

China's Belt & Road Initiative: What Can We Expect?

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The UK National Committee on China (UKNCC) Guest Contributor Programme highlights contrasting responses, by leading authors, to key questions posed by the UKNCC. The programme is designed to stimulate a deeper exploration of China related issues; drive curiosity; and test conventional wisdom.

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Pippa Ebel looks at China's education strategy within its Belt & Road Initiative. Through case studies across Southeast Asia and Africa, Pippa explains how China is investing in the provision of educational opportunities to partners overseas in order to expand its social and cultural influence.

China's Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) is typically interpreted as an umbrella concept comprising large infrastructure projects and multi-billion dollar loans. However, this is only part of the picture. Since the beginning of the BRI, education has played a key role in strengthening China's influence overseas. It continues to shape China's position on the global stage.

The Role of Education in China's Belt & Road Initiative

In 2016, China's Ministry of Education released its 'Education Action Plan for the BRI'. This outlined four key areas of development: student exchanges, resource building, national cooperation and increased global dialogue with educational partners.



The strategy reinforces Beijing's existing efforts to promote understanding of Chinese culture and language across the globe - which intensified in the 1990s - and adds new dimensions in terms of long term strategic partnership. The Education Plan reflects China's holistic approach to investing in BRI partners, where Beijing extends its influence not just financially, but socially and culturally as well.

Beijing's efforts have had mixed results. But it is clear that they have successfully improved the literacy of students in target regions in both Chinese language and culture. Greater student engagement has enabled smoother implementation and operation of China's overseas projects, as ties deepen between China and its neighbouring territories.

An Evolution and Intensification of Confucius Institutes' Influence

China has increased its influence in education through the expansion of Confucius Institutes. Since 2004, China has been systematically promoting the learning of Chinese language and culture abroad through its Confucius Institutes (CIs) as part of its broader strategy of opening up, which began in the 1990s. These institutes are educational establishments which provide linguistic and cultural programmes overseas. They are funded by the Chinese International Education Foundation; a non-governmental organisation.[1]

CIs play a central role in promoting Chinese studies abroad and have been growing steadily in number since 2006, reaching over 500 in 2022. According to 2018 data, there are over 1,200 Confucius Classrooms, a sister initiative providing teacher training.[2]

Contrary to Europe and the US where the presence of CIs is a source of growing controversy, China's regional partners have largely welcomed CIs. This is largely because the learning of Mandarin has been equated with employment opportunities provided by local Chinese companies and construction groups. For countries such as Pakistan and Djibouti - key BRI partners - levels of unemployment are particularly high,[3] and therefore the benefits of learning Mandarin are more tangible than for Western countries. In Pakistan, 30,000 students of leading universities are learning Mandarin at the on-campus Confucius Institutes. There is high engagement in African countries, with 61 institutes and 48 classrooms established across the continent. The effectiveness of CIs in increasing Mandarin literacy is evidenced in the number of students taking the HSK Mandarin proficiency exam (which all Confucius Institutes prepare students for) with over 140,000 students sitting the exam in the first half of 2022, up 10% from the previous year.

Although the number of CIs has continued to grow, it appears Beijing has developed its strategy beyond CIs, deepening its foothold within national educational structures. This is particularly visible in Africa, where sixteen countries are teaching Mandarin as part of the core curriculum.





As the numbers of Chinese businesses, and therefore Chinese residents increase abroad, they will bring in new job opportunities where proficiency in Mandarin is required. If this trend continues, so too will the number of students taking up Mandarin as a second or third language.

Bringing Foreign Talent to China

Beijing's efforts to promote the learning of Mandarin and Chinese culture are not limited to overseas engagement, but have intensified dramatically within China's borders. In 2018, the number of African students in China exceeded 80,000, an increase of 260% from 2011. This is significant given only 40,000 African students were studying in the UK and the US during the same period.[4] The speed at which numbers have increased is in tandem with major investment from Beijing into not just infrastructure projects, but also education opportunities in Africa. From 2009 to 2018, the number of international students studying in China doubled, 65% of which came from BRI partner countries. Unsurprisingly, the onset of Covid-19 led to a sharp collapse in the numbers of international students in China, as a result of stringent border and visa restrictions.

Although it may take time for numbers to return to those of 2018, students from developing countries are unlikely to turn down China's generous offering of fully funded academic programmes, with housing and living stipends included.

Although China is often not the first choice for students in developing countries,[5] the relative inaccessibility of higher education in Europe and the US means that China is often the best, or only, option for students from developing countries. This is unlikely to change in the near future, as China has relaunched its international scholarship programmes in 2022 with the relaxing of border restrictions.

How Beijing's Educational Strategy Supports its BRI Infrastructure Goals

Whilst China's educational agenda in the Global South helps China's image on the global stage, it also plays a very practical role in supporting BRI infrastructure projects. Much of China's scholarship provision has targeted key development areas, including scientific research and technology.

The 'Belt & Road Fellowship Initiative' at Tianjin's Chinese Academy of Sciences is just one example among many reflecting Beijing's targeted investment into academic areas that support BRI projects. This fellowship offers full funding to international doctorate students to conduct collaborative research in biotechnology. Upon completion, scientific and technological developments are expected to be transferred back to the students' home country, and if proven successful, can be implemented across all BRI-partnering countries. Belt & Road Initiative Research Centres are found within most leading universities in China, including Peking and Tsinghua universities (Beijing), Fudan University (Shanghai) and Sichuan University (Chengdu). It is possible that with increasing numbers of collaborative research institutes, China will prove increasingly fertile ground for technological and scientific breakthroughs, the results of which will be seen in BRI partner countries.

Future Geopolitical Impacts

China's educational strategy fundamentally influences bilateral relationships across the globe, as countries largely within the southern hemisphere move closer to China.

Many students who have benefited from China's generous scholarship programmes, or who have engaged with CIs at home, are taking up roles in local BRI projects as translators or interpreters. The more ambitious ones are taking up positions in government, think tanks or universities. The next few decades will see more and more individuals in leadership positions across BRI-partnering countries with first hand experience studying in China, or Confucius Institutes at home. Alumni of leading Chinese universities are already visible among Africa's political elites, including former president of Ethiopia, Mulatu Teshome Wirtu, and former president of the DRC, Joseph Kabila. As the next generation comes through this is likely to become an even more apparent trend.

By promoting engagement with China across all levels of society, particularly the elites, Beijing is pursuing a long-term approach to improve its reputation and political relationship with key BRI regions. This has implications for bilateral relations globally, as we see nations in the southern hemisphere deepen their ties to China socially, economically and perhaps even politically.

Conclusion

Western media and leaders overwhelmingly focus on the economic and military implications of China's Belt & Road Initiative, rather than its potential social, and by extension, political impact. Although it may be years before China reaps the full rewards of its investment into education, the consequences are likely to be profound and enduring, and therefore merit study.

The benefits of Beijing's educational agenda for both China and partnering countries are multifaceted. For China, educational collaboration increases the linguistic and cultural competencies within partnering countries, enabling smoother implementation of projects as well as long-term strengthening of ties. Furthermore, by leaning on the talent of foreign students, China accelerates development in key sectors, such as science and technology, which benefits its domestic economy as well as that of BRI countries.

For partnering countries, besides providing much sought after employment, Beijing offers students the opportunity to continue their education, and in many cases pursue research projects that would not have been possible back home. For these reasons, China is likely to continue to exert social and political influence over the coming years through education. This could potentially rebalance bilateral relationships across the world as countries in the southern hemisphere deepen their ties with China.



References:

[1] The Chinese International Education Foundation is in fact a Government Organised Non-Governmental Organisation, otherwise known as GONGO, a structural model unique to China in which an NGO still has governmental oversight.

[2] The last official number of Confucius Classrooms was announced in 2018. Due to a lack of transparency regarding Confucius Institutes and Classrooms it is difficult to confirm whether these numbers have changed. However, given the period of stasis between 2020 and 2023 as a result of Covid-19, it is reasonable to assume these numbers are unlikely to have changed.

[3] Unemployment rates are 6.4% and 7.4% respectively - a stark contrast with the UK (3.7%) and US (3.5%).

[4] Although numbers of African students studying in the UK and US have also increased since then, with peak numbers in 2020, unlike China regional representation is unevenly distributed, with Nigerian students accounting for over half of overseas student enrolment from Africa.

[5] In a 2022 survey of university students from Papua New Guinea and Fiji, 82% of respondents stated a preference for scholarships from "traditional partners" over China. However, this doesn't prevent them accepting China's offering.

About the Author

Clementine Pippa Ebel is a fluent Mandarin speaker and avid China watcher, Pippa has supported international businesses to understand and operate in China over the past five years. She has worked across a range of areas including education, commercial brands and government. Pippa's previous work included developing the UK Government's GREAT Campaigns in China, as well as the launching of Westminster School in Chengdu, China.

Pippa is now researching and writing about China, with a focus on the Belt & Road Initiative and China's domestic education policy. She will be carrying out research at Peking University as a Yenching Scholar in Autumn 2023.

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