

*Cultural Diplomacy in UAE Foreign Policy Towards China  
–Sheikh Zayed Center as a Model*

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**Abstract**

Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the primary president of the United Arab Emirates, made soft power one of the pillars of the state's foreign policy, and allowed cultural diplomacy to play more influential roles, this became an approach to which the Emirati political leadership was committed and keen to develop it. This reflected positively on the country's foreign relations in general and its relations with China in particular. China enjoys a distinguished position in the foreign policy of the UAE, and then the study monitors the thought of cultural diplomacy in the foreign policy of the UAE towards China, by conducting a case study of one of the most important features of relations between the two countries, which is “Sheikh Zayed Center for the study of Arabic language and Islamic studies” in Beijing Foreign Studies University, and an attempt to clarify the circumstances of the establishment of the center, its objectives, its various educational, cultural and artistic activities, the extent of the great and continuous support it received, and the keenness of senior Emirati and Arab officials, writers and thinkers to visit it. The Sheikh Zayed Center represents a distinguished model in UAE cultural diplomacy thanks to the impressive results achieved by the Center, whether on the educational level or in its constructive role in relations between the two countries, introducing the Chinese side to Emirati society, and building bridges of communication between Arab and Islamic culture and Chinese culture.

Keywords: UAE, China, Culture, Diplomacy, Soft Power

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## Introduction

The United Arab Emirates has close relations with the People's Republic of China that have developed over five decades, and their bilateral relations have become among the most successful and important foreign relations of the UAE and among the most successful and important Chinese relations with countries of the Middle East, in all fields, including the cultural aspect. The Government of the People's Republic of China recognized the United Arab Emirates after its founding in December 1971, but diplomatic relations between the two sides were established on November 1, 1984. The major turning point in relations between the two sides began when President Yang Changkun visited the UAE in December 1989 in his first visit. A Chinese president to the Emirates, followed in May 1990 by the visit of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan to Beijing, which was the first visit by a head of a Gulf state to China (*Khalifa and International Cooperation, 2005, p. 93*).



**Figure 1: Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan and Chinese President Yang Shangkun in Beijing, 1990**

## Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

### 1. Soft Power

Joseph Nye explained the soft power is the ability to attract, and that enhancing preferences tends to be associated with intangible assets such as attractive personality, culture, institutions and political values (*Joseph S. Nye, 2007, p. 25*). Soft power is defined as the ability of the actor to influence the perceptions, preferences, and behaviors of others, Its integrated employment is linked to the existence of a clear vision by the political leadership of the nature of the state's soft power, and how to use it to enhance its position and improve its image regionally and internationally (*Moawad, 2019: PP, 26, 74, 152*). And It isn't possible to perceive a culture without knowing its language. Language is the main factor that shows the reality of the nation and its intellectual and civilizational heritage (*Belazze, 2019, p. 605*) Professor Yan Guohua, Vice President of Foreign Studies University in Beijing says: "Every language has its own treasure. Language is a means of dialogue and understanding among civilizations, and achieving mutual benefit which leads to the progress of human civilization

and the peaceful development of the world (*The Foreign Studies University, International Day of the Arabic Language, 2019*).

## **2. Cultural Diplomacy**

The attractiveness of the country is due in part to the attractiveness of its culture, the success of its national model (*Wei, 2019, p. 48*) culture constitutes an important component of the foreign policy of states (*Terry, 2005, p. 83*). Definitions of cultural diplomacy varied, according to Cummings (*Cummings, 2009, p.1*) "The concept of "cultural diplomacy," refers to the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding. Cultural Diplomacy it based on and utilize the exchange of ideas, values, traditions and other aspects of culture or identity, whether to strengthen relationships, enhance sociocultural cooperation or promote national interests; Cultural diplomacy can be practiced by either the public sector, private sector or civil society" (*Kishore, 2013, p.30*). Cultural diplomacy is carried out through cultural exchange, such as visits by famous novelists and educational exchanges between countries (*Geoffrey, 2014, p. 250*).

### **Cultural Diplomacy in the UAE Foreign Policy**

Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President of the UAE, explained the general features of Emirati culture, in February 2018. "The spirit and identity of our culture is inspired from the Arabic and Islamic Civilizations," and he Highlighting the importance of the Arabic language, "The Arabic language is the backbone of our culture. Preserving our language is a pivotal prerequisite to develop our knowledge, instill our identity and develop our culture " (*Mohammed bin Rashid, 2018*).

Since its establishment, the UAE has tended to prepare its own model of "power building" in its comprehensive concept, based on a number of elements, including strengthening soft power, to raise the status and role of the state and enhance mutual benefits (*al-Ketbi, 2021: 89*). And Soft power has gained importance as a complement to the country's developing hard power through public and cultural diplomacy (*Golębiowski, 2020, p. 164*). The UAE considers cultural diplomacy a major and important component of its foreign policy and one of pillars of the country's soft diplomacy, which aims to support and strengthen cooperation relations between the UAE and friendly countries (*United Arab Emirates Yearbook, 2017, p. 60*).

The UAE took an influential step in institutionalizing its vision for the use of soft power and cultural diplomacy when Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, Vice President of the state, on April 29, 2017, decided to establish the Soft Power Council; With the aim of define a strategy for the soft power of the state, and consolidating popular communication with the regional and global surroundings, to enhance the reputation of the state (*Mohammed bin Rashid, 2017*). On September, 2017, the Soft Power Council launched the "Soft Power Strategy for the UAE".cultural and humanitarian leader. The soft power strategy of the UAE also consists of 7 main axes one of these axes are cultural and media diplomacy (*UAE launches, 2017*).

### **Establishment of the Office of Cultural Diplomacy**

In 2018, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Minister of Foreign Affairs, and International Cooperation, ordered the Minister of State, Zaki Nusseibeh, to establish an

office for cultural and public diplomacy, that will act as a cultural arm of the Ministry (*Nusseibeh, The Values*). The establishment of the office aims at promoting the soft power agenda of the UAE government, training diplomats on cultural diplomacy (*Cultural and Public Diplomacy*), this reflects the UAE government's awareness of the critical role of soft power tools such as cultural diplomacy, in order to achieve successfully its foreign policy goals (*Golebiowski, 2020, p. 164*).

According to the Emirati vision, "Cultural and Public Diplomacy includes, but is not limited to, the exchange of ideas, art and language for the greater purpose of creating understanding between nations and people. Cultural and Public Diplomacy supports dialogue, education and cultural exchange in the service of improved mutual respect, international collaboration and global prosperity" (*Cultural and Public Diplomacy*). This concept is based on the thought of enlightenment and the meaning of global cultural convergence based on the essence of tolerance, flexibility and positivity (*Abo Loze, 2018*). This Emirati approach is in line with the nature of the cultural relations that bind the Arab countries with China, as the cultural field is considered one of the most important areas of cooperation and the most influential between the two sides, thanks to its antiquity, continuity and its cheap costs (*Qassem, 2013, p. 89*).

### **Sheikh Zayed Center "Emirates" for the Study of Arabic Language and Islamic Studies**

After the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and in line with the development of political relations between the People's Republic of China and the Arab countries, the government established the Arabic language specialization in many universities and institutes, including the Institute of Diplomatic Affairs, the University of Foreign Studies in Beijing, and the University of International Studies in Shanghai. The implementation of the Chinese government's policy of reform and openness, starting in 1978, led to a boom in the teaching of foreign languages, including Arabic, and then led to the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the Arab countries, to open new horizons for the development of Arabic language education within China (*Liangying, 2021. p. 24*).

### **Circumstances of Establishing the Center**

Sheikh Zayed Center "Emirates" for the study of Arabic language and Islamic studies was established at the Beijing Foreign Studies University, during the historic visit of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan, President of the UAE to Beijing in May 1990, when he donated \$650,000 was presented to the Arabic Language Department to establish the Arab and Islamic Research Information Center. In June 1990, Sheikh Zayed decided to allocate the grant amount to build a center for Arab and Islamic studies, also in line with the university's aspirations., Later, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, donated a grant of \$700,000 to purchase additional furniture and equipment and to purchase copies of Arabic books, bringing the total amount of the grant to build the center to \$1.35 million, and the center was completed in 1994 and officially began operating the following year. , and The building consists of five floors, with a usable area of 4,100 square metres (*Xue Qingguo, 2008. pp 83 - 85, United Arab Emirates Yearbook, 2013, Obaid, 2004, Interview 1, 2023*).

### **Objectives and Importance of the Center**

There were indications of the presence of the cultural dimension in foreign policy from an early time in the awareness of Emirati officials, Sheikh Zayed who realized the importance

of language to promoting Arab civilization, cooperation and communication and he saw the future through a clear vision to prepare the center as a bridge of cultural communication, to strengthen the historic relations between the Arab and Islamic civilization and the Chinese civilization (*al-Ketbi, 2021, p 136 – 137, Al Qubaisi, 2018*) to assist Chinese students in getting to know the Arab world in a comprehensive way, and for the center to be an educational institution that has its place in the first places among its counterparts in the whole world (*The Sheikh Zayed Center, 2019*) and also the Emiratis and the Chinese have recognized that in order to further strengthen ties, steps must be taken to minimize cultural barriers (*Rakhmat, 2015*). Hence the importance of the Sheikh Zayed Center in building a positive and distinct mental image of the Emirates and introducing the distinctive characteristics of its society.

The Sheikh Zayed Center was welcomed by the Chinese in light of the interest in teaching the Arabic language in the country is due to:

- 1-The Arab-Islamic culture is one of the most important cultural systems globally, and plays an influential role in the international civilizational exchange and dialogue.
- 2-The Arab region has a very important position globally due to its strategic location, its economic potential. In conjunction with the growing relations of the Arab region with China, including the educational field, which is considered a strong impetus for the development of the Arabic language specialization

### **UAE's Support for the Sheikh Zayed Center**

The center and its activities have enjoyed the full and continuous support of the UAE leadership. In April 2007, Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed, President of UAE, presented a grant of one million US dollars to the center to support its educational activities (*Sheikh Abdullah visits, 2007, Xue Qingguo, 2008, 92*). In August 2009, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, granted \$2.8 million to carry out restoration and maintenance work for the center. In March 2012, during his visit to China, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, visited the center, to attend personally its reopening ceremony. He ordered the center's name to be changed from "The Emirates Center for the Study of Arabic Language and Islamic Studies" to "The Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan Center for the Study of Arabic Language and Islamic Studies." In his speech during the ceremony, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed said that he hopes the center will remain a solid bridge linking the Chinese civilization with the Arab civilization, and works to deepen the concepts of dialogue, understanding and noble human values. The ceremony was attended by members of the Arab and foreign diplomatic corps accredited to Beijing, and the Abu Dhabi Authority for Culture, Tourism and Heritage troupe presented artistic performances, and the students of the center presented Emirati and Arab artistic performances and poetry. Omar Al-Bitar, the UAE ambassador to China at the time, announced during the ceremony that Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed had granted a grant of \$1.12 million to the center in order to support its education process (*United Arab Emirates Yearbook, 2013, Chen, Bingjun, 2021, Mohamed bin Zayed attends, 2012*). After renovation, the center building equipped with high-quality, high-tech language classrooms, including 1 computer lab, 2 language labs, 1 audio-visual lab, reading rooms, an infrared simultaneous interpretation system and a conference hall that graduate students can use for training (*Chen, Bingjun, 2021, p. 244*). The arrival of Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed personally to reopen the center and the large grant he gave to support educational activities, inviting members of diplomatic missions to attend the ceremony, and the arrival of the Abu Dhabi Authority band specifically, to present performances at the ceremony. All of the above reveals the great importance that the Emirati leadership attaches to the center as an

edifice distinguished educationally and culturally, and the most prominent symbol of its cultural diplomacy in its relationship with China.



**Figure 2: Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, visited the Center, to attend its reopening ceremony**

Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, continued his sponsorship of the Center and its financial and moral support. On the sidelines of his visit to the Republic of China in July 2019, he a delegation of the Sheikh Zayed Center headed by its Director Dr. Shui Qingguo “Bassam”, who showed Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed the center projects, its programs and initiatives that serve the educational and cultural field. and contribute to the promotion and support of Arabic language studies. During the meeting, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi granted two million dollars in support of the center and its educational and cultural projects (*Mohamed bin Zayed, 2019, Interview 1, 2023*). The continued financial support from the UAE government to the center has greatly enhanced the teaching and scientific research Arabic Language at Beijing Foreign Studies University (*Chen, Bingjun, 2021, p. 244*).

### **The Educational Programs**

The educational program at the Sheikh Zayed Center embodies the civilizational and cultural goals for which the center was established. The study at the center includes Arabic language sciences, culture, history, philosophy, religion and politics, to enable students to learn about the history and civilization of the Arab and Islamic world in a comprehensive way. In addition, there is great interest within the center in studies related to the emergence and development of Sino-Arab relations. In the third and fourth years of the bachelor’s stage, the center offers three programs: Diplomatic Affairs, Economy and Commerce, Civilization and Culture. With regard to master’s and doctoral studies, there are social and political studies, language studies, translation and the literature. The center has contributed significantly, through its distinguished scientific services, to the advancement of the educational and academic activities and the international exchange of Beijing University of Foreign Studies. So the demand for study at the center has increased. The number of graduates from the center since its establishment has reached about 1000 graduates holding doctorate, master's and bachelor's degrees (*Interview 1, 2023*), who have become a source of great confidence. At



various work institutions, especially in the field of translation and Arab and Islamic culture (*Federal National Council visits, 2013*).



**Figure 3: Students with Dr Bassam, professor of Arabic language, director of the Center**

The center's graduates occupy many important positions, in government agencies, universities, embassies, ministries (*The Sheikh Zayed Center, 2019*) and dozens of whom work in the diplomatic corps of the Chinese Foreign Ministry (*Ambassador's China visit, 2010*). Some of them worked as ambassadors of China to the Arab countries (*Mohamed bin Zayed, 2019*) and some of them work in the Chinese Embassy in Abu Dhabi, the Chinese Consulate General in Dubai, and in Chinese institutions and companies in the UAE (*Federal National Council visits, 2013*). In 2012, eleven Chinese ambassadors to the Arab world had received training in the Arabic language at the Sheikh Zayed Center (*Bardsley, 2012*). This indicates the high quality of the educational content of the center in the field of Arabic language and Arab culture. Thus, Sheikh Zayed Center became one of the most important centers for teaching Arabic in China (*Nahyan bin Mubarak, 2014*). It's considered a platform of knowledge for the Arab-Islamic culture in China (*Liangying, 2021. p. 32*) a window to spread a bright image of it, and a bridge to promote friendship between China and the Arab countries in general and the UAE in particular (*Interview 1, 2023*).

### **The Center's Library**

Owning a distinguished library is part of the center's remarkable scientific capabilities. Ali Al Dhaheri, the UAE's ambassador to China, stressed that his country gives great importance to library's projects; Seeking to make it a symbol of cultural exchange between the two countries (*Sheikh Zayed Center Library, 2018*). The Center's library includes 5,000 books in the Chinese language and about 10,000 books in the Arabic language, covering the Arabic language, history, culture, literature, and politics The Center's library also includes the New Silk Road series, the Cultural Exchange series, and the Classic Works series. The Center's library also participated in the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair in April 2017, in which China was the guest of honor (*interview with Ms. Samiha, 2023*). The Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority's Kalima project gave 1,000 books to the Sheikh Zayed Center (*Mohamed bin Zayed attends, 2012*).

## Activities and Visits

### Cultural Activities

Sheikh Zayed Center, as described by the former Emirati ambassador to China, Omar Al-Bitar, has turned into a cultural platform that Arab countries can be proud of (*Emirati-Chinese"relations, 2018*) where scientific seminars, art exhibitions, language competitions, poetry evenings and other cultural and scientific events are held regularly. In October 2023, Mohammed Jalal Al Rayssi, Director-General of the Emirates News Agency (WAM), gave a lecture inside the center on the effective role that the media can play in supporting joint action and raising awareness about issues of climate change and sustainability (*Media report, 2023*). In December 2019, the Center hosted a party on the occasion celebrating the International Day of the Arabic Language and the First Festival of Arab Literature and Arts of the University of Foreign Studies in Beijing. The ceremony was organized jointly by the Center and the UAE Embassy in China (*The Foreign Studies University, International Day of the Arabic Language, 2019*).

Translation contributes effectively to communication between civilizations and building bridges between cultures (*Nerdjes, 2021, p.107*). So The center's professors have published a large number of publications, translations and research in various branches of the Arabic language between language, literature, thought, society and politics. Among these translated books are the translation of the book "With the Power of the Union" Sheikh Zayed, "The Leader and the State" and the translation and publication of the book "My Vision: the Challenges in the Race for Excellence" by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum (*Interview 1, 2023*). And the translation of selections from poems by the famous Syrian poet Ali Ahmed Saeed Esber "Adonis" into Chinese (*symposium, 2017*). In October 2019, the Center witnessed holding a ceremony to launch the Chinese translation of the collection of poems "Osmantus" by the great Syrian poet "Adonis" The collection includes 50 poems that express the poet's impressions of the landscape, history and culture in China, inspired by his previous trip to it (*Interview 1, 2023, The collection of Osmantos, 2019*).

The Center also organized, in partnership with the Lebanese University, a symposium on "Translation and its Role in Civilization Exchange" in May 2016, which is the first event in the field of translation between Chinese and Lebanese institutions (*Massoud, 2021*). On the other hand, the Lebanese poet, writer and philosopher Gobran Khalil Gobran was present in the center's interests and activities. In November 2013, a literary evening was held to commemorate the 130th anniversary of the birth of the great poet, during a scientific symposium hosted by Beijing University in cooperation with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Chinese Society for Studies of Arabic Literature (*Interview 1, 2023*).

In October 2018, as part of the "Year of Zayed" activities, on the occasion of the centenary of the birth of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the late founder and president of the UAE, the Sheikh Zayed Center hosted a symposium under the title "Sheikh Zayed: His Life, Achievements and relationship between the UAE and China in a Changing World", which was established by the University of Foreign Studies in Beijing in cooperation with the UAE Embassy and the Emirates Diplomatic Academy (*symposium, 2018*). As part of the celebration of the same occasion, in May 2018, the Center hosted Dr. Ali Rashid Al Nuaimi, President of the Department of Education and Knowledge in Abu Dhabi and Supreme President of the UAE University, who gave a lecture that dealt with a historical overview of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan and his vision on the level of domestic and foreign policy (*Al*



*Nuaimi, 2018*). On the other hand, the Center held in June 2019 a seminar in cooperation with the UAE Embassy in Beijing, which dealt with a review of the project to resettle the African Oryx antelope, and the launch of the Asian premiere of the documentary “Back to the Wild”, which reviews the achievements of The late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan in the protection of the environment (*UAE Ambassador: Article, 2019*).

The Center participated in the establishment of the Dialogue Conference between Arab and Chinese Civilizations, in cooperation with the UAE Ministry of Tolerance and the International Committee for Confucian Studies. Which was held in, Abu Dhabi in October 2019 (*Dialogue Conference, 2019, Interview 1, 2023*). In September 2014, the Sheikh Zayed Center hosted the Scientific Dialogue Forum between Arab and Chinese youth in cooperation with the Association for Friendship between the Chinese People and the Peoples of the World. Youth delegations from Lebanon, Tunisia and Oman participated in the forum (*A forum for academic, 2014*).

### Visits of Arab Writers

The center hosted meetings for many distinguished Arab cultural and literary figures during their visit to China, such as the Syrian poet Ali Ahmed Saeed Esber "Adonis", the Egyptian writer Gamal El-Ghitani, the Egyptian writer, Nawal El-Saadawi, the Moroccan writer Mahmoud Abdel-Ghani, the Iraqi poet Saadi Youssef, the Algerian writer Wasini Al-Araj and the Egyptian researcher Ahmed El-Sayed Al- Nagar and the Lebanese writer Muhammad Ali Farhat and the Lebanese thinker Masoud Daher and others (*Liangying, 2021. p. 32, Interview 1, 2023*).



**Figure 4: The Syrian poet Ali Ahmed Saeed Esber "Adonis", during visiting the Center**

### Artistic Activities

In June 2015, the Center hosted a photo exhibition under the title: "The Pearl of the Gulf on the Silk Road: The Emirates in the Eyes of the Chinese", which was held under the patronage of Omar Al-Bitar, the UAE Ambassador to the Republic of China at the time, and in cooperation with the Chinese Friendship Association with Foreign Peoples and Peijiing University represented by the Sheikh Zayed Center. The exhibition included about 130

photos taken by Chinese citizens, including the Chinese ambassador to the UAE, Zhang Hua. The photos shed light on various aspects of life in the UAE, and embody the vision of those who took them of the UAE as they loved to see it and wanted others to love it (*Photo exhibition, 2015*).

### Senior Emirati officials Visits

Senior Emirati officials are keen to visit the Sheikh Zayed Center continuously, and emphasize the center's value in strengthening relations between the UAE and China. In March 2012, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, visited the center to attend its reopening ceremony after its restoration (*United Arab Emirates Yearbook, 2013, p. 75*). The presidents of the UAE Federal National Council were also keen to visit the center. In November 2018, the President of the Federal National Council, Amal Abdullah Al Qubaisi, visited the center (*Sheikh Zayed, 2018*). In March 2013, the center received a delegation of the UAE Federal National Council headed by Mohammed Ahmed Al Murr (*Federal National Council visits, 2013*).

In April 2007, the UAE Foreign Minister, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, visited the center, He stressed the importance of cultural exchanges in enhancing friendly relations between countries. He also announced that the UAE government will continue, as always, to support the Center Also in June 2006, the Sheikh Zayed Center was visited by the UAE Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, Mohammed Hussein Al Shaali (*Xue Qingguo, 2008, p92*). In April 2004, the UAE Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak, visited the center (*Xue Qingguo, 2008, p92*) *United Arab Emirates Yearbook, 2005*). In May 2023, Ambassador Emirati in china Ali Al Dhaheri, was keen to visit the Center in a farewell visit before returning to Abu Dhabi. The success and development of Sheikh Zayed Center made it a successful model for the cultural and soft diplomacy that the Emirati leadership has embraced for decades. Therefore, the delegation of the Emirates Diplomatic Academy “Anwar Gargash”, was keen in May 2023, and in March 2017 to visit the center within the framework of the delegation's visit to China (*Interview 2, 2023*).



**Figure 5: May 2023, student delegation from the United Arab Emirates Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy visit the Center**

The visit of the Academy delegation to the center is very significant, because the Academy has a major role in strengthening the efforts of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at educating, preparing and qualifying the Emirati diplomats and leaders of government bodies; to represent the UAE on the international scene (*Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy*). In August 2017, a delegation of ambassadors of the Emirates Youth Program visited the Sheikh Zayed Center during the delegation's visit to China (*UAE Youth Ambassadors visit, 2017*).

These successive visits of senior Emirati political officials, as well as educational and cultural officials, highlight the importance that Abu Dhabi attached to the center as an Emirati cultural force in the heart of Beijing, and that each visit of each Emirati official enhances the value of the center as a symbol of the friendly relations between the two countries.

### **Senior Arab officials' Visits**

The center received many senior Arab officials, who were keen to visit it and give lectures there during their official visits to China, making the center more like an intellectual forum or an Arab cultural salon in Beijing. September 2023, Asma al-Assad The wife of the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad visited the center while her visit to Beijing Foreign Studies University, and She gave a speech and had conversations with teachers, students and guests (*Interview 2, 2023*) and Queen Rania, the wife of Jordan's King Abdullah II. During her visit to the center in September 2007, she stressed the importance of the center's work and what it is doing in terms of breaking the language barrier to strengthen relations between China and the Arab world (*Xue Qingguo, 2008, p89. Queen highlights, 2007*). Egyptian Minister of Education Hussein Kamel Bahaa al-Din also visited the center in 1996, syrian Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam visited it in 1997, and in 2002 the Director General of the Arab Organization for Education, Culture and Science (Alxo) Dr. Mohammed Al-Mili visited the Center, Omani Minister of Endowments Abdullah al-Salmi also visited the center in 2002 (*Interview 1, 2023*).



**Figure 6: Queen Rania Al Abdullah visits the Center**



## Reflections on My Visit to Sheikh Zayed Center

In March 2023, I had the opportunity to visit the Sheikh Zayed Center to be the first foreign guest to visit Beijing Foreign Studies University after the restrictions related to the Covid-19 virus were lifted. Professor Bassam, Director of the Sheikh Zayed Center, received me and took me on an inspection tour inside the center, and from the first moment everything had a spirit. Arab: The atmosphere of the dome-topped conference hall with its beautiful decorations is able to capture the heart of any Arab when he sees this architectural style in the heart of Beijing. Professor Bassam, Director of the Center, gave me a historical account in a literary spirit about the history of the Center, its activities, and the most important officials who visited it. I also had the opportunity to meet Professor Shadi, Dean of the College of Arab Studies, as well as hold an interesting three-way discussion between me, Professor Bassam, and Professor Mai, Professor of Arabic Language and Literature, where our discussion dealt with Emirati relations. Chinese in particular and Arab-Chinese relations in general. I had the opportunity to hold a meeting with some of the center's students in the presence of Professor Bassam, where I gave a speech entitled "We are closer than we imagine," in which I discussed the most important turning points in the history of Emirati-Chinese relations and the value of the Sheikh Zayed Center in strengthening these relations. During the meeting, I noticed the students' good level of proficiency in the Arabic language, and some of them even discussed with me some verses of poetry dating back to the era of the Abbasid Empire in the ninth century.



**Figure 7: My dialogue with Prof. Bassam the Center director and Prof. Mai about the relations between China and UAE**

On the other hand, the center's library was exciting. I did not expect to see within a Chinese educational institution such a diverse amount of Arabic books, which varied between language books, heritage, history, and modern works, as if the library collected within its walls some of the fruits of Arab culture. At the end of my visit to the Sheikh Zayed Center, it became clear to me that Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan was seeking, by building the center, to

create a cultural and humanitarian energy that would drive Emirati-Chinese relations, and whose influence would extend to Arab-Chinese relations.



**Figure 8: My lecture about Chinese - UAE relations and the role of the Center in relations between the two countries**

## **Conclusion**

Cultural diplomacy has imposed itself during the past decades as one of the most important tools of soft power and an influential element in drawing the map of relations between countries, and since the declaration of the establishment of the United Arab Emirates in 1971, the president, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, put soft power and Cultural diplomacy is among the general principles of Emirati foreign policy. Later, the state established the Soft Power Council and the Cultural Diplomacy Office to develop a comprehensive strategic vision and an organized framework.

the march of the Sheikh Zayed Center for Arabic Language and Islamic Studies indicates how Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan succeeded in exploiting this long history of human communication between Arabs and China, building on it and crystallizing it into a modern form of cultural diplomacy since his first visit to China in 1990. Through the establishment of the Sheikh Zayed Center "Emirates" to be a gateway to introducing the Arab-Islamic culture and civilization to the Chinese community, and a way to strengthen the Emirati-Chinese relations in particular and the Chinese Arabs in general, and to contribute to creating a positive mental image of the Emiratis and the Arabs among the Chinese.

Since its inauguration, the Sheikh Zayed Center has enjoyed the patronage and support of the highest levels of political and scientific leadership in the Emirates, In order to help the center to continue its activities and programs in the best way, This support resulted the center to become one of the most important beacons for teaching the Arabic language and its literature and introducing the Arab-Islamic culture in China. About 1,000 Chinese students graduated from the center in various university degrees, and who set out to work in the highest levels of the diplomatic corps, the media, the economy and various fields.

The Sheikh Zayed Center has been visited by senior Emirati officials, as well as students of the Emirates Diplomatic Academy, because it becomes a new and positive dimension of the dimensions of the Emirati-Chinese relations.

The center turned into an intellectual landmark and an Arab cultural salon in the heart of Beijing, and it was keen to visit it by senior politicians, thinkers and writers from all over the Arab world to communicate through it with Chinese researchers, academics and intellectuals.

Clearly, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Center is a living embodiment of the success of cultural diplomacy in the foreign policy of the United Arab Emirates and it is the creative spirit of Emirati-Chinese relations, and one of the most important channels of humanitarian communication between the two Easts... the Arab world and China.



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