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How the Belt and Road Initiative Informs Language Planning Policies in China and among the Countries along the Road

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Abstract: Given that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has penetrated most, if not all, fields in China and the countries along the road, this paper attempts to join the existing literature by providing a unique perspective (language planning) to understand the BRI and its impacts. The article presents the way in which the BRI has informed language planning policies among China and approximately 65 countries along the road. From an ecological standpoint, it proposes how BRI language planning aims at promoting and constructing a language-and-discourse ecosystem. Taking an interpretive policy analysis method, it analyzes policy documents and the existing literature by elaborating upon the planners, purposes and principles involved in designing the language planning initiative. Specifically, different ministries, departments and committees have worked together to propose a systemic, sustainable language plan for BRI; BRI language planning then serves communication, discourse power, global governance and socioeconomics purposes. Under the overarching ecosystem planning, specific planning principles, including Chinese language status planning, foreign language planning, language structure planning, language-in-education planning and language service planning, co-evolve to sustain the system. Instead of simply depicting the language-and-discourse ecosystem, this article also discusses challenges that BRI language planning initiative might meet along the way of its implementation, including the avoidance of making language unity the same as language imperialism, and continued efforts to balance language internationalization and language localization.

Keywords: The Belt and Road Initiative; language planning policies; ecological stance; interpretive policy analysis method; challenges

1. Introduction

On 7 September 2013, President Xi Jinping spoke at Nazarbayev University in the Republic of Kazakhstan and proposed the concept of One Belt One Road (OBOR) for the first time. Ever since then, OBOR was used for approximately three years, until 28 March 2015, when the official outline for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was issued by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) and the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) of the People's Republic of China (PRC), with authorization of the State Council. BRI thus replaced OBOR, and was defined as a transcontinental long-term policy and investment program aiming at infrastructure development and the acceleration of the economic integration of countries along the route of the historic Silk Road (the Road). Originally proposed to include 65 countries in Eurasia at the beginning, over recent years the BRI has far exceeded this range. It has thus become an initiative not only for China but also the whole world.

With considerable positive responses over the last few years, BRI brought about benefits and achievements to different fields in countries along the Road. For example, statistics from the MOFCOM indicate that nearly 4000 companies from all over the world have stationed from 2014 to 2019, creating 244,000 local jobs for the countries along the Road. In 2017 alone, China established 19 new overseas economic and trade cooperation parks in Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, Zambia, Kazakhstan, Laos, Russia and other countries along the Road, with the number of new enterprises being doubled to 2330, compared to the number from 2016. By the end of 2017, 1522 enterprises from 20 overseas economic and trade cooperation zones recognized by MOFCOM had a total output value of $70.28 billion, a total investment of $24.19 billion and a total tax $2.67 billion to the host countries. These revenues have played a positive role in promoting the industrialization of the host countries and bilateral economic and trade relations between China and the countries.

However, there remains a dearth of literature revealing how BRI works and informs different aspects of people's lives and different fields in the world. Therefore, it requires great efforts from scholars to explore hidden themes behind the initiative. In this paper, I take a language planning perspective and present why and how BRI informs language planning and policies in China and also countries along the Road. The concept of language planning emerged at the end of the 1960s, and sharply developed during the 1970s, with Haugen [1] featuring the classic work studying the normative and standardizing activities of languages in a heterogeneous language community. Over the decades, it has been extended to activities that take steps and processes to solve language problems or bring about changes in language structures and/or functions at the community and inter/national levels [2]. Language planning may help inform sociocultural or even political decisions. BRI, as one giant initiative across 65 or even more countries, relates closely to language planning in the way that communications among the countries require great and meaningful language planning. Therefore, studying how BRI informs language planning among China and the countries along the Road is of great significance. By reviewing the different sources of the documents, I thus aim to present answers to the following questions:

(1) Who are the BRI language planners, including national ministries and policy initiators?
(2) What are the purposes of the BRI language planning initiatives?
(3) What are their general and specific principles in guiding BRI language planning initiatives?

With all these answers, I propose that a language-and-discourse ecosystem may emerge from these planning initiatives. I also discuss some challenges along the way to implement these planning initiatives.

2. Literature Review

Traditional and classic language planning focuses on the changes brought about from a linguistic, particularly sociolinguistic perspective [3], as sociolinguists are keen on exploring new terms, non-standard grammatical forms, the nomination of a certain variety of language and how these linguistic units have been changed or added to in the official language. Kaplan and Baldauf asserted that "language planning is a body of ideas, laws, and regulations (language policy), change rules, beliefs, and practices intended to achieve a planned change (or to stop change from happening) in the language use in one or more communities" [4] (p. 3).

2.1. Typology of Language Planning

With the emergence and development of language planning, scholars at the beginning of the century studied the typology of the field [4–10], among which Kaplan and Baldauf [4] is a widely used version with four major types of language planning, including status, corpus, language-in-education (or acquisition), and prestige language planning.

Status Planning: status planning, as the name indicates, defines the particular status a language or languages hold in a society or specific context [4]. The planning is more often applied to defining the status of the second language instead of the first language. For example, van Els [11]

summarized four primary statuses of second languages which work together to serve certain purposes, including communication, language instruction, immigrant or ethnic minority languages and linguistic or language rights. However, on top of these purposes sits community needs, which dominate status planning decisions. Baldauf and Kaplan [8] explained the nature of the community needs and presented how these needs can be identified and planned for status purposes.

Corpus Planning: corpus planning is concerned with the internal structure of a language and the standardization of that language. It may create new words and expressions, or replace old ones with new meanings. It thus involves making changes to linguistic codes and/or grammars and dictionaries for the selected language. The typical activities of corpus planning include devising a writing system for a spoken language, initiating spelling reforms, coining new terms, publishing grammar books or dictionaries, or creating corpora. Often informed by status planning decisions, corpus planning also relates to language teaching and research, which paves the way for language-in-education planning [8,9]; it may be a result of status planning and policies with political and societal ideologies, which lead to the building of certain corpora. Corpora are then used as a language resource for language education.

Language-in-Education Planning: Baldauf and Kaplan [8] also termed language-in-education policy and planning as acquisition policy and planning, which constitutes the sole language planning activity in many countries. However, such a language planning is often restricted to academic contexts, and schools in particular; it may thus affect minority languages outside the school context [12]. Taking three different contexts, including Japan, Sweden and North Korea, Baldauf and Kaplan [8] also examined seven key language-in-education policies (i.e., access policy, personnel policy, curriculum policy, methodology and materials policy, resourcing policy, community policy, and evaluation policy) and four key language-in-education planning goals (i.e., language maintenance, language reacquisition, foreign/second language learning, language shift).

Prestige Planning: compared with the other three language planning categories, prestige or image planning has been far less developed. Ager [13] examined the planning category in Wales, Malaysia and Québec, and then suggested three separate activities that might underlie the prestige of such a planning category. Specifically, prestige in Québec seemed to be related to ethnic or civic identity and language promotion; prestige in Wales worked as a way to guide language policy design, implementation and evaluation; in both Malaysia and Québec, prestige connected language planners and communities through planners' motivations and planned activities.

A synopsis of the typology of language planning may direct us to notice the similarities, overlaps and limitations of the typology. For example, language planning may occur at the macro-level (the state) or the micro-level (the community), which renders a more general type of classifications. Besides theis, hardly any coherent theoretical orientations can be found through the types of language planning, as they may diverge in their theoretical orientations and foci of attention. Specifically, stats planning focuses on the society, corpus planning on the language, acquisition or language-in-education on learning and teaching, and prestige planning on the image. Van Els [11] argued that this might result in planners who might be politicians and laymen outside a certain field being unable to offer sufficient and effective planning strategies for the target field. Therefore, it is vital to map out the theoretical orientations in language planning to help language planners, linguists and other stakeholders in the language planning process.

2.2. Theoretical Considerations in BRI Language Planning

The scientific evolution from positivism to post-positivism leads us to believe that no single orientation could account for a complex phenomenon. This is especially true for language planning, as it involves different dynamics, constructs and stakeholders in the process. However, it is still necessary to exemplify a few theoretical orientations that have been developed for years and contribute to the field. In the following excerpts, I present three primary theoretical orientations in guiding the

development of the language planning field; however, these theoretical orientations may overlap in certain tenets.

2.2.1. Language Planning in a Sociolinguistic Stance

It is generally believed that the study of modern language policy and planning began in the field of sociolinguistics in the 1960s, and developed in the 1970s, when classic language planning emerged as a prototype of the field. The first theoretical orientation is rooted in sociolinguistics. Neustupný [14] attempted to describe the history of language planning as a social practice determined by a number of sociocultural phenomena, including but not limited to the means of production, social equality, ideologies and beliefs about language variation. In chronological order, he even summarized language planning in a four-stage classification: Premodern, Early Modern, Modern, and Postmodern.

Under the overarching theoretical orientation stand different specific approaches. For example, Spolsky [15] developed the language management approach by incorporating sociocultural and sociolinguistic tenets into the field. Nekvapi [16] explained language management as dealing with the management of utterances in specific conversations among individuals and/or in institutions. While highly situation-oriented, language management theory yields insights for studies in various language situations [14,17–21].

Another approach in this theoretical stance is the domain approach stemming from Fishman [22]. This approach has been implicitly and explicitly developed by scholars, including Spolsky [12,23] and Shohamy [24]. Under the domain approach lies its key components, including but not limited to family [20], religion [25], the workplace [26], public space [27] and other settings.

2.2.2. Language Planning in a Critical Approach

Baldauf [28] stated that critical theory has informed language planning studies and discussed key concepts including power, struggle, colonization, hegemony, ideology and resistance. Tollefson [29] argued that language planning in a critical approach serves as a reaction to language imperialism and classical language planning in a hegemonic approach. It also serves as a way to promote social change and reduce inequalities. Some African countries, for example, made efforts to fight against colonial languages with indigenous languages as a way to show their attempts to advocate for social justice and protect their heritage culture [30,31]. Under the critical theoretical orientation, two primary critical approaches have been used, including the historical structural approach [32] and governmentality [29,33].

In addition, as a hybrid between critical literacy and sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis (CDA) also yields insights in guiding language planning to develop. Fairclough, as a classic CDA work, highlighted the importance of language and power, and argued that "language connects with the social through being the primary domain of ideology, and through being both a site of, and a stake in, struggles for power" [34] (p. 15). With such a premise, Lo Bianco [35] explored aspects of the relationship between critical discourse analysis and language planning, and explained that critical textual analysis could play a vital role in democratically oriented projects of language policy. Likewise, Li [36] used critical discourse analysis to examine the shaping of socialist ideology through language policy for primary schools in China, and Skerritt [37] examined the language planning situation in Estonia in the same approach.

2.2.3. Language Planning in an Ecological Approach

As the world becomes increasingly complex and dynamical, the recently-emerged language ecology paradigm extends the literature of language planning. A typical language ecology theoretical orientation presents the following core tenets: the recognition of human rights, equality in communication by means of different national and ethnic languages, multilingualism, the sustainability and diversity of languages, national language status sovereignty, and advocating effective and cooperative language instruction. For example, Mühlhausler stated that:

"In an ecological approach, language planning is seen as a process which is a part and closely interrelated with a large range of natural and cultural ecological factors. It is focused on the question of maintaining maximum diversity of languages by seeking to identify those ecological factors that sustain linguistic diversity. Linguistic diversity in turn is seen as a precondition of maintaining cultural and biological diversity. The ultimate aim of ecological language planning differs from most conventional approaches to language planning both in its aims (diversity rather than standardisation) and the aims required (community involvement rather than specialist management)" [38] (p. 306).

Puppel [39] explained the ecological perspective of language planning by arguing that linguistic diversity enriches the human ecosystem, embodies diversified ethnic identities and presents a holistic inventory of human knowledge. The ecological theoretical orientation paves the way for language standardization and language diversity to co-exist and co-evolve; it also helps protect and restore language resources by mapping out languages with different statuses and functions in a system. This theoretical orientation has thus been widely used and developed over recent years.

The synthesis and analysis of the theoretical frameworks in language planning provide a conceptual and theoretical framework for this current study. I argue that no single theoretical framework is strictly applicable to the BRI language planning in China; tenets from different theoretical frameworks work together to contribute to the underpinning of the BRI language planning theoretical stance. However, an ecological approach may work better as the theoretical framework for analyzing BRI language planning and policies. Specifically, BRI language planning does include prestige and national identity as constructs when it promotes the standardization of Chinese mandarin along the Road; it also encourages the development of linguistic diversity to provide a culturally and ecologically diversified environment along the Road.

3. Research Methodology

The research foci and contents of the study decided the research methodology. As I attempted to explore what the specific language planning policies are under the overarching BRI, and how the BRI informs the language planning and policies among China and the countries along the Road, I thus chose policy analysis as a fitting methodology for the study. Generally, policy analysis provides a way of understanding how and why governments enact certain policies and achieve certain effects. With that general purpose, policy analysis has been broadly classified in three orientations, including traditional, mainstream and interpretive orientations [40–42]. The three different orientations differ in their ontological and epistemological underpinnings, and yield different approaches. One of the key distinctions among the three orientations, according to Bacchi [40], is that the first two orientations focus on problem identification and improvement, whereas the last—the interpretive orientation—focuses on problem representation. Given the theoretical framework and the nature of the study, I chose an interpretive policy analysis approach, the rationale for which is provided in the following section.

3.1. Interpretive Policy Analysis

Interpretive policy analysis derives from the interpretive turn during the late 19th century and the early part of the 20th century, and paves the way for specific methodologies and paradigms including phenomenology, hermeneutics, (some) critical theory from Europe, and symbolic interactionism, pragmatism and ethnomethodology from the United States. Interpretive policy analysis complements positivist approaches, including cost-benefit and analyses, decision trees, and attitudinal and other survey research, and the like [42]. It focuses not only on meanings but also on how analysts and researchers access, generate and explain these meanings [43].

As meanings are situation-specific, a meaning-focused policy analysis is thus contextualized. With that premise, interpretive policy analysis aims at informing rather than generalizing any findings. Yanow [43] thus argued that interpretive policy analysis challenges the very foundations of

traditional public management, which are scientific or evidence-based. With the specific ontological and epistemological foundation, interpretive policy analysis is central to two typical methodological orientations: phenomenology and hermeneutics. Phenomenology has been a major force for shifting attention across the social sciences from generalizable laws of human behavior to situation-specific interpretations of the meaning(s) of human acts. Another typical orientation is hermeneutics, which is also the one I chose for the current study.

Hermeneutics was originally developed as an analytical method to deal with reading texts, particularly the Bible. It was extended over the decades to include other texts, including news, novels, poetry, picture books, and even artifacts, including paintings and films. In policy analysis, a hermeneutic approach leads to a focus on policy-relevant texts [43]. Therefore, in the current study, I chose this hermeneutic, interpretive policy analysis method to map out how different language planning policy documents, reports and news had been issued and delivered to inform the BRI language planning policies. However, taking a critical lens, I argue that not a single methodology or approach fits the current study, and my argument resonates with the belief that meanings are situation-specific and contextualized [44]. While I chose the interpretive policy analysis method, some analyses fall into traditional policy analysis methods. This may partially result from the nature of the theoretical framework and the specific feature of the context. I provide my reasoning on aligning the ecological theoretical orientation with the interpretive policy analysis method in the next section.

3.2. Theoretical and Methodological Underpinnings

The focus of BRI is moving from merely infrastructure and technological development to other social, political, cultural and economic developments among China and the countries along the Road. In other words, it aims at developing a multifaceted, diverse system that embraces most, if not all, industries among these countries. BRI language planning also falls into a systemic and ecological stance. As mentioned earlier in the paper, BRI language planning aims at encouraging the development of linguistic diversity, in order to provide a culturally and ecologically diversified environment along the Road. With that premise, an appropriate, fitting methodology is required for the study.

The interpretive paradigm is a way to gain insights by discovering meanings, and it explores the richness, depth and complexity of phenomena. It aims to produce an understanding of the social context of the phenomenon and the process in a hermeneutic approach [45]. As mentioned in the previous section, official documents, news, and reports are the policy texts that I have used to present and interpret the meaning of the BRI language planning in the study, in terms of its purposes and functions. It fits a hermeneutic, interpretive policy analysis approach. Therefore, the theoretical framework and the methodological approach were aligned with each other to inform the development of the study.

4. Findings

In China, language planning has been a research topic in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics for years, while there is a trend in recent years for studies in culture and foreign affairs to join the language planning literature in order to broaden its scope. Zhou [46] collected and edited some major national language planning and policy works in the Foreign Language Policy and Planning Process. Other language planning and policy planners, either as scholars or institutes, work in their way to broaden the literature in the field [47–55]. All these sample works play a very important role in aligning national language planning and policies with BRI. On 2 June 2020, MOE, together with National Language Committee (NLC), reported 2019 Chinese Language Situations through a press conference. So far, language planning and policies in China have been developed in full wings. In this section, I aim to present why and how BRI language planning works in an ecological way. Specifically, I elaborate on three major constructs, including *planners*, *purposes*, and *principles* in BRI language planning.

4.1. BRI Language Planning: Planners

The understanding of the primary purposes and functions of BRI language planning helps us further explore who might be the planners or administrations in the initiative, and what its overall and specific planning principles are, which will be underpinned in this section. As language planning is more a dynamic, context-specific process than a static and solo work, the role and motivations of planners and the administration involved in the process serve as an important part of language planning [8,56].

BRI language planning has gone through different state ministries and committees which cooperate and collaborate with each other to draft and issue policies and documents. Some of the committees or ministries have taken a leading role, and others are supportive. Specifically, the NLC took a leading role in this initiative. However, two divisions of NLC are affiliated to the Ministry of Education (MOE), which provides firm support to NLC for its language planning decisions. Similarly to the MOE, other ministry-level support comes from the Ministry of Culture (MOC) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), etc. Under the Communist Party of China Committee (CPCC), the United Front Work Department and Publicity Department also support the NLC in language planning decisions. Furthermore, there are several key academic institutes and language research centers working to support BRI language planning, including but not limited to the Beijing Advanced Innovation Center of Language Resources (ALCR), the Research Center for Language Planning and Global Governance (RCLPGG), and the Chinese Language Policies and Planning Committee (CLPPC). The following figure provides a general picture of what administrative and planning ministries, departments and committees might be involved in the BRI language planning process. However, it should be noted that not all the parties, rather only the primary parties involved in the process, are listed (see Figure 1).
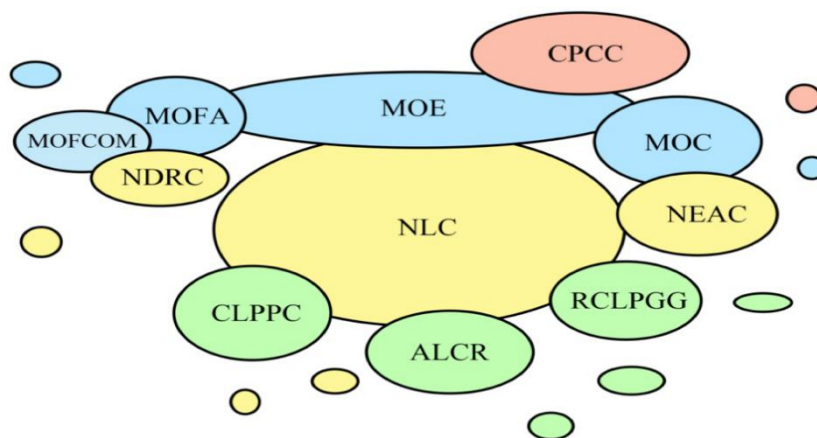

Figure 1. Planners & Supporters in BRI Language Planning.

It should be noted that the circle size in the figure does not indicate the efforts the party has made in the language planning process. Efforts made from all the parties cannot be measured or weighed in a numerical account. However, it does present which committee or planner has taken the lead or made more contributions to the process. For example, the NLC, as the leading committee, together with the MOE, has planned and issued language policies and decisions. As some of the policies and decisions are involved with other policies or decisions, including the ethnic affairs or foreign affairs domestically in China or among the countries along the Road, the National Ethnic Affairs Commission (NEAC) and MOFA thus provided their support and guidance in the language policies and decisions in BRI. With all the guidance from different ministries, departments and committees, the NLC and MOE have developed a systemic, sustainable language plan for the BRI. In the following part, I elaborate on the BRI language planning from both macro and micro perspectives.

4.2. BRI Language Planning: Purposes

A review of the existing literature and documents helps map out five major purposes that BRI language planning aims to achieve. These five purposes work together to serve certain functions, either ideologically or socioeconomically.

4.2.1. Language Planning Serves a Communicative Purpose

The official document of BRI lists five cooperation priorities, also termed as five connectivities or *Wu Tong*. These priorities include *policy coordination*, *infrastructure connectivity*, *unimpeded trade*, *financial integration*, and *closer people-to-people ties*. Achieving these priorities requires languages, which play a very decisive role in being a communicative medium, leveling off the barriers of different cultural societies in the world and bringing people from different cultures together. Li [48] argued that language, in its communicative purpose, works in two ways to bind people or things. The first type of connection is 'thing-to-thing', and the second is 'people-to-people'. Global governance requires both 'thing-to-thing' and 'people-to-people' communication. English may connect things to things, but may not connect people to people, as Chinese culture cannot be fully expressed and conveyed in that language. As the primary investor and initiative planner, China plans to develop Chinese as the communitive language or another lingua franca, or at least the one connected to other languages along the Road.

4.2.2. Language Planning Entails Discourse Power

Li [48] argued that discourse power is not only expressed in the bilateral relations between countries, but also in the multilateral relations represented by international organizations; not only in foreign exchanges between governments but also in the operation of international non-governmental organizations, and in countries around the world in which people's various outlooks exchange. The acquisition of international discourse power takes time; it thus requires detailed, feasible language planning. BRI language planning thus works as a gradual process to support the international discourse system. BRI language planning aims at fostering a positive discourse attitude. Whenever there is a need to speak, whoever has something to say among the countries, BRI aims to provide the countries with opportunities to speak.

4.2.3. Language Planning Matters in Global Governance

Language planning is also one of the basic components of global governance. At present, the main problems in global language planning include language conflicts, endangered languages, English imperialism, information marginalization, language intelligence and language resource construction, etc. For example, as a lingua franca, English provides great convenience for human communication and undoubtedly has positive significance for global governance. However, its drawbacks are also obvious: it hardly leaves any room for other languages, having maintained its language status for decades or centuries. This language imperialism or over-standardization impedes cultural diversity. Language is a worldview, a tool of thinking and a carrier of different ideological achievements. It thus requires different languages to voice and convey ideas. BRI language planning may take the chance to solve these problems, or at least make changes in current situations.

4.2.4. Language Planning Promotes Socioeconomic Growth

From the perspective of language economics, Dalmazzone [57] advocated that language serves a network effect, or the externality of the network, which presents three key types of rewards: first, the rewards that individuals receive from joining a language community develop certain potential communicative abilities; second, all members of the community may be rewarded with more communication opportunities due to the effect; the third kind of reward is the innovation or innovative ideas brought about by the expansion of communication and knowledge sharing, typically in economic

and social activities. BRI language planning, from this stance, provides China and the countries along the Road with more opportunities to boost their socioeconomic development.

4.3. BRI Language Planning: Principles

4.3.1. Overall Planning and Policy: Promoting a Language and Discourse Ecosystem

In July 2016, the MOE in China issued its Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative, aiming to develop a cooperative educational system and promote the common prosperity of education in the countries along the Road. Under the overarching educational principles, a specific principle pertinent to language planning was issued, the core of which aims to break language barriers between the Belt and Road countries. To achieve that goal, the MOE set specific objectives, including:

- "to explore how to build coordination mechanisms for breaking language barriers to jointly develop open language courses, and gradually incorporate courses on our different languages into the curricula of each Belt and Road country.
- to expand inter-governmental language exchange programs and work together to cultivate, and help each other to cultivate, high-level language experts.
- to give full play to the strengths of universities focusing on foreign studies and foreign languages in training strong linguists and promote the development of multilingual teaching staff for elementary and secondary education as well as foreign language education.
- to expand the number of students sent overseas with government scholarships for language training and encourage institutions from the Belt and Road countries to work in partnership with Chinese institutions to establish programs that teach their own languages in China.
- to support the engagement of more social actors in establishing Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms, and scale up efforts to train both full-time Mandarin teachers and volunteer Mandarin teachers to meet the demand from the Belt and Road countries for Mandarin language training" (Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative [58]).

A close look at these specific principles directs us to some thoughts; the former two objectives cater to the communication and the cultivation planning which has been underpinned by status planning [9,10]; the other three objectives echo to the language-in-education or acquisition planning type, which makes sense as they were launched and administered by the MOE. Behind these specific communication, cultivation, and acquisition planning types stand status and prestige planning types, which aim at promoting China's image, national identity and relationships with the countries along the Road. I argue that the overall planning and policies depict a general picture of a language and discourse ecosystem, which is intended to be sustainable, systemic and dynamical (see Figure 2).
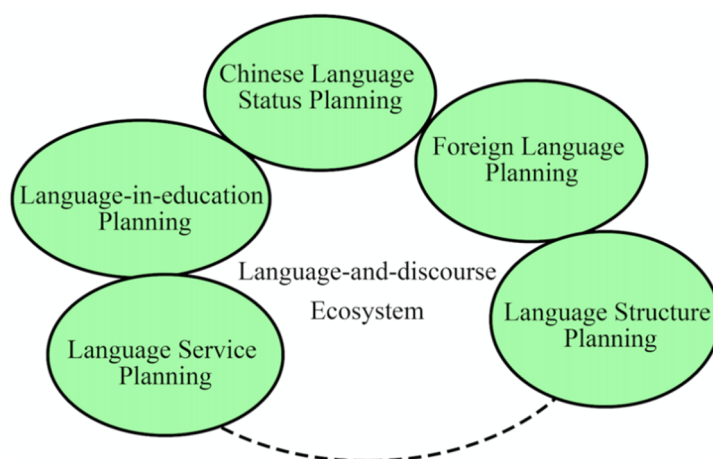

Figure 2. A language-and-discourse Ecosystem.

BRI language planning, at its core, thus aims to improve Chinese discourse power and foster a Silk Road discourse system. It ultimately aims at balancing the political and ideological powers across the globe. The world, over the last few centuries, has increasingly featured the English language and the Western world. BRI language planning supports the promotion of people-to-people communication, and enhances the international influence of the Chinese discourse system. It thus aims at solving various discourse planning issues, including but not limited to policy discourse, academic discourse, institutional discourse and structural discourse. However, to achieve the overall goal and implement the overall language planning and policies, specific planning initiatives are required to take action, including Chinese language status planning, foreign language planning, language structure planning, language-in-education planning and language service planning. Each of the specific planning initiatives works as a unit and contributes in their own way to the planned system.

4.3.2. Specific Planning & Policies: Sustaining the Language and Discourse Ecosystem

Chinese Status Planning: Kaplan and Baldauf [4] explained language status planning as a way to define particular status language(s) hold in a society. It may take the form of overt status planning through legislation or constitutions. Overt status planning may take the form of the officialization and nationalization of a language, and the formalization of language rights. It may also be in the form of covert status planning, which occurs implicitly within certain communities. Primary status planning jobs may include language revival, language maintenance, inter-lingual communication and language spread. Aligning the BRI language planning purposes with these specific principles, I argue Chinese status planning is one key example of language status planning in this sense.

BRI provides a platform to develop Chinese language status overtly, and makes the planning of developing Chinese as a lingua franca possible: the 'Greater Chinese' concept proposed in recent years is conducive to enhancing the centripetal power of Chinese and its global radiation [48,55]. Chinese is still the language of the second phalanx in the world, with its Chinese learners close to 100 million and the number of international students studying in China exceeding 400,000 a year. Within the last ten years, the number of students pursuing a master's degree in translation and interpretation has sharply increased, and the country has equipped the language planning initiative with its seeds. From the perspective of language ecology, it is also overseas Chinese immigrants' human linguistic right to learn their heritage language. Moreover, the inheritance of Chinese as heritage language not only maintains the Chinese language in Chinese ethnic groups from generation to generation but, more importantly, leads them to inherit the national characters and cultural identity bearing behind the language. The inheritance of Chinese could be taken as the key to helping overseas Chinese immigrants and their descendants to solve the confusion between language identity, ethnic identity and even national identity.

To attain the language status planned, China attempted to increase the international spread of Chinese as a second language, which helps spread the culture behind the language. It may take steps to increase the spread through the localization of Chinese teaching as a second language, the local cultivation of Chinese teachers, and the integration of Chinese and Chinese culture with the languages and cultures of the target country, etc. By doing so, China never aims to provoke another language imperialism, such as the existing one featuring English [59]; it instead aims to sustain the world's linguistic ecosystem.

Foreign Language Planning: China has so far made remarkable achievements in language planning for the official languages of the countries along the Road [47–52]. However, with an increasing number of countries joining the initiative, attention should be given to the hidden or possible issues behind the implementation of the initiative.

One issue might be the regional lingua franca plan. BRI is not limited to government exchanges and foreign affairs, but is also connected with transnational cooperation and private trade in different local, unofficial languages. For example, languages including Hausa, Zulu, Amharic, Fulani and Mandinka are not official languages in Africa, but are widely spoken and used in parts of Africa.

Supposing conflicts or disputes, if any, occurred between China and these African countries, an official lingua franca, even in the regional sense, would offer a great solution to these conflicts or disputes. This is the rationale for advocating a regional lingua franca.

However, behind the advocate lies the great efforts that China is supposed to perform to better the understanding of the different languages. Therefore, Wang [50–52] and his team published three books in volumes on language situations among the countries along the Road. The project was sponsored and funded by the NLC, and the idea was started in 2014. Then, in 2020, the third book came out. The project helps scholars, linguists and governments better their understandings of the languages and cultures, and thus enhances the foreign language planning scheme.

Language Structure Planning: mapping out different languages and setting up different language planning policies leads us in the direction of thinking about the language structure along the Road. In the current language structure, Russian is the common regional language of Central Asia, Arabic is a cross-regional common language in the Middle East and North Africa, and French is the common language in West Africa. North Africa and other places are actually cross-regional lingua franca, and English as an international lingua franca has not only absolute influence in Southeast Asia but also a steadily increasing influence in Central Asia.

However, as the initiator and important planner of the initiative, China should make early arrangements and plans for language functions. On the one hand, we should use the construction of various common languages as a starting point, strengthen the strategic research on common regional languages in the 'Belt and Road', and investigate the status, distribution and vitality of various common languages in countries along the route. On the other hand, Chinese language should be identified as one of the universal languages for the construction of the 'Belt and Road' as soon as possible, in order to expand the leading position of Chinese language in the governments and major construction areas of the countries along the route, and to ensure that the Chinese language is in key fields, important projects and major projects. The leading position and role of the basic texts, working documents, negotiating instruments and international conferences are of strategic importance.

Language-in-Education Planning: under the umbrella of language-in-education planning, two specific planning initiatives are put on the agenda. They include Chinese international education planning and Chinese as a medium of instruction (CMI) planning [53,54]. The two specific initiatives collaborate with each other and work on extending Chinese learning in both breadth and depth.

In breath, as a major investor and exporter of BRI, China aims at sponsoring the construction of Confucius institutes and providing the countries along the Road with sufficient and effective Chinese-as-a-foreign-language curricula and language resources. It may bring about language resources, facilitate language communication, enhance language cultivation, and then create a great language environment.

In depth, BRI language-in-education planning attempts to advocate for CMI development. It has been for a long time that English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) programs have penetrated across Europe, Southeast Asia, Africa, the Middle East and even Central Asia as one of the strategic initiatives to promote the internationalization of higher education in these regions. Likewise, the BRI language planning initiative attempts to design and promote CMI programs among the countries along the Road. The primary purposes are to support the realization of the internationalization of higher education among China and these countries, and also to replace the linguistic imperialism of English with a diversified language system in the world's higher education.

Language Service Planning: alongside language-in-education planning comes language service planning, which, in essence, is also an extension of language-in-education planning and an embodiment of language economics planning. Specifically, language service planning involves many industries, such as language translation, language training, online language education, language technical support and language consulting. Under the language service plan, language science research can help companies go global at the basic and application levels, which will have a positive effect on linguistics research 'going out of study' and facing society.

Gazzola and Wickström [60] underpinned the economics of language policy and argued that issues of language diversity have economic and political implications, including transnational labor mobility, trade, the social inclusion of migrants, democracy and education in multilingual countries. Shen [53] explained that when the host country uses the language of the investment country as the language of foreign language education, the country is more attractive to the capital inflow of the investment country. Therefore, the reciprocal learning of Chinese and the languages along the Road is strongly suggested, as it will bring about economic benefits together with educational outcomes. To meet that demand, Wang [50–52] studied the language policies among the countries along the Road and attempted to offer more insights on reciprocal learning. Another example in the BRI language service planning is the ever-increasing number of graduate students pursuing a master's degree in translation and interpretation. This development equips the country with sufficient hands to smooth over issues in communication, education and trade or other fields, and to ensure sustainable communication among the countries along the Road.

5. Discussion

BRI language planning, with clearly-stated purposes, cooperative planners, and overall and specific principles, aims at promoting a sustainable language and discourse system. It aims high and long, and prepares resources and funds for the planning initiative. In this section, I discuss how the BRI language planning initiatives are un/fit for the ecological, theoretical framework in depth. Taking the interpretive policy analysis approach, I also elaborate on challenges along the way to fully implement the BRI and these specific language planning initiatives.

Mühlhausler stated that "the ultimate aim of ecological language planning differs from most conventional approaches to language planning both in its aims (diversity rather than standardisation) and the aims required (community involvement rather than specialist management)" [38] (p. 306). With that explanation, BRI language planning attempts to embrace language diversity among the countries along the Road. For example, Wang [50–52] published three volumes of works studying language situations among these countries. However, these works so far have only explored language situations among these countries, instead of giving specific explanations on how the exploration of these language situations may help China better align their language planning policies with those in countries along the Road. Therefore, sustaining the BRI language ecosystem requires tons of work in the future.

Wiertlewska [61] argued that one major purpose of ecological language planning is to protect natural languages and avoid any language loss. This belief resonates with the proposed language-and-discourse ecosystem, which attempts to embrace linguistic diversity and protect languages in countries along the Road. While it does highlight the importance of Chinese as a possible lingua franca, it does not deprive other languages of their national status. However, as BRI language planning is still running in its emerging stage, it might not be safe to say how it will go with a balanced status between Chinese and other languages. This should be something we keep our eyes on in the coming years or even decades.

Taking a critical, interpretive perspective, I argue that evaluating and assessing BRI language planning initiatives is a long journey with possible challenges. The first challenge that requires attention is the differentiation between language imperialism and language unity; in other words, the avoidance of making language unity the same way as language imperialism. BRI language planning aims at promoting the status of the Chinese language, and helps to facilitate communication between China and other countries along the Road. However, the initiative is theoretically not a replication from the English to the Chinese, which may cause another case of language imperialism. It aims at fostering language unity, serving for simplicity and practicality [53]. Therefore, the implementation of the BRI language planning requires planners, scholars and other parties involved in the process to deviate from a possible language imperialism track.

Together with the first challenge comes the second; that is, how to avoid language utilitarianism. Language unity aims for simplicity and practicality for communication, education, trade and other purposes; however, this is definitely not the premise that BRI language planning serves simply for its utilitarianism, either for economic profits or for political benefits. It should aim at fostering and promoting cultures, education and language diversity as well, which is at the core of a language and discourse ecosystem.

In addition, another challenge of BRI language planning lies in the balance between language internationalization and language localization. In other words, language internationalization cannot be achieved at the expense of language localization, or vice versa. Specifically, China may strive for its mandarin Chinese to be an internationalized language; however, it should also plan for and contribute to its minority language development. Likewise, the countries along the Road should also balance their language planning and policies between their heritage languages and Chinese.

Last but not least, risk analysis and prevention strategies are strongly required along the way to plan and implement the BRI. Most regions along the Belt and Road are developing countries and emerging economies, with immature market economic systems and relatively backward infrastructure. Moreover, religious and refugee issues might also be prominent, causing potential risks, if any, to foreign investment, business exchanges, outbound tourism, and cultural and scientific exchanges, etc. In addition, extraordinary regime changes are rare, but carry profound implications, as regime changes among BRI countries are cyclical, recurrent, and unexpected. China, to gradually achieve a language and discourse ecosystem with shared interests, responsibilities and futures, needs to take risk analysis and prevention into consideration.

6. Conclusions

While BRI has been proposed since 2013, people all across the globe, typically those from the West, still know only a little about the initiative. Originally proposed to boost major industries, including infrastructure development and technology, BRI has been extended to other fields, including education and the arts and humanities. Language planning is a vital field to smooth over intercultural communication and facilitate international transactions, and thus plays a very important role in China and countries along the Road. To provide the global reader with some knowledge on how China aims at planning the languages of her own and even the countries along the Road is the primary purpose of this paper and also something significant.

In this paper, I presented theoretical orientations in language planning and, typically, how they relate to the BRI in China. I then talked about why and how the BRI helped inform language planning and policies in China and along the Road. Specifically, in bonding different cultures, societies and countries, BRI language planning functions to promote communication, discourse power, global governance and socioeconomic growth. Specifically, under the overarching BRI language planning, specific planning strategies, including foreign languages, language communication, language function, language service and Silk Road discourse, co-evolve to consolidate the planning scheme. Using an ecological, theoretical framework, I mapped out and proposed a language-and-discourse ecosystem through all the stated language planning purposes and functions. However, taking an interpretive policy analysis approach, I did not only depict a language-and-discourse ecosystem through selected policy documents and existing literature; I also pondered the challenges that might await along the journey of implementing the BRI language planning policies.

Throughout human history, it has taken time to design, implement and evaluate any project or plan that is influential and phenomenal, including the BRI. While the BRI has been running for years, it is still in its developing stage. It requires a great deal of effort in planning, updating and monitoring the BRI language planning scheme to ensure a sustainable language-and-discourse ecosystem.

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