

Challenges and strategies for international Chinese education under the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract. With the in-depth advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Chinese language education has gained significant development opportunities worldwide, particularly in the countries along the BRI routes. This paper explores the opportunities and challenges faced by international Chinese education under the BRI framework from multiple perspectives. It proposes strategies to address these challenges, emphasizing the importance of strengthening international cooperation, cultivating localized teachers, developing specialized teaching materials, and leveraging modern technology. These approaches aim to facilitate the deep integration of Chinese language education in BRI countries, providing theoretical and practical support for its further development.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, international Chinese education, opportunities, strategies

1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a global cooperation framework proposed by Chinese President Xi in 2013. It aims to promote transnational economic cooperation, cultural exchange, and infrastructure development. As globalization advances, economic and cultural interconnections have become increasingly significant. Through this initiative, China seeks to deepen cooperation with BRI countries by improving transportation, energy, and communication infrastructure, enhancing trade and investment, and fostering global economic sustainability. Beyond economic development, the BRI also prioritizes cultural exchange and people-to-people connectivity. Through collaboration in education, tourism, and cultural initiatives, the initiative aims to strengthen mutual understanding and trust among nations. Language and education, in particular, play a crucial role in deepening these connections [1].

As the BRI progresses, Chinese language education has emerged as a key component of cultural exchange. Chinese has become an essential tool in multinational corporations, international institutions, and academic circles. In BRI countries—especially in Chinese-funded enterprises, foreign trade industries, and transnational cooperation projects—learning Chinese provides local populations with increased employment opportunities, highlighting the growing importance of the language. Chinese language education serves not only as a medium for cultural exchange but also as a bridge for economic cooperation. While it fosters the global dissemination of Chinese culture and expands international collaboration, international Chinese education also faces numerous challenges despite its opportunities.

2. Opportunities for international Chinese education

2.1. Cultural exchange promotes Chinese language education

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has strengthened policy communication and cooperation between China and participating countries. As an essential component of cultural exchange, Chinese language education has received considerable attention and support from various governments. China has signed multiple educational cooperation agreements with BRI countries to promote the establishment of Chinese language courses and the training of Chinese language teachers. For example, in 2015, China and Pakistan signed the China-Pakistan Education Cooperation Agreement, which includes student exchange programs, teacher training, and joint research projects. Through scholarships, teaching materials, and faculty support, China has facilitated the introduction of Chinese language courses in Pakistani schools and universities. Several universities in Pakistan now offer Chinese

language programs and have established Confucius Institutes as key platforms for promoting Chinese language and culture. Confucius Institutes in cities such as Lahore and Karachi regularly offer Chinese courses and organize cultural activities, including calligraphy and traditional Chinese dance. These initiatives attract a large number of Pakistani students each year, enhancing their understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture. In Europe, China and Germany signed an Education Cooperation Agreement in 2004, which not only covered higher education collaboration but also placed special emphasis on Chinese language education and vocational training. In 2014, with the advancement of the BRI, the two countries signed a China-Germany Vocational Education Cooperation Agreement, further integrating Chinese language education with vocational training. This partnership has led to the development of collaborative programs between German vocational institutions and Chinese universities, fostering the spread of Chinese language education alongside professional skills training. Several German cities and universities have established Confucius Institutes, offered Chinese language courses and hosted cultural events that strengthen mutual understanding between the two nations. In the fields of high-tech and vocational education, Chinese students have opportunities to study specialized technical subjects in Germany, while German students can travel to China to learn Chinese and gain insights into Chinese culture. The Chinese government continues to actively promote Chinese language education by collaborating with partner countries to provide language education resources, scholarships, and online learning platforms.

2.2. Economic cooperation drives demand for Chinese language learning

The deepening economic cooperation between China and BRI countries has significantly increased the demand for Chinese language learning. The expansion of Chinese enterprises and multinational projects has made Chinese proficiency an advantageous skill for employment, thereby accelerating the development and popularity of Chinese language education. Argentina, one of China's key BRI partners in South America, has seen a steady rise in economic collaboration with China across sectors such as agriculture, energy, and infrastructure. With growing Chinese investment and trade, particularly in agricultural cooperation, infrastructure development, and energy projects, Argentine businesses and individuals have begun to recognize the strategic importance of Chinese language skills. As a result, more Argentine students and young professionals are choosing to study Chinese to improve their career prospects and better engage with Chinese enterprises and institutions. The University of Buenos Aires (Universidad de Buenos Aires, UBA), one of Argentina's largest universities, has introduced Chinese language courses to help students gain proficiency in both the language and Chinese culture. In addition to offering Chinese language programs for undergraduates, UBA provides opportunities for graduate students and professionals to study Chinese. The university has also established partnerships with several Chinese institutions to facilitate academic exchanges, with Chinese language courses forming a key component of these collaborations. Beyond UBA, numerous universities and schools in Argentina have launched Chinese language programs, many of which are supported by Confucius Institutes. The increasing recognition of Chinese language education in Argentina reflects its growing importance as a tool for economic cooperation and cultural exchange.

2.3. Opportunities brought by technological and educational cooperation

The deep integration of technology and education has created new opportunities for Chinese language education in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries. This integration has not only broken the limitations of traditional educational models but has also provided a wider range of tools and platforms for the dissemination and advancement of Chinese language education. Through online courses, virtual classrooms, and mobile applications, Chinese learners can access high-quality language education resources anytime and anywhere, overcoming time and space constraints. For instance, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Chinese language learning applications have made it easier for students in BRI countries to learn Chinese, expanding the reach of Chinese language education. Additionally, Virtual Reality (VR) and interactive teaching methods have made Chinese language learning more engaging and dynamic. Students can use virtual technology to "experience" China's history, culture, and society firsthand, increasing both their interest and practical engagement in language learning. For example, students can take virtual tours of China's historical sites or participate in traditional festival celebrations through VR experiences, deepening their understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture. This immersive approach enhances motivation for learning Chinese. Furthermore, technology has facilitated resource sharing and international collaboration in education. Chinese universities and research institutions have partnered with BRI countries to develop digital platforms and online cooperative projects focused on Chinese language education and cultural exchange. These initiatives not only improve the quality of Chinese language education but also foster mutual cultural exchange and academic cooperation between China and BRI nations.

2.4. Mutual policy support among nations

Policy support has created a favorable external environment for the promotion of Chinese language education. Governmental cooperation, financial subsidies, and teacher training programs have significantly contributed to the expansion and development of Chinese language education in BRI countries. Bilateral agreements between China and BRI country governments have provided policy guarantees for the promotion of Chinese language education. Many countries have signed education cooperation agreements to introduce Chinese educational resources, establish Chinese language courses, and set up Confucius Institutes. These policies

offer stable funding and institutional support, ensuring the steady growth of Chinese language education. The Chinese government offers scholarships to students from BRI countries, encouraging them to study Chinese language and culture in China. Programs such as the "Chinese Bridge" Scholarship allow many students from BRI nations to pursue higher education in China, promoting the global expansion of Chinese language education and fostering cross-cultural exchange. Additionally, China has established Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms in many BRI countries, providing foundational infrastructure for Chinese language education. Government funding supports textbooks, teaching equipment, and learning materials, which help improve the quality and accessibility of Chinese language education, particularly in resource-constrained regions. To further strengthen teaching capacity, BRI governments have supported teacher training and exchange programs. The Chinese government has launched teacher dispatch and training initiatives, enabling BRI countries to cultivate a greater number of high-quality Chinese language instructors. This effort has significantly enhanced the sustainability of Chinese language education and ensured a more robust long-term development strategy.

3. Challenges in international Chinese language education

3.1. Language barriers and cultural differences

Language barriers and cultural differences significantly impact the teaching and learning of Chinese in various ways. The linguistic systems, cultural backgrounds, and religious beliefs of different countries all influence students' experiences in learning Chinese. These factors not only affect the progress of Chinese language acquisition but also impact the effectiveness and sustainability of Chinese education [2]. For example, Thai and Vietnamese belong to the isolating language family, which has grammatical structures and phonetic systems that differ significantly from Chinese. Thai is a tonal language, but its tones differ considerably from those in Chinese. Additionally, its grammatical structure varies greatly from Chinese. Since Thai and Vietnamese do not have the same four-tone system as Chinese—or have tones that differ greatly—learners often struggle with pronunciation, leading to confusion and errors in spoken Chinese. Furthermore, the grammatical structures of Thai and Vietnamese differ from Chinese; Chinese does not use tense changes like these languages do but instead relies on context and time adverbs to indicate time relations. As a result, students from Southeast Asia may find it challenging to grasp Chinese sentence structure, word order, and grammatical rules. In Arabic-speaking countries, cultural differences between China and the Arab world are significant, particularly in religion, customs, and values. Many Arab countries predominantly practice Islam, whereas Chinese traditional culture includes Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism. These differences can influence students' acceptance and understanding of Chinese language education. For instance, certain topics in Chinese textbooks may not align with the cultural and religious values of Arab students, creating barriers to engagement. Many African countries operate in multilingual environments, where local languages differ greatly from Chinese in structure and expression. Kenyan students, for instance, often find Chinese grammar and sentence formation challenging because of the structural disparities between Chinese and indigenous African languages. The absence of similarities between Chinese and their native languages makes it harder for students to develop an intuitive grasp of Chinese linguistic patterns. In Latin America, most countries have Spanish or Portuguese as their official languages, both of which differ significantly from Chinese in grammar, pronunciation, and expression. For example, Spanish and Portuguese have relatively simple grammatical structures that do not include the classifier system or tonal distinctions found in Chinese. Moreover, Spanish and Portuguese are inflected languages, where verb conjugations and word endings change according to tense, mood, and subject. In contrast, Chinese is an analytic language with no verb conjugation or inflectional changes, relying instead on word order and context to convey meaning. This fundamental grammatical difference requires Spanish-speaking learners to adapt to a new way of thinking about sentence construction. Furthermore, the phonetic systems of Spanish and Portuguese differ significantly from Chinese, particularly in tone usage and the Pinyin system. The four tones in Chinese present a major challenge for Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking students, who often struggle with correct pronunciation and tone differentiation. These difficulties can lead to miscommunication and inaccurate expression, making oral proficiency a significant hurdle for learners from Spanish-speaking backgrounds.

3.2. Teacher resources and teacher training

The shortage of qualified Chinese language teachers, coupled with incomplete training systems and resource allocation, has made it difficult to implement effective Chinese education in some countries. Although China has invested substantial resources in training and cultivating overseas Chinese language teachers, these programs still face significant challenges. First, many Chinese teachers are dispatched to Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries through overseas assignments, and they often encounter difficulties in adapting to the local language and culture. Second, many Chinese language teachers lack sufficient professional qualifications, pedagogical expertise, and cross-cultural education training. These challenges in cultural adaptation, teaching methodologies, and linguistic competence often result in teaching outcomes that do not meet expectations. Although institutions such as Confucius Institutes provide teacher training, these programs often focus primarily on language instruction while neglecting training in cultural adaptability. Even though China has established some teacher training mechanisms, there is still room for improvement in curriculum design, faculty quality, and training content. Additionally, existing Chinese language teachers

are often overburdened with teaching responsibilities, making it difficult for them to provide personalized guidance to students. To address the shortage of qualified teachers, many BRI countries rely on China-dispatched teachers. However, this model presents several challenges, including high turnover rates, cultural adaptation difficulties, and differences in teaching methodologies. These factors contribute to instability in the education system. Many schools must continuously recruit and train new Chinese teachers, increasing education costs and management difficulties, making it challenging to achieve long-term, sustainable development.

3.3. Political and social environment

The level of diplomatic relations between China and other countries directly influences the smooth implementation of cultural exchanges. While some Middle Eastern countries have strong economic ties with China, political differences and historical factors pose challenges to the promotion of Chinese language education. For example, in Saudi Arabia, geopolitical tensions in the Middle East have led to a cautious approach to foreign cultural exchanges in certain years, directly affecting the development of Confucius Institutes in the country. Despite close economic cooperation between China and Saudi Arabia, political and cultural frictions have slowed the progress of Chinese language education initiatives. In Europe, political dynamics and policy shifts may also impact the stability of Chinese language education. Europe's complex political landscape, differing national policies, and the European Union's collective political stance all influence the promotion of Chinese education. Some European countries are open to foreign cultural education, while others adopt a more conservative stance on foreign language education due to changes in political leadership or diplomatic policies. For instance, Poland and Hungary, two Central and Eastern European countries, have deepening economic cooperation with China under the BRI framework. However, their close political ties with Western nations have led to cautious attitudes toward foreign cultural influences, particularly Chinese culture and language education. The level of government support and integration within national education systems plays a crucial role in determining how well Chinese language programs can be established and sustained [3]. Social instability and security concerns also significantly impact the development of Chinese language education. Many BRI countries—particularly in parts of Africa and the Middle East—experience political turmoil, conflict, and security threats, which can lead to the suspension or delay of Chinese education programs. For example, in Syria and Yemen, prolonged wars and conflicts have almost completely halted Chinese language education. In such environments, many schools have discontinued or reduced their Chinese language courses, while Chinese cultural centers and Confucius Institute staff face significant security risks. The combination of political, social, and security challenges poses significant obstacles to the expansion and sustainability of international Chinese language education, particularly in regions with unstable geopolitical conditions.

4. Strategies and countermeasures

4.1. Strengthening teacher training and faculty development

To address the shortage of qualified Chinese language teachers, efforts should be made to enhance teacher training and faculty development, particularly for Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries. China can collaborate with the education ministries of partner countries to implement measures such as Chinese language teacher training programs, scholarship initiatives, and the establishment of Confucius Institute Teacher Training Centers to improve teaching standards and capabilities. In addition, leveraging online platforms for remote teacher training can help mitigate the challenges of teacher shortages and regional disparities. For instance, some universities in the Philippines and Malaysia have already started collaborating with Chinese teacher training institutions, sending their faculty members to China for more specialized Chinese language pedagogy training. Similarly, universities in Argentina and Brazil have partnered with Chinese institutions to offer Chinese teacher training courses while organizing seminars and practical workshops for educators. Furthermore, these countries have begun providing online teacher training courses via digital platforms, allowing for more flexible and accessible professional development opportunities.

4.2. Integrating Chinese language education with Chinese culture

Developing Chinese language courses that incorporate local cultural characteristics can make the curriculum more appealing and relevant to students in different regions. By aligning the curriculum with local education systems and cultural needs, course materials can be designed to not only teach linguistic skills but also introduce Chinese culture. For example, textbooks can integrate Chinese history, literature, and festivals alongside grammar and vocabulary lessons to create engaging and relatable content. Additionally, dedicated cultural modules in Chinese language courses can help students better understand China's history, philosophy, arts, and traditions. These modules can be presented through images, videos, and interactive activities, allowing students to deepen their cultural knowledge while improving their language skills. Combining cultural exchange activities with language instruction can further enhance student engagement. Regularly organizing Chinese traditional festival celebrations—such as Spring Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival—as well as calligraphy exhibitions, tea ceremonies, and traditional dance and music performances can help local students experience the richness of Chinese culture firsthand. Lectures and cultural salons featuring Chinese scholars, artists, and cultural figures can provide in-depth insights into traditional Chinese culture, modern

society, and the significance of learning Chinese, equipping students with broader cultural knowledge and contextual understanding. Confucius Institutes play a crucial role in fostering Chinese language and cultural education. They can expand their offerings by providing courses on Chinese calligraphy, painting, tea culture, and martial arts, as well as hosting Chinese film screenings, theatrical performances, and other cultural events. These activities not only enhance language learning experiences but also showcase the diversity and richness of Chinese culture. China can also establish Cultural Centers in BRI countries, serving as core platforms for cultural exchange. These centers can offer Chinese language courses while integrating elements of Chinese arts, literature, and music through exhibitions, lectures, and interactive events. By strengthening the cultural foundation of Chinese language education, these initiatives can attract more learners and foster a deeper appreciation of Chinese culture among international students.

4.3. Utilizing modern information technology to promote the popularization of Chinese language education

With the rapid development of internet technology, digital education platforms and online learning have become new trends in global education. Many Chinese language learners in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) countries, particularly those in regions without access to in-person courses, are increasingly using online platforms to learn Chinese as a viable alternative. By leveraging online platforms, Artificial Intelligence (AI), big data, and Virtual Reality (VR), Chinese language education can overcome geographical and time constraints, reaching learners across the world more efficiently. China's Confucius Institutes, in collaboration with BRI countries, have launched online Chinese learning platforms, such as the "Confucius Institute Online Classroom" and the "Chinese Bridge" Online Course. These platforms offer a wide range of Chinese learning resources, allowing students worldwide to study Chinese anytime, anywhere. Chinese companies and educational institutions have also developed various intelligent Chinese learning applications and platforms, such as the "Hanyu Da Cidian" (Comprehensive Chinese Dictionary) app and Chinese character learning applications. These tools use AI and big data technologies to analyze students' learning progress and interests, providing personalized learning plans, which significantly enhance the accessibility and efficiency of Chinese language education. In some countries, AI-powered Chinese learning platforms have been introduced in collaboration with Chinese enterprises. For example, Alibaba's AI language platform helps students improve their Chinese speaking skills through speech recognition and grammar correction features. Virtual classrooms and AI tutors provide instant feedback, further enhancing the learning experience. Through digital platforms, people in BRI countries can also access Chinese culture, arts, and films, increasing their interest and motivation to learn Chinese. For instance, China's "Cultural China" platform and China Global Television Network (CGTN) have launched Chinese language teaching programs for international audiences, using social media and video platforms to promote Chinese language education in BRI countries. These platforms offer Chinese learning resources, Chinese films, and cultural documentaries, helping viewers develop an interest in Chinese culture, which in turn inspires them to study Chinese. Additionally, China has organized virtual cultural festivals and Spring Festival celebrations in BRI countries through online platforms, using videos, live streaming, and interactive platforms to introduce Chinese traditions. These events not only help local populations understand Chinese culture but also promote the expansion and popularization of Chinese language education.

4.4. Adapting flexibly to political and social changes

To mitigate the negative impact of external political factors on Chinese language education, China should promote cultural diplomacy and educational cooperation. The role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), cultural exchange programs, and higher education partnerships should be emphasized to minimize direct political interference in Chinese education. For instance, in the Middle East, collaborating with local schools to develop Chinese language textbooks in Arabic and establishing dedicated Chinese learning platforms can help advance Chinese language education and strengthen cooperation with Middle Eastern countries, despite political challenges. In relatively stable Middle Eastern nations such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar, regional economic cooperation can be leveraged to gradually integrate Chinese language education into local education systems. Furthermore, remote teaching methods can be employed to provide Chinese learning resources to areas affected by political conflicts. In Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, China has been actively advancing cultural diplomacy and strengthening China-CEE cooperation in the cultural sector, gradually establishing a stronger foothold for Chinese language education. Through collaborations with Chinese universities, joint Chinese education programs can be developed to increase the appeal and acceptance of learning Chinese in these regions.

5. Conclusion

Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), international Chinese language education has entered a period of unprecedented opportunities and challenges. As China continues to rise on the global stage, the importance of Chinese as a world language has become increasingly evident. Chinese language education has garnered widespread attention and demand in BRI countries, serving as a key tool for cultural exchange and economic cooperation. Government support, cultural exchange, technological innovation, and international collaboration have provided strong foundations for the promotion of Chinese language education. However, its expansion also faces numerous challenges, including cultural differences, language barriers, teacher shortages, curriculum

adaptation issues, and political uncertainties. Addressing these challenges requires joint efforts from all parties involved. To effectively promote the sustainable development of Chinese language education, it is essential to leverage cooperation mechanisms among BRI countries, enhance teacher training, innovate educational materials, and implement targeted policy measures to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers. In response to these opportunities and challenges, the future of Chinese language education must embrace localization within a globalized context, integrating the cultural characteristics of different nations while developing innovative teaching models. At the same time, strengthening the cultural dimension of Chinese language education will ensure that it goes beyond just language acquisition to become a medium for cultural exchange and dissemination. Through continuous efforts and international cooperation, Chinese language education will play an increasingly significant role in BRI countries, serving as a bridge for strengthening international friendships, promoting economic collaboration, and fostering deeper cultural exchanges.

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