Internationalization of Higher Education under the Belt and Road Initiatives

A systematic literature review

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Abstract

This is a systematic literature review of the internationalization of higher education in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Following the systematic literature review methods, the author selected eight English and 29 Chinese studies in the academic databases. Through an inductive thematic analysis, the author synthesized five primary themes: (a) philosophical and theoretical foundations of BRI education; (b) introduction of higher education development in BRI countries; (c) higher education cooperation between China and BRI countries; (d) international higher education and economic development; and (e) international student education management. The goal of this review is to underline new opportunities and challenges of BRI education discussed within the literature and to present how the research can inform scholars, practitioners, and policymakers in the field of international higher education. It called for more joint research among Chinese scholars and overseas scholars in BRI countries. In terms of the future research direction, the author suggested more research on the theoretical exploration and empirical investigation in international higher education within the context of BRI.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative – internationalization of higher education – systematic literature review – international student education
1 Introduction

Internationalization has received substantial attention in China’s higher education (HE) in the past decades. Since the reform and opening-up in 1978, China has been actively engaging in international agendas to boost its economic development. China’s higher education institutions (HEIs) have also been devoted to international activities of international curriculum, mobility of students and faculty, and joint teaching/research programs to enhance their quality of education (Li, 2019; Zha, Wu & Hayhoe, 2019). Initiated in 2013, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or the New Silk Road intended to connect China with Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Higher education cooperation came to the spotlight when President Xi announced that education and training were essential elements of BRI at the 2015 Euro-Asia Economic Forum (Kirby & Van der Wende, 2019). In 2016, China’s Ministry of Education released the Education Action Plan for BRI. The plan prioritized people to people exchange in building the BRI education community (Belt and Road Portal, 2017). In light of this, a large body of literature was published to discuss new dimensions of internationalization of HE under the BRI. However, a systematic literature review on this topic is much lacking, especially in the English scholarly literature.

This paper intends to provide a systematic literature review of internationalization of HE in the context of BRI. Combining both Chinese and English academic databases, it first searched the relevant literature within the topic of internationalization of HE under the BRI. The author then summarized the themes of the selected literature and discussed them from the theoretical lens of the internationalization of HE. The driving questions of the systematic literature review are as follows:

1. What new opportunities has BRI created in transforming and upgrading the internationalization of HE in China?
2. What new challenges has BRI generated in the practice of promoting internationalization in China’s HEIs?

2 Theoretical Framework

The term internationalization began to be applied frequently in higher education in the 1980s. Knight (2003) provides a widely accepted definition: “internationalization at the national, sector, and institutional levels is defined as the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global
dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” (p. 2). Internationalization is a two-way street (Knight, 2004). It focuses on “exchange and builds on the respective strengths of institutions and countries” (Knight, 2003, p. 3). The two-way flows of educational resources, knowledge, and talents are generally represented by the inward-oriented or “bringing in” model (the process of learning from the world) and the outward-oriented or “going out” model (the process of exporting the domestic model to the world) (Wang, 2014; Wu & Zha, 2018). For a long period, the internationalization of HE had been equal to educational Westernization or “learning from the West”. With the increasing presence of emerging powers in the world economy, a number of non-Western countries began to introduce their innovation model through the channel of internationalization of HE, such as Singapore, South Koreas, India, and China (Wu & Zha, 2018). This study focused on the outward-oriented or “going out” model of internationalization in China’s HEIs.

The traditional rationales that push forward internationalization are political, social/cultural, academic, and economic (de Wit, 1998; Knight, 1997). In 2004, Knight further supplemented the national and institutional rationales to this traditional framework: national rationales include human resources development, strategic alliances, commercial trade, nation-building, and social/cultural development; and institutional rationales cover international branding and profile, income generation, student and staff development, strategic alliances, and knowledge production. This paper used Knight’s (2004) interpretation of national and institutional rationales of the internationalization of HE as its theoretical framework. More specifically, this literature review analyzed the extant studies that explored policy analysis at the national level and policy implementation at the institutional level.

3 Method

To answer the research questions, this paper used the method of systematic literature review, which is summarized as “structured data base searches, well defined inclusion and exclusion criteria, and precisely detailed analytical procedures” (Dowd & Johnson, 2020, p. 72). The systematic methods provide a foundation for scholars to conduct a rigorous and transparent review of studies in a given research topic. The manners and trends that systematic reviews produce can be persuasive evidence that educational researchers, practitioners, and policymakers value and respect (Alexander, 2020).
3.1 **Database Search**

The author conducted a comprehensive search using four research databases: (a) **ERIC**, (b) ProQuest Education Journals, (c) Google Scholar, and (d) CNKI. The first three databases are targeting literature in English. **ERIC** and ProQuest Education Journals are authoritative databases in the field of education; Google Scholar provides a broad search for scholarly literature. **CNKI** is a comprehensive database integrating all types of Chinese academic publications. The primary search terms are “Belt and Road” (**一带一路**), and “internationalization of higher education” (**高等教育国际化**). To achieve more search results, similar phrases were employed, i.e. “international student education” (**来华留学**), and “higher education cooperation” (**高等教育合作**). The search conditions were set as follows: time range of 2013 to 2020; peer-reviewed in **ERIC** and ProQuest Education Journals; excluded patents and citations in Google Scholar; and selected resources of China Core Journals (**北大核心**) and Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (**CSSCI**) in **CNKI** (as shown in table 1).

3.2 **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

1. Published from 2013 to 2020 in the field of social science research: The **BRI** was initiated in 2013. Since then, an increasing number of academic articles and books have been published on the topic of BRI education.

2. Peer-reviewed: To guarantee the eligibility of the literature review, the author mostly chose articles that were from journals or book chapters. Dissertations, conference proceedings, and reports in magazines and newspapers were eliminated from the search.

3. Research on the outward-oriented or “going out” model of internationalization of HE: Studies about attracting Chinese talents back or returnees were excluded.

4. Research on general higher education or post-secondary education settings: The review intends to provide a discussion that can be generalized towards a wider context. Therefore, it excluded research that only focus on specific disciplines or one specific region in China.

5. The review includes both English and Chinese literature.

3.3 **Screening and Synthesis**

The initial database search yielded 248 results in the English literature and 167 results in the Chinese literature. After excluding duplication, the

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1 Google Scholar does not specify the option of peer-reviewed, therefore the initial search generated more results of English articles than Chinese articles.
The author went through the abstract checking and the full-text for several articles to assess their eligibility. It finalized eight English studies and 29 Chinese studies that met the inclusion criteria. After the pertinent literature was identified, the author evaluated each study through a summary chart of (a) authors, (b) year of publication, (c) research purpose, (d) theoretical or conceptual framework, (e) research methods, (f) result or implications, and (g) critiques (if any). Through inductive thematic analysis, the literature was grouped into five primary themes. Then, the author read the articles by groups to identify the main arguments and debates in different strands that contribute to the section of discussion and future research implications.

**Table 1** Databases search

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Databases</th>
<th>Search Terms</th>
<th>Conditions</th>
<th>Time range</th>
<th># of Results</th>
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<tr>
<td>ERIC</td>
<td>(Belt and Road) AND (Internationalization of higher education)</td>
<td>Peer reviewed</td>
<td>2013 to 2020</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ProQuest Education Journals</td>
<td>(Belt and Road) AND (Internationalization of higher education)</td>
<td>Peer reviewed</td>
<td>2013 to 2020</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Google Scholar</td>
<td>(Belt and Road) AND (internationalization of higher education)</td>
<td>Excluded patents</td>
<td>2013 to 2020</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNKI (Chinese Literature)</td>
<td>(Bri) AND (Internationalization of higher education)</td>
<td>Resources: 北大核心 (China Core Journals) AND CSSCI Subjects: 高等教育 (Higher education)</td>
<td>2013 to 2020</td>
<td>55</td>
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<tr>
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<td>(Bri) AND (internationalization of higher education)</td>
<td>Excluded citations</td>
<td>2013 to 2020</td>
<td>60</td>
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<td>(Bri) AND (internationalization of higher education)</td>
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<td>52</td>
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<td>(Bri) AND (International student education)</td>
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3.4 Limitations
There are several limitations to this review. First, the literature search is limited to peer-reviewed articles and academic book chapters. It represents the quality and rigor judgment, but to some extent, it excludes high-quality research in other formats, i.e., conference proceedings and dissertations. Second, the selected literature is not evenly distributed, with more Chinese articles included. Third, the review focuses on general education in HEIs; several outstanding studies, i.e. vocational education and language education are not included in the review.

4 Results
Through an inductive thematic analysis, the author synthesized five primary themes. Each theme is presented with the underlying arguments and outcomes of the research. The five themes are as follows:
- Philosophical and theoretical foundations of BRI education
- Introduction of higher education development in BRI countries
- Higher education cooperation between China and BRI countries
- International higher education and economic development
- International student education management

4.1 Philosophical and Theoretical Foundations of BRI Education
The first theme is the discussion of philosophical and theoretical foundations in BRI education. It mainly covers (a) the relationship to the Western model, (b) roles in globalization/nationalism, and (c) new perception of the education community. Peters (2019, 2020) articulated that the philosophy of the Chinese vision of BRI lies in peace and development, civilization and harmony, cooperation and inclusiveness, and education for the future of humanity. In light of this, Peters along with his colleagues and students in Beijing Normal University conducted collective writing essays to discuss different perspectives on BRI education. One of the main arguments is that the BRI strategy is an alternative to the Western development model (Peters et al., 2020). Likewise, Zhang and Liu (2019) attempted to explore a theoretical framework to understand international HE cooperation under BRI. Drawn from the theories of international cooperation in international relations, the authors put forward “four-dimensional” cooperative regimes, which emphasize equality, sharing, mutual benefit, and common prosperity.

Several scholars situated the rise of China’s HE in a wider context of globalization. Kirby and Van der Wende (2019) argued that “[China] claims to lead on
a more sustainable and inclusive version of globalization, which could further rebalance global inequality” (p. 128). Kan and Xu (2019) stated that BRI “can be seen as an example of how to mediate the conflicts between nationalism and globalization” (p. 49). King (2020)’s focus was on how the cooperative regimes and traditions of the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) is reinforced by BRI. The new concept of the BRI Education Community is also discussed in various studies. The authors presented how the term “community” evolved in different disciplines from a historical perspective (Qie & Liu, 2018; Zhu & Liu, 2019). Gu (2019) explored the logic of rule by law for “common development”. Gu further discussed the relationships of the individual development right of international students (micro-lens) and collective development right for BRI countries (macro-lens). Overall, philosophical and theoretical studies about BRI education tend to probe new meanings of the prevalent concepts embedded in China’s context.

4.2 Introduction of Higher Education Development in BRI Countries

The second theme is the introduction of higher education development in BRI countries. Most researchers presented an overall view of education development in BRI countries and classified them into different groups. For example, Xin, Ni, and Lin (2019) compared talent competitiveness in 63 BRI countries; Liu, Liu, and Hu (2016) measured the process of mass higher education among 73 countries and classified them into three groups; Liu and Lei (2019) grouped 46 BRI countries according to the inbound rate of international students; Liu et al. (2018) studied the resumes of faculties in major universities from 30 BRI countries to examine the characteristics of academic mobility in those countries. Several studies evaluated the existing regional HE cooperation. Xue (2016) adopted a case study of Barent Cross-Border University in Northern Europe. This model serves to promote regional education development based on member countries’ common interests. Liu and Che (2020) attributed the success of the European Higher Education Area to the consensus of member states, the policy negotiation among stakeholders, widely recognized standards, flexible reforms, and the emphasis on vocational education and training. In general, these studies conclude with strategic suggestions of how China’s HE exchange with BRI countries can better conform to local conditions.

4.3 Higher Education Cooperation Between China and BRI Countries

The third theme is higher education cooperation between China and BRI countries. These studies are characterized as focusing on China’s cooperation with one region or one specific country along the BRI region. University strategic alliance is another major focus (Liu & Zhu, 2020; Zhu & Liu, 2019). Li (2017)
summarized different characteristics of China's HE cooperation from a regional lens. He pointed out that China's cooperation with ASEAN countries is comparatively comprehensive, with a large number of inbound/outbound international students, a series of cooperatively-run educational institutions, and in-depth academic and cultural exchange. China's HE cooperation with other regions, i.e. South Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, and the Arab League are still insufficient (Hu & Zhu, 2019; Ma & Zhou, 2019; Wang, 2020). Several scholars further elaborated on the enhanced regional HE cooperation driven by the BRI. For example, Wang (2020) indicated a sharp increase of Arabian students in China and the rise of seminars on HE education cooperation and cross-border university. Ma and Zhou (2019) stated that students from Central and Eastern Europe who chose to study in China increased by 43.1% from 2013 to 2017. In terms of a specific country, studies generally start from the historical or policy analysis of their HE cooperation with China and then conclude with new development under the BRI, examples including Kazakhstan (Abudureyimu & Liu, 2019), Italy (Li, Zhuang & Chen, 2019), Poland (Paliszewska-Mojsiuk, 2019), and Russia (Liu & Song, 2019).

4.4 International Higher Education and Economic Development
The fourth theme is the relationship between international education and economic development. Several studies focus on the economic status of BRI countries; others are rooted in China's economic growth and trade relationships. Ren and Qiu (2019) created a two-dimensional matrix of HE and economic development among 53 BRI countries and categorized them into four quadrants. Gu and Qiu (2019) examined whether China's international student education facilitated poverty alleviation in 46 BRI countries. Through the quantitative data analysis, they found that China's international education can significantly reduce the poverty of partner countries by "promoting human capital accumulation, attracting foreign investments, and increasing technology spillovers" (p. 142).

In terms of China's economic development, Cheng and Liu (2020) found that more than half of China's provinces and cities were uncoordinated in the aspects of investing inbound overseas students and their economic capacity. They further suggested to adjust local policies and pay more attention to students from BRI countries. Yuan (2019) concluded that international student education under BRI has a positive impact on China's export trade. Likewise, Gu and Qiu's (2017) findings showed that international student education had a significant positive effect on China's Outward Direct Investment (ODI), but the effect was also related to the number of inbound students and the geographic distance. To sum up, studies in the theme are significant multidisciplinary
research that combines the influence of BRI on both educational and economic development and provides more persuasive evidence to policymakers.

4.5 International Student Education Management

The fifth theme is international student education management. Studies within this theme focus on challenges and problems of international student program management. Challenges mainly consist of complex geopolitical environment, diversified cultural background, and various religious traditions in BRI countries (Ma & Zhou, 2018). The existing problems are primarily low admission requirements for international students (Liu, 2020; Ma & Zhou, 2018; Zheng & Ma, 2016); insufficient social support service, i.e. healthcare service and cultural adaptation facilitation (Zheng & Ma, 2016); teacher-centered teaching that lacks specific class design towards international students (Su, 2020); unbalanced distribution of scholarships among BRI countries and the lack of funding resources (Chen & Yiliman, 2016; Liu, 2020; Ma & Zhou, 2018; Zheng & Ma, 2016). Pedagogically, Akhtar, Pratt, and Hu (2019) provided a new conceptual framework of instructional communication in the classroom of China’s HEIs for international students from BRI countries.

Besides policy analysis, more methodological approaches are employed within this strand. For example, Ma (2018) conducted interviews with 26 international students based on the approach of grounded theory; Su (2020) explored the learning experience of 12 international doctoral students through interviews and class observation; Cai et al. (2019) adopted a mixed-method approach by combining interview, field observations, and questionnaires. Arguably, empirical research further enhances persuasive evidence for policymakers and practitioners to critically reflect on the international student program management.

5 Discussion

This literature review intends to deepen the understanding of BRI education by summarizing themes for international HE cooperation in China and BRI countries. Being a novel research topic, all academic articles selected were published after 2016; more specifically, over two-thirds of studies were after 2019. Among the selected studies, English literature or overseas scholars prioritize the philosophical or theoretical discussions of BRI education, while Chinese studies pay more attention to the analysis of the status quo or future implications of BRI education. From the theoretical lens of rationales of
internationalization of HE, new opportunities and challenges of BRI education discussed within the literature are delineated in the discussion below.

5.1 New Opportunities of BRI Education
The first convergent finding among the literature is that BRI represents the increasing voice of the Global South in promoting globalization and multilateralism. It is in line with the rationale of nation-building. Several scholars argued that in contrast to Western development theories, China’s model of state-led development socialism brought about a new theoretical framework. “BRI is a very different development model to neoliberalism in higher education with its scramble for resources among the top-ranked institutions and nothing for the rest” (Peters, 2020, p. 590). Kirby and Van de Wende (2019) argued that BRI represents a new stage of globalization; one important factor is the rising influence of China’s HEIs in training talents and conducting research that challenged the dominant “Western voice” (p. 133). King (2020) highlighted that “it is the connectedness rather than the China-centeredness that is at the heart of BRI vision” (p. 232). Arguably, BRI embraces a multipolar world order that encourages multilateral and equal cooperation among countries. Scholars also supported the idea that BRI Education Community is built under the common interests and collective responsibilities among all partners. The community is not for protecting self-interest but for shared benefits (Gu, 2019; Qie & Liu, 2018; Zhu & Liu, 2019).

The second new opportunity is the expansion of mutual cultural learning platforms. It covers the rationales of social/cultural development (national level) and international branding and profile (institutional level). BRI countries are characterized by diversified ethical, cultural, religious, and language traditions. Mutual language learning is a unique and essential format to promote HE cooperation since both China and most BRI countries are not English-speaking countries. Learning each other’s language is a tool to build a mutual understanding of culture, history, and literature, i.e., Italian, Russian, and Arabian languages (Li et al., 2019; Liu & Song, 2019; Wang, 2020). In light of this, almost all researchers elaborated on Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms, an existing platform for Chinese language teaching, academic lectures, and the scholarship funding that support the BRI education cooperation.

The third new opportunity is the establishment of university alliances led by China’s HEIs. It represents the rationale of strategic alliances at both national and institutional levels. Since 2015, China’s HEIs have set up over 30 strategic university alliances, including Universities Alliance of the New Silk Road initiated by Xi’an Jiaotong University in 2015 and University Alliance of Belt & Road led by Lanzhou University in 2015 (Zhu & Liu, 2019). Knight (2004) underscored
that the purpose of the strategic alliance is to construct networks across borders. Xue (2016) differentiated three types of cross-border models: mobility of students (i.e., visiting students), mobility of projects (i.e., joint-degree programs), and mobility of institutions (i.e., branch campuses). The university alliance can encompass all three types of mobility with an emphasis on common interests.

The fourth new opportunity is the increasing influx of international students to China. International student education is closely related to multiple rationales of (a) human resources development and the commercial trade at the national level, and (b) income generation, student and staff development, and knowledge production at the institutional level. “Education has a fundamental and guiding role to play in BRI, as educational exchange and cooperation are considered a significant part of BRI through its potential to develop talent and quality human resources” (Kan & Xu, 2019, p. 56). China is now the third most popular study abroad destination, behind the US and the UK (Gu & Qiu, 2019; Kirby & Van de Wende, 2019). Scholarship recipients have also increased substantially after 2013, almost doubled within six years from 2013 to 2018 (Cheng & Liu, 2020). Scholars noted that this trend could be explained by the expansion of students from BRI countries (Chen & Yiliman, 2016). Since students from BRI countries were mostly scholarship holders, researchers perceived that China’s HEIs did not rely on international students for income generation. Rather, at the national level, international student education had a positive impact on trade and investment (Gu & Qiu, 2017; Yuan, 2019) and facilitated poverty alleviation (Gu & Qiu, 2019). In discussing the rationales of knowledge production, Akhtar et al. (2019) suggested an instructional communication model to sustain the internationalization of China’s HE institutions within the context of BRI.

5.2 New Challenges for BRI Education
The first new challenge is the complex geopolitical environment and imbalanced cooperation stages among BRI countries. Due to the complex political relations and historical influence, there is still a lack of trust between China and several countries to develop an in-depth exchange (Liu & Song, 2019). In the negotiation process, the competition within different member countries also engenders more complicated factors. Mutual recognition of HE degrees and diplomas between China and BRI countries is not widely accepted. In Arab League countries, only Albania and Egypt signed the agreement; in Central and East Europe, eight countries endorsed it (Ma & Zhou, 2019; Wang, 2020). Although Arab countries have attracted numerous world-famous universities to set up branch campuses or cross-border universities, China’s engagement is very superficial (Wang, 2020).
The second new challenge is the increasing skeptical perceptions of China in Western countries. Faced with the expanded impact of BRI, a number of scholars raised the concerns of the Thucydides Trap, which holds a view that an emerging power is bound to challenge the existing world value and international order (Peters et al., 2020; Zhang & Liu, 2019). The proposition is in line with the rising critiques of China’s threat, China’s hegemony, and the dissemination of China’s ideology. The reason that most Western countries doubt the BRI is reflected in the conflict between the Chinese model and the existing predominant Western neoliberal model (Peters et al., 2020).

The third new challenge is the difficulty of brand building. Several studies talked about well-known brands of education and research cooperation regimes, such as the Bologna Process and Erasmus Program in the EU and Fulbright Program in the U.S. (Gu & Qiu, 2019; Xue, 2016). Yet, China still lacks a systematic approach that can do the same job. University Alliance under the BRI can be one option. However, as Knight (2004) stated, in many cases, it is more difficult to "manage than bilateral agreements because of the complexities of working with so many different education systems and cultures" (p. 27). Moreover, how the BRI education can coexist with other existing educational plans (i.e., Confucius Institutes and educational aid projects) is also crucial to build China’s brands that are widely accepted by member countries.

The last and also the most debated challenge is about scholarships and international student management in China. Several scholars have called for more scholarship opportunities open to BRI countries (Chen & Yiliman, 2016). However, several studies suggested careful considerations in increasing scholarships. Gu and Qiu (2017) pointed out that the expansion of scholarships cannot further enhance China’s investment opportunities. Some argued that scholarship benefits failed to motivate students’ active learning; on the contrary, they engendered the lazy learning effect (Ma & Zhou, 2018; Ma, 2018). Another debated aspect lies in the separate management mode for international students (Cai, et al. 2019; Ma, 2018; Ma & Zhou, 2018). Cai et al. (2019) indicated that international students were normally offered better living conditions and meticulous caretaking, and thus gave positive feedback. While other scholars perceived this management mode as isolating international students from Chinese peers, which was not conducive to international students’ study experience (Ma & Zhou, 2018).

6 Conclusion

The existing literature on the internationalization of HE under the BRI provides a comprehensive summary of the policy shift, HE programs achievements, and
challenges. In the Chinese context, internationalization generally contains positive and innovative implications. At the national level, China's government regards it as a strategy to strengthen its national building and diplomatic relations. From the institutional lens, China's HEIs take this opportunity to improve their global rankings and research collaboration. The BRI brings a novel model and platform to further enhance international HE cooperation. As a top-down country, the strong state government serves as the leading role to set up strategic planning and policy regulations; and institutions act to respond to policy guidelines. Therefore, a large body of literature follows the logic of policy analysis, institutional responses, and future strategy suggestions. The empirical research is relatively less, primarily focusing on the relationship between education and economy or international students' study experience in China. Since most studies are conducted by Chinese scholars or foreign scholars who are related to Chinese HEIs, it is possible to observe that a large number of articles are published in Chinese journals. As Kirby and Van de Wende (2019) indicated, “Social science scholars may have more choice but may find it difficult to strike a balance between local relevance and global impact in choosing the journals for their publications” (p. 136). For future research, it is critical to conduct cooperative research among Chinese scholars and overseas scholars with both theoretical/conceptual exploration and empirical investigation within the context of BRI. Meanwhile, the current COVID-19 pandemic and other worldwide political, social, and environmental challenges have a deep impact on the international HE interconnection. Pertinent research of education cooperation in the time of COVID-19 pandemic or in post-pandemic era among BRI countries will also contribute to the field of BRI education substantially.

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While the author completed the manuscript, a new book with the title of China and Europe on the New Silk Road: Connecting Universities Across Eurasia was recently published. It is an example of a joint research project that invites scholars across China, the EU, and the U.S.


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