

Reviving the China-Islamic World Connection: from Historical Trade to the Belt and Road Initiative and Beyond

Ku Boon Dar, Mohamad Ainuddin Iskandar Lee bin Abdullah

¹ *Universiti Sains Malaysia*, ✉ kubd@usm.my

² *Institut Tun Perak (ITP) Melaka*

Article history

Received : 2024-09-10

Accepted : 2026-04-10

Published : 2026-04-23

Keywords

Islamic world;
Belt and Road Initiative
(BRI);
Silk road.

Abstract: This paper presents analysis of the relationship between China and the Islamic world, focusing on economic, political and cultural dimensions. Drawing on literature review and secondary data analysis, including academic studies and reports from international organisations, the study investigates historical interactions between China and Islamic civilisations, highlighting trade as the key driver of their engagement. The findings demonstrate that historical China-Islamic world interactions were largely characterised by reciprocal exchange, in which Islamic commercial networks, knowledge systems and religious institutions played a formative role in shaping China's external engagements. The paper further examines the contemporary relationship, focusing on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as the most significant economic framework connecting the two regions. The study finds that in the contemporary period, the relationship has evolved into an asymmetrical form of engagement, with China exercising greater economic leverage and strategic influence through infrastructure investment, energy cooperation and development financing. This shift reflects broader changes in the global political economy rather than a contradiction with earlier historical patterns. In addition, the study explores China's approach to Islam in the context of Muslim minority governance, analysing challenges associated with the treatment of Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang and their implications for China's relations with the Muslim world. The findings indicate that domestic governance practices related to Islam have become a significant constraint on China's soft power in Muslim-majority societies, shaping diplomatic perceptions despite deepening economic ties. Overall, the study adopts historical, political-economic and socio-religious perspectives to provide a concise and integrated understanding of the dynamics shaping contemporary China-Islamic world relations.

Abstrak: Artikel ini menyajikan analisis mengenai hubungan antara Tiongkok dan dunia Islam dengan menyoroti dimensi ekonomi, politik, dan budaya. Dengan menggunakan kajian literatur dan analisis data sekunder, termasuk studi akademik serta laporan dari organisasi internasional, penelitian ini menelusuri interaksi historis antara Tiongkok dan peradaban Islam, dengan menempatkan perdagangan sebagai faktor utama yang mendorong hubungan tersebut. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa interaksi historis antara Tiongkok dan dunia Islam pada umumnya bersifat timbal balik, di mana jaringan perdagangan Islam, sistem pengetahuan, serta institusi keagamaan memainkan peran penting dalam membentuk hubungan eksternal Tiongkok. Tulisan ini juga mengkaji hubungan kontemporer antara keduanya, dengan menyoroti *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) sebagai kerangka ekonomi paling signifikan yang menghubungkan kedua kawasan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pada periode modern, hubungan tersebut berkembang menjadi lebih asimetris, dengan Tiongkok memiliki pengaruh ekonomi dan strategis yang lebih besar melalui investasi infrastruktur, kerja sama energi, dan pembiayaan pembangunan. Perubahan ini mencerminkan dinamika ekonomi-politik global yang lebih luas, bukan merupakan penyimpangan dari pola historis sebelumnya. Selain itu, penelitian ini juga mengeksplorasi pendekatan Tiongkok terhadap Islam dalam konteks pengelolaan minoritas Muslim, khususnya terkait perlakuan terhadap Muslim Uyghur di Xinjiang serta implikasinya terhadap hubungan Tiongkok dengan dunia Islam. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa praktik domestik dalam mengelola isu keagamaan menjadi salah satu faktor pembatas bagi *soft power* Tiongkok di negara-negara mayoritas Muslim, sekaligus memengaruhi persepsi diplomatik meskipun hubungan ekonomi terus menguat.



Available online at
<https://journal.unnes.ac.id/journals/paramita>

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between China and the Islamic world has a long history that dates back to the ancient Silk Road trade routes. In this study, the term “Islamic world” refers broadly to Muslim-majority regions and societies across West Asia (the Middle East), Central Asia, South Asia and parts of South-east Asia and Africa, which have historically been connected to China through overland and maritime networks of trade, diplomacy and cultural exchange (Map 1). These interactions were primarily driven by trade and commerce, facilitating the exchange of goods, ideas and culture between the two regions. Historically, China’s engagement with the Islamic world was shaped mainly by interactions with Muslim merchants, scholars and political entities operating within these interconnected regions rather than by a single, unified Islamic political authority.

China’s economic rise and increasing engagement with the Islamic world have brought both parties new opportunities and challenges in recent years. In the contemporary context, this engagement is most evident in China’s relations with Muslim-majority states in the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa, where economic cooperation, infrastructure development and strategic partnerships under initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative have become increasingly prominent.

As a result, the relationship between China and the Islamic world continues to evolve, shaping their respective futures in the global arena. The Islamic teachings were introduced to China in 651 by a companion of Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. named Saad ibn Abi Waqqas r.a. He is also known as the founder of the Huaisheng Mosque in

Guangzhou. The *Tang Shu* (Old Book of Tang), the official history of the Tang dynasty, records the arrival of envoys from Dashi in 651. The name Dashi comes from the Persian word tazig, which was the name Persians gave to Arabs. In the records, the king of Dashi is called Dan-mi-mo-mo-ni, which refers to Amirul Mukminin. What is certain is that Islam began to spread to China through Arab and Persian traders during the Tang period. The *Tang Shu* records that Islam was known in Tang China as Das Shi Jiao, a term meaning “the religion of the Arabs,” reflecting contemporary Chinese perceptions of Islam as associated with Arab peoples. Thus, the vital aspect of this research is to comprehensively analyse the relationship between China and the Islamic world, encompassing economic, political and cultural perspectives throughout history and the present day. The term describes a shared cultural, social and religious identity among these countries and regions.

The early interactions between China and the Islamic world can be traced back to the 7th century when Arab traders first arrived in China. They brought various goods and products, including spices, precious stones and textiles. These goods were highly prized in China and were traded for Chinese silk, tea and other luxury goods.

This trade relationship continued for centuries and was facilitated by the Silk Road, which connected China with Central Asia and the Middle East. The term “Silk Road” was first coined in the nineteenth century by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen (1877) to describe the extensive network of overland trade routes through



Figure 1. Map of The Muslim World with the largest Muslim populations. (Source: Wikipedia)

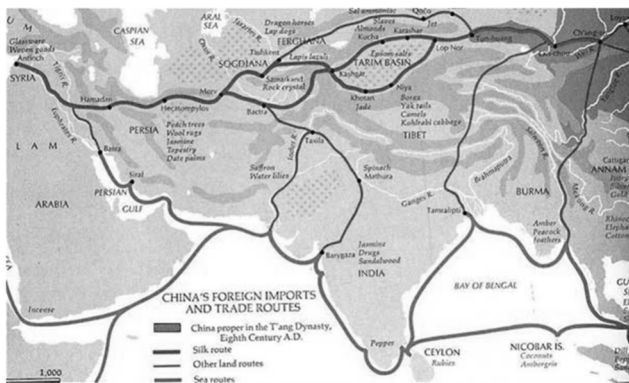


Figure 2. China's Foreign Imports and Trade Route (Source: Worldhistoryconnected, University of Illinois)

which silk, one of China's most valuable and distinctive commodities was transported westward to Central Asia, the Islamic world and the Mediterranean. The Silk Road, which connected China to the Mediterranean through Central Asia, was a major trade route (Map 2) that facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas and cultures between China and the Islamic world. Although silk gave the route its name, historians emphasise that silk was only one of many commodities traded and that the Silk Road functioned as a complex system of interconnected routes rather than a single, continuous road (Frankopan 2015; Hansen 2012). This trade route was not only a conduit for goods, such as silk, tea and porcelain from China, but also for spices, textiles and luxury items from the Islamic world.

The Silk Road also facilitated the exchange of ideas and technologies, such as Buddhism from India and gunpowder from the Islamic world. Elverskog (2010) examines the significance of trade in promoting connections between China and the Islamic world along the Silk Road. According to Elverskog, the Silk Road functioned as a global passageway that linked China to the Mediterranean region via Central Asia, enabling the exchange of people, commodities and concepts. This statement highlights how commerce was vital in facilitating cultural exchange and technology dissemination between these regions.

While Kennedy (2010) describes the importance of the Silk Road in facilitating cultural exchange, he notes that the Silk Road was not just a conduit for goods but also for people, ideas and beliefs. It played a vital role in shaping the civilisations of Eurasia. The historical interactions between the two regions were primarily driven by trade and commerce, which facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas and culture. China's Silk Road, which connected China with Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe, facilitated these

interactions. The importance of trade continued in the following centuries, with Muslim traders playing a significant role in the maritime trade between China and the Indian Ocean region. Dunn (2005) describes the early interactions between China and the Islamic world as,

On the sea coast of China and in the trading towns of Inner China, there were many Muslims and significant quantities of silk, musk and other goods were brought by the Muslims from India and other parts and sold to the Chinese traders. (p. 267).

As Dunn (2005) emphasizes, the crucial role played by Muslim traders in enabling trade between China and the Islamic world. These traders were responsible for transporting various commodities such as spices, textiles and other goods from India, Arabia and East Africa to China and Chinese goods to the Indian Ocean region. This trade also facilitated the exchange of ideas and cultures, as Muslim merchants settled in Chinese ports and established communities influenced by Chinese and Islamic cultures. The Islamic world, in turn, introduced China to new technologies, such as paper-making and contributed to the development of Chinese arts and sciences. The influence of Islamic culture in China can be seen in its architecture, calligraphy and cuisine, among other aspects. (Liu, 2009).

The historical interactions between China and the Islamic world laid the foundation for their current relationship. Hyunhee and Cho (2012) conclude the complex and multifaceted interactions between China and the Islamic world during the pre-modern era. The book they edited provides a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex interactions between China and the Islamic world and sheds light on how these interactions have shaped the history and culture of Asia. This interaction included various aspects of this cross-cultural exchange, including religion, trade, diplomacy and cultural influence. It covers many topics, from spreading Buddhism and Islam in China and the Middle East to developing new technologies and literary genres. (Park, 2012).

Meanwhile, "The Islamic World," the book chapter by Ehteshami (2021), explores the historical and philosophical roots of Islamic international relations and the implications of these ideas for contemporary global politics. He examines the historical development of Islamic international relations, from the early Islamic empires to the

modern era. While Kuran (2011) also highlights the contributions of Islamic scholars and thinkers to developing international law and diplomacy. As argued by Kuran.

The Islamic world joined hands with other civilizations to extend the foundation of what we today call globalisation. Globalization, in the sense of a global trading and financial structure, with all of its social and political consequences, did not begin with the rise of the West after AD 1500. Its foundations can be traced to the Islamic economic networks (p.17).

The Islamic world refined and improved paper-making, which originated in China and spread paper-making techniques to Europe. The Islamic world also introduced new scientific and philosophical ideas to China, such as algebra and astronomy. Chinese scholars were able to study these subjects in depth and they incorporated Islamic ideas into their thinking. The influence of Islamic culture on China can also be seen in its architecture, calligraphy and cuisine. The most famous example of Islamic architecture in China is the Great Mosque of Xi'an, built in the eighth century during the Tang Dynasty. Chinese calligraphy was also influenced by Islamic calligraphy, which is characterised by its flowing lines and intricate geometric patterns. Chinese cuisine was also influenced by Islamic food culture, with the introduction of spices such as cumin and coriander. (Feng & Liu, 2020).

While trade and commerce served as the primary driver of engagement between China and the Islamic world throughout history, there were also periods of conflict. One example is the Mongol invasions of the Islamic world in the thirteenth century, led by the Mongol ruler Genghis Khan and his successors. The invasions resulted in significant loss of life and destruction of cities, including the sacking of Baghdad in 1258. Despite this, trade and commerce between the two regions continued to flourish. Timothy Brook, a historian, highlights that despite the atrocities of the Mongol conquest, Eurasia's economic and cultural prosperity persisted. He points out that Arab and Persian traders continued to engage in commerce in China and Chinese goods were still being transported to the West. (Brook, 1998).

This suggests that while periods of conflict certainly impacted the relationship between China and the Islamic world, trade and commerce

remained resilient and continued to drive engagement between the two regions. Thus, this paper aims to provide a more balanced perspective on the relationship between China and the Islamic World by discussing the significant contributions made by the Islamic world to Chinese civilization. While much of the discourse on this relationship often centres around China's contribution to the Muslim World, this paper delves into how the Islamic world has influenced and impacted Chinese society and culture. The paper examines the contributions of Islamic scholars and intellectuals in fields such as architecture, mathematics, science and technology and their broader cultural and societal impacts.

Through thoroughly examining these contributions, this paper challenges the commonly held notion that China has been the sole contributor to this relationship. Due to their historical connections, Yusuf (2018) asserts that Islamic culture has profoundly impacted various aspects of Chinese culture, including language, food and art. However, the author argues that this influence has been underestimated and undervalued, indicating a need for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the two cultures. Thus, the paper also analyses the relationship between China and the Islamic world, focusing on the Belt and Road Initiative, China's approach to Islam and its foreign policy towards the Middle East and Africa. It explores the challenges of China's treatment of Uyghur Muslims and the implications of China's growing influence in those regions. The study aims to understand their engagement and significance in global affairs comprehensively.

METHOD

The methodology used in this study is a combination of literature review and secondary data analysis. The literature review involved an extensive search of academic articles, books and reports from reputable international organizations related to the relationship between China and the Islamic world. Key academic sources include seminal works on Silk Road and China-Islamic world interactions by scholars such as Liu (2009), Hansen (2012) and Frankopan (2015) as well as studies on contemporary China-Middle East and China-Africa relations published in leading journals of Asian Studies and International Relations. The literature review provided a comprehensive understanding of the historical and contemporary interactions between China and the Islamic world, including economic, political

and cultural perspectives. The secondary data analysis involved collecting and analysing existing data from various sources, including government reports, international organizations and academic literature. Among the main sources of secondary data are official policy documents and reports related to the Belt and Road Initiative issued by the Chinese government, publications by international organisations such as the World Bank, United Nations and International Energy Agency, as well as analytical reports from recognised research institutes and think tanks. This data analysis focused on the current relationship between China and the Islamic world, particularly concerning the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's approach to Islam and its foreign policy towards the Middle East and Africa.

To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data collected, the study employed a rigorous evaluation of the sources used. The sources were selected based on their relevance, credibility, validity and the information extracted was cross-checked with other sources to ensure consistency. Overall, this methodology allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between China and the Islamic world, providing insights into the complexity of their interactions and the challenges and opportunities they face. The study contributes to the existing body of literature on this topic. It provides a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers and stakeholders interested in understanding China's role in the Islamic world and its impact on global affairs

ISLAMIC WORLD CONTRIBUTIONS TO CHINA: INTELLECTUAL, CULTURAL, SCIENTIFIC EXCHANGE AND BEYOND

The exchange of goods between China and the Islamic world was not only a commercial relationship but also led to the exchange of ideas and culture. Gernet (1996) noted that Islamic scholars made significant contributions to Chinese science and technology during the Tang dynasty. He states, "The Muslim traders brought not only goods but also new ideas and discoveries and the Abbasid Caliphs and the Chinese emperors were keen to foster cultural and scientific exchanges" (Gernet, 1996: 245). Gernet (1996) highlights the Chinese emperor's active role in seeking Islamic knowledge and expertise. Kennedy also notes the importance of Islamic scholars in transmitting knowledge and ideas between China and the Islamic world. He states, "Islamic scholarship and literature profoundly impacted

Chinese thought and culture" (Kennedy, 2010:154). He emphasises the lasting impact of Islamic philosophy and literature on Chinese intellectual and cultural history. The Islamic world introduced new technologies to China, such as paper-making, which was refined and improved upon by the Islamic world before it was introduced to Europe. The Islamic world also introduced new scientific and philosophical ideas to China, such as algebra and astronomy, significantly impacting Chinese scholarship.

During the Tang dynasty (618-907 CE), the Chinese empire had an active interest in the knowledge and expertise of Muslim scholars, which made significant contributions to China in various fields such as technology, science and philosophy. Islamic civilisation was essential in introducing new ideas and techniques that greatly influenced Chinese culture. One example is the Arab mathematician and astronomer Al-Khwarizmi, whose works on algebra and algorithms were widely influential in China. According to historian Wang (2003), Muslims were instrumental in transferring a range of technologies from West Asia to China, including paper-making, textile production and innovative agricultural practices such as the cultivation of sugarcane and cotton. These innovations transformed China's economy and significantly impacted the world. Overall, the contributions of Islamic civilisation to China were substantial and their impact can still be felt today.

The impact of Islamic culture on China can also be seen in its architecture, calligraphy and cuisine. Islamic architecture, characterised by its use of geometric patterns and intricate designs, influenced Chinese architecture, as seen in the Great Mosque of Xi'an, built in the 8th century during the Tang Dynasty. Petersen (2002) depicts the impact of Islamic architecture on Chinese architecture, noting that Chinese mosques often feature Arabic inscriptions in Chinese characters and a fusion of Islamic and Chinese motifs. Peterson (2002) also highlights how the fusion of Islamic and Chinese architectural styles can be seen in many Chinese mosques.

Islamic calligraphy, renowned for its flowing lines and intricate patterns, also influenced Chinese calligraphy. Chinese cuisine was also influenced by Islamic food culture, with the introduction of spices such as cumin and coriander. An example of how Islamic cuisine influenced Chinese cuisine can be found in the famous street food, lamb kebab. Siddiqui (2017) notes that the lamb kebab was introduced to China by the Muslim Hui minority,

who combined Chinese cooking techniques with Islamic spices. This fusion of Chinese and Islamic culinary traditions resulted in a unique and flavourful dish that is now enjoyed by many in China.

Another example of the importance of the Silk Road in facilitating trade and commerce between China and the Islamic world is the establishment of the Tang dynasty's capital, Chang 'an (modern-day Xi'an). Chang 'an was a cosmopolitan city that attracted traders worldwide, including the Islamic world. The city's marketplaces were filled with goods from Persia, Arabia and India. It was a hub for the exchange of goods and ideas between China and the Islamic world. Ebrey, Walthall and Palais (2009) note that Chang 'an, the Tang dynasty's capital, was a hub for trade and commerce between China and the Islamic world. They state,

Chang 'an was an international city, with merchants and traders from Persia, Arabia and India...The city's marketplaces were full of goods from around the world and the exchange of goods and ideas was brisk. (p. 139).

They emphasise the importance of Chang'an in facilitating trade and cultural exchange between China and the Islamic world. Bentley (1993), a historian, has argued that the Islamic world played a significant role in facilitating globalization during pre-modern times. The Islamic world was a primary vehicle for connecting China with the Mediterranean and beyond through exchanging ideas and goods. This cross-cultural engagement and exchange of technologies between the Islamic world and China has contributed to the development of human civilization and highlights the importance of cultural interaction and exchange.

Islamic scholars significantly contributed to medicine and chemistry in China, mathematics and astronomy. The Persian physician Abu Bakr al-Razi's work on medicine was highly influential in Chinese medicine. He wrote extensively on the topic, including works such as "Kitab al-Hawi fi al-Tibb" (The Comprehensive Book on Medicine) and "Kitab al-Mansuri fi al-Tibb" (The Book of Medicine Dedicated to Mansur). Al-Razi's works on medicine were translated into Chinese and significantly impacted Chinese medical practices.

Similarly, the Arab chemist Jabir ibn Hayyan's theories on alchemy and chemistry were

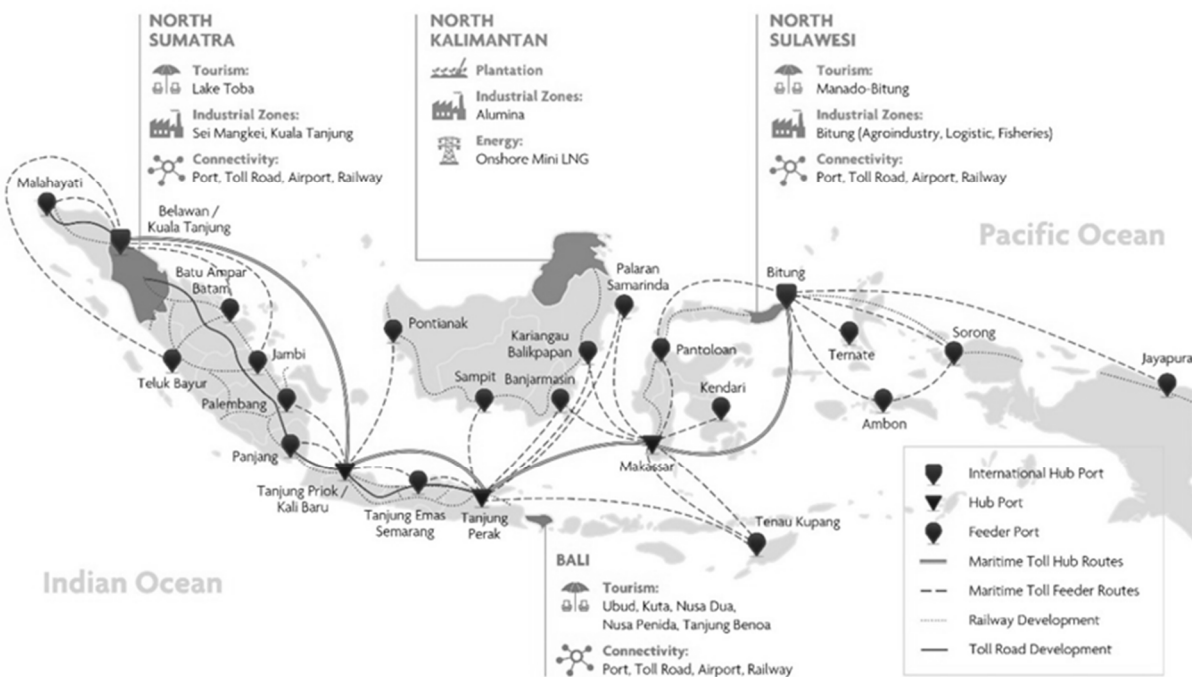
highly influential in China. Jabir's works were translated into Chinese and were studied by Chinese alchemists. His ideas on the transmutation of metals and the use of laboratory apparatus for chemical experimentation influenced the development of Chinese alchemy. According to historian Needham (1986), Jabir's writings were greatly respected in China and significantly impacted the progress of Chinese alchemy, particularly in the field of chemical technology.

The Islamic world was crucial in introducing gunpowder to China, ultimately significantly contributing to China's military power. Needham argues, "One of the great turning points in Chinese history was the acquisition of gunpowder technology from the Islamic world" (Needham, 1986, p. 158). The Chinese were initially introduced to gunpowder by Islamic travellers and traders who had discovered the explosive properties of saltpetre, sulphur and charcoal. While the Chinese initially used gunpowder for fireworks, they later realised its potential for military purposes. Using gunpowder weaponry, including cannons, rockets and bombs, was critical in many of China's military victories throughout history (Chase, 2003). El-Rouayheb (2017) discusses the introduction of gunpowder to China by Islamic traders and travellers. He states that through the intermediary of Islamic civilisation that the Chinese learned about saltpetre and sulphur as explosive agents and gunpowder as a military weapon. Therefore, the introduction of gunpowder by the Islamic world was a significant contribution to China's technological and military advancements.

Overall, the contributions of the Islamic world to China demonstrate the importance of cultural and scientific exchange in shaping the history of these two regions. The importance of trade and commerce in facilitating interactions between China and the Islamic world continued into the modern era. For example, during the 19th and early 20th centuries, Muslim traders from the Middle East, India and Southeast Asia established trading communities in China, particularly in the treaty ports opened to foreign trade after the Opium Wars (1839-1841). These communities played an important role in facilitating trade between China and the Islamic world while also serving as cultural and religious centres for Muslim communities in China. Muslim traders from the Middle East, India and Southeast Asia were essential in facilitating trade between China and the Islamic world. They brought goods, new ideas and cultural practices, including Islam. These traders

Prioritised Regions for Investment

BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE IN INDONESIA:
A PLAN FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Source: Park and Trillo. The Belt and Road Initiative in ASEAN – Indonesia, December 2020. <https://seam.ust.hk/web>
©2020 by United Overseas Bank and Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Institute for Emerging Market Studies.

Figure 3. Prioritised Region for Investment BRI in Indonesia: A Plan for Regional. (Source: Hong Kong University of Science and Technology)

established Muslim communities in China and served as cultural and religious centres for the growing Muslim population in China. Overall, Muslim traders and communities in China significantly facilitated trade and cultural exchange between China and the Islamic world. Their contributions have had a lasting impact on Chinese society and culture and their legacy continues to be felt in contemporary China.

CONTEMPORARY RELATIONSHIP & CHALLENGER

The historical interactions between China and the Islamic world have significantly impacted contemporary relations between the two regions. The rich cultural exchange and trade history has provided a strong foundation for the current economic, political and cultural ties between China and the Islamic world. One of the most significant ways historical interactions have influenced contemporary relations is through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013. (Hsiao, 2019).

In modern times, the relationship between China and the Islamic world has become more complex. China's economic rise and increasing engagement with the Islamic world have brought

both parties new opportunities and challenges. Today, trade and commerce remain a crucial aspect of the relationship between China and the Islamic world, with China's BRI as the most significant economic policy connecting the two regions. (Xu & Vong, 2021). The BRI aims to strengthen economic ties between China and countries along the ancient Silk Road trade routes, including many Muslim-majority countries in Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Many Islamic countries, such as Pakistan, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, have signed up for the BRI, seeing it as an opportunity to boost their economic growth. The BRI has led to significant investments in infrastructure, energy and transportation projects in these countries, which has further deepened the economic ties between China and the Islamic world.

According to a report by the China Global Investment Tracker, as of 2020, China's total investment in Malaysia under the BRI was \$16.1 billion. Most investments focused on the energy and real estate sectors (Xinhua News Agency, 2021). In Indonesia, Chinese investment under the BRI has also been significant. From 2014 to 2019, Chinese investments in Indonesia reached \$91.1 billion, according to data from Indonesia's Investment Coordinating Board. Many of these

investments went towards energy and infrastructure projects like the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway (The Jakarta Post, 2021). The Indonesian President, Widodo, devised a “Sea Toll Road” plan that corresponds seamlessly with the BRI initiative. The plan is intended to channel Chinese investments towards enhancing the infrastructure and promoting economic development in four central provinces of Indonesia. According to HKUST IEMS Report (2021), significant Chinese investments are not directed towards these regions, but their interest is growing. The BRI impetus has led to a significant surge of Chinese investments in Indonesia, which has increased sixteen-fold between 2013 and 2019. Chinese investments in Indonesia have evolved from trading and mining to incorporating innovative technology and developing infrastructure.

While the American Enterprise Institute report estimated that China’s investments in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region reached \$29.5 billion in 2019, with most of the investments going to infrastructure projects such as ports, railways and highways. Beijing invested \$10.5 billion in BRI-related and energy projects in Iraq in 2021. Iraq is the third-largest oil supplier to China, after Saudi Arabia and Russia. In Egypt, China has signed several contracts worth \$18 billion. It is involved in various infrastructure projects including the new Cairo administrative capital and the Economic-Technological Development Area in Egypt’s Suez Canal Economic Zone in Ain Sokhna. China has included 21 Arab countries in its multitrillion-dollar BRI project, which aims to revive the silk road to transport and sell its goods to the markets of Europe and Africa. Currently, two-thirds of China’s exports to these continents transit through infrastructures built by Gulf countries. (Mazel, 2022).

These projects can potentially boost economic growth and development in the region and improve transportation and connectivity between MENA countries and China. The region is strategically important to China due to its location at the crossroads of Asia, Europe and Africa and its abundant natural resources such as oil and gas. From 2013-2018, China became the top trading partner for several MENA countries, including the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt (see Figure 4).

Similarly, China has also increased its investments in African countries, with most of the investments going to infrastructure projects,

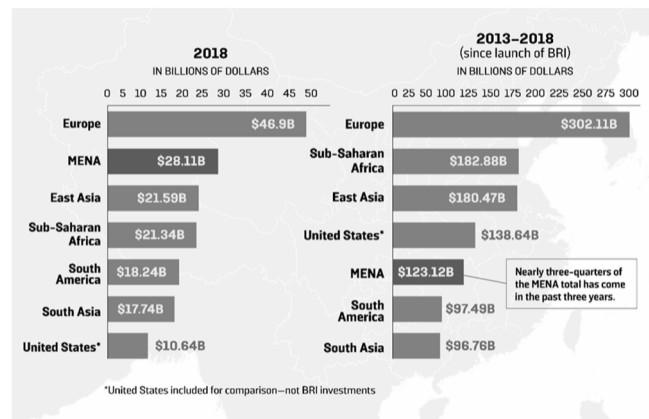


Figure 4. MENA’s Growing BRI Clout (Source: AEI China Global Investment Tracker, 2005-2018; Compiled and Conceived by Afshin Molavi)

agriculture and mining sectors. According to a report by the China-Africa Research Initiative, China’s investments in Africa reached \$45.6 billion in 2019, with a significant portion of the investments going to infrastructure projects such as roads, railways and airports. (China-Africa Research Initiative (CARI), 2019).

Dunne (2019) discusses the significance of the Belt and Road Initiative in strengthening economic ties between China and the Islamic world. According to him, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) holds strategic significance for China's ties with the Islamic world as it establishes connections between China and numerous influential countries with Muslim-majority populations. Duune (2016) emphasises the role of economic policies, such as the BRI, in deepening the economic ties between China and the Islamic world. McMillan (2015) discusses the role of Muslim traders in the maritime trade between China and the Indian Ocean region. However, the BRI has also faced criticism for its potential impact on the environment, debt sustainability and geopolitical implications. The initiative has been met with enthusiasm and scepticism from participating countries, as there are concerns about the potential for debt traps and unequal economic relationships. (Dossani, 2019).

One example of the potential negative impact of the BRI on the environment is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The project involves the construction of highways, railways and pipelines to connect Pakistan’s Gwadar Port to China’s north western region of Xinjiang. While the project is expected to boost economic growth in Pakistan, it has also raised concerns about the environmental impact of infrastructure development in the region. The construction of dams and power plants along the corridor could

threaten the fragile ecosystem of the Himalayas and the Indus River Basin, which provides water to millions of people in Pakistan and neighbouring countries, as reported by the International Crisis Group (2018).

Another concern is debt sustainability. BRI projects often involve massive investments in infrastructure that may need more revenue to repay loans. For example, Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port, built with Chinese loans, needed more traffic to make it financially viable. Sri Lanka eventually had to hand over control of the port to China in 2017 as part of a debt-for-equity swap. (Frayer, 2019; Chatham House, 2020)

Furthermore, the BRI has raised geopolitical concerns in the Islamic world, particularly in countries with ongoing conflicts or tensions with China's allies. For example, in Pakistan, there have been concerns about the potential for the Chinese military to use the Gwadar Port for naval purposes, which could provoke India. In addition, China's close relationship with Pakistan has caused unease in India, which views the project as a strategic encirclement. (Wang, 2019). Furthermore, China's growing influence in the Middle East and Africa has led to concerns about its intentions and impact on the region. Some analysts argue that China's engagement in these regions is driven by its economic interests and desire for strategic influence. In contrast, others see it as a positive force for development and stability. (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021; Ahmed, 2020; Hsu & Zou, 2019)

To address these concerns, China must ensure that BRI projects are environmentally sustainable, economically viable and transparent. Participating countries should also carefully assess the long-term implications of these projects and negotiate for equitable economic relationships. Additionally, China should work with the international community to address geopolitical concerns and ensure that the BRI does not exacerbate existing conflicts.

However, it is essential to note that contemporary relations between China and the Islamic world are not without challenges. One of the most significant challenges is China's treatment of its Muslim minority populations, particularly the Uyghur population in Xinjiang (Tauer, 2007). The treatment of Muslim minority populations in China, particularly the Uyghur population in Xinjiang, has been a significant concern for many countries, including those in the Islamic world. The Chinese government has been accused of violating

the human rights of Uyghurs through a range of policies and practices, including arbitrary detention, forced labour, cultural suppression and even genocide (Fawcett 2020; Amnesty International 2021; Human Rights Watch 2021, Kuo 2021). Many Muslim-majority countries, including Turkey, Malaysia and Indonesia, have condemned these accusations. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), a coalition of 57 Islamic countries, has also expressed concern about the situation in Xinjiang and called for an end to the violations against the Uyghurs (VOA, 2022).

The issue has strained China's relations with the Islamic world, as many countries have expressed concern about the treatment of Muslims in China. In 2019, Turkey's Foreign Ministry issued a statement calling the treatment of Uyghurs "a great shame for humanity" and urged China to close the detention camps (Al Jazeera, 2019; Blanchard, 2019). Similarly, Indonesians protested outside the Chinese Embassy in Jakarta, calling for China to stop oppressing its ethnic Uighur minority. Two rallies supported the Muslim group, one held after Friday prayers and another by a youth group called Laskar Merah Putih (Arabs News, 2019). The tension between China and the Islamic world over the treatment of Uyghurs underscores the complex dynamics at play in China's relationships with other countries. While China's economic influence has increased engagement with many countries, human rights concerns and cultural differences can create significant challenges in maintaining positive relations. However, China denies all allegations of human rights abuses in Xinjiang. (BBC, 2022).

One possible solution to the challenges facing China's relations with the Muslim world is for China to take concrete steps to address the concerns of Muslim-majority countries (China Daily 2019). Specifically, China could work to improve the treatment of its Muslim minority populations, particularly the Uyghur people in Xinjiang, by ending forced labour practices, lifting restrictions on cultural and religious expression and allowing independent observers to investigate allegations of human rights abuses. Simultaneously, China must be more active in repelling the accusations and slanders that continue to be hurled by the Western media and establishing a firmer engagement with the Islamic world. Saikal (2019) argues that China's growing economic and political power presents opportunities and challenges for the Muslim world. Both sides must engage in constructive dialogue and cooperation to build a

more stable and mutually beneficial relationship. This would help to alleviate tensions between China and Muslim countries, particularly those participating in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

In addition, China could engage in more transparent and equitable economic relationships with BRI partner countries. This could involve renegotiating loan terms and ensuring that projects are environmentally sustainable and benefit local communities. By doing so, China could demonstrate its commitment to building mutually beneficial partnerships based on shared interests and values. There are already examples of China taking steps in this direction. For instance, in 2020, China signed an agreement with the United Arab Emirates to abolish forced labour and human trafficking. This agreement was seen as a positive step towards improving China's image in the Muslim world. Similarly, China has provided debt relief to some BRI partner countries, such as Pakistan and Kenya, which could help to ease concerns about debt traps and unsustainable borrowing.

Overall, by addressing the challenges posed by its treatment of Muslim minorities and engaging in more transparent and equitable economic relationships, China can improve its relations with the Muslim world and ensure the long-term success of the BRI. This would require a shift in China's approach towards the BRI from a purely economic initiative to a more holistic development project that considers partner countries' concerns and aspirations.

CONCLUSION

Cultural, religious and commercial ties have shaped China's historical interaction with the Muslim world. The Silk Road facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas and cultures. Muslim scholars and traders contributed to Chinese civilisation, particularly in astronomy, mathematics, medicine and commerce. This historical phase reflects a period in which the Islamic world functioned as an important source of external knowledge, commercial expertise and cultural influence for China.

In contemporary times, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has opened up new opportunities for economic cooperation and cultural exchange between China and Muslim-majority countries. At the same time, the initiative has generated concerns over environmental sustainability, debt exposure and geopolitical influence. China's treatment of its Muslim minority populations, particularly the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, has contributed to

diplomatic tensions with Muslim-majority countries and shaped perceptions of China in the Islamic world. The study finds that this shift from historical receptivity to contemporary projection of influence represents a transformation in the direction of influence shaped by changing global power structures, state capacity and the international political economy.

China's growing influence in the Islamic world has implications for both parties. For Islamic countries, China's economic and political clout provides an alternative to traditional Western powers, while also generating new forms of dependence. For China, the Islamic world offers new markets and investment opportunities, but also presents challenges related to cultural diversity, security concerns and political instability. The findings demonstrate that the relationship is better understood as a historically layered and asymmetrical interaction, in which past experiences of exchange inform, but do not directly determine, contemporary strategies of engagement.

To sustain this relationship, China should improve its treatment of Muslim minorities, including the Uyghurs, while also addressing concerns over debt sustainability and environmental impact in BRI projects through greater transparency and consultation with local communities. Cultural and educational exchanges can further be leveraged to promote dialogue and mutual understanding with the Muslim world. These measures are crucial for mitigating present tensions and ensuring that contemporary engagement does not undermine the historical legacy of mutual exchange and cooperation that once characterised China-Islamic world relations.

In conclusion, China's relations with the Muslim world are complex and multifaceted, rooted in a long history of cultural exchange and economic interaction. The apparent contrast between historical Islamic influence on China and China's contemporary influence on the Islamic world reflects a long-term shift in global agency and power rather than an ideological or civilisational confrontation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The paper is part of ongoing research project supported by the Universiti Sains Malaysia under external agency (international) research grant 2024/289/ET2642

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, A. (2020). China's Investment in Pakistan - debt trap or game changer? *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/20/chinas-investment-in-pakistan-debt-trap-or-game-changer>. Retrieved on 4 April 2023.
- Al Jazeera. (2019, February 10). 'Shame for humanity': Turkey urges China to close Uighur camps. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/2/10/shame-for-humanity-turkey-urges-china-to-close-uighur-camps>. Retrieved on 3 March 2023.
- Amnesty International. (2021). China 2020: A Human Rights Crisis Unfolding. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/asia-and-the-pacific/china/report-china/>. Retrieved on 11 April 2023.
- Arab News. (2019, December 27). Jakarta rally voices anger over Uighur 'oppression' <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1604946/world>. Retrieved on 1 April 2023.
- Bentley, J. H. (1993). *Old World encounters Cross-cultural contacts and exchanges in pre-modern times*. Oxford University Press.
- Blanchard, B. (2019, February 27) China urges an 'objective' view of Xinjiang after Turkey criticism. *REUTERS*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/cnews-us-china-xinjiang-idCAKCN1QG10M-OCATP>. Retrieved on 12 January 2023.
- British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (2022, May 24). Who are the Uyghurs and why is China being accused of genocide? <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-22278037>. Retrieved on 10 December 2022.
- Brook, T. (1998). *The Confusions of Pleasure: Commerce and Culture in Ming China*. The University of California Press.
- Chase, K. (2003). *Firearms: A Global History to 1700*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chatham House (2020). Debunking the Myth of 'Debt-trap Diplomacy,' 19 August. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/08/debunking-myth-debt-trap-diplomacy/4-sri-lanka-and-bri>. Retrieved on 15 April 2023.
- China Daily. (2019). How China is Responding to Belt and Road Criticism. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201904/18/WS5cb7e1b2a3104842260bfcf8.html>. Retrieved on 10 December 2022.
- China's Belt and Road Initiative. (2021). *Council on Foreign Relations*. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounders/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative>. Retrieved on 4 April 2023.
- China-Africa Research Initiative (CARI), Data on China's Global Development Footprint, 2021: Fourth Edition, Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). <https://www.sais-cari.org/data-china-africa-database>. Retrieved on 10 April 2023.
- Dossani, R. (2019). China's Belt and Road Initiative: Implications for the Middle East. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-implications-for-the-middle-east/>. Retrieved on 12 January 2023.
- Dunn, R. (2005). *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveller of the 14th Century*. The University of California Press.
- Dunne, B. (2019). *The Belt and Road Initiative and the Islamic World: Opportunities and Challenges*. Arab Center Washington DC.
- Ebrey, P. B., Walthall, A., & Palais, J. B. (2009). *East Asia: A Cultural, Social and Political History*. Cengage Learning.
- Ehteshami, A. (2021). 'The Islamic World.' In C. Jones (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Middle East Politics* (pp. 1-17). Routledge.
- El-Rouayheb, K. (2017). *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century*. Cambridge University Press.
- Elverskog, J. (2010). *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road*. The University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Fawcett, L. (2020). China's Uyghur Policy and the Crisis in Xinjiang. European Council on Foreign Relations. <https://ecfr.eu/publication/chinas-uyghur-policy-and-the-crisis-in-xinjiang/>. Retrieved on 12 January 2023.
- Feng, H., & Liu, J. (2020). China's Relations with the Muslim World: A Historical Perspective. *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 14 (1), 1-15.
- Frankopan, P. (2015). *The Silk Roads: A new history of the world*. Bloomsbury.
- Fraye, L. (2019). In Sri Lanka, China's Building Spree is Raising Questions About Sovereignty. *National Public Radio (NPR)*. 13 December 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/13/784084567/in-sri-lanka-chinas-building-spree-is-raising-questions-about-sovereignty>. Retrieved on 15 April 2023.
- Gernet, J. (1996). *A History of Chinese Civilization*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hansen, V. (2012). *The Silk Road: A new history*. Oxford University Press.
- Heaver, S. (2023, February 17). Sri Lanka's Chinese-built port city stirs white elephant fears. *Al-Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2023/2/17/sri-lankas-chinese-built-port-city-stirs-white-elephant-fears>. Retrieved on 4 April 2023.
- HKUST IEMS Reports No. 2021-08, The Belt and Road Initiative in ASEAN-Indonesia. <https://news.hkust.edu.hk/news/belt-and-road-initiative-asean-indonesia>. Retrieved on 10 April 2023.
- Hsiao, K. J. (2019). From Silk Road to Belt and Road: China's Interaction with the World. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 78(3), 613-620.
- Hsu, A., & Zou, H. (2019). China's investment in African energy projects. *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 237, 117754. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2019.117754>. Retrieved on 12 January 2023.
- Human Rights Watch. (2021). China's crimes against humanity targeting Uyghurs and other Turkic

- Muslims. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/22/chinas-crimes-against-humanity-targeting-uyghurs-and-other-turkic-muslims>. Retrieved on 4 January 2023.
- Hyunhee, P., & Cho, F. (Eds.). (2012). *China and the Islamic world: Changing perspectives*. Cambridge University Press.
- International Crisis Group. (2023). *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Opportunities and Risks*. 24 Jun 2018. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-asia/pakistan/297-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-opportunities-and-risks>_Retrieved on 15 April 2023.
- Islamic Word. In Buzan, B & Acharya A. (2021). *Re-imagining International Relations: World Order in the Thought and Practice of Indian, Chinese and Islamic Civilizations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 81-112.
- Kennedy, H. (2010). *The Silk Road: A New History*. Princeton University Press.
- Kuo, L. (2021). China's treatment of Uyghurs is genocide, says parliamentary subcommittee. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/22/chinas-treatment-of-uyghurs-is-genocide-says-parliamentary-subcommittee>_Retrieved on 15 April 2023.
- Kuran, T. (2011). *The long divergence: How Islamic law held back the Middle East*. Princeton University Press.
- Liu, X. (2009). Islamic Culture in China. *The Journal of Culture and Tourism Research*, 2(3), 285-296. <https://doi.org/10.3727/109830409789104977>. Retrieved on 10 April 2023.
- Mazel, Z. (2022, April 21) China's growing economic impact on the Middle East. <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/china-middle-east/>. Retrieved on 11 April 2023.
- McMillan, J. (2015). *Islamic Civilization in Thirty Lives: The First 1,000 Years*. The University of California Press.
- Needham, J. (1986). *Science and Civilization in China: Volume 5, chemistry and chemical technology, part 4, spagyric discovery and Invention: apparatus, theories and gifts*. Cambridge University Press.
- Park, H. (2012). *Mapping the Chinese and Islamic Worlds*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Petersen, A. (2002). *Dictionary of Islamic Architecture*. Routledge.
- Saikal, A. (2019). *China and the Muslim world: between cooperation and conflict*. Oxford University Press.
- Siddiqui, J. (2017). *The Silk Road Rediscovered: How Indian and Chinese Companies Are Becoming Globally Stronger by Winning in Each Other's Markets*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Tauer, F. (2007). Islam in China: Hui and Uyghurs between modernisation and Sinicisation. *European Journal of East Asian Studies*, 6(2), 165-198. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156805807781745378>
- The Jakarta Post. (2021, March 27). Indonesia: Indonesia, China sign \$18.28b in BRI deals.
- Voice of America (VOA). (2022, March 25). Organization of Islamic Cooperation Accused of Ignoring Uyghur Muslims in China. <https://www.voanews.com/a/organization-of-islamic-cooperation-accused-of-ignoring-uyghur-muslims-in-china/6501070.html>. Retrieved on 12 January 2023.
- Wang, G. (2003). *The Muslim world and China, 1100-1700: Transcultural flow of people, goods and ideas*. Harvard University Press.
- Wang, J. (2019). China's Belt and Road Initiative and Its Implications for Islamic Finance. *Journal of Islamic Accounting and Business Research*, 10(4), 714-729.
- Xinhua News Agency. (2021, May 20). "Malaysia: China's BRI investment in Malaysia surges 143 pct YoY in Q1." Xinhua News Agency. https://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-05/20/c_139963236.htm. Retrieved on 4 April 2023.
- Xu, J., & Vong, K. (2021). Belt and Road Initiative, trade openness and Chinese outward foreign direct investment. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 30 (129), 533-549.
- Yusuf, H. (2018). The influence of Islamic culture on Chinese culture. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses*, 13(3), 260-273.