

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Transformation of Global Education in Africa: The Impact of Chinese Education Programs and Cooperation in Cameroon

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The economic influence of China is going global and it is noticeable in Africa where she has established a south-south cooperation based on trade agreements and commercial exchanges. China's presence in Africa competes that of the continent traditional partners as she has become one of its main development partners, with an increasing number of official development assistance projects. Considering its growing influence over the African continent, China has decided to extend its soft power by diversifying its cooperation axes now based on medicine, culture, and education. She has taken an example of western international organizations and countries acting in human resources development in Africa and intends to contribute to the development of a knowledge society on this continent. China is thereby changing the face of her diplomacy in Africa by reinventing its cooperation and partnership model based on education. This paper highlights the role of China in the transformation of global education in Africa by taking Cameroon as case study. It analyzes education programs, scholarships, and training centers of China in Cameroon as well as impacts of this new cooperation on national education and local development. It is a qualitative analysis that uses content analysis to illustrate the impact of education policy in Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that extends beyond the traditional Silk Road to encompass the African continent. The BRI has fostered education cooperation between China and Africa partners playing a significant role in the transformation of national education systems in African countries especially in Cameroon; the side effect of this enhanced cooperation has been the challenge of education traditional partners of the continent and the expansion of Chinese soft power.

Keywords: knowledge society, Belt and Road Initiative, official development assistance, education, cooperation

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is described as the most ambitious economic and foreign policy of the President Xi Jinping (Cai, 2017). According to Man Chan (2019), the BRI is a revival of ancient Silk Road that linked European continent to Asia based on economic considerations. This initiative raised by Xi Jinping in 2013 has spackled the attention of various scholars on the different socio-cultural, economic, political but above all strategic opportunities of this initiative to China, first of all, and particularly to each of the countries involved in this project. Of course, these studies highlight the huge challenge faced by such initiative which is mostly infrastructural while at the geopolitical and geostrategic level, they eventually question the increasing influence of China at the international level.

Historically, the Silk Road involved a series of trade routes that intertwined their ways through Europe, Central Asia, and Persia to China, in order to facilitate exchange of trade, commerce, and culture between 130 BC and 1453 AD (Island, 2019). From the stance of Raymond (Lau, 2020), the initial BRI project (2012) did not include Africa; it is only by 2015 after the advocacy of the World Bank chief economist Justin Yifu Lin that the continent got involved into this initiative as a main component of Chinese strategy in the revival and reconfiguration of the ancient Silk Road. Today, besides Egypt and Kenya that are keen African actors in the BRI maritime corridor, more than 40 African countries have signed the BRI agreement with China, among which Cameroon is included.

China has paid a particular attention to education in the BRI and according to the Chinese Ministry of Education, the intensification of cooperation and co-acting with the BRI countries in this domain is necessary to successfully achieve the various aims of this project (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016). In the BRI education plan, the country intends to promote and expand people-to-people exchanges, and harmonize education within the main corridors. In this strategy it can be highlighted the ambition of China to influence knowledge production and distribution across member countries and at the international level as well through the cooperation with International Organizations (IOs) such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

According to authors such as Jean Gonodo (2021), cooperation between China and Africa as education is concerned dates back to 1950s and has been since then one of the outstanding diplomatic tools between the two actors. Of course China has become over time an important donor¹ in the domain of education in Africa, in the vein of her diplomacy and regional cooperation she has early captured the needs of African countries in education, especially in skilled human resources. The cooperation between China and African continent in education and capacity building intertwines with the people-to-people connection of the BRI and its four principles: policy coordination, connectivity, unimpeded trade and financial integration. If skilled capacity building and education transformation had already been discussed at Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) 2006, the BRI crystallizes the various decisions and commitments taken by the Chinese government over education in Africa and across member states. It is argued here that the various FOCACs are bargaining places for the confrontation of different foreign policy objectives in order to improve Africa and China cooperation, while BRI is a well-defined and planned strategy put in place by China to increase her influence at the global level and, internationalization of education is one of the main vessels of this Chinese ambition. According to Changsong Niu and Jin Liu (2016), education in Africa is centered on three main axes: higher education; training program, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET); and scholarship. These are the main tools through which China influences education policies in Africa. Of course the country has supported education in different African countries with primary school construction (146 primary schools); she has equally financed construction of vocational and training schools in agriculture and engineering and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) as well; this has contributed to enhance primary education infrastructure in Africa, especially in rural areas. It has equally enhanced professional training in secondary education as well as diversified this system through the teaching of Chinese language in public secondary schools and public universities.

¹ The government of China prefers the term “partner” to that of “donor”, according to the latter the cooperation between China and other countries especially in Africa is a win-win partnership, meanwhile the term donor is more appropriate in the domain of education as China is a strong financial support to her African partners in this domain.

Human resource development has equally known an increase since the 2015 with the opening of BRI to Africa; another BRI has been envisaged. While some authors talk of a second One Belt One Road Initiative that implies a second BRI in Africa (Schwerbrock, 2017), others refer to this expansion as education Silk Road (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2016), and the various people-to- people exchanges between the continent and China in favor of human development have strengthened "air silk road" linking both. In addition to the already established economic partnership with African countries, the ambition of China to impact knowledge society and expand its knowledge diplomacy has led to an increase in air traffic between African countries and China. For instance, in 2018, about 81,000 African students registered in and attended Chinese universities (Shuo, 2021), while in 2021 China had sent about 23,000 health professionals to Africa with a thousand on the spot dispatched in 45 countries (Ni, 2023), in addition to all teachers and volunteers sent by the country for the teaching of Chinese language, etc. Hence the increase in human development cooperation between Africa and China has equally contributed to the increase in air traffic between Africa and Asia (China) thereby constructing what is considered as air Silk Road; a bridge between Africa and Asia.

As higher education cooperation between China and Africa is concerned, China strategy is articulated around five main axes: scholarship, institutional cooperation, Chinese language education, and high-level communication. Indeed, China is paying a particular attention to higher education in Africa and it is argued that this is the fulfillment of FOCAC and the BRI education plan that put an emphasis on the role of China in education development within member states. The lack of human skilled resources in some African countries has favored the position of China as a donor and strategic partner in higher education sector within the continent. As up mentioned, with the FOCAC there is an increase in scholarships for Africa students by the government of China, more than 33,000 scholarships (King, 2014). As institutional cooperation is concerned, China has increased cooperation with individual universities and between Chinese companies and African universities, in the case of Chinese language education; the diffusion of Confucius Institutions in certain member countries and the cultural center for the training of African languages in China have increased higher education cooperation since 2010s. The last but not the least, is high-level communication, which encourages collaboration between African higher education ministers and Chinese government. The aim of this one is to put in place convergent higher education policies between China and African ministers on research and training programs; with the support of UNESCO.

According to different authors, China intends to bring in an alternative educational pattern that is not lying on education for all (EFA) and sustainable development goals on education programs supported by traditional education donors in Africa (Niu & Lui, 2016). For others, the internationalization of China education is a symbolic action to expand foreign diplomacy and strengthen its soft power with countries around the world with a particular attention to African countries. Then, it is a seduction operation to give a more beautiful face of the China-Africa economic cooperation that others describe as another colonization of African countries (Ogbonna, 2024). Despite the assertion of Chinese government that cooperation as education is concerned between China and Africa is not unilateral, but based on mutual benefits (Kind, 2020) (Africa learns from China and China learns from Africa), it is nevertheless argued that China uses cooperation in the domain of Education to internationalize her knowledge and know-how with the aim to position herself as a keen actor in knowledge society and develop, moreover, her knowledge diplomacy and soft power. Africa appears to be a good experimental field for her ambition and a way to meet BRI goals.

The purpose of the present paper is therefore to analyze the influence of Chinese BRI ambitions on the development and transformation of higher education in Africa by answering the question: What are the

mechanisms used by the China within the BRI for the diffusion of know-how and knowledge on the African continent? And what are the implications for the continent? For the purpose of this study, Cameroon is the case study. Of course, the country has become one of the BRI members as well as FOCAC member country; education has been at the center of the cooperation between China and Cameroon since the reestablishment of their diplomatic relations in 1971. It is argued that the BRI has enhanced the cooperation between Cameroon and China in the domain of education: China influences people-to-people exchanges and impact education in Cameroon by developing various programs for Cameroonian students in Cameroon and in China. But, if education cooperation between China and Africa is considered as a win-win partnership (Xi, 2015) in regard of the investment of the Chinese government in promoting education at all levels within the continent, it is a stance that this investment is not only to the benefit of the African countries; the Chinese government uses higher education to position the country at the international level as a potential pillar in knowledge society and challenge western education standards. BRI is used in the achievement of such ambition. The present study uses policy diffusion² drawn from policy transfer studies and strategic analysis as theoretical framework, in order to explain how education policy made by China affects Higher Education in African countries and the position of China in global higher education. It eventually focuses on the existing literature as well as the various documents relative to this subject produced by various actors involved.

Internationalization of Chinese Knowledge and Know-How in Africa: Position of China in Africa Higher Education Through BRI

According to Knight (1993), internationalization of higher education is the process of integrating an international and intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service function of an institution. Internationalization of knowledge and know-how at the level of higher education is considered; first of all, as a response to global issues of societies, it reflects the convergence of various systems and policies at the international level. The most important thing to consider here is the fact the internationalization of higher education (or knowledge and know-how) is the concern of more than one actor within the international system and is multipolar. Knowledge has become a power and actors in this system do not only want to control its production but equally its diffusion as this goes along with transfer of ideologies, programs, ideas, and policies that can affect the way a society thinks and develop. Hence, the internationalization of China higher education through BRI in Africa has an impact on this latter directly within the continent but equally with the increase of African students in China that can play the role of transfer vessels from one higher education system (China) to another (Africa).

Diffusion of China Knowledge and Know-How in Cameroon's Higher Education: The Strategic Importance of Chinese Language in BRI

The BRI reflects the expansion of Chinese foreign diplomacy and the materialization of its soft power in Europe, Asia, and Africa. In addition to the various sectors engaged in this ambitious project, it reflects Chinese's ideology as it is the case in the education sector. Education is an important aspect of the BRI and China intends through this project to significantly impact tertiary education which is the most important sector through which knowledge is produced and diffused. The main strategy through which China intends to influence higher

² Defined as the process through which policy making in one place can affect policy making in other one.

educational and internationalized her knowledge and know-how in the BRI is through the promotion of Chinese language in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

The diffusion of Chinese knowledge and know-how in Africa especially in Cameroon has taken another turn within the BRI. As up mentioned, the diplomatic relations between China and Cameroon can be traced back to 1970s, based on bilateral agreements within which education has been at the center of negotiations. Actually, China is a non-negligible donor in Cameroon's primary, secondary, and tertiary education. Since 2007 the bilateral cooperation between the two countries is increasing economically, politically, culturally, etc., amplified within the FOCAC and equally in the BRI. What is observed, is the importance of this cooperation to BRI within the sub-Central African region. It is argued that Cameroon is an experimental field to the Chinese expansionist policy in Central Africa especially concerning education strategy in this region of Africa. Indeed the country presents considerable advantages to BRI and Chinese foreign policy in general within the Central Africa Subregion; population is one among others. With a population of more than 25 million people, Cameroon has the biggest population within the Central African Subregion within which she is considered as economically and politically stable. Additionally, despite the fact that the country is third in alphabetization rate in the sub region with 77% in 2018, its population in higher education is the highest. In 2022 the country has registered 89,522³ newcomers while countries such as Gabon and Congo that have a higher alphabetization rate 83.2 and 79.4 respectively; the percentage of incomers in higher education is very low as compared to that of Cameroon (in 2022 Gabon registered 23,032 new students in higher education⁴ and Congo, 36,995⁵). This demography at glance is attractive to China education policy expansion within the sub region, coupled to the cultural diversity of Cameroon, and is a significant advantage in BRI within the Subregion. It is a stance that all these elements have favored the intensification of China-Cameroon cooperation over education as a sample of Chinese influence in Central Africa Sub Region. Of course Cameroon benefits from this cooperation in human development and particularly in higher education with a support in training and education, etc. with the fast-growing population, 51.4 million by 2050⁶; Cameroon needs to ensure education of her population at all stages.

The internationalization of Chinese know-how and knowledge, especially in higher education in Cameroon passes through the integration of China education policy within the system. This includes the implementation of Chinese language in higher education, the opening of Confucius centers. Respectively to the global education policy of China in Africa, the influence of the former is perceivable through the transformation of the national education system. In Cameroon for instance the implementation of Chinese language in public universities (University of Yaoundé I), the creation of Confucius Institute at the University of Yaoundé II precisely at International Relations Institute of Cameroon (IRIC) in 2007 has punctuated the turn in the implementation of Chinese language in higher education. The importance of this diffusion lies in the fact that it opened Chinese culture not only to Cameroonians but equally to the various students from the sub region registered within this institute e.g. Chad, Congo etc. Moreover, the increase in bilateral relations between the two countries, but actually the increasing interest of Chinese language in this sector has led to its expansion within higher education system. Of course the extension of Confucius Institute to Maroua University and Douala University has fostered the influence of China in higher education in Cameroon, especially as the Chinese strategy implies to set up her

³ www.cameroon-tribune.cm.

⁴ www.gabonmediatime.com.

⁵ www.voxcongo.com.

⁶ www.observatoire-comifac.net.

cultural centers right within the most important universities of the country such as Yaoundé II and Maroua University that have a great proportion of foreign students from the sub region, thereby reaffirming the central position of Cameroon in the institutionalization of China knowledge and know-how in Central Africa. Not only the cultural aspect is being put forward the Confucius Center proposes quality education, scholarships for training in China and certificates to students, also, the training of more than 260 Cameroonian teachers has been trained in the higher teachers' Training College of Maroua to teach Chinese language in secondary schools; enough to diffuse the language within the sub region. The spread of Confucius centers in Africa is the main mechanism of internationalization of Chinese knowledge and know-how; it is the flagship of Chinese education. It is considered as a non-lucrative education center which emerged from Sino-foreign cooperation and which mission is to adapt to needs of societies in the world concerning Chinese language training and, improve the learning of this latter as well as Chinese culture, and strengthen educational and cultural exchanges between China and other countries, to develop friendship relations and between China and the rest of the world, in order to promote the development of a multicultural and world and build a harmonious world (Bankuwika, 2020).

Hence forth in 2023 during the 15th administrative council of Confucius Center of University of Yaoundé II, the director of the center has announced the implementation of Confucius Center to University of Dschang, Bertoua, and Ebolowa (Omboudou, 2023). It should be noted that the two last universities are just newly created state-owned universities and that of Bertoua has the advantage of being located at the border with Congo and Central Africa Republic, thereby given the opportunity to Chinese culture to penetrate these countries through different angles. This expansion will increase the influence of China's soft power (linguistic soft power) within the sub-region as only Cameroon and Congo are entitled with Confucius Centers. According to Bjørn H. Nordtveit (2010), China has already shown interest in expanding to Higher Technical Teachers Training College (HHTC) in Yaoundé I University because of the increasing interest of students to study Chinese language (about 1,565 students), University of Buea, Saint Andre in Douala and Senior Commerce School, with the perspective of increasing partnership with private HEIs.

Language plays a significant role in the conquest of knowledge society. It is not only a tool for communication and social interactions, it serves as a foundation for the diffusion of knowledge and learning. It is, first of all, an instrument of domination through which ideas are transferred and influence the society. In the case of China, the language is used to construct its identity in the international system and introduce Mandarin as a language of science through which knowledge is produced and diffused in other countries of the world. Henceforth language is an important factor in the internationalization of knowledge and the diffusion of this one into the international system; it eventually places Mandarin or Chinese language as a pillar in the knowledge society besides other languages like English and French (Bhaya, 2018) and often prepares the world to Chinese ideas, culture, and knowledge.

The internationalization of knowledge therefore starts with the diffusion and the promotion of Chinese language through the BRI, this is the first step towards the achievement of this objective. Confucius Centers in Africa are almost 100 spread in all the countries (Bankuwika, 2020), and their strategic implementation in HEI such as public universities had a great influence in the HE systems of some of these countries. The BRI has intensified the spread of these institutions in Africa and we notice that many of them have been created after the launch of BRI. According to some authors, language plays a significant role in the BRI; it is important for the cultural understanding at people to people exchanges and a communication tool for collaboration (Ge & Ho,

2022). Above all, Chinese language is used as the main communication language in the BRI over the diversity of language existing (53 official languages) (Ge & Ho, 2022). The implementation of Confucius Centers and Chinese language in Cameroon has therefore taken another turn with the BRI as the country is experiencing an increasing interest in Chinese language and training of Chinese teachers in the second school due to the demand. Chinese language has become one of the main languages taught in secondary school and university language courses in Cameroon and have therefore transformed these two educational systems with almost 20,000 Chinese learners from primary to higher education with more than 350 Cameroonians teaching Chinese language. The impact of Confucius Center is not only limited to learning of Chinese language but equally involves contact with Chinese learning materials such as books and other pedagogic material that gathers Chinese knowledge, culture, and ideas.

In addition to the spread of Chinese language through the BRI, the internationalization of Chinese knowledge and know-how equally passes through the diversity of education initiatives within BRI countries as it is the case in Africa and particularly in Cameroon.

The Polymorphic Nature of the Higher Education Cooperation Between China-Africa Under the BRI

The second characteristic of internationalization of Chinese know-how and knowledge in Cameroon's Higher education is its polymorphic nature. Of course the cooperation between China and Cameroon in higher education affects various domains: technological, financial, and pedagogical, medical, etc.; it eventually intensifies the role of China in the transformation of higher education in Africa and Cameroon in particular by diversifying and improving trainings in Higher education, and above all strengthen the collaboration and exchanges between the two countries.

As technological aspect is concerned, the government of China has greatly impacted higher education by becoming the main partner in the achievement of E-National Higher Education Network (ENHEN) of the incumbent ministry. Why starting with this point? The assistance of China in the materialization of this initiative has enabled higher education in Cameroon to put in place E-education dearer to the government. Through this project, Ministry of Higher Education intends to—professionalize teaching—move towards digitalization of teachings in Cameroon's private and public HEIs (MINIESUP and SICHUAN TELECOM CONSTRUCTION ENGINEERING Co., LTD., n.d.). Within this plan, the Chinese government has already contributed to the manufacturing of 50,000 laptops that the government has distributed to students in HEIs and other E-learning equipment since 2017. ENHEN is the main project involving all the HE sector, while the Chinese government assists various institutions in the domain of technology; for instance, it has equipped a laboratory at the University of Yaoundé I (Gonodo, 2021). It is equally observed here that technological aspect does not only involve equipment; it equally concerns the nature of the various scholarships offered by the Chinese government. These scholarships are mostly oriented towards technological development including sectors like engineering, telecommunication network, renewable energies, electricity, agriculture, etc.⁷ This training offered by the Chinese government intends to provide Cameroon with skilled human resources that can help her in the achievement of all technical aspects of development.

The support of China in the domain of technology is pairing with infrastructure and financial support. Financially, Cameroon has become the second main beneficiary of Chinese investment in Africa, while the

⁷ The partnership of China with universities in Cameroon is equally favoring technological development as it is the case with the University of Yaoundé I that already benefits from the knowledge and know-how of China in medicine and health care.

country is already its major economic partner. In 2017, China has invested about 1.430 billion FCFA in Cameroon in education (Chidiebere & Brenda, 2019). According to Etienne Songa (Gelin, 2010), Confucius Institute in Cameroon, generates a budget of about a hundred million of FCFA annually; this is eventually helpful in financing the institute scholarship in favor of Cameroonian students. In addition to the up-mentioned equipment of Yaoundé I University Laboratory, the Chinese government in the frame of the cooperation with Zhejiang University, has equally helped the Cameroonian University financially with about eighty-five million of Francs CFA (Pokam, 2019). The government of Cameroon has signed two main frame agreements in 2015 between the First Minister Philemon Yang and Li Keqiang in China. In the second frame agreement, the Chinese government agreed to support E-Higher education in Cameroon with 93.5 billion Francs CFA (MINIESUP and SICHUAN TELECOM CONSTRUCTION INGENGINEERING Co., LTD., n.d.), while in 2017 the Ministry of Higher Education received financial assistance from China of about 75 million francs for students' laptops, the construction of IT centers in eight state universities, and the implementation of E-Higher Education Network (all of these were included within the ENHEN). Just to mention these few examples. Chinese government often provides a considerable support in Official Development Assistance (ODA) and particularly in the domain of higher education in Cameroon, thereby becoming one of the main partners of the country. In addition to her financial support, China equally supports higher education in Cameroon through the construction of infrastructure. Accordingly to the various agreements and partnerships between China and HEIs, as well as the Ministry of Higher Education, the Chinese government has constructed various infrastructures across the country in public universities. This is the case of IT centers of the ENHEN in eight state-owned universities created before 2022, the construction and equipment of the various infrastructures of this project (with the contribution of Huawei), the construction of the center for digital development of Cameroon-Congo Interstate University in Cameroon which is the first High Digital University in Cameroon at Sangmelima⁸. Stand-alone initiatives such as the electrification of Yaoundé II University's campus and surroundings with solar energy by Huawei Company in 2013; this initiative has been financed by the Chinese Government at 1.5 million Francs CFA.

As institutional cooperation and scholarships are concerned, China has equally intensified its partnership with Cameroon's Ministry of Higher Education, along with other public and private institutions and universities directly. China through the Cameroon Ministry of Higher Education, awards scholarships to Cameroonian students and official, according to various sources, the Chinese have given more than 300 scholarships to Cameroonians (128 scholarships were granted in 2019 by the Chinese government to the ministry). Frequently, scholarships are offered by the Chinese government through the Ministry of Higher Education⁹; for the academic year 2022/2023, 33 scholarships were awarded directly to Cameroonians and 12 for the 2023/2024 session (Ministry of Higher Education, 2021). Indeed the cooperation between China and the Ministry of Higher Education is highly welcomed by this latter because of its impact in human resource development and education in this sector. On the other hand, in the frame of universities cooperation, Chinese government has signed partnership with University of Yaoundé II and that of Maroua where it has established her main cultural centers and is continuously expanding its influence in Cameroon's Higher Education through the signing of partnership with other public universities in Cameroon. The Chinese government is equally encouraging institutional

⁸ www.cameroon-tribune.com.

⁹ These application are diffused by the Ministry of Higher Education in Cameroon on its website and social network pages such as Facebook, and in some cases it is diffused at the national radio station.

cooperation between Chinese and Cameroonian HEIs and students mobility. For instance, the Chinese government has offered more than 70 scholarships to the African Institute of Computer Science, a private HEI in Cameroon, which gives 15 students each year over five years the opportunity to attend Chinese universities and benefit from internship at some Chinese enterprises in Cameroon.

China-Cameroon cooperation in the domain of higher education actually shows the impact of this one within the national higher education system in Cameroon. This strategy reflects Chinese influence in the education sector in Africa; that intends to harmonize and converge the various education systems with that of China thereby contributing to her knowledge and know-how internationalization. While, it is argued that the penetration of China in Africa through the BRI will equally enhance the influence of China at the international level. Therefore, Africa is not only a partner, but is equally a means for the Chinese government to meet her ambition of controlling knowledge society by internationalizing higher education within the BRI.

The Geopolitical and Geostrategic Impact of Chinese Education in Global Education: Shaping the Landscape of Education in Africa

The second part of this paper examines the impact of Chinese knowledge and know-how internationalization in Africa. It is argued that the inclusion of Africa in the BRI has given to China more incentive to expand her education policy on this continent, and since 2015 she has become a main partner and donor in education in Africa, thereby challenging the position of traditional and new partners of the continent in this domain. This is done through the expansion of higher education cooperation right within Chinese's territory and the strengthening of its position as a global education actor.

Challenging the Traditional Education Partners of Africa

The previous section tried to show mechanisms through which China internationalizes her knowledge and know-how in FOCAC and BRI member countries by focusing on their national education systems. This section intends to present the internationalization of Chinese education policies through the BRI as a means to influence knowledge society and become an important pole for knowledge production and diffusion within the various BRI routes in general and more globally. Internationalization of Chinese higher education in the various routes of BRI will enable the country to influence national education systems right within these countries but will equally enable China to challenge the traditional education partners or knowledge powers such as Britain, France, the USA, etc. that have a great influence in knowledge production and diffusion across the globe. China therefore does not only adopt their various mechanisms as it is the case in Africa by influencing directly the domestic education system; she eventually tries to consolidate this influence right within her territory in order to build a strong pole of knowledge society in China. Europe and America are no longer the only attractive territories as education is concerned; Asia and China in particular have been able to take advantage in this domain especially in higher education through the BRI. She influences education at the regional level, but equally on other continents such as Africa, where many students now prefer to study in China. According to various sources, up to 80,000 African students studied in China before the COVID-19 crisis and according to various reports, the rate of African students in China have grown by 285% between 2011-2017 while within the same period certain traditional education partners of the continent have faced a decreased (Kudzai, Kokutse, & Mbonyinshuti, 2022). The fact is that the increasing interest of Africans, especially in Cameroon facilitates Chinese knowledge and know-how transfer in towards African countries as some of these students may seek for employment within higher education

system as lecturer, etc., and this may also affect or influence the system. However, the government of China is using three main mechanisms to attract higher-education students in China: Networking, creation of circulatory places and easy visa for people from Africa willing to study in China. It is argued that besides the strengthening of economic reasons, China equally shows her global influence in training and education as well as human development at large; the more students learn in China, the greater her impact and the smother and easier her education plan in BRI can be achieved.

As networking is concerned, the government of China has put in place different networks through which cooperation with African partners can take place. They intend to favor cooperation between African and Chinese universities, between Chinese enterprises and African universities, as well as the cooperation between African countries' education ministers and China. The China-Africa universities 20+20 cooperation and the forum of the ministers of education are some examples. From the stance of H. Kenneth, the 20+20 cooperation that links 20 universities in Africa to 20 counterparts in China is the occasion to internationalize Chinese universities and Chinese education; and foster capacity building for Africa partners (King, 2014). On the other hand, the forum of ministers of education of Africa and China strengthens this cooperation from the top; it has a direct influence on decision makers of African education systems. For instance, Sino-African education minister forum in 2005 in Beijing has opened the gate to Chinese influence in African education issues by positioning the latter as a partner to human resource development and transformation of education within the continent (Xinhua News Agency, 2005). Important programs such as "University 100 program" between China and Africa equally densify networking in the domain of higher education in Africa; this program intends to promote talent's development, knowledge and technology transfer and joint research through activities like students and faculty exchanges¹⁰. It will enable African students in general to benefit from the education environment in China and facilitate international mobility between for these students as well as university cooperation.

Indeed, networks equally lead to circulatory places where the Chinese and African partners can discuss and exchange in different domains such as education. It is the occasion for China to diffuse its various norms, standards as well as initiatives concerning its vision of higher education modernization. Through this, China ought to impact education as well as knowledge sharing at the global level and particularly in Africa; this is the case of the Chinese IT company Huawei that has built a network that gathers higher education institutions across Africa under the banner of "Huawei ICT Academy" and "seed for future". Three HEIs in Cameroon have already subscribed to this network, Polytechnic Higher National School, Higher National School of Posts and Telecommunications, and Coast University Institute. Through these various initiatives, Huawei has contributed to the training of several Cameroonian students and teachers in technological domains such as routing and switching. Coupled to the cooperation with Chinese companies, short term and long term scholarship in China in favor of African students equally contribute to widen the influence of Chinese education in Africa. In the case of Cameroon, the Sino Cameroonian fraternity scholarship has facilitated this process; in recent years, 3,000 Cameroonians were registered into Chinese universities and over 300 of them have benefited from these scholarships.

The internationalization of Chinese know-how and knowledge is therefore taking place within the Chinese territory equally, not only in Africa. The government of China through various mechanism influences higher education transformation in Africa by the intensification of the Sino-African cooperation within Chinese

¹⁰ www.en.bfsu.edu.cn.

boundaries. It is not that easy to draw out the particularity and specificity of China in education aid in Africa as it is the case of traditional partners and donors of African countries, especially in Cameroon as they already use these mechanisms to influence and internationalize higher education in Africa, thereby asking the question: What is new in China's education aid in Africa? To this question, it is advanced that the volume of investment and aid policy between China and African countries have eventually encouraged and facilitated the adoption of Chinese know-how and knowledge into their national systems. The country stands today as one of the main development partners in the domain of education in Africa. The volume of her investment as well as the various education programs¹¹ in Africa and China in favor of African students demonstrates the ambition of the latter to influence knowledge production and transmission outside her territory.

Education is considered to be the main incentive to economic development and growth and as such it constitutes the main issue in Africa's economic boom. International organizations such as United Nations Development Program (UNDP) have emphasized on human development in the diffusion of the various adjustment programs of World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) to highlight the importance of education, training, etc. in economic development programs in poor countries (adjustment with a human face). This evidence has increased education aid towards poor countries as it was the case in Africa. From then, it is observed a path on the mechanisms of aid and assistance in education developed by Western countries and eventually reproduced by emerging countries such as China towards African countries. This implies diffusion of culture, internationalization of higher education, institutional cooperation, scholarships, and construction of schools and other educational and training infrastructure (concerning the higher education sector). In the case of Cameroon, the country has a large panel of education donors and partners; she attracts. What has been mentioned as traditional partners i.e. international organization linked by treaties and international agreements: World Bank, IMF, UNESCO, UN, PNUD, bilateral partners France, the USA, Britain, Japan, seem to be in competition with China that equally tries to influence education in this part of the world and as such transfer also a part of idea, norms, and standards as up mentioned. Even though she is not acting in coalition with other actors, China is willing to work along with international organizations such UNESCO to deepen and widen her assistance to African countries in the domain of education and particularly in higher education and intends to intensify digital education, vocational training as well as teaching skills on the continent (Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, 2024).

Extending Chinese Soft Power Through Education

The socio-economic expansion of China since several decades is teaching an important lesson: China has a word to say in the knowledge society. Knowledge society can be described as human structured organization based contemporary development knowledge and representing new quality of life support system (Hamdija & Carvalho, 2010) and the contribution to knowledge at the international level passes through the capacity to influence its production. What is being observed from China is that the country is trying to become a pole of knowledge production and diffusion especially concerning Hi*tech and ICT in general. Of course the experience of the country as the "world manufacturer" has placed the country as a pioneer in these various domains, today its knowledge and know how is taught and diffused in the domain of education and academia. It cannot be denied

¹¹ China eventually focuses her assistance on domain that is attractive to African countries such as medicine, telecommunication, and agriculture. She proposes programs that are not always affordable to students in Europe and America. And her position as the world's manufacturer has given to the country the necessary credibility to propose.

that the digitalization of societies today has fastened and strengthened the position of China in at the international level concerning the knowledge production and diffusion in the domain of ICT. Not only through economic partnerships, education has been one of the means through which China strengthens its soft power at the international level.

Indeed, education is considered as a source and tool of soft power in international relations: It is being used to foster soft power and contribute to its production (Wojcuk, Michalek, & Stormowska, 2015), according to Joseph Nye (2004) education is a source to build and strengthen soft power. Even though education is always put forward in soft power studies, its influence is visible in several ways and it often influences the development of societies within which it is diffused. This is the case of the influence and impact of scientific researches of western countries on the global south. It influences the way people think and act along with the way these countries organize their societies. Through education, it is possible for a country to influence other through attraction and persuasion by becoming a valuable source of knowledge and ideas. According to some authors, education especially higher education plays a significant role in the foreign policy of a country willing to demonstrate its soft power at the international level (Gauttam et al., 2024). It eventually shows its ability to contribute to the socio-economic development of other countries by sharing information, knowledge, know-how etc. that can be used to develop another territory. It is therefore assimilated to a transfer system.

Through the BRI and eventually the education aspect of this initiative, China equally tries to foster its soft power in Africa and Cameroun in particular. As this section outlines, there is equally a diversification of soft power's resources that states put in place in order to become more attractive and persuasive to others. The BRI is a circulation space for Chinese knowledge and education policies; it is equally a means through which the country can influence education in the international system and stands as a model; in this domain it is stance in the present analysis that China has shown a particular interest in influencing global education by going into partnership with international organization in this domain like UNESCO and has gradually the summit as a pillar in education across the world for instance; the Chinese government is organizing since decades high level conferences and summit in the domain of education such as the International Conference on Artificial Intelligence and Education in Beijing with a focus on AI in education and planning, the Global Smart Education Conference in 2023 with a focus on education transformation and data governance and many others more recently in 2025, many others were organized among which the Global Smart Conference in Beijing in August 2025, the International Conference on Digital Lifelong Learning in Shanghai in October 2025 and the Global AI (artificial intelligence) Policy Dialogue in July (UNESCO Institute for Information Technologies in Education, n.d.).

China is gradually becoming a pole for the production of smart knowledge based on digital education across the world; thanks to its foreign policy and the strategy of using education as a strong weapon in its diplomacy. In addition then to the various language centers (Confucius centers) across higher education systems in different countries such as Cameroon that promote Chinese culture, it is equally observed that China tries to stand as an important actor in the construction of knowledge society in the international system and it eventually contributes to foster her soft power within this one. According to a study on Chinese education at the international level, it is reported that the number of international students in China has increased; in addition to the African students, 500,000 international students were enrolled in Chinese's universities and higher institutions by 2019. It has contributed a long way to position China as a top leader in study abroad in Asia (Wen & Du, 2023); describing education in China as high quality and professional. She does not only seek to reproduce the patterns of leading countries in global education; she equally challenges their position into the international system as a leader in the

knowledge society; of course China has this capacity with about 3,000 public universities and 800 private HEIs. Hence internationalization of Chinese in Africa through the BRI and multilateral cooperation contribute to the expansion and strengthening of Chinese soft power into the international system. Of course China through this strategy has been able to deepen her influence in international education mobility across the world and particularly with the African continent; according to Professor Samuel Donkor (Manyukwe, 2025), in addition to thousands of Africans that have studied in China over the last decades. The country is actually hosting more than 50,000 students from Africa. The country has also established relations with over 350 universities in more than 50 African countries as well.

Higher education (university) in one of the main pillars of knowledge society is a place where complex knowledge is created and reproduced. HE, especially university is essential in generating and disseminating knowledge, as well as skilled human resources necessary for modern economy and development for this reason; authors such as Frank Webster (2005) think that universities ensure the creation of new knowledge that guaranty market success. It is therefore argued that the education soft power of China is a strategy that strengthens her economic ambition at the regional and global level.

Conclusion

The present paper has tried to show the impact of BRI on education development in Africa. By taking as case study Cameroon it is stance that the BRI has contributed to the strengthening of China-Africa cooperation in the domain of education and particularly in higher education. In addition to the already existing cooperation such as FOCAC, the BRI had intensified education cooperation and exchanges between Africa and China; the latter have succeeded in transforming higher education systems in some BRI members such as Cameroon through the diffusion her knowledge and know-how and the polymorphic nature of this cooperation within BRI. In addition, it is observed that this strategy is enhancing the position of China in the international system as a keen actor in the knowledge society hence the BRI is not only of economic benefit to African countries involved in this initiative but it settles the roots of economic growth and development for these countries through human development; on the other side apart from being a mechanism of soft power development in the main routes it specifically enhances education soft power of China by given her the opportunity to internationalize higher education right to Africa. It is clear that despite the win-win discourse China takes advantage of this transformation thereby opening the debate on the de-neo-colonization discourses of academicians and experts claiming that Africa is still exposed to foreign influence (China) through such initiatives.

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