

From Soft Power Policy to Academic Diplomacy: The “Belt and Road Initiative” in EU–China Internationalisation of the Higher Education System

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This article analyses the higher education systems in the European Union (EU) and China, and the influence of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI, yidai yilu) on the implementation, development and reforms of an international agenda. It also takes into consideration the development of EU–China cooperation in education and academia through research and scientific programmes launched in recent years, as well as the role of some key institutions such as the Confucius Institutes. To this end, the aim is to analyse China’s “soft power” policy and its link with the novel concept of “academic diplomacy” introduced in this article to describe the engagement and academic international cooperation between the EU and China. Such reforms and promotion of collaboration with the EU have ultimately promoted China’s influence and visibility in the global arena.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, China has recorded unprecedented economic growth that has boosted its global influence. It has been gradually adopting the behaviour, attitudes and responsibilities of traditional great powers in the context of increasing multipolarity. Along with its economic “renaissance”, China has become an active international player, spreading its growing power beyond its borders. The implications of China’s

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rise in world politics and international relations are a pervasive topic in academia, with repercussions in numerous areas of study.

Today, in the early 21st century, China is developing several strategies to consolidate its political and economic power in the international arena and to secure its economic growth for the following decades. “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR, *yidai yilu*), also known as the “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) is Beijing’s jewel in the crown. This expansive strategy, which involves more than 60 countries, intends to foster economic integration throughout Eurasia and regions of Africa and even Latin America. It is Beijing’s latest and most ambitious attempt to show its commitment to gain a more hegemonic role in the international community through the globalisation of its economy and the internationalisation of its culture and values.¹

China has become aware that, in current international relations, the application of a “soft power” policy is more pragmatic, as this tool allows countries to pursue their strategies in international politics by using non-coercive means. Therefore, it has deployed several instruments and reforms to expand its political clout beyond its borders, using means such as culture, language and a form of “soft power” policy applied to academia—the so-called “academic diplomacy”—for such purposes. For more than a decade, Beijing has been able to build a strong and loyal network of Confucius Institutes (CIs), which act as cultural embassies in more than 140 countries. Chinese universities have become active players by adopting reforms and opening their faculties to foreign students and scholars, and several have climbed to the top tier of the world’s university rankings.²

Chinese political elites recognise that the current international order is eminently designed, shaped and dominated by the Western perspective, and that China must strive to promote and defend itself beyond its borders, and nurture the Western community’s understanding of China’s world view and values. Beijing also aims to explain to other countries the positive aspects of the Chinese economy and society, since scholars, as well as the political circles in China perceive that there is a lack of understanding about China in the West. The narrative that government officials intend to promote abroad is that China’s rise as an economic and political superpower does not constitute a threat to other countries. On the contrary, the goal is to accentuate China’s role as a peaceful power in an increasingly multipolar world, as well as to open windows of unprecedented opportunity for cooperation and common development. “Harmonious” coexistence, as an abstract and vague concept of the current neo-Confucian policy of the Chinese government, is always available to eradicate negative

¹ Manuel Perez-García, “The Global Dimensions of ‘One Belt, One Road’ Strategy in China–Latin America International Relations: Toward a Sustainable Economic Growth Model”, *China and Latin America in Transition: Policy Dynamics, Economic Commitments, and Social Impacts*, ed. Cui Shoujun and Manuel Perez- Garcia (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 131–56.

² See Times Higher Education, World University Rankings 2021, at <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2021/world-ranking#!/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats> [25 October 2021].

images of China. As was the neo-Confucian revival during the Song dynasty, the Chinese government has implemented neo-Confucian rules and pragmatism in recent years to maintain a regime of rigid obedience to the ruler that aims to eradicate any type of internal frictions or external (Western) interference in China's political affairs. This however has not prevented the Chinese government and political leaders from abandoning the ideals of Marxism-Leninism to promote the so-called "socialism with Chinese characteristics" as a means of national protectionism.³ These ideas are summarised under the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence", namely (i) mutual respect for each other's territorial integrity and sovereignty; (ii) mutual non-aggression; (iii) mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs; (iv) equality and cooperation for mutual benefit; and (v) peaceful co-existence, to guide China's international relations.

Postmodernism has developed a type of international relations theory of the relationships between Western and Eastern powers in which cultural structures and values reinforce the credibility, policy-making and international perception of hegemonic powers.⁴ Cultural diplomacy and internationalism through the higher education system are the most effective instruments to expand and project a positive image of hegemonic powers in the international arena.⁵ In the case of China, growing nationalism and the reinforcement of patriotism through history and culture have demonstrated to world powers China's unique characteristics as a long-lasting civilisation.⁶ Confucius Institutes are a tool of critical importance for China's international projection as an institutional instrument to consolidate its domestic policies and national unification.⁷

World leaders and businessmen educated in prestigious Western universities have a higher tendency of embracing hegemonic Western world views in international relations and economics. In the case of the United States, world leaders and citizens who participated in the Fulbright programs declare a fondness for the United States in cultural, socio-economic and political terms, demonstrating that international higher

³ Alan T. Wood, *Limits to Autocracy: From Sung Neo-Confucianism to a Doctrine of Political Rights* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), p. ix; and Ian Wilson, "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics: China and the Theory of the Initial Stage of Socialism", *Australian Journal of Political Science* 24, no. 1 (2007): 77–84.

⁴ As cited in Jan Melissen, "The New Public Diplomacy: Between Theory and Practice", *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*, ed. Jan Melissen (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), p. 4.

⁵ Geoffrey Pigman, *Contemporary Diplomacy*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Polity Press, 2010), p. 124.

⁶ Manuel Perez-Garcia, "Introduction: Current Challenges of Global History in East Asian Historiographies", in *Global History and New Polycentric Approaches: Europe, Asia and the Americas in a World Network System*, ed. Manuel Perez-Garcia and Lucio de Sousa (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 1–17.

⁷ Yuan Zhenjie, Guo Junwanguo and Zhu Hong, "Confucius Institutes and the Limitations of China's Global Cultural Network", *China Information* 30, no. 3 (October 2016): 334–56; Christopher R. Hughes, "Confucius Institutes and the University: Distinguishing the Political Mission from the Cultural", *Issues and Studies* 50, no. 4 (December 2014): 45–83; and Zhou Ying and Sabrina Luk, "Establishing Confucius Institutes: A Tool for Promoting China's Soft Power?", *Journal of Contemporary China* 25, no. 100 (March 2016): 628–42.

education programmes contribute to promoting the image of the country.⁸ Meanwhile, only a handful of recent international leaders, mainly those from partner countries of BRI such as the presidents of Ethiopia and Kazakhstan, have studied in Chinese universities. This may partially explain why, over recent decades, China has launched several reforms in its academic system, opening its universities to attract more international students and scholars, and increasing its cooperation in the education field with other nations, as is the case with the Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC) discussed below.

China's launch of the Project 211 and Project 985 in 1995 and 1998, respectively, was aimed at modernising its higher education system. At the time, Chinese President Jiang Zemin stressed that "China must have a number of world-class universities".⁹ In the 1990s, Beijing also established several programmes to attract new talent from other countries, such as the Hundred Talents Program (which started in 1994 and is designed to bring high-level scientists from different backgrounds to conduct research in China); the National Outstanding Youth Fund (established in March 1994 with the aim of funding young researchers below the age of 45 who work in research institutes and universities); and the Changjiang Scholars Program (launched in August 1998 to attract, select and form a group of researchers at the global level, the goal of which is to initiate advanced investigations in all higher-education fields).¹⁰ As a result, China is the one of the most popular destinations for international students. In 2018, according to official data from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA), China hosted 492,185 foreigners studying at its universities, surpassed only by the United States with 1,094,792 foreign students in 2017/2018, and higher than the United Kingdom with 458,490 foreign students in 2017/2018.¹¹ By the end of 2020, there were 2,332 educational joint ventures established between Chinese and overseas education institutions, 1,230 of which offered higher education programmes.¹² Among them are renowned institutions such as Duke University, the University of Nottingham

⁸ Patti McGill Peterson, "Diplomacy and Education: A Changing Global Landscape", *International Higher Education*, no. 75 (Spring 2014): 2.

⁹ Zhao Litao and Zhu Jinjing, "China's Higher Education Reform: What Has Not Been Changed?", *East Asian Policy* 12, no. 4 (2010): 121.

¹⁰ Manuel Perez-García, "Internacionalización y reformas del sistema de educación superior en China" (Internationalisation and Reforms of Higher Education in China), *Revista Problemas del Desarrollo (Problemas del Desarrollo, Latin American Journal of Economics)* 187, (October–December 2016): 49.

¹¹ Chris Parr, "A Two-way Street: Why China is Not Just a Student Departure Lounge Anymore", *The Pie News*, 20 April 2018, at <<https://thepienews.com/analysis/international-students-in-china-increasingly-diverse/>> [7 January 2021]; "International Student Statistics: UK Higher Education", UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA), 12 December 2019, at <<https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Research--Policy/Statistics/International-student-statistics-UK-higher-education>> [7 January 2021]; and "Enrolment Trends", Open Doors, 2020, at <<https://opendoorsdata.org/data/international-students/enrollment-trends/>> [7 January 2021].

¹² "China Has Over 2,000 International Joint-venture Schools", *Xinhuanet*, 22 December 2020, at <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-12/22/c_139610195.htm> [7 January 2020].

and New York University, all of which had set up campuses in China. Moreover, six Mainland universities have managed to attain a ranking in the world's top 100,¹³ and most, if not all of them, recruit foreign lecturers and researchers, as well as Chinese scholars who have obtained diplomas overseas. Arguably, Chinese universities are therefore becoming global actors aiming to compete with their overseas counterparts.

In this context, the BRI is intended to facilitate the flow of both inbound and outbound students to/from China, since this comprehensive initiative aims to foster economic, social and cultural exchanges among over 60 countries that participate in it. From 2004 to 2016, the number of international students in China grew fourfold and that from BRI countries increased eightfold. In 2012, before the BRI was launched, students from these countries represented less than 53 per cent of all international students in China; in 2016, they accounted for 61 per cent.¹⁴ China pledged to reserve 10,000 scholarships annually for students from countries participating in the BRI to fund study programmes in the country. But this strategy is not limited to only BRI-participating nations. According to *The Economist*, China's Ministry of Education budgeted 3.3 billion yuan in 2018 (16 per cent higher than the previous year) for international students who receive essential subsidies.¹⁵ Yet, it remains to be seen to what extent the COVID-19 crisis and its repercussions on international mobility will affect the flow of students and researchers between Europe and China, and whether the trend observed over the last decade will continue in the post-pandemic world.

However, such internationalisation and reforms in the higher education system confront several factors that seem to pull in another direction. The Communist Party of China (CPC) is also conscious that education is a key element to build and control the so-called "harmonious society". Chinese President Xi Jinping, who will be in power for more than two mandates due to the 2018 amendment of China's Constitution, stated at the CPC's 19th Congress in 2017 that "government, military, society and schools—north, south, east and west—the Party is leader of all".¹⁶ Furthermore, a year earlier, Xi claimed that Chinese universities must be the stronghold of the Party and the communist system.¹⁷ Xi's statement has translated into tighter control of domestic public education, as well as joint ventures between Chinese and overseas universities,

¹³ "World University Rankings", QS World University Rankings, n.d., at <<https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2020>> [2 December 2020]; and Emily Feng, "Beijing Vies for Greater Control of Foreign Universities in China", *Financial Times*, 19 November 2017, at <<https://www.ft.com/content/09eaae2-ccd0-11e7-b781-794ce08b24dc>> [30 December 2020].

¹⁴ "Silk Rhodes: Why China is Lavishing Money on Foreign Students", *The Economist*, 26 January 2019, at <<https://www.economist.com/china/2019/01/26/why-china-is-lavishing-money-on-foreign-students>> [30 January 2021].

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Emily Feng, "Ideological Purge Hits China Universities with Western Ties", *Financial Times*, 25 April 2017, at <<https://www.ft.com/content/8a7552d8-1f68-11e7-a454-ab04428977f9>> [30 January 2021].

¹⁷ Tom Phillips, "China Universities Must Become Communist Party 'Strongholds', Says Xi Jinping", *The Guardian*, 9 December 2016, at <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/09/china-universities-must-become-communist-party-strongholds-says-xi-jinping/>> [20 January 2021].

both aiming to halt the propagation of Western values.¹⁸ As a matter of fact, Beijing has revived the teaching of orthodox Marxist-Leninist values by faculty members and has established CPC departments in some universities.¹⁹ In addition, China's increased economic and political influence has also had implications for academic publications, with removal of sensitive articles from website repositories.²⁰ This is occurring in a context of Chinese nationalism on the rise. Moreover, Chinese higher education still faces endemic problems that hinder its comprehensive internationalisation because incentives and labour conditions to attract overseas scholars to Chinese universities are still comparatively poor in relation to other, more developed countries.

The European Union (EU) and China have been strengthening their collaboration in education over the last decade. For example, the EU–China High-Level People-to-People Dialogue (HPPD) was launched in 2012 and, in 2016, the China–EU Education Ministers Conference took place in Beijing. In 2020, the EU and China released a joint press statement at the fifth EU–China HPPD, pledging that “both sides agreed to further promote two-way student and researcher mobility on the basis of reciprocity”, and that this could be achieved by “developing links between Erasmus + opportunities and support from Chinese Government Scholarships and other available resources”.²¹

The EU has also been actively promoting culture as an important soft power element. In 2007, the European Commission (EC) launched a “European agenda for culture in a globalising world”, which included the notion of promoting culture in its external policy.²² In 2015, the Council of the EU advocated preparatory action on a “strategic approach to culture in the EU’s external relations”.²³ In 2016, the global strategy for the EU’s foreign and security policy set “cultural diplomacy” as a new field for its joint external action²⁴ and a cultural diplomacy platform was established, which became the cultural relations platform (CRP) in 2020.

In this regard, the EC and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy clearly acknowledge the role of education in external relations. Their 2016 joint communication “Towards an EU strategy for International

¹⁸ Feng, “Ideological Purge Hits China Universities with Western Ties”.

¹⁹ Nectar Gan, “Chinese Universities Tighten Ideological Control of Teaching Staff”, *South China Morning Post*, 28 August 2017, at <<https://www.scmp.com/news/china/policies-politics/article/2108597/china-universities-tighten-ideological-control-teaching>> [30 January 2021]; and Feng, “Ideological Purge Hits China Universities with Western Ties”.

²⁰ Christopher Balding, “China Looks at Western Universities and Smells Weakness”, *Foreign Policy*, 24 August 2017, at <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/24/china-bullies-western-universities-because-they-let-it/>> [31 January 2021].

²¹ European Commission, “Joint Press Statement Following the 5th EU–China High-Level People-to-People Dialogue”, 10 November 2020, at <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_20_2080> [29 December 2020].

²² European Commission, “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations”, JOIN(2016) 29 final, 8 June 2016, p. 2.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ European External Action Service (EEAS), “Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union’s Foreign and Security Policy”, April 2016, p. 49.

Cultural Relations”, which included cultural diplomacy as its third pillar, states that “the EU’s mobility and inter-university cooperation programmes are invaluable instruments for establishing lasting academic and cultural ties, which simultaneously promote the EU in partner countries”.²⁵ According to this document, throughout the 2014–20 period, the EU would promote the mobility of researchers, the exchange of students and alumni and EU studies networks. For example, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions programme pledged to “enable 15,000 researchers from outside Europe to begin or pursue their careers in Europe”.²⁶

This article analyses China’s strategy to apply “soft power” policy and its derived concept in the educational sector, i.e. “academic diplomacy”, and assesses the extent of internationalisation of China’s higher education system and its cooperation with Europe. Such internationalisation of the higher education system is in line with China’s rise as an economic and political powerhouse, and the policy of “internationalisation with Chinese characteristics” (*Zhongguo tese*). This article also argues that despite the increase in cooperation between foreign, mainly European, and Chinese universities and the growing number of international students pursuing their degrees in China, the overall trend seems to conflict with a comprehensive internationalisation of China’s higher education and tends towards neo-nationalism. In other words, research institutions and universities apply the new narratives and neo-Confucian policies implemented by China’s Ministry of Education,²⁷ striving to infuse China’s higher education system with patriotic spirit but also aiming in some way to internationalise it.²⁸ This article will contribute to the understanding of the current situation of universities and academia in China, as well as raise awareness of the challenges and opportunities that higher education faces in the current context.

There exists a research gap in the field of internationalisation of China’s higher education. Scholarship has focused primarily on the development of the higher education system for the period between China’s times of isolation and today,²⁹ but analysis of the internationalisation of the Chinese higher education system through

²⁵ European Commission, “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations”, p. 14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁷ Manuel Perez-Garcia, “From Eurocentrism to Sinocentrism: The New Challenges in Global History”, *European Journal of Scientific Research* 119, no. 3 (2014): 339.

²⁸ Charles Holcombe (2001) as cited in Manuel Perez-Garcia, “Internacionalización y reformas del sistema de educación superior en China” (Internationalisation and Reforms of Higher Education in China), p. 45.

²⁹ Chen Linhan and Huang Danyan, “Internationalization of Chinese Higher Education”, *Higher Education Studies* 3, no. 1 (2013): 92–105; Xi Y., Guo J. and Li H., *Study on the Characteristics and Strategies of the Internationalization of Chinese Universities* (Beijing: People’s Publishing House of China, 2010); Mao Liuri and Shen Guanquan, eds., *Zhongguo jiaoyu tongshi* (*Comprehensive History of Chinese Education*), vol. 4 (Jinan: Shandong Education Press, 1988), pp. 151–62; Yang Rui, “China’s Strategy for the Internationalization of Higher Education: An Overview”, *Frontiers of Education in China* 9, no. 2 (June 2014): 151–62; Paul S.N. Lee, “The Rise of China and Its Contest for Discursive Power”, *Global Media and China* 1, no. 1–2 (June 2016): 102–20.

the concept of “academic diplomacy” is scarce. In this article, the authors’ main argument is based on the underlying logics of internationalisation of higher education in China and the engagement with Europe and international partners under the BRI. This study, therefore, aims to bridge the gap by analysing the influence of the BRI strategy on Chinese universities and its implementation. This article is structured as follows. First, a literature review gathers relevant theoretical background related to the importance of the “soft power” policy, cultural ties and the concept of “academic diplomacy” applied to current international relations. Second, the article focuses on the internationalisation of the Chinese higher education system and examines to what extent its “soft power” objectives have been successful. In the concluding section, the authors briefly describe the political control over Chinese education and its impact on the internationalisation of universities.

SHIFTING THE BALANCE OF POWER THROUGH “SOFT POWER” POLICY AND “ACADEMIC DIPLOMACY”

The consequences of China’s rise are a pervasive topic widely discussed in academia since the country started emerging as a global power, changing the balance in world politics. Its rise represents a reshaping of the global order that has existed for decades and has tremendous economic, political and social implications beyond China’s borders. As Lee points out, “historically, the rise of a new power often ended in wars that were used to alter the status quo”.³⁰ Nevertheless, even though the PRC is not in favour of some features of the current international system, which was mainly designed by the United States and its allies in the post-World War II period, China has prospered and become more engaged with the international system since its implementation of economic reforms in 1978 and, as a matter of fact, is one of the most fervent advocates for globalisation today.

Hans Morgenthau³¹ identifies nine elements of national power, namely geography, natural resources, industrial capacity, military preparedness, population, national character, national morale, the quality of diplomacy and the quality of government, of which the latter four can be regarded as “soft’ side power”.³² In the current international system, the use of soft diplomatic tools to pursue desired goals is less costly and more efficient. While the exercise of power may be defined as the capacity to obtain desired outcomes through coercion,³³ the exercise of soft power involves forms of psychological persuasion and non-physical violence, with the aim of co-opting people to obtain wanted results.

³⁰ Lee, “The Rise of China and Its Contest for Discursive Power”.

³¹ As cited in Lee, “The Rise of China and Its Contest for Discursive Power”.

³² Ibid.

³³ Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy”, *Cultural Diplomacy Magazine*, Endnote, Winter 2010.

This explains why many countries have focused their recent diplomatic efforts on increasing the capabilities and effectiveness of this sort of diplomacy involving psychological persuasion. Chinese President Xi Jinping stated in 2014 that “we should increase China’s soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China’s message to the world”.³⁴ China has realised that economic and military powers are not enough and that they need to be combined with soft power.³⁵ By contrast, former High Representative of the [European] Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini emphasised the importance of the EU’s soft power during a debate at the European Parliament on the EU Global Strategy, but she stressed the need to complement it with other tools when carrying out its external policy:

We are also starting to explore new fields of common action, such as energy, diplomacy, cultural diplomacy and economic diplomacy, but the strategy also states very clearly that what we are so good at, soft power, is not enough in these times. Obviously, nobody calls into question the fact that soft power is and will remain the centre of our external action, also because we are the best in the world at soft power.³⁶

A distinction between soft power based on traditional and on public diplomacy should be made. The former style of diplomacy is related to state officials and the latter to the public in general associated with foreign affairs, acting through non-formal institutions.³⁷ Public diplomacy should also be defined as both direct relations among individuals and official institutions,³⁸ as well as government management of communication in foreign affairs; and public diplomacy related to culture and higher education systems for academic and scientific cooperation involves projecting national goals and policies in the form of “academic diplomacy”.³⁹

Cultural diplomacy has been considered as a subcategory of public diplomacy, and most governments implement it merely to engage in communication through cultural values and ideals with partner countries.⁴⁰ A country’s hegemonic role in world affairs is partially sustained by cultural transfers.⁴¹ Such diplomacy is founded upon

³⁴ Eleanor Albert, “China’s Big Bet on Soft Power”, *The Economist*, 9 February 2018, at <<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-big-bet-soft-power>> [30 December 2020].

³⁵ “Is China’s Soft Power Strategy Working?”, *China Power*, 27 February 2016 (updated 26 August 2020), at <<https://chinapower.csis.org/is-chinas-soft-power-strategy-working/>> [7 January 2021].

³⁶ European Parliament, “A Global Strategy for the EU’s Foreign and Security Policy (Debate)”, 6 July 2016, at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/CRE-8-2016-07-06-ITM-010_EN.html/> [30 December 2020].

³⁷ Melissen, “The New Public Diplomacy”, p. 5.

³⁸ As cited in Melissen, “The New Public Diplomacy”, p. 11.

³⁹ Tuch as cited in Melissen, “The New Public Diplomacy”, pp. 11–2.

⁴⁰ Nye, Jr., “Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy”.

⁴¹ Simon Murden, “Culture in World Affairs”, in *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, 5th ed., ch. 25, ed. John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

the expansion of national ideals through cultural and popular forms with the goal of implementing foreign policies and national agendas.⁴² As public diplomacy is government-driven, other countries often label it as “propaganda” for its attempts to influence public opinion by portraying a positive image of the country that emits the message.

The notion of cultural diplomacy has been adopted by institutions such as the EU. The 2016 joint communication “Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations” stated that “[t]he EU’s mobility and inter-university cooperation programmes are invaluable instruments for establishing lasting academic and cultural ties, which simultaneously promote the EU in partner countries”.⁴³ In this regard, the document asserts that:

The EU is strongly committed to promoting a global order based on peace, the rule of law, freedom of expression, mutual understanding and respect for fundamental rights. Accordingly, promoting diversity through international cultural relations is an important part of the EU’s role as a global actor.⁴⁴

Within cultural diplomacy, the use of education to pursue national strategies is particularly relevant. The concept of “academic diplomacy” is intrinsically related to the expansion and consolidation of foreign policies within the academic world.⁴⁵ Academic diplomacy could be defined as a form of visible diplomacy through cultural exchange programmes that basically host outreach activities on university campuses for the general public. In addition, exchange of faculty staff with international partner universities is also considered academic diplomacy. Thus, the idea of academic diplomacy is to institutionalise national policies within academia and at the same time internationalise departments, faculties and universities.⁴⁶

Bertelsen claims that universities have been traditionally overlooked in international relations literature on transnational actors, despite their importance in moving information, money and people across state boundaries.⁴⁷ Universities exercise “moral and cultural suasion” through the exchange of ideas and the promotion of scientific

⁴² Jessica C.E. Gienow-Hecht and Mark C. Donfried, “The Model of Cultural Diplomacy: Power, Distance, and the Promise of Civil Society”, in *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy*, ed. Jessica C.E. Gienow-Hecht and Mark C. Donfried (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013).

⁴³ European Commission, “Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations”, p. 14.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Thomas Adam and Charlotte A. Lerg, “Diplomacy on Campus: The Political Dimensions of Academic Exchange in the North Atlantic”, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* 13, no. 4 (November 2015): 299–310.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

⁴⁷ Rasmus Gjedssø Bertelsen, “Private Universities, the State and Soft Power: The American University of Beirut and the Université Saint-Joseph de Beyrouth”, Aalborg University, 2017, p. 5.

critical research and thinking, and therefore they play a crucial role as non-state actors.⁴⁸ Such a capacity has been defined as “university soft power” which is understood as the “behavior by outsiders to the universities, which is desired by the universities and based on attraction or co-optation”.⁴⁹ Deodato and Borkowska cite the example of the countries of the Warsaw Pact, which were invited to join the EU Tempus and Erasmus programmes long before their accession to the union.⁵⁰ The British House of Lords acknowledged the importance of education in soft power, claiming that UK universities are “centres for shaping the thoughts of the future elite in the world”.⁵¹ The committee recommended that the British government remove students from its net migration targets. According to its report, 95% per cent of international students who graduated in the United Kingdom are positively oriented towards Britain, “develop an awareness and respect for UK culture, governance, institutions and history” and also gain exposure to “UK norms and cultural values”.⁵²

In a nutshell, academic diplomacy is one of the soft power tools that any government may use to create and foster “strategic narratives”, which are tools for governments and other political actors to shape the perceptions, beliefs and behaviour of both domestic and international actors.⁵³ If governments manage to create compelling strategic narratives in a comprehensive and attractive form to foreign powers and global actors, then the said nation may achieve its goals when other infrastructural capabilities fail to implement in the international arena the government’s strategies and image.⁵⁴

NEW “ACADEMIC DIPLOMACY” AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE INTERNATIONALISATION OF CHINA’S HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM UNDER THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

The application of “academic diplomacy” in international relations dates back to the early 20th century. This concept employs cultural and educational means to influence values and perceptions to elicit other societies’ willingness to cooperate by fostering goodwill among them. It developed as a political instrument in the interwar period,

⁴⁸ Ettore Deodato and Iwona Borkowska, “Universities as Actors and Instruments in Diplomacy. The Academic Soft Power Potential”, Valdai Papers, no. 8, Valdai Discussion Club, December 2014, p. 5; and Nye as cited in Bertelsen, “Private Universities, the State and Soft Power”, p. 6.

⁴⁹ Bertelsen, “Private Universities, the State and Soft Power”, p. 7.

⁵⁰ Deodato and Borkowska, “Universities as Actors and Instruments in Diplomacy. The Academic Soft Power Potential”, p. 5.

⁵¹ David Matthews, “Universities ‘Shape Future Elites’ through Soft Power, Say Peers”, *Times Higher Education*, 28 March 2014, at <<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/universities-shape-future-elites-through-soft-power-say-peers/2012327.article>> [6 January 2021].

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, as cited in Falk Hartig, “Communicating China to the World: Confucius Institutes and China’s Strategic Narratives”, *Politics* 35, no. 3–4 (2015): 248.

⁵⁴ Antoniadou, O’Loughlin and Miskimmon, as cited in Hartig, “Communicating China to the World”, p. 248.

expanded during the Cold War and has become significant since the 1990s.⁵⁵ The United States has been the greatest exponent of academic diplomacy. In the 1930s the US Department of State set up the Division of Cultural Relations with the aim of establishing a programme for cultural and academic exchange with Latin American countries.⁵⁶ Furthermore, Washington, DC, under the auspices of the federal government, used this strategy to win support for its cause during the Cold War, when private institutions expanded American values into Europe and the Third World.⁵⁷ The strategy motivated a cultural diplomatic race between Washington and Moscow, both attempting to legitimise themselves and boycotting each other on either side of the “Iron Curtain”. In this regard, cultural programmes and academic exchanges, along with non-official institutions, served as a means to promote US culture and values, in contrast to those imposed by the Soviet and the communist blocs.⁵⁸

In the EU, one of the paramount examples of academic diplomacy is the Erasmus programme (the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students). The European Commission (EC) noted in its 1986 proposal to establish the Erasmus programme that one of the goals was “to strengthen the interaction between citizens in different Member States with a view to consolidating the concept of a People’s Europe”.⁵⁹ This goal was also acknowledged in the EC’s 2020 Erasmus+ Programme Guide, which specified that the EC sought “the promotion of European values in accordance with Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union”, which states that:

The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to the Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.⁶⁰

The programme seemed to yield positive outcomes as student exchanges among EU countries can develop the knowledge of the founding of the EU and cultural diversity

⁵⁵ Jessica C.E. Gienow-Hecht, “Introduction: What Are We Searching For? Culture, Diplomacy, Agents and the State”, in *Searching for a Cultural Diplomacy*, ed. Jessica C.E. Gienow-Hecht and Mark C. Donfried (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), p. 3.

⁵⁶ Espinosa as cited in Jessica Gienow-Hecht and Donfried, “The Model of Cultural Diplomacy”, p. 14.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵⁸ Bill Ivey and Paula Clegget, “Cultural Diplomacy and The National Interest: In Search of a 21st-Century Perspective”, The Curb Center for Art, Enterprise and Public Policy, 2008, p. 3.

⁵⁹ European Commission, “Proposal for a Council Decision Adopting the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (Erasmus)”, *Official Journal of the European Commission*, No C 73/4, COM (85) 756 final (1985).

⁶⁰ European Union, “Consolidated Version of the Treaty on European Union”, *Official Journal of the European Union*, C 326/13 (2012).

of its member states.⁶¹ This contributes to European integration as the cornerstone of the EU that is in accordance with the so-called “Erasmus effect”.⁶²

Since its inception over three decades ago, Erasmus, in its different forms, has facilitated more than 10 million people to study abroad.⁶³ Since 2015, the Erasmus+ programme has also facilitated students, researchers and staff from other parts of the world to participate in this programme and it launched a traineeship programme in 2018. China has played an important role as a partner country of the Erasmus+ programme, accounting for 28 per cent of the programme’s international credit mobility budget in Asia, the largest share in the continent, between 2015 and 2018. Vietnam, India and Indonesia accounted for 17 per cent, 11 per cent and nine per cent, respectively, of the programme’s international credit mobility budget. Over the same period, 3,177 students moved from China to Europe and 1,973 from Europe to China. In addition, 36 Erasmus Mundus Joint Master’s Degrees were selected and 234 Erasmus Mundus Master’s Scholarships were granted to China between 2014 and 2018.⁶⁴

The Erasmus+ programme also includes capacity-building for higher education projects, which span from two to three years. Between 2015 and 2018, China participated in 114 capacity-building projects, which aim at “modernising and reforming higher education institutions, developing new curricula, improving governance, and building relationships between higher education institutions and enterprises”.⁶⁵ China has also been involved in Jean Monnet (JM) activities, which seek to promote teaching and research in the field of EU studies worldwide.⁶⁶ Between 2014 and 2018, 18 projects from China were selected.⁶⁷

At the national level, European countries have also used cultural and “academic diplomacy” to pursue their desired outcomes. The British Council is the United Kingdom’s main body to establish cultural and educational relations with other countries, while the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) is Germany’s counterpart for such purposes.⁶⁸ The Institut Français “has sole responsibility for France’s cultural diplomacy” and it “is tasked with driving new ambitions for France’s

⁶¹ Pigman, *Contemporary Diplomacy*, 1st ed., pp. 188–9.

⁶² Emmanuel Sigalas, “Cross-border Mobility and European Identity: The Effectiveness of Intergroup Contact During the ERASMUS Year Abroad”, *European Union Politics* 11, no. 2 (2010): 241–65; and Kristine Mitchell, “Rethinking the ‘Erasmus Effect’ on European Identity”, *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 53, no. 2 (2014): 330–48.

⁶³ “10 Million Erasmus Participants and Counting”, European Commission, 28 January 2020, at <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/QANDA_20_130> [30 December 2020].

⁶⁴ European Commission, “Erasmus+ for Higher Education in China”, November 2018.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ European Commission, “Jean Monnet Actions in the Field of Higher Education”, n.d., at <<https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/programme-guide/part-b/jean-monnet-actions/higher-education>> [25 October 2021].

⁶⁷ European Commission, “Erasmus+ for Higher Education in China”.

⁶⁸ Peterson, “Diplomacy and Education”, p. 2.

projection of soft power, helping to enhance France's influence abroad through greater dialogue with other cultures through a process of listening and partnership".⁶⁹

The PRC's first attempts to use such "soft power" can be traced back to its founding in 1949, when the Chinese government wanted to show the world its commitment to communist values. To do so, China officials participated in sport and cultural meetings to promote such values when visitors came to China.⁷⁰ In the early years, the Soviet Union was the PRC's most important partner. Despite the past grievances and animosity, China also had close cultural ties with Japan in the post-war period. In 1956, "2,000 out of a total of 5,200 visitors to China from 75 different countries came from Japan".⁷¹ Besides, in the 19th and 20th centuries, China attracted important experts in China studies, such as H.B. Morse, J.K. Fairbank and Orville Schell, who aimed to study and understand the language, history, economy and politics of this Asian nation.⁷² Yet it was not until the 1970s, during Richard Nixon's and Jimmy Carter's presidencies, followed by Deng Xiaoping's push for reforms, that China truly started opening up its universities to foreigners and a new generation of sinologists.⁷³ However, even with the increase in the number of foreign scholars and experts in Chinese universities as a result of these efforts, the statistics were still low. In the last decade, the Chinese government has recommitted its efforts to fostering its international image. For example, Beijing has established cultural study centres around the world. However, despite these endeavours, China has yet to see a significant return on its investment.⁷⁴ Some experts, such as the US sinologist David Shambaugh, have claimed that China spends approximately US\$10 billion annually on maintaining its cultural study centres worldwide.⁷⁵

Other scholars, however, have interpreted the origins of "soft power" in China from a different perspective. In arguing against "the prevalent impression", Palit states that "soft power" applied to education and culture in China is a genuine product of the Chinese tradition and heritage rather than a mere imitation of the West.⁷⁶ Palit notes that China's emphasis on and approach of the "spread of harmony and amity" today have ancient Chinese origins in the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 BCE),

⁶⁹ "France's Overseas Cultural Network", *Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères* (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs), 2015, at <<https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/cultural-diplomacy/france-s-overseas-cultural-network/>> [2 January 2021].

⁷⁰ Gienow-Hecht and Donfried, "The Model of Cultural Diplomacy", p. 20.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Perez-Garcia, "Internacionalización y reformas del sistema de educación superior en China" (Internationalisation and Reforms of Higher Education in China), p. 40.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Albert, "China's Big Bet on Soft Power".

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Parama Sinha Palit, "China's Cultural Diplomacy: Historical Origin, Modern Methods and Strategic Outcomes". *China Currents Journal* 12, no. 2 (2013), at <https://www.chinacenter.net/2014/china_currents/12-2/chinas-cultural-diplomacy-historical-origin-modern-methods-and-strategic-outcomes/> [7 January 2021].

also known as the Hundred Schools of Thought, which “preferred diplomatic manoeuvring to secure state objectives and were averse to territorial expansion by force”.⁷⁷ In addition, “[a]long with Confucianism, the doctrine of Taoism and Mohism also emphasized ‘universal love’ and the virtues of discussion and persuasion for solving problems”.⁷⁸ Indeed, Hu Jintao’s concept of a “harmonious world” was inspired by this ancient tradition, and the Cultural Revolution (1966–77) was the only period in the course of China’s history that attempted to break with this past.

In June 1978, Deng Xiaoping, who was educated in France for several years and had already developed ideas of policy implementation should he come into power, stressed that China should increase academic cooperation with foreign countries and send more students abroad.⁷⁹ Many years after, at the 17th National Congress of the CPC in 2007, soft power was eventually referenced in a government policy by Hu Jintao. Hu claimed that the flourishing and enduring Chinese culture and civilisation could help to transform the nation.⁸⁰ Thus, the investment in establishing Confucius Institutes (CIs) around the globe increased significantly.⁸¹ Compared to previous decades, China’s Ministry of Education is more active today as high-level government officials have been actively engaging with foreign, mainly EU partners, to strengthen scientific and academic cooperation.⁸² These actions go in line with the application of academic diplomacy in China as the means to use international education to achieve its political aims.⁸³

Since the 1990s, the Chinese higher education system has become more international, increasing inbound and outbound flow of students. As Figure 1 shows, the number of foreigners completing part of their studies in China grew steadily from 110,844 in 2004 to 492,185 in 2018. Therefore, the country almost met its target of hosting 500,000 international students by 2020 (Figure 1). Beijing has established cooperation agreements in this field with other countries and regions. Apart from the Erasmus+ programme, the establishment of the Euraxess Links in Beijing in 2008 is another example of scientific and academic cooperation between China and the EU. This platform, which provides information about European policies, funding for investigations, and international cooperation and mobility, has facilitated the exponential increase in cooperation between China and the EU.⁸⁴

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ “The Legacy of Overseas Study for China’s Early Leaders: Deng Xiaoping”, China.org.cn, 27 June 2016, at <http://www.china.org.cn/china/CPC_95_anniversary/2016-06/27/content_38756438.htm> [31 January 2021].

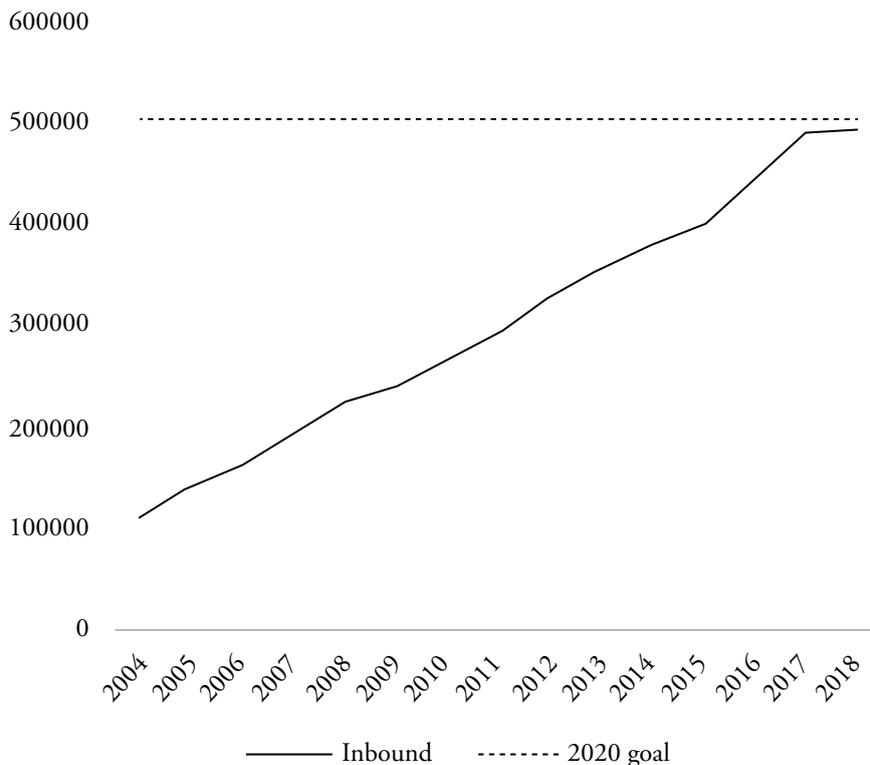
⁸⁰ Albert, “China’s Big Bet on Soft Power”.

⁸¹ Nye, Jr., “Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy”.

⁸² James Paradise, “International Education: Diplomacy in China”, *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 19, no. 1 (Fall 2012): 1.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 2.

⁸⁴ Perez-Garcia, “Internacionalización y reformas del sistema de educación superior en China” (Internationalisation and Reforms of Higher Education in China), p. 40.

Figure 1. Inbound Students in China between 2004 and 2018

Sources: Authors' own elaboration. "China: Inbound Mobility—Past Years", *Institute of International Education*, n.d., at <<https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Project-Atlas/Explore-Data/China/Inbound-Mobility---Past-Years/>> [30 December 2020]; "Inbound Students Mobility", Project Atlas, n.d., at <<https://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Insights/Project-Atlas/Explore-Data>> [30 December 2020]; "China Now The World's Third Most-popular Study Destination", *ICEF Monitor*, 11 June 2014, at <<https://monitor.icef.com/2014/06/china-now-the-worlds-third-most-popular-study-destination/>> [30 December 2020]; "2016 niandu woguo lai Hua liuxuesheng qingkuang tongji" (Statistics of International Students Studying in China in 2016), Ministry of Education of the PRC, 1 March 2017, at <http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/xw_fbh/moe_2069/xwfbh_2017n/xwfb_170301/170301_sjzj/201703/170301_297677.html#:~:text=%E6%8D%AE%E7%BB%9F%E8%AE%A1%EF%BC%8C2016%E5%B9%B4%E5%85%B1%E6%9C%89,%E3%80%81%E6%BE%B3%E3%80%81%E5%8F%B0%E5%9C%B0%E5%8C%BA%EF%BC%89%E3%80%82> [30 January 2021]; Zhou Shuo, "Almost 500,000 International Students in China in 2018", *China Daily*, 12 April 2019, at <http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201904/12/WS5cb05c3ea3104842260b5eed.html> [30 January 2020]; and Chris Parr, "A Two-way Street: Why China is Not Just a Student Departure Lounge Anymore", *The Pie News*, 20 April 2018, at <<https://thepienews.com/analysis/international-students-in-china-increasingly-diverse/>> [7 January 2021].

In addition, as highlighted by Fu,⁸⁵ China is also considered a player pushing for the internationalisation of the EU's higher education system. Europe is increasingly popular among Chinese students due to tuition costs and the flexibility of visa applications

⁸⁵ Fu Jia, "Moving Towards a Bright Future: Chinese Students in the EU", *EU-Asia at a Glance*, European Institute for Asian Studies (February 2019): 4–5.

offered by some European universities. According to Eurostat,⁸⁶ in 2018, China (including Hong Kong) was overall the most important country of origin of foreign tertiary education graduates in the EU-27 (8.5 per cent) and in two member states, Germany (13.6 per cent) and Sweden (9.8 per cent). China was also the second most common origin of the foreign students in Ireland (12.7 per cent), France (12.1 per cent), Italy (7.2 per cent), the Netherlands (7.1 per cent) and Finland (8.2 per cent). The percentage was even higher in the United Kingdom, where Chinese students accounted for 30.4 per cent of its foreign tertiary education graduates.

Internationalisation of China's Higher Education System under the Belt and Road Initiative

As discussed, China has a vast geostrategic plan to act beyond its borders and the BRI is its priority. The strategy is to foster economic integration throughout Eurasia and beyond based on the creation of several economic and logistic inland and maritime routes. With China and Western Europe as its end points, the land route resembles the ancient “Silk Road” that facilitated trade and exchange of ideas and technology between the eastern and western shores of Eurasia. Beijing’s intention is to build a network of roads, railways, airports and seaports, facilitating China’s access both to raw materials to feed its insatiable industry and to new markets to export its goods and services. That said, the BRI provides a platform that facilitates not only trade, but also cultural exchanges. In other words, as Chinese officials have claimed, the BRI has brought mutual gains for participating countries and has aimed to foster economic, social, cultural and academic exchanges.⁸⁷

This is evident in the 2016 China–EU Education Ministers Conference, themed “Building the China–Europe Silk Road of Education”, held in Beijing. In his speech, European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport (2016–19) Tibor Navracsics stressed the need for cooperation in the field of education: “At the top of the list, we have the EU’s Erasmus+ programme and the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions under Horizon 2020. The Chinese Scholarship Council and Hanban (also known as the Office of Chinese Language Council International) actions have pursued similar aims on the Chinese side”.⁸⁸ He also reiterated the EU’s support for the network

⁸⁶ “Share of Tertiary Education Graduates from Abroad by Country of Origin for the Three Largest Partner Countries, 2018 (% of All Tertiary Education Graduates from Abroad)”, Eurostat, 9 November 2020, at <[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Share_of_tertiary_education_graduates_from_abroad_by_country_of_origin_for_the_three_largest_partner_countries,_2018_\(%25_of_all_tertiary_education_graduates_from_abroad\)_ET2020.png](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=File:Share_of_tertiary_education_graduates_from_abroad_by_country_of_origin_for_the_three_largest_partner_countries,_2018_(%25_of_all_tertiary_education_graduates_from_abroad)_ET2020.png)> [4 January 2020].

⁸⁷ Perez-Garcia, “The Global Dimensions of ‘One Belt, One Road’ Strategy in China–Latin America International Relations”, pp. 131–56.

⁸⁸ European Commission, “Speech of Commissioner Tibor Navracsics at the China–EU Education Ministers Conference “Staying Connected: Why We Need to Strengthen Our Cooperation on Education”, 11 October 2016, at <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_16_3421/> [31 December 2020].

of Chinese Jean Monnet Chairs and the activities of the Chinese Jean Monnet Centres of Excellence, which “is enabling Chinese students to learn about the European Union integration in Chinese universities”.⁸⁹ Navracsics also stressed that cooperation has gone beyond mobility and commended Chinese universities for their participation in joint academic projects alongside European universities:

Just to mention a few examples, Tongji University is involved in a Joint Master[']s Degree on Cinematography together with schools in Ireland, Estonia and Hungary. Nankai University is offering a joint Master[']s on “Global Markets, Local Creativities”. Hohai University is taking part in a Master[']s on water management coordinated by the University of Nice in France. And Peking University is one of the Chinese partners in a project coordinated by the Free University of Brussels on governance and academic leadership.⁹⁰

On the other hand, China has also sought to increase its cooperation in education in Europe beyond the framework of the EU. In 2012, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs initiated another channel to establish relations with most Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC), some of which are EU member states, through the China–CEEC platform (previously known as 16+1). This platform, comprising representatives from 17 European countries which are key pieces of the BRI puzzle, meets annually in China.⁹¹

Within this framework, the China–Central and Eastern European Countries Education Dialogues are held annually, along with the China–CEEC Educational Cooperation and Exchanges Exhibition. The latter was held in 2019 in Dubrovnik (Croatia), forming part of the “Year of China–CEEC Education and Youth Exchange” theme. That year, 5,418 Chinese students were studying in CEEC, while 6,188 CEEC students were studying in China, with 1,582 of these students receiving funding through Chinese government scholarships.⁹² The framework also includes the China–CEEC Higher Education Institutions Consortium, which attracted participation of 134 educational institutions from China and CEEC countries.⁹³ In addition, the China–CEEC high-level think tanks symposium has met annually since 2013. In 2017, China and CEEC launched a think tank, the China–CEE Institute, in Budapest to “build ties and strengthen partnerships with academic institutions and think tanks

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ The 17 European members of the Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC) group are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia.

⁹² “Romania Hosts China–CEEC Education Policy Dialogue”, Xinhuanet, 18 May 2019, at <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/18/c_138067675.htm> [2 January 2020].

⁹³ Alicja Bachulska, Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova and Nina Pejić, “We the People? The Challenges of Societal Relations with China”, ch. 3, in *Empty Shell No More: China’s Growing Footprint in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Ivana Karásková (Prague: Association for International Affairs, 2020), p. 58.

in Hungary and other Central and Eastern European countries”.⁹⁴ However, “the multitude of seemingly high-level frameworks for cooperation associated with the 17+1 initiative, [the BRI] as well as bilateral cooperation does not mean that their existence translates directly into achieving long-term goals on both sides”.⁹⁵

In this regard, the ubiquitous application of multilateral platforms between China and the 17 European countries has attracted criticism because it has developed beyond the scope of the EU. Specifically, critics have pointed out the controversial nature of a framework that allows China to establish relations with other regions of the world, “given the concerns expressed about arrangements under its umbrella being in conflict with EU law and about a perceived erosion of EU norms, values and unity”.⁹⁶ Whether this platform is a possible “Trojan horse” aiming to “divide and conquer” Europe has been the central focus of discussion.⁹⁷

As discussed earlier, the BRI and the increasing internationalisation of Chinese universities have already paved the way for hundreds of students to study in China. Scholarship programmes are Beijing’s preferred instrument for facilitating student exchange, since they are “a cost-effective way of cementing relationships and creating goodwill among future leaders”.⁹⁸ In this regard, Bachulska et al. explain that “given increasingly restricted academic freedom at most Chinese universities, there have been fears of Chinese government scholarships forming a new generation of China-minded individuals who might not be able to critically assess Beijing’s behavior”.⁹⁹ While they caution that this criticism seems “exaggerated”, “nurturing a China-friendly cohort from different world regions does seem to be one of the aims of these kinds of scholarship programs”.¹⁰⁰

Within this context, in the past decades, China managed to attract future leaders from other countries to study at its universities. For instance, former Ethiopian President Mulatu Teshome studied 12 years in Beijing at the renowned Peking University, where he received his bachelor’s degree in Philosophy of Political Economy and a doctorate

⁹⁴ “China Launches ‘China–CEE Institute’ Think Tank in Hungary”, China–CEE Institute, 25 April 2017, at <http://www.china-ceec.org/eng/zdogjhz_1/t1456482.htm> [1 January 2021]; and “China–CEE Institute: Structure”, China–CEE Institute, n.d., at <<https://china-cee.eu/structure/>> [1 January 2021].

⁹⁵ Bachulska, Běrziņa-Čerenkova and Pejić, “We the People? The Challenges of Societal Relations with China”, p. 64.

⁹⁶ Gisela Grieger, “China, the 16+1 Cooperation Format and the EU”, European Parliament Research Service, Briefing, September 2018.

⁹⁷ Eamonn Butler, “16+1: The EU’s Concerns of a Chinese ‘Trojan Horse’”, *Europe Now* (April 2018); and Richard Turcsányi, “Central and Eastern Europe’s Courtship with China: Trojan Horse within the EU?”, *EU–Asia at a Glance*, European Institute for Asian Studies (January 2014).

⁹⁸ Peter Cai, “China Targets Foreign Elites in Scholarship Push”, *National Interest*, 29 January 2016, at <<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/china-targets-foreign-elites-scholarship-push-15063>> [30 January 2021].

⁹⁹ Bachulska, Běrziņa-Čerenkova and Pejić, “We the People? The Challenges of Societal Relations with China”, p. 65.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

in International Law.¹⁰¹ At the time, he experienced China's economic opening up and had a grasp of the Chinese development model. According to his predecessor Negasso Gidada (president between 1995 and 2001), Mulatu Teshome's "Chinese education played a role in informing the country's reform policy. At present, China is Ethiopia's largest investor as well as trading partner".¹⁰²

Nevertheless, the prevailing impression that points towards a gradual internationalisation of Chinese universities can be misleading or, at least, inaccurate.¹⁰³ Despite the fact that Chinese universities are increasingly involved at the international level, facilitating the flow of foreign students and scholars, and adopting several reforms, they have also faced in recent years a strengthened political control from the Chinese government and the Party. Xi Jinping, who has held power since 2012, has reiterated that education plays a key role in China's political system but that "the Party is leader of all".¹⁰⁴ He has also stressed that "adherence to the Party's leadership is essential to the development of higher education in the country".¹⁰⁵ In this regard, not only has political control over Chinese higher education tightened since 2012, the government has also reintroduced an ideological curriculum and many universities have established "Xi Thought" institutes in their departments.¹⁰⁶ In this context, the increasing nationalism in China is perceived as a social glue that holds together and strengthens the country's cohesion.¹⁰⁷ The government has also promoted "a new narrative [that] is based on China's MoE [Ministry of Education] current neo-Confucianism project followed by universities and research institutions"¹⁰⁸ with the aim of shaping China's national history,¹⁰⁹ while putting a halt to the propagation of Western values.

¹⁰¹ Terje Skjerdal and Fufa Gusu, "Positive Portrayal of Sino–African Relations in the Ethiopian Press", in *China's Media and Soft Power in Africa: Promotion and Perception*, ch. 11, ed. Zhang Xiaoling, Herman Wasserman and Winston Mano (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 150; and "Who is Ethiopia's New 'President' Mulatu Teshome Wirtu?", *Ethiopian Review*, 9 October 2013, at <<https://www.ethiopianreview.com/index/49181>> [31 January 2021].

¹⁰² Cai, "China Targets Foreign Elites in Scholarship Push".

¹⁰³ Darla K. Deardorff, Hans de Wit, John D. Heyl and Tony Adams, eds., *The SAGE Handbook of International Higher Education* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2012); Jane Knight, "Internationalization Remodeled: Definition, Approaches, and Rationales", *Journal of Studies in International Education* 8, no. 1 (March 2004): 5–31; and Philip G. Altbach and Jane Knight, "The Internationalization of Higher Education: Motivations and Realities", *Journal of Studies in International Education* 11, no. 3–4 (2007): 290–305.

¹⁰⁴ Phillips, "China Universities Must Become Communist Party 'Strongholds', Says Xi Jinping".

¹⁰⁵ "China: Xi Calls for Stricter Ideological Control of Universities", BBC News, 9 December 2016, at <<https://www.bbc.com/news/38261706>> [30 January 2021].

¹⁰⁶ Feng, "Ideological Purge Hits China Universities with Western Ties".

¹⁰⁷ Perez-Garcia, "Introduction: Current Challenges of Global History in East Asian Historiographies", pp. 1–17; Gan, "Chinese Universities Tighten Ideological Control of Teaching Staff"; and Feng, "Ideological Purge Hits China Universities with Western Ties".

¹⁰⁸ Perez-Garcia, "From Eurocentrism to Sinocentrism", p. 339.

¹⁰⁹ Holcombe as cited in Perez-Garcia, "Internacionalización y reformas del sistema de educación superior en China" (Internationalisation and Reforms of Higher Education in China), p. 45; and Perez-Garcia, "Introduction: Current Challenges of Global History in East Asian Historiographies", pp. 1–17.

Another issue regarding China's "academic diplomacy" is the role of the Confucius Institutes (CIs). The first cultural and educational centres of this type were established in 2004. The administration of the CIs by Hanban,¹¹⁰ an institution composed of representatives from 12 ministries and commissions within the Chinese central government,¹¹¹ has attracted strong criticism. Hanban currently lists 112 CIs throughout the EU on its website.¹¹² One of their particularities compared to the cultural institutions of other countries such as Germany or France is that many of the CIs are embedded in the campuses of foreign universities, some of which regarded hosting these institutions as appealing because of funding.¹¹³ There are concerns over the influence of CIs on academic freedom, and also on the outsourcing of discussion and research related to China to an institution linked to its government. In fact, Hanban controls the hiring and training of teachers, "who are not considered university employees and do not enjoy standard academic freedom protections".¹¹⁴ Although most CIs operate under the umbrella of host universities, they have continued close ties with the Chinese government. Because of such controversial arrangements, several universities, such as the University of Chicago and Pennsylvania State University in the United States, McMaster University in Canada, Stockholm University in Sweden and the University of Lyon in France have withdrawn their agreements with the Confucius Institute.¹¹⁵

China has repeatedly rejected these accusations. In 2014, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Hua Chunying asserted that "all class and cultural activities are open and transparent. The Chinese side has provided teachers and teaching materials assistance according to requests of the US side. It has never interfered with academic freedom".¹¹⁶

Additionally, Chinese higher education still faces other intrinsic problems when competing at the international level. China's Ministry of Education introduced a reform in 2012 to recruit foreign faculty staff at Chinese universities, and from then on, foreign experts could collaborate in universities and research centres as professors or

¹¹⁰ Jane Pong and Emily Feng, "Confucius Institutes: Cultural Assets or Campus Threat?", *Financial Times*, 26 October 2017, at <<https://ig.ft.com/confucius-institutes/>> [31 January 2021]; and Pratik Jakhar, "Confucius Institutes: The Growth of China's Controversial Cultural Branch", BBC, 6 September 2019, at <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49511231>> [6 January 2020].

¹¹¹ Zhe, as cited in Hartig, "Communicating China to the World", p. 246.

¹¹² "About Confucius Institute/Classroom", Hanban, n.d., at <<http://english.hanban.org/>> [6 January 2021].

¹¹³ Pong and Feng, "Confucius Institutes".

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Josh Rogin, "Waking up to China's Infiltration of American Colleges", *The Washington Post*, 19 February 2018, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/waking-up-to-chinas-infiltration-of-american-colleges/2018/02/18/99d3bee8-13f7-11e8-9570-29c9830535e5_story.html> [2 January 2021].

¹¹⁶ "China Defends Confucius Institutes after New Doubts in U.S.", Reuters, 5 December 2014, at <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-usa-education-idUSKCN0JJ0MC20141205?edition-redirect=ca>> [2 December 2020].

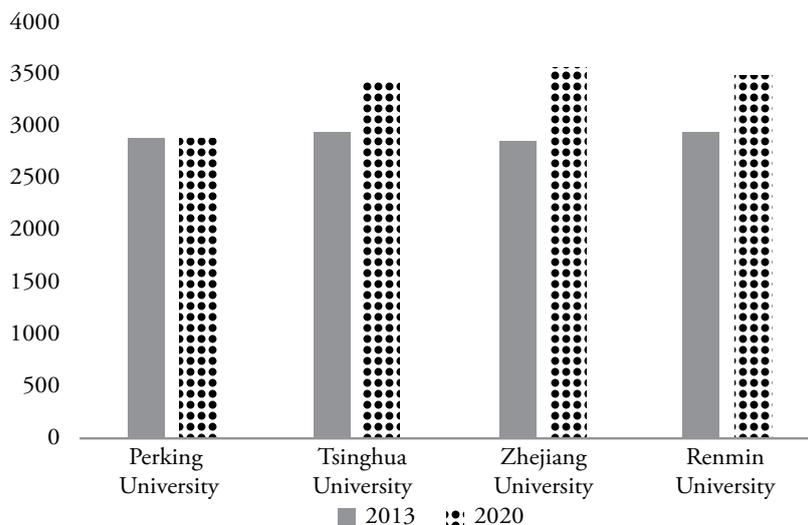
investigators for short periods. Despite the growing number of international researchers and professors working full time in China in recent years, the total figure (excluding visiting professors or scholars participating in Chinese consortia and scholars from Taiwan, Hong Kong or Macao) remains small¹¹⁷ (see Table 1, Figures 2 and 3).

TABLE 1
SHARE OF FOREIGN FACULTY WORKING AT MAJOR UNIVERSITIES IN CHINA IN 2020

	Total Number of Faculty Employees	Proportion of Foreign Staff (%)
Peking University	2,900	0.5
Tsinghua University	3,416	1.43
Renmin University of China	3,580	0.30
Zhejiang University	3,502	0.22

Sources: Authors' own elaboration. These statistics were compiled from the websites of the mentioned universities (faculties and departments) by calculating the share of foreign faculty staff working on a full-time basis (excluding visiting professors) of the total number of faculty employees. "Facts and Figures", Tsinghua University, August 2020, at <https://www.tsinghua.edu.cn/en/About/Facts_and_Figures.htm> [15 December 2020]; "Schools and Departments", Peking University, n.d., at <http://newsen.pku.edu.cn/Schools_Departments/> [15 December 2020]; Renmin University of China, at <<http://www.ruc.edu.cn/humanities-en/>> [15 December 2020]; Zhejiang University, at <http://www.zju.edu.cn/english/wcademics/list.htm#right_box_02> [15 December 2020].

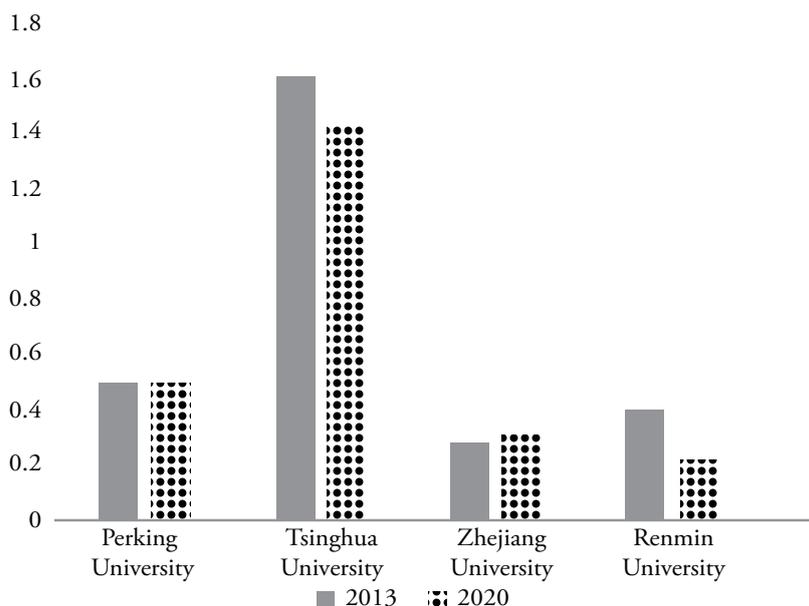
Figure 2. Total Number of Faculty at Major Universities in China in 2013 and 2020



Sources: Authors' own elaboration. These statistics were compiled from the websites of the mentioned universities (faculties and departments). This graph includes both Chinese and non-Chinese faculty staff. See sources from Table 1 and <http://newsen.pku.edu.cn/Schools_Departments/> [15 December 2020].

¹¹⁷ Perez-García, "Internacionalización y reformas del sistema de educación superior en China" (Internationalisation and Reforms of Higher Education in China), p. 42.

Figure 3. Share of Foreign Faculty in Major Universities in China in 2013 and 2020 (%)



Sources: Authors' own elaboration. These statistics are taken from the websites of the mentioned universities (faculties and departments) by calculating the share of foreign faculty staff working on a full-time basis (excluding visiting professors) of the total number of faculty employees. See sources from Table 1 and <http://newsen.pku.edu.cn/Schools_Departments/> [15 December 2020].

CONCLUSION

The internationalisation of China's higher education system and the education reforms within the strategic policy of the BRI are key elements to understanding China's current economic growth and its global hegemony. The implementation of the "academic diplomacy" concept has been crucial for the sustainability of China's higher education reforms when engaging with Western powers, or with European partners in this case. The concept also serves as a channel to achieve the desired outcomes of maintaining the political values, patriotic sentiment, national cohesion and uniqueness of China's long-lasting culture and civilisation.

China has implemented both "soft power" policy and "academic diplomacy" through its worldwide expansion of CIs, as well as academic and scientific partnerships with the main powers to promulgate the idea that China's rising power does not entail any threat. And the BRI initiative, as a principal policy of China's government since 2014, serves as the main instrument for expanding global cooperation in culture, education and science. Through the Erasmus+ programme, CEEC academic cooperation, the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions or European Research Council actions within the Horizon 2020 or Horizon Europe programmes, EU countries have become relevant partners in scientific and academic exchanges with China. However, there are various

opinions regarding the internationalisation of China's academic institutions among government officials and academic bodies. In reality, current patriotic discourses and a reversal to nationalism seem to contradict the internationalisation and reform of China's higher education system. Patriotic or national discourses shaped by the "internationalisation with Chinese characteristics" policy and narrative may be seen as contradictory to the internationalisation concept. "Internationalisation with Chinese characteristics" has indeed strengthened China's framework and schemes in its national model of education and research system, which have diverged from the Western model or international academic standards in many aspects. In short, patriotic discourses, in advocating non-inclusive frameworks, tend to be contradictory to the Western models which, on the other hand, encourage diversity by recruiting international faculty, adopting new labour practices to attract overseas talent and introducing an open and transparent peer review system. Thus, China's officials and institutions play a crucial role in exercising "academic diplomacy" to legitimise its current directions and policies in education, culture, and the higher education system.

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