

# Working Papers on University Reform

Working Paper 31

## **Repositioning China in the Global Education Hierarchy: Sino-Foreign Educational Partnerships in the Belt and Road Initiative**

By Jie Gao

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**Repositioning China in the Global Education  
Hierarchy: Sino-Foreign Educational  
Partnerships in the Belt and Road Initiative**

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# Table of Contents

Introduction: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its redefined utilization of Sino-foreign education partnerships (SFEP).....	6
Phase 1: The ‘Bringing-in’ of Foreign Educational Resources into China’s higher education system.....	9
Phase 2: The ‘Moving-up’ of SFEPs within the higher education system .....	15
Phase 3: The “Going-out” of the SFEPs within the BRI framework.....	21
Conclusion: .....	25
References: .....	27

## **Introduction: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its redefined utilization of Sino-foreign education partnerships (SFEP)**

In 2016 the Chinese Ministry of Education (MOE) issued the *Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative*. This document defines the ‘fundamental’ and ‘guiding’ role of education in the Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) by clarifying the mission, vision, principles, and priorities of educational cooperation between China and the regions and countries along the BRI routes. It also provides specific proposals for actions designed to achieve the designated goals. The MOE makes it clear, through the action plan and the following discussion of it, that transnational educational cooperation should play an equal role, as well as keep pace, with the economic and trade cooperation of the BRI. It emphasizes that these two types of cooperation should be ‘the two wheels of the carriage’ and ‘the two wings of the bird’ (CPPCC daily 2016).

Ever since the proposition of BRI in 2013, transnational education (TNE) in China has gathered greater momentum, and a much more nuanced agenda for its development in the BRI era. The Education Action Plan of 2016 further adds to the momentum with official endorsement and guidelines. These signal yet another historical turning point in China’s regulation policies on TNE. This Chapter will reflect on the evolution of policy paradigms related to a specific type of TNE in China by focusing on the policies in the field of Sino-foreign education partnerships (SFEP) within the BRI framework. This chapter will explore how SFEP shifted from being mobilized earlier as a strategic tool to reform and upgrade China’s own domestic higher education sector, to becoming a vital instrument in building an economic and educational network between China and the regions and countries along the BRI routes.

SFEP here refers to a particular form of transnational education. Compared to the older forms of TNE which feature the movement of people, knowledge and educational services across borders, SFEP features the entry of foreign educational programs, providers and campuses into the territory of mainland China. They take the form of joint ventures, double-degree programs, franchise and twinning arrangements. Upon joining the WTO in 2001, China stated its commitment to GATS and opened its educational market to the world, but it also installed some restrictions. One of the fundamental rules

is that foreign educational institutions can only enter China through forming partnerships with Chinese institutions to establish joint programs, and joint-venture institutions.

Such particular forms of TNE, which this chapter refers to as SFEP,<sup>1</sup> have rapidly expanded and diversified in the last decade in mainland China. Before 1995 there was no Chinese legislation directly addressing SFEP, as back then they were marginal and very few. After China joined the WTO, and opened its educational market, within a decade the number of SFEP grew from 71 in 1995, to 1100 in 2006. By mid-2019, there were 2431 SFEP entities, involving 36 foreign countries or regions, 800 foreign universities, and 700 Chinese universities. There are now more than 600,000 students, with more than 150,000 students enrolled every year on SFEP programs or at SFEP institutions. The total number of SFEP graduates has surpassed 2 million (MOE n.d.). With rapid growth in both scale and impact, they have quickly risen from a ‘supplement’ to China’s higher education system, to become an important ‘component’ of it (He 2016).

Studying the evolution of SFEP policies not only reveals the key actors and forces at work in China’s reform of its higher education system, but it also opens a window into the transformation of how China positions itself within the global education hierarchy – especially the redeployment of SFEP resources towards the BRI framework. In this Chapter, I clarify and compare SFEP’s three main functions as defined by the Chinese MOE at different developmental stages of the SFEP. They are: ‘bringing-in’ the foreign educational resources into China’s higher education (higher education) system,

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter uses the term SFEP (Sino-foreign Education Partnership) to refer to the Chinese term ‘中外合作办学’. However, in the official translation of such policies into English, ‘中外合作办学’ is literally translated as *Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools* (CFCRS). The term CFCRS has been used in the official English version of the Chinese policy documents for at least 16 years. Yet in most English studies of CFCRS, ‘中外合作办学’ is translated into transnational education (TNE). This translation connects the research subject to the existing literature of TNE as TNE has become a prominent category and is widely used in English study of the subject, but it fails to recognize that fact that SFEP is only one specific category under TNE. Though the term TNE is widely accepted, it is too general; Meanwhile, the term CFCRS is an accurate translation, but it is too indigenous and it doesn’t connect directly to the existing English scholarship which use the term TNE. Therefore, this chapter uses the term SFEP to bring out both the meaning of CFCRS and make it understandable and relatable to the existing English scholarships of CFCRS which uses the term TNE to signify what’s actually within the range of CFCRS.

“moving-up’ foreign resources within China’s higher education system, and China’s higher education resources ‘going-out’ into the regions and countries on the BRI route.

To explore the process of SFEP evolution, this Chapter uses the methodology of ‘study-through’ from anthropology of policy (AoP) (Shore and Wright 2011). AoP cracks open the conventional ontology of policy, and introduces a new route for policy analysis by treating policy as “a fundamental organizing principle” for the “continuous process of organizing and negotiating of meanings and social relations” (Shore and Wright 2011). This ontology leads to an interpretive approach, challenging the idea that policy is simply an instrumental governmental tool, and asks what policies mean to different audiences, and how those meanings are conveyed. By studying particular policies, following them through different times and places, seeing how different actors interpret them, implement, resist, or modify them with various tactics and strategies, small windows can be opened into large processes of political and social transformation that are taking place in the higher educational sectors and beyond.

In this chapter I study the relevant policies on SFEP through the three stages of ‘bringing-in’, ‘moving up’ and ‘going-out’ of China’s higher education system. I pay special attention to how values and the models of cooperation shift as the SFEPs take on new roles generated by the national development strategies through the evolving policies. This is done by identifying specific turning points in policy documents between 1995 and 2016, and tracing them back to the policy practices, which interact with them continuously. In the later parts of the chapter, I will go through each of the different development stages of the SFEP policies to show why and how the policies shift their focus. I argue that the shifts in SFEP policies go hand-in-hand with the repositioning of China in the global knowledge hierarchy. It will show how China is shifting from the follower/importer of ‘advanced foreign educational programs’ to the proactive player that builds a platform and framework for the educational collaboration of the world, and its developmental pushes to becoming an initiator/exporter of its own educational programs and culture.

## ***Phase 1: The 'Bringing-in' of Foreign Educational Resources into China's Higher Education system***

Before 1995, there was no Chinese legislation directly addressing Sino-foreign educational partnerships - as back then they were very scant and fragmented. In 2003, the *Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools* was enacted by the State Council, which provided a relatively more systematic legislation for SFEP. It was with this regulation that SFEP were officially defined, and found its form and function clarified. While this document provided the legal foundation for the early development of the Sino-foreign educational partnerships, it was too short to cover the multi-faceted questions that practitioners faced while initiating and operating such partnerships. Therefore, in the next decade, when the SFEPs quickly developed, new policies frequently came out to deal with challenges rising in its practice – and to enforce more governmental control and guidance from the top (Lin and Liu 2010). The first systematic legislation regarding the SFEP is the '*Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools*' issued in 2003 (hereon referred to as Regulation 2003), which officially defined the function of the SFEP as:

1. To introduce high-quality foreign educational resources (Regulation 2003, Article 3);
2. To train talents and satisfy the domestic needs for education (Regulation 2003, Article 5).

In this context, SFEPs were mobilized to bring in the foreign educational resources, which could satisfy China's domestic needs – and boost the development of its educational institutions. Therefore, they were quite similar to the Sino-foreign joint ventures (such as in the automobile sector), which were installed to enable Chinese enterprises to learn advanced technologies and administrative ideals from their Western counterparts. The aim was to 'catch-up' by learning from the West directly and closely. Even though, in theory, all institutions of 'higher education or vocational education' were encouraged to cooperate with 'renowned foreign institutions of higher learning' in establishing these partnerships (Regulation 2003, Article 3), given the development history and specific structure of China's tertiary education, in practice it was the

‘underdogs’ – the private universities and vocational colleges at the bottom of the system – that responded quickly and effectively to this opportunity.

The Chinese higher education system is very hierarchical (see Figure 1). A relatively small group of elite public universities in the top-tier enjoy great advantages when compared to private and vocational institutions below. Accommodating 82% of the whole student population in tertiary education, the public universities receive huge fiscal support from the government, as well as many favorable policies. Top-tier universities get first selection of students after their college entrance examinations, a feedback loop intensified by the students with the highest exam results as they themselves prefer these top-tier universities – over the aforementioned private or vocational institutions. In contrast, the private and vocational institutions that initiated SFEPs need to pay a tax to the government, receive few public subsidies, and have a more marginal existence in China’s higher education system.

Two national projects greatly reinforced the polarization between the public and the private HEIs, namely the Project 211 and Project 985. Project 211 was launched by the Chinese MOE in 1995, with the intention to select and develop a set of key universities as the ‘seeded players’. The MOE hoped that after years of intensive cultivation, about 100 select HEIs and key disciplines would greatly improve their over-all performances so as to become the base for breeding high-caliber talents, and offer a means to tackle major economic and social development challenges. By 2005, investment in Project 211 had already reached more than 36.82 billion Yuan (4.7 billion Euros) (Liu 2015). Project 985 was officially launched in 1999 with the goal of pushing a number of elite Chinese universities, particularly the C9,<sup>2</sup> to becoming world-class (or world-famous) high-level research universities. Although Project 985 began with C9, it was later was

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<sup>2</sup> The C9 is China’s so-called Ivy League, including the following nine institutions: Peking University, Tsinghua University, Fudan University, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, University of Science and Technology of China, Zhejiang University, Nanjing University, Xi’an Jiaotong University, and Harbin Institute of Technology.

expanded to a total of 39 universities<sup>3</sup>. In addition to the budget of the universities themselves, the central government, together with provincial and local governments, spent more than 91 billion Yuan (11.6 billion Euros) on the three phases of Project 985 (Liu 2015).

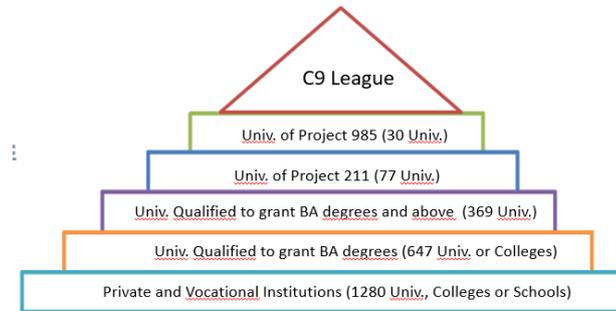


Figure 1. The Hierarchy of China's Higher Education System

In this case, it is very difficult for private and vocational colleges, located at the bottom of Figure 1, to compete with provincial, 211, and 985 universities in the hierarchy, let alone with the C9 universities. Therefore, some colleges at the bottom of the hierarchy resorted to setting up partnerships with foreign universities. By capitalizing on the brand of their foreign partners, they were seeking to position themselves outside of the current hierarchy. The first independent Sino-foreign university in China was the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC), which was established in 2004. It was a joint venture between the Nottingham University in the UK, and the Wanli Education Group<sup>4</sup> of Zhejiang province in China. The UNNC ventured into new territory, and pioneered innovations in education in China. By importing the pedagogy, curricula, faculties, as well as replicating part of the campus of the mother university, the UNNC virtually

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<sup>3</sup> For more info on Project 985 and 985 universities, see <http://www.gx211.com/gxmd/985.html>

<sup>4</sup> The Wanli Education Group is a self-sustaining public institution that turned itself from a private vocational school into a comprehensive educational institution that covers the whole range of preschool, primary, secondary and higher education

created a foreign university, for Chinese students, within China. Its success was apparent not only in the fact that their graduates are able to either get good jobs, or continue their education in great universities abroad, but also in the unprecedented achievements it has created, now being preferred as an academic destination by many students and their families over some of the traditionally elite public universities in China.

The fact that UNNC outcompetes many public universities, has given great lessons to both the private and public sectors of higher education. On the one hand, the model of UNNC shows private universities, colleges, and vocational schools a way to create competitive advantages, and find niche markets under inconvenient circumstances. For example, the students that are most likely to choose UNNC are usually from affluent families, and they plan to study abroad to pursue further education, or to work for international companies or organizations. These students have done well enough in the Gao-Kao (national college entrance examination) to enter 211 or even 985 universities, but not good enough to enter the top-tier universities (such as the C9), which have extremely high admissions standards for entry scores. In this case, the UNNC's advantage in sending students to universities abroad, and foreign companies at home, outshines the prestige of many public universities. Adopting the same strategy, many private HEIs (the 'underdogs' in the higher education hierarchy) have begun to seek partnerships with foreign counterparts with particular specialties in certain fields or disciplines.

The benefits also extend to the whole higher education system. The UNNC and many other Sino-foreign partnerships have helped to diversify China's higher education sector. In the particular context of China's higher education reform, some scholars have claimed that partnerships can have a 'catfish effect' on the higher education system (Lin 2015). Just as a catfish is used to invigorate a tank of lethargic sardines in the transportation of the latter, these Sino-foreign partnerships bring competition into the Chinese university sector, and spark self-improvement in Chinese universities.

It is worth pointing out that though SFEPs, like UNNC, exert a positive influence on the whole higher education system of China, it has not been their priority to achieve this. In fact, all the private universities and vocational colleges have, first and foremost, been driven to sustain themselves financially and make a profit. It was the same

capitalistic momentum that attracted most foreign educational providers to China's large educational market. This means that market-oriented reasoning characterizes the initiation and operation of these SFEPs. Instead of integrating the Chinese and foreign curricula (or pedagogies), it is more practical and financially rewarding to just import foreign educational curricula. Localizing foreign educational programs would take a lot of effort, as the market prefers 'authentic Western education'. As such, foreign imported programs became so successful, they have gained great advantages in their competition with the otherwise totally dominant public universities in China.

In 2006 the MOE released the policy document *Proposals on Some Current Issues of the SFEP* (hereon referred to as *Proposals 2006*), which called for greater awareness in educational sovereignty, and political sensitivity among the Chinese HEIs. It also called for enforcing more control over the Sino-foreign educational partnerships. From 2006 to 2009 the MOE suspended its process of examining and ratifying Sino-foreign educational partnerships, with these procedures being reinstated again in 2010. This pause to rectify SFEPs was imposed not only out of ideological concerns, but due to quality problems that troubled a great proportion of them by then. Many Sino-foreign educational partnerships had been established by small-scale, low-level colleges or vocational institutions in pursuit of profit, without the capability or motivation to appeal to high-level overseas partners. They collaborated with little-known foreign vocational schools, and instead of bringing in high-quality resources from abroad, many of the educational programs were taught by the local Chinese staff with little "foreign engagement" to offer students: the programs were labelled Sino-foreign but were de facto repackaged from the old models (Wang 2014). Offering chaff for grain, they could not deliver what they claimed, and instead employed foreign elements as a gimmick to attract students, and sell fancier diplomas.

To crack down on the unqualified SFEPs, Proposal 2006 imposed some measures. Because of its structure, this policy was called the 'Four Indices of 1/3', which built up a set of quantified indices with which the applicants had to comply if they wanted to initiate a Sino-foreign program or institution in mainland China. These indices were:

- 1) The imported courses must occupy more than 1/3 of the whole curriculum in the Sino-foreign programs;

- 2) The imported core professional courses must take up more than 1/3 of the whole core professional curriculum in the Sino-foreign programs;
- 3) The number of teachers from the foreign institution must constitute more than 1/3 of the whole faculty;
- 4) The teaching hours taught by teachers from the foreign institution on the professional curriculum must make up a proportion of more than 1/3 of the whole teaching hours.

The policy was intended to ensure that foreign resources were brought in, and called for true integration between the Chinese institutions and their foreign partners. But as can be seen from its content, what it actually achieved was quantified standards that enforced a guaranteed proportion of foreign elements in the Sino-foreign programs. This was the solution provided by the MOE in response to the quality problems at that time. The logic behind this was that a program with under 1/3 of foreign components – whether they be teaching hours, foreign teachers, courses, or the curriculum as a whole – could not qualify as a collaborative program between Chinese and foreign partners. Though it has been criticized as unrealistic and constrictive to impose such restrictions, these indices indeed showed that the prioritized function of the SFEPs, at the time, was undoubtedly the ‘bringing in’ of the foreign resources.

### ***Phase 2: The ‘Moving-up’ of SFEPs within the Higher Education system***

While SFEPs did bring in foreign educational resources quite efficiently, they also raised new challenges for the MOE: the role of the Chinese partner institutions in these collaborations was too passive, if not trivial. This time, the MOE was not concerned with the lack of resources or engagement from the foreign side, but the dominance of the foreign universities in these partnerships, which also raised concerns about ideological threats. These partnerships have satisfied the requirements of the ‘Four Indices of 1/3’, but they pose a different challenge. The Chinese HEIs were usually not motivated, or prepared enough, to localize the foreign educational program, or integrate them into the Chinese curricula or pedagogies. Instead, they are more attracted by the cultural capital that came from being associated with the name of an overseas institution, which they used to attract more students. Meanwhile the partnerships also

increased the amount of financial capital that the overseas partner reaped through such cross-border collaboration (Postiglione 2010).

This was a win-win situation for universities on both sides, though not for the overall development of the higher education sectors of China. One extreme case was when an Australian university opened its ‘chain-stores’ in China by partnering up with different Chinese higher education institutions through 44 SFEP programs, these programs were very ‘standardized’ export products aimed at generating profits. The MOE circulated a notice of criticism on 31 July 2013 and forbade such practices of ‘educational dumping’ (Lin 2015). There were also cases of Chinese HEIs turning themselves into “preparatory schools” for the foreign universities. For example, they offered programs in which students were scheduled to learn English in China as preparations for taking professional courses abroad in subsequent years. With these cases, the MOE was no longer concerned about quality, but was faced with the challenge to protect China’s educational sovereignty and provide a more specific set of guidelines to keep the SFEPs aligned with their fundamental role, which is to bring in foreign resources to enhance, rather than dominate the partnerships.

The new problems can be summarized as: the resources brought in by SFEP were not necessarily the high-quality resources that China really needed, or those that could raise standards across the sector and benefit the country. They were sometimes repetitive programs dumped by foreign HEIs in China in pursuit of profit. There was not much integration between the partners in the SFEP and they did not contribute to China’s development in the expected ways. Instead, they marginalized the Chinese curricula, and were thus deemed as a threat to China’s educational sovereignty. While the above policies show the MOE’s determination to tighten its ideological control and shift the focus from increasing scale to raising quality, the need for an overall design to optimize the alignment between Chinese institutions and foreign education resources brought in by SFEPs became urgent. In December 2013, the MOE released a further document: *Proposals on Further Enhancing the Quality Assurance of the SFEP* (referred to as Proposals 2013 from here onward). It was considered to be “a comprehensive summary of the construction of quality assurance system in the past 3 years and a clear statement of the future goals for the construction of a quality assurance system.” (Xue 2016).

Among the eight major proposals launched in this document, most of them were still about completing and fine-tuning the infrastructure for the Sino-foreign educational partnerships, such as the systems for quality assurance, administration, and the supervision of SFEPs. However, three of the proposals stand out as they reflect the new orientation towards partnerships between higher ranked foreign and Chinese institutions in order to raise the standing of the sector as a whole:

- 1) Proposal for enhancing the central co-ordination and optimizing the overall design of the SFEP (Proposals 2013, point 2, P2);
- 2) Proposal for refining the mechanism to bring in high-quality educational resources (Proposals 2013, point 3, P3);
- 3) Proposal for promoting reform and innovation, reinforcing the support for the flagship SFEP programs/institutions with “Best Practice” (Proposals 2013, point 7, P5).

These three policies aim to shift the focus of regulations by redefining the role of SFEPs in the higher education sector. Proposals 2013 addressed both the positive and negative features of SFEP partnerships and provided more specific instructions and guidelines to distinguish the good from the bad – and to identify desirable practices. The most desirable model was inspired by the success of the UNNC as the first university with independent legal person status jointly set up by a Sino-foreign partnership. Many elite universities inside and outside of China realized the great opportunities for SFEPs in higher education, and they wanted to get on board as well. Therefore, the SFEP expanded into the higher end of China’s higher education hierarchy. Top-tier domestic universities managed to attract more foreign elite universities, which were able to provide fully-exportable programs to China. These Chinese partners did not really have to engage much in the design of curricula or pedagogy, but only needed to provide administrative, logistical services, and infrastructures so that the imported foreign program could be up and running in China, just like the UNNC model.

According to Proposal 2013, ideal partnerships should not only be ‘alliances between giants’, one where the foreign partner is strong, desirable, or even famous – but the Chinese partner should also remain dominant in the collaboration. In the proposal, an ideal model is described with imperative sentences, which are typical in Chinese policy

documents. Such documents work somehow like top-down orders and instructions, which carry with them the authority from the “top” or “center”. Examples include:

- Insist on the collaboration between strong partners, set up role-models for demonstration...
- Make sure that the foreign partners are great or famous universities...Encourage the collaboration to take place in those disciplines where China is either wanting, weak or blank...
- Complement each other’s advantages, install essential integration...
- Maintain the dominance of the Chinese institutions in the partnerships and utilize the foreign resources to the service of China...
- Enhance the attraction, introduction, digestion, integration, and innovation of the high-quality resources...
- Promote innovation in operating schools...
- Build high-level, SFEP programs or institutions as flagships of “best practice” ...
- Encourage more financial and property investment from HEIs in different areas to set up a cohort of exemplary SFEP institutions, majors with brand effects and exemplary courses...
- Enhance the study and communication of the experiences of high-level, exemplary SFEP praxis...

Negative examples are also depicted, and subjected to more control, if not totally forbidden:

- Impose strict control over the SFEP in the disciplines of business, management and other disciplines that China has tried to curb...

- Impose strict control over the entry of foreign resources; protect China's educational sovereignty...<sup>5</sup>

Though far from being complete, these rules and instructions established a set of basic criteria which reflected the purposes of SFEP, and connected them directly to practices. They could work not only as standards for the evaluation of existing SFEP programs or institutions, but also as a blueprint for new applicants to initiate and construct their own SFEP entities. These were the new solutions provided to integrate and enhance the contribution of Chinese institutions into these joint programs.

The specific rules and guidelines in policy documents such as the Proposals 2013 acknowledged the differences between those SFEP institutions with independent legal status and those without and sets out different goals and developmental paths for them:

- To establish SFEP institutions with independent legal status (independent Sino-foreign universities or colleges), it is important to learn the advanced ideas and experiences of school-running from the foreign education institutions. The role is to set up the high-caliber models to lead the rest.
- To establish SFEP institutions without independent legal status (Sino-foreign colleges that are affiliated to Chinese universities as second-tier colleges or schools), it is important to bring out the special features of both sides, encourage

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<sup>5</sup> According to academic discussion as well as to interviews and comments by MOE officials, the practices that could be considered as “sovereignty infringement” include the dumping of foreign educational programs in China for profit, using Chinese universities as prep schools, and so on. Such programs would not be profitable for public welfare and are considered ‘invasive’ rather than ‘collaborative’.

the Chinese and foreign institutions to build disciplinary advantages and push for disciplinary innovation.

This policy had direct effects. From 2013 to 2014, no SFEP institutions with independent legal status was approved. Applicants with the intention of setting up independent Sino-foreign universities during this period had to compromise and set up a Sino-foreign institution with no legal status, and they are affiliated to the Chinese partner instead. The two independent Sino-foreign universities that won approval in 2015 were Guangdong Technion-Israel Institute of Technology and Shenzhen MSU-BIT University. These two SFEPs brought a special appeal, as they brought Russia and Israel into the game to dilute the dominance of the UK, US, and Hong Kong.

In Phase 2, we see the formation of a clear top-down design imposed by the MOE to the structure of SFEPs, which refined the categories and agendas of the Sino-foreign educational partnerships. This political momentum formed a counter force against the capitalistic momentum and pushed the SFEP to move up in the hierarchy of the higher education sector. While the capitalistic momentum goes after profit, and favors fully imported foreign educational programs, the political momentum strategically employed SFEP for the overall development of the higher education sector and the nation in general. It subdivides different categories and levels of the Sino-foreign partnerships and designs different agendas for them, as laid out in the proposals. While the lower-end partnerships are used to boost diversity, and bring the foreign resources to the poor areas of China, the MOE calls upon more resource-rich and prestigious Chinese universities to play more active roles in exploring the best practice for SFEP. The MOE expects this to generate true integration between the Chinese and foreign educational systems within the partnerships, and form an ‘alliances of giants’ in knowledge innovation and flagship building.

In summary, Phase 2 showed how the MOE introduced a political momentum and laid out different development paths and goals for different levels of SFEPs. This enables the strategic deployment of foreign educational resources to serve the reform and upgrading of China’s higher education sector, for the sake of China’s overall economic development.

### **Phase 3: The “Going-out” of the SFEPs within the BRI framework**

Phase 3 was marked by the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which provides tremendous new momentum and orientation for the top-down design of the SFEPs. As the BRI assigns a fundamental role to education, the SFEP together with other forms of trans-national education are mobilized as instruments in building the connection between China and the countries/regions on the BRI routes. To further boost reform and the opening up of China’s education sector, the MOE issued further proposals and long-term plans. Together they point to a more detailed top-down design of the missions and actions to utilize SFEPs in supporting BRI. Among those the *Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative* issued in 2016 and *China's Education Modernization 2035* issued in 2019 directly call for the SFEPs to serve the BRI proactively. The *Education Action Plan* outlines three visions for Sino-foreign cooperation and proposed actions to achieve them (see table 1).

Table 1: Overview of the Education Action Plan for BRI (Form 1) (Source: MOE 2016b).

Vision	1. Promoting people-to-people ties	2. Cultivating and supporting talent	3. Achieving common development
<b>Action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Boosting student exchanges</li> <li>• Signing agreements on the mutual recognition of academic qualifications</li> <li>• Increasing language and cultural education, particularly through Confucius Institutes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building Sino-foreign educational partnerships</li> <li>• Carrying out vocational training, particularly through the medium of Luban Workshops</li> <li>• The promotion of entrepreneurship education through forums, competitions, and entrepreneurship networks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capacity building through the construction of schools and the training of local staff</li> <li>• The promotion of girls’ and women’s education and entrepreneurship</li> <li>• The promotion of research collaboration through alliances, partnerships, research centers, and think tanks</li> </ul>
<b>Principles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote people-to-people exchanges</li> <li>• Government guidance combined with social involvement</li> <li>• Shared growth through consultation, collaboration, and coordination</li> <li>• Harmony, inclusiveness, mutual benefit, and win-win outcomes</li> </ul>		

The BRI *Education Action Plan* redefines the priorities of SFEP. Instead of bringing in foreign educational resources into China, now the Chinese educational programs and

institutions are encouraged to ‘go out’ along the BRI route countries and regions. What’s more, SFEP is just one piece of a jigsaw puzzle, part of a whole picture. As one form of a range of TNE deployed to provide specific support to the BRI, it works in coordination with the others. For example, Confucius Institutes are employed to promote Chinese language and culture while the Luban Workshops are mobilized to provide vocational training that train local talents for the Chinese enterprises and factories that are operating abroad. Meanwhile, Chinese universities are establishing SFEPs with their counterparts in countries along BRI routes to build education and research networks. In May 2015, The University Alliance of the Silk Road was created with the lead of Xi’an Jiao Tong university from China. There are now 151 universities from 38 countries and regions participating in this global educational platform.<sup>6</sup>

Within the BRI framework, transnational education is taking on a whole new set of roles. Though SFEPs still have ‘nurturing talents’ as their mission, their diplomatic function is now being brought into the spotlight. The Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative (MoE 2016b) clearly defines the primary mission of the education as ‘to build people-to-people ties’. That is to say, they are first expected to ‘bridge’ and ‘connect’, with the traditional function of educational institutions in ‘training talents’ comes out only in vision 2 “cultivating and supporting talent” (see table 1). It is worth noting that in this English version of action plan, the term ‘to build people-to-people ties’ is not a very literal translation of the Chinese version of the Education Action Plan. A more literal translation of the Chinese phrase (推进民心相通) would be ‘to connect the hearts of the people’. ‘To build people-to-people ties’ emphasizes the *means* of achieving such a connection through spontaneous activities initiated by non-

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on the University Alliance of the Silk Road see: <http://uasr.xjtu.edu.cn>

government entities (civic society rather than the government), whereas ‘to connect the hearts of the people’ emphasizes more the *end* or goal – that is: to influence ‘the hearts’.

This echoes the heated debates within China in recent years about building China’s soft power. The term ‘soft power’ was first coined by Nye in the field of international relations. It refers to “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment” (Nye 2004). Here ‘soft power’ is ‘soft’ because it is different from the approaches of the ‘hard power’ which affects others’ behavior by either “threats of coercion (‘sticks’)” or “inducements and payments (‘carrots’)”. Instead, soft power “rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others”, it gets “others to want the outcomes that you want. It co-opts people rather than coerces them” (Nye 2008). China’s president Xi Jinping has appealed to “gaining soft power and telling good stories of China” in his speeches at various meetings. These speeches echo and refine the core values designed in the BRI; “harmony, inclusiveness, mutual benefit, and win-win outcomes”.

This leads to the building of ‘a human community with shared destiny’, which is a vision at the center of the BRI ontology that the cluster of BRI’s core values revolve around. On 17 March 2018, the vision of building "a human community with shared destiny" was incorporated into a UN Security Council resolution for the first time (UN 2017). This symbolized a moment when China proposed its own narrative and vision of the world order, and it was recognized internationally. The BRI proposes a new value system and new order for the world as a platform for achieving cooperation and building community. By creating BRI, China is proposing an alternative way for countries to coexist and operate in the world. It not only has to build and refine this framework conceptually so as to explain and legitimize the imagined future world the BRI intends to bring about, but also needs to materialize such visions into practice, on the ground, in the form of frameworks and infrastructure for international collaborations.

Materializing these abstract values into education action, the *Education Action Plan* argues for the building of “an educational community among the Belt and Road countries together” and setting up “a diverse range of mechanisms for educational cooperation, based on principles of openness, cooperation, mutual-benefit, and win-win outcomes”. In this case, the TNE, especially the SFEPs, are not just functioning as educational or research institutions, but are mobilized to create an educational

community with shared resources and move together towards the same vision. Therefore, SFEPs, in this context, are put in place not just to provide practical support in building networks and train talents for BRI, they also seek “to win the heart and minds” (Nye 2004). They seek to build a value system and shared visions for others to identify with, which is precisely how soft power is created.

However, there are both ideological and practical obstacles against the deployment of SFEPs and other TNE forms in the BRI. The visions and value systems proposed by the BRI are not usually well received by the Western world; and many countries remain doubtful towards the agenda and capacity of the BRI and even deem it as a threat. The mainstream Western media painted quite a sinister picture of BRI by presenting it as “debt traps”<sup>7</sup> set up by China for poorer countries, or as a way for China to increase its political influence and military presence around the world<sup>8</sup>.

Due to such conceptions regarding the BRI and China, the TNE institutions initiated by Chinese universities, or involving Chinese partners, are also often being accused of being the tools for ‘China’s infiltration’<sup>9</sup> of Western societies. For example, countries including the U.S., Canada, Sweden and Denmark have been shutting down Confucius Institutes within their territories; and on the other hand, building SFEPs outside of China can be difficult in itself. It calls for the construction of basic institutions and infrastructure, from the beginning, which enable mutual recognition and integration between the Chinese educational system and the system of their foreign partners. The gaps in degree schemes, language, credit system, curricula, and pedagogies remain huge

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<sup>7</sup> See more: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/one-belt-one-road-and-a-lot-of-debt-11556789446>

<sup>8</sup>See more: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/ng-interactive/2018/jul/30/what-china-belt-road-initiative-silk-road-explainer>

<sup>9</sup> See more: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/americas-universities-are-finally-waking-up-to-the-china-threat/2019/04/04/1b21e616-5716-11e9-9136-f8e636f1f6df\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/americas-universities-are-finally-waking-up-to-the-china-threat/2019/04/04/1b21e616-5716-11e9-9136-f8e636f1f6df_story.html)

and difficult to bridge. So far there are 84 Chinese universities that managed to go out and set up more than a hundred educational programs abroad (Ni et al. 2019). Foreign campuses are still quite rare, including the Soochow University in Laos, Xiamen University in Malaysia, Tongji University in Italy and Peking University in the U.K. They experience to varying degrees the difficulty of getting local students; most of them are new, and still exploring ways to sustain themselves financially.

## **Conclusion:**

In this Chapter, I looked into the history, development, and prospects of the development of SFEPs to identify how the policy paradigms for their regulation has taken an evolutionary path. I show how the SFEP has been shifted from a strategic tool, to a reform tool that upgraded China's domestic higher education sector, and finally has become a diplomatic instrument for building connections between China the regions and countries along the BRI routes.

The SFEPs were first used for 'bringing-in' the foreign educational resources to 'catch up' with western education, and later they became the catalyst for reforming and optimizing China's higher education system. In the new era of BRI, they are mobilized to build an educational community among BRI countries and regions. With the 'going-out' of Chinese educational programs and institutions, SFEP, and other TNE forms are mobilized to 'connect hearts' and 'build ties' in other countries as a form of soft power. In this process, China is changing itself from a mainly passive follower of Western standards, or importer of foreign educational programs, to becoming a proactive designer of SFEP, as well as an exporter of higher educational programs.

Though the BRI is first and foremost a platform for economic and trade cooperation, its vision of the world order provides an alternative set of values that aim at redefining the dynamics of international relations. The core values of the BRI, such as harmony, inclusiveness, mutual benefit, win-win outcomes, and the concept of building "a human community with shared destiny", promises to provide an antidote to the hegemony and zero-sum mentality that has characterized the geopolitical interactions in today's world. Yet the building of platforms and networks for sharing, cooperation, and the mechanism to deal with conflicts and crisis, calls for deep mutual trust, shared values, and positive feedback from China's partner countries along the BRI. That is why China's soft power,

its ability to win the hearts and minds, is vital to the success of BRI. As education has great advantages in connecting people and winning hearts, it is natural that SFEP and other forms of TNE will be more and more mobilized for diplomatic missions, to bring the BRI countries closer to China, and improve the connection, communication, and collaboration between China and the rest of the world.

Due to the geopolitical rivalry between China and some Western countries, China's rise, the operation and development of the BRI, and the deployment of the educational institutions within the BRI framework will continue to be received with concern, resistance, and even hostility by the rest of the world. In addition to that, whether the vision and plans of BRI can be put into practice is still hard to predict. Too many practical obstacles seem to slow down, and even put an end to the operation of the TNE institutions that China has set up abroad. The shutting down of the Confucius Institutes in many countries shows how local resistance and practical issues can spell the death of educational practices. Difficult as it is, the BRI as a grand-scale project has started, and Chinese universities are actively taking on the roles assigned to them in this policy context. China has yet to prove to the world its determination and capacity in delivering the win-win outcomes that it proposes via BRI. Yet in shifting to be a proactive initiator, it switches from a passive follower of the Western standards, or importer of foreign educational programs, to a creator and exporter of transnational higher educational programs. The 'going out' of China's educational programs and institutions reflects China's need to get proactive and take initiative in the field of education and knowledge production. It also enables China to reposition itself in the global education hierarchy: from receiver to exporter, from following rules and working within the framework set for it, to initiating its own frameworks in which collaboration and communication between China and the rest of the world can take place.

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