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China-Arab Co-produced Documentaries: Narrative Strategies and International Communication under the Vision of Civilizational Mutual Learning

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Abstract

Amid deepening global cultural exchanges, documentaries have become vital instruments for cultural communication and national image building, playing an increasingly prominent role in China's international discourse. In recent years, China-Arab co-produced documentaries—characterized by their authenticity, objectivity, and vivid narration—have significantly contributed to civilizational mutual learning and people-to-people connectivity. Anchored in the theoretical framework of civilizational mutual learning, this study examines the driving forces behind the production of these documentaries, further clarifying the development and impact of Global Civilization Initiative, international communication aspirations, construction of national image and cross-cultural communication, cultural resonance imperatives. Through the analysis of representative cases, it explores key narrative strategies including cultural hybridity, horizontal perspective, and emotional resonance. The study further identifies cross-cultural communication challenges such as audience reception gaps, contextual misalignment, and media ecosystem disparities. Finally, it proposes strategies to enhance global outreach, including strengthening localized storytelling, building multilingual communication networks, and fostering cross-platform collaboration. This research aims to offer new insights into the international communication of China-Arab co-productions and contribute to the broader discourse on cultural diplomacy and mutual understanding.

Keywords: Civilizational Mutual Learning, International Communication, Sino-Arab Co-Produced Documentaries, National Image Building

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Introduction

In an era of increasingly deepened globalization, the destinies of nations are becoming more closely interwoven. Exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations have emerged not only as key drivers of sustainable development but also as essential conditions for achieving the common prosperity of human civilization. Such exchanges are a vital source of national progress and serve as a cornerstone for global peace and cooperation. As China's international influence continues to expand, the challenge of presenting a true, multidimensional, and comprehensive image of China and of countering the entrenched "China threat" narrative in Western discourse has become a pressing issue in the field of international communication.

In his report to the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, General Secretary Xi Jinping clearly stated: "We should enhance our capacity for international communication, tell China's stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China, and strengthen our country's cultural soft power."¹ Moreover, President Xi Jinping has articulated the vision of civilizational exchange and mutual learning on several international occasions, such as at UNESCO headquarters in Paris (2014) and at the Arab League headquarters (2016), emphasizing that "civilizations become colorful through exchange and enriched through mutual learning." This concept reveals the intrinsic logic of human civilizational development and provides strategic guidance for advancing China's international communication efforts in the new era.

Under the frameworks of the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, China and Arab countries have engaged in a range of initiatives to promote civilizational dialogue. Since its inception, the Forum has introduced a series of practical measures to foster cultural exchange across sectors including economy, education, and the arts. These efforts have not only deepened bilateral cooperation and mutual understanding but also facilitated people-to-people connectivity through cultural media.

Among various media forms, the documentary has emerged as a particularly vivid and persuasive medium of cultural expression. It not only provides an insightful window into Chinese society but also serves as a powerful instrument for international communication. In recent years, several China-Arab co-produced documentaries—such as *Eternal Friendship*, *Footprints of a Traveler*, *Tunisia Through Chinese Eyes*, *China Through Tunisian Eyes*, and *Connected Hearts*—have been released. Through authentic, multidimensional, and immersive storytelling, these productions have played a significant role in shaping a favorable image of China. They have been positively received by Arab audiences and have become a vital medium for conveying China's narrative to the global community.

Literature Review

Current academic research on China-Arab international communication primarily concentrates on four key areas. First, studies of China's image in mainstream Arab media explore how these outlets construct and disseminate narratives about China.² Second, analyses of media coverage on China-related events or concepts examine how Arab media interpret major developments involving China.³ Third, research focusing on China's international communication strategies toward the Arab world addresses communication mechanisms and proposes optimization pathways.⁴ Fourth, studies on China-Arab cooperation in news

publishing and audiovisual media investigate the institutional frameworks, achievements, and challenges of bilateral media partnerships.⁵

Although these studies offer diverse insights into China–Arab international communication, most focus on Arab media portrayals of China, while comparatively little attention has been paid to the dissemination and cultural impact of China–Arab co-produced documentaries in the Arab world. Furthermore, existing literature predominantly adopts qualitative or textual analysis approaches, lacking empirical, data-driven investigations based on concrete case studies. As a result, the real-world function and effectiveness of such documentaries in cross-cultural communication remain under-explored.

Based on the above literature review, in view of the inadequacies in existing research, this paper adopts the perspective of civilizational mutual learning and investigates how China–Arab co-produced documentaries can facilitate cross-cultural communication through effective narrative strategies. Taking the China–Egypt co-produced documentary *When the Pharaoh Meets the Sanxingdui* as a representative case, the study systematically examines the international communication logic and optimization pathways of such productions from four key dimensions.

First, it analyzes the motivations behind these co-productions and evaluates their functional roles within broader frameworks of China’s national friendly foreign exchanges and development initiatives, international communication, and civilizational dialogue.

Second, it explores narrative strategies and modes of cultural representation, with a particular focus on how topic selection, visual aesthetics, and symbolic elements coalesce to construct an engaging and intelligible communication context.

Third, it identifies the principal challenges facing cross-cultural communication—such as audience reception asymmetries, cultural translation barriers, and media environment mismatches.

Fourth, guided by the goals of “breaking the communication barrier” and fostering “emotional resonance,” the study proposes practical recommendations including the enhancement of localized storytelling capacity, the development of multilingual communication systems, and the reinforcement of cross-platform collaboration mechanisms.

By integrating theoretical reflection with case-based analysis, this research contributes new perspectives to the academic discourse on China–Arab international communication and offers actionable insights for improving the global reach and cultural impact of co-produced documentary media. Ultimately, it aims to support the high-quality development of China–Arab civilizational exchange in the context of global cultural connectivity.

I. Motivations Behind the Co-Production of China–Arab Documentaries

In recent years, co-produced documentaries between China and other countries have emerged as a prominent mode of documentary production. As Chinese documentary filmmaking enters a new developmental stage, its outputs have become increasingly diverse in both content and form. Against this backdrop, China and Arab countries have actively responded to the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum’s call to “inherit China–Arab friendship and share audiovisual development.” Jointly focusing on themes such as the Belt and Road Initiative and civilizational mutual learning, both sides have deepened cooperation in the audiovisual sector and co-produced numerous high-quality documentaries. These works have

effectively narrated stories of China–Arab friendship and garnered wide acclaim among audiences.

The historical roots of China–Arab civilizational exchange and friendly interaction can be traced back over two millennia to the ancient Silk Road. Since then, the overarching principles of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning, and mutual benefit have consistently characterized China–Arab engagement.⁶ Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, socialism with Chinese characteristics has entered a new era, during which the central leadership has attached growing importance to cultural exchanges and civilizational mutual learning with other countries. China–Arab civilizational dialogue, accordingly, has entered a phase of accelerated expansion and comprehensive development.⁷

The blueprint for China–Arab audiovisual cooperation originated with the Action Plan of the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum, adopted in 2004. This foundational document proposed the mutual dispatch of professional production teams to create tourism and cultural programs about both China and the Arab world. Subsequent action plans have continued to refine and expand the scope of cooperation from multiple angles.⁸ The 2012–2014 Action Plan encouraged joint documentary production, mutual translation and dubbing of artistic works, and the organization of national film weeks.⁹ Both the 2018–2020 and 2020–2022 action plans emphasized the role of China Media Group in producing and broadcasting documentaries or special programs focused on China–Arab cultural exchange. They also called for the coordination of broadcasting in Arab League member states through the League’s Secretariat and the Arab States Broadcasting Union.¹⁰ In December 2022, at the First China–Arab States Summit, President Xi Jinping proposed the “Eight Major Joint Actions” to strengthen China–Arab practical cooperation, including a Joint Civilizational Dialogue Initiative. Among these initiatives was a plan to jointly produce 50 audiovisual programs, marking the beginning of a new chapter in bilateral broadcasting collaboration.¹¹

In this context, the China Global Television Network (CGTN), in partnership with Egyptian National Television, produced the cultural-historical documentary “TREASURES AND MASKS” (Arabic title: *أقانع وكنوز*). The program was broadcast in Arabic on Egypt’s national television from November 6 to 12, 2023; the English version aired on CGTN’s documentary channel from November 20 to 23; and the Chinese version aired from December 25 to 28. Framed within the perspective of civilizational mutual learning, the documentary constructs a dialogue between two ancient civilizations, presenting the richness and diversity of early human cultures through vivid narrative techniques. It guides audiences to appreciate the notion that “the true beauty of harmony lies in the integration of differences.”

Since its release, the documentary has generated widespread interest across the Arab world and beyond. Over the course of a year, its reach on CGTN Arabic’s social media platforms has steadily expanded. As of March 6, 2025, the documentary had accumulated more than 9,380 views on Twitter, 8,808 views on YouTube, and an impressive 2,024,419 views on Facebook.¹²

2. Narrative Strategies of Sino-Arab Co-produced Documentaries

In the context of media convergence, social transformation, and national rejuvenation, documentaries in the new era are increasingly expected to reflect the diversity, richness, and complexity of Chinese society through innovative perspectives and high-quality

production.¹³ Sino-foreign co-productions, including Sino-Arab collaborations, tend to select themes based on cross-cultural resonance. Such thematic strategies help convey the concept of “civilizational exchange and mutual learning.” In response to a diverse international audience, these documentaries integrate both Chinese and Arab elements, and span across historical and contemporary topics. Their narrative strategies can be examined through three key dimensions: thematic selection, narrative construction, and communicative effectiveness.

2.1 Pluralistic Themes and Polyphonic Narratives: Emphasizing Cultural Dialogue and Mutual Understanding

Sino-Arab co-produced documentaries function as vital instruments of cultural diplomacy, characterized by their cross-cultural communicative nature. Given the distinct cultural backgrounds of both producers and target audiences, enhancing international reach requires selecting themes grounded in shared human concerns and presenting Chinese stories through localized and audience-sensitive lenses. Only through such narrative internationalization can the content resonate with viewers from diverse social and educational contexts.

Rather than relying solely on historical retrospection, Sino-Arab co-productions draw upon contemporary realities and mutual interests to construct diversified themes. For instance, the year of 2018, *Eternal Friendship* commemorates the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations between China and Oman, and narrates bilateral cooperation in economic, educational, and cultural sectors under the Belt and Road Initiative, showcasing joint efforts in building a shared future for humanity. *The Road of Sunshine* revisits the legacy of Zheng He’s maritime expeditions to explore the historical foundations of Sino-Qatari relations and their cultural exchanges, highlighting the Silk Road spirit of openness and mutual benefit. Meanwhile, *When the Pharaoh Meets Sanxingdui* adopts a trans-temporal lens to establish an imaginative dialogue between ancient Egyptian civilization and China’s Sanxingdui culture, illuminating their symbolic convergence and shared contributions to global civilization. These documentary narratives expand viewers’ horizons while facilitating mutual recognition between distinct civilizational traditions.

In terms of discursive construction, traditional documentaries have historically emphasized archival authenticity and authoritative perspective, often resulting in mono-vocal narratives. From Grierson’s “image plus narration” model to the observational mode of direct cinema, the dominant voice has typically belonged to an external narrator, rendering the subject as “the Other.”¹⁴ In contrast, Sino-Arab co-productions seek to construct polyphonic narratives that incorporate both Chinese and Arab voices, fostering dialogic storytelling. In *When the Pharaoh Meets Sanxingdui*, for example, the production team conducted interviews with archaeologists and historians from both China and Egypt, alongside Kunqu opera performers, VR artists, and educators. By weaving together multiple perspectives, the documentary creates a platform for intercultural dialogue and co-narration, advancing a more inclusive and reciprocal model of storytelling.

2.2 Narrative Innovation: Emphasizing Engagement through Audience-Centered Storytelling

The essence of documentary filmmaking lies in public communication. Sino-Arab co-produced documentaries primarily target general audiences in Arab countries, many of whom may possess limited familiarity with China’s actual conditions, cultural traditions, or historical evolution. If the narrative approach is overly formalistic or didactic, it can diminish audience

engagement and impair communicative efficacy. Since audience psychology significantly influences the reception of media content, narrowing the cognitive and emotional distance between the subject matter, the storyteller, and the audience is essential for enhancing international communication outcomes.

Sino-Arab co-productions actively pursue narrative innovation by prioritizing engagement and entertainment value, reducing the prevalence of pedagogical tones, and improving overall viewer immersion. This audience-centered approach enables international viewers to better comprehend and internalize the stories being told.

The documentary *When the Pharaoh Meets Sanxingdui* adopts a problem-driven narrative strategy, framing specific questions around core themes. This technique serves dual communicative functions. First, it stimulates the viewer's curiosity and epistemic motivation. By following the inquiry-oriented storyline, audiences are drawn into a deeper exploration of Chinese culture, history, and contemporary realities, thereby fostering active viewership. Second, such a method facilitates cross-cultural communication by dismantling cognitive barriers and misperceptions. Through carefully constructed questions and culturally sensitive explanations, the documentary delivers information in a clear, accessible, and non-patronizing manner, helping Arab audiences gain an accurate and empathetic understanding of China's development. This approach enhances mutual intelligibility by transcending linguistic and cultural divides, promoting meaningful civilizational dialogue.

Moreover, these co-productions display remarkable innovation in both content structure and visual presentation. *When the Pharaoh Meets Sanxingdui* breaks away from the conventional monotony of historical documentaries characterized by slow pacing and heavily expository narration. Instead, it employs globally intelligible visual language and stylistic elements tailored to the preferences of younger audiences. By integrating compelling content with dynamic cinematography and immersive visual effects, the film portrays a vivid encounter and dialogue between two ancient civilizations, offering a refreshing civilizational perspective to viewers. Its narrative design—including voice-over scripting, title composition, and editing style—reflects a bold departure from tradition, introducing a youthful creative energy that revitalizes the genre of historical documentary.

As Naila Farouk, Director of Egypt's National Television, observed, *When the Pharaoh Meets Sanxingdui* is highly attuned to the aesthetic tastes and viewing habits of young Arab audiences. She emphasized that the documentary's vivid and emotionally resonant storytelling plays an important role in enhancing youth awareness of the shared historical and cultural legacies of Egypt and China, thereby contributing significantly to mutual understanding and people-to-people connectivity.¹⁵

2.3 Technological Empowerment: Enhancing Audiovisual Quality and Refining Production Processes

In Sino-Arab co-produced documentaries, the integration of advanced technologies is manifested not only in the enhancement of audiovisual effects but also in the professionalization and precision of the entire production workflow. With the continuous advancement of digital technology, all stages of documentary production—from filming and post-production to sound design and visual effects—have experienced substantial improvements. These developments rely heavily on sophisticated hardware, specialized software, and highly trained technical personnel to ensure a final product that meets international standards of quality.

More importantly, technological innovation has reshaped the very paradigm of documentary production. The incorporation of Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) technologies allows viewers to immerse themselves in reconstructed historical and cultural environments, blending virtual content with real-world imagery to deliver enriched informational and interactive experiences. At the same time, the application of Artificial Intelligence (AI) introduces new dimensions to content generation and dissemination. By leveraging intelligent algorithms for the classification, analysis, and editing of large-scale raw footage, production teams can significantly increase narrative efficiency and audience engagement.

Technological sophistication also facilitates international collaboration. In the context of Sino-Arab co-productions, teams based in different countries can employ digital platforms and collaborative tools to jointly develop complex projects in real time. This model of transnational cooperation broadens the creative horizon, enhances resource integration, and promotes intercultural dialogue throughout the documentary development process.

The documentary *When the Pharaoh Meets Sanxingdui* offers a compelling case study of these technological applications. Through the extensive use of Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI), the film seamlessly fuses ancient artifacts with natural and historical environments, effectively visualizing the convergence of ancient civilizations and contemporary science. This technique enables viewers to virtually enter the palaces of ancient Egypt and engage with the enigmatic world of Sanxingdui, creating a sense of spatial and temporal immersion that bridges antiquity and modernity.

Furthermore, the deployment of AI-generated imagery introduces surreal, hyper-realistic visual elements that transcend the constraints of traditional historical storytelling. These imaginative visual reconstructions invite viewers into a speculative space of cultural imagination, thereby stimulating interest in heritage while also showcasing the possibilities of emerging media technologies in documentary narratives.

Auditory design is equally refined. The involvement of elite sound production teams brings a heightened level of artistic integrity to the film. With original musical scores and intricately designed soundscapes, the documentary delivers an immersive acoustic experience that complements its visual dimension. This synergy between image and sound transforms the viewing process into a multi-sensory encounter, significantly enriching the aesthetic and communicative power of the documentary.

3. Challenges in the Cross-Cultural Communication of Sino-Arab Co-Produced Documentaries

As pointed out in the research by Professor Liu Xinlu from the Department of Arabic Language, Beijing Foreign Studies University, “China initiated international communication with the Arab world at an early stage. In particular, under the promotion of the ‘Going Global’ strategy, China has gradually developed mass communication channels targeting Arab audiences, encompassing both traditional and new media platforms. However, ‘making one’s voice heard’ does not necessarily equate to ‘being heard.’ The actual effectiveness of China’s communication efforts in the Arab world remains limited and in need of improvement.”

16In the context of the current global transformation—often described as changes unseen in a century—Sino-Arab co-produced documentaries, as important tools and carriers of international communication, face increasing demands in terms of their global

communication capabilities. Despite the growing cooperation between China and Arab countries, these documentaries still confront significant obstacles in their dissemination and reception across the Arab world. These challenges stem from persistent cultural differences, the limited availability of Arabic-language corpora and professional translators, and underdeveloped media platforms tailored to Arab audiences.

3.1 Cultural Differences as a Fundamental Barrier in Cross-Cultural Communication

In cross-cultural communication, cultural differences are not only inevitable but also central to understanding the complexities of audience reception. These differences reflect the diversity of historical trajectories, religious beliefs, and value systems across regions. While such diversity enriches human civilization, it also complicates cultural exchanges. With globalization accelerating the flow of cultural products across borders, the extent to which audiences from different cultural backgrounds can relate to or understand foreign content plays a critical role in shaping its international reception.

The American scholar Colin Hoskins introduced the concept of “cultural discount” to describe the phenomenon whereby audiovisual products lose value when exported to culturally dissimilar regions. According to Hoskins and colleagues, media content such as television programs and films are deeply embedded in the cultural contexts of their country of origin. While domestic audiences may find such content appealing due to shared social norms and everyday experiences, foreign audiences—especially those unfamiliar with the cultural references, values, historical narratives, belief systems, and institutional structures—may find it difficult to establish a sense of identification or relevance. As a result, the appeal of such products is significantly diminished in international markets, giving rise to the “Cultural Discount” effect.¹⁷

Arab-Islamic culture constitutes the foundational backdrop of cultural identity in the Arab world, where strong emphasis is placed on preserving traditional values and social customs. As a result, many Arab audiences exhibit a cautious and often conservative attitude toward emerging phenomena in the contemporary era, including new formats and themes in documentary film. This cultural disposition significantly shapes their expectations and preferences regarding visual storytelling.

For general audiences in Arab countries, Chinese culture is frequently perceived as mysterious and distant, often reduced to a set of tangible and stereotypical symbols—such as the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, Confucius, and Chinese mythology. While these symbols reflect China’s long-standing civilization and rich cultural heritage, they tend to oversimplify a complex and dynamic cultural reality, thereby constraining deeper cross-cultural understanding.

In addition, some historical documentaries that incorporate strong political narratives or are embedded within intricate socio-cultural frameworks may pose cognitive challenges for foreign audiences. The combination of implicit ideological messaging and unfamiliar cultural contexts can result in confusion, resistance, or even aversion among viewers. As pointed out by Li Fang, a reporter from People’s Daily of China, “China’s films are often hindered in their global circulation by the ‘cultural discount’ that reduces their appeal to foreign audiences.”¹⁸ Consequently, Sino-Arab co-produced documentaries must account for the impact of cultural difference and

actively mitigate the effects of the “cultural discount” in order to enhance their international communication effectiveness.

3.2 The Need to Improve Subtitle Translation in Sino-Arab Documentary Co-productions

Audiovisual translation (AVT) refers to the process of rendering audiovisual works into another language, but unlike traditional text-based translation, AVT deals with multimodal semiotic texts composed of images, visuals, sound, and color. It is also constrained by the spatiotemporal limitations of audiovisual media. As such, audiovisual translation entails not only the transformation of linguistic content but also the translation of sounds and images. It involves both the encoding and decoding of language and serves as a key medium through which heterogeneous cultures participate in the construction of local narratives. Consequently, AVT is an interdisciplinary field that spans language, culture, art, and media studies.¹⁹ In the context of Sino-Arab co-produced documentaries, subtitle translation must account for the unique characteristics of audiovisual language, including its aurality, multimodality, immediacy, accessibility, and non-annotative nature.²⁰ It must also prioritize the needs of the target-language audience and strive to create an equivalent experience between source and target audiences—ideally enabling the latter to achieve a sense of emotional resonance with the content. This represents a major challenge for documentary subtitling, particularly in a cross-cultural setting.

German functionalist translation theory places strong emphasis on factors such as the “socio-cultural background” of the target audience, their “expectations” of the translated text, its “affective impact,” their “social knowledge,” and the intended “communicative purpose.” As Nord asserts, “one of the most important factors determining the purpose of a translation is the recipient: a translation only has meaning if it is understood by the recipient and meets their needs.”²¹ Thus, subtitling should be viewed as a process of cross-cultural communication. High-quality subtitle translation not only conveys China’s cultural values and way of life but also promotes intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding, opening up new spaces for global cultural exchange.²²

However, due to significant differences in historical experience, social systems, linguistic conventions, and cultural cognition between China and Arab countries, along with the lack of standardization in the current translation industry, the quality of audiovisual subtitling remains inconsistent. In some cases, translations fail to achieve linguistic accuracy or artistic fluency, thereby compromising the communicative effectiveness of the documentaries and weakening their influence in the target media environment.

3.3 Inadequate Platform Development: Weak International Communication Channels for Documentaries in the Era of New Media

Effective communication channels are essential for the wide dissemination and influence of audiovisual works. In recent years, within the framework of the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum, China has gradually established a relatively comprehensive communication system targeting Arab audiences, encompassing both traditional and

digital media platforms. These include print media such as China Today, radio platforms like China Radio International Arabic, satellite channels such as CGTN Arabic, and online portals like the Arabic versions of Xinhua Net, People's Daily Online, and China.org.cn.²³ Moreover, supported by the China–Arab States Broadcasting and Television Cooperation Forum, audiovisual cooperation has continued to expand, providing strong momentum for the international promotion of Chinese media.

However, the rapid evolution of “omnimedia” systems—characterized by full-process, immersive, participatory, and interactive communication—has fundamentally reshaped public opinion ecosystems, media structures, and dissemination models. In this context, China’s international communication must be dynamically adapted to audience preferences and new media habits, particularly by leveraging the advantages of digital platforms and social media. While Arab countries have historically lagged in technological infrastructure, significant investments in recent years have yielded rapid advances in digital connectivity and telecommunications. Internet users across Arab states surged from approximately 3 million in 2000 (around 1% of the total population) to roughly 275 million by the end of 2020, representing nearly 64% of the region’s population.²⁴ The average internet penetration rate reached 64.5%, far surpassing the global average of 54.5%, with leading markets such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE exceeding 95%. Furthermore, 71% of users in major Arab states access the internet via 3G/4G networks, and mobile internet penetration has reached 90%.²⁵

This digital transformation has profoundly reshaped traditional information consumption patterns in the Arab world. According to the Arab Youth Survey, from 2018 to 2022, social media emerged as the primary source of news for Arab youth. Over half of young respondents reported accessing news through Facebook on a daily basis, surpassing online portals (39%), television (34%), and print newspapers (4%).²⁶ As of 2021, Facebook had 188 million users in Arab countries, with Egypt accounting for 40 million. Twitter users totaled 42 million, with Saudi Arabia leading (15 million), followed by Egypt.²⁷

In contrast, Chinese platforms such as TikTok remain in the early stages of adoption in Arab countries. Although user growth has accelerated since 2020, TikTok’s penetration and user base remain significantly lower than those of Facebook. The limited strategic engagement of Chinese mainstream media on high-traffic digital platforms has somewhat constrained the international communication impact of China–Arab co-produced documentaries and other cultural content. In effect, Chinese media’s sparse footprint on major Arab digital platforms has constrained the regional visibility and dissemination of its storytelling.

4. Breaking Communication Barriers and Fostering Cross-Cultural Resonance: Strategies to Enhance the International Communication of Sino-Arab Co-produced Documentaries

In the report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, President Xi Jinping emphasized the need to “strengthen international communication capacity, comprehensively enhance communication effectiveness, and develop a discourse system that matches China’s composite national strength and international standing.” In recent decades, China–Arab relations have witnessed remarkable progress

at both the official and societal levels. With China's growing economic power and global influence, Arab countries—despite their varied political trajectories—have increasingly responded to this shift. Today, the Arab world is arguably more attentive to China than at any point in modern history. Politically and ideologically, many Arab countries are “looking East,” perceiving China as a reference for alternative models of development and governance. Their expectations and demands toward China have accordingly grown stronger.²⁸

In this context, China's international communication approach toward the Arab world should capitalize on this momentum by actively advancing its discourse power, strengthening mechanisms for mutual understanding, and deepening civilizational exchange. Co-produced documentaries have emerged as a critical medium to convey China's image, narrate its development story, and enhance soft power. Leveraging the communicative strengths of this genre, it is essential to explore new modes of cross-cultural expression to present a credible, amiable, and respectable image of China to Arab audiences.

4.1 Innovating Communication Paradigms: Prioritizing Empathetic Engagement

A growing body of international communication scholarship highlights the pivotal role of emotional connectivity in enhancing the persuasiveness and receptivity of global narratives. In audiovisual communication, the immersive and affective nature of media lends itself particularly well to fostering emotional resonance. Empathetic communication thus provides a promising framework for addressing longstanding challenges in intercultural dissemination, including the widely acknowledged phenomenon of “cultural discount.”²⁹

Within the frameworks of the Belt and Road Initiative and the vision of building a “community with a shared future for mankind,” China and the Arab world share extensive common values and development interests. Ahmed Aboul Gheit, Secretary-General of the Arab League, remarked, “China is a sincere partner of Arab countries. The two sides have achieved substantive progress in economic and cultural cooperation. Both advocate true multilateralism and seek shared development and prosperity.”³⁰

In the era of media convergence, international communication with the Arab world must draw upon universal emotional mechanisms to construct pathways of cross-cultural identification. As a prominent tool of cultural diplomacy, documentaries are not merely tasked with “telling China's story well,” but must also be restructured to resonate with diverse cultural sensibilities. During the conception and production of Sino-Arab co-produced documentaries, the communication strategy should shift from a traditional “subject-object” model toward a more balanced and empathetic discourse. Conventional models often emphasize the subjectivity of the disseminator, leading to top-down information flows and diminishing audience resonance. By contrast, empathetic communication foregrounds equality and mutuality, using emotional alignment as a conduit for cultivating cultural affinity.

This demands a reorientation in topic selection—one that emphasizes emotional common ground and shared human experiences. Multi-perspective narratives should

be employed to replace didactic messaging, while overtly policy-driven content should be softened to enhance viewer engagement and cultural receptivity. Such approaches help transcend cultural boundaries and deepen affective identification.³¹

Moreover, the shared emotional and historical trajectories between China and the Arab world provide a unique foundation for empathetic storytelling. President Xi Jinping has emphasized the importance of “tailoring messages to the specific cultural, regional, and demographic characteristics of international audiences, and improving the affinity and effectiveness of communication.”³² Sino-Arab co-produced documentaries should therefore focus on issues of mutual concern and strike a balance between “what China wants to convey” and “what audiences are interested in.”

Both China and Arab nations share histories of resistance against imperialism and colonization, and in the contemporary era, both emphasize national development, social stability, and sovereign governance. These parallels—both historical and present-day—provide a fertile ground for cross-cultural resonance. In this regard, documentaries should explore China–Arab cooperation in areas such as peacebuilding, economic growth, sustainable development, agriculture, public health, and environmental governance. By narrating real-life stories through the lens of lived experiences, filmmakers can humanize abstract concepts and illustrate Chinese solutions in relatable, emotionally resonant ways. Such narratives expand the shared symbolic space and deepen mutual understanding and trust between China and Arab societies.³³

4.2 Expanding Communication Platforms: Forging a New Paradigm of International Communication Empowered by Digital Media

As Han Yunjun observes, “the global media industry has evolved from digital convergence to intelligent convergence. The ongoing information technology revolution offers unprecedented opportunities for mainstream media to enhance their international communication capacities. Intelligent digitalization has thus emerged as a strategic trajectory in China’s global media outreach. At the policy level, the state has identified the development of intelligent new media as a core mandate. At the institutional level, key outlets such as China Media Group have integrated intelligent technologies into content production and distribution, delivering high-quality audiovisual services to global audiences.”³⁴ In this context, Sino-Arab co-produced documentaries must adapt to the evolving communication ecosystem by harnessing the potential of digital-intelligent convergence. This entails expanding media platforms and establishing a new paradigm of international communication driven by emerging technologies.

First, the diversification of distribution platforms is essential. Leveraging global social media and video-sharing platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok can significantly enhance the international reach and communicative efficacy of Sino-Arab documentaries. These platforms, characterized by massive user bases and trans-regional influence, are pivotal for increasing audience engagement and extending cultural impact.

Second, targeted engagement with Chinese digital media platforms is crucial for bridging cultural distances and fostering familiarity among Arab audiences. Platforms such as iQIYI International and Tencent’s WeTV represent important vectors for disseminating Chinese audiovisual content and offering Arab viewers direct access to

contemporary Chinese society. Enriching Arabic-language content libraries and promoting culturally resonant programming can enhance narrative resonance. As Well-known Scholar Ding Yusen and Zhuang Yan argue, “by telling vivid and accessible Chinese stories through formats that align with local audience preferences, Chinese media can not only strengthen cultural appeal but also effectively counter the real-time distortions prevalent in international discourse, offering timely and credible Chinese narratives.”³⁵

Third, the integration of big data analytics and artificial intelligence presents new avenues for precision communication. By deploying data-driven insights and algorithmic modeling, producers can identify audience preferences across regions and optimize content delivery accordingly. Drawing on China’s domestic experience in digital marketing and aligning with international social media trends, content can be strategically fragmented into short-form videos and highlight reels for dissemination. These strategies enhance interactivity and extend reach, particularly among younger demographics. Furthermore, personalized recommendation algorithms can ensure the efficient targeting of receptive audiences, thereby increasing content visibility and user engagement. Through these methods, Sino-Arab documentaries can embody globalized, localized, and segmented storytelling approaches, thereby improving the overall effectiveness and cultural relevance of international communication.

4.3 Leveraging the “Chinese Language Fever”: Enhancing the International Communication Effectiveness of Sino-Arab Co-produced Documentaries through Language Education

Chinese language education was introduced to Arab countries as early as the 1950s. Egypt took the lead in 1954, followed by Tunisia (1977), Mauritania (1987), and Sudan (1993). With the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Chinese language education has entered a new stage of development in the Arab world. As of October 2022, universities in 15 Arab countries had established Chinese departments, and 13 countries had jointly founded 20 Confucius Institutes and 2 Confucius Classrooms.³⁶

In recent years, the “Chinese language fever” has continued to intensify across the Arab region. In countries such as the UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, Chinese has been officially incorporated into national curricula, with structured instruction beginning at the primary school level. This phenomenon has become a key component of the broader “Chinese Wave”, and presents significant long-term potential for the expansion of the Chinese audiovisual content audience.³⁷ The increasing interest in Chinese language not only consolidates the foundation for Sino-Arab cooperation but also highlights the deepening mutual engagement in cultural exchange and mutual learning.

The global promotion of Chinese language has long been a core component of China’s international communication, with cultural diplomacy and language instruction as central pillars. It stands as a significant manifestation of promoting Chinese culture “going global”, and through cultural communication, enables more people to understand a true and multi-dimensional image of China. As an important audiovisual medium, documentaries serve both as a tool for national image-building and as a

pedagogical resource capable of enhancing the communicative effectiveness of co-produced cultural content and enriching Chinese language instruction abroad.

First, the documentary genre, with its inherent authenticity and affective appeal, offers an immersive environment that allows learners to experience Chinese society, history, and modernization firsthand. Integrating documentary materials into Chinese language pedagogy provides learners with contextualized exposure, thereby enhancing their cultural understanding and engagement. For instance, in intermediate-to-advanced audiovisual courses at Confucius Institutes across Arab countries, the documentary *When Pharaoh Meets the Sanxingdui* has been adopted as a key teaching resource. By taking “masks”—a historically resonant symbol in both Egyptian and Chinese civilizations—as its entry point, the documentary facilitates linguistic skills training while encouraging critical reflection on cultural parallels and distinctions, thereby improving intercultural communicative competence and fostering people-to-people connectivity.

Second, incorporating documentaries fosters pedagogical innovation in Chinese language education. Traditional instruction often centers on textbook-based input and teacher-led explanation, whereas documentary-based instruction offers vivid language exposure and richer cultural immersion. Educators may design classroom activities—including thematic discussions, content analysis, and language drills—based on documentary narratives, enabling learners to acquire communicative proficiency through authentic, real-world contexts.

Finally, the expansion of Chinese language education in Arab countries has cultivated a naturally receptive and youthful audience base for Sino-Arab co-produced documentaries. As Chinese language instruction becomes more widespread across various educational levels, the demographic of learners is increasingly skewed toward younger generations. Compared to older cohorts, youth are more attuned to digital and multimedia content and represent the dominant user group on Arab social media platforms: approximately 64.3% of Facebook users in the region are under 30 years old.³⁸ Consequently, Arab youth who are learning Chinese constitute both a key target audience and a vital conduit for further dissemination and localization of Sino-Arab co-productions.

4.4. Leveraging the Influence of “Foreign Internet Celebrities” to Cultivate Grassroots Narrators

With the advent of the mobile new media era, the global communication landscape is undergoing a rapid transition toward visual and video-based formats, significantly transforming how audiences access and engage with information. Short-form videos, characterized by their visual immediacy and fragmented structure, are increasingly emerging as a new mode of transnational exchange. This development has facilitated the rise of a new profession—online influencers—with “foreign influencers” in China (commonly referred to as *yang wanghong*) occupying a particularly visible space.

In recent years, the number of foreign nationals visiting China has grown substantially. According to the National Immigration Administration, the first quarter of 2024 witnessed a threefold increase in foreign arrivals compared to the same period in 2023. A total of 466,000 visas and permits were issued, representing a year-on-year growth of 118.8%, while visa-exempt entries reached nearly two million—an increase

of 266.1% year-on-year.³⁹ Against this backdrop, a growing number of foreign content creators are gaining popularity on short video platforms, offering novel perspectives and diverse content that contribute meaningfully to China's cross-cultural communication strategies.

Since 2016, foreign influencers have become increasingly prominent on major Chinese platforms such as Douyin, Bilibili, and Kuaishou. Most of these individuals study, reside, or work in China and possess a relatively high level of Chinese language proficiency. Their content frequently centers on topics such as everyday life in China, culinary experiences, and cross-cultural differences. Importantly, their reach extends beyond Chinese platforms to global social media networks including TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook. Utilizing their position as cultural intermediaries, these influencers convey Chinese narratives to global audiences, thereby enhancing international understanding and contributing to the construction of a more nuanced and multidimensional image of China.

Foreign nationals living in China are uniquely situated to observe, experience, and participate in the country's development. Their lived experiences make them credible witnesses and effective storytellers of contemporary China. As key opinion leaders (KOLs) in the field of international communication, they serve as bridges between China and the world.⁴⁰ Within the context of globalization and digitalization, such individuals have become critical agents of cross-cultural dialogue. Their storytelling—rooted in personal, immersive experiences—offers an accessible and authentic portrayal of Chinese society that transcends cultural boundaries and fosters mutual understanding.

As Professor Lu Di of Peking University observed, “The most effective communication results when foreigners tell China's stories, when firsthand experiences are narrated by those who lived them, and when ordinary people speak of everyday realities.” In this sense, the voices of foreign influencers enrich China's narrative ecology and introduce a layer of credibility and emotional resonance often absent in traditional state-led communication.

To enhance the international visibility of Sino-Arab co-produced documentaries, it is imperative to integrate the storytelling power of foreign influencers and cultivate localized narrators capable of resonating with Arab audiences. For instance, Egyptian influencer Hassan shared his reflections on the documentary *The Silk Road: Our Story* via YouTube, offering insightful commentary on the historical and contemporary significance of the Silk Road and sparking interest among Arab viewers. Egyptian YouTuber and Instagram creator Lixia (李诗雅) recommended the Chinese drama *I Will Find You a Better Home* by analyzing its characters and plotlines, thereby facilitating audience engagement with urban life and societal dynamics in China. Similarly, Moroccan influencer Mrs. Btissame shared selected clips from *Feather Flies to the Sky*, using her own life in Morocco as a lens to explore cultural parallels and distinctions, which triggered wide-ranging discussions online.

These content creators have made substantial contributions not only to the global dissemination of Chinese media content, but also to the broader landscape of Sino-Arab

cultural exchange. Their videos encompass a wide range of content—from interpretive commentary on Chinese documentaries and dramas to vivid depictions of cultural encounters. Through their sustained efforts in digital storytelling, they have helped to bridge the psychological and cultural distance between Chinese and Arab societies, fostering mutual respect, curiosity, and understanding.

4.5. Building a Professional Talent Pool to Meet the Demands of New-Era International Communication

Effectively telling China's stories through an international lens requires a corps of globally minded, highly professional communicators. One of the primary constraints facing the internationalization of Chinese documentaries is the shortage of top-tier creative talent—especially individuals equipped with global production sensibilities and market awareness.⁴¹ As President Xi Jinping emphasized, “We must comprehensively enhance the effectiveness of international communication and build a specialized team of professionals capable of meeting the requirements of international discourse in the new era.”⁴² Fostering a cohort of politically competent, professionally skilled, and innovative communication professionals is fundamental to advancing China's “going global” documentary strategy.

First, it is critical to develop elite translation professionals to strengthen China's translation infrastructure and meet growing international communication needs. Modern translators must be multidimensional, combining linguistic proficiency with intercultural competence, media literacy, and public relations awareness.⁴³ They should also cultivate a global outlook to effectively convey Chinese narratives in a way that foreign audiences are willing and able to receive. For Sino-Arab co-productions, this translates into nurturing professionals fluent in Chinese, Arabic, and English, deeply knowledgeable about both cultures, and skilled in intercultural communication. Commercial success in international dissemination depends first on achieving genuine cultural exchange and, second, on understanding both the target audience and home-country context.⁴⁴ Documentary localization requires excellence across three interrelated dimensions: subtitle translation, digital media strategy, and cross-cultural communication skills.⁴⁵ Addressing the shortage of bilingual Arabic translators and suitable corpora remains a major barrier; the complexity of Arabic orthography also hinders effective subtitle rendering.⁴⁶ To overcome these challenges, national audiovisual bodies should partner with universities, research institutes, and tech enterprises to advance Chinese-Arabic language technologies and elevate the professional quality of co-produced audiovisual content.

Second, existing national initiatives—such as talent programs for audio-visual professionals and young media innovators—should be leveraged to expand and strengthen the workforce. Establishing talent incubation systems that prioritize craftsmanship, cultivate industry leaders, and facilitate creative exchange and training is critical.⁴⁷ International communication companies should collaborate with domestic and international universities to pilot new educational models suited to globalization, digitization, and intelligent media trends. Joint training programs with Arab institutions can enable not only technical expertise sharing but also cultural and creative collaboration, thereby enabling deep cooperation in documentary production.

Finally, instituting systematic audience research and feedback mechanisms is essential. These tools allow producers to understand Arab viewers' interests and preferences, enabling real-time adjustment of content and dissemination strategies. Regular market research provides first-hand insight, helping production teams align direction with audience expectations and maintain dynamic engagement. Ultimately, this approach enhances documentary quality and appeal and strengthens the cultural relevance of Sino-Arab co-productions in the region.

Conclusion

At the First China–Arab States Summit, President Xi Jinping underscored that “Inclusiveness and mutual learning is a key value inherent in China-Arab friendship.”⁴⁸ According to the survey report released by the Arab Youth Survey website in 2022, a significant majority of Arab youth regard China as their most important “friend”, with 78% identifying it as an “ally”.⁴⁹ On March 15, 2023, President Xi Jinping put forward the Global Civilization Initiative at the CPC in Dialogue with World Political Parties High-level Meeting, issuing a sincere appeal to the world for further promoting exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations and advancing the progress of human civilization. The Global Civilization Initiative advocates respecting the diversity of world civilizations, carrying forward the common values of all mankind, attaching importance to the inheritance and innovation of civilizations, and strengthening international people-to-people exchanges and cooperation. It injects impetus into the inclusive coexistence, exchanges and mutual learning of different civilizations, and also provides wisdom and inspiration for responding to the changes of the times through civilizational dialogue.⁵⁰

This initiative has been met with enthusiastic support from the peoples of Arab states. Over the years, China and Arab countries have consistently upheld the principles of openness, inclusivity, and mutual learning in their cultural interactions, engaging in a diverse array of exchange activities that have deepened mutual understanding and interpersonal connectivity. As a critical medium for telling China’s story within the global communication landscape, Sino-Arab co-produced documentaries have become a powerful vehicle for fostering mutual empathy and trust. These documentaries exemplify public diplomacy in action under the Belt and Road Initiative framework.

Thematically grounded in shared human experiences and cross-cultural resonance, Sino-Arab documentary collaborations serve as a conduit for conveying the essence of “civilizational dialogue and mutual learning.” They have emerged as pivotal instruments in international storytelling, facilitating meaningful cultural encounters and contributing to the formation of a more balanced and pluralistic global discourse on China. In its Guidelines on Promoting High-Quality Development of Documentaries in the New Era (2022), National Radio and Television Administration of China (NRTA) explicitly encouraged the co-production of documentaries that “reflect common human values and advance civilizational dialogue.” In this context, Sino-Arab collaborations have entered a period of rapid expansion. These projects increasingly exhibit narrative autonomy, greater discursive agency, and heightened emphasis on storytelling strategies that prioritize mutual respect, shared agency, and cross-cultural understanding. They

also demonstrate distinctive characteristics such as diversified narrative subjectivities, innovative formats, and technology-enabled storytelling.

Nonetheless, significant challenges remain. These include insufficient engagement with new media ecosystems, a lack of consistency in subtitle translation and adaptation, and the underdevelopment of region-specific distribution infrastructures. To enhance international communication effectiveness, content must be designed to be both accessible and contextually nuanced; in terms of distribution, collaborative strategies that leverage multi-platform ecosystems are imperative; and at the industrial level, investments in talent cultivation must be scaled up to invigorate the creative sector. In the digital media era, Sino-Arab co-productions must adapt to evolving communication environments by innovating narrative frameworks, enhancing emotional resonance through empathy-driven storytelling, expanding dissemination channels, and fully utilizing digital and AI-driven technologies. These efforts will collectively contribute to more effective global outreach, reinforce people-to-people ties, and foster deeper cultural affinity between China and the Arab world.

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