relations, the countries have managed to maintain a conflict-free history. Unlike the U.S., China has a non-colonial history and did not participate in any wars and conflicts in the Middle East. Non-intervention in Middle Eastern countries domestic politics, and a focus on trade and other areas of mutual benefit are the foundations of Chinese diplomacy. Official documents signed between the countries always include aspects of the long-standing and peaceful friendship between the countries and emphasize the importance and shared benefits of partnership (Dorraj, 2020). A significant event was the signing of a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2016, which marked the greatest possible cooperation in terms of China's diplomatic standards (Chen et al., 2018). As some scholars have commented on the signed partnership, Saudi Arabia has become

more relevant to China's strategic goals than ever before (Foley, 2018; C. Zhang & Xiao, 2021).

From Saudi Arabia's side, China attracted Riyadh with its neutrality in terms of political intentions. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Saudi Arabia embarked on diversifying its international partners and reduce its reliance on the United States. Additionally, Saudi Arabia was looking for a reliable partner to market its oil after the United States has reduced its dependence on foreign oil, including oil from Saudi Arabia. In this sense, China was an obvious candidate to fill the resulting vacuum (Dorraj, 2020).

Most Chinese and Saudi scholars share the view that the BRI benefits both countries and leads to the overall development of all countries in the Middle East (Chen et al., 2018). The active high level involvement from the Saudi government towards the BRI also establishing solid foundation for future partnership (Chen et al., 2018).

However, not everything is as positive as it may seem. As C. Zhang and Xiao (2021) point out, the Chinese media does not pay as much attention to the Middle East as they do to Southeast Asia, Europe, or Africa. There is no doubt that the Middle East is strategically important, at least in terms of energy security. However, even scholars specializing in Middle Eastern affairs point out that in the global context, the Middle East is far from being China's top priority (C. Zhang & Xiao, 2021). The Middle East has always been perceived as a region with high political risks. The example of the U.S. shows that excessive attention can pull China into an unnecessary quagmire, from which it will be challenging to get out (C. Zhang & Xiao, 2021). As the Evron (2019) mentions, China sees the Middle East as a threat to its national security because of the connection between so-called "terrorist organizations"<sup>1</sup> and separatist Uyghur groups in China.

Shichor (2017) holds a similar view, arguing that for China, the Middle East is first and foremost a bridge to reach Europe. For China, the Middle East is not stable in terms of political and religious situation. However, Shichor (2017) interestingly points out that China deliberately gives the impression to Middle Eastern countries that they are an irreplaceable and critical part of the BRI, thereby trying to please everyone.

C. Zhang and Xiao (2021) concluded that China has not fully defined its role in the Middle East, and its diplomatic actions are still functioning without a concrete and consistent concept. They argue that China wants to benefit from its cooperation with the Middle East but is afraid of losing its status as "everyone's friend" country and thus causing resentment in some Middle Eastern countries. Evron (2019) adds that China's involvement in the Middle East is still

---

<sup>1</sup>According to Article 104 of China's anti-terrorism law "terrorism" means "any thought, speech, or activity that aims to generate social panic, influence national policy-making, create ethnic hatred, subvert state power, or split the state." (Zunyou Zhou, 2015)

gradually expanding, which demonstrates China’s minor involvement in the Syrian and Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition, China is increasing the number of joint military exercises in the region and has even established a military logistics base in Djibouti.

However, if we look at the picture as a whole, there are not enough indications that China is backing away from its basic guideline, namely building economic relations on common interests while avoiding potential points of conflict.

## 2.2 Economic aspects

During the Cold War, trade ties between the China and Saudi Arabia were virtually non-existent. The significant improvement of economic relations between China and Saudi Arabia started in 1990 (Garlick & Havlová, 2020), and since then, trade between the two countries has been gaining momentum. China is the leading non-oil exporter for Saudi Arabia as well as the primary partner for Saudi imports (Garlick & Havlová, 2020). Additionally, the Middle East has become an important and lucrative market for construction contracts (B. Wu, 2021). From an economic point of view, the Middle East benefits China as a destination for its surplus production, especially in the construction industry (Trang, 2020). In 2017, of all the investments that went into the Middle East, one-third belonged to China, which surpassed the U.S. and the UAE (Petranek, 2019). Saudi Arabia is also actively investing in the northwestern provinces of China, which have the largest Muslim populations (Garlick & Havlová, 2020).

According to Dorraj (2020), China’s major investments in Saudi Arabia are aimed at construction projects, infrastructure, joint research, and telecommunication. As of 2015, there were 158 Chinese companies registered in the Saudi market, with more than 100 Chinese enterprises that carried out investment projects in the country (Chen et al., 2018). Moreover, it is estimated that around 20,000 Chinese foreign workers currently reside in Saudi Arabia (Garlick & Havlová, 2020). One project that particularly stands out is the construction of the Mecca subway. The construction was carried out by a Chinese construction company and was operational in just 16 months, providing significant ease of travel for millions of Muslims. As Dorraj (2020) importantly summarizes, the cultural contribution of this project far exceeded its economic value.

According to Jin (2017), there is a dominant view that China is only interested in the Middle East to protect its energy needs. This view has been shaped by years of academic attention, which has focused mainly on the energy aspect. However, this view is rather one-sided. After the visit of the Chinese president in 2016 and the establishment of the 1 + 2+3 Cooperation

Pattern, cooperation between China and Arab countries is expected to diversify in many different areas. At the same time, the energy cooperation was indeed put as the central axis of the future cooperation. Additionally, cooperation in such sectors as infrastructure construction, trade, investment, nuclear energy, space satellite, and renewable energy have been put at the front line as well (Chen et al., 2018; B. Wu, 2021). However, we can observe that the above-mentioned cooperation does not include any cultural cooperation.

### 2.2.1 Energy

In the context of the Middle East, oil and natural gas are at the top of the agenda. China's oil consumption has grown from 2.3 million barrels per day in 1990 to more than 13.5 million barrels per day in 2018. Saudi Arabia, as a rentier state, could satisfy China's growing thirst for energy which caused the rapid growth of diplomatic relations between the countries (MacGillivray, 2019). The academic interest in the energy cooperation between the countries has grown with a similar intensity (Yellinek et al., 2020).

The energy aspect of Sino-Saudi relations is the most common academic topic. That is not a surprising phenomenon since, as Evron (2019) and MacGillivray (2019) point out, the cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia has focused mainly on energy and, to a lesser degree, expanding China's share of emerging markets.

As the Foley (2018) points out, by the mid-2000s, up to 80 percent of all Chinese oil imports passed through the Straits of Malacca. The Straits are critical to China's economic development and security. Given that there are currently no sustainable alternatives for shipping oil from the Middle East to Asia other than through the Straits of Malacca, it is crucial for China to ensure the security of these trade routes. Therefore, fortifying its relations with Saudi Arabia to the fullest extent possible becomes imperative for China.

China's ranking on the list of countries importing oil from Saudi Arabia has significantly changed over the years. In 1995, China ranked 25th on the list, but by 2022, it had risen to the top position (Dorraj, 2020). According to the data provided by OEC, as of 2020, Saudi Arabia emerged as the primary exporter of oil to China, making it an indispensable source for China's energy needs<sup>2</sup>. It is also important that among Middle Eastern countries, Saudi Arabia often takes the lead in oil exports to China, slightly ahead of Iraq (B. Wu, 2021). Given the

---

<sup>1</sup>In this cooperation pattern, each number denotes a distinct priority for cooperation: 1 denotes energy, 2 denotes infrastructure, trade, and investment, and 3 denotes nuclear energy, space satellite, and renewable energy (Fulton, 2020a).

<sup>2</sup><https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-product/crude-petroleum/reporter/chn?subnationalFlowSelector=flow1>

international sanctions that are regularly imposed on Iraq, China has no choice but to import more oil from Saudi Arabia (Garlick & Havlová, 2020).

As Chen et al. (2018) predicts in one of his works, Saudi Arabia has the potential to become China's second source of crude oil, right after Russia. Considering Russia's "precarious" state after invading Ukraine, Saudi Arabia can be projected to obtain the leading role. The data indicates that the author's prediction was slightly inaccurate, as evidenced by the OEC data, which reveals that in 2019 and 2020, China imported the largest volume of oil from Saudi Arabia, narrowly surpassing imports from Russia<sup>3</sup>.

At the same time, an energy alliance with China is also beneficial for Saudi Arabia. As the Jin (2017) stresses, revenues from oil exports to China have played a significant role in maintaining social and political stability in the Persian Gulf countries during the global crisis and economic downturn. Without these revenues, it would have been challenging for the countries in the region to maintain stability.

## 2.3 Cultural dimension of the BRI

Although oil is still a priority of cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia, it can be argued that energy cooperation between the countries has served as a catalyst for new forms of cultural cooperation (Al-Sudairi, 2017).

Historically, economic cooperation inevitably led to cultural cooperation (Sparks, 2018). Although the cultural part has received noticeably less attention, cultural ties are rapidly developing alongside economic relations. Based on the conducted literature review, the cultural aspect of the Belt and Road Initiative can be divided into three categories: education, media, and other cultural activities.

### 2.3.1 Education

The aspect of education received the most attention among the scholars. As Edeh and Zhao (2021) point out, under the axis of the "people-to-people bond", a series of educational initiatives have been developed to accommodate diverse cultural perspectives.

Education is one of the most effective ways to make a country more attractive in the eyes of others. Under the auspices of the BRI, China deepens relations with partner countries by focusing on university cooperation, research, student exchanges, entrepreneurship training, and skill development (Edeh & Zhao, 2021). China is currently the third destination for international

---

<sup>3</sup><https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-product/crude-petroleum/reporter/chn?yearExportSelector=exportYear1>

students, after the U.S. and Britain (Zreik, 2021). Students studying at China institutions return home and indirectly become the cultural ambassadors for the host country, thus contributing to a change at the national level and spreading China's positive cultural image.

Many scholars emphasize the vital role of Confucius Institutes (CIs) in promoting China's educational policies. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, Confucius Institutes have a goal of introducing Chinese culture and soft power (Li et al., 2021). d'Hooghe (2021) stresses that through educational channels, China promotes its cultural ties with its partners. The Ministry of Education in China is responsible for seminar organization and research promotion on topics that are relevant to China and the BRI. The role of the Confucius Institute plays a critical role in this regard. According to Edeh and Zhao (2021), the number of Confucius institutes has increased exponentially since their creation in 2004. Along the BRI, the 153 Confucius Institutes currently operate in 54 countries. Saudi Arabia is one of them. During an interview with a Chinese language teacher at King Abdulaziz University, it was revealed that over 2,000 teachers have been dispatched by the Confucius Institute Headquarters to teach Chinese worldwide. The teacher emphasized that the decision to open Confucius Institutes abroad depends on the population and economy of the host country. He further added that two Confucius Institutes in Saudi Arabia are sufficient, as other cities besides Riyadh and Jeddah do not have the necessary population to make the institutes work effectively.

Language can serve as a quick and effective way to establish connections with foreign individuals and cultures (Gauttam et al., 2021). Via the Confucius Institute (CI), China offers Chinese language classes to people of other nations. However, the Confucius Institute's activities extend beyond teaching the Chinese language, as they also organize seminars, forums, lectures, and international conferences related to the Belt and Road Initiative. Edeh and Zhao (2021) add that the Confucius Institute has expanded its traditional language and cultural activities even further, and additional training is being added to meet the local needs and social development of the host countries. These include training in areas such as finance, accounting, computers, agriculture, and electromechanics. China utilizes these educational programs as a tool for cross-cultural integration and to encourage foreign individuals to immerse themselves in Chinese culture (Liu, 2019). An interesting aspect of the Confucius Institute's operations is that it operates in partnership with the national educational institute, rather than as an independent entity (Gauttam et al., 2021). This mode of operation is a unique feature that distinguishes the Confucius Institute from other cultural institutions. Due to its integration with the national educational institute, the line between the Chinese cultural center and the local university is blurred, allowing the institute to operate indirectly.

Regarding the effects of Confucius Institutes, H. Wang et al. (2021) emphasize that there is a positive relationship between the presence of CI and the number of international students studying in China. However, Yellinek et al. (2020) add that the CI is not always successful in achieving its goals around the world. For example, between 2013 and 2018, 25 Confucius Institutes were closed across Canada, the United States, France, Sweden, Holland, Germany, and Australia. While democratic regimes are typically wary of Chinese propaganda, Middle Eastern countries with non-democratic regimes are more open to allowing Chinese presence, as noted by Yellinek et al. (2021).

An essential point of d’Hooghe (2021) analysis is devoted to the state-driven character of China’s educational diplomacy. It is important to understand that China’s educational initiatives in the BRI are primarily implemented via a top-down approach, which means that the government plays a significant role in setting the agenda and directing the resources. Even though universities may be seen as independent stakeholders, they are still closely tied to the government and obliged to carry out the government’s directives. Thus, as Liu (2019) completes the point, through the Confucius Institutions, the Chinese government seeks to address misunderstandings and promote a positive image of China in the countries where it operates.

Apart from Confucius Institute analyses Rahman (2019) stresses other educational exchange programs that took place under the BRI. According to him, China provides 10 000 scholarships per year. Additionally, China has established 50 joint laboratories, 2,500 young foreign scientists were offered an opportunity to visit China, and 5,000 foreigners have received special training. In his work Gauttam et al. (2021) refer to such programs as the “Educational Silk road”. By investing in Educational Silk Road, China creates a positive image and attracts those wishing to experience China.

Since the BRI announcement, China has followed a policy of establishing cultural channels with Arab countries. Although China has considerable economic and military potential, in the case of Arab countries, they have chosen the path of soft power<sup>4</sup> (Zreik, 2021). This approach has led to a notable rise in the number of Arabic speakers who are proficient in the Chinese language. Zreik (2021) further highlights that Sino-Arab academic exchange is developing rapidly. The number of Arab students in China is steadily increasing as well. In 2012, their number exceeded 10,000, an increase of 70 percent compared to 2010.

Using the case study of Saudi Arabia, Peng and Keane (2019) mention that there is a large number of Chinese teachers and study centers that operate in Saudi Arabia. According to Al-Sudairi (2017), a relatively small but growing community of Saudi graduates began returning

---

<sup>4</sup>Soft power can be defined as a nation’s ability to achieve its goals by shaping the preferences of others through attraction and persuasion, rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 1990)

to Saudi Arabia around 2011 to 2013.

Foley (2018) on the opposite notes that China is still far behind the U.S. in terms of the educational impact. He points out that Saudi Arabia has sent around 1500 students to study in China since 2006. By contrast, 60000 students from Saudi Arabia studied in the U.S. in 2016. Foley (2018) applies the same logic when comparing the influence of the English language in comparison with Mandarin. In his analysis, the author cited an interview with an undersecretary from the Saudi Ministry of Education, who confirmed that English is the sole foreign language currently taught in Saudi schools and that there are no plans to deviate from this approach. However, the time has shown otherwise. As Edeh and Zhao (2021) and Yellinek et al. (2021) point in their later research, government officials of China and Saudi Arabia have signed an agreement to incorporate Chinese language studies into school curricula at all levels.

In Saudi Arabia, the first Confucius Institute was approved relatively recently, only in 2020, and there is no official confirmation of its functioning yet. One possible reason for this late approval is mentioned by Al-Sudairi (2017). Because of the conservative basis of the Saudi Arabian state, the opening of the Confucius Institute has caused opposition at the state level. The reason for the resistance was that the institute was often identified with Confucianism, thereby raising fears about the institute's hidden religious purposes. However, this opinion still lacks a foundation. For the time being, there is no concrete evidence that China pursues any religious goals in Saudi Arabia or the Middle East.

### **2.3.2 Media and global entertainment**

China actively promotes its soft power through educational channels and its engagement with global entertainment has great potential. As Peng and Keane (2019) pointed out the success depends not only on whose army wins but also on whose story wins. Despite the size of China, the recognition of its popular culture outside its domestic market is quite limited. Film production is one of those potential tools China uses to catch up with other countries. As Ye et al. (2018) point out film industry is one of the most effective ways to achieve mutual understanding between different cultures. In addition to the substantial material benefit, the film industry consists of many cultural elements that are crucial in identification and communication (Ye et al., 2018). China, in this sense, is an extraordinarily important player in the global film market due to its vast domestic market (Kalathil, 2017). Additionally, China has the second-highest money earning from ticket sales in the world (Ye et al., 2018). In order to access this market, countries are willing to adapt to the Chinese harsh censorship rules. This form of partnership preclude scenarios where China can be put in an unfavorable light that is not pleasing to the government.

If a film is produced in collaboration with a Chinese company, it must include at least one scene filmed in China, have at least one Chinese actor in the cast, and also promote “positive Chinese elements” (Kalathil, 2017). However, there is also the other side of the coin. Simultaneously, the strict control over the media substantially limits the effectiveness of Chinese soft power (Peng & Keane, 2019). One problem is the cultural distance between Western and Eastern culture. Western audiences have formed their own preferences and find it difficult to them to accept Chinese film traditions. The other problem lies in the strict censorship in China, which limits the choice of genres for screenwriters. Additionally, China has a lack of international stars and its overseas marketing strategy is also very uncertain (Ye et al., 2018).

Kalathil (2017) points to a shift in China soft power strategy towards film industry. China has realized that in addition to the profitability of the film sector, investment in film production is an excellent way to transmit culture and promote China’s influence in the world. However, Ye et al. (2018) notes that the enormous investments in the so-called “going out” strategy for film production have not yet paid off. Despite the enormous efforts and investments from the Chinese government, Chinese films that have financial success <sup>5</sup> can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

It should be noted that China is still far behind the United States in the size of its cultural industry. U.S. cultural products such as movies, music and copyrights, make up a large part of the country’s exports. The U.S. cultural industry makes up a significant portion of its GDP, accounting for 24 percent of the total. This is in stark contrast to China’s cultural industry, which only accounts for 3 percent of its GDP, according to Kalathil (2017).

The film industry and other media channels are powerful tools for constructing and promoting particular images. Although China rejects comparisons with the U.S., they are pretty similar in their policy of expanding media influence in order to achieve cultural dominance (Sparks, 2018). The media in China are invariably associated with heavy state involvement. According to Chong and Pham (2020), China does not see much difference between suppressing critical thinking and promoting Chinese propaganda through its media portals. The entire media structure functions under a censorship filter, and China does not see anything wrong with it. Not surprisingly, international media freedom rankings such as Freedom House give China a meager rating (9/100) <sup>6</sup>. However, Sparks (2018) argues that this low status will not be a significant obstacle to Chinese cultural influence, provided that the low status of Chinese media may not impede China’s cultural influence, as long as the target country also has limited media freedom. Considering

---

<sup>5</sup>In the context of a movie or film, financial success refers to the achievement of positive box office revenue.

<sup>6</sup><https://freedomhouse.org/country/china/freedom-world/2022>

that Saudi Arabia has the similar ‘low rating (7/100)’<sup>7</sup>, China’s cultural influence is expected to be significant.

In his analysis, Liu (2019) refers to a study on news content about China that was published in U.S. news stories. The results showed that the media greatly influences the formation of public opinion. If we consider that reports about China in the U.S. are often adverse, it can be argued that the public opinion about China will be also negative. In a similar analysis of media representations of China, L. Zhang and Wu (2017) emphasize that the portrayal of China is not unequivocally negative or unequivocally positive. However, if we look at the picture as a whole, Western media often portrays China in a negative light. According to Yellinek et al. (2021), the global image of China can be divided into two distinct views. On the one hand, China’s rapid economic growth and the speed of its achievements generate amazement and positive reactions. On the other hand, China is portrayed as an aggressive, authoritarian state, with accompanying discussions on its human rights issues, environmental pollution, and other concerns (L. Zhang & Wu, 2017). The main moral of those analyses is that it is easy to maintain an old negative image or create a new negative image, but it is very difficult to create a new positive image (L. Zhang & Wu, 2017). A review of academic literature on China’s Belt and Road Initiative suggests that China has not prioritized the task of building a positive image, which is closely linked to the underdevelopment of China’s cultural representation on the global stage. However, if we look overall, China is perceived positively in the Middle East, with the only exception of Turkey (Yellinek et al., 2021).

Liu (2019) continues that in addition to the influence of the media on the formation of perceptions, the distance between countries plays an important role. Thus, the farther apart geographically countries are, the stronger the influence of the media on creating the “right” image of the country. If we apply the same logic to Saudi Arabia and China, we can safely assume that the media will play a key role in creating cultural ties.

Apparently, the Chinese government supports this view. This is confirmed by the differences among cultural initiatives, which vary from country to country (Liu, 2019). In East Asia, cultural missions tend to prioritize language teaching. The reason for this is the already established historical connection and thus a high level of mutual understanding. In Europe, as in Central Asia, there is no such connection. Thus, China’s primary focus in these countries is on introducing and promoting Chinese culture. For instance, regions far from China have been particularly active in promoting trips to China (Liu, 2019). An example of such policy can be seen in the Yellinek et al. (2021) analysis, where the author mentioned a case from 2012 when

---

<sup>7</sup><https://freedomhouse.org/country/saudi-arabia/freedom-world/2021>

the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs invited representatives of the central media channels from Saudi Arabia on a week-long tour to China. As the participants of this trip further emphasized, they returned with unforgettable impressions and generally changed their view of China. In a meeting with the Chinese delegation, the Chinese foreign minister stressed that the media plays a crucial role in strengthening relations between the countries. Therefore it is essential for them (China) to convey facts about the “real” China to the Arabs. A case like this clearly demonstrates the importance of the media in achieving cultural goals in Saudi Arabia.

In addition to building ties with media structures in the Middle East, China also produces daily news in Arabic on its state-run channels. Xinhua News Agency is the largest and most influential media organization in China, which has 17 national media channels in Arabic, 15 Arabic news agencies, 52 newspapers and magazines, two T.V. stations, and ten other Arabic language sources (Yellinek et al., 2021). However, during my visit to Saudi Arabia, I did not meet anyone who confirmed that they were aware of these media channels or watched them.

### 2.3.3 Other cultural ties

The cultural relationship between China and Saudi Arabia is complex, encompassing not only educational, media, and linguistic aspects, but also the rapid development of ties in areas such as tourism, business, and religion. Undoubtedly, these ties introduced audiences of both countries to each other and, as a result, strengthened their cultural understanding of each other.

Although the vast majority of analyses of the cultural aspect of Sino-Saudi relations point to China as the main initiator of cultural initiatives, Al-Sudairi (2017) stresses that this is not always the case.

China’s growing interest in Saudi Arabia from the late 1990s, combined with economic reforms aimed at expanding its market, facilitated the development of diverse cultural relations between the two nations, encompassing even religious affiliations. Recognizing the potential of China as a critical future partner, Saudi Arabia began to view the country as a possible area for da’wah<sup>8</sup> (Al-Sudairi, 2017). The reason for the emergence of missionary work can be explained by two factors (Al-Sudairi, 2017). First, the mass influx of workers from China into Saudi Arabia and their conversion to Islam. Second, the growing popularity of China as a da’wah space among the circle of du’at<sup>9</sup>.

This case is significant because it not only highlights the existence of transcultural ties that do not originate from China, but also demonstrates that despite cultural, geographic, and linguistic

---

<sup>8</sup>Da’wah - the practice or policy of conveying the message of Islam to non-Muslims <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/dawah>

<sup>9</sup>Du’at - preachers

differences, Saudi Arabia and China can foster cooperation on diverse grounds, as evidenced by the conversion of Chinese citizens to Islam.

Another exciting example demonstrating the growth of cultural ties between China and the Middle East can be found in Y. Wang (2018) analysis. The author's work analyzes the increasing social status of China's Muslim minorities in the context of the development of Sino-Saudi relations. Using the example of the Hui minority, Y. Wang (2018) illustrates how China's ascent to the position of the world's second-largest economy has transformed the status of the Hui minority, turning them from a middleman minority to cultural ambassadors between regions. Using their unique ethnoreligious status of being Chinese and Muslims simultaneously, the Hui minority gained an advantageous position in China-Middle East relations. As a result of such transformations, they were able to play an essential role in developing cultural ties, serving as cultural ambassadors between China and the Arab World. As Y. Wang (2018) stresses in conclusion, the dual status of such minorities will strengthen in the future, and thus cultural exchanges between China and the Arab world will strengthen as well.

In general, it could be argued that China has become an integral part of almost every major event in Saudi Arabia. An excellent example of such tendency could be seen in the 28th Janadriyah Festival <sup>10</sup>, where China was a central theme. The festival's guest of honor, Jackie Chan, was among the many stars in attendance, resulting in greater attention than in previous years (Yellinek et al., 2021).

---

<sup>10</sup>Janadriyah Festival is an annual two-week cultural festival near the city of Riyadh.

## Chapter 3

# Theoretical Framework

What role does culture play in foreign policy and why is it an important aspect to consider when analysing a Sino-Saudi relationship?

### 3.1 Rostow's stages of growth

Historically, the cultural aspect was not automatically considered in the formation of every foreign policy agenda. If we look at the American model for Third-World development, which took place in the late 1950s and was often referred to as “developmentalism”, we will notice that the aspect of culture was not in the sphere of attention (Wiarda, 2016). The famous Rostow's stages of economic growth, which was the basis for this development strategy at that time, precisely demonstrate the ignorance of the cultural aspect. According to Rostow, to reach the stage of development, the countries must pass through five stages, namely by completing the process of growth and industrialization and becoming the countries of “high mass consumption” (Rostow, 1959). However, the problem lies in the fact that no cultural aspects have been taken into account. All that was needed was to provide the necessary amount of aid and investments to speed up the development process. Suppose we try to integrate this vision into BRI. In that case, we can assume that China should focus on one of its main targets, namely substantial infrastructural investments, and that alone will revive the ancient Silk Road and connect China with the rest of the world. The BRI, however, which will be discussed later, is much more comprehensive and not that linear. I assume that the results of Western development policies throughout the 1950s served as a case for rethinking current foreign policy agendas. By now, we understand that what works in the Middle East will work differently or not work at all in Africa. Over the past five decades, Western countries have spent more than 2 trillion dollars on development assistance in Africa, yet it has not resulted in any significant improvement in the

lives of African people (Moyo, 2009).

Since that time, the role of the cultural aspect in foreign policy has evolved dramatically, and it plays a crucial role in international diplomacy. Diplomacy exists in many forms, but this study will focus on two forms, namely public diplomacy and its subtype - cultural diplomacy.

### 3.2 Public and Cultural Diplomacy

This work will heavily rely on the concept of cultural diplomacy to understand how China's BRI plans to build cultural ties with Saudi Arabia. There is no concrete definition of cultural diplomacy, and the interpretation of cultural diplomacy among the scholars is quite broad (Wyszomirski et al., 2003). Cultural diplomacy is often blurred with public diplomacy, but it is more accurate to say that cultural diplomacy is one facet of the broader field of public diplomacy (Clarke, 2020). Additionally, it is also important to understand that by being a subset of public diplomacy, cultural diplomacy is not synonymous with public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy is a state's tool for communicating with foreign audiences in order to build an understanding among the foreign citizens about its ideals, goals, and policies (Hooghe, 2015). The purpose of public diplomacy is to influence the behavior of foreign states by influencing the attitudes of its citizens (Signitzer, 2008). Usually, it is done through such fields as information, education, and culture. China, through public diplomacy, seeks to promote its agenda to foreign audiences and create a positive image of its political model. One may say that this description can also be applied to cultural diplomacy. However, there is a difference that lies in public diplomacy approaches. According to Signitzer (2008) there are two crucial elements of public diplomacy, namely, persuasion by way of political information and cultural communication. The key difference between these two elements lies in the time it takes to operate them. Often public information spreads through the so-called mass and fast media (newspapers, internet, radio). On the other hand, cultural communication is projected through slow media (language courses, academic exchanges, films). That is where the difference between public and cultural diplomacy comes into play. According to Leonard et al. (2002) cultural diplomacy, unlike public diplomacy, is long-term in terms of building the relationship between countries.

Additionally, Signitzer (2008) points out that public diplomacy is dictated by the top of the state foreign ministry, while cultural diplomacy can be projected apart from state foreign policy and operate through non-state actors and other institutions like British Council, Goethe Institute, or Alliance française. However, we should not forget that the activities of these institutes are funded by taxpayers through government department budgets (Taylor, 1997). In the case of China, it is not very relevant since the dominant role of China's diplomatic activity

is played by the state (d’Hooghe, 2021).

Also, according to Berger et al. (2008), cultural diplomacy differs from public diplomacy in its multilateral approach, whereas public diplomacy is rather one-sided and focuses on presenting one’s policies to others. In the case of cultural diplomacy, the key aspect is to achieve mutual understanding and common ground. Cummings (2003) very accurately stresses the importance of the “exchange” factor while defining cultural diplomacy. According to him, cultural diplomacy refers to the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their people to promote mutual understanding. That is why cultural diplomacy is not suited to promote national culture (Berger et al., 2008).

According to Maltzahn (2013), the term cultural diplomacy is usually applied when government produces activities in the sphere of cultural relations, emphasizing that the activities come directly from governments, therefore excluding indirect activities (from non-state actors). The term is often used when a state organizes activities and, through these activities, uses culture as a way to promote its interests. It is important to note that state interests extend beyond cultural aspects and frequently encompass political, strategic, and national objectives. Although with the evolvement of democratic regimes, there is a trend of moving away from this model and including the non-state actors in the analyses of cultural diplomacy (Zamorano, 2016). However, this work prefers the interpretation that put the government in the lead, especially if we consider that China has a high degree of governmental control. Therefore, in this work, I refer to China’s cultural diplomacy when China promotes itself through official and long-term cultural exchanges to foster mutual understanding with foreign citizens.

While cultural diplomacy aims to enhance mutual understanding on a global scale, it is crucial to avoid being overly idealistic. According to Taylor (1997), cultural diplomacy in its larger sense is a political activity that aims to serve national interests through cultural investments. The author connects cultural diplomacy with cultural imperialism, pointing to the enormous expenditures of the state on cultural initiatives that do not directly benefit the taxpayers with whose money these initiatives are financed. There is a benefit, but it is a long-term one. Upon graduating in China, a student from Saudi Arabia may develop a healthy dose of skepticism towards Western media’s portrayal of China, potentially leading to a sympathetic and favorable view of China that fosters a cherished mutual understanding.

Based on this logic, is it possible to say that China’s Confucius Institute and its various educational and cultural programs are simply a new form of cultural imperialism hidden behind the veil of “innocuous” cultural diplomacy? To begin with, it is important to understand what cultural imperialism is.

### 3.3 Cultural Imperialism

In a broad sense, the term cultural imperialism is used when one country dominates another country through cultural channels. In the modern world, the concept of imperialism has been transformed and has taken new forms. The classical notion of imperialism, where one country dominates another country, has retained its structure but has taken new forms. Traditionally, imperialism was based on the use of military force, political and economic intervention and defined mainly by the borders of an empire (Gudova, 2018). However, as practice shows, modern “empires” build their policies through new channels, and modern imperialism is defined much more on relationships between the countries rather than on territories a certain country acquires. One such channel to produce imperialism is soft power, which will be described later.

Galtung (1971) brings attention to cultural imperialism, by employing the dependency theory. In his work, he introduced the cultural imperialism through the example of scientific imperialism, which is a subtype of cultural imperialism. According to Galtung (1971), there is a vertical division in science between the center (teachers) and the Periphery (students). Thus, a system is formed where the center establishes criteria and role models through teachers, and the Periphery consequently provides students who try to meet these criteria. To all this, the author describes a model of brain drain, when the most potential students from the Periphery move to the center, leaving their home countries with a shortage of skilled labor and human capital. Galtung argues that that the developed countries benefit from the brain drain by acquiring highly skilled workers who can contribute to their economies, while the developing countries suffer a loss of human capital and struggle to meet the needs of their own populations. While the comparison of the center and the Periphery using the example of China and Saudi Arabia may cause controversy and debate, the traces of “brain drain” can be visible in the model of China. Through the Confucius Institute and the Belt and Road Initiative China is building educational bridges and invites the most talented and educated individuals from from developing countries to visit China leaving their home countries with a shortage of skilled labour and human capital.

### 3.4 Soft Power

Both concepts of cultural diplomacy and cultural imperialism are connected to soft power debates. Joseph Nye firstly introduced the concept of soft power in 1990, who used this term to reformulate the role of power in today’s world (Nye, 1990). According to Nye, the traditional sources of power have transformed from purely military and economic assets to the ability of the state to entice and attract (Nye, 2003). In other words, in the era of globalization, where

all countries are interconnected, the state's power is defined not only by military and economic resources but also by how well the state can make its behavior legitimate in the eyes of others. This can be done by the use of three resources, namely culture, domestic political values, and foreign policy (Nye, 2004a). In this sense, the soft power concept and cultural diplomacy are very much interrelated and pursue the same goal of attraction rather than coercion. In turn, according to Nye (2012) "hard power" refers to a country's ability to use coercion or force to get others to do what it wants. Hard power can be exercised through military force, economic sanctions, or other forms of direct coercion. Hard power uses a fundamentally different approach in comparison with soft power.

In the book "The Future of Power," Nye (2011a) discusses China's use of soft power and how it is shaping the country's global influence. He notes that while China has been successful in using hard power to achieve its goals, such as economic growth and military expansion, it has also been investing heavily in soft power. China's soft power strategy includes initiatives such as the Confucius Institutes, which promote Chinese language and culture around the world, and the Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to improve infrastructure and connectivity in Asia and beyond. China has also been expanding its media presence and promoting its technological prowess, particularly in areas such as artificial intelligence and 5G<sup>1</sup>. Nye (2011a) notes that while China's soft power efforts have been successful in some areas, such as Africa and Southeast Asia, they have also faced challenges in other regions, such as Europe and the United States. This is due in part to concerns about China's human rights record, its aggressive territorial claims in the South China Sea, and its role in global governance. While the Saudi Arabian government's stance on this issues may be different from that of Western nations, concerns about China's record could potentially impact its soft power efforts in Saudi Arabia.

In China's efforts to enhance its soft power, culture has been identified as a key element and cultural diplomacy as a primary means of promoting Chinese values and interests around the world with the Confucius Institute playing a major role (H. Wang et al., 2021). The cultural aspect has become so central to the analysis of soft power that the term has gradually been replaced by the term "cultural power" (Cao, 2011). The last term has often been used in discussions of Chinese soft power given the crucial role that the cultural component plays in China's exercise of soft power. Some scholars have suggested that China's cultural diplomacy should be viewed as a distinct subform of cultural diplomacy, thus highlighting its uniqueness

---

<sup>1</sup>5G is the fifth generation of mobile network technology that provides faster download and upload speeds, wider coverage, and more stable connections compared to previous generations. It also enables the connection of a larger number of devices and has the potential to support new technologies such as autonomous vehicles and smart cities.

(Becard & Filho, 2019). In addition to the particular importance of the cultural element, soft power is distinctive in its emphasis on the central role of the state in determining the vector of its cultural diplomacy and for its use of cultural diplomacy to ensure cultural security and domestic coherence (Becard & Filho, 2019).

In the soft power debate, China is often presented as a country that has chosen the soft power approach as the primary model for its international affairs (Hartig, 2016; Nye, 2012). According to Nye (2017) China realized that as China's hard power grows, it may lead to concerns among its neighboring countries and result in balancing coalitions. As a result, billions of dollars were invested and numerous articles were published to promote soft power in China. Since the 2000s, China has been following the path that often includes such terms as "peaceful development", "responsible power", "harmonious world" (Cho & Jeong, 2008) or, in the case of the BRI - "win-win cooperation" and "mutual benefit." The sources that allow China to generate soft power are, first of all, the rise of its economy and also its cultural and educational exchanges. China achieved significant results in promoting its culture and recognition by attracting large numbers of international students as well as investing in global entertainment (Kalathil, 2017) and in Confucius Institutes around the world that aim to promote Chinese values and culture (Kurlantzick, 2007). In an address to the U.S. government, Nye et al. (2005) points out that while China still does not provide a threat to American cultural dominance, its cultural progress cannot be ignored.

Despite the significant investment in the direction of soft power, the outcomes have been inconsistent. The tight party control in China makes this challenging to produce and increase soft power. According to Nye (2017), civil society plays a crucial role in a country's soft power, and the government should provide more freedom to its civil society to showcase its talents. In addition, territorial disputes with neighboring countries are hindering China's soft power efforts. As Nye (2017) pointed out, creating a Confucius Institute to teach Chinese culture in Manila will not be effective if Chinese naval vessels are chasing Philippine fishing boats out of Scarborough Shoal, which lies within 200 miles of its coastline. While this may not apply to the case of Saudi Arabia, it remains imperative to consider those contradictions to achieve a more objective assessment.

It is also important to remember that soft power does not automatically mean that it may resonate with every country. As practice shows, China's soft power resonates with the Middle Eastern countries but is mostly rejected in Western countries. Also, it is one thing to produce soft power and quite another to have an effective outcome. As Pan (2013) points out, there is a misconception about the effectiveness of Chinese soft power, especially concerning the Confucius

Institute. Despite their rapid emergence in many countries of the world, their effectiveness is quite insignificant. The key problem lies in the structure of CI's operation. There is a tangible lack of professional personnel from China, as well as doubts about the program's quality. The Confucius Institute in Jeddah is a good example of such operational problems. Even though the agreement to open the Confucius Institute was signed at the end of 2019, there are still no teachers from China. Additionally, the program that was launched at Jeddah University is limited to an "introductory" Chinese language course which has not been changed until today.

There are also some other significant limits to Chinese soft power. Simultaneously with the rise of the Chinese economy, the military component rose as well. According to Nye (2012), military resources can sometimes contribute to a country's soft power, particularly when they are used to provide humanitarian assistance or support peacekeeping efforts. However, in most cases, military resources are viewed as an expression of hard power. China's current regional conflicts in Taiwan and in the South and East China seas demonstrate that China uses the hard power approach towards its territorial claims, which resulted in the construction of military and civilian facilities (Morton, 2016). Such policies undercut soft power. One explanation stems from the historical injustice and territorial takeover that occurred in China during the "century of humiliation" (Al-Tamimi, 2017). Thus, by adopting a stricter policy toward these regions, China seeks to restore justice and views its actions as a defense of its territorial boundaries (Al-Tamimi, 2017).

Additionally, special attention should be paid to the rising role of China in providing lending arrangements, especially for developing countries. According to Nye, economic resources can produce soft-power behavior as well as hard military power (Nye, 2011b). However, if we consider that the average debt stock owed to China has risen from less than 1 percent of debtor country GDP in 2005 to more than 15 percent in 2017 (Narins & Agnew, 2021), we can assume that China poses leverage to influence debtors country behavior. What makes these assumptions even more realistic is the nature of China's lending system. According to recent studies, around half of China's lending arrangements are not reported to international organizations (Narins & Agnew, 2021). This lack of transparency and "secrecy" factor gives China a negotiation advantage and additional resources to advance their interests. Such practices are indicative of hard power, where one party can exercise leverage over others to achieve its objectives. By extending loans and investments with opaque terms and conditions, China can secure strategic assets, favorable trade agreements, and political influence over recipient countries. Therefore, the non-transparent nature of China's lending system, combined with its economic clout and diplomatic reach, represents a formidable manifestation of hard power in the realm of global

finance.

In fact, soft power and hard power, even though they are fundamentally different approaches, can coexist with each other. Nye (2004b) concept of “smart power” involves a combination of hard power (military and economic coercion) and soft power (cultural appeal and attraction) in order to achieve strategic goals in international relations. While China has certainly been investing in its soft power capabilities in recent years, such as cultural diplomacy, media outreach, and promotion of Chinese language and culture abroad, it has also been expanding its military and economic power, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region. Therefore, Nye (2004b) concept of smart power may better reflect China’s approach, which involves a combination of both hard and soft power resources.

In conclusion, this study is aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of how China produces soft power in Saudi Arabia, with a particular focus on identifying any contradictions between China’s promotion of soft power and the observed realities using the case of Saudi Arabia.

## Chapter 4

# Methodology

To answer the research questions, the work will entail a mixed-method approach to combine the content analysis of secondary sources with quantitative and primary data.

As the primary source of gathering data, the thesis performed the systematic literature review using PRISMA guideline (Pahlevan Sharif et al., 2018). By following a set protocol, the systematic literature review allows to identify literature with limited bias from a researcher's side but also increases reliability and potentially improves the communication of the findings (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008). The search was conducted on 14.10.2021 through the Scopus database and included three search terms. The first search term was aimed to identify sources that include Belt and Road Initiative and Saudi-Arabia in its title, abstract, or keywords. The second search term was aimed to find sources that included the BRI and any cultural discussions in its title, abstract, or keywords, but without geographical scope. The last search term aimed to identify papers that included the BRI, cultural aspects, and the region of the Middle East altogether. The search query yielded a total of 605 studies. After that, duplicates, documents that were published before 2013, documents from other subject areas, and documents outside the geographical and research questions scope were removed. The remaining documents were saved to a BibTeX file and reviewed based on title and abstract. The sorting process resulted in identifying 67 studies that were included in the qualitative synthesis. The selection process has been summarized in Figure 4.1.

To demonstrate the evolution of Sino-Saudi relations, the thesis collected and visualized quantitative data by creating graphical representations for both economic and cultural perspectives.

Primary data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews and informal discussions with different actors participating in cultural activities between China and Saudi Arabia. I conducted two semi-structured interviews with teachers of the Chinese language. One is a

Chinese teacher at Jeddah University, and the other is a Chinese teacher at King Abdulaziz University. Additionally, I conducted a semi-structured Interview with a student who is enrolled in a newly open bachelor's degree in the Chinese language at King Abdulaziz University. Finally, I conducted a semi-structured interview with an expert from China who had in-depth knowledge of current trends in relations between the countries. Two interviews with teachers and one with the student were recorded for transcription and analysis purposes with consent from all parties. The interview with the Chinese expert was anonymous and off the record.

Additionally, the field research was carried out with a focus on participant and field observations and by exploring cultural points of the U.S. and China in Jeddah. During my field research, I visited three major shopping centers in order to compare the representation of American and Chinese brands in the Saudi market. I visited the Jamjoom center, one of the oldest commercial centers in Jeddah, known for its ties to the Chinese market. I also visited the Jeddah University and King Abdulaziz University, where I held informal meetings with heads of departments, the head of Student Affairs, teachers, and students. This allowed me to better understand the current vector of educational cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia. Finally, I visited the Islamic Development Bank, a multilateral development finance institution which cooperates closely with China in both economic and cultural projects <sup>1</sup>. I conducted many informal meetings with staff from different fields and explored the economic and cultural side of cooperation between Saudi Arabia and China.

A summary of data collection methods and their connection to the research questions is presented in the table 4.1 below:

| <b>Research question:</b>                                                                  | <b>Data collection methods:</b>                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| How have cultural and economic ties between China and Saudi Arabia developed historically? | Systematic literature review & quantitative data analysis       |
| How sustainable is the cultural cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia?                | Semi-structured interviews & participant and field observations |
| How visible is China's cultural presence in comparison with the U.S?                       | Participant and field observations                              |

Table 4.1: Data collection methods

---

<sup>1</sup><https://www.isdb.org/search?q=china&locality=&search=&page=0>

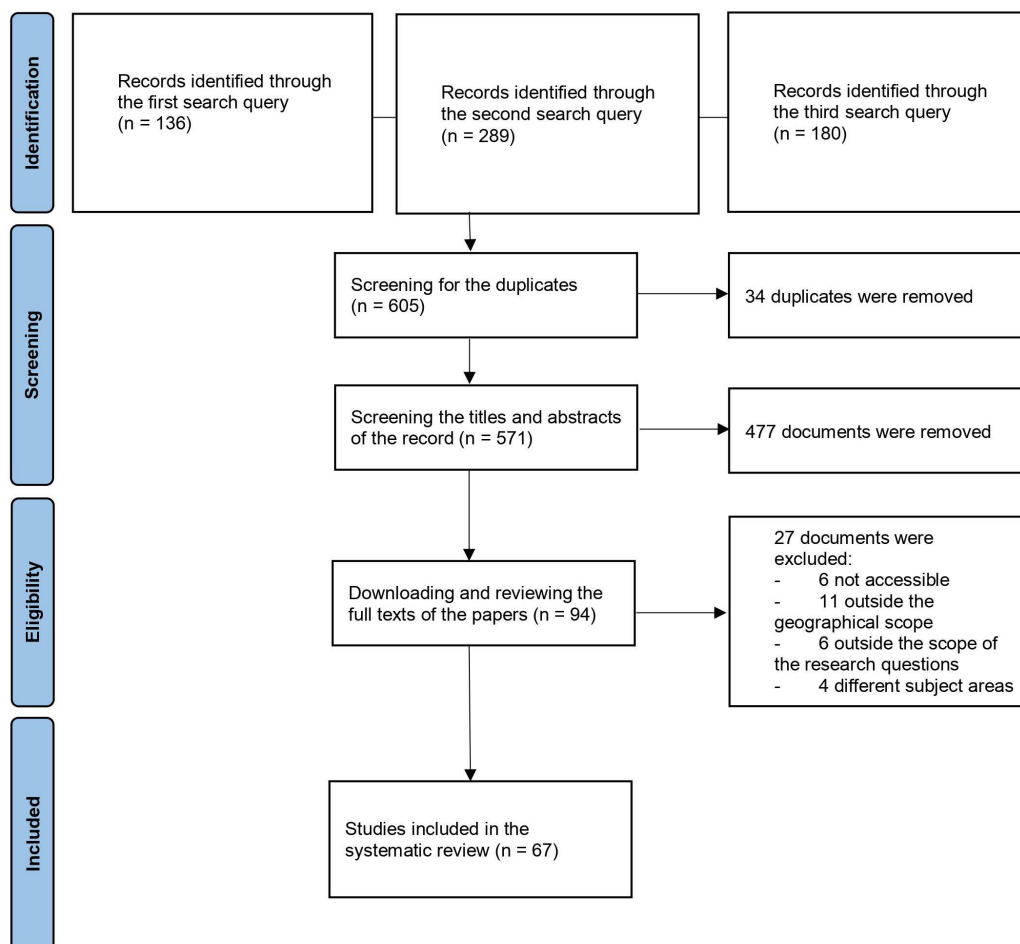


Figure 4.1: PRISMA flow diagram

## Chapter 5

# History

The rapid growth in cooperation between China and the Middle East may inadvertently give the wrong impression that China’s interest in the Middle East is a new phenomenon. However, this is far from being the case, and the frequent reference to China’s BRI as the “new” Silk Road clearly hints at this. Trade links between China and the Middle East began in the ancient Silk Road era and continued through many dynasties after (MacGillivray, [2019](#)).

Another common misconception is that the history of relations between China and Saudi Arabia is exclusively economic. However, even during the ancient Silk Road, tea, spices, and technology circulated harmoniously with ideas, religion, and art, creating cultural ties and exchanges between ancient China and Arabia.

Even President Xi, while describing the BRI, mentions Zheng He maritime expeditions that took place between 1405 and 1433 and passed through the Straits of Malacca, Yemen, and Jeddah, thus emphasizing the depth of the relationship between the countries (Foley, [2018](#)).

### 5.1 Sino-Saudi relations before 1990

From the establishment of the PRC in 1949 until the establishment of diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia in 1990, contact between the countries was relatively informal and unofficial (R. Wu & Zhao, [2020](#)). The main reason for this were ideological differences. In the early years of the People’s Republic of China, the country aligned itself with the socialist revolutionary movement, a path that has significantly shaped China’s political, economic, and social development over the past several decades. Saudi Arabia was, in turn, a close ally of the United States, which had a policy of countering communist regimes in the Middle East. Oil was the main link between Saudi Arabia and America. Since the establishment of the Kingdom in 1932, America has supplied technological, exploration, and financial support to the Saudi oil industry. Thus, until World

War II, the Saudi oil economy was entirely controlled by the U.S. (R. Wu & Zhao, 2020). For these reasons, China and Saudi Arabia had enormous ideological differences from the very start. Saudi Arabia was in the anti-communism camp, and China was sceptical about the Sino-US partnership (Duan & Aldamer, 2022).

Such ideological differences prevented the countries from establishing bilateral relations. However, it is essential to emphasize that informal contacts were still maintained and mostly related to religious topics. In the 1950s, for example, China negotiated with Saudi Arabia about the possibility of Chinese Muslims performing Hadj in Mekka and did receive approval from Saudi Arabia (R. Wu & Zhao, 2020).

Between 1950 and 1966, China fell under the influence of the socialist ideology, according to which China believed that political consciousness was growing at the expense of falling religious beliefs (R. Wu & Zhao, 2020). During this time, China also began cooperating with Middle Eastern countries, mainly to confront other superpowers. In 1960, China proposed the theory of “revolution in the Middle zone” and began to support developing countries in their attempts to achieve independence through anti-colonial movements (R. Wu & Zhao, 2020). Some Arab countries were also affected by this policy. In the early 1970s, China’s support for radical movements in South Yemen and the guerrilla insurgency in Oman intensified, reflecting its growing influence in the region (Dorraj, 2020; C. Zhang & Xiao, 2021). By supporting radical movements in the region, China raised concerns among Saudi Arabia, which sought to maintain stability and continuity of the leading royal family’s power in the country.

By 1971, China’s relations with Saudi Arabia had deteriorated to the point where Saudi Arabia was the only Arab country to vote against the UN’s proposal to restore the PRC’s legitimate seat (R. Wu & Zhao, 2020) and in 1975 Saudi Arabia even refused to recognize the People’s Republic of China as a country (Zavareh & Barzoki, 2018).

## 5.2 Sino-Saudi relations after 1990

China’s improving relations with the United States in 1972, its rapid economic growth, the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, and the collapse of communism in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 collectively prompted Saudi Arabia to reconsider its views (Dorraj, 2020; R. Wu & Zhao, 2020). China focused entirely on economic development and building friendly relations between the countries, thereby abandoning its ideological policy and support for revolutionary movements in the Middle East (Duan & Aldamer, 2022). Thus, the process of normalization of relations began. Saudi Arabia was the last Arab country to establish a diplomatic relationship with China (Duan & Aldamer, 2022). The first official meeting took place in 1985, and official

diplomatic relations were established in July 1990 and have developed rapidly ever since. In 2008 the countries strengthened their bilateral relations by signing a strategic partnership agreement, and just eight years later, a comprehensive strategic partnership was signed, which marked the highest level of cooperation according to China's diplomatic standards (Chen et al., [2018](#)). Prince Mohammed bin Salman's visit to China in 2019 deserves special attention. It was at this meeting that an agreement was reached to include the Chinese language in the curriculum at all educational levels in Saudi Arabia, which in my opinion was the main catalyst for the development of cultural cooperation between Saudi Arabia and China. The results of diplomatic activities between Saudi Arabia and China are presented in table [5.1](#) made by R. Wu and Zhao ([2020](#)), which was updated as of December 2022.

| <b>Time</b>    | <b>People and events</b>                                   | <b>Achievement</b>                                                                                                                                                   |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| September 1990 | Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister Prince Faisal visited China | The first stop in high-level exchanges between China and Saudi Arabia                                                                                                |
| January 1991   | Chinese Premier Li Peng visited Saudi Arabia               | Leaders of China visited Saudi Arabia for the first time                                                                                                             |
| October 1999   | Chinese President Jiang Zemin visited Saudi Arabia         | Chinese President visited Saudi Arabia for the first time, signed cooperation agreements involving education, radio and television, communications and others fields |
| January 2006   | Saudi King Abdullah visited China                          | Saudi King visited China for the first time; signed cooperation agreements on oil, gas, minerals, vocational training and other fields                               |
| June 2008      | Chinese Vice President Xi Jinping visited Saudi Arabia     | The two sides published China and Saudi Arabia joint statement on strengthening cooperation and strategic friendly relations                                         |
| February 2009  | Chinese President Hu Jintao visited Saudi Arabia           | Beijing and Riyadh put forward six proposals on the strategic friendly relations between China and Saudi Arabia                                                      |

|               |                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|---------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| March 2014    | Saudi Crown Prince Salman visited China                                         | The two sides published the Joint Communique of the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia                                                                                                                 |
| January 2016  | Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Saudi Arabia                               | The two sides published a joint statement of the People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on building a comprehensive strategic partnership                                                                  |
| March 2017    | Saudi King Salman visited China                                                 | The officials discussed issues on the docking of China's Belt and Road initiative with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030                                                                                                              |
| December 2018 | President Xi Jinping met Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Buenos Aires | Crown Prince Mohammed agreed on China's position and proposition in international affairs                                                                                                                                      |
| February 2019 | Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited China                            | The two sides emphasised enhancing mutual political trust and strengthening the docking of development strategies. Saudi Arabia has decided to include the Chinese language in the curriculum both in school and universities. |

|               |                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| March 2021    | China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi held visit with Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister in Riyadh | The two sides advanced negotiations on a free trade agreement with the Gulf Cooperation Council                                                                                             |
| December 2022 | Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Saudi Arabia                                         | 34 agreements in the fields of green energy, information technology, infrastructure, oil, etc have been signed. The Chinese leader hailed the visit as a "new era" between the two nations. |

Table 5.1: High-level interactions between China and Saudi Arabia since 1990

## Chapter 6

# Analysis of Quantitative data

In this section, quantitative data is analyzed to explore the economic and cultural development between China and Saudi Arabia.

### 6.1 Economic analysis

The first graph [6.1](#) shows the flow of U.S. and Chinese foreign investment into Saudi Arabia over the past thirteen years. The data shows that since the announcement of the BRI in 2013, China has increased its investment in Saudi Arabia. In 2018, China surpassed the U.S. for the first time in terms of the amount of investment flow and broke the record for investment in the following year. However, this is still not enough data to draw conclusions. With the exception of recent years, and 2010, when the investment was minimal on the part of both countries, the U.S. has shown a stable pattern of investment in Saudi Arabia. One can see a decline in recent years, starting in 2015, but only the data for the next couple of years can give a stable basis for discussion.

Often, the flow of FDI is determined by a few significant investments. The figure [6.2](#) breaks down Chinese investment in Saudi Arabia into categories, helping to identify the main areas of cooperation between the countries. Undoubtedly, investments in the energy sector remain dominant. Nevertheless, investment flows from China to Saudi Arabia extend beyond the energy sector and offer a diverse and complex perspective. In 2019, for example, the number of Chinese investments reached 4,800 million U.S. dollars, a record for the last 14 years. Of that, only 2,480 million U.S. dollars came from the energy sector. Similarly, in 2018, the total investment was 4,710 million U.S. dollars, of which 1,130 million U.S. dollars came from the energy sector. The drop in investment from 2020 can be justified by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has affected the entire global sector. However, even with the world experiencing the peak of the Covid-19

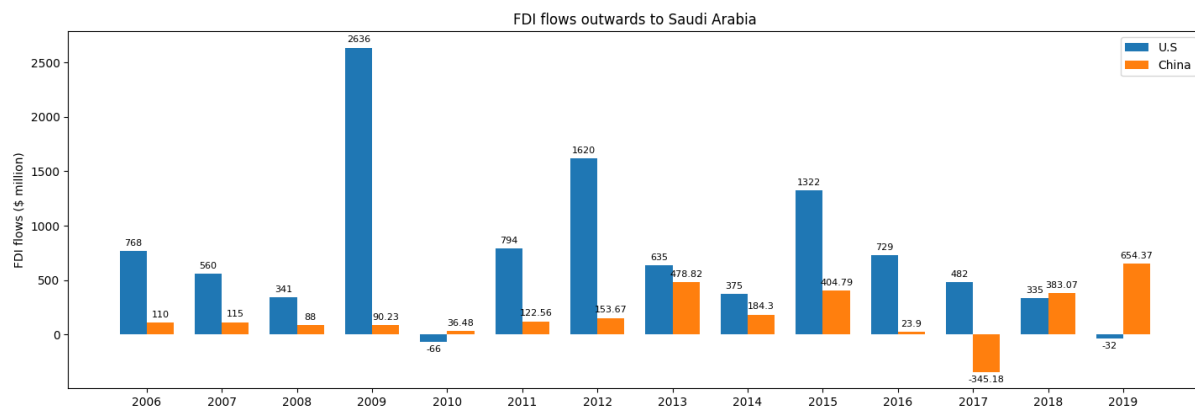


Figure 6.1: FDI flows outwards to Saudi Arabia

**Source:** Bureau of economic analysis/KAPSARC/OECD International Direct Investment Statistics/CEIC/UNCTAD, Aug 2021.

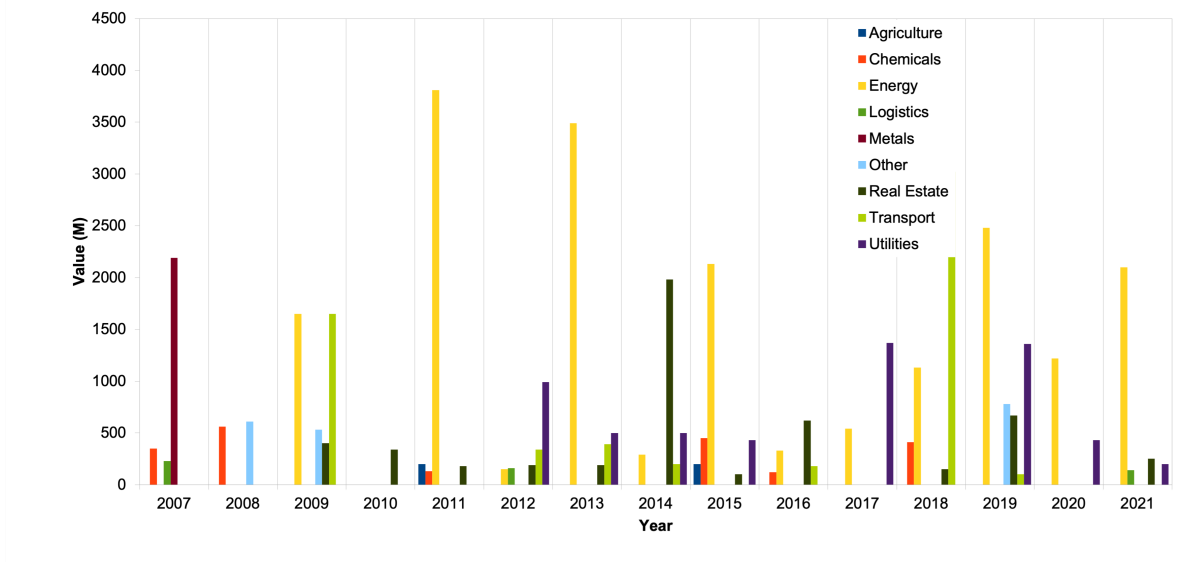


Figure 6.2: China's investments in Saudi Arabia by sector.

**Source:** China Global Investment Tracker, Nov 2022.

pandemic, China invested 1,220 million U.S. dollars in 2020 and as much as 2,100 million U.S. dollars in 2021.

It is crucial to note that Figure 6.2 only displays the total project cost. Often state-driven projects take a long time to implement, while the most money flow occurs in the “announcement” year of the project. An excellent example of this can be seen in 2018 when the state-owned Power Construction Corporation of China won the tender for the construction of marine facilities in Saudi Arabia. The total cost of the contract is estimated at 3 billion U.S. dollars, the largest project with cash settlements received by PowerChina (Katherine Si, 2018). Such a case highlights Saudi Arabia’s ambition to become the world’s leading shipbuilder and also underscores China’s desire to help Saudi Arabia achieve this goal. The perception of China-Saudi Arabia relations being solely energy-focused is gradually diminishing. All signs point towards the further growth of economic cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia, which has been established through China’s consistent and varied investments in Saudi Arabia over the past 14 years.

Examining the export figures of China and Saudi Arabia (see figures 6.3 and 6.4), reveals a stark contrast. While China and Saudi Arabia may have similar export volumes, their export composition vary significantly. China’s exports to Saudi Arabia are diverse, with a wide range of products. The highest-ranking export category is broadcasting equipment, which accounts for only 10 percent of total China exports to Saudi Arabia.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia’s exports to China show a homogeneous picture with crude petroleum accounting for a dominant share of 74 percent of Saudi Arabia’s total exports to China. The share of other products remains minimal and does not go beyond energy resources, chemicals and plastics. Currently, Saudi Arabia has nothing to offer China except its natural resources, which puts them at a disadvantage. China is not as dependent on Saudi Arabia as it may seem, at least if we look at export data. The dominance of oil as Saudi Arabia’s main export product to China creates a dependency that can be a double-edged sword. The example of the energy crisis between Europe and Russia clearly shows this. Europe’s heavy reliance on Russia for natural gas made it significantly vulnerable when Russia invaded Ukraine and the European Union was forced to cut its gas imports from Russia. Similarly, Saudi Arabia’s dependence on oil exports to China creates a vulnerability to changes in demand or prices for crude oil. China, for its part, has very diverse exports and thus holds economic leverage in this cooperation.

During my stay in Saudi Arabia, I was struck by the prevalence and variety of Chinese-made cars on the roads. The success of these cars in the Saudi market, as depicted in Figure 6.5, is a testament to China’s ability to rapidly penetrate and dominate even the most competitive and

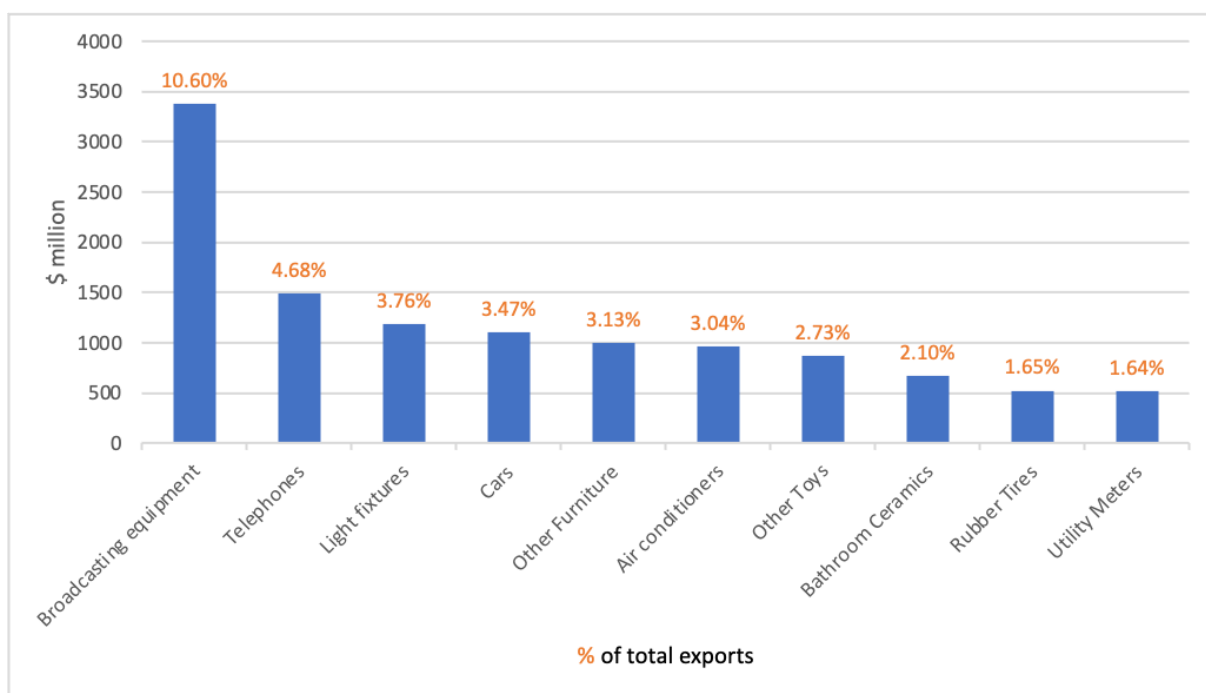


Figure 6.3: China exports to Saudi Arabia by product 2020.

**Source:** The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), Dec 2022.

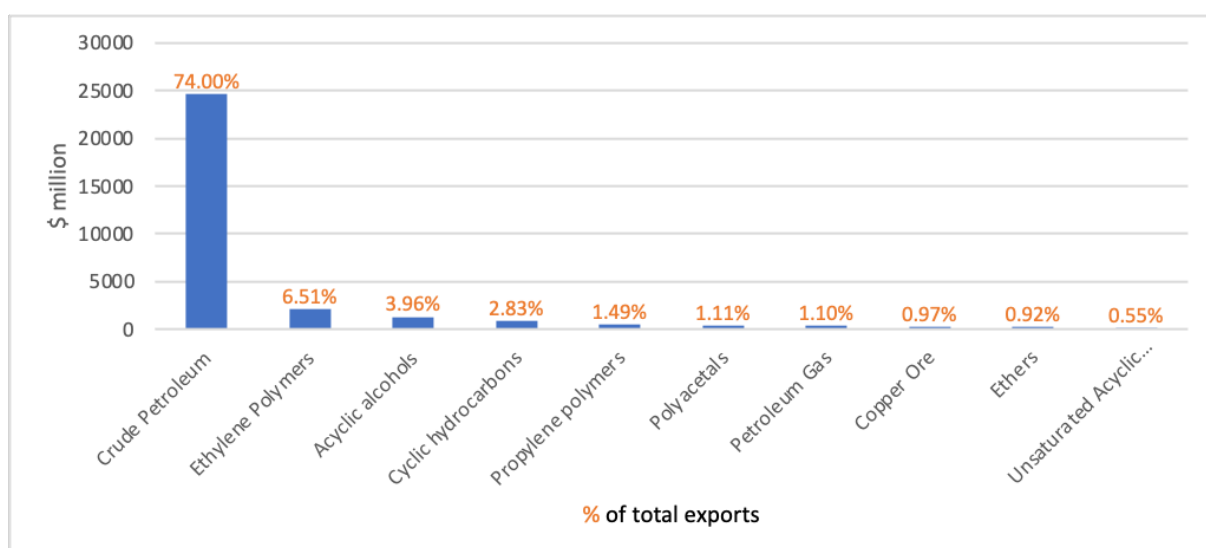


Figure 6.4: Saudi-Arabia exports to China by product 2020.

**Source:** The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), Dec 2022.

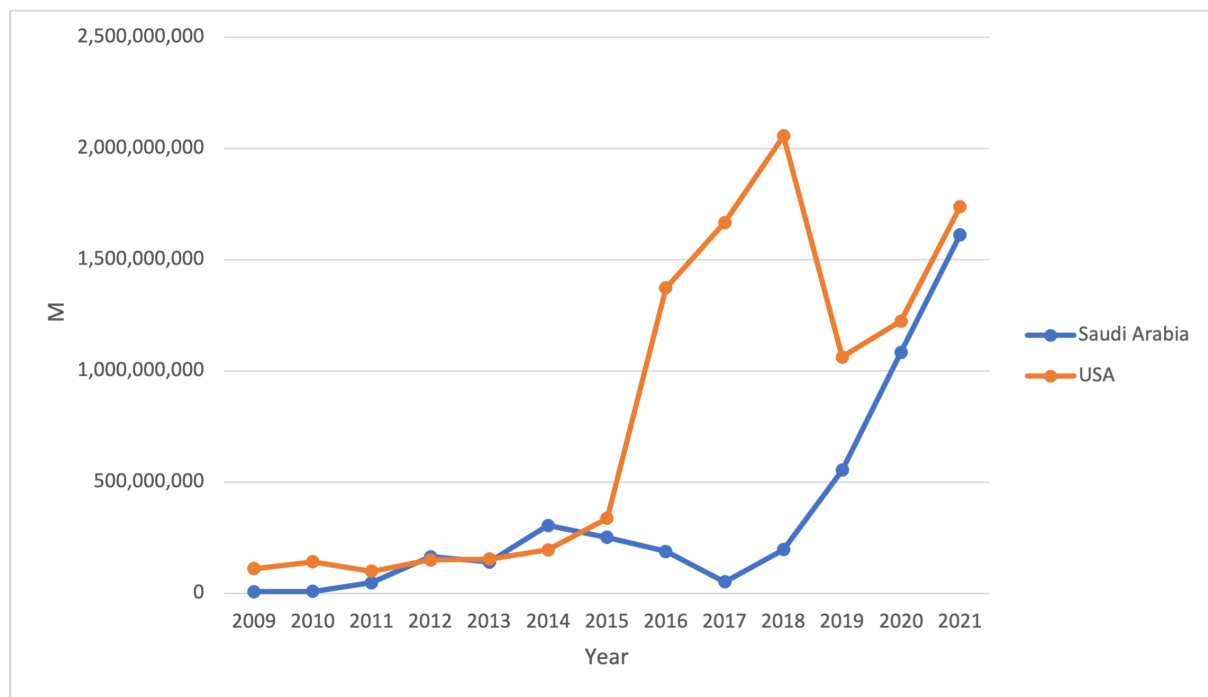


Figure 6.5: China car exports to Saudi Arabia and the U.S.

**Source:** United Nations COMTRADE database, Oct 2022.

complex industries, such as the automotive industry. In just four years, China's exports of cars to Saudi Arabia have increased by 32 times, representing a staggering 3094.15 percent increase from 2017. In 2020, the share of car exports from China to Saudi Arabia was the fourth-largest (figure 6.3). Considering that car exports have increased significantly since then, we can assume that the car industry is one of the key Chinese exports to Saudi Arabia. This rapid growth has allowed little Saudi Arabia to almost equal the United States in the number of imported cars from China. An undeniable success that demonstrates how quickly integration can happen, bypassing the pandemic and the economic crisis.

The success of Chinese-made cars can be attributed to the rising demand from the lower and middle socioeconomic classes. Chinese-brand cars offer more attractive prices than their Japanese, European, and American competitors. On average, Chinese brands in the same price range are 50 percent more affordable than German-made cars and 35 percent cheaper than cars from Japan. Furthermore, Chinese-made cars boast superior specifications, making them a more appealing option for consumers seeking value for their money. The quality of cars has also increased noticeably. The average Saudi family buys a car for approximately six years<sup>1</sup>. Despite the fact that the quality of Chinese cars is often inferior to their European, Japanese, and American competitors, Chinese-made cars will, without problems, last for the desired period.

<sup>1</sup>[carspiritpk.com/chinese-cars-invade-the-gulf-market/](https://carspiritpk.com/chinese-cars-invade-the-gulf-market/)

| Country | 2016    | 2017    | 2018    | 2019    | 2020    | Change 2016/2020 |
|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|------------------|
| World   | 5119101 | 5409216 | 5716027 | 6100755 | 6361963 | +19,5%           |
| USA     | 971517  | 984898  | 987314  | -       | 957475  | -1,45%           |
| China   | 137527  | 157108  | 178271  | 201177  | 225100  | +61,1%           |

Table 6.1: Number of incoming students between 2016 and 2020

**Source:** UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Oct 2022. Author’s own calculations.

Given the versatility of the Chinese market, which can offer almost any product, the phenomenon of the automotive industry can be repeated in other areas. China is a serious competitor that can offer goods with better pricing and similar quality, which, as the case of Saudi Arabia shows, is causing interest among the Saudi population. The “Made in China” label is currently undergoing a shift in perception, as Chinese manufacturers work to improve the quality of their products and shed the reputation for low quality that has dogged them in the past. Interestingly, the “Made in Germany” label has a very similar story. Initially, the “Made in Germany” label was seen as a warning to British consumers about the inferior quality of German-made goods. However, German manufacturers responded by improving the quality of their products and marking them with the “Made in Germany” label, which soon became associated with quality and reliability. Today, the “Made in Germany” label is recognized around the world as a sign of high quality and precision engineering (Balderston, [1994](#)).

## 6.2 Cultural analysis

As stated on the official McDonald’s corporate website, Saudi Arabia ranks 19th worldwide in terms of the total number of McDonald’s restaurants operating within its territory. This is a significant achievement, especially considering that it is the only Middle Eastern nation to have made it into the top 20 (graph [6.6](#)). Although McDonald’s, a multinational corporation, is not directly representing the United States, it is difficult to ignore the fact that it serves as a significant advertising and cultural asset for the country. Moreover, the franchise’s popularity and success clearly demonstrate the population’s compatibility with the American way of life. According to Foley ([2018](#)), American influence in Saudi Arabia has spread rapidly in the twenty-first century, and the prevalence of American companies in the Saudi market is a clear indicator of the profound cultural connection between the two countries.

Analysis of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics data indicates that in 2020, the United States

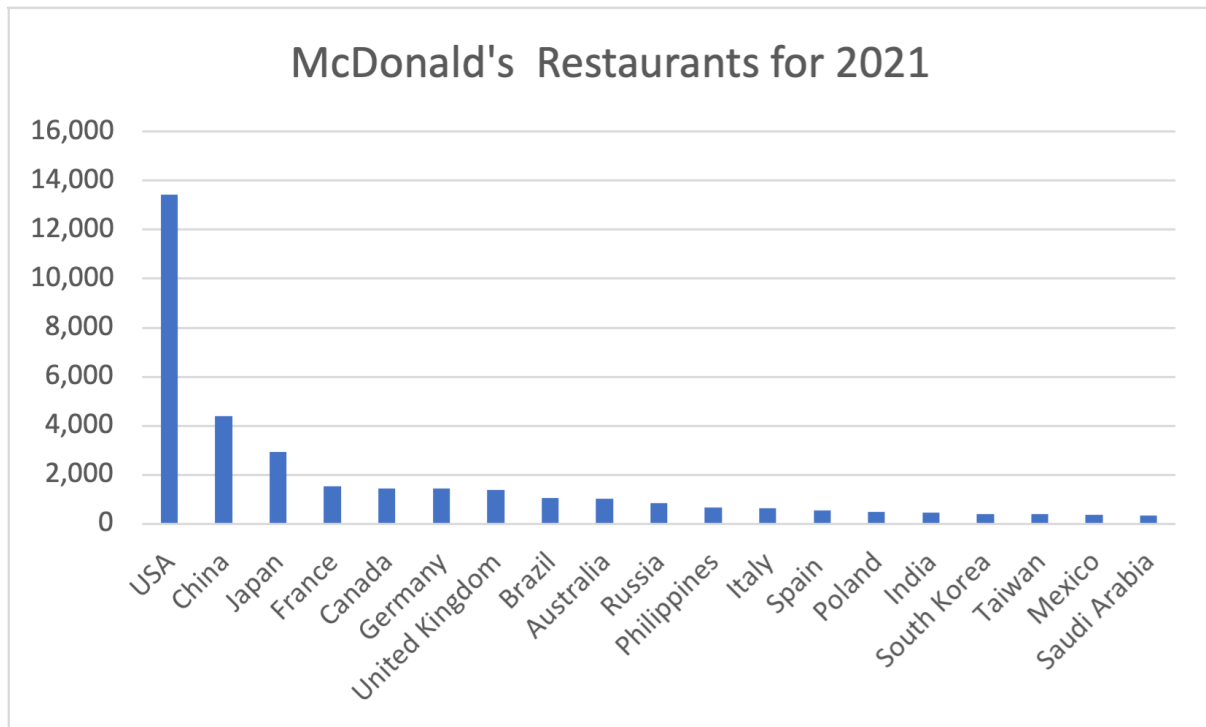


Figure 6.6: McDonald's Systemwide Restaurants - 2021

**Source:** Corporate McDonald's website, Oct 2022.

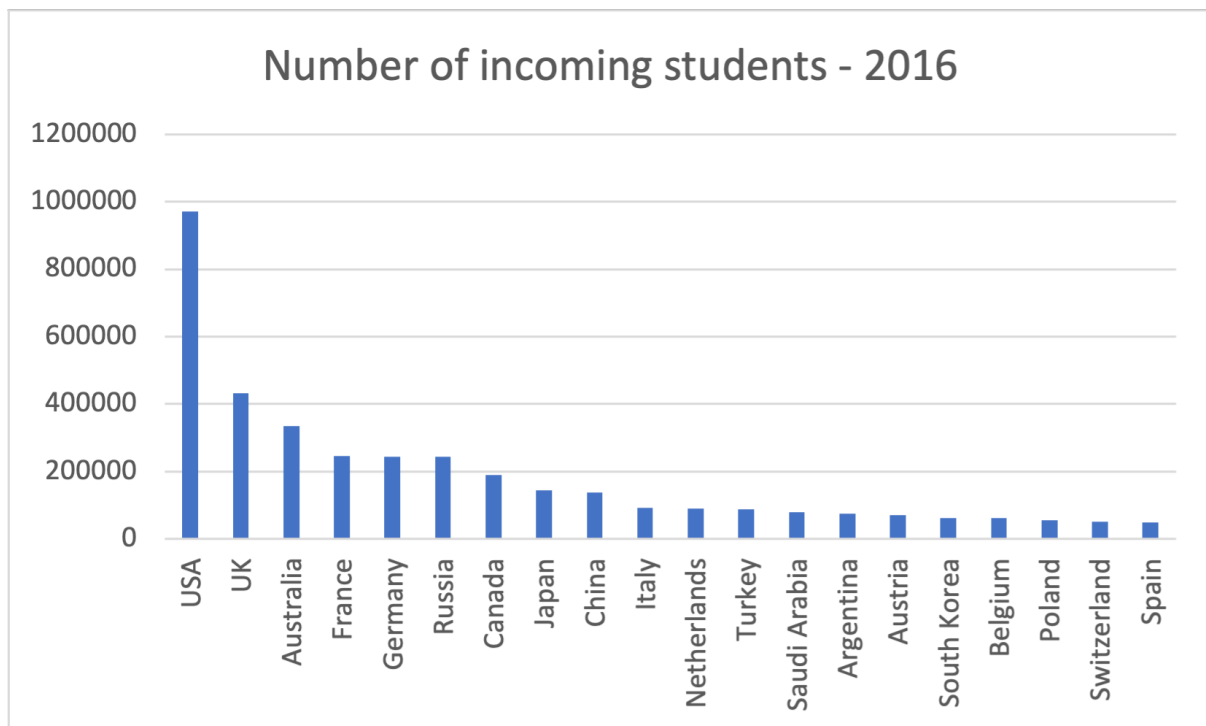


Figure 6.7: Number of incoming students - 2016

**Source:** UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Oct 2022.

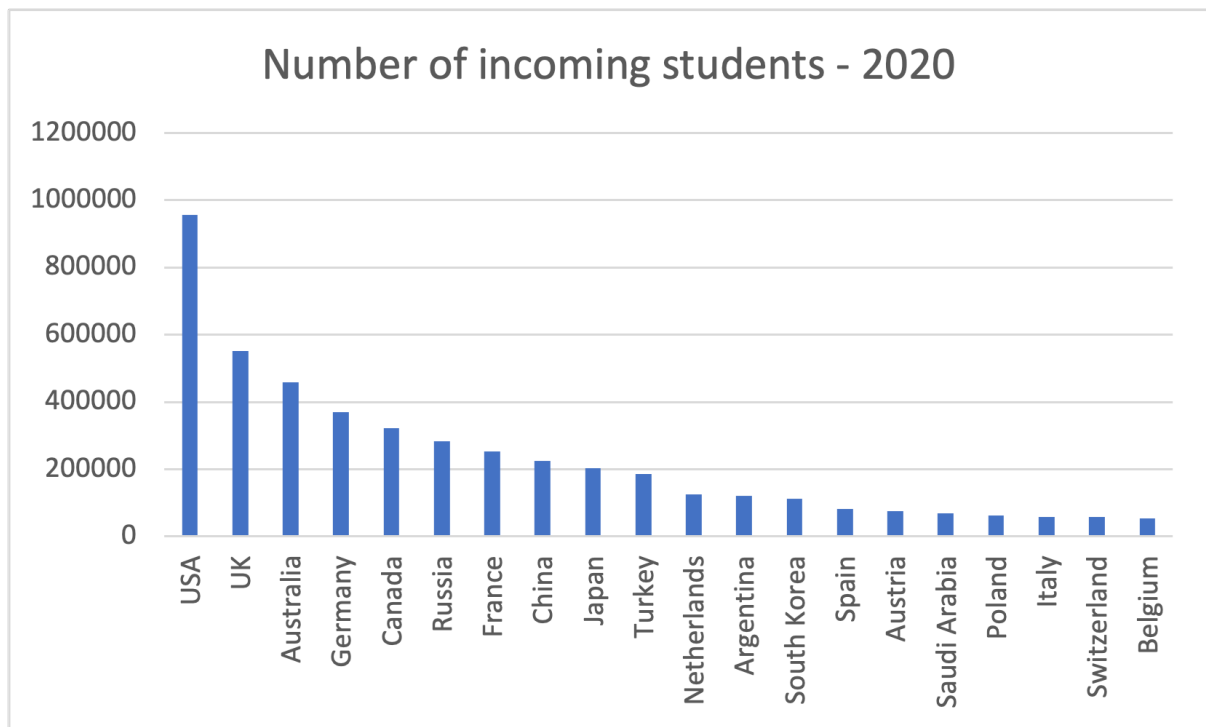


Figure 6.8: Number of incoming students - 2020

**Source:** UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Oct 2022.

remained the top destination for international students, with 957,475 individuals choosing to pursue their studies there, representing 15 percent of the global market (see figures 6.7 and 6.8). This trend is consistent with the data from the past five years and suggests that the U.S. will maintain its dominant position in the near future. The significant prominence of the U.S. in the global education market underscores its considerable influence in the field of education.

From 2016 to 2020, China saw a noteworthy 61.4 percent increase in the proportion of international students choosing to study in the country, indicating a significant rise in its popularity as a destination for foreign students (table 6.1). It is worth noting that this did not allow it to climb high in the rankings, and China was only able to improve its ranking by two positions. For the year 2020, China's share of international students accounts for only 3.6 percent. The graphs also show that other countries are increasing their internationalization policies as well. The only country that has slightly lost its international student share is the U.S. However, given the share of the education market as a whole, it cannot be said that the U.S. is losing its attractiveness. The reality is more likely the opposite. Other countries are only now increasing their potential, while the U.S. has steadily held its ground. Overall, China is growing in attractiveness and is likely to grow slowly but steadily. However, it is difficult to imagine a scenario where China competes with the U.S. in the near future. The data shows that the U.S. has secured its position

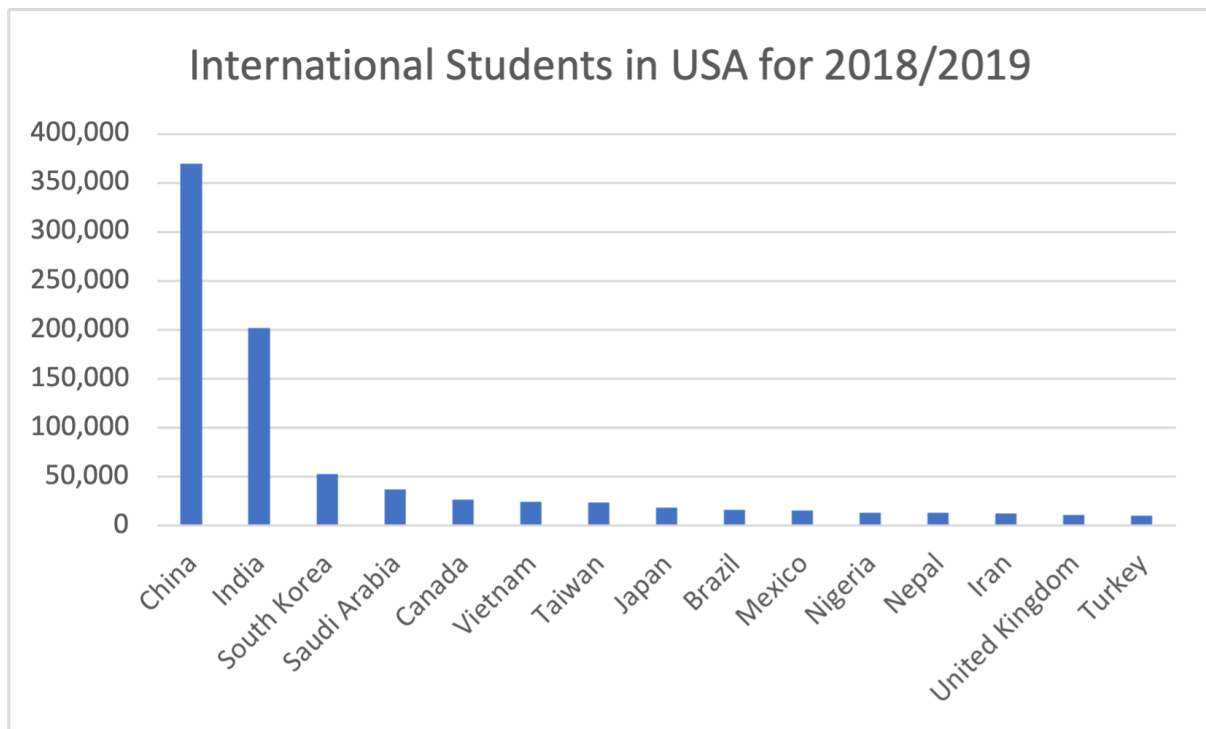


Figure 6.9: International Students in USA for 2018/2019 (Top 15).

**Source:** Open Doors data, Nov 2022.

without any opposition.

If we look at the data of international students by specific countries (graph 6.9, 6.10), it is immediately apparent that the U.S. educational market is more widespread, while the Chinese educational market consists more of Asian countries. Also immediately striking is the dominance of Chinese international students who have chosen the U.S. as their primary choice of destination. Additionally, Saudi Arabia is located in fourth place, ahead of Canada. This trend unmistakably illustrates the U.S. dominance not only in the Saudi cultural and educational sectors but also on a global scale, as exemplified by China's ranking position. Conversely, Saudi Arabia's omission from the top 15 countries with the largest population of international students studying in China indicates that the educational collaboration between the two nations was still in its nascent stages as of 2018 (graph 6.10). Remarkably, despite media discourse on the declining relations between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, as of 2021, Saudi Arabia ranks fifth in terms of the highest number of international students studying in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>. Of greater interest, as of the 2019/2020 academic year, only 10 American students were enrolled in academic programs in Saudi Arabia. In general, the statistics paint a similar picture to the aforementioned data, with the United States currently leading the way in the global and Saudi Arabian education markets. Meanwhile,

<sup>2</sup>[https://opendoorsdata.org/fact\\_sheets/saudi-arabia/](https://opendoorsdata.org/fact_sheets/saudi-arabia/)

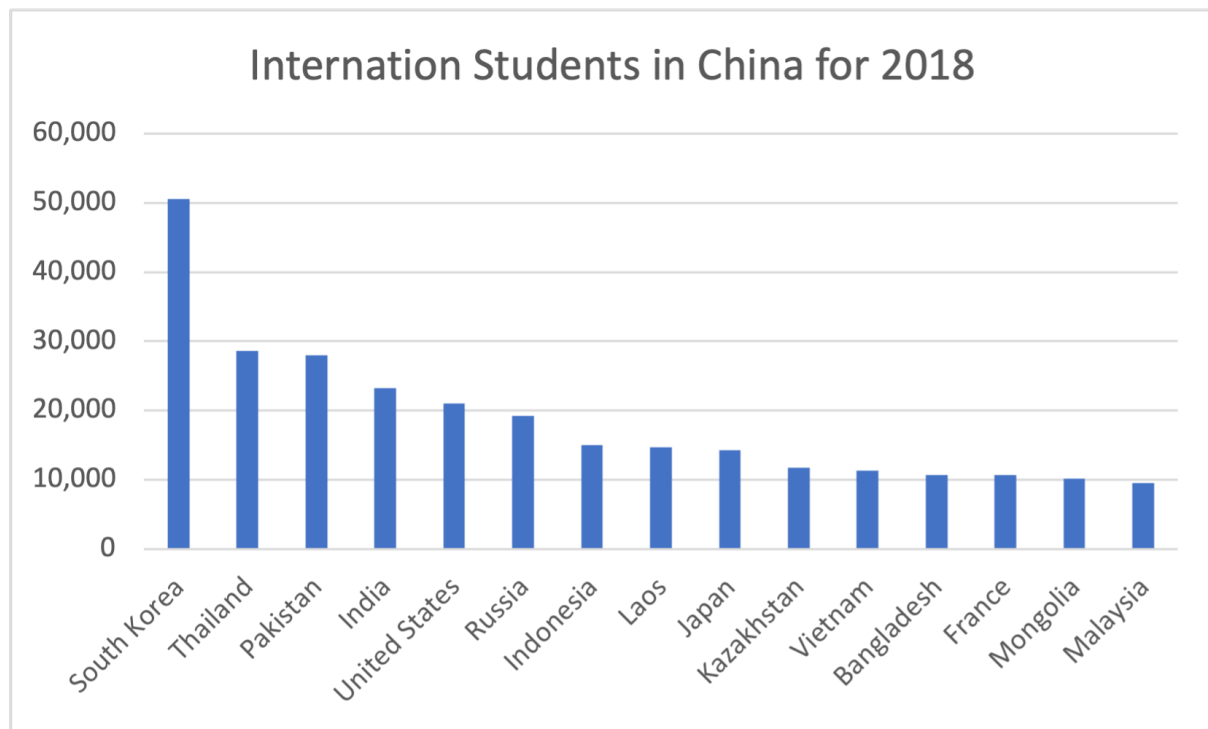


Figure 6.10: International Students in China for 2018 (Top 15).

**Source:** Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, Nov 2022.

China is slowly but steadily expanding its presence.

## Chapter 7

# Analysis of Qualitative data

As was emphasized at the beginning of the thesis, cultural cooperation is highlighted as one of the main targets of the Belt and Road Initiative. The main purpose of the master's thesis is to identify traces of cultural cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia. In order to do so, a one-month research visit was conducted in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. The city of Jeddah was chosen for a case study since it is:

1. a commercial capital of Saudi Arabia and the second-largest city in the Kingdom.
2. the second largest port in the Middle East.
3. home to the first and only Confucius Institute in Saudi Arabia.

The results of the field research will be presented in two categories: education and the public image of China in Saudi Arabia.

### 7.1 Education

Based on the literature review, it can be concluded that China's cultural policy primarily utilizes the educational system as its main channel. As the Liu (2019) stressed, China uses different approaches to strengthen cultural ties depending on the historical, territorial, and cultural backgrounds of a specific country or region. For example, in East Asia where China has a significant historical presence, there is a greater emphasis on language education as a means of promoting cultural understanding. In contrast, in more remote regions, more attention is paid to improving the understanding of Chinese culture in general. Saudi Arabia is considered to be among the group of countries that have limited cultural connections with China. Thus, it is logical to assume that at first China will primarily aim at presenting its image and increasing familiarity with its culture.

### 7.1.1 Confucius Institute of Jeddah University

The Confucius Institute plays a pivotal role in advancing cultural exchanges and fostering cooperation between China and other nations. According to Li et al. (2021), the Confucius Institutes under the Belt and Road Initiative serve a threefold purpose of introducing partner countries to Chinese culture, enhancing soft power, and facilitating foreign trade and economic cooperation. The agreement to open a Confucius Institute in Saudi Arabia was signed at the end of 2019. As stated earlier, the Confucius Institute does not function independently but in cooperation with other institutions. In the case of Saudi Arabia, the Confucius Institute signed an agreement with the University of Jeddah and will operate on their territory. Despite the agreement signed in December 2019, the Confucius Institute has not yet opened after two and a half years.

The Covid-19 pandemic was frequently cited as the primary reason why the Confucius Institute has yet to open. This is understandable when considering the timeline of the pandemic's emergence in relation to the formation of the Institute in Jeddah. It had been less than a month from the agreement to establish the Confucius Institute in Jeddah when the WHO declared the Covid-19 pandemic. It is worth highlighting that the continued inclusion of the Confucius Institute in the University of Jeddah's agenda suggests that it remains a crucial component of their plans. Also, as will be emphasized later, the Confucius Institute is funded directly by the Confucius Institute Headquarters in China. Chinese teacher at King Abdulaziz University, Li Bowen, mentioned that the Covid-19 pandemic made it impossible to send teachers to Saudi Arabia. Thus, it forced the Confucius Institute Headquarters to put the launch on hold since it carries a significant financial burden which may not be justifiable given the current circumstances. Although the institute launch was put on hold, some progress can be already observed. The University of Jeddah was the first institution in Saudi Arabia to launch a Chinese language program for its students. Notably, this initiative emerged at the same time as the agreement to open a Confucius Institute was signed. It is logical to assume that these initiatives are closely related and flow from each other.

Despite the ongoing pandemic of Covid-19, the plan of introducing a Chinese language course was not written off. Not only was the course included in the university curriculum it also became compulsory for all first-year students. the University of Jeddah has made considerable investments to create this course, underscoring its seriousness. According to Douglas Steedman, the former Chinese teacher of the newly established Chinese course at Jeddah University:



Figure 7.1: Translated sign at the university of Jeddah.

*“[...] things happen quickly here [in the University of Jeddah] and also acquiescently slowly, so there is a momentum, and it is in place now, and I cannot see our university just stopping the program.” (D. Steedman, personal communication, May 23, 2022)*

We can assume that the course is not experimental or demonstrative, and the fact that it was launched at the very peak of Covid-19 shows the seriousness of the universities intentions (figure 7.1).

However, despite visible progress in educational initiatives, there are significant limitations in the structure and sustainability of these initiatives. It has been two years since the Chinese course was founded at Jeddah University. During this time, there has been no progress regarding the development of this course. While the course has been made mandatory for graduation, it primarily serves as an introductory-level program. There is no gradation of levels. The course is three hours a week, and there is no continuation at the end of the course. After completing

the course, students continue their studies and no longer have any options to study the Chinese language. Furthermore, the course is offered only in an online format. Among all the teachers involved in this course, there are no teachers from China. It could be argued that Covid-19 is to blame for the current state of affairs, and to some extent, this is likely true. However, given that the course is conducted online, it would have been logical to invite teachers from China, as it was done at King Abdulaziz University (will be discussed later). These factors collectively suggest that the course is quite formal in nature, raising questions about its long-term effectiveness and sustainability. During the interview, Mr. Steedman pointed out that the timing of the launch of the Chinese course was unfortunate, as it happened to coincide with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

*“[...] as it was closer to something actually happening [closer to the launch of the Chinese course], the pandemic hit, and it was almost exactly right at the time when we were going to introduce the program. I do believe that the initial plan was to bring over a lot of teachers from China and qualified teachers and specialists, and that was no longer possible to do, but the momentum was already in progress, and they [the management that was responsible for launching the course] were stuck on what to do with this. Because when you put in a mandatory first-year class, and it is in a GPA, it is a big deal, and it is not like an option or an elective class. [...] The book was already chosen, everything was already set, the documents for the students in Arabic, everything was already there.” (D. Steedman, personal communication, May 23, 2022)*

Upon reflection of Mr. Steedman’s response, I came to an opinion that Jeddah University invested heavily in the Chinese course, and even the pandemic did not halt the project. It is also apparent that the university remains dedicated to expanding the course into a full-fledged program. However, due to travel restrictions and safety concerns related to the pandemic, particularly with regards to travel from China, the Institute had to resort to a temporary online format which has been in place for several years.

The substantial investment made by the institute into the Chinese course indicates that it is unlikely to be discontinued in the foreseeable future. However, the key question is not its mere existence, but rather its effectiveness, sustainability, and student interest. While there are valid reasons for the course’s limited success, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial to objectively evaluate the situation. Throughout my research at the University of Jeddah, I formed the impression that the Chinese course was more of a decorative addition to the curriculum rather than a well-designed, purposeful program. Although the inclusion of Chinese language course into the university’s curriculum has the potential to foster cultural ties, the

implementation at Jeddah University appears to prioritize appeasing higher authorities rather than developing a comprehensive course. In contrast, the English course at the same university has a well-established department with guest native teachers, and a full-fledged program. According to Mr. Bowen, a Chinese teacher at King Abdulaziz University, although English remains the top priority for students, Chinese language has the potential to compete for the second spot among additional foreign languages. Just ten years ago, this was hard to imagine.

### **7.1.2 Chinese culture and art exchange center and Chinese language degree at King Abdulaziz University**

King Abdulaziz University serves as another intriguing example. In 2018, the university established the Chinese Culture and Art Exchange Center, which formally fulfills the same objectives as the Confucius Institute, specifically, facilitating cultural exchanges and cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia, but simultaneously, it operates independently of the Confucius Institute. During my trip, one of my goals was to understand the difference between the King Abdulaziz Chinese culture and art exchange center and the Confucius Institute at the University of Jeddah and to find common ground between them. Li Bowen, a Chinese language teacher at King University provided valuable insight into the difference between the two. As explained by him, the initial step towards establishing a Confucius Institute in a foreign country involves obtaining approval from the Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban), an organization closely associated with the Chinese Ministry of Education. After that, the institute in China and the foreign institute need to sign a cooperation agreement. In the case of Saudi Arabia, such an agreement was signed between the Shandong Normal University in China and the University of Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. Hanban is responsible for the financial component. It dispatches teachers, provides them with accommodation, pays their salaries, and develops the study program. The host university provides teaching facilities in return. Unlike the Confucius Institute, the Chinese Center at King Abdulaziz University is not funded by Hanban, and instead relies solely on the university's financial resources to cover its expenses. Therefore, despite having comparable goals, the Chinese Culture and Art Exchange Center at King Abdulaziz University and the Confucius Institute at Jeddah University are structurally different.

Unfortunately, when I tried to visit the Chinese Center at King Abdulaziz University, found it to be closed. According to the staff at the former center building, the Chinese Center at King Abdulaziz University has been closed since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and has remained inaccessible to visitors. In contrast to the Confucius Institute at the University of Jeddah, the Chinese Culture and Art Exchange Center at King Abdulaziz University demon-

strated a sustained operational presence due to its opening one year before the pandemic in 2018. One thing they have in common is that they were both influenced by Covid-19. Later, I had the opportunity to meet with Dr. Othman, the Vice Dean for Study Affairs at King Abdulaziz University, and asked him about the reasons for the closure of the Chinese Center. Dr. Othman confirmed that the center was closed due to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic but assured me that it was a temporary measure and not a permanent one. More interestingly, he told me about the recent opening of the Chinese language bachelor's degree program and shared informative documents related to cooperation between King Abdulaziz University and China. One of these documents is a booklet that serves as an introductory guide to the Chinese language learning opportunities provided by King Abdulaziz University. On the first page we can find an introductory speech by the university president Abdulrahman Obaid Al-Youbi, where he emphasizes that learning Chinese is a bridge that will strengthen commercial and cultural ties between Saudi Arabia and China<sup>1</sup>.

The booklet also describes the main goals of the Chinese Center at King Abdulaziz University, which are to provide opportunities to learn the Chinese language as well as to introduce Chinese culture to Saudi audiences. To achieve these goals, the center offers different Chinese language courses for different age and professional groups. During the interview with Turki, a student who is pursuing a bachelor's degree in Chinese language at King Abdulaziz University, he mentioned that he had completed a five-week Chinese course at the center before enrolling in the degree program, which provides evidence of the center's active operation before the pandemic.

The Chinese Center at King Abdulaziz University is also the only accredited center for the HSK exam, which is essentially a Chinese language proficiency test for non-native speakers. It is noteworthy that in addition to learning the language, the center offers cultural programs that include the study of Chinese calligraphy, tea culture, paper tearing, and face painting. Furthermore, the center provides educational tourism opportunities to China, allowing visitors to learn about Chinese culture by visiting universities, museums, and monuments.

While the center's activities appear promising on paper and the initiative is aimed at strengthening cultural relations between China and Saudi Arabia, the center is currently closed. Dr. Othman indicated that the center's reopening is not expected at this time due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. However, Dr. Othman assured that the center has not closed completely, and its re-opening is in the plans of the university, as soon as the Covid-19 situation will allow it. Li Bowen, the Chinese teacher for the bachelor program at King Abdulaziz University, mentioned that the center currently does not have a specific physical location. He explained that

---

<sup>1</sup><https://studentaffairs.kau.edu.sa/Pages-274236.aspx>

before the pandemic, the center had its own office, but due to the situation, everything shifted to an online format.

Of greater significance, however, is the launch of the bachelor's degree in Chinese language in 2019, which marked the first program of its kind in Saudi Arabia. According to Mr. Bowen, the program began in September 2019, and there are currently three generations of students who are enrolled in this degree. The department has a total enrollment of 80 students, comprising both male and female groups. Mr. Bowen reported that the department staff included seven teachers from China. However, all of these teachers were currently in China and conducting their classes online as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Not surprisingly, the course was transferred completely to an online format since the pandemic started. Turki confirmed that during an eight-month period, he had been in contact with only three teachers, and had direct communication with only two of them. One of the two teachers with whom he had direct contact was identified as Mr. Bowen.

It is worth noting that all of the teachers, including Mr. Bowen, have plans to return to Saudi Arabia in September 2022. The degree is a standard four-year program where at the end of each semester students must take the HSK Chinese language exam. At the end of the study, students must have a minimum level of HSK 4, which is the equivalent of B1. By comparison, in eight months of study, Turki was able to get HSK 3.

Additionally, it is noteworthy that the university recruits approximately 15 students for the women's group and 15 for the men's group on an annual basis. I do not have an explanation about why such a limit was set, but most likely, it has to do with the number of available teachers, which does not allow for an increase in the number of students.

Dr. Othman provided me with a link to the faculty website, which enabled me to download the study plan for a Chinese bachelor's degree. According to this plan, students spend the first four semesters mainly studying the Chinese language. Starting from the fifth semester, students deepen their understanding of Chinese culture by attending mandatory classes such as "Modern Chinese civilization", "Modern Chinese literature," "Chinese Fiction and drama," "Chinese in the Press and media," and "Chinese for tourism." The Chinese language course at King Abdulaziz University has an entirely different approach compared to the one offered at Jeddah University. The program offered at King Abdulaziz University offers students a diverse and gradual approach to studying and engaging with Chinese culture. According to Turki, a student enrolled in the program, during the second semester, he solely focused on learning the Chinese language, whereas he confirmed that he will have the opportunity to enroll in other programs during future semesters.

Additionally, Mr. Bowen noted that after the first year, students can choose to continue their Chinese major or switch to a different one. In order to be admitted to a Chinese program, students must successfully complete three levels of intensive Chinese courses. However, upon reviewing the study plan that was accessible through the university website, it was discovered that the plan only comprises of two levels of Chinese, with no mention of a third level. It is unclear why such contradictions exist between the admission requirements and the study plan, both of which are available on the same website.

In the event that a student fails to pass the first level of the Chinese course, they will be automatically redirected to another department within the arts and humanities faculty, such as English or French. Mr. Bowen also stated that there are currently few agreements between the ministries of education in Saudi Arabia and China, so there are no exchange programs available for students. Nonetheless, students are eligible to apply for various types of Chinese scholarships, on the condition that they successfully pass the HSK 4 exam, which is equivalent to B1 level proficiency. According to the booklet which was published by King Abdulaziz University the Chinese center has a broad network of partnerships with fifty Chinese universities, and there are various scholarship programs available for students, company employees, and teachers <sup>2</sup>. Turki acknowledged his familiarity with these programs, and confirmed the availability of a scholarship that covers all expenses, including accommodation and meals. He intends to take advantage of this opportunity once he attains the necessary language proficiency level.

Although the Chinese culture and exchange center at King Abdulaziz University appears to be more advanced than that of Jeddah University, there are inconsistencies between the statements made and the observable facts. Despite the optimistic predictions made by Mr. Bowen and Dr. Othman, the office for the program was closed “temporarily,” and all related activities were shifted online. When attempting to gather information about the center on the university website, only a blank page with the name of the center is displayed, which can make it impossible to obtain the necessary details.

The Chinese bachelor degree program at King Abdulaziz University presents a more compelling foundation for exploration. The program has a dedicated section on the faculty website that includes a detailed study plan and admission requirements. Nevertheless, during a discussion with Turki, it was revealed that even after eight months of studies, his classes were limited to three-hour online Chinese language classes, and there was no requirement to attend the university physically. However, this contradicts the program curriculum available on the University website, which mandates second-semester students to attend other classes such as

---

<sup>2</sup><https://studentaffairs.kau.edu.sa/Pages-274236.aspx>

Islamic Culture, Arabic Writing, and Human Behavior Skills, for a total of 14 hours per week.

Furthermore, the Chinese language program at King Abdulaziz University lacks a dedicated physical location. The Chinese language program is affiliated with the “Department of European Languages and Literature,” which causes uncertainty about how Chinese language relates to the department. There is only one room allocated for Chinese language students, and the HSK exam is held there. I was unable to find any Chinese teachers in the teaching staff lists posted on the walls. The head of the department confirmed that the Chinese language program is part of their department but presently lacks a designated location due to the Covid-19 pandemic. He also mentioned that the department is planning to change its name to the Department of Global Languages and Literature in the near future.

During my interview with Turki, he stated that his group started with 15 students, but ultimately only nine remained. He also disclosed that the first generation group only consisted of five students. Based on these statements, it can be inferred that there appears to be a low level of interest among male students towards the Chinese Bachelor’s program. Mr. Bowen mentioned that the women’s group was larger than the men’s group, but I could not verify this information.

It is unclear whether there will be changes in the post-Covid-19 world, but there is unanimous optimism among the experts I interviewed that educational initiatives will continue to develop between China and Saudi Arabia. Mr. Bowen stated that Chinese language development in Saudi Arabia commenced only in 2019, while other universities had already introduced English programs considerably earlier. He firmly believes that the cultural collaboration between the two nations will continue to flourish, as the Middle East and Saudi Arabia, in particular, play a vital role for China.

## **7.2 Chinas image in Saudi Arabia**

The easiest way to identify traces of Chinese and American culture in Saudi Arabia is to delve into the daily life of local people. An essential part of the research was field observations which were conducted by exploring entertainment spaces in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

### **7.2.1 China’s image in shopping malls**

In Saudi Arabia, malls are more than just shopping centers. They are hubs of entertainment, culture, and cuisine. The size of shopping malls goes beyond what we are used to seeing in Europe. In comparison, the Mall of Arabia, which is located in Jeddah, is the world’s 41st largest in terms of square footage. No single mall from Europe is listed in the top 50. Given

the climate, which reached an average of 40 degrees during my stay, shopping centers are the central place to spend free time. In Saudi Arabia, the average consumer can meet almost all his needs there. Undoubtedly, malls hold a vast cultural influence. During my trip, I visited the four largest shopping centers in Jeddah (Mall of Arabia, Red Sea Mall, Al Salaam Mall, and JamJoom Center) to trace the extent of China's presence in the Saudi market.

I decided not to review the Mall of Arabia, Red Sea Mall, and Al Salaam Mall separately since they are very similar in design. The JamJoom Center, however, deserves particular attention because it is the oldest mall in Jeddah. It is also known as China Mall because of the variety of Chinese goods and brands it is filled with.

The Mall of Arabia, the Red Sea Mall, and the Al Salaam Mall are examples of modern shopping centers that are very similar in their layout. They are divided into three zones, which can overlap or be on different levels. The first zone features a shopping area with different brands, the second zone contains the restaurant court, and the third zone contains the entertainment area. The range of brands present in Saudi Arabia is comparable to those in Europe, with a predominant presence of European and American brands in most stores. However, I observed the absence of any Chinese brand representatives in these shopping malls. It is also worth emphasizing that, despite the European-American dominance, we can see some brands from Japan and Korea (figure 7.2 ,figure 7.3). To what extent this can serve as an indicator also remains a question because, according to the anonymous expert , even in China, the Chinese population exhibits a preference for Western brands over domestic ones. Historically, Chinese brands can't win the competition even at home, let alone in other countries.

A similar picture can be observed in the restaurant industry with the apparent dominance of the American food networks (figure 7.4). For comparison, Saudi Arabia currently holds the leading position in the Middle East with respect to the number of McDonald's restaurants, and ranks 18th globally (graph 6.6). The only Chinese restaurant I could find belongs to P. F. Chang's restaurant group, which, although it specializes in Asian and Chinese food, is an American-based company.

The entertainment sector is also out of the zone of Chinese influence. One of the most famous movie theater chains- Muvi Cinemas, which offers the widest selection of films, was not showing a single film that was directly or indirectly related to China at the time of my stay. Not surprisingly, the Saudi movie market is filled with Hollywood movies and blockbusters.

The Jamjoom Commercial Center provides another captivating illustration. As one of the first shopping malls in Saudi Arabia, it has been converted into a local China market or China Town with a variety of Chinese goods and brands. Since arriving in Jeddah, the most frequently



Figure 7.2: Korean shop in Al Salaam Mall.



Figure 7.3: Japanese shop in Red Sea Mall.



Figure 7.4: American steakhouse in Red Sea Mall.

provided recommendation has been to visit the Jamjoom Commercial Center. It came as a surprise to discover that the Jamjoom Commercial Center was almost entirely empty. The term 'empty' can be applied to both the dearth of visitors as well as the limited number of operational stores. At first, it seemed to me that the center was closed and under renovation, because there were obvious signs of repair, and the access to the second floor was blocked entirely. Nevertheless, despite the limited number of stores, the employees assured me that the center remained open to the public. I could not find any connection between the center and China, except for echoes of the interior and some of the remaining decorations from the old stores (figure 7.5).

The situation with the JamJoom Commercial center reminded me of the story of China Mart, the 80 million dollars and 100,000 square-meter shopping center which was opened in 2010 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Despite the scale of the project, the center did not arouse consumer interest and remained empty most days of the week (Foley, 2018). We can trace a similar scenario with the JamJoom center, but we have to keep in mind that the center was one of the very first in Jeddah and could not have survived that long without consumer interest. I could not find the official reason for the center's sharp decline, as the center's hotline and website were not working. After numerous conversations with local residents, I understood that the popularity decline has been going on for several years. Several locals also mentioned that the center was undergoing renovations, which was difficult to comprehend, given that some stores were still operational. However, the most prevalent explanation provided was that the center could not withstand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Suppose we add the fact that most of the stores at the time were represented by Chinese companies. In that case, we can imagine a scenario where the stores were completely cut off from supplies and faced an immediate decline in customer activity. On



Figure 7.5: Closed Chinese store in Jamjoom Center

the other hand, “Western” mall models survived the crisis and are now on the rise. Based on the opinions of locals, the possible reasons for JamJoom decline are connected to Covid-19 but were taking place even before that. The rise and variety of western-style shopping malls in the last ten years played a crucial role in the decline of JamJoom Center. As Foley (2018) wrote in 2017, Saudis still understand the modern world through the American English-language prism, and they do not consider Chinese products comparable to Western products. This conclusion remains relevant and there are no observable indications of a shift in this trend.

### 7.2.2 Jeddah Seasons

Jeddah Seasons is an annual summer festival lasting 60 days and is the most significant cultural and entertainment event in Saudi Arabia. In 2022, the festival consisted of about 2,800 activities that attracted a record 6 million visitors during its two months of operation (Jennifer, 2022). The plan for the 2-month event was announced in advance and was available on the official festival website. Fundamentally, the festival epitomizes the city’s cultural scene, representing an exceptional platform for observing its external cultural influences<sup>3</sup>. It is worth starting with the fact that I could not find a single activity that was either connected or related to China’s culture in the two-month program. On the other hand, the broad array of American cuisine, movie and comic book characters, as well as the event’s sponsors, most of whom are US-based companies, undeniably reveal the locals’ affinity towards the American lifestyle.

One of the four international exhibitions that were part of the festival was Stan Lee’s Comic Con<sup>4</sup>, where participants were invited to dress up as their favorite character from the American comic book universe and explore the world of American movies, comic books, and fiction (figure 7.6).

The fact that cultural bonds between Saudi Arabia and China have been exceptionally robust throughout history is widely acknowledged. As a general trend, in the era of globalization, many countries tend to adhere to the American lifestyle model. What astonished me was the rapid proliferation of Japanese and Korean culture, which has permeated a country as distant as Saudi Arabia in a relatively short period. In the first case, the organizers created a so-called “Anime village” (figure 7.7). According to the organizers, this exhibition is the world’s first of its kind, offering visitors a chance to immerse themselves in the world of Japanese culture. With over 300 events featuring anime, Japanese cuisine, artists, calligraphy, and even a Tokyo street exhibit, attendees have the opportunity to experience what it’s like to stroll through the streets of Japan.

---

<sup>3</sup><https://jeddahseason.sa/>

<sup>4</sup>Stan Lee was an American comic book writer, editor, publisher, and producer.



Figure 7.6: Jeddah Seasons Festival 2022

**Source:** Jeddah Seasons Instagram page, Oct 2022.



Figure 7.7: Anime Festival, Jeddah Seasons 2022

**Source:** Jeddah Seasons Instagram page, Oct 2022.

In the second case, the organizers created a festival specifically dedicated to K-pop<sup>5</sup>, a genre of popular music originating from South Korea that has gained tremendous popularity worldwide. In a promotional post, the organizers describe the event as “an unmissable innovative Festival for any K-Pop fan, where you will indulge in the Korean culture on a brand new level.” Upon reviewing the official Instagram page of the Jeddah Seasons festival, it becomes evident that a significant proportion of the posts are focused on concerts featuring Korean guest stars, which are attracting higher levels of engagement and follower activity than other festival events (figure 7.8, figure 7.9).

Thus, it is evident that China lags behind other countries in terms of cultural influence. As pointed out by Liu (2019), while K-POP and anime have gained global recognition, Chinese culture’s influence outside of China is limited to its diaspora. Saudi Arabia serves as a clear example of this phenomenon. At present, China has not been able to reverse this trend.

---

<sup>5</sup>K-pop, or Korean pop music, refers to a genre of popular music originating from South Korea, characterized by its fusion of various musical elements from around the world, including electronic, hip-hop, and RB. The genre has gained a significant following worldwide, particularly among young audiences (Han, 2017).



Figure 7.8: K-POP concert, Jeddah Seasons 2022

**Source:** Jeddah Seasons Instagram page, Oct 2022.



Figure 7.9: Korean Food Court, Jeddah Seasons 2022

**Source:** Jeddah Seasons Instagram page, Oct 2022.

## Chapter 8

# Conclusion

Since the launch of the One Belt and Road Initiative, the relations between Saudi Arabia and China have shown solid and steady growth. In 2016, countries signed a comprehensive strategic partnership, marking the highest possible cooperation in terms of China's diplomatic standards. China is Saudi Arabia's first trading partner, ranking first in terms of exports since 2013. In turn, Saudi Arabia is China's leading oil supplier, accounting for 18 percent of China's total crude oil imports. Overall, trade between the China and Saudi Arabia was worth over 80 billion U.S. dollars in 2021. Despite the widespread perception that oil is the reason for the rapid development of the relationship between China and Saudi Arabia, this is not entirely true. Undoubtedly, the energy sector remains the dominant branch of cooperation between countries. However, in recent years, there has been a diversification of China's investments in other sectors, such as metals, real estate, transport, and utilities, while energy investments also remain on a high level.

From a diplomatic point of view, since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, the countries have held five high-level meetings involving the leaders of the two countries. The most recent was the Chinese president's visit to Saudi Arabia on Dec. 8, 2022. Each visit was accompanied by a breakthrough package of agreements, and the fact that the last visit of President Xi to Saudi Arabia was his third overseas state visit since the COVID-19 pandemic started, indicates the scale of importance of Sino-Saudi cooperation.

The growing economic relationship between China and Saudi Arabia is unquestionable and has been widely analyzed in academic circles. The cultural aspect, however, raises much more questions. One of the five cooperation priorities of the Belt and Road Initiative is strengthening of "people-to-people bond". In other words, China has set the development of cultural exchanges between partner countries as one of the critical goals of its project. However, the success of this agenda item is far inferior to the success of the others.

Although China has repeatedly stressed the importance of education in maintaining the “people to people” aspect since the creation of the BRI, the spark of educational cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia only began to develop after the prince’s Mohammad bin Salman visit to China in 2019. The most significant step was the inclusion of the Chinese language in the entire educational plan at all levels. Since the visit of the Saudi Prince to China, seven universities have opened Chinese programs. Prior to 2019, the Chinese program was exclusively offered at King Saud University in Riyadh, however, from 2019 until the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, Saudi Arabia has witnessed a substantial surge in Chinese initiatives and programs. Universities started to open programs and centers, agreement to open the first Confucius Institute was signed in this period too. There is no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic has frozen this surge of cooperation. It is important to note that even though the pandemic was still ongoing during my visit to Saudi Arabia, no program or center was officially closed and continued to operate, even with minimal output. The very fact that all teachers were planning to return in September for the start of the new semester at King Abdulaziz University demonstrates the potential for the continued growth of educational cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia. However, while I support the optimism of the experts with whom I was able to talk, we must remain objective. In the three years since the cooperative spark took place, the Chinese language is very far from attracting the interest of Saudi students. Sometimes I had an impression that the program was rather “formal”, as seen in the Jeddah University case, or that there was simply a lack of student interest, as the case at King Abdulaziz University demonstrates. Since the program launched, only 80 current students have been enrolled in the bachelor’s program at King Abdulaziz University.

On the other hand, English has long been entrenched in the Saudi educational system and is an integral part of any program, be it secondary or high education. There is also no doubt that the English language is still a priority for students. China does not aim to challenge the dominance of the English language but instead seeks to coexist with it, a stance that extends beyond the educational system.

In everyday life, the cultural influence of China is minimal. Apart from the sudden popularity of the Chinese automotive industry, which can be somewhat attributed to business success, China has failed to build a sustainable cultural channel to Saudi Arabia. The local population is tied to the American market and values, which have been built and shaped over the years. Clearly, it does not make sense to compete and rebuild this market, and it does not seem to be part of China’s plans. As noted by an expert in an anonymous interview, China cannot win the competition with the Western brands at home, let alone abroad. In Saudi Arabia, China has

pursued a policy of interaction in Saudi Arabia, focusing on government officials and utilizing effective methods such as education. How effective and sustainable this path will remain a mystery.

The Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly slowed down China's cultural policy. The inclusion of the Chinese language in the national curriculum represents a crucial and valuable resource for Saudi Arabia. However, for this resource to be fully utilized, there is a need for adequate tools and support. Despite the potential benefits, the current cultural programs aimed at promoting Chinese language and culture in Saudi Arabia are having only a minimal impact. This limitation may pose a significant obstacle to the further development of relations between China and Saudi Arabia, regardless of the underlying reasons.

It is logical to assume that the strengthening of economic ties will also develop cultural relations. However, as it stands right now, there is a growing gap between economic and cultural development. Despite the ongoing discourse surrounding the diminishing role of the U.S. in Saudi Arabia, given the extent of its cultural dominance, it is difficult to conceive of a scenario in which the U.S. would lose its influence in the region.

We can also admit, that China has been successful in maintaining its soft power strategy despite a relatively low level of cultural influence in Saudi Arabia. One factor that has contributed to China's attractiveness in the eyes of Saudi Arabia is its economic power. With Saudi Arabia looking to diversify its economy and reduce its reliance on oil exports, China's economic success has been particularly appealing.

Although China's cultural exports have been gaining popularity in Saudi Arabia, the pace of growth has been slow. Nonetheless, China has made efforts to promote its language and culture in Saudi Arabia through initiatives such as the establishment of Confucius Institutes and Chinese educational programs.

China's political soft power has also been attractive to Saudi Arabia, as both countries share a commitment to non-interventionist foreign policies, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. While China's adherence to these principles has not been consistent in all regions, such as in the Asia Pacific region, it has been consistently observed in the case of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, China has sustainably increasing its role in the Middle East through the Belt and Road Initiative, which is built on soft power foundation.

While the concept of China's projection of purely soft power may be subject to some contradictions, as discussed in the theory section, this study argues that in the context of Sino-Saudi relations, it is appropriate to view China as a soft power projector. This assertion is backed up by the analysis of China's economic, cultural, and political influence in Saudi Arabia that was

presented in previous sections.

# Bibliography

- Al-Kibsi, G., Woetzel, J., Isherwood, T., Khan, J., Mischke, J., & Noura, H. (2015). Saudi arabia beyond oil: The investment and productivity transformation. *McKinsey Global Institute*.
- Al-Sudairi, M. T. A. (2017). China as the new frontier for islamic da‘wah: The emergence of a saudi china-oriented missionary impulse. *Journal of Arabian studies*, 7(2), 225–246.
- Al-Tamimi, N. (2017). The rise of china: Beijing’s core interests and possible arab repercussions. *Contemporary Arab affairs*, 10(4), 596–622.
- Balderston, T. (1994). Made in germany: The corporate identity of a nation. *Business History*, 36(3), 118–120.
- Becard, D. S. R., & Filho, P. M. (2019). Chinese cultural diplomacy: Instruments in china’s strategy for international insertion in the 21st century. *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*, 62(1), 1.
- Berger, M. S., Plas, E., Huygens, C., Akrimi, N., & Schneider, C. (2008). *Bridge the gap, or mind the gap? culture in western-arab relations*. Clingendael.
- Cao, Q. (2011). The language of soft power: Mediating socio-political meanings in the chinese media. *Critical arts*, 25(1), 7–24.
- Chen, J., Shu, M., & Wen, S. (2018). Aligning china’s belt and road initiative with saudi arabia’s 2030 vision: Opportunities and challenges. *China quarterly of international strategic studies*, 4(3), 363–379.
- Cho, Y. N., & Jeong, J. H. (2008). China’s soft power: Discussions, resources, and prospects. *Asian survey*, 48(3), 453–472.
- Chong, A., & Pham, Q. M. (2020). Critical perspectives from outside china on the belt and road initiative: An introduction. *Critical reflections on china’s belt and road initiative* (pp. 1–20). Springer Singapore.
- Clarke, D. (2020). Cultural diplomacy. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*.
- Cummings, M. C. (2003). *Cultural diplomacy and the united states government: A survey*. Center for Arts; Culture.

- d'Hooghe, I. (2021). China's bri and international cooperation in higher education and research: A symbiotic relationship. *Global perspectives on china's belt and road initiative* (pp. 35–58). Amsterdam University Press.
- Dorraj, M. (2020). The belt and road initiative and china's relations with iran and saudi arabia: A delicate balancing act. *Critical reflections on china's belt and road initiative* (pp. 125–138). Springer Singapore.
- Duan, X., & Aldamer, S. (2022). The saudi arabia–china relationship at a crossroad: A neoclassical realist analysis. *Asian Politics & Policy*, 14(1), 114–128.
- Edeh, E. C., & Zhao, C. C. (2021). Cultural practices as part of socioeconomic development strategies in one belt one road: A conceptual insight. *East Asia (Piscataway, N.J.)*
- Evron, Y. (2019). The challenge of implementing the belt and road initiative in the middle east: Connectivity projects under conditions of limited political engagement. *The China quarterly (London)*, 237, 196–216.
- Foley, S. (2018). Obor and the dawn of a new era in sino-saudi ties. *China's presence in the middle east* (1st ed., pp. 67–87). Routledge.
- Foreign Languages Press. (2019). The belt and road initiative. progress, contributions and prospects. Available online: <http://www.chinagoabroad.com/en/article/the-belt-and-road-initiative-progress-contributions-and-prospects>.
- Fulton, J. (2020a). China-saudi arabia relations through the '1+ 2+ 3' cooperation pattern. *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 14(4), 516–527.
- Fulton, J. (2020b). Situating saudi arabia in china's belt and road initiative. *Asian Politics & Policy*, 12(3), 362–383.
- Galtung, J. (1971). A structural theory of imperialism. *Journal of peace research*, 8(2), 81–117.
- Garlick, J., & Havlová, R. (2020). China's "belt and road" economic diplomacy in the persian gulf: Strategic hedging amidst saudi–iranian regional rivalry. *Journal of current Chinese affairs*, 49(1), 82–105.
- Gauttam, P., Singh, B., & Chattu, V. K. (2021). Higher education as a bridge between china and nepal: Mapping education as soft power in chinese foreign policy. *Societies (Basel, Switzerland)*, 11(3), 81.
- Gudova, I. (2018). Cultural imperialism: A concept and a phenomenon. *KnE Engineering*, 27–32.
- Guzansky, Y., & Shavit, E. (2020). Us-saudi relations: What lies ahead? *INSS Insight No. 1405, JSTOR*.

- Han, B. (2017). Korean wave— k-pop in latin america: Transcultural fandom and digital mediation. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 20.
- Hartig, F. (2016). How china understands public diplomacy: The importance of national image for national interests. *International Studies Review*, 18(4), 655–680.
- Hooghe, I. d. (2015). *China's public diplomacy*. Brill Nijhoff,
- Jennifer, B. (2022). Saudi's jeddah season 2022 sees record-breaking six million visitors in 60 days. Al Arabiya English, available online: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2022/07/02/Saudi-s-Jeddah-Season-2022-sees-record-breaking-six-million-visitors-in-60-days>.
- Jin, L. (2017). China's role in the middle east: Current debates and future trends. *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, 3(01), 39–55.
- Kalathil, S. (2017). *Beyond the great firewall: How china became a global information power*. Center for International Media Assistance Washington, DC.
- Katherine Si. (2018). Powerchina wins 3bnconstructionprojectforSaudimega – yard. Seatrade Maritime News, available online: <https://www.seatrade-maritime.com/asia/powerchina-wins-3bn-construction-project-saudi-mega-yard>.
- Kucukcan, T. (2017). The belt and road initiative and middle eastern politics: Challenges ahead. *Insight (Turkey)*, 19(3), 83–91.
- Kurlantzick, J. (2007). *Charm offensive: How china's soft power is transforming the world*. Yale University Press.
- Leonard, M., Stead, C., Smewing, C., & policy centre (Londres)., F. (2002). *Public diplomacy*. Foreign Policy Centre.
- Li, Q., Han, Y., Li, Z., Wei, D., & Zhang, F. (2021). The influence of cultural exchange on international trade: An empirical test of confucius institutes based on china and the 'belt and road' areas. *Ekonomika istraživanja*, 34(1), 1033–1059.
- Liu, X. (2019). China's cultural diplomacy: A great leap outward with chinese characteristics? multiple comparative case studies of the confucius institutes. *The Journal of contemporary China*, 28(118), 646–661.
- Lopez, J. (2020). *A study of the sino-saudi and sino-persian relationships* (tech. rep.). Monterey, CA; Naval Postgraduate School.
- MacGillivray, I. (2019). Maturing sino-saudi strategic relations and changing dynamics in the gulf. *Global change, peace and security*, 31(1), 61–80.
- Maltzahn, N. (2013). *The syria-iran axis : : Cultural diplomacy and international relations in the middle east*. I.B. Tauris,

- Morton, K. (2016). China's ambition in the south china sea: Is a legitimate maritime order possible? *International Affairs*, 92(4), 909–940.
- Moyo, D. (2009). *Dead aid: Why aid is not working and how there is a better way for africa*. Macmillan.
- Narins, T. P., & Agnew, J. (2021). Veiled futures? debt burdens, the belt road initiative, and official chinese lending after coronavirus. *Human Geography*, 19427786211045404.
- Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft power. *Foreign policy*, (80), 153–171.
- Nye, J. S. (2003). *The paradox of american power: Why the world's only superpower can't go it alone*. Oxford University Press.
- Nye, J. S. (2004a). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. Public affairs.
- Nye, J. S. (2004b). *Soft power: The means to success in world politics*. Public affairs.
- Nye, J. S. et al. (2005). The rise of china's soft power. *Wall street journal Asia*, 29(6), 8.
- Nye, J. S. (2011a). *The future of power*. PublicAffairs.
- Nye, J. S. (2011b). Has economic power replaced military might? *Project Syndicate*, 6.
- Nye, J. S. (2012). China and soft power. *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 19(2), 151–155.
- Nye, J. S. (2017). Soft power: The origins and political progress of a concept. *Palgrave communications*, 3(1), 1–3.
- Pahlevan Sharif, S., Mura, P., & Wijesinghe, S. N. R. (2018). Systematic reviews in asia: Introducing the “prisma” protocol to tourism and hospitality scholars. *Quantitative tourism research in asia* (pp. 13–33). Springer Singapore.
- Pan, S.-Y. (2013). Confucius institute project: China's cultural diplomacy and soft power projection. *Asian Education and Development Studies*.
- Peng, W., & Keane, M. (2019). China's soft power conundrum, film coproduction, and visions of shared prosperity. *International journal of cultural policy : CP*, 25(7), 904–916.
- Petranek, L. M. (2019). Paving a concrete path to globalization with china's belt and road initiative through the middle east. *Arab studies quarterly*, 41(1), 7–32.
- Petticrew, M., & Roberts, H. (2008). *Systematic reviews in the social sciences: A practical guide*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Rahman, S. (2019). Does the “belt and road initiative” possess soft power? *Contemporary Chinese political economy and strategic relations*, 5(1), 301–XII.
- Rostow, W. W. (1959). The stages of economic growth. *The economic history review*, 12(1), 1–16.

- Selim, H., & Zaki, C. (2016). The institutional curse of natural resources in the arab world. *Understanding and avoiding the oil curse in resource-rich Arab economies*, 322–72.
- Shichor, Y. (2017). Vision, revision and supervision: The politics of china's obor and aiib and their implications for the middle east. *China's presence in the middle east: The implications of the one belt, one road initiative* (pp. 38–53).
- Signitzer, B. (2008). Public relations and public diplomacy: Some conceptual explorations. *Public relations research* (pp. 205–218). Springer.
- Sparks, C. (2018). China's soft power from the brics to the bri. *Global media and China*, 3(2), 92–99.
- Taylor, P. (1997). *Global communications, international affairs and the media since 1945* (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Trang, N. T. T. (2020). China's belt and road initiative: China's motivations and its impacts on developing countries. *Critical reflections on china's belt and road initiative* (pp. 189–199). Springer Singapore.
- Wang, H., Han, Y., Fidrmuc, J., & Wei, D. (2021). Confucius institute, belt and road initiative, and internationalization. *International review of economics and finance*, 71, 237–256.
- Wang, Y. (2018). The making of china's "good muslims": From middleman minority to cultural ambassadors. *China review (Hong Kong, China : 1991)*, 18(4), 131–154.
- Wiarda, H. J. (2016). *Culture and foreign policy: The neglected factor in international relations*. Routledge.
- Wu, B. (2021). China and new middle east. *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern studies*, 23(3), 443–457.
- Wu, R., & Zhao, J. (2020). The continuous weakening of ideology in the construction of china-saudi arabia relations: A historical review. *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 14(4), 554–566.
- Wyszomirski, M. J., Burgess, C., & Peila, C. (2003). International cultural relations: A multi-country comparison.
- Ye, H., Binwei, L., & Starkey, G. (2018). Economic and cultural implications of china's one belt one road initiative for the film industry: Cultural distance and taste preference. *Australian economic papers*, 57(3), 250–264.
- Yellinek, R., Mann, Y., & Lebel, U. (2020). Chinese soft-power in the arab world - china's confucius institutes as a central tool of influence. *Comparative strategy*, 39(6), 517–534.

- Yellinek, R., Mann, Y., & Lebel, U. (2021). Chinese 'soft power pipelines diffusion' (sppd) to the middle eastern arab countries 2000-2018: A discursive-institutional study. *British journal of Middle Eastern studies*, 48(5), 941–959.
- Zamorano, M. M. (2016). Reframing cultural diplomacy: The instrumentalization of culture under the soft power theory. *Culture unbound*, 8(2), 165–186.
- Zavareh, M. S., & Barzoki, M. F. (2018). China's energy security: I.r. iran and saudi arabia's role in china's energy diplomacy. *Iranian Economic Review*, 22(3), 707–717.
- Zhang, C., & Xiao, C. (2021). Bridging the gap between overseas and chinese perceptions on sino-middle eastern relations: A chinese perspective. *Globalizations*, 18(2), 273–284.
- Zhang, L., & Wu, D. (2017). Media representations of china: A comparison of china daily and financial times in reporting on the belt and road initiative. *Critical arts*, 31(6), 29–43.
- Zreik, M. (2021). Academic exchange programs between china and the arab region: A means of cultural harmony or indirect chinese influence? *Arab studies quarterly*, 43(2), 172–188.
- Zunyou Zhou. (2015). How china defines terrorism. The Diplomat, available online: <https://thediplomat.com/2015/02/how-china-defines-terrorism/>.