



RCAS Commentary

China-Saudi Cultural Ties Enter A New Era

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October 18, 2024

About RCAS

香港亞洲研究中心| The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS) is a nonprofit research organization focusing on Asian affairs. It is a newly established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng in Haikou and subsequently moved to Hong Kong in September 2023. We currently have an international research team with nearly 100 resident/nonresident researchers from China and other countries.

RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

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Saudi films will be screened in China for the first time in late October, starting in Beijing, Shanghai and Suzhou, before being shown in theaters across the country, the world's largest cinema market. These events are part of the efforts by China and Saudi Arabia to promote cultural exchanges and strengthen people-to-people connections, an area in which significant progress has been made over the past year.



▲ Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman met with visiting Chinese Premier Li Qiang in Riyadh on September 11, 2024. Image via the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
(China-US Focus)

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In August 2023, the national flagship airline, Saudi Arabian Airlines, made its first direct flights to China. In November, the Saudi Tourism Authority held its first international promotional campaign in Shanghai, attracting 80,000 visitors. The overall campaign reached 500 million Chinese and significantly increased bookings to the Kingdom by 277 percent.

An important turn in China-Saudi cultural relations came with the visit of Saudi Arabia's minister of culture, Prince Badr bin Abdullah bin Farhan, to Beijing in March last year. On that occasion, the cultural ministries of both countries signed a memorandum of understanding to increase collaboration on libraries, cultural institutions, visual arts, performing arts, theater, architecture, design and traditional arts and crafts.

Riyadh announced the creation of the Prince Mohammed bin Salman Award — an annual honor to be given for cultural research; artistic and creative works; translations between the two languages; and naming the cultural personality of the year (one individual from each country). China also invited Saudi Arabia to be guest of honor at the Beijing Book Fair 2024, which was held in June.

Starting with the first direct flight to Saudi Arabia in April, the number of weekly direct flights operated by China's national carriers increased to four. Cathay Pacific will resume another direct flight. In an agreement signed between the aviation departments of both countries in February, Riyadh and Beijing pledged to increase air transportation stops, expand cooperation in air freight and add more routes and flights. Saudi Tourism Minister Ahmed Al-Khateeb said there will soon be more direct flights to China. Airlines operate on a commercial basis, so the rising number of direct flights indicates demand on both sides.

In August, the Saudi Ministry of Education announced the incorporation of Chinese language courses into primary and secondary school curricula. Under the MoUs, China sent the first batch of 175 trained teachers to Saudi Arabia, part of a total commitment of 800 teachers. The same month, the Saudi-Chinese Media Entrepreneurs Forum launched a media business accelerator to assist entrepreneurs in the media sector by providing resources, mentorship and exchanges of expertise between the two countries.

In September, the Saudi Ministry of Culture's Museums Commission arranged an art exhibition titled "Writings of Today Are a Promise for Tomorrow." The exhibition highlighted how China and Saudi Arabia place great importance on calligraphy, viewing it as a profound cultural and spiritual practice transcending mere communication.

Both countries have strengthened translations. Bayt El-Hekma, an organization specializing in translation from Chinese to Arabic, has already translated "The Art of War," "Three Kingdoms" and others. The organization noted an increase in Saudi interest in Chinese culture and civilization. Similarly, several Saudi works have been translated into Chinese.

Tourism is also emerging as an important component of cultural exchanges, especially from the Saudi side. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, an ambitious plan conceived by Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salma to diversify the country's economy, identified tourism as the top industry after oil and energy. Riyadh aimed to increase tourism's contribution to GDP from 3.5 percent in 2019 to 10 percent by 2030, targeting \$46 billion in revenue.

As a result of the kingdom's extraordinary measures for the promotion of the sector, it surpassed the initial target of attracting 100 million visitors annually in 2023, seven years ahead of schedule. It set a new target to attract 150 million tourists annually by 2030.

China is the largest source of tourism globally. Before the pandemic in 2019, Chinese travelers made 155 million outbound trips and spent over \$250 billion while vacationing abroad. In light of this, Saudi Arabia will not want to ignore the world's largest source of tourism to achieve its goals.

In 2023, Saudi Arabia attracted 150,000 Chinese tourists. The kingdom aims to attract 5 million Chinese tourists annually by 2030, making China the third-largest source of tourists. While speaking at the World Travel & Tourism Council Summit 2024 in October, the Saudi Deputy Minister of Tourism for International Affairs, Sultan Al Musallam, pinpointed China as a key target market for future tourism. Saudi Arabia has already implemented several China-specific measures. It streamlined the visa process, reduced fees, improved air connectivity and ensured destination readiness by providing information in Mandarin, signage at airports, Mandarin-speaking tour guides and hotel staff and acceptance of Chinese payment processing companies.

These measures, along with the kingdom's reforms to abolish social taboos and open up the country, will help attract tourists. China also granted Saudi Arabia "approved destination status," allowing Chinese citizens to travel to Saudi Arabia on group tours.

It is said that seeing is believing. In-person interactions between the Chinese and Saudis would break stereotypes and foster deeper connections between people.

Saudi Arabia was the last GCC member to establish diplomatic relations with China in 1990. The strong influence of the United States over the kingdom throughout its modern history, along with the late start of Sino-Saudi diplomatic relations, limited cultural exchanges and people-to-people interactions for a long period of time. The absence of direct flights between the two countries as late as August 2023 reflected this limited interaction. However, this is changing rapidly. While Saudi Arabia is expanding its global reach, few culturally diverse countries have received as much attention as China.

Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of three important religions, has a rich history. China is the only surviving civilization dating back 5,000 years. Both China and Saudi Arabia have strong traditions in arts and crafts, ancient trade relations through the Silk Road, and a belief in the essential role that culture plays in developing relationships. The trajectory of their cultural cooperation and people-to-people exchanges over the past year indicates a promising future. A deeper understanding of these areas will also support their ever-expanding, multifaceted relationship, which is arguably an important development on the international stage.

The article was first published at China-US Focus, Hong Kong, October.18, 2024, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/china-saudi-cultural-ties-enter-a-new-era>.

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