



# RCAS Commentary

## Middle East Nations Woo Chinese Tourists with Grand Chinese New Year Celebrations

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## About RCAS

香港亞洲研究中心| The Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS) is a nonprofit research organization focusing on Asian affairs. It is a newly established institution founded in February 2022 by Dr. Nian Peng in Haikou and subsequently moved to Hong Kong in September 2023. We currently have an international research team with nearly 100 resident/nonresident researchers from China and other countries.

RCAS aims to become a leading research institute and think tank on Asian affairs in the Indo-Pacific region. To date, RCAS has conducted research programs on maritime disputes in the South China Sea (SCS), China's relations with the Indo-Pacific states, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), terrorism/counterterrorism in the Afg-Pak region, and so on. It is committed to promoting maritime cooperation, regional integration, and regional peace in the Indo-Pacific region at large.

RCAS has published nearly ten books in Chinese and English and more than 20 papers in SSCI/SCOPUS/CSSCI-indexed journals. Recent English publications include *Populism, Nationalism and South China Sea Dispute: Chinese and Southeast Asian Perspectives* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2022); *Pakistan's Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics* (London: Routledge, 2022); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *The Reshaping of China-Southeast Asia Relations in Light of the COVID-19 Pandemic* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2021); *Territorial Disputes, The Role of Leaders and The Impact of Quad: A Triangular Explanation of China-India Border Escalations* (2023); *Managing the South China Sea Dispute: Multilateral and Bilateral Approaches* (2022); *China-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan: Assessing Key Interests and Implementing Strategies* (2022); *Hedging Against the Dragon: Myanmar's Tangled Relations with China since 1988* (2021); and *China-Pakistan Conventional Arms Trade: An Appraisal of Supplier's and Recipient's Motives* (2020).

RCAS has also published hundreds of articles, and its researchers have been interviewed in various local and international media outlets, such as *The Diplomat* in the United States, *East Asian Forum (EAF)* in Australia, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand, *Jakarta Post* in Indonesia, *Lian He Zao Bao*, *Think China* in Singapore, *South China Morning Post (SCMP)*, *China-US Focus* in Hong Kong, *CGTN*, *Global Times*, *World Affairs* in China. RCAS researchers have actively participated in international conferences or study visits in the United States, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Myanmar, Cambodia, and other places.

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## Middle East Nations Woo Chinese Tourists with Grand Chinese New Year Celebrations

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Member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) celebrated the Chinese New Year (CNY) of Spring Festival this year, with leaders sending congratulatory messages, illuminating iconic buildings in their respective nations, and hosting various events such as fireworks displays, traditional dances, feasts and galas. These celebrations were mainly organised by Chinese embassies in collaboration with host countries. Compared to previous years, these events were more extensive and reflected a strengthening relationship between the two sides.



▲ On 28 January 2025, the Wahda Arch in Doha, the capital of Qatar, was illuminated with Chinese New Year-themed lights. (Xinhua).

In 2024, this resulted in a 9% year-over-year rise in Chinese visitors to the UAE, while nearly 400,000 Chinese reside in the UAE on a long-term basis.

The year 2025 marked the first time since UNESCO included the Spring Festival in its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, recognising it as the 44th Chinese tradition officially acknowledged by this global cultural body. This, along with the Chinese government's extended holiday, provided the public with the opportunity to travel overseas, including to the GCC region.

### **CNY festivities in the UAE**

The UAE took the lead in celebrations among the six GCC nations (the other five being Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia). Activities in the UAE began as early as 12 January, with the CNY Gala at the Coca-Cola Arena. On CNY eve, UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan sent best wishes to all those celebrating in the UAE and worldwide. "May this year bring peace, prosperity, and joy to you and your loved ones," he said in a social media post. Other prominent CNY events in the UAE included floating dragon dances on Dubai Creek and holographic fireworks illuminating the Burj Khalifa.

China's selection of Abu Dhabi as one of the seven cities worldwide to host New Year festivities was well-founded. The UAE's visa-on-arrival policy for Chinese nationals, along with direct flights from 14 Chinese cities and the acceptance of Alipay and WeChat, has significantly encouraged tourism. In 2024, this resulted in a 9% year-over-year rise in Chinese visitors to the UAE, while nearly 400,000 Chinese reside in the UAE on a long-term basis. Last year, China and the UAE celebrated the 40th anniversary of their diplomatic ties.

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### **CNY festivities in other GCC countries**

Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia, hosted a "Warmly Welcoming Spring, Celebrating Chinese New Year Together" themed market. King Abdulaziz University initiated a new four-week course, "Discover China and Learn Basic Chinese", through its Institute of Chinese Science and Culture in collaboration with Safia, a subsidiary of Jeddah Valley. This event marked the beginning of activities commemorating the 35th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Saudi Arabia. Beijing and Riyadh designated 2025 as the Year of Culture, organising a series of events.

Elsewhere, Bahrain's crown prince and prime minister, Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, sent a congratulatory cable to Chinese President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang for CNY. In January, the Confucius Institute at the University of Bahrain arranged a Bahrain delegation's visit to China.

In Qatar, iconic landmarks throughout the city, such as the Museum of Islamic Art, the National Museum, the Sheraton Hotel, the Wahda Arch and the Torch Tower,

were illuminated in red along with messages that read, “Happy Chinese New Year” or “Happy Spring Festival” in both Arabic and Chinese.

Kuwaiti Princess Al Anoud Alsabab extended her greetings for the CNY in a video message, describing China as Kuwait’s primary trade partner and a key ally in achieving its sustainable development goals, particularly in relation to Kuwait Vision 2035. The Chinese embassy in Kuwait, meanwhile, hosted a reception and organised cultural events. Simultaneously, Chinese media highlighted a group of Chinese construction workers who continued work on a housing project during the Spring Festival to ensure timely completion, symbolising China’s commitment to Kuwait’s development.

In Qatar, iconic landmarks throughout the city, such as the Museum of Islamic Art, the National Museum, the Sheraton Hotel, the Wahda Arch and the Torch Tower, were illuminated in red along with messages that read, “Happy Chinese New Year” or “Happy Spring Festival” in both Arabic and Chinese. For the first time, the Mall of Qatar also organized events featuring Chinese drummers, a dragon parade, Chinese calligraphy, face painting, oil-paper umbrella painting, and ribbon dancing.

### **The growing influence of Chinese culture**

During the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, China sent two pandas to the country for the first time in the Arab world and built the iconic Lusail Stadium, which hosted key matches, while Chinese-made buses transported fans to the games.

In addition to showcasing traditional cultural artefacts during the CNY celebrations in the region, China highlighted its modern technological achievements, including drone light displays, popular games like Black Myth: Wukong and Honor of Kings, and various brands of electric vehicles.

The festive celebration of Spring Festival in countries like Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam has deep roots due to the longstanding presence of Chinese communities that back decades, or even centuries. The rapid rise of CNY festivities in GCC countries—which do not have prominent Chinese communities—is thus a noticeable trend.

What makes this even more interesting is that the GCC countries have a distinctive Islamic culture that differs significantly from Chinese culture. Moreover, since their independence, all GCC countries have remained under Western political, military and cultural influence. Western culture and the English language are widely known among their citizens, with the West long serving as a favoured destination for education, business, and even settlement.

However, this trend is gradually shifting. At the state level, the GCC countries and China have steadily strengthened their mutual relations, driven by shared interests in a rapidly evolving world. Both sides take pride in their cultures, which is reflected in their national outlooks and relations with other countries, and both make efforts to promote them.

As Chinese cultural influence in the GCC nations expands—evident in the increasingly vibrant CNY celebrations each year—GCC countries are also actively promoting their culture in China through various initiatives. GCC nations, especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, have signed multiple agreements with China to promote cultural and people-to-people exchanges. In particular, they are competing to attract the world’s largest source of tourism: China.

Given this trajectory, cultural engagement between the two sides appears set to grow, and one might expect upcoming CNY celebrations in the GCC to become even more significant. Enhanced cultural understanding will invariably strengthen the overall China-GCC relationship.

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## About Author



Dr. Ghulam Ali is currently Deputy Director of the Hong Kong Research Center for Asian Studies (RCAS), Hong Kong. Before joining RCAS, he was Associate Professor at the Department of Political Science, Sichuan University of Science and Engineering, Zigong, PR China. He obtained his PhD from Monash University in Australia in 2013 and his Postdoc from Peking University, China. He is the author, editor or co-editor of four books: *Pakistan’s Foreign Policy: Contemporary Developments and Dynamics*(London: Routledge, 2022); *Perspectives on Contemporary Pakistan: Governance, Development and Environment*(London: Routledge, 2020); *Crossing the Himalayas: Buddhist Ties, Regional Integration and Great-Power Rivalry*(Singapore: Springer, 2022); *China-Pakistan Relations: A Historical Analysis*(Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2017). His articles have been published in SSCI-and Scopus-indexed journals such as *Issues&Studies*, *The Pacific Review*, and *Pacific Focus*. Email: ghulamali74@yahoo.com.