

Exploring China-Malaysia Educational Cooperation within the Context of BRI

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Abstract

Under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework, many policies and measures to foster international educational cooperation and exchange have been gradually introduced and implemented. This research aims to explore the key points of China-Malaysia bilateral educational cooperation, discover the laws and needs of cooperation, and summarize good experiences and practices under the policy background of the BRI. It will help form a long-term mechanism for bilateral educational cooperation and further improve the quality of education and cultural exchange.

Keywords: China-Malaysia Relations; the Belt and Road Initiative; Educational Cooperation

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1.0 Introduction

Since China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, trade, economy, and infrastructure cooperation have deepened. On this basis, BRI has gradually become a comprehensive platform for multi-sectoral cooperation between China and its neighboring countries. Since 2016, the government of China has successively introduced the Belt and Road educational policies, focusing on three key areas: educational cooperation, talent training cooperation, and the joint construction of the cooperation mechanisms (MOE, 2016). For example, the "Silk Road" Chinese Government Scholarship was established to fund 10,000 students from countries along the route to study in China each year (MOE, 2016). China's educational cooperation with other countries has flourished within the BRI policy framework, particularly with Malaysia.

Within the background of the favorable policies of BRI, the educational collaborations have improved the quality of education on both sides and significantly accelerated personnel exchanges between China and Malaysia, promoting tourism and boosting trade and economic development. This research aims to explore the key points of China-Malaysia bilateral education cooperation, including the projects, mechanisms, achievements, and obstacles, to identify the characteristics and patterns, so as to summarize the good experiences and practices under the BRI policies.

2.0 Literature Review

The existing literature can be categorized into two perspectives: the education perspective and the policy perspective.

2.1 Educational Cooperation Analysis Perspective

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Scholars focus on international students and higher education institutions abroad from the standpoint of educational partnership. Xiujuan (2025) investigated the cultural adaptation of current Chinese international students in Malaysia, as it is an important issue in educational cooperation. Zhang, Y. et al. (2025) confirmed the cross-cultural adaptability of online learning among Chinese and Malaysian students through comparative research. Zhang Ying et al. (2024) stated that the BRI policies led to a continuous expansion of the number of students studying abroad in both countries. Against this backdrop, it is crucial to formulate regulations for the management and safety of international students and improve international management standards for the international student market.

Vocational education became the hot trend within the BRI framework. Ma (2023) noted that the lack of a regional qualification framework and a long-term cooperation mechanism, poor cooperative education quality, and a lack of awareness of the vocational education community all limit cooperation between China and Malaysia. In this sense, the foregoing issues can be resolved, and deeper and more useful cooperation can be fostered by creating a new vocational education system through the “Luban Workshop” and concurrently creating a regional certification framework system for vocational education. Wang (2024) explored the convenience of vocational education for youth development from the perspective of Chinese-funded enterprises in Malaysia. Pan Yu and Zhang Chaokai (2025) preliminarily explored the mechanism of cross-border collaborative education in vocational education between China and Malaysia, and this type of research deserves more attention.

2.2 Policy Analysis Perspective

This type of research examines the cultural exchange activities between China and Malaysia from the perspective of geopolitics and cultural soft power, and regards educational cooperation as one of the powerful ways to shape international image (Tien & Bing, 2021). These studies focus more on the bridging role of Confucius Institutes (Yanran & Salleh, 2025) and international students (Yang et al., 2023). As Dong and Shi (2024) stated, the China-ASEAN cooperation mechanism is characterized by a relationship between a single entity and a regional group. In the case of China and Malaysia, collaborative initiatives in education might be seen as a mechanism that mirrors and reinforces the broader orientation of their respective foreign policies. These projects serve as a barometer of bilateral ties, indicating mutual confidence, common development goals, and a commitment to long-term partnership in an ever-changing geopolitical situation.

2.3 Comprehensive Literature Evaluation

In current research on China-Malaysia educational cooperation under the background of BRI, the education perspective emphasizes the practical challenges and development paths in cooperation, while the policy perspective focuses on the role of educational exchanges in international relations and the construction of cultural soft power. However, existing research often focuses on specific aspects, lacking a systematic analysis of the overall mechanisms of educational cooperation and its positioning within the BRI context. Therefore, this research aims to investigate a previously overlooked issue in the existing literature: the multi-layered, interactive cooperative system created by different forms of cooperation within China-Malaysia educational collaboration. This issue not only connects to discussions on vocational education collaboration, student exchange, and cultural adaptation, but also attempts to establish a closer connection between policy and educational practice, thereby providing an analytical path for understanding the overall picture of China-Malaysia educational cooperation.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Data Collection

Semi-structured in-depth interviews serve as the source of primary data for this research, which employs qualitative analysis. According to Deterding and Waters (2021), the sample size of interviews for a qualitative paper should be between 12 and 208 if scientific conclusions are to be drawn. Based on the author's visits to 5 universities and institutions that currently have China-Malaysia educational cooperation programs, and with the help of Victor Yocco's (2017) formula for calculating the sample size of interviewees, 12 interviewees were selected and numbered for interviews.

In this research, the selection criteria for the respondents are as follows: the primary employees involved in China-Malaysia international education collaboration, who refer to the head of some culture-related organizations, or staff who have undertaken or experienced international cultural exchange activities. The interviewees are not restricted by gender. However, they are mainly defined according to their work experiences, and the age is required to be between 20 and 60 years old to ensure that the interviewees are at the stage of engaging in cultural exchange activities. In addition, this paper was completed in English, and the interview protocol is also in English. Therefore, participants who do not understand English will not be considered. Since the author's mother tongue is Chinese, interviewees can be interviewed in Chinese if they are proficient in it. The interview transcripts will be presented in both Chinese and English. The basic information of the respondents is detailed in the table below.

Table 1. Basic Information of Interview Participants

Participant	Gender	Age	Profession	Tenure of engaging in China-Malaysia educational exchange
P1	M	46	Visiting scholar at a university in Malaysia	20 years
P2	M	35	Manager of international cooperation projects of a university	8 years

Participant	Gender	Age	Profession	Tenure of engaging in China-Malaysia educational exchange
P3	F	35	Project manager of a study abroad agency	7 years
P4	F	34	Head of vocational education cooperation projects at a vocational college	3 years
P5	M	24	Translator for a study abroad agency	3 years
P6	F	28	Project manager of a study abroad agency	5 years
P7	M	44	Director of the International Cooperation Office of a college	7 years
P8	F	37	Chinese language teacher at the Confucius Institute	8 years
P9	M	34	Project manager of a study abroad agency	6 years
P10	F	44	Manager of international cooperation projects of a university, English teacher	15 years
P11	F	56	Director of the International Cooperation Office of a University	17 years
P12	M	30	Specialist in charge of the Chinese students program at a university in Malaysia	6 years

(Source: Compiled by the author based on interview data, 2025.)

3.2 Data Analysis

The recordings were transcribed exactly as spoken during the interviews. The transcripts were loaded into NVIVO14 qualitative analysis software for initial coding. The coding system primarily emerged from the research objectives and interview content, focusing on specific themes, terminology, and phrases that consistently appeared in the text. A multi-tiered coding framework was established through the systematic induction and organization of interview data, encompassing core themes, secondary themes, and specific categories, thereby concluding the analytical process from data to themes. The coding process involved categorizing recurring topics in the transcripts to create initial codes, which were then structured into themes, sub-themes, and relevant categories. Secondary and tertiary coding was conducted to improve topic refinement, examining each theme's core organizing principle, its relevance to the research question, and the sufficiency of data support. The data for each subject was clarified and organized into a coherent narrative based on thematic elements. This process emphasized the interrelations among concepts. This study conducted interviews with 12 individuals, with saturation reached for 10 participants after coding, leading to a reduction of the data to 101 codes and 326 references.

4.0 Findings

Based on the three-level coding of the interview data, the types of educational cooperation can be divided into the following categories:

Table 2. Types of China-Malaysia Educational Cooperation under the BRI Context

Category	Description	Typical Forms /Examples	Main Participants
International Students and International Language Education	The flow of students between China and Malaysia, as well as Chinese language education promoted through Confucius Institutes and "Chinese + Vocational education" programs.	- International students - Language programs in universities - Confucius Institutes and Classrooms	Universities, Confucius Institutes, the Ministry of Education, and language centers.
China-Malaysia Cooperative Education Programs	Joint academic programs or institutions established through bilateral agreements.	- Branch of universities (e.g., Xiamen University Malaysia) - Dual-degree or "2+2" programs - Collaborative curriculum development	Partner universities, the Ministry of Education, and accreditation bodies.
Vocational Education Cooperation	Collaboration between Chinese and Malaysian vocational colleges, and industrial training within the "Chinese + Vocational Education" system.	- Technical training centers - Joint skill certification programs - Internship exchanges with enterprises	Vocational institutions, enterprises, local governments, and universities.
Short-term and Online Exchanges	Non-degree cooperation activities such as academic exchanges, online learning platforms, and short-term study tours.	- Exchange students - Academic forums - Cultural exchange camps	Universities, NGOs, online education platforms, and cultural organizations.

(Source: Developed by the author based on interview data and relevant literature, 2025)

4.1 International Students and International Language Education

The most obvious and developed aspect of China-Malaysia educational collaboration, according to interview data, is still international student mobility. Reciprocal student exchanges have enhanced cultural comprehension and afforded both parties a multitude of educational options. P11, a director of international cooperation, asserted, "Student mobility constitutes the cornerstone of our collaboration; it is the genesis of genuine mutual understanding." Participants emphasized the language and policy benefits of pursuing education in Malaysia for Chinese students. P2, an international project manager, explained that Malaysia's English-speaking environment "lowers the language threshold for Chinese students", while P6 added that "the cost of study and living is relatively affordable, making Malaysia an ideal destination."

However, China's growing scholarship programs are a major source of motivation for Malaysian students studying in China. "Many Malaysian students apply for the Silk Road Scholarship; they see it as a bridge to gain professional training in China and later contribute to bilateral projects," said P8, a Chinese language teacher at a Confucius Institute. Respondents also underscored the importance of international Chinese language education. The Confucius Institutes in Malaysia have become not only language centers but also cultural platforms. Several participants (P7, P10) observed that Confucius Institutes have become an important vehicles that foster goodwill and cultural affinity between the two nations.

Overall, this theme suggests that language and mobility cooperation provide the human and cultural foundation for more structured institutional collaboration. According to this research, most respondents agreed that the most mutually beneficial and long-lasting type of collaboration is still language instruction combined with student exchange.

4.2 China-Malaysia Cooperative Education Programs

A second major finding relates to the establishment of joint programs and institutions, such as Xiamen University Malaysia and the "2+2" articulation agreements between universities and colleges. These initiatives were seen by participants as representations of long-term collaboration and institutional trust under the Belt and Road Initiative. "Joint programs go beyond student exchange—they are about co-developing curricula and degrees that both countries recognize", noted P7, director of a college's international office. According to P3, "students prefer joint programs because they provide dual-degree opportunities and international exposure at a lower cost than going abroad entirely", the manager said. A number of individuals gave specific instances. P4 described a program between Shandong Institute of Commerce and Technology and UCSI University: "Students complete two years in China and two in Malaysia; if they meet English and academic requirements, they obtain dual diplomas recognized by both sides."

But the interviewees also mentioned difficulties. While P2 noted that "some students struggle with English proficiency, which limits their progression." P10 noted that "curriculum alignment and credit recognition are still not seamless." Respondents concurred that cooperative education initiatives have increased institutional capacity, broadened learning routes, and raised graduates' employability in spite of these problems.

Analytically, this theme shows how bilateral collaboration in higher education has matured, moving from temporary student movement to greater institutional integration.

4.3 Vocational Education Cooperation

The "Chinese + Vocational Education" paradigm was the driving force behind the third theme, vocational education collaboration, which emerged as a significant novelty. "Vocational training has become an engine for industrial collaboration as it connects education directly with the labour market", stressed P4, who oversees vocational cooperation initiatives. "Vocational partnerships fill the gap that Chinese companies in Malaysia need skilled local workers who understand both the language and the technical processes," P9 stated. The statement "our students are interested in short-term training in China's advanced industries, and many later get hired by Chinese firms" was also emphasized by P12, an expert from a Malaysian university. The information also shows that both governments support these programs through enterprise partnerships and governmental incentives. For example, P1 referred to the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) training project as a successful case.

Nevertheless, challenges remain. P11 cautioned that "vocational cooperation still lacks a standardized certification system", while P8 stressed that "students' Chinese proficiency often limits their participation." Despite these concerns, respondents generally agreed that vocational collaboration not only supports BRI-related industries but also fosters sustainable people-to-people connectivity. This theme essentially focuses on how China-Malaysia educational cooperation has changed from being solely intellectual to being practical, job-focused, and producing quantifiable socioeconomic results.

4.4 Short-term and Online Exchanges

The fourth theme is about online and short-term interactions. These activities were regarded by respondents as inclusive, adaptable, and supportive of academic continuity. "Virtual exchange programs and online seminars became the lifeline of our cooperation during the pandemic", P5 recalls. According to P10, hybrid models that combine in-person meetings with virtual ones enable participation "without geographical barriers". The Chinese Bridge Language Competition and the China-Malaysia Maritime Silk Road Symposium, both of which have continued virtually in recent years, were cited by a number of respondents as noteworthy examples. P3 observed that "online exchanges make cultural learning more accessible, especially for students who cannot afford to go abroad." P6 emphasized that such exchanges "enhance inclusivity and continuity of dialogue even in different times".

From an analytical perspective, this theme demonstrates the digital transformation of educational cooperation. Online collaboration is not merely a substitute for physical mobility; it represents an emerging modality that complements long-term programs, strengthens institutional ties, and widens access to transnational learning.

5.0 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that China-Malaysia educational cooperation within the BRI framework has evolved beyond traditional student exchange into a comprehensive, multi-level partnership that integrates higher education, vocational training, and digital interaction. The interviewees' statements showed that these activities are not isolated phenomena but are directly aligned with the BRI's objective of "people-to-people connectivity".

For instance, Malaysian students' enrolment in Chinese universities reflects both the BRI's intended talent flow and their own educational goals. As stated by P10, "our students who study in China will return with skills that align with ongoing China-Malaysia initiatives." This supports the claim made by Tian and Bing (2021) that, under the BRI, educational collaboration serves as a kind of cultural diplomacy. Therefore, it is important to consider international student mobility as a tool that facilitates infrastructural and trade cooperation between China and Malaysia.

Li and Bao (2023) believe that the logical trend for China to deepen its higher education cooperation with other BRI countries is to promote economic and trade interactions through higher education cooperation, which is an important basic prerequisite for ultimately achieving coordinated development of education and economy among countries. This research further confirms this view. At the same time, this research believes that vocational education has played a huge role in promoting economic and trade, and infrastructure construction. Several interviewees emphasized that vocational education has become the "engine" of bilateral cooperation. However, vocational education is not limited to higher education. It also includes non-academic "apprenticeship programs" and corresponding language education. P4 and P9 specifically mentioned that apprenticeship programs will be the hot trend.

However, discrepancies emerged between the interviews and the current scholarship. Zhang et al. (2024) emphasized the expansion of higher education exchanges; however, several respondents (P6, P10) indicated that linguistic and mechanical barriers persist in restricting long-term student mobility. This suggests that while BRI policies establish a supportive framework, implementation challenges remain.

Participants like P5 and P3 say digital platforms have "broadened access" and "kept cooperation alive" for online and short-term transactions. This supports Dong and Shi's (2024) claim that China-ASEAN educational collaboration is becoming hybrid and inclusive. The BRI's connectivity goals are being altered to reflect new technology and social realities by integrating online and offline media.

From a practical standpoint, the findings imply that educational cooperation contributes to both people-to-people and cultural exchanges, the aim of the BRI. Yet, the interviews also suggest a need for more coordinated policies. According to this research, three targeted and actionable policy recommendations can be proposed:

1. Establish a China-Malaysia Joint Educational Certification Framework. A bilateral mechanism under the BRI's educational policies could ensure mutual recognition and support the employment of graduates in transnational projects.
2. Create a "BRI Education Cooperation Coordination mechanism". Fragmented program management often weakens efficiency. A joint mechanism between the ministries of education of China and Malaysia could streamline policy alignment, monitor program quality, and facilitate inter-institutional collaboration.
3. Create an online community for long-term knowledge sharing. Continuing the fruitful trend of online exchanges, a permanent China-Malaysia "BRI e-Exchange Hub" may serve as a platform for cooperative research, credit-sharing classes, and hybrid seminars, all of which would guarantee continuous connection across time.

6.0 Conclusion& Recommendations

The findings show that educational collaboration is essential to the BRI's "people-to-people connectivity" pillar. Students moving across nations foster cultural understanding and trust; cooperative and vocational programs generate industry-aligned human capital; and internet exchanges make international learning more inclusive. These results show how education localizes and materializes the BRI's strategic objective.

Nevertheless, the investigation also revealed a number of constraints that impede the comprehensive attainment of BRI's educational objectives. Some of these factors are the absence of standardized qualification frameworks in vocational education, the unequal language proficiency of international students, and the lack of consistent coordination among institutions. It is imperative to confront these obstacles in order to enhance the long-term sustainability of the educational cooperation between China and Malaysia.

As for the limitations, projects at lower levels, such as middle and primary school, were not thoroughly examined in this research. In China, for example, the idea of "education going global" has become a big and quickly rising part of the process of internationalizing education as a whole. A rising number of well-known high schools and early childhood education organizations have opened campuses abroad. This is a sign of the trend. Additional data from more levels need to be collected and used to support this field of study. The current study mainly included practitioners from universities and vocational institutions. Future studies should also involve policymakers, enterprise representatives, and students to capture a more comprehensive view of the cooperation ecosystem under the BRI.

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Paper Contribution to the Related Field of Study

The paper contributes to the fields of cultural and educational exchange between Malaysia and China.

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