

THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE AND THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION FROM BRI EDUCATION PHD STUDENTS IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched by China in 2013, is a massive project designed to promote development, trade, mutual understanding and cooperation. Within the five pillars of the initiative, education plays an important and overarching role. That is why part of that initiative is increasing international higher education students in China, in particular from countries taking part in the initiative. This research is focused on gaining the perspective of nine education PhD students at a major university in Beijing, who all have the shared feature of being from Belt and Road countries. These students were all chosen from students beginning their PhD journey in the years 2017, 2018, and 2019 and from a geographically diverse range covering Asia, Europe, Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa. Through 24 questions, much insight was shed on the BRI and the rhetoric associated with it and how that has influenced the internationalization of higher education in China but most importantly how that is perceived by those at the very center of that process and in essence are the realization of that process. By examining the perspectives of these students on three core aspects of the BRI- people to people bonds, knowledge economy and a “community of shared future for mankind”, more light was shed on not only how the BRI is living up to its attached rhetoric but also the internationalization of Chinese higher education and the pertinent issues that arise in this process of China going from an exporter to importer of higher education.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, International Education, China, Higher Education, PhD Students.

INTRODUCTION

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI/B&R) also known as One Belt, One Road was announced in 2013 by the Chinese government in reference to both the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road. Much has been said about this initiative from it being part of Beijing’s “Go Global” strategy and being “China’s response to challenges and opportunities of tomorrow” (Visvizi et al., 2019, p. 2), to the BRI being “in part a reflection of China’s emergence as a major economic power, a driver of global economic growth and a catalyst of regional economic integration” (Liu & Dunford, 2016, p. 326), to an essential part of the foreign policy that will allow for the realization of the “Chinese dream” (Aoyama, 2016, p. 20). However, one chooses to view the BRI, it is still a massive undertaking for development, modernization and globalization, with participation from over 60 countries, which estimates account “for over 30% of global GDP, 62% of the world’s population, and 75% of known energy reserves” (Visvizi et al., 2019, p. 2).

The BRI is designed to allow for the flow of services, goods, capital and cultural exchanges along the ancient Silk Road and between Asia and the rest of the world “by promoting further

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market integration in the region and by forging new ties among the nations and cultures that comprise the new Silk Road” (Peters, 2019, p. 1). With five main areas/links including trade and investment, facilities connectivity, policy coordination, financial integration, and cultural exchanges, education has become an important factor in this initiative (Peters, 2019). Higher education is a crucial facet of the social and cultural exchanges as it facilitates a growth in the “knowledge economy”, creating more people to people bonds and allowing for more mutual understanding for the many diverse cultures and people that participate in this initiative (Peters, 2019; Jiang & Shi, 2019). Furthermore, education can be viewed as a way to allow for a “community of shared future for mankind” but also as a way for increasing Chinese soft power and possibly the key factor in enhancing public opinion of China along the many countries that will be and are linked by the BRI (Jiang & Shi, 2019, p. 76). These are also part of the prominent ‘opinions’ or ‘priorities’ put forth by the CPC Central Committee and the State Council on the “opening-up of education in a new-era”, in which stress is placed on the creation of world-class universities and scientific research, deepening Sino-foreign understanding and people to people bonds and exchanges and finally further promotion of the BRI educational initiative. Thus highlighting both the ideological and practical essence of the BRI in terms of the internationalization of Chinese higher education. These three concepts of people to people bonds, knowledge economy or cognitive economy and a “community of shared future for mankind” will play an especially important role in this research, as they can be deemed three of the foremost rhetoric associated with the BRI and higher education, as there is no better way to encourage all three of these concepts than in higher education. As Kaufman and Feldman (2004) and Kim (2019) point out, universities are an arena in which an individual interacts with a variety of different actors and a multitude of settings, and through these social influences and social interactions, the identity of those individuals are in part formed.

The Internationalization of Chinese Higher Education

Known for being the largest exporter of international students, China has been transforming themselves into an importer of international students in recent years. The Chinese government’s efforts have resulted in China becoming a leading destination for many international students (Chiang, 2015). Wen (2018) states that, “the internationalization of higher education has become one of the major strategies countries utilize to educate young talents and yield world-class scientific outcomes” and in China’s case “there are at least four streams of ideologies/theories to explain the rationale of China’s inbound international student policies, namely, neo-liberalism, developmental-state thesis, the soft power approach and the cultural approach” (p. 175). Wen (2018) goes on to address the BRI as part of that soft power approach as international education, student mobility, in particular more international students in China will allow for the advancement of both Chinese culture and wisdom in countries that make up the BRI as that will potentially “facilitate the connectivity of policy, infrastructure, trade, finance, and people” (p. 176).

According to the Australian Department of Education, the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) had established four joint venture institutes along with 98 education projects in 14 different countries, most of which were BRI countries, by the end of 2016. Furthermore, by the end of that year along the BRI routes, over 134 Confucius Institutes had been established, which further aids in allowing more countries and their people to come into contact with Chinese cultural without ever having to go to China. Also, when it came to Chinese Government Scholarships in the year of 2016, around 60% went to students who came from BRI countries. According to the MoE’s *Statistical Report on International Students in China for 2018*, in the year of 2018, in Chinese higher education institutions there were a total of 492,185 international students of which 59.95% came from Asia, 16.57% from Africa, 14.96% from

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Europe, 7.26% from America and 1.27% from Oceania, which marked a 1.62% increase in international students from 2017. The top ten countries represented by those students including South Korea, Thailand, Pakistan, India, USA, Russia, Indonesia, Laos, Japan, and Kazakhstan, show that a great percentage of those international students are coming from BRI countries.

Yet, even with the increasing amount of student mobility in China and elevated emphasis being placed on the BRI, limited research has been conducted on BRI students undertaking higher education in China. Research conducted by Yan et al. (2019) at four Chinese universities from the years of 2012-2017, on ASEAN students studying in China showed that out of the students surveyed only 67% of those students had a “slight understanding of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, and even 26% did not understand it at all” (p. 1756). Which lead the authors to conclude that the “One Belt, One Road” initiative has been implemented but not yet fully “Into the hearts of the people” of the BRI countries (Yan et al., 2019, p. 1756). Further research done at Tongji University, showed that “foreigners with experience of studying in China have a more positive attitudes toward the Belt and Road initiative (Cheng, 2018). By conducting team studies on 60 international students from more than 50 different countries who cooperated with Chinese students for the research has very unique implications (Cheng, 2018). It shows the importance of international students studying in China as a way for them to not only come to understand more of the BRI but also come to understand China, Chinese culture and promote those people to people bonds in the cultural exchange link, while also promoting the knowledge economy, with the eventually end goal of “a community of shared future for mankind”. As it does seem that when it comes to “a community of shared future for mankind”, it will only be possible by achieving the other rhetoric.

Student mobility has been shown to increase tolerance towards the host country’s people and culture and create more awareness of diplomatic relations between the student’s home country and host country, as was shown by Nor and Mustafa’s (2013) study of Malaysian students in Japan. To further understand this in the Chinese BRI context, the research conducted in this paper will address the perceptions of the BRI countries students who are currently undertaking a PhD in education at Beijing Normal University, on their time in China, the Chinese PhD experience and their perceptions on the BRI. Education is an important part of the BRI and who better to impact that then students studying education. Zhang and Chen (2018), note that one goal of BRI is for, “the countries along the route complement each other, open up and cooperate with each other and offer a new stage for international cooperation” (p. 2364). Is there truly a better way to encourage international cooperation than through students from the numerous BRI countries studying together?

Methodology

My research began with the question, what perspectives do PhD students in education studying in China, from countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative have on the initiative? How much did they know about the initiative, did that initiative affect their choice to study in China and how will that influence them as education students? Education students in particular have the potential to have great sway back in their home countries, as education in itself is influential but their time in China will be viewed as first-hand information on China. Whether they go on to teach high school or university, they will be in direct contact with future generations. If they continue to do research and publish papers, their thoughts and opinions will also have the potential to influence those that read their words. Some might even go back to their home countries and work on creating educational policies. As Bilecen (2013) explains, “postgraduate students are a very important subject of study because they are in a phase of transition from being consumers of education to producers who are appreciated for their

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academic achievements and innovation capabilities, which will have an influence on the reputation of the university and, later, of the country” (p. 668). Therefore, their potential for influence is vast, especially with concepts such “a community of shared future for mankind”, knowledge economy (as they are an essential part of it), and with the promotion of the exchange of both education and culture in the realization of “mutual understanding” (Jiang & Shi, 2019, pp. 75-76). When returning to their home countries these students will be in the position to influence public opinion on China, with their experiences as a PhD student, and therefore coming from Belt and Road countries, there is a great need “to consolidate the public opinion base of the countries along ‘B&R’” (Jiang & Shi, 2019, p. 76).

I have chosen to conduct semi-structured interviews of 9 English-taught PhD students in the Faculty of Education. These students were chosen as they were PhD students in the Faculty of Education, in an English taught program, started in 2017, 2018, and 2019, and lastly came from countries participating in the BRI Initiative. Out of the 75 PhD students in English-taught programs in the faculty 23 out of 75 meet those qualifications. There is the drawback that the sample size is rather small and geographically limited, yet, I still tried to choose students from two clusters. One cluster is 4 students who come from countries along the China- Pakistan Economic corridor and South Asia. Another is students from a variety of the other regions including Europe, Eurasia, Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, who represent geographically very central locations among the Belt and Road Initiative, which add more diversity and therefore more strength to the research. With one or two students to represent particular geographic areas, it will be hard to reach conclusions, but overall trends might be possible for PhD students in general. With that limitation in mind, I designed the interviews to be semi-structured, with 24 set questions that could be built upon or taken away, depending on how the interview was progressing. The questions were designed with a mixture of questions, many of which were knowledge-based question content, which were used to try and elicit more sincere answers and answers to more sensitive questions, knowing that for a mixture of reasons, these students might avoid giving true opinions. For example, “how do you see your role as a PhD student”, might seem like a simple question but it can give deep, insightful ideas about the student’s identity in China, and how the student sees the treatment from the university. Do they see themselves as a student, researcher, or employee will not only show how they see themselves on their quest to a PhD certificate (is it just a paper or a way to progress in academia?) but also how they see the university as treating them (a researcher on par with other employees or as a more advanced student). These questions will be used to elicit more information on the PhD candidates time in China, how they see China and their perspectives on the BRI.

Using a phenomenological approach will provide for more contrast as I will be focusing on the commonality of a lived experience within a particular group. The particular case is comprised of English-taught Education PhD students (from the classes of 2017, 2018, 2019) at Beijing Normal University, who all happen to be from BRI countries. The results, while rather limited in their scope, by the size of the research can provide crucial information on how universities in China can better promote the educational aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative and find more conducive ways to implement the initiative “into the hearts of the people” and promote better policies for international PhD students in China. (Yan et al., 2019, p. 1756). Which therefore has the potential to show how the promotion of people to people bond aspect of the BRI is being actualized as China begins to exert more educational soft power. It also has significance in that it can highlight students from a range of geographical locations and countries in differing stages of development, and numerous socio-cultural backgrounds, and their experiences as PhD students in China. Thereby providing more of an answer on how to

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create “a community of shared future for mankind” and how to more fully promote the link of cultural exchange through the medium of higher education, through education students who will have direct influence on the next generation. As Visvizi et al. (2019) notes, the “BRI is a unique case study in mastering global economic exposure, strategy, diplomacy, and political communication” but it is also a unique case study on how education can be used to shape all of that (p. 2). These interviews provide results of tentative analysis when looking at the actualities of the BRI and the internationalization of Chinese higher education.

Table 1: Interviewed students demographics

B & R economic corridor/ route	Gender	Marriage status
Pakistan- China/ South Asia	Male	Married
South Asia	Female	Married
Pakistan- China/ South Asia	Female	Unmarried
Bangladesh- China- India- Myanmar/ South Asia	Male	Unmarried
The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road route (Middle East)	Male	Unmarried
The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road route. (North Africa)	Male	Unmarried
The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (Europe)	Male	Unmarried
Eurasia	Female	Unmarried
Southeast Asia	Female	Unmarried

RESULTS & ANALYSIS

With the 24 questions asked, much light was shown on the perspectives of students from BRI countries who are studying at the PhD level in China. When it came to why they chose to study in China, students chose to underscore the friendly relationship between their home country and China, being interested in trying something new or to study in Asia, to more practical responses such as scholarships and being provided with an opportunity. All the students were receiving scholarships and seemed to see their roles as PhD student in different light. One student commented on how in China, the universities seem to hold more traditional views of the PhD student as a student (maybe relating back to Confucius) but he chose to see himself as a researcher. Three other students echoed the idea of being a researcher, one provided the example that being from Ukraine, he had access to more information as he could read English, Ukrainian, and Russian, which would allow him to find more interesting and new information. One other student commented that she saw herself right now as a student but noted that “when you are doing a PhD, we don’t just want to limit ourselves as a student.....we want to be a researcher”. This thought seemed to be echoed in other sentiments such as being a teacher educator and seeing themselves as contributing to the bank of knowledge and as active participators in enhancing the knowledge economy of both China and their home countries.

When it came to family and going back home, most of the students went back about once a year and most had families that supported it or played no role in their decision. One married

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student that his family played a key role in his decision as he chose that program and university as his wife was also admitted as a PhD student and that his daughter could also attend school at the affiliated school. One other student noted that as a single woman, her family was more than okay with the idea, as her country had a close relationship with China, and as China was helping her country develop, her parents were okay with the idea, even more so than attending universities in Europe. Which shows that in some of the BRI countries, the close relationship between the country and China is very influential, and seeing China help with the development of the countries is earning China a higher reputation as a good place for students to go. Yet, this was not a reflection made by any other of the interviewees.

When questioned about what they planned to do after finishing their PhD, most responded looking for post docs around the world. When questioned about China, most said, they would stay if the opportunity was good but one student noted that as she was married, living in China would be impractical as she could not buy a house or really settle down here as language and immigration barriers would provide a major hindrance. These language barriers in numerous other capacities were noted alongside cultural barriers as challenges faced by many of these students, who were studying in an English program and therefore most held rudimentary Chinese skills. Language seemed to play the biggest role as the paramount challenge, with one student lamenting that he wished the university would allow more access to language courses beyond the introduction course that is mandated by the Chinese Ministry of Education. Highlighting the lack of investment the university seems to show in facilitating the international student's understanding of the both the language and culture, which inevitably has led to many issues for these students, and seemingly at odds with much of what is touted as the reasons for this turn to internationalization of the Chinese higher education and the BRI. Another similar issue was the difference in cultural and how that can manifest itself in cultural misunderstandings as was mentioned by one student, who pointed out that being a Muslim, that some of her religious and cultural needs seemed to be ignored by the university. It must be pointed out that about half the interviewees were Muslim but only she lived on campus, which could allude to the differences faced from students residing on campus to those who live off campus, especially in terms of religion, but that was not a focus of this research.

However, studying in China was seen as beneficial to them as students/researchers of education, as China provided many unique opportunities and access to educational policies in the making, conferences, seminars and the ability to understand differing Asian concepts of education. One interviewee mentioned that the environment was the most beneficial, with people all around him, who have experience and knowledge and being in China allowed for them to share that knowledge, which he nicely summed up by saying that if he was to stay in his home country, he would stay at the same level. One student commented how being in China would allow him to compare his home country and China, while another mentioned along the same lines that "you learn from Chinese culture and share something from your own". Which reflects nicely on the social and cultural exchange link of the BRI but overall there does appear to be some barriers when it comes to these social and cultural exchanges.

The question was asked on how the students saw themselves as being a benefit to China and many students chose to stress that China is trying to go global and market its education and in some ways they are the materialization and embodiment of that dream. The rationalized that their presence in China was adding to the diversity that Chinese higher education was searching for, but not just in terms of nationalities but also adding diversity in terms of exchanging ideas and research. Others saw themselves as benefiting China by producing research, exploring the Chinese education system as an outsider, bringing in new perspectives and cultures and

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building connections between their countries, seemingly continuing to stress the people to people bonds and knowledge economy. This was brought to highlight examples from two different students. One mentioned that when he graduates and goes back to teach at universities in his country, he will still have ties and connections with Chinese professors. Another student mentioned that recently, his old supervisor from his home country approached him about creating a link between his Ukrainian university and his new Chinese one. He acknowledged that as a student in China, he is “not just a simple PhD student” but a bridge and diplomat of two education systems. In other words, they saw themselves as an essential aspect of the growing knowledge economy and in facilitating bonds, therefore helping to promote “a community of shared future for mankind”, although most did not directly make this connection or understand their role in the promotion of BRI rhetoric.

When it came to being asked about the BRI and their perspectives on those phrases many saw them as idealistic, especially the shared community one. To quote one participant, “it is a very nice statement. Anyone who has traveled abroad will mention about. When we get to see other people, their successes, their failures, we get to learn, to influence, and help each other”. When asked about BRI, most students knew a varying degree of knowledge about it. Many focused on the economical and developmental aspects of it, and some mentioned more of the political factors and strategic policies involved. One student mentioned the educational aspect of it, while another student discussed that it was “an interconnectivity between nations” and that his being in China was a part of it. Most students also reflected the ideas that their countries are important partners in the initiative. Only one student, saw his country, as should be playing a more important partner for China and that some countries seemed more valued in the initiative than others. The majority mentioned the geographical benefit of their home country as of importance to the BRI, from ports, to strategic locations between one or more countries, to being a bridge between two continents. One student expressed some hesitations on his country’s role and what that might mean for the future of his country. Yet, one student chose to philosophize that his country, “is an ancient country- it influences and gets influenced” but it has wisdom when building relationships with other countries.

When asked if China does a good job of recruiting talent for PhD programs, most students agreed that China does, with agencies to recruit the best students and with strong political ties which draw students to studying there. This was especially true with the students interviewed from Pakistan, which makes sense as that corridor is of especial importance. As noted in the 2015, *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st- Century Maritime Silk Road* issued by the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, with State Council authorization, “the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor are closely related to the Belt and Road Initiative, and therefore require closer cooperation and greater progress”. Which stands to prove why students from that country feel like their country is both an important part of the BRI, but also why these students believed that talented students from their country are being recruited for Chinese universities. This is further reflected in the data from the MoE from 2018, in which it lists Pakistan as ranking third in international students in China, country of origin. In contrast, one student mentioned that in his country in North Africa, the talent was not being as well-recruited as it should be; whereas one student from a BCIM, mentioned that from his viewpoint many of the students being given scholarships are given for political reasons, and not as a result of talent as some excellent students are being ignored for the less academically inclined students.

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The questions on how they have felt social and cultural bonds (people to people bonds) and if they feel more connected to China and the Chinese, now that they had been in China, brought up a mixture of responses. Some students acknowledged that the BRI is helping to close that gap between the people of different countries and that education is an important part of creating bonds. While two students highlighted that time is what forms bonds and that this internationalization process is new for China but they have seen a willingness amongst the Chinese to engage and have dialogues. On the contrary, a few students mentioned that while they feel closer to the Chinese and China than they did before coming to China, it was still like they were living in a PhD bubble, insulated and cutoff from the real China. Which did not coincide with most Chinese, as the Chinese were outside their bubble. Thus how could they be expected to form bonds with people, that they never come in contact with, outside of the narrow time they spent doing activities like going to the bank. With no classes with Chinese students and limited opportunities for interactions even within the university, it seemed that the bonds were deemed hard to form, unless one went of their way to do so. Furthermore, it seemed that the cultural views of friendship also bore some responsibility for the lack of bond creation. One student mentioned the difficulty he had making friends with Chinese and had felt no genuine connection with most Chinese, whom he grew to see as having a different idea of friendship as he mentioned that most of the time Chinese students will ask for his WeChat (social media application) in order to practice English. In his mindset, that action was not a sign of trying to form a true friendship but a more transactional type of friendship, one in which “I help you, you help me” (as expressed by another interviewee, who has spent a vast part of her adult life in China).

It was also mentioned by a few students, the clustering of students from the same country, especially countries, like Nepal and Pakistan, where many students come to China to study. As one student explained when reflecting on watching her countrymates form into these clusters, that this process was conducive to forming bonds with compatriots but not with those from other countries, seemingly detrimental to what the BRI is about and why those students were brought to China. Yet, this is not necessarily a Chinese university only problem as researchers such as Fincher (2011) mentions a similar issue in Australian universities. She acknowledges that “connections with co-cultural are much stronger for most international students than connections with Australians” (p. 923). Rosenthal, Russel, and Thomson (2006), sampled 1/3 of all international students at a major university, finding that the social separation between local and international students as inopportune. A similar lack of local and international students were brought up during the interviews conducted for this research.

The students also expressed that their time in China was a way to add on to their identity as a global citizen and that being a student in China has put them in a better position to see the world from a new perspective. This question was a very interesting one as students chose to see global citizenship from two different perspectives, seemingly unaware that they were doing so: one a more neo-liberal (Schultz, 2007) and one a more international understanding approach or as Schultz (2007) would classify it as a transformationalist view. Following along the lines of the neo-liberal paradigm, one particular student noted that this experience is providing her a way to be an influencer between her country and China, and that does not necessarily stop with just her home country and China, as she will have made networks with people from a myriad of countries both inside and outside the BRI. Following along the lines of the BRI, it was expressed by one student from South Asia, that as long as his country continues to be part of the BRI, that his experience will be beneficial to both his career prospects and his country. Thus, it seems that the practical benefits of studying abroad go beyond the ideological basis of international education and the BRI and into the more neo-liberal. Yet, there is that duality of

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neo-liberalism and the BRI, as for some students from BRI countries, the value of studying in China, might be from a practical one of being an advantage and a way to get ahead as China becomes more and more important in the world, that does not necessitate that this is the only way in which students highlighted their growing global citizenship. One student noted that his experience in different situations in education is good for his exploration in education and learning from different lens. Lastly, one student enjoyed his time in China, sharing knowledge and learning more about other cultures outside his own, likening it to going to different gold mines and finding different types of gold. As he explained “it could be dusty but it is still gold”. Both of these differing paradigms can be seen as well within the realm of the BRI, in both its ideological base but practical realities.

Lastly, the students were asked about what they would tell people back home and how their time in China would influence them in their future endeavors in the realm of education. Most said they would tell people back home the truth, the good and the bad, but that overall it was a good experience that made them more global. One student highlighted that China is a different world. In his words, “we understand the world differently- what is normal in China is abnormal in my home country”. That is complemented with that these PhD students mostly saw their time as beneficial to their future in the education field. One commented that being in China allowed him to see a new system of education, which allowed him to contemplate on what would work back home and what would not. One noted that being in China has allowed him to see change over time, he saw the ancient country of China developing, and that has allowed him to see a bigger picture. Although, some noted the difficulty they might face competing with students who studied in other countries such as the USA and the UK, as the symbolic capital of a “‘British education’ or an ‘American degree’” has been noted by many students and scholars alike (Lomer, 2018, p. 309), most still understood that their experience in China was unique, allowed them to develop, and was a crucial tool for helping them break prior held stereotypes of China, thus indeed showing aspects of the three crucial elements of the BRI.

CONCLUSION

The use of the historical Silk Road for this new initiative, was not empty rhetoric, but based on something historically very significant. It has a very specific cultural meaning (Liu & Dunford, 2016). The ancient Silk Road was always more than just a trade route. It was more than just a route for the trade of good and services. In its essence, it was a place for the trade of knowledge, ideas, social capital, and “knowledge economy” or “cognitive economy”. More than that it stood for the transfer of technology, creating ‘webs of knowledge’, and creating cultural understanding (de la Vaissiere 2014). At the bottom of all of this is education. Education in its most basic form is nothing more than ideas exchange and is not that what the new BRI is truly about and what the ancient Silk Road was.

That is why this research is so important, as this study has numerous future implications for both universities and policy makers. In its most basic sense, these interviews draw on the concerns of the internationalization of higher education. While some research like that from Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo (2009), reminds that international study may bring about a change in perspectives and outlooks; however, there is much literature dedicated to the possible negative outcomes of higher education, which in the case of the BRI, could be highly detrimental to what the initiative is trying to do. For example, Moskal and Schweisfurth (2018), referring to Andersson, Sadgrove, and Valentine (2012), state that “differences in social lifestyle, culture, religious beliefs, language and sexuality across the student body are critical catalysts of many of the tensions that exist on campus between international and home students”

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and can therefore create many obstacles that must be overcome by both the international and local students (pp. 93-94). This research can attest to that.

Furthermore, it draws on the concerns of international PhD students at a famous university in Beijing. More importantly, it depicts the concerns of future education leaders in the BRI countries. Answers from the students have highlighted issues such as family concerns and cultural issues which are quite relevant to many developing countries. Other issues have been mentioned, as even though these students have a greater understanding of China, these students still do not feel so connected to the country that they are living in for their PhD duration, one key factor being communication and language barriers, which were acknowledged by all the students interviewed. Yet, the experience was seen as mostly positive, contributing to them as researchers and global citizens, while giving them unique opportunities for building connections, bridges, and future research opportunities between the student's home country and China. The students interviewed echoed similar sentiments that through their time in China, their preconceived notions of China have been changed and that not only have they benefited from China but they also saw China as benefiting from them.

Identity was also shown to be a key issue. One student provided more enlightenment on one particular issue inside identity, and that was how he saw the university as seeing him. He had hoped to play a more "professional role" as a junior faculty or being able to be more of a lecturer but saw the system as seeing him as "merely a student in a senior class". He had anticipated before arriving that a PhD would provide him more opportunities and the ability to be seen as more than just a student but as mentioned "all the arrangements are based on studentship" and being taught in an international setting, as senior students, he did not feel that it was a real experience of Chinese education. He felt pigeon-holed into an identity that did not reflect how he saw himself, creating some cognitive dissonance. Cotterall (2015) remarks that "identity lies at the heart of doctoral study" (p.21) and this was indeed reflected by these students or researchers. For most, it seemed that identity seemed rather fluid and changing. Other students commented how they saw themselves as more than just a simple citizen of their country. Like previously mentioned, others saw themselves as facilitators of connections between the two countries. These multiple identities, some conflicting and some not, is one area in which further research should be done, as it will be one aspect that will facilitate these BRI students into truly understanding and being key components of the BRI.

Many of these people to people bonds were shown to have been created and that their time in China will be influential when they go back to their home countries and continue on their educational journeys. Although, it seemed that many lacked the people to people bonds with the Chinese, often viewing themselves as in a bubble or commenting on a lack of Chinese friends, which may once again highlight communication difficulties that most students mentioned but it also relates back to what Zhang and Chen (2018) spoke about the BRI countries opening and cooperating with each other as a new stage of international cooperation, as most students spoke in positive terms of creating bonds with other international students and professors. Thus while these people to people bonds were being created, it did not necessarily denote amongst the Chinese and foreign student. As one student noted, that bonds take time to form, and that for most Chinese, this is still a rather new process. Studies have shown that an increased diversity on a university campus can provide, "a rich source of lived experience in cultural boundary crossing that could be harnessed as a resource in promoting intercultural understanding" (Caruna, 2014, p. 86). It seems that this process, although briefly alluded to by some of the students interviewed from their own experiences, mostly with other foreign students and professors, is a work in progress.

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Which gives many opportunities for further research by including a larger sample size, including BRI countries students who study PhD programs in Chinese, who will indeed have a very different experience as they hold the language ability to communicate with locals and are in classes with Chinese students, and maybe even students who have returned home, who would have much more to say on the topic. Issues have been raised about recruiting of talent from BRI countries, how to attract more students, students from BRI countries main concerns such as family, culture, educational reputation, etc., and policies on international students with regards to aspects such as language courses, accommodation, meeting religious and societal needs of the students and most importantly how the university views the students versus how they students view themselves. In some senses, it appears that the BRI is living up to its rhetoric, at least from what these students have said, bonds have been created, knowledge and ideas have been exchanged and the students see themselves as having benefited from their time in China in more ways than one but it seems that there are still many issues that need to be addressed before “a community of shared future for mankind” can be realized.

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