

# From a Transit Hub for Goods to a Knowledge Hub: The Global Historical Significance of the Sharjah International Book Fair

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**Abstract:** The Sharjah International Book Fair, established in 1982, marks a significant transformation in the history of the Emirate of Sharjah, from a historical transit hub for goods to a global knowledge center. Situated in the heart of the Persian Gulf, Sharjah's cultural significance has long been recognized, with UNESCO designating it as the "Cultural Capital of the Arab World" in 1998 and as one of the "Seven Cultural Capitals of the World" in 2014. The founding of the Book Fair is part of Sharjah's strategic response to the post-oil era, aiming to convert oil wealth into sustainable cultural capital and create a nation of readers. Over the course of more than four decades, the fair has grown into the third-largest book fair in the world, becoming an influential platform for Arabic literature and knowledge exchange. This article examines how the Sharjah International Book Fair has redefined the global knowledge flow, challenging the Western-dominated unidirectional model and establishing a cross-civilizational knowledge hub. The paper explores the fair's role in reshaping post-colonial global knowledge structures and its contribution to the democratization of global cultural production, with a focus on regional collaboration, literature, and knowledge circulation between the Global South and the rest of the world.

**Keywords:** Sharjah International Book Fair; Global knowledge hub; Post-colonial knowledge flow

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## 1. From a Transit Hub to a Knowledge Hub

Sharjah, as an ancient land on the Persian Gulf coast, has long been a crossroads of civilization within the Indian Ocean trade network. Its deep cultural heritage has earned it the title of the "cultural heart of the UAE." From its numerous mosques, over twenty museums, to the first modern schools, the first newspaper, and the first cultural club in the UAE, Sharjah is home to a unique and vibrant cultural landscape. In 1998, UNESCO designated it as the "Cultural Capital of the Arab World," and in 2014, it was named one of the "Seven Cultural Capitals of the World," recognizing its early international cultural self-awareness. However, the establishment of the Sharjah International Book Fair emerged from a profound choice of the era. Facing the prospects of the "post-oil era," Sharjah boldly invested its limited oil wealth into the accumulation of sustainable cultural capital. The birth of the Book Fair, therefore, marked Sharjah's strategic transformation from a historical transit hub for goods into a global knowledge hub in the era of globalization. This article aims to explore how, through its evolution over more than forty years, the Sharjah International Book Fair successfully challenged the traditional unidirectional flow of knowledge dominated by the West, building an emerging cross-civilizational knowledge hub, thus participating in and promoting the reconstruction of the global knowledge order in the post-colonial era.

To understand the global historical significance of the Sharjah International Book Fair, it must be placed within the broader context of civilizational exchanges. As historian Peter Frankopan has revealed, the essence of the Silk Road was far more than a passage for goods; it was a network for the exchange of "ideas, languages, technologies, and beliefs." Historically, cities like Samarkand and Baghdad thrived on their pivotal positions, evolving from

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trade centers into cradles of knowledge production. Sharjah, as a critical node in the ancient Indian Ocean trade network, continues this internal logic of the Silk Road, which evolved from being a "transit of goods" to a "transit of knowledge." The founding of the International Book Fair is a contemporary manifestation of this historic continuation.

## **2. Historical Context and the Emergence of the Sharjah International Book Fair**

The establishment of the Sharjah International Book Fair is rooted in the broader context of the Arab world's pursuit of cultural independence and "decolonization" during the late Cold War period. In 1982, His Highness Sultan bin Muhammad Al Qasimi, the Emir of Sharjah, founded the Book Fair with the aim of transforming "oil dollars" into sustainable cultural capital. His vision was to create a nation of readers. The establishment of the fair was not without precedent; it represented a conscious continuation and institutionalization of Sharjah's cultural gene. It sought to cultivate a local knowledge ecosystem, meet national educational needs, revitalize Arabic publishing, and nurture local authors—laying the foundation for cultural autonomy. This initiative echoed similar cultural movements in places like India and Latin America, representing the early efforts of the Global South to seek spiritual independence and narrative autonomy in the cultural domain.

After more than forty years of development, the Sharjah International Book Fair has become the third-largest book fair in the world. Its strength and influence are evident through several statistics. At the 2023 fair, it attracted 2,023 publishers from 109 countries, displayed over 15 million books, and achieved a total sales volume exceeding 50 million USD. In the new century, the Sharjah Book Fair underwent a critical transformation from cultural self-awareness to systematic construction. A key characteristic of this phase is the growing clarity of its strategic positioning as a "cultural special zone." Just as some studies have likened book fairs to "special economic zones," the Sharjah Book Fair has created a dynamic experimental space for the flow of global knowledge capital by establishing special policies and infrastructure. This transformation has received strong backing from national power. For instance, the UAE federal cultural budget increased to 7.15 billion dirhams in 2025, with Sharjah receiving the largest share of local cultural funding. The funding for Sharjah's youth arts projects increased by 35% over three years. These sustained investments are clear evidence of the long-term national policy of systematically injecting energy wealth into the cultural sector.

## **3. Institutional Development and Global Influence of the Book Fair**

In practice, the Sharjah Book Fair reconstructs the global knowledge value chain through three main approaches. First, by establishing the Sharjah International Book Award with a total prize fund of 625,000 dirhams and a translation subsidy program, it systematically promotes Arabic literature and academic works to the world, fundamentally changing the passive position of the Arab world in global cultural trade. Second, relying on the "Publisher's Honor Award" and professional conferences, it attracts over 2,000 exhibitors and, in synergy with the Sharjah Publishing City's physical infrastructure, successfully builds a cross-regional copyright trading center, significantly altering the traditional knowledge circulation path centered on Europe and the United States. Finally, through precise data insights and innovative prize distribution mechanisms, it provides a guide for emerging markets in the global publishing industry, strengthens industry chain collaboration, and strategically cultivates future knowledge consumers, with 135,000 students participating.

These measures directly address the deep contradictions in the global knowledge system. The Book Fair clearly recognizes the limitations of the traditionally Western-centered, unidirectional knowledge flow and is committed to building a more inclusive, regionally-led knowledge-sharing and innovation platform. Its action logic resonates deeply with the global open-access movement. Particularly notable is the development of the children's literature

section, which, with its unique cross-cultural appeal, not only has become an important component of international copyright trade but also serves as an efficient carrier of "South-South knowledge flow" and the export of cultural soft power. This strategic focus is clearly evident at the fair. On one hand, the local Arabic-language publications demonstrate a strong sense of planning and series, reflecting a conscious effort to build a systematic local knowledge framework. On the other hand, it actively opens the doors of the world's books. The Emir's personal attendance at the opening ceremony and award presentations underscores the highest-level national support for the Book Fair as a core cultural strategy platform. However, challenges remain. The Arab world's translation industry is still constrained by high costs and a shortage of professionals, which hampers the establishment of a virtuous cycle between foreign translations and Arabic output, highlighting the complexity and long-term nature of the rise of non-Western knowledge hubs.

The leadership role of the Sharjah Book Fair has become even more pronounced in the past decade, with its core mission now elevated to a cognitive revolution under the banner of "allowing the East to speak for itself." This requires the Book Fair to, through meticulous cultural planning, push a vibrant, self-defined, self-critical, and self-updating image of the East onto the global stage, fundamentally dismantling the simplified and rigid Orientalist fantasies constructed by the West. This grand goal means that its practices must explore multiple frontiers, while simultaneously facing profound internal tensions.

The Book Fair's core function is to build bridges between global writers and publishers, facilitating face-to-face discussions on industry trends and cooperation opportunities. Its professionalism has been recognized by authoritative organizations like the International Publishers Association and actively participates in international platforms like the Asian and African Publishers Association, signaling its deep integration into and influence on the global publishing industry's governance structure and network.

In the field of civilizational dialogue, the Book Fair has set up cross-religious and cross-cultural dialogue agendas in an attempt to culturally mend profound geopolitical rifts. The 43rd Book Fair, with its massive scale, brought together 110 countries, 2,500 exhibitors, and hosted over 600 cultural events, providing vivid evidence of its global influence. However, this self-representation inevitably serves the self-positioning of its regional cultural order creators and guarantors, resulting in inherent tensions: On one hand, its global influence grows daily; on the other, there is a simultaneous increase in the number of visitors and the number of censored books, clearly showing that all dialogues are conducted within specific cultural boundaries. The limited relaxation of the Gulf countries' publishing laws in 2020 may indicate a cautious internal transformation, but whether the Book Fair can transcend its current positioning and become a truly unlimited open dialogue space remains a core test of its future potential.

In terms of knowledge equity and social participation, the Book Fair, through its symbiotic relationship with organizations like the Kalimat Foundation, has constructed an inclusive knowledge ecosystem. The foundation's flagship project, which fosters a love for reading among disadvantaged youth, links the government and private sectors via the Book Fair platform. This model not only compensates for the commercial activities' lack of inclusivity but also strengthens Sharjah's ethical legitimacy as a knowledge oasis. Meanwhile, the Book Fair has deeply rooted knowledge welfare within communities through initiatives like the Children's Reading Festival, "50 Books for Every Family," and mobile libraries. These initiatives, together with 30 specially curated lectures on AI and audiobooks, form a knowledge dissemination system that is both rooted in the present and oriented toward the future.

#### **4. Sharjah as a Knowledge Garden and Global Exchange Hub**

Looking back on its more than forty years of evolution, the global historical significance of the Sharjah International Book Fair can ultimately be understood through the key metaphors of the "knowledge garden" and "exchange hub." As a meticulously planned global knowledge garden, it transcends the geographical concept of a

civilizational crossroads and has become an ordered space capable of fostering creative dialogues and nurturing new ideas from different intellectual traditions. At the same time, it is an efficient exchange hub, a key cultural infrastructure that skillfully bridges traditional geopolitical divides and promotes the global flow of knowledge and ideas.

Through these two roles, the Book Fair has not only participated in the democratization of global knowledge production but has also powerfully demonstrated that the Global South has the ability to create and lead knowledge hubs with global influence. Its success lies not in simply replicating the Western model, but in, driven by the transformation of the oil economy, carving out a unique path from "consumer node" to "production hub" through sustained negotiation with internal tensions, thus profoundly reshaping the global cultural power structure and providing the Sharjah paradigm for non-Western entities to achieve cultural ascendancy in the post-colonial world.

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