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Cultural links help to foster stronger bonds

By XU WEI | CHINA DAILY | Updated: 2023-04-11 07:12



The "Silk Road Artists' Rendezvous" exhibition opened at the Cairo Opera House on April 4, 2023.[Photo/Xinhua]

Art workshops **part of broader efforts** to enhance China-Arab understanding

For Omani artist Saud Al Hunaini, **the trips he made to China for both artistic creation and exchanges have always been "pleasant and eyeopening"**, allowing him to gain a deeper understanding of Chinese culture and traditions.



"In my opinion, exchanges in art between China and Arab countries are essential for building stronger cultural and humanitarian ties," he told China Daily.

"Art is a universal language that transcends boundaries and enables people to connect and understand each other's cultures. Through cultural exchanges, we can share our respective artistic traditions, learn from each other's techniques, and create new works of art that reflect our shared values and aspirations."

Al Hunaini is among the over 50 Arab artists who recently wrote a letter to President Xi Jinping to share their impressions from participating in the "Silk Road Artists' Rendezvous" visits to China — art workshops first launched by China in 2009 to facilitate trips by Arab artists to better learn about the country and its culture.

The 11 art workshops, which have so far attracted over 100 artists from 22 Arab countries and facilitated the creation of 487 paintings, sculptures and ceramic works, are a microcosm of broader efforts between China and Arab countries to build up mutual understanding and enhance people-to-people exchanges.

A strong level of mutual understanding, broad-based public support for bilateral ties between China and the Arab world, and China's respect for the diversity of civilizations have played an important part in its successful mediation efforts that led to the resumption of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran, analysts said.

In their letter to the Chinese president, the Arab artists expressed their hope that with Xi's support, cultural and artistic exchanges between China and the Arab world will be more colorful, dialogue between the two civilizations more active and friendship between them more solid.

The reply from the Chinese president, published on April 3, offered the artists "immense pride and happiness", Al Hunaini said.

In his reply, the president welcomed more artists from Arab states to visit China, saying that he hopes they can use their creations to promote cultural exchanges

between China and the Arab world and help more Arab people learn about China.

"Culture can connect hearts, and art can interlink the world," Xi wrote in his reply.

"Knowing that the president of China took the time to respond to our letter and acknowledge our message of fostering cultural and humanitarian ties between China and Arab countries was a testament to the value of the workshops," Al Hunaini said.

Nizar Daher, a Lebanese artist who was a co-author of the letter, said in an interview that cultural and artistic exchanges have played a major role in developing bonds of friendship between the Lebanese, Arab and Chinese people.

He underlined the Global Civilization Initiative, proposed by President Xi Jinping in March, as a "realistic vision of cultural pluralism".

The 71-year-old artist said he is embarking on a project to establish a Chinese cultural week program in Lebanon, which includes an art exhibition, a theatrical show and a musical group, in order to bring the two peoples closer.

People-to-people links

The emphasis from the Chinese president on cultural and people-to-people exchanges between China and Arab countries was also expressed in a reply letter Xi wrote to young people learning the Chinese language in Saudi Arabia, while he was making a four-day visit to the Middle Eastern country in December.

During the visit, Xi and leaders of Arab countries jointly **laid out** a blueprint for comprehensive cooperation and agreed at the first China-Arab States Summit to build a China-Arab community with a shared future in the new era.

He called on China and the Arab world to increase exchanges among civilizations to enhance mutual understanding and trust, highlighting the need to increase personnel exchanges, deepen people-to-people cooperation and set an example of inter-civilizational exchanges and mutual learning in the new era.

According to a report on China-Arab cooperation in the new era issued by China's Foreign Ministry in December, cooperation between China and the Arab world has

been expanded to youth, religion, political parties, media, education, culture and health.

Mutual learning

China has trained over 25,000 people from Arab countries in various categories and offered 11,000 scholarships to Arab states since 2013, according to the report.

As of October, four Arab countries have included the Chinese language in their national education systems, 15 Arab countries have launched Chinese language majors in their colleges and 13 Arab countries host Confucius institutes.

The two sides have also hosted 24 regular people-to-people exchange events since 2013, including art festivals and forums on women's empowerment.

Tang Zhichao, a researcher of Middle East studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said that Xi's recent reply to Arab artists would help usher in new breakthroughs in people-to-people exchanges between China and the Arab world.

Xi's statements in the reply letters are in alignment with the GCI, which stressed the key implications for dialogue and mutual learning between different civilizations, he said.

He explained that even though COVID-19 has posed immense obstacles to people-to-people exchanges between China and Arab countries, the two sides have written new chapters of mutual learning in their joint fight against the pandemic.

The recent China-Arab States Summit has also given fresh impetus to cultural and people-to-people exchanges between the two sides, he said.

"The mutual learning and exchanges between China and Arab civilizations have been a vivid example for the GCI. Such exchanges will be of stronger realistic implications in a turbulent world filled with uncertainties," he said.

Beijing's vision for civilizations and values has been fully displayed in its success in brokering the agreement between Riyadh and Teheran to restore diplomatic and economic ties, Tang said.



The mediation was a process in which the Chinese civilization joined hands with Arab and Persian civilizations in demonstrating the importance of seeking harmony without uniformity and enabling all parties to prosper and flourish together, he said.

Al Hunaini, the Omani artist, said he fully supports the GCI on the basis that "cultural diversity is a strength that should be celebrated and preserved, and that mutual learning and respect are essential for building a peaceful and prosperous world".

"The cultural exchanges between China and Arab countries are a perfect example of this vision in action, and I am honored to be a part of this important initiative," he said.

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