

CHINA-CENTRAL ASIA EDUCATIONAL COOPERATION AS A COMPONENT OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION MANAGEMENT

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Abstract:

This article examines how education cooperation is implemented within the framework of international cooperation between China and Central Asia. It analyzes institutional mechanisms at the intergovernmental, university, and programmatic levels, with a particular focus on scholarship programs and Confucius Institute exchanges. The study argues that education functions as a strategic “soft infrastructure” that supports the economic, political, and regional goals of the relationship. Case studies and regional studies illustrate the growth and impact of education ties between China and Central Asia.

Keywords: China, Central Asia, education, cooperation, soft power, scholarships

In recent years, cooperation between China and Central Asia is growing stronger, especially within the framework of “The Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), but also within the other regional initiatives between countries. Five Central Asian countries – Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, all have signed cooperation agreements with China under the “Belt and Road Initiative”, and bilateral trade between China and Central Asian countries recently exceeded \$70 billion (US dollars) [9]. Along with infrastructure and energy projects, exchange in the field of education has also increased significantly. Official sources demonstrate us that the number of students from Central Asia studying in China increased from 11 930 in 2010 to 29 885 in 2018, which represents an annual growth rate of 12.3% [9]. According to Chinese official sources, all around Central Asia there are around 13 Confucius Institutes and 24 language centers, with more than 18 000 students studying according to information for 2023 [9]. All these growing tendencies reflect China’s strategy at deepening ties between countries, with the goal of improving connectivity between China and other countries, and development of cross-border talents in the case of students, who are studying in China. And as we know, high level agreements between countries now include student exchange programs, joint research and vocational training centers such as the Luban workshops (named after an ancient Chinese artisan) in partner countries.

However, most of the existing studies on the topics of educational cooperation only examine programs in isolation (like student mobility or language diplomacy), not like a tool of governance within China and Central Asia cooperation. This article fills in this gap, analyzing how exactly educational cooperation is managed as an instrument of international policy in the context of China and Central Asia. To be more precise, it examines the institutional channels (bilateral commissions, university partnerships, scholarship programs) through which education functions that this cooperation performs. The analysis is based on recent initiatives of BRI and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and as well as on-the-ground evidence. For example, author of this article is studying on a Chinese Government Scholarship (CSC) in Shanghai International Studies University (SISU), after spending a semester in Lanzhou University under a Confucius Institute language grant. In that Confucius program class, she had a student from Uzbekistan, reflecting the growing mobility of Central Asian youth to China. These patterns suggest that educational exchange is both expanding and being woven into the fabric of China and Central Asia policy.

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This article will proceed in the following way – firstly, it reviews concepts of education diplomacy and literature on China and Central Asia cooperation, then it describes institutional mechanisms of cooperation on intergovernmental, universities, and educational programs level. Next section analyzes the roles that education exchange plays in advancing China's and Central Asia's broader goals, such as economic capacity-building, political trust, and regional connectivity. In the discussion there will be comparison between educational cooperation and trading and infrastructure initiatives, noting that education is a form of long-term "soft infrastructure" in regional governance. In conclusion, it argues that education is a strategic element of China's regional management, with important implications for Central Asia's development and China's influence in the region.

Educational exchange is widely known and recognized all over the world as a tool of soft power and public diplomacy. By training foreign students and building networks of alumni, a country can foster favorable attitudes and long-term influence, which is widely known. In the case of China and Central Asia many analysts say that China is "deepening its use of higher education as an instrument of soft power" [4]. From the mid of 2010s in Beijing's policy documents emphasize the role of education in people-to-people bonds. For example, China's 2015 BRI vision ("Visions and Actions") explicitly highlights academic exchanges to garner public support, and the 2017 BRI strategy further emphasizes international cooperation in higher education as part of China's goal to lead global science and technology by 2050 [8]. Educational diplomacy directs studying Chinese language, learning Chinese culture and technical skills to partner countries. The "Educational Silk Road," which includes student scholarships and Confucius Institutes, introduces young Central Asians to Chinese culture and could potentially become their future allies in the elite.

More precisely, China has offered tens of thousands of scholarships and language fellowships under these programs. In 2013 President Xi Jinping announced a ten-year education plan in Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), including around 30 000 government scholarships for students from SCO members (Which includes Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan) and 10 000 placements for teachers or students at Confucius Institute. [7, p. 530]. All these measures train capable professionals, and also create an alumni network, which connects China and Central Asian countries. They also shape perceptions, for example, studying abroad in China can be often viewed as a path to well-paying jobs (for example, Chinese language interpreters can command high wages). This way, educational exchange and cooperation is not about development of human capital, but also a means of building trust and mutual understanding through personal connections.

Besides education, many scholars also examine the boarder framework of China and Central Asia cooperation. Central Asia has a key role within the "Belt and Road Initiative" and SCO, especially in such sectors as transport, energy and trade. Education is directly connected to these agendas. China's 2016 Education Action Plan for the BRI identifies student exchanges, mutual recognition of degrees, vocational training, and capacity building as priority areas [2]. On practice, China advances these goals through bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. Platforms like as the "China-Central Asia Cooperation Forum" and the "2023 Xi'an Summit" have produced education-related commitments, including joint laboratories and Luban Workshops, alongside infrastructure and trade agreements.

Academic literature though has largely focused on infrastructure, trade, and geopolitics, treating education as a secondary topic, that is often overlooked. While studies acknowledge Chinese universities as sources of technical training and expertise, systematic analysis of education as a governance instrument remains limited. This study addresses that gap by framing educational cooperation as a strategic tool shaping China and Central Asia relations.

Educational cooperation between China and Central Asian countries can operate across intergovernmental, institutional, and programmatic levels, for example:

First of all, Intergovernmental coordination. China and Central Asia both support bilateral agreements about education, science, culture, supported by ministerial exchanges

and joint commissions. Multilaterally, SCO works as a main platform: President Xi Jinping's 2013 pledge of 30,000 scholarships institutionalized large-scale exchange. After that, SCO and China-Central Asia summits has set goals for student mobility and joint research [3].

Institutional partnerships. Universities are able to support long-term networks through Confucius Institutes, branches, joint degree programs, alliances like University Alliance of the Silk Road, and faculty exchange. Dozens of Confucius Institutes, language and cultural centers run by the Hanban or Ministry of Education, work in Central Asian universities, teaching Chinese and hosting teachers. As of 2023 there are 13 Confucius Institutes in Central Asia (5 in Kazakhstan, 4 in Kyrgyzstan, 2 in Uzbekistan, 2 in Tajikistan) plus 24 Confucius Classrooms in high schools [5]. Beyond language, Chinese universities are partnering with local counterparts: for instance, Northwestern Polytechnical University has opened a branch at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, and City University of Hong Kong plans a branch at Satbayev University in Almaty. The University Alliance of the Silk Road, launched in 2015 at Xi'an Jiaotong University, now includes several Central Asian members to promote BRI education and research goal [5].

Exchange programs. There are many exchange programs between Central Asia and China, such as different scholarships, mobility programs, and vocational training constitute a separate level, providing technical and social education, funding students, and strengthening regional professional and administrative capacity.

Together, all these intergovernmental, institutional, and programmatic mechanisms form a multi-level governance system that ultimately supports long-term cooperation between China and Central Asia, particularly in education.

In general, all these mechanisms form a multi-level system, as discussed previously: governments sign memoranda of understanding and set the main agenda (at the intergovernmental level), universities establish partnerships and alliances (at the institutional level), and specific exchanges occur within the framework of funded programs (at the program level, which can include various student exchange programs or faculty exchanges). All this creates a governed system of cooperation in education that is integrated into the broader framework of cooperation between China and the Central Asian countries.

Case Studies: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Regional Mobility: The profiles of cooperation vary by country but share common trends. Kazakhstan, as the largest economy and most populous Central Asian state, sends the most students to China. Recent reports cite roughly 15,000 Kazakh students enrolled in Chinese universities in 2023 [6]. Many are on Chinese government scholarships, and significant numbers come from Russian-medium backgrounds who seek Chinese-language skills. Host cities for Kazakh students include Beijing, Shanghai, Xi'an and Xinjiang. Chinese universities such as those in Beijing and Shanghai offer popular programs in Chinese studies and engineering;

Uzbekistan has accelerated cooperation under President Mirziyoyev. Chinese language education is expanding (even high schools in Uzbekistan now offer Chinese) and top Uzbek students win Chinese scholarships. In 2023 Uzbekistan sent ambassadors-level delegations to Xi'an to discuss university rectors' forums. According to Chinese sources, over 8,000 Uzbek students were in China in 2023 [6]. This is partly fueled by programs like the Confucius Institute Scholarship and the Uzbekistan-China joint degree programs.

In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, China's cooperation is often more technical. China funds teacher training and ICU (Information Communications University) distance learning. In 2023 Kyrgyzstan detained two university deans for selling Chinese scholarships, showing how prized and contested these opportunities are [6]. Yet large numbers still go: about 4,000 Tajik students were reportedly in China in 2023 [6]. Many study in Xinjiang (close to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) on disciplines like medicine or engineering, at institutions like Xinjiang Medical University (our Tajik student case study above). The Lanzhou example likewise shows broad Central Asian presence: outside of elite cities, frontier provinces like Gansu and Xinjiang host many Central Asian scholars through branch campuses and Hanban programs.

Regionally, these trends reflect a rapid rise in academic mobility. Xinhua reports that Central Asian student numbers in China have grown “rapidly” in the post-pandemic period. Major education hubs such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Xi’an host hundreds of students from across Central Asia, fostering cosmopolitan learning environments. Over time, this mobility generates cross-border academic networks: Chinese universities establish joint institutes with regional partners, while Confucius Institute alumni associations connect graduates across national boundaries. As a result, Central Asian educational participation in China has surged, alongside a growing Chinese educational presence in Central Asia through schools, cultural centers, and vocational programs.

Unlike trade or infrastructure projects that deliver immediate material benefits, educational cooperation represents a long-term investment. Textbooks, teacher training, and student exchanges form “soft infrastructure,” gradually shaping skills, perceptions, and institutional capacity. Within the Belt and Road Initiative, education belongs to the “people-to-people” pillar, complementing transport and energy connectivity by producing trained engineers, planners, and administrators.

Educational initiatives also demonstrate resilience to political change: new administrations often maintain previously signed education agreements even when revising economic contracts. This durability gives education a governance function, ensuring stable channels of engagement. Although outcomes materialize slowly - graduates enter the workforce over years rather than months - China systematically treats education as a strategic complement to hard infrastructure.

Coordinated through bilateral agreements, SCO frameworks, university partnerships, and scholarship programs, educational cooperation builds human capital, fosters elite trust, and strengthens regional connectivity. In the long term, alumni networks may orient regional elites toward China, reinforcing influence and stability along China’s western frontier.

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