

Education along the Belt and Road

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Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is focused on extending the cooperation between China and the countries of Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. The five goals laid out by the Chinese government, along with unimpeded trade and financial integration, include people-to-people bonds. This last goal is to be achieved by education and international academic cooperation. In 2016, China's Ministry of Education provided a detailed framework that stated which educational projects may be implemented within the BRI. The aim of this research is to analyze, based on the official documents proposed by Chinese ministries, the variety of educational programs offered by the Chinese government to the BRI countries. Furthermore, their strengths and weaknesses will be shown, and the article will also focus on the opportunities available for Polish higher education institutions that may profit from well-led projects.

Introduction

Most academic studies of the Belt Road Initiative (BRI) have focused on the purely economic possibilities of the BRI, while this research is devoted to educational solutions offered by the New Silk Road. Education is one of the most important elements that determine the innovation of the Chinese economy. A number of studies confirm that investing in education has a greater impact on the economic growth of a country than building new infrastructure. Beginning with Deng Xiaoping's reforms of 1978, education in China has undergone constant changes that have allowed it to successfully building its human capital. However, the low levels of teaching at Chinese universities still remain a problem. The Chinese government is looking for new ideas and schemes for improvement; through the BRI, they wish to achieve bilateral and multilateral transfer of knowledge through interdisciplinary and multicultural cooperation (Bieliński, 2016, Bizon, 2019). In this article, based on the documents published by the Chinese government, the main ideas for developing education

through the BRI will be presented. Moreover, Polish educational opportunities that can be achieved with the support from China will be discussed.

The Belt and Road Initiative

The concept of the New Silk Road, which would “forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand development space in the Eurasian region,” was presented by the President of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Xi Jinping, during his visit to Kazakhstan in 2013 (MoFA, 2013). Before 2016, it was known under the name *One Belt One Road* (OBOR, Chinese: 一带一路, pinyin: Yídài yílù); however, its name was changed to the *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) as the Chinese government noticed that the emphasis on the word ‘one’ lead to misunderstandings that there would be only one route within the OBOR. The BRI should be perceived more as an international cooperation strategy between countries, rather than geographically-defined tracks (Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2016). For China, the BRI is an opportunity to further develop, expand

its sphere of influence, and strengthen its position in the international arena. In times of widespread globalization, the New Silk Road also aims to reinforce economic cooperation between countries along the route. Initially, the initiative involved 65 countries located along the historic Silk Road from China to Western Europe (Hübner, 2014), but it has now spread around the globe, even to countries in the Americas or Southern Africa. Although a number of these countries did not sign onto the Initiative, the investments made by the Chinese government in their region are perceived as an agreement to take part in the BRI. On the official BRI webpage, hosted by the Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative and the State Information Center, 137 countries are listed on the 'international cooperation' page, including Poland. The site also includes a total of 187 cooperation documents that have been signed with both national governments and international organizations (Belt and Road Portal, 2019a; 2019b).

In 2015, the Chinese government issued *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*. In this document, five cooperation priorities were listed: a) policy coordination, b) facilities connectivity, c) unimpeded trade, d) financial integration, and e) people-to-people bonds (NDRC, 2015). Realizing these goals would stimulate the global economy and promote dialogue between the countries along the BRI. However, the whole world noticed the opportunities of this project only in 2017, and its importance for China, and also for the BRI region. Leaders from 29 countries and over 1,600 representatives from 140 other countries attended the *Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation* (BRFIC) organized in Beijing in May 2017. Since then, under the idea of the New Silk Road, the policy of *soft expansion* has developed, which includes expanding cultural influences, financial aid for selected projects, and supporting regional integration. The BRI has grown in scope and should be perceived as an international collaboration strategy for common development. Whether a given country will benefit from this initiative or not depends only on the governments' decisions (Wang, 2019).

Polish-Chinese relations

Although Polish-Chinese relations have never been a priority for previous Polish governments, along with the growing importance of Beijing in the international arena, Poland has begun to pay more

attention to closer relations with China in the political and economic spheres. However, the results of these efforts remain limited, and controversies related to the nature of China's foreign policy and international expansion are growing. In order to understand the current dynamics of the relations between Warsaw and Beijing at the bilateral and multilateral levels, one should first understand the historical conditions for the development of these relations.

Polish-Chinese relations in the last few decades were to a large extent conditioned by wider political and economic context in the international arena. Given both geographical and cultural distance between the countries, the People's Republic of China (PRC) has never been a leading international partner for the Polish government. Poland established official diplomatic relations with the PRC in October 1949, the second country after the USSR. Initially, these relations developed relatively dynamically; the PRC Prime Minister Zhou Enlai visited Poland in 1954 and 1957, and a Polish delegation of the Central Committee of Polish United Worker's Party (Polish: Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza – PZPR) visited China to attend the 8th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In connection with the split between the USSR and the PRC, the relations between Poland and China also weakened (Gawlikowski, 2009).

This situation changed only after the death of Mao Zedong. An era of reforms initiated in the late 1970s under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping became an opportunity for creating new relations between Poland and China. However, internal problems of both countries prevented the strengthening of dialogue. The year 1989 turned out to be a breakthrough for both Poland and the PRC, but for extremely different reasons, which once again hindered cooperation. Even after 1989, Poland's diplomatic relations with China can only be described as correct, apart from the PRC government's disapproval after the Dalai Lama visited Poland in 2008. The diplomatic situation only changed in 2010. First, during the 2010 EXPO in Shanghai, Poland received a very prominent exhibition space, which was well received by the Polish government. Then in 2011, the President of Poland, Bronisław Komorowski, visited China, where he signed a strategic partnership agreement between Poland and China. In 2012, the Prime Minister of China, Wen Jiabao, visited Poland. During his stay in Warsaw, the first summit of the heads of governments of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and China took place. In practice, this meeting turned out to

be the inauguration of the so-called platform 16+1, a mechanism for multilateral cooperation between the PRC and the 16 countries of the region. This event symbolically assigned Poland the role of leader of Central and Eastern Europe in relations with China. Since then, the Polish government has continued to strengthen its relations with the PRC. Poland sees opportunities that go hand-in-hand with cooperation with China; however, despite the signing of many bilateral contracts and agreements, most of their assumptions have not been implemented yet (Tuszyński, 2014; Habowski, 2016).

Prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Poland and China maintained scientific relations. Even though these relations may seem more fruitful than diplomatic ones, China has never been an important field of study for Polish scholars. However, two Polish travelers, a missionary and a scientist, are historically significant. The first documented contact with the Chinese was made by Benedict of Poland (Polish: Benedykt Polak, Latin: Benedictus Polonus), a Franciscan, who entered the court of the Great Khan of the Mongol Empire in 1246 with Giovanni da Pian del Carpine. He was the author of the chronicle *De Itinere Fratrum Minorum ad Tartaros* (English: *On the travel of Franciscan friars to the Tatars*), and another work *Historia Tartarorum* (English: *The history of the Tatars*), both published centuries after his death. In the 17th century, other Poles visited China, the Jesuit missionaries Michał Boym (Chinese: 卜彌格, pinyin: Bǔ Mígé) and Jan Mikołaj Smogulecki. Apart from his missionary work, Michał Boym was involved in collecting scientific materials. From this, he developed a series of works about China, including Chinese medicine, local fauna and flora, descriptions of the country, and most importantly, maps and atlases of China. Unfortunately, many of his works were not published (Olszewicz, 1953, Miazek-Męczyńska, 2014).

In the 21st century, China became the world's second-largest economy by nominal GDP and until 2015, it was the world's fastest-growing major economy. Poland should seek cooperation, especially since China offers a number of proposals that Poland can benefit from (IMF, 2013; The World Bank, 2019). Assumptions of economic agreements signed between Poland and China have so far not been implemented due to numerous formal barriers and bureaucratic problems. Due to these setbacks, Poland should consider becoming involved in other branches of cooperation, one of which may be education.

Education on the Belt and Road

Education has always played an important role in China. The imperial examination system was in force until the early 20th century and served as a tool for the direct selection of government officials. The biggest changes in the country's education system occurred at the end of the 20th century when Maoist attachment to ideology was replaced by skills and knowledge. This was followed by the appreciation of practical sciences, especially technical ones. Currently, the Chinese government faces many challenges regarding its education system, ranging from elementary schools to higher education. Some of the concerns are similar to those of their Western counterparts, as no education system is perfect. To improve its education system, China seeks solutions, further reforms, and support from foreign governments (Yong, 2014). One of the ways to find allies in the search for better education is the *Belt and Road Initiative*.

One of the five major goals for the BRI is 'people-to-people bonds.' Even though this term may describe a variety of actions, the Chinese government has stated that the main way to achieve this goal is education. In July 2016, the Ministry of Education released *Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative*, a document that has since served as a guidebook to the ideas and visions proposed by the Chinese government (MoE, 2018a). According to the document, "education is vital to the strength of a country, the prosperity of a nation, and the happiness of a people" and it should be used to develop the remaining goals of the BRI. For China, it is important to integrate with global educational trends and to also promote common educational prosperity among nations along the BRI. China is also open to cooperation in as many educational projects that will contribute to further development of the BRI region as possible (Belt and Road Portal, 2017).

The *Education Action Plan* includes three visions for cooperation for countries along the BRI to "work together to build a Belt and Road educational community," and to promote the improvement and development of education in order to educate a wide range of specialists whose knowledge may support the BRI. To accomplish these goals, the BRI countries should endeavor to complete the proposed visions: a) "**promote closer people-to-people ties**" – meaning the improvement of the relations between the nations of the BRI countries and deepening the understanding between the people; b) "**cultivate supporting talent**" – meaning the promotion of

talents that may be supportive for realizing the BRI goals; c) **“achieve common development”** – meaning common co-actions of BRI countries to improve the level of education in the region (Belt and Road Portal, 2017).

A set of four principles for cooperation has also been prepared to achieve these visions: a) “focusing on nurturing of the people, prioritizing people-to-people exchanges” i.e. promoting the growth of competences of the population within the region and encouraging people to create bonds to exchange knowledge and qualifications; b) “combining government guidance with social involvement” i.e. governments should cooperate together with schools, universities, and entrepreneurs to promote changes and educational development; c) “realizing shared growth through consultation and collaboration, and fostering greater openness and cooperation” i.e. countries of the BRI region should start reforming their systems of education to be more open to international cooperation and integration; d) “promoting harmony, inclusiveness, mutual benefit, and win-win outcomes” i.e. the BRI countries descend from culturally different civilizations and there is a need for mutual understanding to sustain cooperation (Belt and Road Portal, 2017).

To fulfill the first vision, i.e. **“promote closer people-to-people ties”**, the Chinese government wants to boost student exchanges. Many different scholarships are available both for students and scholars from the BRI region; among the most recognizable aids is the *Silk Road Scholarship* which supports up to 10,000 students from the BRI countries each year. In 2017, 66,100 Chinese students, 3,679 of them on government scholarship, studied in 37 BRI countries. Moreover, in 2017, 317,200 students from the BRI countries studied in China, accounting for 64.85% of all international students (MoE, 2018a). Having so many students obtaining their degrees abroad, there was a need to sign agreements on the mutual recognition of academic qualifications with foreign governments. According to the PRC Ministry of Education, a total of 47 agreements have been signed, including 24 agreements with the BRI countries, including Poland in 2016. China also promoted the implementation of UNESCO’s *Asia-Pacific Regional Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education*, proposed in 2011 and enforced in February 2018. A further step is to pursue efforts at creating a global system for the mutual recognition of qualifications (UNESCO, 2011; Belt and Road Portal, 2017; MoE, 2018b).

Another step to promote people-to-people ties are Chinese language and cultural education, which is particularly supported by the Confucius Institutes (CI), a project established in 2004 which serves to advocate the BRI goals. CIs are non-profit educational organizations with the assistance of the Ministry of Education of PRC, overseen by the Confucius Institute Headquarters (Hanban), operating at universities, colleges, schools, and other educational institutions around the world. Their goal is to promote Chinese language and culture to local society through, e.g., language courses, cultural events, academic lectures, or summer camps (Chen, Wang & Cai, 2010). CIs have an existing initiative that supports the BRI. According to the Ministry of Education, in June 2018 51 of the BRI countries established 135 CI and 129 Confucius Classrooms (MoE, 2018b). Among the activities held by CIs to promote the BRI are the organization of academic lectures and conferences along the BRI, carrying out research on various branches of the BRI, teaching Chinese to students and scholars willing to deepen their academic knowledge of China, or CI scholarships and a Chinese Bridge Competition which allow students to study in China. The Ministry of Education has noted the importance of learning languages and thus promotes studying foreign languages within China, especially those from countries across the BRI region. One of the key universities in China – Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU, Chinese: 北京外国语大学, pinyin: Běijīng Wàiguóyǔ Dàxué) has been obliged to increase the number of languages it teaches. In 2019, it offered 101 different languages used as official languages in 176 countries with diplomatic relations with China, and 45 of these languages are offered exclusively at BFSU (BFSU, 2019).

The second vision, **“cultivating supporting talent,”** can be developed by the aforementioned scholarship programs, but the Chinese government has also proposed additional solutions. To prepare future students to study abroad, they must first learn foreign languages and be open-minded to different cultures, especially Western ones. More and more international kindergartens and schools have been opened in China to prepare young Chinese for becoming overseas students. Additionally, the Ministry of Education also promotes technical and vocational education and training (TVET). The importance of TVET lays in the variety of technical projects to be accomplished through the BRI. Although TVET is in a way contrary to the Confucian tradition which promoted theoretical knowledge instead of skills,

the Chinese government is aware that it must educate skillful engineers to continuously develop local industry (Xiong, 2011; UNEVOC, 2018).

In China, skilled workers have been undervalued for decades, even though an enormous number of people are employed in blue-collar jobs. In 2006, 270 million people were employed in the workforce, but only 87.2 million (32%) were qualified skilled workers, and only 3.6 million were high-level skilled workers (Xiong, 2011). The situation did not change much, leading to a great shortage of skills. In 2018, the number of employed rose to 776 million, but only 20% (155.2 million) were qualified, and only 6% of those were high-level skilled workers (Xinhua Net, 2018). One idea is to encourage the operation of foreign industries in China to provide vocational skills training along with local TVET institutions to educate specific qualifications needed by those companies. Another project is named Luban Workshops, after Lu Ban (Chinese: 鲁班, pinyin: Lǔ Bān), an ancient Chinese architect. The idea of this project is in a way similar to the Confucius Institutes but for technical and vocational training. Teachers are to provide up-to-date knowledge on technology, promote collaboration between vocational schools in the BRI region, and encouraged to implement vocational education reforms. Luban Workshops operate in African countries, Thailand, Cambodia, Pakistan, and even Great Britain, and are planned to spread to other European countries (MoE, 2018c; China Daily, 2019).

The last vision, “**achieving common development**,” seems more open to all the countries of the BRI region and means enhancing the quality of education through the *Silk Road Education Assistance Program*. However, this program is in fact aimed mostly at the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), which can receive support from China. Starting with the aforementioned Luban Workshops to educate skillful workers, the Chinese government has prepared a set of aids to improve the level of education. First, China will educate staff with different specializations to support those countries to convey their knowledge to local teachers and scholars. Moreover, apart from teacher training, the Chinese government will equip educational institutions with teaching materials and schemes and high-quality technologies. They will also encourage each country to develop new mechanisms of educational fundraising to accumulate more resources, increase the scope of educational assistance, and receive support from external investors. This will achieve shared educational development with support from both the local

government and institutions which will benefit from an educated labor force (King, 2014; Belt and Road Portal, 2017; Ehizuelen et al., 2017).

Since 2013, the Chinese government has supported many educational institutions (31 projects until 2016) in LDCs to show their commitment to the development of the region. Mutual development can be also achieved by increased connectivity between higher education institutions (HEIs). Multiple scholarships for students and scholars, many signed cooperation agreements with governments and HEIs, and a thriving desire to conduct research to go down in history, have propelled collaborative research. Chinese HEIs have established research alliances not only with universities along the BRI, but also with corporations and governments to conduct innovative research in fields such as economics, medicine, and new technologies or science. These alliances allow staff exchanges, resource sharing, division of research costs, and facilitate access to research subjects. Moreover, the Chinese government will establish research centers that focus on understanding the perspective of the BRI countries through their culture and language and also through education, economics, politics, and social development. The centers are expected to evolve into think tanks supporting Chinese decision-makers (MoE, 2018b).

Opportunities for Poland

In the *Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative*, the Chinese government proposed many suggestions for boosting education using the idea of the BRI. Some ideas are not applicable to Poland; however, Polish HEIs should seek ideas that may be implemented in Poland and may develop our native educational system. This section will discuss several opportunities proposed in the BRI that Polish academies, students, and scholars may benefit from.

According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, in 2017, 608,400 Chinese students left their home country to study abroad, and 1,454,100 students were enrolled in foreign higher education institutions, making China the largest source of international students in the world. The majority of these students are self-funded (89%), which should be important to Polish HEIs (MoE, 2018a). Studying in Poland is much cheaper than Western European countries, due to lower tuition fees, cheaper educational materials, and lower overall costs of living. Moreover, the level of education at Polish academies is comparable to that offered in the West. These factors should incentivize Chinese students willing to

obtain an education abroad; however, the curricula offered by Polish HEIs provide a limited number of degree courses in English, making it almost impossible for Chinese to study in Poland. Polish HEIs should seek opportunities to establish more majors taught in English, encouraging Chinese youth to study in Poland. Gaining these overseas students will increase the internationalization of Polish academies and grant additional income from tuition fees.

Another opportunity for Polish students and young scholars are the *Confucius Institute Scholarships* (CIS). There are currently five CIs in Poland – in Cracow, Wrocław, Poznań, Opole, and Gdańsk – and all offer annual scholarships for those willing to study in China. Students may choose from a variety of types of stays, from a four-week study during summer, up to doctoral degree. Depending on the length of the stay, candidates must meet different sets of requirements; however, a common requirement is that an applicant must know the Chinese language to receive financial aid from Hanban. Nonetheless, CIS degree courses are dedicated only to sinologists and future Chinese language teachers. The Chinese government offers its own scholarship, open to everyone, allowing a student to take degree courses in any major, even those conducted in English. Both of the aforementioned scholarships cover tuition fees, accommodation, insurance, and even pocket money (from 2500 RMB to 3500 RMB per month). The only expenditure for a scholarship holder is the cost of international flights and obtaining a visa (CSC, 2018; Confucius Institute, 2019).

Educational cooperation with China is visible not only at the level of universities but also at the governmental level. In 2018, the National Science Centre (Polish: Narodowe Centrum Nauki), a governmental grant-making agency that provides financial support to Polish scholars conducting research, opened a grant competition called SHENG for research projects carried out by Polish-Chinese teams. SHENG is a competition carried out in cooperation between the National Science Center and the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC). The evaluation included joint Polish-Chinese applications for financing research projects, and experts assessed the scientific value of the projects, the qualifications of the research team, the possibility of project implementation, and the cost estimate. The awarded grants totaled almost 36.4 million PLN, divided amongst thirty projects from 250 applications (NCN, 2019). Even though the next edition of SHENG has not been announced, it is possible that future releases will appear and once again draw the interest of scholars.

These are only a few of the opportunities provided to Polish academia that may be realized through the Belt and Road Initiative. More are likely to come, along with the development of the BRI, with more openness from the Polish government, HEI authorities, and scholars and students themselves.

Conclusions

The number of different projects to be completed using the influence of the BRI is enormous, ranging from scholarships and scholar exchanges to cultural education served by Confucius Institutes, as well as technical and vocational education and training initiatives in the Least Developed Countries. Many other ideas not mentioned in the article may also fall within the vision the Chinese government laid out in the *Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative*. Cooperation with Chinese partners may be profitable for Poland, not only from a financial perspective but also for the transfer of knowledge. However, there is a need to set a coherent vision of this partnership in order to realize a high number of projects and avoid the recurrence of activities which have already been carried out or completed.

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