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Role of Civilizational Culture in Establishing a New Era in China–Arab States Economic Relations

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ABSTRACT

On May 30, 2024, Beijing hosted the 10th jubilee ministerial meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF). It intended to open broad horizons for developing China-Arab relationships, based on a common future and civilizational dialogues. Hence, the **subject** of the present study is constituted by analyzing the role of civilizational culture in establishing a new era in China – Arab states trade and economic relations. The **purpose** is to identify most significant features of the Chinese and Arab cultures and their relevant business practices, which could assist in navigating more easily while conducting cross-cultural business communications at the levels of states, companies, and individual entities. The **relevance** of the research relates to the growing importance of non-confrontational political, economic, and cultural tools of “soft power” in enhancing Beijing’s role across the MENA region. The **scientific novelty** of the article stems from the use of a vast variety of sources in Arabic, Chinese, and Russian, inaugurating some of them into scientific domain. The list of the **methods** includes comparative and systems analysis, as well as the empirical method of field research, sampling, observation, grouping, generalization, and systematization, following historical, convergent, and synergetic **approaches**. The **results** of the study enabled the authors to make recommendations about organizing future expert discussions and scientific publications with the comparative analysis of the Chinese and Arab cultures. The authors **concluded** that sharing common ethic fundamentals by the Chinese and Arabs could create a favorable ground for fulfilling the Arab dimension of China’s Global Civilization Initiative.

Keywords: civilizational culture; multi-cultural dialogue; MENA region; China-Arab relations; China’s Global Civilization Initiative; China-Arab States Cooperation Forum; business communications; international economic relations

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Роль цивилизационной культуры в установлении новой эры в экономических отношениях Китая и арабских государств

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АННОТАЦИЯ

30 мая 2024 г. в Пекине состоялась 10-я юбилейная министерская встреча Форума сотрудничества Китая и арабских государств (CASCF). Она была призвана открыть новые горизонты для развития китайско-

арабских отношений, которые основывались бы на общем будущем и цивилизационных диалогах. **Предметом настоящего исследования** является анализ роли цивилизационной культуры в установлении новой эры в торгово-экономических отношениях между Китаем и арабскими странами. **Цель** состоит в том, чтобы выявить наиболее существенные черты китайской и арабской культур и связанных с ними деловых практик, что могло бы облегчить выстраивание кросс-культурных деловых коммуникаций на уровне государств, компаний и физических лиц. **Актуальность исследования** связана с растущей значимостью неконфронтационных политических, экономических и культурных инструментов «мягкой силы» в контексте усиления роли Пекина в Ближневосточном регионе. **Научная новизна** обусловлена использованием широкого круга источников на арабском, китайском и русском языках с введением ряда из них в научный оборот. Перечень **методов** включает в себя сравнительный и системный анализ, а также эмпирический метод полевых исследований, методы выборки, наблюдения, группировки, обобщения и систематизации – при следовании историческому, конвергентному и синергетическому **подходам**. **Результаты исследования** позволили авторам сформулировать рекомендации по организации будущих экспертных дискуссий и научных публикаций со сравнительным анализом китайской и арабской культур. Авторы пришли к **выводу** о том, что наличие общих этических основ у китайцев и арабов может создать благоприятные условия для успешной реализации арабского измерения китайской Глобальной цивилизационной инициативы. **Ключевые слова:** цивилизационная культура; мультикультурный диалог; регион Ближнего Востока и Северной Африки; китайско-арабские отношения; Глобальная цивилизационная инициатива; Форум сотрудничества Китая и арабских государств; деловые коммуникации; международные экономические отношения

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1. Introduction

Different civilizations and countries have developed their own cultural traditions, which largely influence and even determine their communications and business behavior. Facing the acceleration and enhancement of globalization processes around the world, the importance of such traditions in terms of facilitating cross-cultural communications, as well as solving interstate difficulties and avoiding tensions in international trade, has been increasing. Hence, research in this particular area has acquired particular relevance, for instance, in light of the growing Arab-Chinese trade, energy, investments, and technological cooperation related to Beijing's "Belt and Road" global transport initiative. Those facts logically explain the reason for choosing the subject of the present article.

European studies historically distinguish the main dichotomies (dimensions) of national cultures and the factors that shaped them [1, p. 69]. According to M. Weber, modern capitalism and its rationality are associated with the peculiarities of national mentality. Thus, in his famous work "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism", he raises most important issues related to the formation of rational economic thinking under the influence of a certain sociality, conditioned by national religion and culture [2, p. 6]. C. Joinson emphasizes

the importance of the concept of cultural sensitivity, manifesting itself in sincere concern for people from other cultures. Such cultural sensitivity requires decision makers to understand the way of thinking of those who live in other cultures, since this is what primarily influences the success of interstate projects and organizational processes in intercultural spaces [3, p. 4]. K. Polanyi calls the national socio-cultural background a "restraining factor" for economic development of a country and a region, while social institutions, in his view, ensure the harmonious development of any state and society [4, p. 255]. D. Landes, after examining the "successes of minorities in foreign lands" (Chinese in Southeast Asia, Jews and Calvinists in Europe, etc.), came to the conclusion that culture, with its deep values and attitudes, determined the economic behavior of masses, pushing them to carry out certain acts of economic activity [5, p. 38].

In turn, G. Hofstede defines culture as a collective mental programming and a part of the predetermination of our perception of the world, common with other representatives of our nation, region or group and distinguishing us from representatives of other nations, regions, and groups [6, p. 36]. He also argues that features of national culture and mentality could serve as tools for solving many problems in the interaction of representatives of different countries. In national culture, Hofstede

identified the following dichotomies: Individualism/Collectivism, Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Masculinity/Femininity. Subsequently, K. Leung, M. Bond, and S. Schwartz added the fifth dimension, namely, attitude to time (short-term and long-term), also called the “Confucian dynamism factor.” Remarkably, the process of further research proved that those parameters alone were not enough to truly understand the modalities of economic behavior of the inhabitants of the East, although at the same time they allowed for understanding the behavior of Europeans and North Americans quite well [7, p. 73].

Therefore, in the era of globalization and growing economic interdependencies, the practical imperative of overcoming an objective disadvantage of studying Western cultural traditions separately from the Eastern (Oriental) ones, and vice versa, similarly to the existing studies of individual Eastern cultures, determines the need to compare different civilizations and cultures, finding their outstanding common and unique features. This task becomes particularly relevant for analyzing not just regular cultures but civilizational cultures with thousand-year histories, such as the Chinese civilizational culture covering vast political-geographic areas.

Taking into account the above-mentioned, an important common feature of the Chinese and Arab cultures is embodied by their civilizational character, characterized by oriental identity and uniqueness; they are either still largely geographically isolated in the case of China or covered by the broader Islamic world in the case of the Arabs. Not by chance, in the 1990s, Samuel Huntington singled out the Sinic (Chinese) and Islamic civilizations separately from the Western civilization. In his view, the Sinic civilization relates to all of Vietnam, mainland China, including the Chinese island of Taiwan, but without the “Western” Hong Kong, along with both Koreas [8, p. 26–27]; meanwhile, the Islamic civilization includes Arab countries, or the Arab world (*Al-Watan Al-Arabi* in Arabic). For the purpose of the present article, the notion of the Arab world applies to the vast geographical area encompassing 21 member countries of the League of Arab States (LAS), excluding the remote Comoros, i.e., the macro-region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with the adjacent Horn of Africa.¹

¹ The notion of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is broadly used in both scientific and expert domains, being reflected in documents of the United Nations, the World Bank,

Interestingly enough, Huntington’s approach at least partly correlates with the later gradation of civilizations proposed by a leading Russian neo-Eurasian philosopher, A. Dugin, who calls both the Chinese civilization and the Semitic civilization of the borders (which includes the Arab-Islamic civilization) civilizations “beyond the West” in Eurasia [9, p. 21; 10, p. 492]. Another substantial marker of the civilizational nature of both cultures is constituted by the self-perception of their identities, which is in the Chinese case linked with the emerging paradigm of states-civilizations (civilization states). Not by chance, the Armenian researcher H. Bardakchyan calls China a paradigmatic example of a state-civilization, referring to the longevity and clear cultural continuity of Chinese dynasties and political regimes [11, p. 11].

Quite naturally, the issues of cultural determinacy of economic and social life of people, recognized by Chinese thinkers for many centuries, still create a subject of deep study in the context of returning to the imperial ideas about the superior uniqueness of the Chinese civilization. For instance, Ma Zhiqing notes that cultural development is a decisive factor in the development of a national economy, i.e., a more developed culture means a more developed economy. Importantly, the same author notes that the creation of regional trade alliances, such as the European Union and the North American Free Trade Agreement, couldn’t eliminate the influence of cultural differences on interethnic dialogues [12, p. 17].

On a more practical level, Song Yilin, studying the features of Chinese national corporate culture, says that national corporate culture, being a set of common values, credos and codes of conduct, represents a key element of management and long-term development [13, p. 85]. Li Guizi, for his part, outlines that in China, the Confucian culture, which has been dominating for many centuries, produces a profound influence on customs, moral ethics, life views, values, and other civilizational traditions of the Chinese nation. At the same time, in the era of inter-country competition and economic globalization, traditional culture keeps playing

and other international organizations: MENA. United Nations Global Compact. N/d. URL: <https://unglobalcompact.org/engage-locally/mena> (accessed on 09.01.2025); Middle East and North Africa: Overview. The World Bank e-resource. 15 Dec 2021. URL: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena/overview> (accessed on 11.01.2025).

either a positive role in promoting or a negative role in restraining the development of corporate governance practices [14, p. 216].

At the same time, the Arab world, although geographically not localized but covered by the Islamic civilization, will forever remain the cradle of the Islamic religion as such. Importantly, Islam (which currently unites more than 2 billion followers) has been no less, if not more, influential than Confucianism in China and has been deeply influencing the economic and social life of Arab countries from the very top to the bottom and vice versa, forming nearly 1400-year-long traditions of civilizational culture. Moreover, since the 1990s' post-Cold War ideological crisis, the importance of those traditions and relevant rules has been constantly increasing across the whole MENA region.

Thus, the fundamentals of Arabs' ethics (*akhlaq* in Arabic), business behavior, and trade, such as permitted activities (*halal*) vs. taboos (*haram*) are consecrated by the provisions of the Holy Quran, hadiths of Sunnah, and their interpretations by prominent Oriental thinkers, such as Imam Mohammed al-Bukhari (810–870), who is recognized as the most distinguished scholar of Hadith in Islamic history [15]. The authors also referred to the relevant historical and contemporary views presented by R. Abdel Hamid, H. Basmisirli, Z. Muttaqin, and other scholars, covering the basic ideas of Arabism, Islamic morality, *halal*, and Arab hospitality vs. excessive behavior (*israf*), along with the basic rules of Islamic banking.

In summary, this study focuses on analyzing how civilizational culture contributes to establishing a new era in trade and economic relations between China and Arab states. Hence, the authors, fulfilling the *purpose* of the research, outlined the most significant features of the Chinese and Arab civilizational cultures related to their business practices in the general context of building the Chinese-Arab partnerships at the present stage. Such analysis could assist in navigating more easily while conducting cross-cultural business communications at the levels of states, companies, and individual entities. Meanwhile, the *relevance* of the selected topic relates to the growing importance of non-confrontational political, economic, and cultural tools of “soft power” in enhancing Beijing's role across the MENA region, bearing in mind that the relevant experiences could become advantageous for Russia and other countries. The *scientific novelty*

of the article stems from the use of a vast variety of sources in Arabic, Chinese, and Russian, inaugurating some of them into the scientific domain.

2. Materials and methods

The goals and objectives of this study are implemented by using the methods of comparative and systems analysis, as well as sampling, observation, grouping, comparison, generalization, and systematization.

The method of comparative analysis as prioritized by the authors enabled them to identify common and distinct features of the Chinese and Arab civilizational cultures and business ethics. Those influence cross-cultural communications, trade, and economic relations between the People's Republic of China and different Arab states. Hence, the present article could be fully recognized as a comparative one.

At the same time, the historical analysis of practical and theoretical material allowed the authors to draw appropriate conclusions. In that, they referred to a scope of notions and works previously developed by European, Chinese, and Arab scholars, among them R. Lewis's model of cultural types, as well as relying on their own business, diplomatic, and academic experiences of dealing with Arab countries and China.

The convergent approach is based on the acknowledgment of the fact that China and the Arab countries have become key and important players in the emerging multipolar world. It implies the synthesis of accumulated data aiming to formulate recommendations for doing mutual business.

The synergetic approach provided the authors with an opportunity to take a closer look at the current and future harmonization of the China-Arab dialogue, taking into account mental, religious, legal, ethical, and professional peculiarities of the Chinese and Arab civilizational cultures, which nowadays serve as either catalysts or inhibitors of qualitative transformations of bilateral and multilateral relations between states.

Specifically, the authors used the empirical method, conducting a series of expert interviews with business and academic professionals to identify distinctive features of business behavior and the ethics of negotiations inherent to Arabs and Chinese. From May to October 2024, ten (10) senior employees of multinational corporations and companies from the People's Republic of China

were interviewed on condition of anonymity, both in face-to-face conversations and with the use of remote technologies in Beijing, Qingdao, Shenzhen, and Moscow. Those business entities operate in Russia and Arab countries, specializing in the manufacturing and sales of large household appliances and consumer electronics, as well as the automobile industry. The respondents included five (5) CEOs and heads of overseas offices of the above-mentioned Chinese companies, three (3) brand development directors, and two (2) human resources (HR) managers.

During the same period, parallel field research of the Arab civilizational culture was carried out using both interviews and visual observation. The personal meetings, negotiations, and online conversations covered ten (10) representatives of business, academic, and expert circles of Egypt, Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, Syria, and Yemen (Aden). Among them were one (1) head of a Russian-Arab business council, one (1) head of a Federation of Industrial Chambers, one (1) industrialist and merchant, two (2) top employees of a service company, one (1) franchise specialist, one (1) corporate and arbitration lawyer, one (1) business consultant, and two (2) top representatives of university administrations involved in the training of economic specialists.

Eventually, the empirical methods allowed the authors to gain access to uncoded data, individual opinions, and reputed experts' assessments, which contributed to a certain increase of knowledge related to the Chinese and Arab civilizational cultures, especially as part of a mutual comparison.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Fundamentals of the Chinese civilizational culture and business approaches

Chinese civilization has gained more than 5,000 years of continuous history. In the “cycle of chaos” of successive dynasties, the traditional Chinese family continued to maintain authentic Chinese culture in a relatively stable status quo. Despite certain periods of upheaval, including the active foreign presence in China during the Mongol rule or the Opium Wars, those civilizational values were not abandoned but became an important part of the Chinese cultural code, harmoniously integrated into the modernization of contemporary China.

Among the striking features of Chinese traditions, it is worth highlighting the family hierarchy. The most respected members of the family are grandparents. Then, in descending order, come parents, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. The Father is endowed with special patriarchal features, since he bears all responsibilities for providing for and protecting the family. The wife and children occupy a subordinate position. In a modern Chinese family, gender roles often change: if a woman works, the family structure becomes more matriarchal. Nevertheless, the tradition of respect for elders and care for younger ones continues to be reproduced.

In business, this civilizational tradition is manifested by the perception of the owner of the enterprise as the father of the family with the corresponding attitude. The value of traditional family ethics in China lies in the ethical responsibility of family members for the common cause, shown both in everyday and economic life [16, p. 85]. This helps to smooth out the contradictions that arise in the process of economic modernization, using Chinese families in administrative ethics, as well as management of business and the state. In the modern logic of “integration of family and country” within the framework of economic modernization, China follows centuries-old traditions of integrating life, nature and man, just perceiving the whole world and society as one family [17, p. 85].

Family spirit as a key feature of the Chinese business culture is also seen in the prevalence of family-run businesses. Such small and medium-sized businesses constitute the backbone of the Chinese economy, receiving significant government support in the form of simplified taxation and benefits. As the head of the HR department of the largest Chinese manufacturer of household appliances noted, it is now very common to find enterprises where three to four generations of one family work together. Here, Chinese business partners look like a clan: the head of the company is usually called *laoban* by subordinates, which could be translated as “the highest respect and command.” As noted by Wan Jiangxin [18, p. 23], during negotiations with the Chinese side, this special attitude towards the Boss is especially pronounced, since in China “corporate culture is the culture of the Boss.” The family spirit of a Chinese delegation is also reflected in mutual assistance, collectivism, and the absence of selfishness in decision-making.

Closely connected with the perception of all the states of the world as a large family is the Chinese concept of the “middle state” (*Zhongxin zhi guo*). The ancient Chinese shaped the earth as a square with China in its center. The geographical position of China contributed to the idea that it was the center of the world. Isolated from the rest of the world by natural barriers (mountains and seas), the Chinese created a civilization that adopted virtually nothing from contacts with any other people at the same stage of development as them, right up until the middle of the 19th century. Thus, the Chinese world order was represented by China, located in the center, and the barbarian periphery — all other states. Fig. 1 illustrates the structure of this world order:

The following categories are distinguished:

- *tianzi* — son of heaven, head of the middle state, emperor;
- *neichen* — close confidant of the emperor;
- *waichen* — foreign subjects, vassal territories;
- *chaogong* — foreign subjects who brought tribute on a permanent basis.

At the head of everything was the emperor *tianzi*, to whom all things were subordinated. The immediate circle included *neichen*, i.e. imperial nobility, ministers, and assistants. *Waichen* and *chaogong* were representatives of the territories under Chinese rule. This concept was the idea of an ideal state in the period before and during the Qin Dynasty. During the Han Dynasty, this concept became a reality, and the entire region of East Asia was included in the tribute system, the core of which was Chinese civilization [19, p. 70].

In addition to the above categories, northern, southern, western and eastern barbarians were also distinguished on the external contour of communication with the world. Thus, the world in Chinese was represented by the central state *tianxia zhongxin* (the center of the Celestial Empire, i.e. China) and the barbarian periphery (other states). At different times, representatives of other peoples were treated either with contempt or condescension. As the brand development director of a large Chinese company in the telecommunications sector notes, in local business culture this is manifested by the fact that the Chinese in general are indulgent towards foreign partners who do not speak Chinese but can establish very close friendly contacts making big concessions and discounts to those

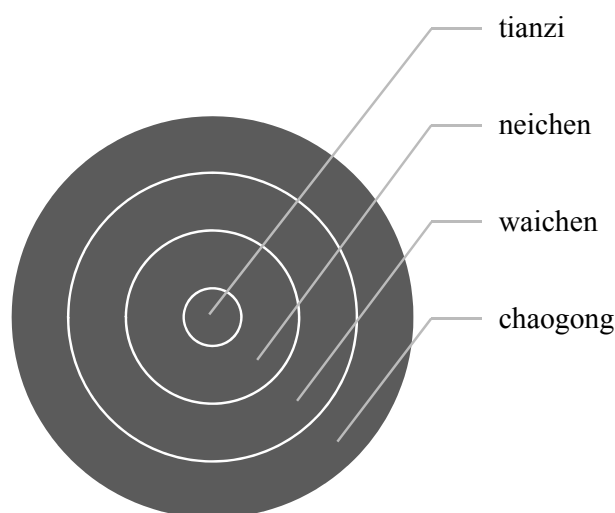


Fig. 1. The structure of the world order in ancient China

Source: Compiled by the authors.

representatives who speak or at least study Chinese. In contrast, the foreigners who speak Chinese fall into one of the categories of the circle shown in Fig. 1, thus, becoming part of the Chinese world.

This is also reflected in the specifics of accepting Western business practices. As a rule, they are not accepted in their pure original forms, undergoing “Chinese modernization,” over time acquiring Chinese national characteristics and eventually becoming part of the Chinese inner world [20, p. 5]. Hence, under the Chinese model, any mixture of traditional business culture represented by Confucianism and the market economy’s rules is implanted into the long-term business practices of local entrepreneurs through mutual transformation and complementary integration under the motto of Chinese wisdom, as it is said in the Chinese Global Civilization Initiative [21].

Richard Lewis places the Chinese among the nations of the reactive culture [22, p. 102]. Thus, the Chinese business culture gives great value to friendship and family harmony, which is reflected in the negotiation process through flowery speeches and the absence of direct dialogue in order to avoid confrontation. It also respects patience, persistence, and perseverance. During talks, the Chinese usually listen to their vis-à-vises silently and calmly, reacting very carefully to proposals. As the director of an overseas office of a major Chinese consumer electronics company notes, the Chinese rarely use the word “no” in negotiations; instead, they say *daoshihou* (“when the time comes”). Extremely long silences make people from the West think that their Chinese partners have nothing to say, but in fact,

they just need time to make a balanced, usually collective decision. Naturally, in Chinese corporate behavior, whereas hierarchy and the above-mentioned family spirit are important, decisions are often made in the interests of the whole team.

During negotiations with the Chinese, as the general director of the overseas representative office of a major Chinese electric vehicle manufacturer emphasizes, it is particularly important to observe Chinese ceremonial etiquette, which is an integral part of the Chinese civilizational culture, embodying Chinese virtues. Meaningfully, the Analects of Confucius says, “If you do not learn etiquette, you will not be able to stand up,” which means that only by paying special attention to politeness and etiquette can one achieve goals. Here, it is worth mentioning the following details [23, p. 119]:

1. *Appearance*. The Chinese are very careful about their clothes, shoes, and accessories. They usually dress modestly but neatly, not allowing themselves to be careless. Women prefer to wear simple jewelry to demonstrate a sense of elegance and generosity. Any bright clothes, according to the Chinese, leave the other side with the impression of instability and frivolity.

2. *Behavior*. As noted above, the Chinese are careful and polite in negotiations, trying to gain the respect of others. In a favorable situation, one shouldn’t show pride or happiness, while if the situation is unfavorable, one shouldn’t be sad.

3. *Dining etiquette*. Here, the Chinese pay more attention to the seating order. It is viewed as an important symbol, allowing one to distinguish between higher and lower ranks: people with their ranks in descending order sit from south to north on the western side of a table. Thus, the place in the farthest position is recognized as the most prestigious, while the place closest to the door is the most modest.

4. *Greetings and farewells*. In ancient times, “bowing” and “kneeling” were common. Nowadays, a handshake typically takes their place. However, in a particularly friendly atmosphere, the Chinese may bow when saying goodbye as a sign of special respect. Special greeting etiquette includes the etiquette of exchanging business cards.

According to the precepts of Confucius, the Chinese try to achieve harmony during negotiations. “Harmony is the most valuable thing, and harmony brings wealth.” That is why the Chinese are almost

never late for meetings but arrive early. They believe that to ensure the success of the final talks, one can sacrifice own interests and time, showing respect for the interlocutor.

As the development director of a major Chinese automaker says, the Confucian business spirit in China puts “righteousness” above “profit.” In negotiations and transactions, a *junzi* (noble man) must adhere to the basic principle of putting justice above profit. Just pursuing one’s egoistic interests won’t bring any success, possibly leading to a one-time profit deal without a long-term value. The main goal of negotiations, according to the Chinese, is to achieve mutually beneficial cooperation. This goal is coined in a main Chinese treatise of antiquity, namely, the “Historical Notes” [24, p. 68]. Therefore, the Chinese highly value personal communication and the establishment of long-lasting and stable friendly relations.

Friendly relations with Chinese businessmen are often ensured through congratulating them on traditional Chinese holidays. As the brand development director of a Chinese manufacturer of household appliances and refrigeration equipment admits here, the following rule applies: if you are a Buyer, you will be congratulated, but if you are a Seller, congratulations are expected from you. Another element of the Chinese business culture is about building sustainable partnerships via shared meals. Hence, the Chinese are very sensitive to sharing dinner or lunch, quite frequently drinking alcohol. People believe that during a shared meal, partners exchange energy and establish Confucian harmony, paving the way for future joint projects.

Similarly, if it comes to the modern Chinese political system, one should mention the special role of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in shaping the local business environment by establishing strong contacts between government agencies and the private sector. The CPC attracts attention of entrepreneurs, trying to integrate them into harmonious public-private partnerships (PPPs) and joint ventures (JVs) on national and international levels and usually delegating CPC’s members to appropriate business entities.

3.2. Fundamentals of the Arab civilizational culture and business approaches

Many Arab societies keep their traditional tribal structure (Libya, Mauritania, the Gulf Coopera-

tion Council (GCC) monarchies, Somalia, and Yemen) based on *nassab*, i.e. tribal or family-clannish identity [25, p. 77]. Thus, the Saudi royal family rules Saudi Arabia, while the Al Nahyan and Al Maktoum dynasties are in charge of the UAE's Abu Dhabi and Dubai Emirates, respectively. Representatives of influential tribes (*banu* in Arabic) [26, p. 137] hold most prestigious positions in the state and leading raw materials companies, being treated with demonstrative respect.²

Another significant ethical component of the Arab civilizational culture is embodied by the hierarchy of identities (*hawiyat*), historically based on the fundamental notion of Pan-Arabism (*'Urubah* in Arabic), invented by Abdel Rahman al-Kawakibi, a 19th-century Syrian philosopher [27, p. 1] and then supplemented by the concepts of Pan-Arab identity (*al-hawiya al-qaumiya*) and country-level identity (*hawiya qutriya*) [28, p. 1]. Hence, Arabs first of all perceive themselves as Egyptians, Emiratis, Syrians, Yemenis or even South Yemenis, etc., while at the upper level they name themselves Arabs apart from non-Arabs or foreigners/strangers (*ajanib*). This is constantly and openly illustrated by the interviews with the Arabs in all the above-mentioned states. Such hierarchy affects different-level relationships, starting from selling entry tickets to museums to *ajanib* at prices much higher than those for national citizens and Arabs³ and up to facilitating projects with foreign partners, preferably through Arab intermediaries.⁴

Given the relative openness of Arab societies in the era of globalization, diplomatic protocol, etiquette, and corporate ethics appear to be international in nature. However, Arab rulers try to preserve the Arab identity⁵ amidst outer attempts to impose on them the Western consuming

culture. Although nowadays, the demonstrated adherence to Sharia law by Arabs often coexists with their "free" behavior in non-Muslim countries, for example, in Europe or even Arab countries with secular regimes and Christian inner enclaves, such as Lebanon.⁶

Originally, Arab etiquette was formed on the basis of Muslim hospitality (*ikram al-deif*) [29], although its initial imperatives, such as benevolence, generosity, keeping the word, and mutual respect, had emerged during the pre-Islamic period of *Jahiliya* within the Bedouin code of courage (*murawwa*) [30, p. 72]. Subsequently, they became enshrined by the Holy Quran and Sunnah, however, no longer at any cost, but with the avoidance of excessive consumption (*israf*) [31, p. 2].

According to Richard Lewis's model of cultural types, Arabs belong to the nations of the multi-active culture [32, p. 42–46] focused emotionally on communications more than results. Arab businessmen can run several projects at once or, on the contrary, use the tactics of dependency, relying on the state, family, or "workhorses" from *ajanib*. Another important feature of the Arab civilizational culture is linked with the higher status of Islamic narratives in the scale of values as compared to the tasks of making profits, along with the obligations to help people in need, especially during the holy month of Ramadan.

Many Arabs are characterized by a loose attitude to time, for instance, ignoring the passing of time, which is viewed as an event- or personality-related subjective commodity [32, p. 55–57]. Thus, being late for meetings with unfamiliar people and junior partners appears to be common, although Arab officials and businessmen always try to come on time for the negotiations with trusted or promising partners.⁷

The establishment of contacts with representatives of government agencies and business circles of Arab countries could be ensured either by delegation exchanges or on the sidelines of fairs and exhibitions, as well as with the assistance of diplomats and business associations and, most importantly, by pieces of advice from reputed people, who enjoy broad experience of cooperation with

² Those sensitive facts are sometimes admitted by Arabs themselves, although strictly on condition of anonymity. For instance, as told by a top employee of an Emirati service company in Abu Dhabi in a conversation with an author of the article.

³ Price for an adult entry ticket to the Egyptian museum in Cairo is only 30 EGP for Egyptians and all Arab citizens in comparison with 550 EGP for other nationalities. The Egyptian Museum official web-site. URL: <https://egyptianmuseumcairo.eg/ticket-opening-hours/> (accessed on 12.12.2024).

⁴ Based on the field data accumulated by an author of the article throughout 2017–2024, during providing business consultancy to ensure entries of Russian companies to the markets of Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and the UAE.

⁵ The UAE Vision 2021 National Agenda. United Arab Emirates: The Cabinet. URL: <https://uaecabinet.ae/en/national-agenda> (accessed on 12.12.2024).

⁶ This fact was discussed with a Lebanese corporate lawyer, who proved that such behavior doesn't meet legal restrictions.

⁷ For instance, neither the interviewed Lebanese corporate lawyer nor two leaders of Syrian business associations were late for meetings with an author of the article.

China and the Middle East states.⁸ In all cases, it is recommended to establish offline personal contacts, even if preceded by the online correspondence. Since even in the digital era, Arabs still highly appreciate face-to-face communication.⁹

Holiday greetings could also be useful for strengthening relationships, starting from sending e-postcards and up to presenting gifts. Primarily, we are talking about various Muslim holidays, including all of Eid al-Adha, marking the completion of Hajj; Eid al-Fitr, related to the end of Ramadan; Mawlid, celebrating the birthday of Prophet Muhammad; and Raas al-Sanah al-Hijriyah, i.e., Islamic New Year. During acquaintances and meetings, it is customary for Arabs to exchange gifts and souvenirs almost equal in size and value, while Muslims often exchange *tasbeeh* prayer beads.¹⁰ Alcohol, pigskin products, perfumes, and other women's personal items could not serve as gifts.

Besides, Arabs prefer to use personal connections to solve complex issues. Their style of doing business is ultimately determined by religious traditions, family clannish interests, or friendly relations, following *akhlaq*, inspired by the Holy Quran and Sunnah [33] together with *halal* trade [34]. A major rule of Islamic banking is related to the prohibition of *riba* interest profit, whereas confidence is secured by the exclusion of uncertainty (*gharar*), obliging a client to provide all necessary data to the bank, which in turn is obliged to avoid ambiguity in the contract. Following the ban on making profits without effort (*maisir*), lotteries are also prohibited [35, p. 77–78]. As usual, defending their own reputation, Islamic banks try to take into account life difficulties of their customers, such as losses of health or salary, allocating all collected fines to charity projects. Thus, the list of key cultural narratives of Islamic banking implies partnership, humanism, and deep connection with ethics.

Along with the prohibition of *riba*, the Sunnah does not allow *al-majhul* (selling unknown products), *al-muhaqala* (sale of an unprepared product,

such as futures) [36], *al-mukhadara* (sale of goods before certifying its quality [37]), *al-mulyamasa* (when the sale is considered to take place after the buyer touches the goods), *al-munabaza* (blind exchange) [37], and *al-muzabana* (sale of goods not delivered to the point of sale, unless otherwise agreed by the terms of the transaction) [38]. Upon concluding transactions, a Muslim is always obliged to comply with *halal* not overstating the prices of goods, which, however, does not rule out the traditional oriental ritual of market bargaining.

Facing deep differences in mentality, foreigners should discuss with Arabs in advance the fundamental terms of a project or contract, filling out *Minutes of the meeting* after each round of talks.¹¹ Before the start of a business meeting in Arab countries, especially in the GCC monarchies, the guests are invited to a “waiting room” (*majlis* in Arabic) for 15–20 minutes [39]. After an Arab host comes out to meet the guests, he or she enters the relevant room prior to them. This old tradition dates back to *Jahiliya*, when a Bedouin entered the tent first to demonstrate the absence of danger. Upon completion of a successful meeting, the guests could be seen off by the main negotiator in person.

The inaugural small talk, which contains such phrases as *al-salamu alaykum* (peace be upon you), *sabah al-kheir* (good morning), *naharukum as-said* (good day), *Masaa al-kheir* (good evening), or just *marhaban* (hello), is followed by personal questions. Those include *keyfkum* (how are you) and *keyf al-ailah* (how is your family), yet they do not ask about the health of a wife or husband. At the moment of greeting people for the first time, Arabs emotionally express their happiness by saying *tasharrafa* (it's an honor for us) and replying with *fursah saeedah* (it's a happy opportunity). Two usual forms of addressing elderly people are *sheikh* and *ustaz* (teacher in Arabic). In conversations, one should not mention the issues related to the internal politics of Arab countries, the personalities of their leaders, and Israel, also refraining from criticizing Islam and elaborating on health topics.

In all cases, a man introduces himself to a woman first, with the exception of meetings with theologians and tribal leaders (*sheikhs*). Younger people and those who occupy lower official positions are presented to the elders. A single man

⁸ During a series of interviews with an author of the article, a Lebanese-Syrian entrepreneur spoke about his positive personal experiences of helping his colleagues in facilitating useful contacts with business people from China.

⁹ This hypothesis was proved by two Emirati participants and two top university officials in Egypt and South Yemen in their conversations with an author of the article.

¹⁰ As numerously approbated in 2017–2024, in communications between an author of the article and Arab representatives.

¹¹ As shown by real practices of communicating with Arabs in Lebanon, Syria, and the UAE, enjoyed by an author of the article in 2017–2024.

should introduce himself first to a married man, similarly to a single woman introducing herself first to a married woman or a couple. When two men meet, they shake their right hands (since the left hand is considered unclean in Islam), demonstrating mutual good intentions [40, p. 87]. Old friends usually hug, touching each other three times on both cheeks [41, p. 6]. Remarkably, a person can shake hands with an Arab woman only if she extends it first.

Preferably, the age, official position, and social status of chief negotiators need to match or at least be comparable to each other. At the same time, young people shouldn't flaunt their elite education, unless they have essential work experiences. On the contrary, a person should refer to his/her title [40, p. 87]. Those include the degrees of Professor, Associate professor, Assistant professor, and PhD together with the professional title, such as engineer, medical doctor, etc., since Arabs have always shown respect for them regardless of the person's age. Aristocracy and VIPs must be addressed as Your Highness or Your Excellency. A married woman is called Madame, while yet an unmarried girl is addressed as Anisa (mademoiselle in Arabic). Despite the growing use of English, a good knowledge of Arabic by foreigners is still highly appreciated by Arabs. However, a member and especially the head of a foreign delegation, shouldn't act as an interpreter, since the Arab partners may regard this as a visible depreciation of personal status.

As Chinese, Arabs very rarely use the word "no," preferring to say *Inshallah* (if God allows) in all situations, which seem ambiguous or unclear to them [40, p. 87]. Thus, the expression of *bukra Inshaalah* (tomorrow, if God allows) has become a byword, not guaranteeing the fulfillment of a promise. Otherwise, an Arab partner will say *ghadan* (definitely, tomorrow).¹²

Frequently, Arab businessmen try to transfer initial communications into a friendly format by inviting promising foreign partners to "informal" lunches or dinners. The goal is to get to know those people better, grasping their weaknesses with an eye to obtain maximum future dividends. Strong Arabic or Turkish coffee (*qahwa* or *bunn*) is served as a welcome drink, usually with cardamom (*al-hel*) and without sugar (*qahwa sada*). It is prepared in a

long-nosed copper pot named *dallah* and afterwards poured into a small cup of *finjan*. Before eating, the Arabs pronounce the phrase *Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem*, which in Arabic means "In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful" [42, p. 172], to be followed at the end of the meal by the exclamation of *Alhamdulillah* (Praise be to God).

Before serving soups and main dishes of the Arab cuisine, all guests are offered a set of cold and hot snacks (*mezzah*, accompanied by spirits or *mukabbilyat* without them). In conclusion, sweet desserts (*hilvayat*) are served. After eating, time comes to distribute Arab oil perfumes, moistening the skin behind the ears, as well as lighting some incense. At the moment of farewell, the heads and hands of the participants could be sprayed with rose water.

During the Holy Month of Ramadan, which demands strict fasting during daylight hours, there are no lunches for Muslims, while dinners are held in the form of *iftars* after the sunset [43]. However, they create real possibilities for establishing contacts not only between Muslims and Arabs but also between non-Muslims and non-Arabs as well.¹³

Arabs, particularly in Egypt and the GCC monarchies, usually appear at official events in national clothes. Those include *jalabiya* (a long loose shirt), *keffiyeh* (head scarf), *ukal* hoop, and sandals made of leather, which is convenient in hot climate.

3.3. Comparative analysis of the Chinese vs. Arab civilizational culture

Logically, patterns of communications manifested by both the Chinese and Arab cultures in different spheres, including economy and trade, can't help reflecting fundamental distinctive features inherent to reactive and multi-active cultures. Although, one should keep in mind Richard Lewis's important acknowledgment that "personal traits can occasionally contradict the national norm" [32, p. 43].

Hence, following Lewis's description, the main differences could be summarized as follows (see Table).

While the Chinese culture has more features of civilization due to the rather monolithic territory

¹² This fact was repeatedly proved by personal contacts of an author of the article with Arab partners in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and the UAE.

¹³ This assessment is based on the field data accumulated by an author of the article during his stint as a senior Russian diplomat in Syria (2014–2017), whereas he regularly attended iftars organized by the Damascus Chamber of Commerce and the Chamber of Industry of Damascus and Rural Damascus.

Table
Comparative brief of key features related to the Chinese and Arabs

Criteria	Chinese	Arabs
Ability to listen to a companion	Good listeners	Gregarious
Attitude to business	React	Do several things at once
Attitude to planning	Look at general principles, after that make slight changes	Plan grand outline only, after that could change plans
Attitude to project managing	See whole picture	Let one project influence another
Behavioral type	Introverts	Extroverts
Body language	Subtle body language	Unrestricted body language
Degree of patience	Patient	Impatient
Delegation of authority	Delegate to reliable people	Delegate to relations
Emotionality	Quietly caring	Emotional
Features of behavior	Silent	Talkative
Interruption of speech	Don't interrupt	Interrupt frequently
Mixing social and professional	Connect social and professional	Interweave social/professional
Perception of facts	Statements are promises	Juggle facts
Personal ambitions	Protect face of other	Seek favors
Preferred methods of gathering information	Use both first-hand and researched information	Get first-hand (oral) information
Punctuality, attitude to timetables and schedule	Yes, react to partner's timetable	No, timetable unpredictable
Saving of face tactics	Must not lose face	Have ready excuses
Style of telephone talk	Summarize well	Could talk for hours

Source: Compiled by the authors based on [32].

with a common history, the Arab culture, although more territorially fragmented, yet is still cemented by a stronger attachment not to philosophy and ethics, like in the Confucianism, but religion as such. Despite the existence of Caliphates during the early Middle Ages, the Arabs did not manage to re-create any similarly unified state during Modern and Contemporary times. However, right now, Islamic traditions gain more and more strength across the MENA region, covering even such former secular countries like South Yemen, which in the 1970–80s was known for its radical, leftist, and secular ideology of scientific socialism.

Politically, economically, and ideologically, today's China is more sovereignty-oriented than most Arab countries, although the GCC monarchies recently adopted ambitious national strategies of building XXI-century economies, among them the Saudi "Vision 2030" and Emirati "4th Industrial Revolution." Nevertheless, this doesn't apply to the borrowing of Western technologies, applicable to both Chinese and Arabs, although here China

plainly takes an upper hand. Those peculiarities, however, explain more openness of certain Arab countries (a plain example is Egypt) towards the outer world in terms of both relying on financial donor help and Western-like business patterns.

Amazingly, but only at the first glance, common cultural features between the Chinese and Arabs also exist. Despite belonging to different cultural types, the Lewis's triangular model not by chance depicts these two Oriental nations standing on the same side of the triangle. Interestingly enough, from Fig. 2 one could see that the Chinese and Arabs are separated from each other by four (4) positions only, which are occupied by the Koreans, Indonesians/Filipinos (considered by R. Lewis as a hybrid of multi-active and reactive cultures [32, p. 41]), Indians, and Iranians/Turks, in comparison with six (6) positions between the Arabs and Japanese. At the same time, the Chinese and Arabs stand 9–10 positions away from the Western-dominated linear-active cultural type, plainly represented by the Swiss, Germans, British, and White Americans.

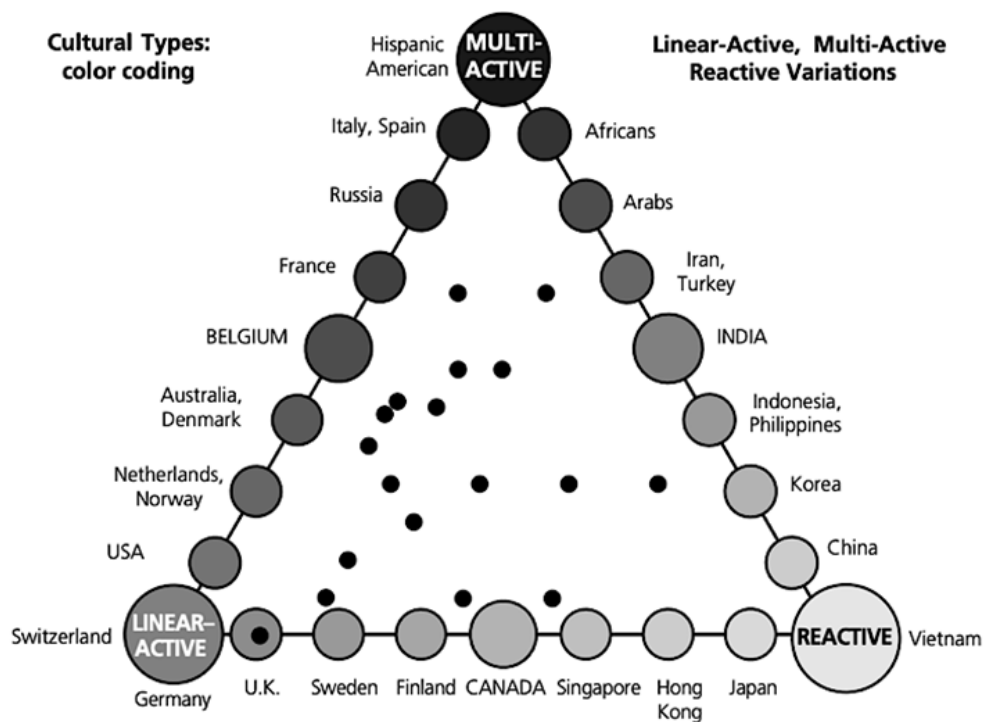


Fig. 2. Lewis's Cultural Types Model

Source: [32, p. 42].

Same R. Lewis rationally points out that both reactive and multi-active cultures are people-oriented in contrast with the job-oriented linear-active culture [32, p. 34]. This fact correlates with their common collective nature.

In parallel, the Lewis triangle and his follow-up research adequately prove that not all linear-active, multi-active, or reactive nations are similar in terms of key features, characteristics, approaches, ethical attitudes, and common values, which in turn is confirmed by the vast field experiences accumulated by the authors of the present article. Thus, the Arabs look more like the Chinese by always trying to avoid confrontations, not saying the word “no,” and, thus, differing from many representatives of other multi-active nations, who, in Lewis’s words, tend to confront emotionally [32, p. 34].

Significant common features of the Chinese and Arab ethics also imply traditional, if not to say patriarchal, family values. Firstly, they include descending family hierarchies, which demand obedience and honoring of the elders, such as grandparents and parents, but are not limited to them.

Secondly, despite the influences of globalization, natives in China and Arab countries still emphasize deep respect for those foreigners who demonstrate real knowledge and/or sincere will to study their

culture, religion, ethics, and traditions. This is at most applicable to language proficiency skills.

Thirdly, the Chinese and Arabs, especially from the GCC area, both men and women, pay strong attention to clothing and dress codes as demonstrative tools to present personality. This fact must be taken into account for personal acquaintance and facilitating successful business communications.

Fourthly, as it comes to the general scale of ethics, people in China and Arab countries place moral values (justice, godliness, fear of God, etc.) above earthly imperatives related to profits or other commercial benefits.

Fifthly, the keys to establishing and improving friendly relations and long-term partnerships with Chinese and Arab entrepreneurs are often linked to congratulating each other on holidays, presenting gifts, and enjoying joint meals.

Remarkably, the above-described similarity between the Chinese and Arabs correlates with the East–West dichotomy of paradigms of power (Fig. 3), reflected by the hierarchies of major institutions of State, Individual, and Law. Those are either based on the Rule of Law and Protestant tradition in Western societies (i.e., human-centric, individualist) [44, p. 285] or blessed by Confucianism and Islam (religion-centric or state-centric, collective) in China and the Arab world, respectively.

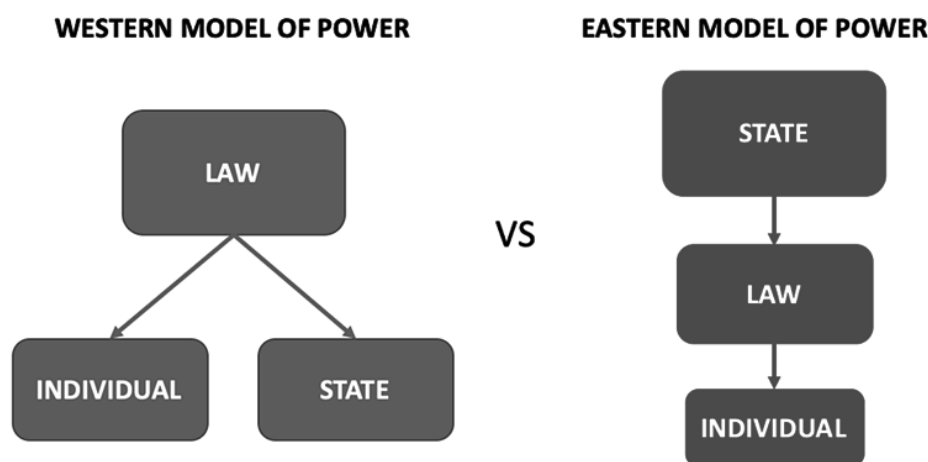


Fig. 3. Dichotomy of Western and Eastern models of power

Source: Produced by the authors of the article.

In a nutshell, all the above-mentioned characteristics bring the Chinese and Arabs closer to each other than it appears to be at first glance, therefore easing the tasks of doing business between the People's Republic of China and her Arab partners. Despite their long-distanced geographic locations, which have been determining huge civilizational, historical, traditional, religious, and language differences, common ethic perceptions and values often create human chemistries, assisting in building mutual trust and successful business stories.

4. Conclusion

From cross-cultural and business perspectives, sharing common ethical fundamentals by the Chinese and Arabs creates a rather favorable ground for fulfilling the Arab dimension of China's Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), which was put forward by President Xi Jinping on March 15, 2023, while delivering a keynote speech at the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties high-level meeting, following the inaugurations of the Global Development Initiative and the Global Security Initiative. It advocates the respect for the diversity of civilizations, based on the principles of equality, mutual learning, dialogue, and inclusivity [21].

The GCI's three main pillars, namely, respect for civilization diversity, flourishing people-to-people exchanges, and exploring paths toward modernization¹⁴ [47], have been incorporated in

the agenda of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF), which was established in January 2004, on the sidelines of the visit of then-President of China Hu Jintao to Egypt as a permanent mechanism of Arab-Chinese coordination on a vast variety of issues, covering world economy and politics, along with regional problems. Not by chance, the 10th anniversary CASCF ministerial meeting, held on May 30, 2024, in Beijing, highlighted among key priorities building the China-Arab community with a shared future, aimed to provide strategic guidance for continued "leapfrog growth" of China-Arab relations, opening a new era of China-Arab relations and creating a better future for the world.¹⁵

Altogether, the above-mentioned imperatives determine the importance of scrutinizing, by joint efforts of China and Arab states both ethical diversities and, more importantly, identifying common features, cementing China-Arab partnerships under the CASCF's umbrella and beyond. This task explains the significant practical usefulness of the current article, especially in light of China's plans to host the second China-Arab States Summit in 2026. Here, Russia's long-term experience of cooperation with the Arab world, based on previous Soviet achievements, could also be in demand.

The objective limitations of conducting even a general comparative analysis of the Chinese and Arab civilizational cultures in a single scientific

¹⁴ 3 things to know About China's Global Civilization Initiative. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. 2024. URL: http://english.scio.gov.cn/in-depth/2024-04/03/content_117103205.htm (accessed on 24.12.2024).

¹⁵ Xi Urges Greater Efforts to Build China-Arab Community with Shared Future. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China. 2024. URL: https://english.www.gov.cn/news/202405/30/content_WS_665889d7c6d-0868f4e8e7acb.html (accessed on 24.12.2024).

research paper due to its limited size forced the authors to concentrate attention only on selective, although major, points, not going into further details. Which was reflected in the titles of the article and its sections. Yet, they couldn't help briefing the broad audience of the journal of publication about the main pillars and fundamentals of the Chinese and Arab civilizational cultures related to the future implementation of the Arab dimension of the Chinese Global Civilization Initiative.

For the same reason, the authors were not able to deeply cover the issues related to the business ethics patterns inherent to the Chinese and Arab civilizational cultures. Nevertheless, they recognize this article as an inaugural one in a series of research papers, such as articles and maybe even a collective monograph, which could contain much bigger materials on this particular topic. Here, one could remember a famous Chinese saying, attributed to Lao-Tse and translated into English as "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step".

The authors also plan to conduct a new field analysis via using sincere personal communications with more reputed Chinese and Arab business professionals, university teachers, and academic experts.

Finally, as the last but not the least, the concise nature of the material didn't prevent the authors from formulating two concrete recommendations linked to the GCI's Arab dimension. Among them:

- organizing a series of scientific-practical discussions dedicated to the comparative analysis of the Chinese and Arab civilizational cultures, business ethics, and business behavior to work out relevant codified practical instructions, summarized in collections of scientific papers. Those discussions (forums, conferences, seminars, round tables, etc.) could be facilitated preferably in China as the country of the GCI's origin with the participation of orientalist from Arab countries, Russia, India, Japan, Singapore, as well as USA, UK, France, Germany, and other Western powers, thus, enabling them to exchange views and already accumulated practices;

- publishing a series of collective articles in top scientific journals in Arab countries and China, covering concrete issues of cross-cultural communications between Chinese, Arabs, and other nations, paying more attention both to their theoretical fundamentals and practical modalities to overcome effectively the existing challenges and other difficulties.

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