



Narrating the Belt and Road Education Policy: A Critical Policy Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This article analyzes the China Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) education policy using a critical policy discourse approach. At the textual level, this paper focuses on policy framing by identifying how diagnostic (problem definition), prognostic (solutions), and motivational (rationales) framings are described in two foundational BRI education policy documents. Next, six additional policy documents are selected to construct a discursive totality to understand how framings are linked to and embedded within the broader discursive practice of policy documents. The interpretations of these framings are viewed through the lens of policy driver, lever, and value. Finally, a macro-sociological analysis aimed at explanatory and normative critique shows that BRI education is embedded in the discourses of national rejuvenation and China's aspirations to become a global leader of an alternative global governance and order. The paper ends with a discussion postulating that the BRI education policy's success depends on various shifting domestic and geopolitical factors, from the growth of the Chinese economy and ideological struggles among the world's major powers to grassroots reception or resistance to Chinese influence in BRI countries.

Keywords Belt and road education · Chinese higher education internationalization · Higher education policymaking · Critical discourse analysis · Critical policy analysis

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), commonly known as One Belt and One Road, is China's signature infrastructure development and region-building geopolitical strategy. The Belt and Road (B&R) comprises the Silk Road Economic Belt and the twenty-first-century Maritime Silk Road. "Belt" refers to interlinking overland

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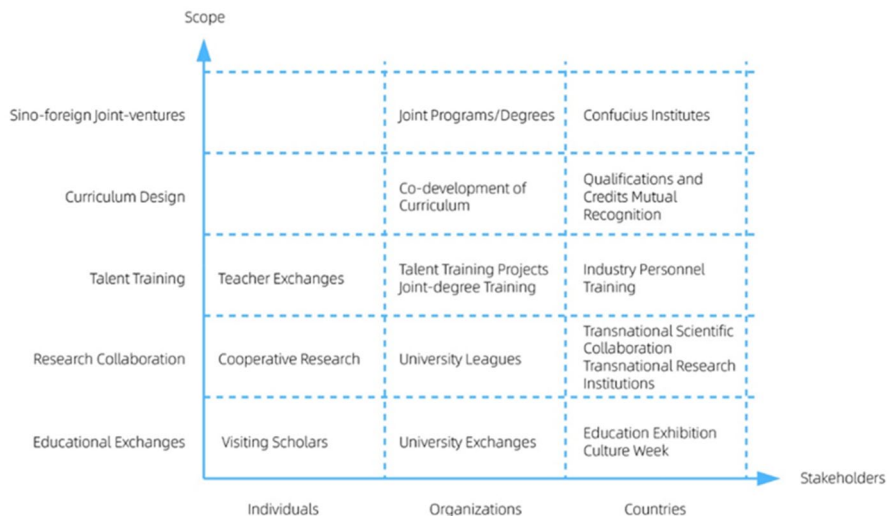


Fig. 1 Key components of BRI education. *Source:* Based on Educational Cooperation Spectrum from Chen and Li (2018). Translated by the author

development corridors in Eurasia, while “Road” refers to the sea route corridors spanning from China to Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. In early 2018, the China State Council Information Office issued China’s Arctic Policy, extending the BRI to build a Polar Silk Road to develop infrastructure along Arctic shipping routes. The BRI comprises six main economic corridors encompassing China and Mongolia and Russia; Eurasian countries; Central and West Asia; Pakistan; Indian sub-continent countries; and Indochina. However, the BRI is not determined solely by its geography, as many countries outside these corridors have also participated in it. Initially conceived as a global infrastructural project, the BRI expanded its scope to incorporate education as a key component in 2016. As summarized by scholars in Fig. 1, all the activities proposed or undertaken by the Chinese government and education institutions under the rubric of BRI education indicate that China’s underlying concern regarding BRI education is higher education.

China hopes that BRI higher education can revolutionize and transform the west-dominated global higher education landscape. The most visible achievement of BRI education is the increase in international students in China. Before the pandemic, the number of international students had reached 492,185 in 2018 (MOE, 2019), with Africa and Central Asia leading this increase (Parr, 2018). China is the world’s largest provider of tertiary education scholarships for Africa, with 12,000 scholarships provided in 2020 (Jack, 2020). To study internationalization at home, researchers have studied the development of English and multilingual degree programs at Chinese universities aimed at accommodating the growing inflow of international students (Han et al., 2019). The acculturation of these students has also attracted researchers’ attention (Yuan et al., 2021). In response to the central government’s call for support, some leading Chinese universities have created new colleges and

degree programs, such as the Silk Road School of Renmin University or Tsinghua University's Master of Public Administration, to train students from B&R countries for future leadership roles (Huang, 2020, 373). The fact that collaboration between leading Chinese and European research universities has been hardly studied shows that BRI strategy is predominantly about recruiting outstanding students from B&R countries for these so-called foremost Chinese universities (Tian and Liu, 2020, 324).

Internationalization abroad is the other side of BRI education. Since 2015, the number of alliances between Chinese universities and universities in B&R countries has risen sharply, such as with the University Alliance of the Silk Road, which has more than 130 members from five continents (Huang, 2019). In addition to non-governmental education cooperation platforms, China reached an agreement for mutual recognition of academic qualifications with 24 B&R countries by 2019 (Huang, 2020, 370). Following in the footsteps of Western universities, some Chinese universities have begun embarking on transnational education projects for education soft power, such as Xiamen University's Malaysian branch campus and Yunnan Finance and Economic University's Bangkok Campus. Moreover, BRI education opens the international higher education markets for low-tier universities and colleges (van der Wende and Zhu, 2016, 10), as it provides less well-known Chinese universities and vocational colleges the opportunity to partner with B&R institutions to train students to work on BRI projects. For example, the China-Africa Vocational Education Academic Exchange and China-Africa TVET (technical and vocational education and training) Cooperation Conference serve as platforms to promote vocational education exchanges between Chinese and African institutions. Despite being an ostensibly Global South-pivoted project, the rhetoric of higher education cooperation between China and Western Europe has been concocted. However, studies have shown that BRI influence on Western European science on a large-scale is limited (Tijssen and Winnink, 2020). In contrast, Central and Eastern European states tend to have the most education cooperation with China (Sielker and Kaufmann, 2020), probably due to the stronger cooperation between China and Eastern Europe on investment-based infrastructure projects.

Although China initiates and leads these education initiatives, other participating countries possess the agency to strategize for their own interest. Lee et al. (2021, 237) argue, "Kazakhstan's engagement with the BRI operates with a utilitarian logic that seeks revenue generation, links with industry, and opportunities for students in employment and further education." This brief review demonstrates that empirical research on BRI higher education is conducted in the following main areas: education cooperation and policy coordination, academic exchange platforms, promotion of Chinese education, language and culture, and establishment of a framework for mutual recognition of academic qualifications (Huang, 2020, 370–371).

In fact, these policy areas are prescribed and enunciated in policy documents or texts, which refer to policy statement, release, and speech. Policy documents taken at face value without critical scrutiny make policymaking look innocuous, but it is an area for struggling over meaning, with policies being the outcomes of these struggles (Hyatt, 2013). The "ritualistic repetition" of narratives embedded and emphasized in policy documents, such as win–win cooperation, that have

been “internalized as legitimate principles” (Vangeli, 2018, 679) should be questioned and scrutinized.

Consequently, these texts should be understood as the site of sense-making and meaning-making. In other words, they should be considered as discourse, which sees language as semiotic. Social actors reduce complexity through semiosis as a condition for “going on” in the world (Sum and Jessop, 2013, 188). Critical discourse analysis (CDA), as a critical policy approach, studies policy texts as discourse with the goal of explanatory and normative critique. The former aims to explain “existing realities,” whereas the latter seeks to evaluate them and assess the extent to which they “match up to the values that are taken to be fundamental for just societies” (Fairclough, 2013b, 178). CDA of BRI education policy is guided by the following questions: (1) what are the framings of the BRI education policies; (2) how are these framings interconnected to broader education policies through which they are given meaning; (3) what kind of macro-sociological contexts and conditioning give rise to BRI education policies?

Methodology

CDA of Policy Framing

CDA treats language as a social practice by considering the role of language as semiosis, the context of its use, and its broader implication for social processes within power relations. As a methodology, CDA helps researchers investigate the relationships of texts, practices, social processes, and social structures. In CDA, language is viewed as a site of struggle, requiring researchers to see how meaning is created and disseminated, and view its effect. In policy analysis, CDA takes a “problem-driven approach” based upon “an internal relation between explanation, critique, and normative evaluation” (Fairclough, 2013b, 185). Thus, CDA helps with understanding the problematization of a policy issue, and its relevance to processes of social transformation and change.

CDA presupposes that reality can be sought through analyzing ideational and symbolic systems and orders (Arts and Buizer, 2009, 340). In Fairclough’s (1995) CDA model, the tasks of analysis span three dimensions: description, interpretation, and explanation. Figure 2 is a modification of Fairclough’s three-dimensional CDA model. At the textual level, I have replaced linguistic descriptions with a description of issue framing. Framing is incorporated as a first-level description because a critical discourse approach for policy analysis primarily encourages policy analysts to examine policy texts critically by considering how policy problems are framed, by whom, how, and why.

At the discursive level, the analysis examines how the policy being framed relates to the production, distribution, and dissemination of other related texts. Finally, at the macro-sociological level, the task is to reveal the framing’s social context, ideology, and power relations.

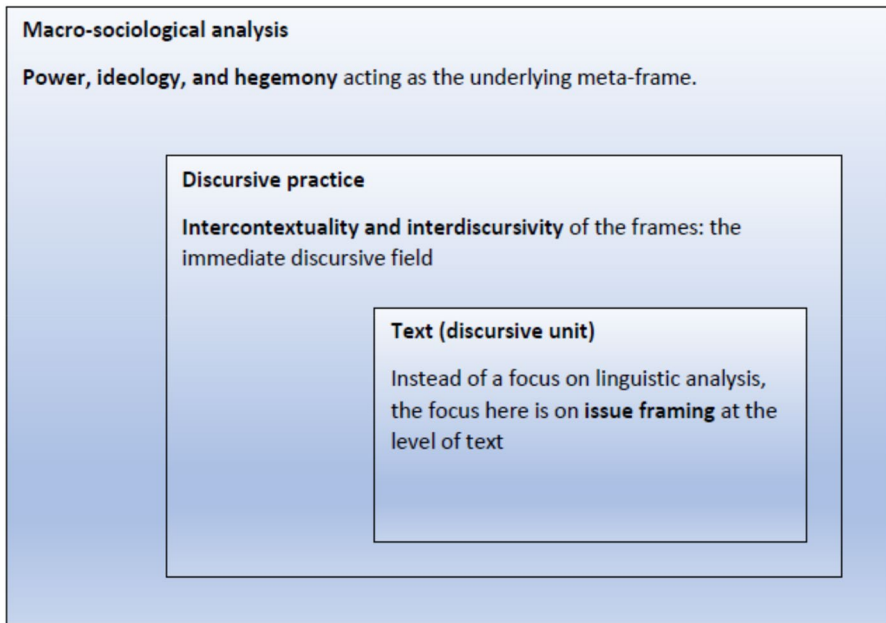


Fig. 2 CDA of policy analysis framework

Method of Analysis

A challenge in conducting CDA is choosing the “right” method. There is no standard method or protocol. According to Fairclough (2013a, 22), the description of text through identification and labeling should not be considered unproblematic because what one “sees” in a text, what one regards as worth describing, and what one chooses to emphasize in a description, are all dependent on how one interprets a text.” Therefore, instead of coding my data, which would translate texts into labeled codes, I preferred adopting an explorative and iterative approach to data analysis. At the framing analysis stage, I have conducted a thematic analysis that fits diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framings, seeking to construct a viable object of research to provide an entry point for the second and third dimensions of Fairclough’s model. The next step is explorative and iterative. Through structured readings of the policy documents, their intertextuality and interdiscursivity are examined. The investigation is guided by the following questions: who produces the text? Why is the text produced? What are the main features of the texts? How are the texts interrelated? The aim now is to build up arguments to substantiate this interpretation stage. The third stage of the analysis—macroecological analysis—is guided by Bhaskar’s “explanatory critique” (Bhaskar, 2008), which is rooted in the idea that the critique of ideology and social domination related to social phenomenon can be derived directly from sound explanatory models of them. Therefore, explanatory critique can be understood as “an explanation of something which criticizes it, not in addition to, but by explaining it (Collier, 1999, 35). This concept is central to critical

Table 1. Policy documents selected for CDA Analysis

Description of policy frame (Fig. 2's first dimension)
Belt and Road Initiative Education Action for Promoting Co-Construction Notice, Ministry of Education, 2016 (<i>BRI Education Plan</i>)
Let the Vision and Action of Belt and Road Initiative Take Root in the Field of Education, Ministry of Education, 2016, (<i>BRI Education Plan Press Conference</i>)
Discursive practice (Fig. 2's second dimension)
Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a Better Future at Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev University, Xi Jinping, 2013 (hereafter <i>Xi Speech A</i>)
Join Hands to Build a community with a Shared Future for ASEAN and China, at Indonesian parliament, Xi Jinping, 2013 (<i>Xi Speech B</i>)
Promoting the Vision and Action of Jointly Building Belt and Road Initiative, National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2015 (<i>BRI Vision and Action</i>)
Higher Education Institution Technological Innovation in Service of Belt and Road Initiative Action Plan, Ministry of Education, 2018, (<i>BRI HE Technological Innovation Action Plan</i>)
<i>Higher Vocational Innovative Development Education Action Plan</i> , Ministry of Education, 2015, (<i>Higher Vocational Education Plan</i>)
Opinions on Doing Well the Work of Opening Up Education to the Outside World in the New Era, General Office of Party Central Committee and General office of State Council, 2016, (<i>New Era Education Plan</i>)

realism, the underpinning philosophy of CDA, because explanatory critique is critical in uncovering the generative causal mechanisms of social phenomena, i.e., the “real” domain of critical realism.

Another challenge with CDA is narrowing down materials to a manageable quantity through appropriate selection criteria. Table 1 lists the documents selected. For the framing analysis, I have used the Ministry of Education's (MOE) *BRI Education Plan* and *BRI Education Plan Press Conference*. The former is not only the first, but also the foundational policy text for BRI education, while the latter, in the Chinese context, is considered a policy interpretation (*Zhengce Jiedu*). They are used conjointly for the framing analysis because they are the primary texts of the BRI education policy.

For the discursive practice analysis (the CDA framework's second dimension), two genres of documents—two ways of acting in CDA terms—are included. The BRI is often labeled Xi Jinping's brainchild because his two speeches in Kazakhstan and Indonesia in 2013 set the stage for it. Hence, these two speeches are included. *BRI Vision and Action* is included because it is the first formal national policy on BRI whose people-to-people exchange component laid the groundwork for the subsequent emergence of BRI education. *BRI HE Technological Innovation Action Plan*, which was issued by the MOE, is also selected for two reasons. First, it is a national policy (provincial policies are not within this paper's scope of analysis, and second, it is the only policy explicitly targeting BRI higher education. A careful reading of it shows that it primarily focuses on the “high-end” of technological cooperation. However, as mentioned in the introduction, technical and vocation education is also an indispensable part of BRI education. Moreover, the *Higher Vocational Education Plan*, issued by the MOE in 2015, not only overlaps with BRI

education temporally, but also has a significant influence on this topic. Hence, it and the *BRI HE Technological Innovation Action Plan* can offer a more complete picture of BRI higher education.

Finally, the *New Era Education Plan* has been added for three reasons. First, as a meta-narrative and political guideline, it has always served as a metagovernance tool for BRI education, as manifested in the tedious heading of BRI education displayed on the MOE's website, “*Opinions on Opening Up Education to the Outside World in the New Era—Promoting the Co-construction of BRI Education Action Plan.*”¹ Second, the BRI occupies a key position in the *New Era Education Plan*, whose aim is to internationalize Chinese education. Third, for a macro-level policy analysis, as I have included documents from various ministries and speeches of the paramount leader, it is natural to include a party document reflecting realities of top-level Chinese politics—the party, the leader, and the government. The selection of these documents reflects a balanced matrix of discourses.

Findings

Policy Framing

Verloo (2005, 20) defines a policy frame as an “organizing principle that transforms fragmentary or incidental information into a structured and meaningful problem, in which a solution is implicitly or explicitly included.” Identification of framing is the entry point for this study. Benford and Snow (2000, 615–616) identified three levels of framing. Diagnostic framing is the identification and definition of a problem. Prognostic framing refers to the solutions and approaches to solving the identified problem. Motivational framing refers to the argumentative rationales for action.

The BRI education initiative was formally established with the promulgation of two MOE policy documents in July and August 2016: The *BRI Education Plan* and the *BRI Education Plan Press Conference*. Following Benford and Snow (2000), textual descriptions for each framing type are excavated from these two policy documents. The analysis at this stage is primarily descriptive.

Diagnostic framing:

- B&R countries lack cooperation and coordination in education, and talents equipped with the necessary training to benefit from BRI projects. Therefore, education is indispensable to the BRI, which is a “great cause for the benefit of people of all countries along the route” (*BRI Education Plan*, section 1).

Prognostic framing:

- Education cooperation schemes include regional cooperation agreements, mutual recognition of degrees, student visa facilitation, and institutional cooperation.

¹ http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/xw_zt/moe_357/jyzt_2016nztzl/2016_zt18/

- Talent training cooperation: such as Chinese scholarships for students from B&R countries, Chinese higher education institutions establishing campuses in B&R countries, and multilateral collaboration in training teachers and students in areas that these countries urgently need, such as “language, transport, architecture, medicine, energy, environment, water, bioscience...” (*BRI Education Plan Press Conference*, “supporting measures” section)
- The co-construction of BRI Cooperation Mechanisms through China-led international/multilateral organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, China-Africa Cooperation Forum, and the six economic corridors of the BRI (e.g., China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor).

Motivational framing:

- BRI education promotes the opening-up of regional education and social and cultural exchanges and provides opportunities for regional integration and convergence, which is beneficial for all countries involved.
- BRI education can facilitate common prosperity and a shared destiny among B&R countries.
- BRI education means a “better tomorrow” (*BRI Education Plan*, section 6) because it is a win–win scheme for the participating countries.

Discursive Practice

By themselves, the framings identified earlier are static and inconsequential in the sense that they are linguistically meaningful, but devoid of social meanings. They need a context as well as other policy “movers and shakers” for life and meaning, to be socially and politically meaningful, and thereby actionable. In short, they need a context to make them interpretable. As shown in Fig. 2, the step following description is the analysis of discursive practice, which, according to Fairclough (1995), is a form of social practice, and focuses on the processes of text production, distribution, and consumption. It involves interpreting the framings identified above, considering the order of various discourses (i.e., the totality of discursive practice), the discursive processes of meaning production. The interpretation process boils down to an investigation of the intertextuality and interdiscursivity of policy documents that help constitute the BRI education imaginary as we currently see it. Intertextuality is the shaping of a text’s meaning by another text, whilst interdiscursivity refers to the diverse ways in which texts and discourses interpenetrate. One way to approach the interpretations of policy framing is to explore the policy driver, lever, and value (Ball, 1990). Policy driver refers to the initiative prompting a particular policy, policy lever refers to the policy instrument(s) that can be applied to carry out the goals of that policy, and, policy values are the political and ideational underpinnings guiding the policy toward a certain ideological orientation. Through the lens of driver, lever, and value, we can understand what these framings really mean, how their performative functions are realized, and what political or ideological values

underpin them. Six policy documents are selected for this purpose (see Table 1). The Appendix provides a sketch of these six documents.

Policy Driver

China's policymaking method manifests distinctive features of an authoritarian party-state. "When Chinese leaders speak, they do so in a context in which their power is signaled, and their status confirmed both in the ways they speak and, in the setting, and actions they deploy as they speak" (Brown, 2015, 13). The ideas proposed in top Chinese leader's speeches matter because they often provide guiding political ideologies and governing philosophies of their administration that have long-lasting effects on domestic and international affairs. The Silk Road Economic Belt and twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road emerged from Xi's *Speech A & B*, birthing the ideational construct of the BRI. The speeches proposed a vision of a grand project. Consecutively, they set the ideological undertone (non-Western order), spatial layering of geography (developing countries along the B&R), and policy possibilities (infrastructure connectivity, people-to-people exchange, etc.).

BRI Vision and Action, promulgated jointly by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce, serves to materialize the BRI, moving it beyond an ideational construct. The joint promulgation testifies to the BRI's nature as a multi-faceted and cross-ministerial project. Moreover, as an NDRC-led policy, it automatically enjoys higher political status than other ministerial policies since the NDRC is the most powerful ministry, dubbed "a superagency with responsibilities of formulation and implementing policies affecting all aspects of socio-economic development" (Woodall, 2014). Mr. Xi and the NDRC's stamp on the BRI can be considered a sort of political endowment that it enjoys, unlike other policies that come directly from less-important ministries.

This inter-ministerial policy issuance represents the intermediate stage between the broad political vision of the paramount leader and the more specific BRI policies. *BRI Vision and Action* is a direct response to Xi's speeches, which echoes his vision of transnational policy communication, infrastructural connectivity, unimpeded trade, cross-border investment, and people-to-people communication. To promote "people-to-people" exchanges, *BRI Vision and Action* advocates expanding the scale of international student and education joint ventures among BRI countries and promises that China will provide 10,000 government scholarships. Apart from this, the education aspect is negligible. However, these documents provide a context and condition for BRI education to emerge. Traces of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational framing can be found in the policy driver. A few examples suffice to illustrate. The lack of education cooperation and coordination among B&R countries (diagnostic framing) is embedded in the greater danger of non-cooperation in a world facing economic slowdown and development fragmentation (*BRI Vision and Action*, section 1). To tackle such problems, one solution (prognostic framing) presented is that China assume more responsibilities and obligations within its capabilities and make greater contributions toward the peaceful development of humankind (*BRI Vision and Action*, section 1). Regarding motivational framing, the BRI is

portrayed as building a road of “mutual respect, win-win, [and] mutual learning of civilizations” (*BRI Vision and Action*, section 9).

Policy Lever

In response to the call for “South–South” cooperation in *New Era Education*, the *BRI Education Plan* encourages the flow of students among B&R countries and encourages higher education institutions to expand outwards on a two-pronged approach: increasing high-level research cooperation in “language, transport, architecture, medicine, energy, environmental engineering, hydraulic engineering, biological engineering, marine science, ecology, culture heritage protection” and encouraging China’s vocational education institutions to train “technical staff who are urgently needed in BRI projects” (*BRI Education Plan*, “key areas of cooperation” section).

The first paragraph of the *BRI HE Technological Innovation Plan* declares that it is customized for the *New Era Education Plan* and *BRI Education Plan* and it demands that universities implement it accordingly. This policy document identifies four critical research collaboration areas: the acceleration of the technological innovation platform, commercialization of research, high-tech exchanges, and high-tech talent exchanges (*BRI HE Technological Innovation Plan*, “key tasks” section). The MOE sets the operation guidelines and evaluation standards for most four-year universities and all three-year higher vocational colleges under the jurisdiction of provincial governments. However, it is not simply a government ministry overseeing and regulating state education at the macro-level. Seventy-five of China’s most prestigious universities are under its direct jurisdiction. Consequently, higher education policies promulgated by the MOE inevitably influence these 75 universities directly and affect the entire higher education system through ripple effects. For instance, B&R scholarship allocation is mostly the responsibility of provincial governments. However, they need guidelines from the MOE regarding which areas should be prioritized. This *BRI HE Technological Innovation Plan* pronouncement demonstrates that China strategically prioritizes enhancing the dissemination of its technological expertise, thereby cementing its leading position in technology and innovation among B&R countries. The rationale of emphasizing technology is in line with both the actual rise of Chinese science and technology and the aspiration to become a world leader in this field.

Another facet of BRI education is higher vocational education. Although the *Higher Vocational Education Plan* was not a follow-up policy of the *BRI Education Plan*, its formulation to modernize higher vocational training had already considered the BRI even before the *BRI Education Plan* was formally announced. Hence, in a way, the element of vocation education originated in the *Higher Vocational Education Plan*. From this perspective, the *BRI Education Plan* can even be considered a policy lever of vocational education. According to this policy, vocational colleges should serve China’s “going out” strategy (i.e., becoming global or internationalizing), which was mentioned five times throughout the document, by cultivating both Chinese and local technical talents needed by Chinese enterprises in BRI projects. Higher vocational colleges are also encouraged to establish campuses overseas. The

BRI HE Technological Innovation Plan and *Higher Vocational Education Plan* complement each other, serving BRI's overarching goal as a project of "going out" while contemporaneously modernizing and globalizing Chinese university and vocational education. As instruments to fulfill the goals of the BRI in general and education in particular, these documents emphasize the prognostic aspect of framing, i.e., solutions to identified problems. Cooperation—whether in form of mutual agreements, collaborations, joint-training schemes, or regional cooperation platforms—is proposed as a means to improve policy coordination and increase benefits from education for all participating members.

Policy Value

The joint promulgation of the *New Era Education Plan* by the General Office of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee (CCP CC) and General Office of the State Council is evidence of its supreme political importance. New Era is a neologism for Xi Jinping's era, which commenced in 2012 when he came to power. *Xi Jinping Thoughts on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era* (known as Xi Jinping Thought) were enshrined in the CCP constitution in 2017. In terms of political significance, Xi Jinping Thought is on par with Mao Zedong Thought, which outranks Deng Xiaoping Theory, Jiang Zemin's Three Represents, and Hu Jintao's Scientific Outlook on Development (Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2018). Consequently, New Era represents a different vision (from those of Xi's predecessors) for China's economic development and international relations, for which a new role in the world is assigned to China by the Chinese leader. Conferring New Era status to a policy carries the top leader's personal mark; however, it is also an embodiment of an ideology with immense political significance.

In the Chinese political system, the Party and government operate in parallel throughout all bureaucracies, whereby the Party dominates. For example, in universities, Party secretaries enjoy higher political rank than presidents do (Hu and Mols, 2019). The CCP General Office is the nerve center of its operations. Hence, policies from the CCP CC have more political salience than those from government agencies, such as the State Council or its ministries (Chen and Stepan, 2017). In China's one-party system, Party documents primarily set the tone of ideology. Moreover, the unique instrument of Party documents has the advantage of making timely arrangements to handle constantly changing conditions in economic and social reforms (Chen and Stepan, 2017). The combination of education and the New Era highlights the importance of education as a tool to implement reforms to fulfill particular ideological and political goals under Xi's leadership.

The *New Era Education Plan* stresses that education in the New Era should "serve the overall work of the Party and the state...promote China's soft power and international influence, [and] provide strong support for realizing the two centenary

goals² and the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” (*New Era Education Plan*, paragraph 1). The BRI belongs to the New Era’s so-called “overall work.” Within the BRI’s framework, education plays a supporting and facilitative role in the overall BRI project. Within the realm of the New Era ideology, education and the BRI are tools to fulfill the CCP’s political goals and aspirations. Education’s role in social-cultural exchanges emphasizes “telling the China story well” and “patriotic Chinese overseas students actively promoting the achievements of China’s development, and actively mobilizing foreign students and teachers in China to spread the China model” (*New Era Education*, paragraph 3). This appeal contradicts the much-touted notion of education as mutually beneficial and benign in the BRI education policy documents and Chinese media. Instead, the analysis of the discursive practice uncovers that education in the New Era is instrumental in serving China’s strategic goals and transactions in its cooperation with other countries. The scrutinization of policy values demonstrates the ambivalence and inconsistency, if not total falsity, of the motivational framing identified earlier. Furthermore, even these political values do not negate some aspects of the motivational framing, such as the benefits derived from education’s regional integration, but a critical examination of policy value reveals what is silenced in the framing.

Macro-sociological Analysis

Finally, we come to the last stage of Fig. 2, seeking explanations for the existence of BRI education as a social phenomenon. At this stage, the analysis relies less on policy documents, and more on the prevailing socio-political concepts on which social conditioning is predicated. BRI education is embedded in the more ambitious BRI policy, which is simultaneously socioeconomic, political, geopolitical, and ideational, and it constitutes a minor part of it. Consequently, a macro-sociological analysis, which may initially seem unrelated to education, can bring researchers closer to ontological realism and the nature of causation, agency, and structure operating in BRI education. According to Wuthnow, a discursive field not only constitutes space within which discourses can be framed (Wuthnow, 1989, 555), but also provides “the foundational categories of discussion in which thinking can take place” and “establishes the limits of discussion and defines the range of problems that can be addressed” (Wuthnow, 1989, 13). Critical realism uses the retrodution method for causal inference. In retrodution, events are explained by “postulating and identifying mechanisms which are capable of producing them” (Sayer, 1992, 107).

Domestic Politics: National Rejuvenation

The “hundred years of humiliation” and “the great rejuvenation” are twin narratives in Chinese domestic politics that have been internalized by almost every Chinese

² The two goals are that China becomes a moderately well-off society in 2021, which is the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party and China becomes a fully developed country in 2049, which is the 100th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China.

person. The former refers to the hundred years of China's subjugation to foreign power, since the First Opium War in 1840 until the founding of the People's Republic of China by the CCP in 1949. The tangible embodiment of rejuvenation is the two centenary goals. Xi said in a speech, "we are closer to the goal of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation than at any time in history and have more confidence and ability to achieve this goal than at any time in history" (Xi, 2016a).

National rejuvenation is the converse of humiliation. Consequently, the implicit presumption is that China's growing domestic prosperity can rectify the injustice it suffered under Western powers. The BRI is "'the tangible embodiment' of Xi's Chinese Dream of rejuvenating the nation and its ruling Communist Party" (de Jonquière, 2016, 2). The ancient Silk Road's restoration is considered the reinstatement of China's ancient glory, both as an ancient civilization and as a hegemon in a tributary system wherein a network of autonomous and independent neighboring countries used to pay tribute to China to secure guarantees of peace, investiture, and trading opportunities.

The goal of education in the New Era is to help China "realize the two centenary goals and the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (*New Era Education Plan*, paragraph 1). Its role in national rejuvenation comprises two dimensions regarding outlook: domestic and international. Firstly, the Chinese state considers education a means to turbocharge economic development. This is linked to the two centenary goals of achieving economic prosperity. The selection of BRI education as one of the 100 major projects of the 13th Five-year Plan, where Chinese leadership "spells out its vision concerning the economic direction of the country in the medium term and indicates how to achieve it through a wide range of tools, some that are typical of a command economy" (Bertoldi et al., 2016, 4), is evidence of the link between education and economic development. Secondly, BRI education (primarily higher education) is also about helping China move from the periphery to the center of the global soft power sphere. According to Xi Jinping, as China becomes the second-largest economy in the world, it must establish a global vision and coordinate and plan domestic and international developments simultaneously with a more proactive attitude (Xi, 2016b). Thus, BRI education embodies both the desire for continued high-growth economic development and the rightful place that China's education would deserve in the global system towing to such a development.

Global Order Aspiration: The China Model

The twin narratives of the China Model and Chinese Wisdom and Solutions can serve as a peephole to assess the worldview of the political elites. The BRI is part of this worldview. "As China's material strength and confidence grew, CCP leaders became increasingly interested in reversing the balance of power in the ideational realm" (Rolland, 2020, 9).

The vagueness of the China Model's meaning is inconsequential as long as it is understood as an alternative economic and political model to Western liberal democracies. In other words, its function matters as a classificatory category that could potentially draw developing countries away from the Washington Consensus

into the Chinese sphere of influence—the so-called Beijing Consensus. In the words of Halper,

China’s governing model is more appealing to the developing world and some of the middle-sized powers than America’s market-democratic model. Given a choice between market democracy and its freedoms and market authoritarianism and its high growth, stability, improved living standards, and limits on expression—a majority in the developing world and many middle-sized, non-western powers prefer the authoritarian model (Halper, 2010, iii).

In September 2013, at the eighth G20 summit, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, introducing Xi Jinping, said that China was standing on a higher and broader international stage; he concluded that China would dedicate more Chinese Wisdom to the world, provide more Chinese programs, and work with other countries to build a harmonious world of lasting peace and shared prosperity (People’s Daily Online, 2014). The Chinese Model and Chinese Wisdom and Solutions have since been used in tandem or interchangeably for transnational governance problems, especially in developing countries and areas where US leadership has been less forthcoming. For example, during the closing of the G20 leaders’ special summit on dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, CCTV, the state television station, launched a micro-video named “The Global ‘War’ on Pandemic and Xi Jinping’s ‘China Solution’” (China News, 2020). According to the *Think Global Health* report, of the 72 countries to which China pledged doses, all but two participants in the BRI participated in China’s scheme of “vaccine diplomacy” (Kiernan et al., 2021).

In the framing analysis presented earlier, we identified the underlying representation of the BRI’s “storytelling,” whereby China is portrayed as the bellwether in BRI education. Statements such as, “China is willing to undertake more responsibilities within its capacity to contribute more to regional educational development” (*BRI Education Plan*, “education mission” section), “China’s education sector and all other sectors of society need to take the lead in setting an example and taking positive actions (in the establishment of an education community)” (*BRI Education Plan Press Conference*, “question on BRI education support mechanisms”), and “forge a ‘study in China’ brand” (*New Era Education Plan*, paragraph 3) epitomize an education project in which the Chinese initiative, “wisdom,” and solution are privileged.

Geopolitical: A Community of Shared Destiny

The transformation of the mission in foreign relations from one “seeking a peaceful environment conducive to domestic development to one that puts expanding China’s global reach as a linchpin to achieve the so-called Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation” is a defining characteristic of current Chinese foreign policy (Zhao, 2020, 90). The 2008 financial crisis and the later mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 in Western democracies reinforced the belief of Chinese political elites that the East is rising, while the West is declining (The Economist, 2021). According to *BRI Vision and Action*, the BRI was proposed against a background of profound transformations of the world, the continued impact of the international financial crisis, and a multipolar world (*BRI Vision and*

Action, section 1). According to Foreign Minister Wang Yi, the BRI has “helped China’s foreign relations achieve a historic leap” when “foreign policy functions to invigorate the historical promotion of China’s international status” (Wang, 2019).

“Governance failures, especially in the West, have undermined the world’s confidence in the Washington Consensus, making more imperative the search for an alternative model that is more just, equitable, and representative” (Zhao, 2018, 27). China’s identification with “‘the third world,’ post-colonial developing countries has been very consistent” (Shambaugh, 2020, 7). It would be normal for China to forge a strategic sphere with the developing countries of the BRI. At the United Nations Office in Geneva, Mr. Xi gave a speech in January 2017 titled *Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind*, which views the BRI as an embodiment of this community of shared future as it “aims to achieve win-win and shared development” (Xi, 2017). The call to build a community with a shared future represents a watershed moment in Chinese geopolitical thinking that has shifted from “hide to bide” to global activism. Moreover, the “Community of Shared Future for Mankind” concept “has a theoretical high ground in the CCP’s diplomacy under Xi Jinping” as it represents a theoretical contribution of Chinese wisdom or an application of the China Model to global governance (Zeng, 2020, 111–112). It can be justified that the BRI, therefore, marks the beginning of this grand theoretical narrative’s formulation.

Discussion and Conclusion

Fairclough uses the term “imaginaries” to denote the element of discourses or narratives that “not only represent the world as it is (or rather is seen to be),” but are also projective, “representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world, and tied in to projects to change the world in particular directions” (Fairclough, 2003, 124). The BRI is a grand strategy that sets long-term objectives and political, economic, informational, and cultural policies to support its implementation (Freeman, 2020, 44). Consequently, the direction of BRI education is not decided much by factors purely related to education, as it is contingent on a range of macro-sociological factors that shape the BRI imaginary.

First, the contemporary success of Chinese higher education, for example, as measured by international university rankings, results from China’s remarkable economic success over the past four decades, which has enabled the state to pour funding into universities, especially elite institutions, as well as finance researchers to study abroad through institutions like the China Scholarship Council. Globalization provided fertile ground for the masses of middle-class students to study overseas. These aspects, which have placed Chinese higher education in an enviable position in the global higher education system, may nonetheless change faster than we can anticipate. The lack of domestic political and institutional reforms has stifled industrial upgrading and economic growth. Single-digit, as opposed to double-digit economic growth, will inevitably lead to diminished funding in science and technology in the long term. According to Knight (2019), knowledge diplomacy refers to the role of international higher education and research collaboration in strengthening

relations between and among countries. This characterization of diplomacy presumes equality and benign cooperation between partners. It differs from soft power, which refers to “a government’s *activities* utilized to increase its national attractiveness abroad to achieve foreign policy goals” (Trunkos, 2021, 338, emphasis original). Despite the public diplomacy narratives of “win-win” and “shared community,” the BRI is a de facto economic hard power instrument. Heavy reliance on economic power would make the application of higher education as soft power tool less potent and steadfast if Chinese economic prowess were to diminish. Take the example of the inflow of international students. B&R students choosing China as their destination are attracted mainly by potential promising job prospects in China and their home countries and the abundance of scholarships offered by the Chinese government. Students’ utilitarian interests would fade if these pull factors changed for the worse. Whether higher education can become a soft power tool that increases China’s international credibility and mask the unattractive parts of its attributes (Kurlantzick, 2007) remains questionable.

Second, China’s economic success undoubtedly lends credibility to its one-party state structure and has persuaded many—at home and abroad—that China is “uncommonly suited for authoritarian government” (Westad, 2020, 25). Growing confrontational geopolitical relations with the West will not only rob China of its rich source of knowledge import from Western countries, which inevitably undermines its burgeoning HE sector, but also spur the West to compete with it for global influence. The end of the gilded age of globalization has started for China. Three Republican legislators in the US introduced legislation in May 2020 to ban Chinese students from graduate or postgraduate studies in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics,³ while Sweden closed all Confucius Institutes and Classrooms in the same year. Moreover, Joe Biden believes the \$2.6 trillion spent on infrastructure will place the US “in a position to win the global competition with China in the upcoming years” (The White House, 2021). In the first half of 2021, a flurry of geopolitical shifts with far-reaching repercussions likely caught China by surprise. In March, the European Union imposed sanctions on four Chinese officials for human rights abuses (Emmott, 2021). In May, Lithuania pulled out of China’s “17+1” bloc in Eastern Europe (Lau, 2021). In June, G7 leaders adopted the “Build Back Better World” plan to rival China’s B&R strategy (Holland and Faulconbridge, 2021), and the NATO communique described China as presenting a global security challenge (Erlanger and Shear, 2021). China’s deteriorating international relations with major Western democracies and their resultant concerted efforts to counter the BRI mean that China’s aspiration for a Sino-centric sphere in any sector, including education, will meet insurmountable challenges.

Third, the BRI also has its share of political and economic problems with states that are more receptive to Chinese influence. For instance, local backlash in some Southeast Asian countries against certain BRI projects and America’s pivot toward Indo-pacific regions under Joe Biden could lead some countries to reduce, if not terminate their involvement with the BRI. HE, as an unintended target, is bound

³ The Secure Campus Act.

to suffer consequently. China's own experience with the Soviet Union—its “big brother” in the early 1960s—demonstrates the fragility of people-to-people changes. It was illuminating to toward how ideological and political differences between countries of the same ideological camp could lead to a geopolitical reconfiguration. Approximately, 13,000 Soviet experts were sent to China in the 1950s to work in engineering fields, research institutes, and universities (Li, 2017, 250). Between 1949 and 1959, 38,000 Chinese students were sent to Soviet universities to study (Li, 2017). However, amidst the deterioration of China-Soviet relations, the departure of Soviet experts left many unfinished projects behind. In contrast to this top-level ideological rupture, the recent protests in Budapest against Fudan University campus, which is linked to the BRI, represent a grassroots movement that is an embodiment of intolerance toward the exorbitant cost of infrastructure construction and Chinese influence (Panyi, 2021) in a country that enjoys a cozy relationship with China.

The strategic positioning of education in the BRI implies intricate bonding between education, ideology, geopolitics, regional economic integration, and cross-border infrastructure-building cooperation. This ensemble of factors on which the politics of BRI education is predicated is never stable, especially in a post-pandemic world. Therefore, BRI education will remain a complex, contingent, and contested arena.

Appendix

Sketches of the six documents for discursive practice analysis

Document	Time	Producer (s)	Consumers	Key ideas	Relation to BRI education
Xi Speech A	Sep. 2013	Supreme Leader	Countries along Silk Road Economic Belt; international audience	Silk Road Economic Belt: The Silk Road that connected China to Eurasia has a 2000-year history	This provides a historical narrative and a futuristic vision from which the BRI emerged
Xi speech B	Oct. 2013	Supreme Leader	Countries along Maritime Silk Road; international audience	Community of shared destiny Twenty-first century Maritime Silk Road: China has been a seafaring country for over 2000 years	This provides a historical narrative and a futuristic vision from which the BRI emerged

Document	Time	Producer (s)	Consumers	Key ideas	Relation to BRI education
BRI Vision and Action	Mar. 2015	Led by The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC)—the most important ministry of the government	Ministries; provincial governments; state-owned, and private companies	<p>The backdrop of the BRI: globalization and a multipolar world</p> <p>Scope of the BRI: policy communication; road infrastructure connectivity; increased trade; national currencies circulation and people-to-people communication</p> <p>Forms of cooperation are enhanced through existing multilateral organizations/forums, especially those led by China</p> <p>The role of China's region: each has a role to play in BRI</p>	<p>A broad and comprehensive agenda for the BRI was set jointly by several ministries and led by the NDRC</p> <p>Chinese education scholarships were mentioned as a component of people-to-people communication</p>

Document	Time	Producer (s)	Consumers	Key ideas	Relation to BRI education
Higher Vocational Education Plan (2015-2018)	Oct. 2015	Ministry of Education—government ministry in charge of overseeing education	Tertiary institutions specializing in vocational education	A three-year plan to develop and modernize higher vocational education by improving the quality of vocational education, adjusting the structure of HE institutions (academic vs. vocational) and improving the link between vocational education and the economy	This policy facilitates the BRI strategy as it helps China to export production capacity by providing the necessary human resources through the expansion in training and cooperation in vocational education with other BRI countries.
New Era Education Plan	Apr. 2016	General Office of the CCP and General Office of the State Council—Central Party & Central Government	Universities; ministries; provincial governments.	China is entering into a New Era Education has a vital role to play for great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation Education is a soft power tool to tell the China story Promoting south-south education cooperation through education aid and the BRI Strengthening Party's control over education.	It aims to increase the number of international students in Chinese universities. It also emphasizes the importance of a world-class education with Chinese characteristics throughout the BRI

Document	Time	Producer (s)	Consumers	Key ideas	Relation to BRI education
BRI HE Technological Innovation Action Plan	Nov. 2018	Ministry of Education—government ministry in charge of overseeing education	Universities; vocational colleges; and research institutes	Establishing platforms of technology and innovation Commercialize research Facilitate scientific and cultural exchange, as well as science and technology personnel exchange	It aims to strengthen the leading role of Chinese universities in serving the BRI It also encourages and guides Chinese universities to explore their full potential in scientific and technological innovation to participate in the comprehensive opening-up strategy of the New Era of which the BRI is a vital component

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