

China's Cultural and Public Diplomacy to Countries in the Middle East

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***Abstract:** Recently, China's cultural and public diplomacy has aroused the increasing attention of the international community. As a political power, its cultural and public diplomacy mode has had a positive influence on many countries in the world. Through three main waves of the cultural exchanges between the Middle East and P.R. China, this article further summarizes the successful experience of new China's cultural and public diplomacy model to Asia, Africa and Latin America. In the theoretical and practical level, it explains the basic model of cultural and public diplomacy: at the theoretical level and advocates the concept that government and people participate in it simultaneously, and countries coexist in harmony and peace. In the practical level, we maintain that cultural and public exchange and cooperation from a "multi-level, multi-track, and multi-field", thus has promoted China's post-Olympic era of cultural and public diplomacy. Finally, in ambassadors meeting held in August 2009, President Hu Jintao made an important speech on the implication of cultural and public diplomacy; the article summarizes four advices of constructing cultural and public diplomacy with Chinese characteristics.*

***Key Words:** China; Middle East; Cultural and Public Diplomacy*

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I

Since the founding of the P.R. China, particularly in 1955, the Bandung Conference provided a historical opportunity for China's cultural and public exchanges with the Middle East and opened the door for the communications between the new China and the Arab-Islamic countries. It formed the first upsurge between China and Middle East during the 1950s and 1960s: a religious delegation led by Bakuri, the Egyptian Minister of Awqaf, paid an official visit to China in May 1955. Both representatives on behalf of each governments signed "Minutes of Cultural Talks", including the exchange of teachers and students, the engagement of Egyptian religious scholars to lecture in China, and the exchange visits of cultural groups. Under the invitation of Bakuri, the China Islamic Association sent the first pilgrimage group via Saudi Arabia to visit Egypt in August 1955, and also paid visits to Pakistan, India and other countries on the way back to China; A trade delegation led by Nusayr, the Egyptian Minister of Trade and Industry Department came to China in August 1955 and signed the "Sino-Egyptian Trade Agreements and Protocols" which promoted the mutual establishment of trade representatives' offices in 1956. A teacher and seven students were selected to train for going to Egypt in September 1955. Premier Zhou Enlai met them and made important instructions on their study and work in Egypt. Then the first group of teachers, students and business officials from the new China reached Egypt in January 1956 and the Chinese trade representative's office in Egypt was established. Later on, the Egyptian trade representative's office in Beijing was created in February 1956 and four Egyptians were sent to learn in China. From February to April in 1956, the Vice Chairman of CPPCC and head of the China Islamic Association Bughraxan led a delegation of Chinese culture and art consisting of more than 80 people to Egypt and signed the "Sino-Egypt Agreement on Cultural Cooperation." They also paid visits to Sudan, Ethiopia,

Syria, Lebanon and other countries; Ye Jizhuang, the Chinese Minister of Foreign Trade led a delegation to participate in the Cairo Fair in March 1956 and further implemented the purchase of Egyptian cotton.....“ P.R. China sending Muslim delegations, delegations of culture and art as well as trade missions to Egypt in a short time made an important accomplishment in the Arabic and African countries. Many countries expressed their wishes to communicate and learn more about China. As a result, these countries through various channels, requested China to send a delegation to their own countries” (Liu, 2008:172). The Chinese and Egyptian governments issued a joint communiqué on May 30, 1956, announcing the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries and an exchange of diplomatic representatives at the ambassadorial level. Because of its long history, ancient civilization, unique and important geographical factors, Egypt has become one of the important countries in China’s new diplomacy. Middle Eastern countries which established diplomatic relations with China in this period included : Pakistan (1951: May), Afghanistan (1955: January), Syria (1956: August), Egypt (1956: May), Iraq (1958: August), Morocco (1958: November), Algeria (1958: December), Sudan (1959: February), Somalia (1960: December), Tunisia (1964: January), Mauritania (1965: July) and so on. In addition to the Bughraxan’s Chinese cultural troupe visiting the Middle East countries in 1956, and following, the China National Acrobatic Troupe (1957: August), the Egyptian Cultural Delegation (1957: October), the Chinese Youth Delegation (1958: January), the Iraqi Cultural Delegation (1958: September). Other exchange visits were frequent in this period involving not only arts, sports, education, media, academia, women, public health, science and technology but also other official and non-official contacts and exchanges.

After the end of the “Cultural Revolution”, China’s foreign exchange was gradually restored. In October 1971, the 26th UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 2758 which assumed the P.R. China’s legitimate seat at the United Nations. This ushered in the

second upsurge of China's diplomatic relations establishment. The Middle East countries which established diplomatic relations with China in this period are including: Kuwait (1971: March), Turkey (1971: August), Iran (1971: August), Lebanon (1971: November), Cyprus (1971: December), Comoros (1975: November), Jordan (1977: April) , Oman (1978: May), Libya (1978: August), Djibouti (1979: January), the United Arab Emirates (1984: November), Qatar (1988: July), Palestine (1988: November) Bahrain (1989: April) and other countries. At this stage, the cultural exchanges between China and the Middle East countries not only had contact visits, but also substantive cooperation: besides the continuing folk art exchanges such as singing, dancing, and acrobatics. The two sides also organized film festivals, cultural weeks, art exhibition, seminars, sports, health collaboration and other activities. They signed a series of cultural cooperation agreements and implementation plans starting to address and resolve the problems from institution construction level.

Since reform and opening-up, China established formal diplomatic relations with the last two Middle Eastern countries: Saudi Arabia (1990: July) and Israel (1992: January). China's cultural exchanges with Middle Eastern countries also entered the third period of rapid development. From 1991 to 1999, China has set up a Sino-Egypt, Sino-Syria, Sino-Sudan, Sino-Saudi Arabia, Sino-Israel Friendship Association. In the years 2000 and 2004, China established the "Forum on China-Africa Cooperation" and "China-Arab States Cooperation Forum" which institutionalizes the cultural exchanges between China and the Middle East. Particularly, in 2004, the Arab Friendship Association was established "by the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) and the relevant enterprises and institutions, social organizations and interested people of all circles. It is a national and non-profit social organization for the purpose of promoting relations between China and Arab countries, expanding international cooperation and safeguarding world peace." (Chinese Arabic Friendship Association,

2005: November 10).

In short, the new cultural and public exchanges between China and the Middle East have undergone three periods and have formed a basic communication path: non-official communication in culture and trade → establishment of formal diplomatic relations → cultural cooperation agreements and action plans → implementation of cultural action plan → carrying out various types of visits, exchanges and cooperation projects → establishment and improvement of mechanisms of cultural exchanges and cooperation at all levels and → further strengthening the communication and cooperation in response to global challenges.

II

It has been proved that cultural exchanges between China and the Middle East have a long history with notable achievements. A unique cultural and public diplomacy model with Chinese characteristics has been formed which is mainly expressed in two levels.

At the theoretical level, advocating that “government and people should participate in it simultaneously, and countries coexist in harmony and peace” embodies the systematic cultural and public diplomacy cognitions of Zhou Enlai, the Chinese initiator of cultural and public diplomacy. These cognitions have been verified in diplomatic practice and include the following main content.

1. The idea of people diplomacy. Zhou Enlai emphasized that: “the object of the diplomatic issues is the relationship between two nations. Diplomacy is carried out through the relationship between two nations, but the end point still affects and serves the people, which is dialectical.” (Zhou, 1990: 52). It is also a reflection of Chinese traditional humanistic values: “people are the root of a country” “the relationship of countries depends on the relation of their people.”

2. Trade and culture theory. In the 1950s, Premier Zhou told Peking Opera master Mei Lanfang that cultural and trade exchanges

are “two wings” and “pioneers” of diplomacy, and “cultural and trade exchanges have vitality and ability of promotion, because they are not as sensitive as political relations. Arts and sports are easy to be accepted. Cultural and trade cooperation benefit both of them.... At a certain point, political relations thaw ties, and two nations establish formal diplomatic relations. After all, it is diplomatic skill to achieve goals indirectly.” (Hu, 2008: 92). It also reflects the Chinese traditional brilliant idea that “the granary reality but knows the courtesy, the food and clothing foot but knows the honor or disgrace”. China and Egypt established diplomatic relations, which is the confirmation of Premier Zhou’s idea. After the Bandung Conference, cultural and trade exchanges were vigorous and frequent. When the two countries opened up formal diplomatic relations with each other, a large Chinese cultural and trade delegation coincided with this event in Egypt and witnessed this special moment in history.

3. Premier Zhou pointed out that “the relations between China and Arab world should bide its time, enhance exchanges and have more actions. When conditions are ripe, diplomatic relations will be established.” (*Contemporary Chinese Diplomacy*, 1988: 135). With the obstruction of Taiwan issue, the Western powers, religious factors, and even other Middle East hot issues, new China and Middle East nations continuously carried out a series of contacts, communications, exchanges and cooperation from 1950 to 1990 with the attitude of understanding and respect, consolidating the basis of mutual social understanding and trust.

4. Concerning China’s national reputation, on the eve of establishing diplomatic relations between China and Egypt, the Arab-Islamic world was cautious toward the new China. “When Premier Zhou knew none of eight teachers and students to Egypt was Muslim, he thought it was inappropriate” and he remedied it in time and established a positive image of Chinese Muslims. According to Premier Zhou’s idea, the representative of China attended the Bandung Conference with “*the Koran*”, “*The People’s Republic of China*

Constitution" (Arab version), "*Chinese Muslim Life*", "*China's Muslims*" and other meeting information. Besides, two Muslims were arranged to accompany Zhou; one was Imam Da Pusheng, the Deputy Director of the China Islamic Association as the religious adviser of Premier Zhou; the other was Professor Liu Linrui from the Arabic language department of Peking University, as the journalist of "*World Knowledge*" Publishing House participating in the meeting. As a result, the participants changed the prejudice and suspicion toward China in the Bandung Conference.

5. In the spirit of seeking common ground, in the Bandung Conference of 1955, Premier Zhou Enlai had a clear-cut stand of adhering to the spirit of seeking common interests: "The Chinese delegation is to seek common ground rather than to be different after finding common grounds from the pain and disasters of relieving colonialism, we can easily gain mutual understandings and respects, mutual sympathy and support, rather than doubt and fear, exclusion and confrontation." (Zhou, 1984: 154-155). It is also the use of "the men of virtue seeking the commons, while the men of meanness seeking difference" which is a dialectic method of analysis in Chinese traditional culture.

6. In terms of the principles of peaceful coexistence, as early as December 31, 1953, when meeting with the Indian government delegation, Premier Zhou Enlai pointed out that "the principles which the new China established were to deal with Sino-Indian relations. Those are mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity; mutual non-aggression; non-interference in each other's internal affairs; equality and reciprocity (later change to equality and mutual benefit) and peaceful co-existence". Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence later evolved into the basic spirit of the Bandung Conference and promoted the Chinese traditional thought— "All men are brothers" making great contributions to the course of world peace. Therefore, the cultural and public diplomacy in New China which was created by Premier Zhou aimed to present "a peaceful new China" to the world. Because Zhou Enlai led a delegation to attend the Bandung

Conference, it promoted the establishment of the official diplomatic relations between New China and Egypt and showed the path to the establishment of China's diplomatic relations with Arab, Africa, and other developing countries. "Peaceful coexistence" and "seeking common ground while accepting the existing differences" have become a valuable resource in China's cultural and public diplomacy and also become the public goods that the new China provided to the international community. It indicated an initial establishment of the new China's diplomacy discourse. In practical levels, China should carry out cultural and public communication and cooperation from "diverse levels, ways and fields".

The Middle East includes twenty-two Arab countries and five non-Arab countries. Except Israel and Cyprus, the rest are all Islamic countries. Among Islamic countries, Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan are non-Arab countries. Arab countries are all Islamic ones; among non-Islamic countries, 81.2% of the Israeli population are Jewish believing in Judaism, so Israel is regarded as a Jewish state in which the Jewish sabbath and all traditional and religious festivals are national holidays. 77% of the Cyprus population are Greeks believing in Orthodox; 18% are Turkish believing in Sunni Islam. Cyprus is the only Middle East country in which Christians are the majority of the population. In view of this complex situation in the Middle East, when developing a cultural and public diplomacy with Middle East countries, China should pay more attention to the following suggestions and institutions.

1. Multi-level communication. In addition to governmental departments such as the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Culture, and government departments in collaboration such as the Sino-Arab Friendship Association, the Islamic Association, there are also inter-governmental non-governmental organizations, multinational corporations, political parties, individuals, religious organizations, and others at different levels which are active in diplomatic relations between China and Middle East countries. It is consistent

with the complicated situation of the Middle East and the spirit of "seeking common ground while shelving difference." Considerable success has been achieved.

2. Multi-track communication. According to American scholars Diamond and McDonald, "multi-track diplomacy" refers to the diversified conceptual framework helpful to activities of world peace. They summarized nine approaches leading to peace: 1) diplomacy; 2) a professional conflict resolution; 3) commerce; 4) individual participation; 5) study; 6) advocacy of peace; 7) belief in peace; 8) provision of resources; 9) information (1996: 1). Therefore, multi-track diplomacy is also known as the "nine-track diplomacy / nine-channel diplomacy". We have found that China has developed cultural diplomacy with Middle Eastern countries through various channels such as government, academia, business, civilian contacts, research and educational training, social activities, religion, finance, and communication and media at various levels. Meanwhile, we have set up Confucius Institutes in the Middle East, and made gratifying achievements in assistance to Africa, the Hajj exchange, and media cooperation.

3. Multi-field communication. In the history of cultural and public communication between China and Middle East countries, there are exchanges in broad fields, including culture, education, science and technology, public health, sports, journalism, movies, youth, women, tourism, religion, and environmental protection. In November 2009, Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi made a report on "Implementation of Follow-up of Beijing Summit of Forum on China-Africa Cooperation" at the Fourth Ministerial Conference of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation. There are many achievements in cultural and public cooperation. China has signed cultural cooperation agreements with all African countries which have formal diplomatic ties with China. The "2008 Focus on African Culture" in China and "2009 Focus on Chinese Culture" in Africa were successfully held. China has increased government scholarships to African countries, which have reached 4,000 people in 2009. Twenty-three Confucius institutes and Confucian

classrooms have been set up in 16 African countries. China has sent 1200 medical personnel to a total of forty-two African countries, and provided medical equipment worth 50 million RMB, and established 30 malaria controls and prevention centers in African countries. The All-China Women's Federation has established women's training and exchange centers in five African countries, and provided 28 batches of aid for women's organizations of 14 African countries. Five hundred African youth have visited China. Ninety-eight pairs of sister cities have been established between China and African countries. Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi claimed in October 2008 that "we should vigorously carry out cultural and public diplomacy and actively expand cooperation and exchanges in culture, sports, and tourism, further promote development of overseas Confucius Institutes and Chinese Cultural Centers to spread Chinese culture. We should also strengthen exchange and friendship with foreign non-governmental organizations, social elites, think tanks and scholars to increase understandings and eliminate misunderstandings. We should adopt forms favored by the general public to introduce the real situation in China, and to obtain extensive understanding and support of the international community." (Yang, 2008: November). Therefore, a thorough analysis of the theory and practice of China's cultural diplomatic model to Middle East will help to summarize successful experience in cultural and public diplomacy with Asian, African and Latin American countries, and promote it in the post-Olympic era.

III

At the envoys' meeting of August 2009, President Hu made it clear that the mission of China's diplomatic work is "to strive to make our country more influential in politics, more competitive in economy, more compatible on the images and more appealing on morality. It creates a favorable international environment and external conditions for building a moderately prosperous society and accelerating

socialist modernization.” Among these factors, the cultural and public diplomacy went to an unprecedented height: the priority of the cultural and public policy is the creation of “the compatible image” and “the appealing moral.” While during the creation process, how to expand our political “influence” and economic “competitiveness” is also a difficult task for China’s cultural and public diplomacy. Therefore, China should seize opportunities and meet challenges to deepen cultural exchanges between China and the Middle East. The specific recommendations are as follows:

First, the cultural and public interactions between China and Arabian (African) countries have undergone a long history. The relationships between China and Iran, Israel, Turkey, and other countries started early but were intermittent. At present, the cultural and public diplomacy between China and Arab countries remains the stage of deepening cooperation while the relationships with other Middle East countries are still in the stage of deepening communication. Therefore, how to coordinate and develop the four relationships of China cultural and public exchanges in the Middle East would be the primary challenge.

Second, China’s diplomacy in the Middle East encountered many interfering factors (such as power factor, the religious factor, the Taiwan factor, the “Three Evil” Forces of terrorism, extremism and separatism and the Middle East hot spots ,which results in cultural communication situations with different effects). Therefore, how to balance the different ethnic demands of Arab countries and Israel in the relationship of China and Israel; how to safeguard China’s interests overseas in dealing with the Iranian nuclear and how to protect the core of our own concerns in handling the problems of the East Turkistan separatists and Kurdish issue with Turkey. To some extent, these numbers of interfering factors increased the difficulty of solving these problems.

Third, apart from the Taiwan and Tibet issue, the “7 • 5 Event” which is still spreading negative effects corrodes China’s soft power

and affects the China's favorable external environment for public opinions. Therefore, how to deal with religious, ethnic, human rights and other sensitive issues and prevent such incidents happening again and proper change the unfavorable situations are not only the real reflection of the absence or weakness of cultural and public diplomacy, but also the future focus of our diplomatic work.

Fourth, in the face of great humanistic challenges such as global environmental protection, ecological and human disasters, the way to further strengthen international exchanges and international cooperation in order to shape the "harmonious China" and the "responsible major power" will be the difficult points of cultural and public diplomacy. This diplomacy policy and even the theoretical construction of China's cultural and public diplomacy have realistic meanings the relations between China and the Middle East in the future.

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