

## Transcript

**Jonathan Fulton** Welcome to the China Mena podcast. I'm your host, Jonathan Fulton, a senior nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council and a political scientist at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Since at least the Hu Jintao era, China has made a real push to boost its global image and increase its international cultural presence. This is partly meant to address the gap between China's tremendous economic power and its relatively limited influence and an international system long dominated by Western powers. It is also seen as an important way to provide Chinese narratives about the country's people, culture and ambitions. Simply put, soft power is an important tool in China's foreign policy here in the Middle East. Beijing has been working to project its power, and it seems to be paying off. Recent public opinion surveys by the Arab Barometer consistently show favorable if shallowly held, attitudes towards China. This is an especially interesting contrast with many other parts of the world, where views of China since 2020 have been noticeably less positive. What is China doing in the Middle East to help it develop a better image? To discuss this, I'm happy to introduce our guest for this episode. Dr. Shaojin Chai. Shaojin is a professor of international relations at the University of Sharjah here in the UAE and formerly worked in the UAE's Ministry of Culture and Youth. He has spent a lot of time thinking and writing about China's cultural, educational and religious outreach to the Middle East, including and please forgive the shameless plug here, but including a great chapter in my recent book, *The Routledge Handbook on China Middle East Relations*. So, Shaojin, welcome to the show.

**Shaojin Chai** Thank you for having me. Jonathan, nice to see everyone here.

**Jonathan Fulton** Yeah, it's great. My pleasure. So, Shaojin, just to start, generally, you'll find statements from every major Chinese leader over the past 20 years about the need for more soft power, focusing on culture, media, entertainment and education. Can you give us a quick overview of what China has been doing to project its power globally?

**Shaojin Chai** China's push for soft power or soft power projects mainly started during the early years of a huge industry, which was in early 2000, and in 2004, China established headquarters of a Confucius Institute in Beijing. And this, I think, coincides with the Chinese confidence that, OK, now we are a developing economy globally and we also need to protect or export our culture, product, culture and influence globally. So there is a national pride and national rejuvenation desire to drive from there globally. China has established many institutes and centers and has funded many programs to project China's image and to improve Chinese perceptions among the foreigners and to establish a culture and media educational cooperation projects with many countries around the world. In particular, we will see that China's push for

soft power is rooted in its strong desire for national rejuvenation and strong desire for us to be able to recover its lost glory legacy. So there is this public foundation there, and in particular, we can see there's, uh. For example, we can talk a little more later, if you like. Just to give you a quick example of Confucius Institute has been, you know, very well known already. And plus then China is building a media presence in many parts of the world. For example, see one news agency. The official news agency of China has rented the largest screen, an auto screen in Times Square of New York City, and they can project Chinese stories and Chinese reports every day. Actually short both as advertisement and also the image of. Presented in Chinese culture and Chinese achievement. And China has given a lot of funds to support overseas, the media drives in different languages in Spanish, English, French, Arabic, etc. And this is like the media. And then China is also exporting the, you know, China's culture products like, you know, different programs. They have the dances, performances and that's specialized, producing the work with its cultural centers abroad to promote this on both sides of business and as a cultural product. And recently, you will see China also promoting the, you know, the high tech. So they use, you know, all the technology and short videos and social media to present their story of China. And here in the Middle East, you will see, you know, many Chinese technology companies promoting their product and their brand and here so you will see both drives from public and private sector are pushing toward this goal of projecting China's soft power.

**Jonathan Fulton** That's a really good overview. Thanks for that. So looking specifically at the Middle East, North Africa region, then is there anything specific that China is doing to develop its soft power across the region? Is there something that sets it apart from other parts of the world?

**Shaojin Chai** Yes. First of all, you have to protect the soft power to this region, you have to look at the characteristics of this region and historical ties of this region. And with China, always, that is the starting point. So apparently, when China is pushing soft power here, they realize that, you know, there's a dramatic or huge difference between Chinese civilization and Chinese culture vis-a-vis Middle Eastern culture that feeds Arabic, Islamic, Persian and Jewish Judaism civilizations, which has a long history. So China often, you know, evoke this, you know, historical ties. We heard this in a long history of exchange between Chinese and Arab civilization like Silk Road has been always invoked in the important in the very two important platforms state level platform China Arab State Economic Cooperation Forum. Now it's become the China Arab State Expo and also the China African Summit, or the China-Africa Cooperation Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Forum Omanis forums. You see, it's really portrayed the, you know, the cultural cooperation, culture exchange people to be Christian as one of the pillars of this forum. And whenever there's this state visit and this summit happening, the culture is one of the parks, of course. In the beginning, it's meant to be like an exchange. You know, Chinese will learn something about Middle East and the Middle East to learn some in terms of China. But in practice, it looks a little bit uneven. Chinese culture is much more dominant, much trying to have more resources and funding to support cultural projects to be present in the Middle East

and not the other way. You know, as a country they are often not very active or resourceful in terms of protecting their culture or their soft power toward China. Plus, there are some restrictions inside China. Always, you know, you cannot remain open, you promote certain kinds of cultures of religions or ideas, you know. So I think that actually really tells the Middle East and China a soft power thing. To be specific, when China is promoting their soft power in the region, I think, you know, we always use these historical figures, which actually build a bridge between China and the Middle East. For example, this famous general Admiral Jungkook, who sailed his fleet across the Indian Ocean to the Middle East and to East Africa. So that's all it is about. And there's some forum that you're dedicated to do that. And in the early days, I think the book *Sometimes The Islam*, you know how Islam is spread to China and how this to civilization, Islamic civilization, Confucius Village has squeezed a lot of time. Yeah. So Confucian institutions and the study groups are trying to see if there's a, you know, possibility for our Middle Eastern people to understand, you know, Confucian and so Confucian goes beyond East Asia now.

**Jonathan Fulton** OK, so you were talking about,

**Shaojin Chai** as I say about

**Jonathan Fulton** Confucianism when I started studying in Confucianism,

**Shaojin Chai** why evidence for this is like a Chinese funding project to translate the so-called translation of one 1000 Chinese classics into Arabic. So this includes *Analects*, the Confucian confusing and deluging, you know, the always. And I think there are many other classics, generations of modern classics and the and there are supposedly this is like also there is sort of a translation of Arabic classics into Chinese. What was the task set by the China-Arab Cooperation Forum? But you know, again, because of many reasons, financial reasons or political reasons. Many of the early classics are not translated into Chinese as much as Chinese are being Chinese because they're being translated to Arabic Middle Eastern languages and even if they are translated, then they often have time to publish in China.

**Jonathan Fulton** So one thing that you mentioned when you talked about the Silk Road ancient ties. This is something that any of us who spend a lot of time reading official statements from Chinese and Arab leaders is a point that's often emphasized. You know, our civilizations have ties that go back for four generations. But at the same time, I find when I talk, especially with my students, with younger people, there's not really a lot of cultural familiarity with China. It still

seems that people don't know as much about China as they do about, say, the U.K. or India or France or the U.S. So. But I wonder, because you mentioned just now when you were talking that it seems to be a one way projection that China's bringing a lot of its culture and cultural products to the Middle East. But you don't see a lot of Arab countries doing the same. So I wonder in China, is there that familiarity with Middle Eastern cultures and civilizations? Or is it a case of both sides still being somewhat limited in their understanding or awareness of each other?

**Shaojin Chai** It's the latter, as you said. So both sides have a limited understanding with each other compared to what they are not standing with. Let's see with the West, with Europe, Americans and with their neighbors. Apparently this there's many reasons for that. So, yeah, we can name a few. Like kung fu or Chinese medicine or this, you know, the very popular things, you know? But other than that, they knew very little about Chinese culture or even Chinese modern transformation and American achievement. So that's, I think, is one of the things in response to your question that we have very limited data on this and even some somehow like a benign misunderstanding of Chinese culture of China. Also, we should not forget there's a mutual understanding of what China actually comes from English or Western languages sources. So they might not have much, you know, their own understanding of China from their own language, their own section?

**Jonathan Fulton** Sure. So how does it feel to be exotic to you when you walk around Dubai or Sharjah? Do you? Are you constantly feeling like a very special exotic guy?

**Shaojin Chai** Uh, yeah, exotic. First of all, after you feel a little traveling, you know, you said you read your article actually first, you think, Oh, you are Japanese or Korean. And then we had our Chinese. Oh, so that's reflected too. You know, Chinese newcomers in terms of. And then Japanese, all Koreans are becoming better, whether they have four more tourists or more business, their new year. And on the other side. So yeah, and it being exotic really doesn't really. I think they would keep us trying to learn Chinese, you know, Chinese language to learn from TV or from where to try to speak with you. And I think that it was not much deep competition. That's what we mean by we. You mean, you know, showing other languages.

**Jonathan Fulton** I think that's an interesting point you made a couple of minutes ago when you talked about how a lot of their knowledge from China is coming from, not directly from China and often not directly from their own sources, their own language sources, but coming from a third place, whether it's in English or in French. And I think that's part of why China's been working to address this soft power shortage. You know, you often hear Chinese people talk about media hegemony that a lot of the stories about China are being told by Western countries.

So they perceive a need to kind of take ownership of those stories to deliver them in a way that they would rather see it presented. So I can see why in the Middle East, especially in a place where there's a long tradition of information flowing, especially from the U.S. or the U.K. or France, for China to say it's important for us to try to get in there and tell these stories on our own and try to present our image in a way that we find reflects who we are in a more meaningful way. Yeah. So you talked about people-to-people bonds, and I know that the Belt and Road white paper that was released way back in 2015, it listed five cooperation priorities and people-to-people connections was one of them. So obviously, this is something that the Chinese government considers quite a priority to be working to develop these cultural connections, and it was very broadly defined, you know, talking about media, education, religion, personal connections. I want to ask this question first. Pre-COVID, because obviously this has changed a little. But so before the pandemic, how did this look in the Middle East region? Were there a lot of student groups or tourism or educational outreach or religious groups that were driving these people to people relations in a big way?

**Shaojin Chai** Yes. Before. People to people exchange and the peculiar Chinese tourists, Chinese students study tour Chinese delegates have been viciously pouring into Middle Eastern cities, especially like regional hubs like Dubai, sometime Cairo or Istanbul. You will find so many Chinese in those places like, for example, tourism. We can see countries that are not really pure, only about soft power culture exchange. It also has an economic side, but with this economic business implication, you see Chinese presence or Chinese influence here in many hotels in the Middle Eastern cities. They offer Chinese TV channels, Chinese newspapers, even Chinese slippers and likely try to cater to Chinese tourists. You know, I think this in turn actually slowly disseminated the understanding of China toward the local population in terms of education. Confucian Institute was already established here long before the Belt and Road Initiative. I think, first of all, it's not a very long story. In 2010, First Confucian Institute was established in the UAE, United in rusty and slowly establishing other universities and immediately starting. So far, around 20 to 24 Confucian Institutes have been operating in the East and Mena region and the first African region, you know, in Kuwait. The open while in Saudi Arabia, which often will be seen as a very conservative and the heartland of Islam. Now they allow Confucian institutes to open, you know, in Jeddah. So I mean, some of the media in late 2016-17 Chinese established this huge media plan basically found all the media establishments are proven all over the world, including the Middle East. So the reception, the CCTV, Arabic and the tried to establish the People's Daily, the Arabic calling regional distribution and the Chinese internet read you had also ah, because Middle Eastern languages, options, and the class. There's some public-private partnership between the Chinese state and Chinese entrepreneurs. They came to the Middle East to establish some Chinese media companies or media channels. They wanted to promote Chinese culture, but also promote business and promote finance between the two countries and finance and trade. So plus, I think there's the annual conferences, workshops, academic exchanges, student visits. Many universities in China have established a, you know, a kind of Pittenger cooperation program with the universities in the Middle East in terms of language training, in terms of science and technology. And even in the advanced technologies like artificial intelligence and cloud computing, et cetera. So it looked like

a fool. Let's hope reaching out to people, to people exchanges have been played partially. I think at least from the Chinese side, I can tell that many of this project or initiative, because they are encouraged or, you know, funded by different, you know, governments or provincial funds or financed by the wealthy. If every cooperation whiskey idea they get support from the same idea Kouchner found or scientifically found or if a Silk Road farm. So this actually makes the poorest people to people exchanges much more. Let's not. We have to remain to see whether it's effective, what is long lasting, but at least it's the phenomena is there and the. We will observe more later.

**Jonathan Fulton** So I wonder when I mean, obviously, I haven't been to China for a few years now, but you know, when I used to go pretty regularly, I was often visiting different university campuses. And one thing that always stood out to me was just the huge number of international students. And I know that the Chinese government offered a lot of funding opportunities for students to go and do a bachelor's or master's degree, not just in language, but, you know, as you said, across the sciences, the humanities, you know, just a proper university education. Did you see a lot of students from the Middle East who go to China and do their degree in a Chinese university and develop language skills and develop over four plus years living in China, developing that cultural understanding as well?

**Shaojin Chai** Yes, there's a lot of Middle Eastern students going to China, but it's uneven among the countries, for example, you see countries, the oil rich countries. I think they send more students to Europe and the USA than to Central China. And one, maybe one, the phenomena is like Saudi Arabia actually trying to send 1000 students at one point to China, like there's a world war that is published by authorities' last conflict. You have 1000 Chinese students in different universities in China. That what? I think height. What? You're your? That was around 2010. OK. Yeah. And then, as you said, the money subject is mostly focused on languages and the sciences, technology, engineering and many, such as many people, studied medicine to expect a change in the medicine. We can see that. Those 160 countries from the Middle East like Egypt, Jordan, some from Morocco, we have seen many of these students from this country studying at very good universities. Often they are funded by the Chinese Ministry of Education. There is this fund which is specifically tailored toward foreign students, in particular students from developing countries from Africa, from South Asia, including the Middle East. So the many students who actually have the ticket took advantage of these scholarships and found them studying in Chinese universities, and many of them were actually finished. The study actually started working either in China or in Chinese companies. Yeah, actually, you program in the you. You find many state companies and you private companies they hire are working for them. So it looks like these students tend to have a positive view of China. One example I will give, in 2020 during the early eruption of the pandemic? And there is a lot of media criticism against China. So some of the students from Iran and from Middle Eastern countries, they come out on social media defending China. So there was an interesting anecdotal. We don't know if it's like a cause or whether they're paid by some organization to see it all just come voluntarily.

But I tend to believe it's a voluntary thing. You know, you saw their own social media, so you don't have to do it, you know? So it looks like, you know, the idea that they pay some positive views when they start in China? Hmm.

**Jonathan Fulton** Well, I saw it firsthand. I think it was in twenty seventeen here in Abu Dhabi. The International Book Fair China was the guest of honor, and at our university there sent a delegation of world class authors, you know, yuan and just these great authors, great accomplished authors. And I was scrambling trying to find somebody who could do a translation from Chinese into English for our students because they were coming to meet our students. And when the delegation arrived, they actually had two Egyptian grad students who were studying in Beijing. And they translated from Chinese into Arabic. And this sounds obvious, but I've been at this university for years. Usually what happens is people speak to our students in English, and they expect our students to understand English. And the Chinese came in and said, No, we'll speak to you in your own language. And the students were really pleasantly surprised because they don't see that very often here. So it was, I thought, quite smart. You know, I don't know if that's soft power or if that's just smart diplomacy. But it was really effective, I thought. A follow-up question. So. So you've described what happens pre-COVID in terms of people-to-people outreach? So during the pandemic, you know, has China had to change course? Is there a better way to try to develop these people-to-people relations in a world where it's very difficult for Chinese to travel outside the country and it's very difficult for people to travel into China?

**Shaojin Chai** True. Since the pandemic, I think that dynamic has changed, and apparently we have to shift as we are doing today to online for digital diplomacy or digital soft power protections. So even with the pandemic, I mean, China did not really stop in a soft power projection toward the world and toward this region. So they keep doing the cultural diplomacy of diplomacy, health diplomacy, you know, vaccine diplomacy, what all of this diplomacy drives through online meetings, online forums, online exhibitions and digital ceremonies, etc.. Yeah, it remains to be seen whether they're effective or not, you know, compared to the non offline once traditional ones. But it's still doing that. In fact, Kuwait and China kind of realized, Hey, there's a lot of, you know, misperceptions, a lot of misunderstanding and the bias against China, according to their understanding. So the action emphasized, they said we should develop, you know, better narrative, a better image and better stories to counter those narratives, to counter those biases and their prejudices. You may see John. I think last year I heard of one of the high-level meetings you addressed to the thing in China this summer, probably called international communication or international culture confrontation. This is the terminal part of what you term. So when we are doing international communication, we need to be smarter and we need to develop lovable images, you know, lovable. So this is the word he used. So, yeah, so be the guy that you need to soften and you need a good image, you know? So now they realize, you know, even more, even in Kuwait, they need to invest in developing better strategies, better approaches for soft power and culture diplomacy.

**Jonathan Fulton** Well, that's interesting because, you know, especially during the pandemic, what we've seen is, in many cases, the opposite of lovable and you know, with, you know, the narrative often being wolf warrior diplomacy or a much more strict term stricter delivery of how Chinese people want the rest of the world to see it. And I know when I talk to people in the US or in Canada or in Europe, they obviously respond to this. But as I said at the start, when you look at the polling data or the survey data in the Middle East, people see it differently. And I think that's consistent with a lot of countries in the global south where, you know, China wasn't seen in the same negative light as it was in a lot of democratic countries, primarily democratic countries. I don't know if it's about regime type or government type or if it's just about geography. But really, over the past few years, China seems to be developing a much more positive image across the Middle East.

**Shaojin Chai** Yes, I think this has many factors that contribute to this. There's a certain country, they don't have much, you know, media freedom. So then those, you know, public opinion polls may not really reflect, you know, accurately. But there is this one, another possibility. You know, what I call it is the Chinese off hands approach, you know? So yes, we are doing it, doing business with you, and we are doing exchange with you. We provide you with Chinese language teaching and it would bring on Chinese media programs, entertainment, et cetera. But we are trying to decide that we are not imposing force into a topic we are not claiming, Oh, we are the right one. We are. Our values are universal. And you have to adapt to it. I think Middle Eastern countries have some trauma or a certain type of reaction where you try to impose, you know, like democratic values and many of these good ideologies that you see in terms of certain standards. But if you use force to impose on them or use some sort of threat or something like that, how is it arrogant to you that maybe you are not getting many good responses? So I think the Chinese way is much softer and much like Han, although it can be seen. It's not like China wants to do that because China knows that even though China wants to sell our values the best, you know, our country is the best. They will feel they find very little agreement even in this region where a lot of positive or favorable views are toward China. So but anyway, I think this balanced on and off hand approach maybe explains why China is favored in certain sectors of the society, either with the Middle East and then other countries and maybe other reasons we could see China did some. Foreign aid programs and.

**Jonathan Fulton** Medical aid,

**Shaojin Chai** yeah, medical aid and loans and many infrastructure projects, they see that, you know, they did not at any, you know, condition, let's see. So they don't ask for, you know,



reforms or anything. So if that's true, then yes, it's not surprising, you know, these regions will favor China more than other countries. Sure.

**Jonathan Fulton** Yeah, that's a good point. I hear that very point frequently when I talk to people from the region where they say, you know, that they appreciate that Chinese lending institutions or development agencies don't place the same kind of restrictions or conditions. They feel that their projects have more respect, that it seems less colonial or less arrogant, so it seems to be something that really resonates. You know, you made a couple of good points in that, and one of them is when I mentioned the Arab Barometer survey. They do say that some of those favorable opinions seem a little soft just because, like you said earlier, that there's still not a lot of real deep cultural awareness yet. So their initial feelings are that they feel better about working with China on certain things, but they don't yet know completely what it's all about. And I think that also is consistent with what you've been saying, that there is still a lot of room to grow on both sides of the relationship. But one question I'd like to ask you about is, as I said, I been teaching here for quite a while and my students, when they talk about China, it still seems that they're speaking from a place where they don't know as much about the about China as they do about a lot of other places. But if I say other countries, you know what, for example, South Korea, they get very excited. You know, I lived in Korea before I came here, and I was surprised to learn that my students want to hear all about my experiences there because they know that they're studying the language and they love the shows and the movies and the music. So just looking at China's soft power projection compared to other countries, you know, some of these soft power heavyweights like South Korea, like Japan, like India. Do you see any interesting points of comparison or contrast with what China is doing in the region or China's success or room for development?

**Shaojin Chai** Yes, I could. China has a lot to learn from these countries in terms of soft power projection. One apparently, you know, in the Middle East, the countries you mentioned, you know, other Asian powers like South Korea, Japan, India, they have much more soft power influence than China. One reason may be that they have a long, longer history, even with the Middle East. I think Japan, South Korea have stopped dealing with the Middle Eastern 1960s or at least 70s, and India has a much longer history because of the proximity they are nearby. And the Bollywood and the K-pop's and the Japanese comics are so popular among the young people in this country. I think many others are used to it. If you have the new atomic, what exactly is a Chinese culture product that can compete or can be comparable to those countries. And unfortunately, you are not, you know, so China has such huge size and big power, but does not really have very distinctive and prominent cultural products, you know? So it's like, you know, you eat Chinese hotpot, you know, you have everything, but there's nothing you can just pick up a visit to China besides me. Early days, we could talk about the old Chinese kung fu or medicine, et cetera. But again, in Chinese medicine, the Chinese there, there's no one product or one brand. You can do the entire thing. This is the one which will be popular, which would be accepted, which would be Chinese people. No, because when you talk about Chinese people,

there are so many branches and sects and it's kind of confusing people. I actually worked with some kung fu groups in this country and we are trying to try to promote Chinese kung fu and some Chinese universities or Chinese companies to give them a little bit of support. But we want it promoted to the young people here. This is OK. How is it different from Karate? How is it different from this? you know, the Japanese style of jujutsu? Because yeah, it's just too complicated and too sophisticated for people to absorb the Chinese culture product. So because of that reason, I think you know. China needs to learn how to, you know, refine how to transform and even commercialize or modernize, you know, capitalize its culture content results into, you know, popular culture products. That's what the reason being China is not doing this for is because many of the soft power products are pushed by the Chinese government in the state actor, not by the private company even is. Sometimes you see private companies try to push for this. And we are not. I think it may take time. They are not as successful as the cultural products from those countries. I had a similar experience, as you do when we ask about China. It's my students at loss. You know, they cannot name a thing which will reflect what is about China. But we can talk about countries like India or Hollywood of Korea. And then is RC? Yeah, I know the Korean star, I know that star and I know this show, etc. Recently, there's some, you know, Chinese TV's and these pictures that reflect ancient China where you have, you know, extraordinary, you know, decorations and interesting plots. You might track some foreign audience, including people from, you know, actually quite all of my students who you talk about . I'm sure that we actually did not watch it from Chinese, not from 53 Arabic or some Chinese incorporated TV channel, but from Netflix, which is the American platform. So you see Chinese products need to be put on the American platform in order to gain popularity. So there are many areas Chinese culture, entrepreneurs, the Chinese government and soft power practices need to work on. You wanted to present a better narrative and a better image and a better product.

**Jonathan Fulton** So I guess this is interesting because I'm thinking about Joe Nye's, you know, classic definition of soft power, the ability to attract based on, you know, values or an attractive foreign policy or these cultural products. And one thing you like when you describe Japanese, you mentioned anime and manga. When you talk about Korea, you talk about K-pop and then these dramas in Korea or in India, rather with Bollywood. A point you mentioned a lot of this stuff are coming from private industry or private actors. And I wonder if that's an important distinction, too, because I think in China, you know, somebody who reads a lot of Chinese novels and likes a lot of Chinese film, you know, Chinese creative people have often complained or just maybe just pointed out that they do face a lot of restrictions in the stuff that they produce sometimes and that maybe Chinese popular culture content creators or authors or filmmakers might do this with an eye to Is this going to be acceptable? You know, will I have to be able to get this passed to the censor? Do you think that might play a role in how some popular culture stuff travels or doesn't travel easily? Is it that some of these things might be made for more of a local audience in China rather than a global audience?

**Shaojin Chai** Yeah. First of all, really, I think the second reason you mention is that China has a huge market for these private content creators. So if they have to, they will first cater for the Chinese audience for that content and they can sell China's largest film viewership in the world. So now. But there is this, you know, drive or there's this demand for Chinese creators and the content distributor to go abroad. Censorship plays a role. Many of those, I think, you know, apparently there's this issue of degree of media freedom and degree of what should be talked and what shouldn't be. And a lot of this Chinese content are very complex and country-specific. So we still don't travel well beyond its borders. And even though I think there's a. If you are into a movie, I can name the aim of an international audience. They aim to get a global audience. We go to Hollywood and the famous director dynamo made by you and others made to those who are popular internationally, and they will get very bad reviews inside China. So you see this very interesting contrast. And I think that still needs time for Chinese culture to produce a content creator to find out what is the best, how to present China's image, Chinese stories and China's good content to the global audience. And so it's really that's how well China's relatively new the last 20 years. When China starts seriously, think about presenting itself to the world. Still, the thing about soft power projection?

**Jonathan Fulton** OK, well, just to wrap up, what do you think of future trends that you're seeing or are you anticipating for China's soft power in the Middle East? You know, it seems every single day there's a half dozen articles or headlines about how China's playing a bigger role in the region. So just in terms of these cultural or people to people or religious or educational, what is it you anticipate playing a bigger role in driving this China Middle East relations?

**Shaojin Chai** I don't have this, you know, the growth of the economy in this region is actually will reflect the fundamentals, fundamentals, our energy trade and economic cooperation and between the two regions and actually culture or soft power cooperation or products could play a better role of bigger role than the current strategy. Currently, I see that they still have much room to improve or much to catch up, though for various reasons, you know, for the turnover of newcomers. China has not, you know, familiar with this region and doesn't have much historical experience for promoting soft power, et cetera. So if in the future. China Benoit, in relation to improving terms of strategic cooperation, for example, recently there's discussion about, you know, establishing China. Well, free trade rights and also improving. Yeah, to promote more energy trade and expand even to some of the military technology corporations. So if that's. Or grow, then I think according to which has soft power, we also need to grow it accordingly. We need to learn Chinese. We need to understand Chinese culture, our Chinese practice better in order to have lasting and better and more active communication. When we are trying this energy, strategic technology, military and security cooperation. So even though soft power and the cultural exchange between the two now are very nascent, very new. But I see it playing a bigger and bigger role in the future if China, Middle Eastern Energy and the economic trade continue to grow. Already, we are seeing many more countries encouraging their students to study Chinese language and to have more technology cooperation with the Chinese and

companies and institutions, despite the pressure from the U.S. and from other actors which warned this could curtail the interests of their in the interests of some other aspect. But I think cooperation does go beyond the Middle East in need to have its own independent voice or agenda. If you want to develop genuine good relations with China, they need to treat this as encouraging their Chinese speakers. China observers so that we don't have to always learn from the Western media or Western and Western intellectuals or academic establishment could have their own. What I'm seeing is that the infrastructure needs time to build. China apparently can help the Middle East to build this knowledge of Iraq, to understand China better, to cultivate relations between the two.

**Jonathan Fulton** But that's a really good point to end on. I think that's what we're seeing is, as we've both seen where we are here now, especially in the Gulf, it's still at a very low level. But, you know, here in the UAE and also in Saudi, the public school system is starting to teach Chinese language. You're going to have a coming generation of local students who go to university that already know quite a bit about China. And I expect we're going to see quite a significant shift in the next 10 to 15 years. Shaojin, thanks so much. This has been really helpful, I think you've really helped us understand what China's soft power in the region looks like. What are its ambitions? What are its limitations? And you've given us a lot to think about. So thank you for that.

**Shaojin Chai** Thank you for having me. Of course.

**Jonathan Fulton** And to our listeners, thank you for joining us. Follow us on social media. Subscribe on iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts and we'll see you next show. Thank you very much.

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