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Xiaoyu Li

Associate Professor
Shandong University of Art & Design
China
15318856805@163.com

Education for International Understanding Design Literacy in the Context of the Belt and Road Initiative

ABSTRACT

Education for international understanding is an educational concept put forward by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) with the goal of promoting cultural understanding and world peace, which is still of great practical significance in the current world of changing and complex conflicts and crises. Following a close look at the humanistic perspective of promoting exchanges, cooperation, prosperity and world peace in the Asia-Europe-Africa region and the rest of the world, China's government developed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to put into practice the concept of education for international understanding. This article presents the argument that as art and design education serves social development and promotes humanistic exchanges, the concept and values of education for international understanding should be integrated into university art and design education. This important literacy not only explores the design value of promoting cultural understanding in the face of the current complex global crisis and a challenging environment but also adds a new dimension to promoting exchanges and cooperation in the humanities along the BRI.

Keywords: Education for Peace, humanistic exchange, design education, international education

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PROMOTING INTERCULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

At the present time of global integration, the mode of international coexistence brought about by the cross-border flow of people, property and goods makes the collision and exchanges between countries, religions, ethnic groups, races and other multiculturalism increasingly frequent. However, the world's political pattern remains complex and volatile and contradictory conflicts are constantly emerging, thus presenting a grim reality regarding peace, the rights of various ethnic groups, and equality. In the complex context of globalisation and a diverse world, the search for intercultural understanding and tolerance, the pursuit of equality and the realisation of global coexistence based on the understanding of the cultures and values of both sides is no longer just a beautiful utopian ideal; rather, it needs to be implemented with increasing urgency.

The concept of education for international understanding, which was once based on avoiding war to achieve the goal of peaceful human development, has also received attention from some scholars in the hope of finding a way forward for the survival and development of globalisation. Starting in June 2022, UNESCO revamped ‘The Recommendation on Education for Peace and Human Rights, International Understanding, Cooperation, Fundamental Freedoms, Global Citizenship and Sustainable Development’ (hereinafter referred to as ‘the Recommendation’), which was adopted in 1974 and was a landmark document on education for international understanding. The significance of the revision was to provide a clear road map for how education in the twenty-first century should evolve to meet new and continuing challenges and threats to human rights and international understanding, reaffirming the promotion of peace, human rights, global citizenship and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2023 [1974]).

This paper stems from such a contemporary context and advocates integrating the cultivation of literacy for international understanding into art and design education to expand the new connotation of education for international understanding in the humanities field. In this article, I discuss the specific practice of education for international understanding in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) advocated by China. Additionally, based on observations of China’s higher education opening-up policy and education policy for the BRI, and combining those observations with the research results of China’s higher education in Chinese-foreign cooperation and exchanges, I believe that art and design education should actively serve society by promoting a cross-cultural understanding of humanistic exchanges and cooperation of the BRI. I also reflect on and make suggestions about how best to foster literacy for international understanding in the discipline of art and design education.

Education for International Understanding and its Chinese Practical Dimensions

The two world wars of the twentieth century brought enormous disasters and suffering to people around the world. The world was urgently in need of peace and an educational service institution where people could have closer contact and coexist peacefully. This was the prerequisite for the emergence of international understanding and the original intention of the establishment of UNESCO’s International Bureau of Education (IBE). On 11–16 November 1945, based on the recognition of the important role of education in the struggle for and maintenance of world peace, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was established by a conference on education held in London by representatives of some 40 countries, the purpose of the Organization is:

[...] to contribute to peace and security by promoting collaboration among the nations through education, science and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, for the rule of law and for the human rights and fundamental freedoms which are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion, by the Charter of the United Nations. (Unesco, 2023 [1945])

The Conference signed the ‘Constitution of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization’ (UNESCO, 1945), which emphasised its moral mission as follows: ‘That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed’ (UNESCO, 1945). The term ‘education for international understanding’ was introduced at the conference; however, a specific definition of the concept was not given.

The literal concept of education for international understanding means promoting mutual understanding and tolerance among international people. Since its earliest inception, education for international understanding has been more of an educational concept that holds a utopian vision for humankind – that is, to enhance cultural understanding, avoid wars and conflicts, and maintain world peace – and has yet to form a complete theoretical system or a value system for practical guidance (Jiang, 2018, pp. 8–9).

In 1974, at the 18th session of UNESCO, the Recommendation was issued, which academics consider a landmark event because the Recommendation refines the mission, practical requirements, objectives and specific methods of education for international understanding to carry out specific practices. Taking the Recommendation as the basis for practical guidance, education for international

understanding takes the issues and universal values facing the world in the new era as areas of concern and practice, including education for human rights, development, the environment, multiculturalism, global citizenship, and international issues (UNESCO, 1974). Education for international understanding is lifelong education for individuals and social groups: ‘It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace’ (UNESCO, 1974). The education for international understanding applies to all types and stages of education and targets member states for implementation. The objective is to realise, through means of education, the goals of equity, liberty, human rights and peace.

After the issuance of the Recommendation in 1974, education for international understanding developed a basic paradigm in terms of educational philosophy, objectives and practice (Yu, 2002, p. 25). The 44th session of the International Conference on Education (ICE), organised in Geneva in October 1994, under the theme ‘Review of and prospects for education for international understanding’, reaffirmed the need to develop international understanding within students’ attitudes and competences and ensure they can relate to and live with others (Zhao, 2005, p. 450), basically, relevant content involving the international communication element of education can be categorised within the scope of education for international understanding (Zhou, 2015, p. 39).

Education for international understanding has been described as a ‘root’ educational concept (Zhao, 2005, p. 292) because of the great ideals with which it was conceived. ‘Education for Understanding’ and ‘International’ represent a macroscopic vision of educational practice that transcends geography and whose aims and educational philosophy advocate and pursue a common good that is universally accepted by human beings almost worldwide, making it a philosophy of education with vitality. Vitality also means a kind of tension and ductility, which is reflected in the fact that from the proposal of the concept of education for international understanding to its concrete practice, it has shown different stages of development due to the influence of the world’s political situation as well as different realities in different countries, and has given rise to different educational ideas and branches (Yan, 2012, p. 13; Jiang, 2018, pp. 8–18; Zhou, 2015, pp. 40–47), such as mentioned above, education for human rights, development, the environment, multiculturalism, global citizenship and international issues, which have emerged due to the influence of the current environment, global issues and universal values, are all relate to the concept of education for international understanding; In addition, the practice of education for international understanding is mainly carried out with the support and participation of different countries and regions of the world, international educational organisations, transnational organisations (such as UNESCO, the World Bank Group, the World Health Organization, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the World Trade Organisation) and other social forces (Zhou, 2015, pp. 56–60), which has resulted in different effects of the practice and different forms of expression. All of the above shows that the vitality of the education for international understanding and its open educational concepts can be adapted to different social organisations, national conditions and cultures in different eras and develop a set of self-adaptive systems, just as the combination of the great socialist ideals put forward by *Karl Marx* and the concrete social realities in China has led to the formation of a Chinese-style socialist practice and development. Therefore, in this paper, I argue that China’s current BRI is a concrete form of practice in which education for international understanding is mutually adapted to China’s culture.

Today, when the future and destiny of all countries are closely intertwined, the tolerance and coexistence of different civilisations, exchanges and mutual understandings, seeking common ground while reserving differences and win-win cooperation are essential for basic survival and for nurturing the common and cultural values of all humankind. In traditional Chinese Confucian cultural thinking, this embodies the principle that ‘harmony leads to prosperity’ and tolerance in respecting differences, which underlies the cultural spirit advocated by the BRI. Based on the humanistic ideal of a community of human destiny, the BRI promotes prosperity and world peace through mutually beneficial cooperation with the countries in areas of trade and commerce, infrastructure and culture (Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, 2016). Education for international understanding, as an intercultural education concept compatible with pluralism, starts by seeking peace and development through mutual understanding among different cultures and values and has much in common with the BRI in terms of

promoting cultural understanding and the ideal of peace. It can therefore be argued that the BRI is another important transnational social organisational force actively working to explore the practice of education for international understanding.

Over 10 years, the BRI initiative has transformed the concept of a humanistic initiative into concrete actions and through cooperation among countries in transport, energy, communications, education, health care, science and technology, trade and investment, exploring market potential, promoting investment and consumption, creating demand and employment, and enhancing the economic development and well-being of people in various countries. BRI is being explored for the sustainable development of countries along the route, which are home to close to 70% of the world's population, as well as for world peace. If one looks at the idealism of *Victor Papanek's* (1971) call on socially responsible design for the developing country and for more people in pursuit of the general happiness of mankind in his time, the BRI construction is engaged in such practical endeavours in pursuit of 'goodness'. Therefore, this paper discusses the initiative of international understanding of design literacy in the context of the BRI, which is not only a rethinking and exploration of the value and social responsibility of art and design in the current era, but also a new dimension of interpretation of Chinese practice in education for international understanding.

The Belt and Road Humanities Exchange and Cooperation and the Mission of Art and Design Education

In modernised societies of the twentieth century, higher education and related research have been closely linked to national construction (Marginson & Yang, 2020, p. 272), and Chinese universities have made the service of national construction and development an important goal. On the path of opening China's education to the outside world, typified by the BRI, higher education is an important foundation and route to promoting humanistic exchanges and cooperation and enhancing mutual understanding. This mission is clearly positioned in the 'Promoting Educational Actions to Build the Belt and Road' programme document issued by the government in 2016. The vision of its educational cooperation is to enhance understanding, openness, cooperation, mutual learning and mutual appreciation among the countries along the BRI, seek common interests and focus on building a BRI educational community to promote the development of education in the region through an equal, inclusive, mutually beneficial and active educational cooperation situation (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2016).

Under the impetus of the policy, universities are actively using the BRI as an opportunity to develop their practices. In the past 10 years, the BRI education exchange has been committed to promoting exchanges and cooperation between countries, remarkable achievements have been made in the prosperity of areas of Sino-foreign cooperation in running schools, mutual recognition of academic degrees, exchange of foreign students and establishing the BRI platform for higher education academic research exchanges and cooperation (Qin & Wang, 2023). In the field of humanities and social sciences, breaking away from the traditional humanities cooperation dimensions of language, history, philosophy and archaeology, the agenda of global affairs has also been incorporated into collaborative research, to promote higher global destiny and development, focusing on common global problems and values, and promoting the solution of international problems (Sachsenmaier, 2020, p. 296). By targeting common global problems, we can better realise true communication and cooperation based on the values of the common global and shared values, which is also the ideal goal of the BRI in building a community of shared destiny for humankind. For example, the International Association of Universities (IAU) is a major player in world development, with goals of exchange and cooperation that are (1) to develop, through multinational cooperation, academic debates on global issues and practical approaches and initiatives to respond to the crises and challenges facing the world and (2) to foster global citizenship and train the people of the future (Feng & Gao, 2020, pp. 113–115). What can be clearly seen is that the mission of the alliance and the goals of exchange and cooperation are the objectives of education for international understanding. Global citizenship and the values of international education, as well as global communication and cooperation between people and organisations, have the same goal as education for international understanding.

In the same year as the release of the policy document ‘Promoting Educational Actions to Build a Belt and Road’ (2016), the Ministry of Education in China (MOE) issued ‘Opinions on Doing a Job of Opening Up Education to the World in the New Era’, The document proposes to ‘actively carry out education for international understanding and strengthen the mechanism of humanistic exchanges’ and deploys it as a key point to enrich humanistic exchanges between China and foreign countries and promote people-to-people communication’ in the work of opening up education to the outside world in education (MOE, 2016), It can be seen that education for international understanding has received attention in the development of China’s education for opening up to the outside world. China’s higher education system has also become the largest higher education system in the world (MOE, 2020), According to relevant data released by the MOE, the number of students enrolled in 2023 reached 47.63 million, an increase of 1,081,100 or 2.32% over 2022 (MOE, 2024). At the same time, China is the world’s largest source of international students and Asia’s largest destination for study abroad (MOE, 2020). These data on the scale of education indicate that with the formulation of China’s coherent strategic policy for strengthening education exchanges and cooperation with the outside world and the accelerated pace of development, Chinese higher education will need to further expand international cooperation and exchange, and promote intercultural communication and cultivation of cultural understanding literacy, whether for the BRI or for any field of education in the context of China’s current emphasis on Globalisation and ‘Going out’ strategy, this is an unavoidable issue.

Art and design education, as a key component of the humanities, is a central part of quality education for peace and sustainable development (Wan & Long, 2008). The World Conference on Arts Education, held in Lisbon, Portugal, in 2006, noted that the challenges and social problems facing the world today are often due to a lack of communication and mutual understanding:

The learning environment also focuses only on education for the development of cognitive skills and lacks a focus on emotional processes [...]. This is one of the factors that have contributed to the decline of ethical behaviour in modern societies [...]. Arts education is one that encourages the development of emotions and can lead to a better balance between cognitive and affective development, which in turn can help to promote cultural peace. (MaZe, 2020, p. 224)

There is a need to develop policies and cultural strategies for arts education that promote and enhance cultural diversity and develop peaceful, prosperous and sustainable societies (MaZe, 2020, p. 227).

The concept of art education, as referred to by the Lisbon Conference on Art Education, encompasses the discipline of design, which is defined in the conference document Art Education Route Map (MaZe, 2020, p. 225). In addition, the concept of ‘aesthetic education’ in the Chinese policy documents mentioned later in the article is a broad conceptual framework that includes art and design education (e.g. In the ‘Opinions on Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Aesthetic Education in Schools in the New Era’, issued by the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council in 2020, as well as the ‘Opinions of the MOE on Promoting the Development of Art Education in Schools’, issued by the MOE in 2014, both mentioned this. (source: <https://www.gov.cn>).

For modern design education that has been developed over more than 100 years, art and design educators have paid close attention to the design of objects and living environments that are closely related to people, which has provided people with comfort and convenience in their lives. Starting from the ideal of designing for people and society, design has been committed to creatively solving problems faced by society and humankind. Especially since the environmental crisis that emerged in the 1960s, design thinking and practice, represented by sustainable design, has continuously endeavoured to work for a better and harmonious life on Earth. However, in addition to focusing on themes such as the environment and global sustainability, design education in this new era needs to promote peace as a new field and philosophical mission. That is, the design discipline should integrate the promotion of dialogue and mutual understanding to exert creative power for realising peace and to sow the seeds of promoting world peace among students.

In April 2019, China's MOE issued the 'Opinions on Effectively Strengthening the Work of Aesthetic Education in Colleges and Universities in the New Era', which states, among other things, that it is necessary to enhance the ability of aesthetic education,

to serve the economic and social development, to deepen the international humanities exchanges and co-operation, to take advantage of the multiple channels of foreign exchanges and platforms for activities at home and abroad, government and civil society, and to give full play to the important roles of the professional art colleges and high-level students' art associations, and to actively participate in the educational actions of the Belt and Road and the China-foreign humanities exchanges projects. (MOE, 2019)

This puts forward a point of action for art and design education to serve the BRI's humanistic exchanges and increases the new connotation of the BRI's humanistic education exchanges and cooperation.

Combining the above key policy observations, I argue that the ideas and concepts of education for international understanding should be actively integrated into the practice of art and design education to cultivate students' values and qualities of international understanding. In the area of intercultural understanding for promoting communication and cooperation, we should actively explore and interpret the richer cultural values and ideas of education for international understanding in China and on the construction of the BRI through practice.

International Understanding: Suggestions for a New Dimension of Art and Design Literacy

As mentioned above, the practice of education for international understanding is carried out in many countries and regions of the world, international educational organisations, transnational organisations (e.g. UNESCO, the World Bank Group and the WHO) and other social forces, and it is mostly influenced by policy directions. At the same time, it is well known that practice in the education system and organised educational activities require government and policy support, which are necessary to ensure that the concept of education for international understanding can be 'put into practice'.

Therefore, developing policy is important for supporting the development of practice, and the development of literacy for international understanding in the field of design education also needs to be guided and supported at the policy level first.

Combined with the 'Opinions on Effectively Strengthening the Work of Aesthetic Education in Colleges and Universities in the New Era' issued by the MOE in 2019, which provides guidance for strengthening aesthetic education to serve society and participate in *Educational Action for Building a Belt and Road Together* as well as China-foreign humanistic exchanges, this article argues that, first, it is necessary at the local policy level to encourage and support the art and design education of universities, strengthen foreign exchanges and cooperation, and with the help of international organisations such as UNESCO, develop cooperation among the countries along the route based on disciplinary exchanges to make The Belt and Road Art and Design Education Action Initiative an art avenue of 'international understanding' in promoting the development of humanities to facilitate cultural exchanges and understanding designed for the sustainable development of 70% of the world's population and the promotion of mutual understanding. Second, in terms of the future development of China's higher education opening up to the outside world, there is a need to support and encourage, at the policy level, the strengthening of new humanistic qualities of international understanding in the field of art and design education and to cultivate students' global vision.

In terms of more specific policy planning and implementation programmes, each region should study and formulate overall objectives, key tasks, major initiatives and organisational safeguards in light of the reality of art and design education in the region. However, this discussion is beyond the scope of this paper.

Recommendations for Developing Literacy in International Understanding

Cultivating the literacy of international understanding in art and design education aims mainly at the value level. That is, the spirit of peace, understanding, equality, tolerance, global vision, mutual learning and mutual appreciation, which is jointly advocated by the education for international understanding. The BRI is integrated into teaching as an important literacy cognition to enhance students' international vision and sense of global responsibility and mission. As advocated in the Core Qualities for Student Development in China, issued by the project team of 'The Study on the Overall Framework of Core Qualities for Students at the Basic Education Stage and Higher Education Stage in China', it is important to be globally aware and open-minded, to respect the diversity of the world's diverse cultures, to actively participate in cross-cultural exchanges, to be concerned about the global challenges facing humankind and to understand the connotations and values of the community of human destiny (Beijing Normal University High Precision Innovation Centre for Future Education, 2016).

Therefore, I propose to include the following content knowledge into practice as a national initiative for Chinese Arts and Design University education:

1) Awareness of the history and basic philosophy of education for international understanding.

This is an understanding of why UNESCO developed the concept of education for international understanding and the underlying spirit. Students are made aware of the significance and relevance of this 'rooted' philosophy of education and are given the opportunity to identify with it.

2) Further awareness of the value and content of the BRI.

Students will be made aware of the profound humanistic connotation of the BRI and its value and significance as a Chinese practice of education for international understanding to cultivate their sense of mission and responsibility and to actively participate in the construction of the BRI.

3) Awareness of the spirit of education for international understanding of 'learning to live together'.

'Learning to live together' is an important goal of education for international understanding (Report of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, 1996, pp. 85–87), which centres on the fact that we live in a pluralistic and increasingly interactive world, where we need to learn to live with incomprehensible others and their cultures, and to learn solutions to conflicts, a sense of cooperation, interdependence and responsibility. 'Learning to live together' provides students with pathway guidance on the ways in which education for international understanding can be achieved.

4) A correct understanding of the self in relation to others and the world.

This is an important basis for 'learning to live together' and for developing the basic ethical values promoted by education for international understanding. The basic spirit of education for international understanding lies in the fact that, by means of education, each individual can learn to understand himself and others through a better understanding of the pluralistic world, to respect others and their cultures, ways of thinking, ways of behaving, national histories and spiritual values, and to communicate and cooperate with others on an equal footing. Doing so enables individuals to become profoundly aware of the objectivity and historical legitimacy of the world's interdependence and to learn to coexist ultimately in order to promote the peace process.

Two modes of curriculum development can be used to implement the above in specific courses. One way is to integrate them into the corresponding design theory courses. For example, for the theoretical general course Chinese and Foreign Design History, which is commonly offered in major design and art colleges in China, more attention can be paid to the design and cultural phenomena of different regions and countries in the course, including those parts of the design and cultural 'flow' content generated by

the mutual exchanges between different countries and nations, and students can be guided to think about the education of international understanding and the spirit and values of the BRI-related concepts, such as ‘cultural diversity’, ‘mutual learning and mutual enlightenment’, ‘intercultural exchanges’ and ‘harmony and symbiosis’. Another way is to offer an independent international understanding theory course; however, offering a separate course may be difficult for many schools, as each school has different teaching and training programmes, objectives and other circumstances.

In terms of the practical attributes of the design discipline and its service to the BRI, or the idea of education for international understanding, possessing basic skills provides an important foundation for developing practice. Skill literacy in this context refers to how the study of influences, perspectives and lifestyles that impede intercultural understanding, communication and exchange can be integrated into the logic of thinking for design practice and identifying which languages of design are used to communicate in order to enable intercultural understanding. To do so, knowledge of the following two basic skills is required:

1) Promote communication skills with creative thinking in art and design.

Creative expression in art and design can help us to illustrate, display and feel those contents that need to be illustrated, displayed and felt in the process of promoting intercultural understanding and communication. Students should be trained to discuss and research topics such as how design innovation can promote cross-cultural communication in order to serve the real needs of healthy social development.

2) Skills in using digital media technologies to promote cultural understanding.

In an age of rich, diverse and accessible information, educators and learners need to ensure students have digital media skills and information literacy to survive and thrive, this idea is also highlighted in the revised UNESCO’s (2023 [1974]). Digital tools such as games, digital animation and online audio-visual artworks are important tools for supporting and facilitating cultural dissemination, cross-regional long-distance communication and exchange, and cultural understanding, the ability of students to express themselves on how to promote cultural understanding with the help of these new technologies should be enhanced, thus promoting the goal of multicultural meeting of minds and wider cultural exchanges between different groups of young people.

Skills need to be explored specifically in relation to specific practice projects and real-world problems. The article notes that it is more important for the cultivation of skills literacy to cultivate and development of a sense of co-operation and interdependence, values and attitudes as a guide to practice.

CONCLUSION AND REFLECTIONS

Undeniably, the article’s advocacy for literacy for international understanding in the field of design education is an idealistic proposition, and this article presents a personal and subjective discussion of policy and curricular practice recommendations. Since the concept of education for international understanding was introduced, the values and ideals pursued have faced various challenges in practice. UNESCO has been advocating and actively practising for almost 80 years for such a desirable goal – which can be constantly approached but may not be fully realised – with the aim of building peaceful and just societies through education, eradicating poverty, promoting gender equality, fostering health and wellbeing and fostering understanding among nations and peoples. Taking the BRI as the basis for practice, the ideal vision and goal of developing literacy for international understanding in the field of art and design education and promoting humanistic exchanges and cooperation, as well as intercultural understanding, will face various problems and challenges. But just as design ethics is a traditional and classic theme that is continually discussed in design education, knowledge, skills, values and attitudes

that promote tolerance, respect and a sense of common humanity should also be ethical responsibilities and important literacies of art and design education in these complex times.

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