

# China's international education aid to Cambodia in the 2010s: Situation analysis and trends

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*Since 2004, China has contributed an increasing amount of annual financial aid to Cambodia, especially from 2010 to 2012. Cambodia's increasing budget shortages in education from 2014 to 2018 motivated its government to seek development aid from abroad. In the context of the ongoing rise in China's overall budget aid to Cambodia, this research studied the circumstances of this educational aid, discerning trends from 2010 to 2019, and evaluating China's position. Data was gathered using descriptive mixed methods, with statistical data gathered from the Cambodia Official Development Assistance (ODA) Database as well as relevant documents.*

*Results were that 1) China was among the five countries with the overall highest number of development assistance projects in Cambodia (others included Japan, South Korea, the US, and Canada). China was the largest financial contributor with the most concessional loans, with the likelihood of offering further grants by the late 2010s; 2) China provided little educational aid compared to other national providers of educational aid. Yet China tended to increasingly provide educational aid in the school and facilities sector. Notably, most Chinese educational aid programs were unrecorded in the Cambodia ODA Database. Budget amounts for these activities did not vary much from those of Japan to South Korea.*

*Keywords: Cambodia; China; International educational aid; situation analysis*

## INTRODUCTION

China's foreign aid became widely accepted and more prominent as the 21<sup>st</sup> century approached. A major turning point occurred in 2001 when the Cambodian government emphasised China's influence as the highest priority in international relations (Percival, 2007), and China and Cambodia began a relationship with support of the One China policy (Sotharith, 2010) and the establishment of economic and trade cooperation in 2002. Data from the Council for Development of Cambodia (CDC) revealed that between 2011 and 2019, China was one of Cambodia's top trading partners, with its trade value increasing steadily every year (CDC, 2021a). During 1994-2019, China had the largest share of foreign aid at 21.81%, invested in infrastructure, resource development, rubber, and tourism (CDC, 2021b). Statistics from the Cambodia Official Development Assistance (ODA) database show that such aid increased with every passing year (Yang & Ma, 2015). In tourism, the 2018 third quarter figures show that the number of Chinese tourists has increased by 34.5% since 2012, higher than tourists

from South Korea, Vietnam, Thailand, Japan, and the US (Bopharath, 2018). In 2006, cooperation between Cambodia and China covered almost all areas including education (Vannarith, 2009).

Cambodia-China relationships date back centuries, being prevalent in the ancient Funan, the Chenla, and, especially, the Kingdom of Angkor periods. A Chinese diplomat, Zhou Daguan, lived in Angkor city for a year when the two countries had strong relationships in trade, tribute, and migration (Griffiths, 2011). Politically, Cambodia is one of the oldest and closest allies of China. Culturally, Chinese values are rooted in the Cambodian way of life (Pheakdey, 2012).

In 2018, Cambodia declared a key national strategy to join China's "One Belt-One Road" (BRI),<sup>1</sup> realizing that the initiative had great potential to develop the country in all sectors, economically and socially (Royal Government of Cambodia [RGC], 2018). China's assistance has gradually promoted economic, military, and political cooperation under the form "Asia Only" to strengthen its ties with Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV) countries (Weitz, 2011). As Percival (2007) noted, China's use of a tool named "Soft Power" was a popular new mantra in Southeast Asia.

However, China has a different model of development aid from that of traditional donors. In its initial phase, the assistance focused on the development of infrastructure, along with a set amount of funds allocated to human resource development activities (Sato et al., 2011). However, with budget allocations for education from the Cambodian government constantly reducing (Tweed & Som, 2015), the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) turned to China for help (MoEYS, 2014). By 2018, the Cambodian education sector received less than 10% of the national budget, which was lower than the global average (15-20%) and was also the lowest education expenditures in ASEAN (Kaewkumkong, 2020).

As stated by Yang and Ma (2015), a new stage of China's foreign aid occurred in 2010 when China's National Conference of Foreign Aid was conducted to review the country's aid policy and plan for upgrading foreign aid in new settings. China released the First White Paper on Foreign Aid in 2011, discussing its foreign aid from 1950 to 2009. The Second White Paper was released later, in which China's foreign aid policy from 2010 to 2012 was discussed. The paper covered activities such as human resources training, youth volunteers and scholarships. It was evident that the number of projects had increased significantly (Zhang, 2014). The announcement of the BRI in 2013 also drove educational aid in that decade. On the Cambodian side, the government operated under the Rectangular Strategy from Phase 3 (2009-2013) onward, which aimed to emphasize education reform and continue to intend implementing the Education for All (EFA) global agenda. A turning point in this period showed that Cambodia made significant progress through reforms of government finance administration, allowing it to successfully cooperate with international partners (Cambodian Rehabilitation and Development Board [CRDB], 2019; RGC, 2013).

This study, acknowledging that China's foreign aid has risen across developing countries, examines the following research questions: (1) What is the overall aid condition of Cambodia and education in particular? (2) What is the Chinese aid trend

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<sup>1</sup> The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), formerly known as One Belt One Road and the author holds the original name here as it was stated in the Cambodian strategic plan in 2018.

during the years 2010-2019? And (3) what is China's unique approach to managing foreign aid and what was the response from Cambodia? The analysis examined aid characteristics, concepts, project type, budget, activities, and feedback from Cambodia. The aim of this study was to increase the discussion of issues within the area of study of China and Cambodia in accordance with the donors and the recipients. As Yang and Ma (2015) specified, there are meager sources in English that discuss China's foreign aid with respect to education. Studies of China's education aid are mostly limited to Africa, with few works on aid elsewhere. Similarly, the World Bank (2008) observed two challenges regarding the most significant implementation of foreign aid policy among emerging donors: (1) limitations in access to the data on types and amounts of aid from these countries, and (2) diverse methods of providing aid to achieve harmony and alignment.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Concept and evolution of foreign aid**

Morgenthau's theory of foreign aid (1962) hypothesised that aid is an aspect of foreign policy, essentially transferring money, goods, and services from one country to another. Pakenham (1966) supported this concept by calling it one of the tools of international politics. Foreign aid is economic development for the benefit of the giving country. In a narrow sense, Riddell (2007) stated that foreign aid was the provision of assistance to improve the basic welfare and to reduce poverty of the recipient country. Such assistance can be referred to as development aid. With respect to educational aid, Phillips (1976) defined it as the giving country's distribution of educational resources, including teachers, educational equipment, loans, scholarships, grants, exchange programs, and the construction of educational institutions. Aid can further include training to improve the quality of educational systems, students, personnel, and civil servants in developing countries.

Foreign aid, in its modern guise, began in the immediate aftermath of World War II with the development of the Bretton Woods institutions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (Ali & Zeb, 2016). It has been used as a tool to drive economic growth and development, support post-war reconstruction, and promote peace and prosperity around the world (Kim, 2016). Over the past six decades, foreign aid has evolved through different stages (Ali & Zeb, 2016). In the 1950s, there was a boom of economic growth ideas. In 1960s, economic progress was still pursued based on the modernisation concepts promoted by economists such as Rostow and Lewis, who projected capital transfer and investment and supply of labour. However, it became clear that aid did not benefit all sectors of society. In the 1970s, the focus turned towards aid for the local economy and rural development for poverty alleviation with the participation of civil society, NGOs, and multilateral organisations.

In the 1980s, a development strategy was replaced by an adjustment strategy. Specific conditions for receiving economic assistance and loans from the IMF and the World Bank were established. Developing countries needed to make structural and policy changes, such as privatisation, trade liberalisation, and reduction in public expenditure to minimise the role of government. Scholars believe it to be the era of neo-liberalism, but recipient countries experienced negative outcomes. By the 1990s, foreign aid tended to decline due to the collapse of communism, the rise of globalisation, greater budget pressures in developing countries and general disappointment in the outcomes of the aid provided. Most donors pursued commercial interests and neglected political

conditionality such democratisation in a bid to increase better outcomes from the provision of aid. The years between the mid-1990s and the early 21st century witnessed wars, internal conflicts, and instability in several states, and the structure of aid was thus shifted to the focus on poverty eradication and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and now Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

At the beginning of the 21st century, Fengler and Kharas (2010) stated that despite the influx of aid and the increasing involvement of players, the importance of aid had decreased. Foreign aid's new architecture was the result of three major changes. First, strong growth in many developing countries. Since 2000, aid was redefined as many Asian countries became donor countries. Second, the donors' landscapes have changed radically over the past decade with the help of NGOs, foundations, and private corporations. Third, innovation, especially information technology, has created new forms of development assistance. As Heller (2011) explained, in addition to poverty, gender discrimination, and epidemics, the issues of globalisation, global warming, biodiversity loss, and geopolitical turmoil have become major threats to global citizens. As the environment of international aid changed dramatically over the last century, with more players participating, charitable organisations, the private sector, and emerging donors began playing an increasingly important role in supporting poor countries, while the recipient countries also gained more economic and political experience.

### **China's foreign aid and its agenda**

China's foreign aid was driven by political, economic, and humanitarian factors. Politically, the Chinese government has used aid as a foreign policy tool to promote its international status as a power holder. The country's aid budget has increased rapidly since 2004, with 80% of its total allocated to Asia and Africa and has contributed to the boosting of economic growth in recipient countries, particularly in least-developed countries (Zhang, 2018), with Africa the largest recipient (Lönnqvist, 2008). However, Fazzini (2019) argued that the distribution of aid in Africa was not evenly distributed and was politically motivated to build friendships among non-partisan countries, compete with Taiwan and maintain access to oil and minerals for its own economic growth (Lum et al., 2009). Sun (2014) also noted that various Chinese projects operated to access Africa's natural resources and markets, which created business opportunities for Chinese companies and employment of Chinese workers.

Weston et al. (2011) examined various projects implemented by China in Africa and found that although the leaders of those countries welcomed the projects, the local people were frustrated because of issues such as employment of Chinese workers rather than Africans, lax safety measures, frequent accidents in Chinese-managed projects, oversupply of products from China creating a disadvantage for local productivity, substandard buildings and structures, and bribes given by Chinese companies to local officials. Chan and Chung (2015) also remarked that by employing advertising like "Making friends" to gain acceptance, Chinese aid to African partners was, in fact, a political driving force transmitted through different levels of friendly relations with recipient countries.

Nevertheless, Chinese aid has worked towards eradicating poverty and improving people's well-being in developing countries (Fuchs & Rudyak, 2017), though remaining focused on the foundations of the economy, industry, energy and resources, agriculture,

and public facilities, with education and health listed in the category of public facilities (Yang & Ma, 2015).

Between 1956 and 1973, China's aid to Cambodia accounted for 2% of China's overall aid programs and increased by about 24 times from 2017 to 2018 (Cambodia Public Debt Statistical Bulletin [CPDSB], 2019). This was in part to reward Cambodia for its support of the One China policy. China has also assisted Cambodia through the implementation of the BRI, particularly in transport infrastructure (Vathanak, 2021), which has enabled the country to open up to foreign trade markets, increasing employment, and raising the quality of life of individuals (Sullivan, 2011).

However, Pheakdey (2012) pointed out that most of Chinese aid to Cambodia was in the form of soft loans for infrastructure projects. Compared with those of other donors, loans from China had higher interest rates with shorter amortisation and periods of grace. Moreover, China's aid also caused negative social impacts. Most of the aid sponsored the construction of factories, hospitals, airport, a teacher-training college and a TV broadcast station. China also provided technical assistance (Griffiths, 2011). Pheakdey (2012) argued that China's aid to Cambodia did not always lead to development but to tragic outcomes. For example, from 1975 to 1979, China provided financial and political assistance to the Khmer Rouge through military aid, armament, construction of a military airfield, and oil refinery repair. When Vietnam occupied Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge retreated and settled along the Thai border, continuing to receive supplies of weapons from China and Thailand.

Sullivan (2011) was also critical of Chinese aid, pointing out that the lack of transparency in Cambodian projects sponsored by Chinese aid may allow Cambodian political elites and business owners to seize rent-seeking opportunities. Pheakdey (2012) concurred, adding that China had emphasized the "no strings attached policy", a practice that differed from traditional donors and pointed to China having a hidden agenda.

China is a member of BRICS,<sup>2</sup> and a vital contributor to development cooperation among this group of developing countries with emerging markets. China operates within the framework of South-South Cooperation by focusing on building partnerships rather than a donor-recipient relationship (de Siqueira, 2019). Aid from OECD-Development Assistance Committee shrank from 90% in 2000 to 77% in 2014 and rebounded to 83% in 2017. Meanwhile, BRICS has increased its share of Chinese aid from 2% to 8% during the same period (Zhao & Ouyang, 2020). Overall, following the establishment of BRICS, the level of economic development mechanisms of many countries increased significant, and China's role in aiding international development became more prominent as a result of economic and political strength (Guo et al., 2020).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative research employed a descriptive mixed-method strategy of statistical data analysis and document analysis. Data were derived from: (1) the Cambodia ODA Database published by the CDC in the years 2010 to 2019 and accessed in January-February 2020, and (2) peer-reviewed and grey literature. Peer-reviewed articles mainly

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<sup>2</sup> An acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa

dealt with discussion and supported the results, while grey literature was used for detailed explanations of situations from statistical data occurring in the 2010s.

The criteria included literature published in English because it is easier to retrieve and contains extensive and varied information. The peer-reviewed articles are based in accuracy and are reproducible as the standard most employed by official organisations and researchers (Mbah et al., 2021). This study also utilised online search engines from the Web of Science and Scopus databases, as well as from Google for relevant reports and working papers linked to international agency websites, such as the World Bank, UN, Asian Development Bank (ADB), and UNESCO, to ensure credibility and authenticity. Prior to the search, the key themes focused on China's foreign aid in principle and practice to countries as well as China's aid to Cambodia, particularly in the education sector with corresponding research objectives and scope of study. The selection of grey literature was based on its origin: the national plan and strategies of both China and Cambodia; official Chinese documents, including the China White Paper on Foreign Aid and other updating sources, such as *China Daily*, *Xinhua*, *Global Times*, and *hanban.org*; Cambodian official documents included the Education Strategic Plan, Rectangular Strategy, National Strategic Development Plan, and reports from CDC and Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI), a national think-tank.

For data analysis, the study was divided into two parts. Statistical data were compiled and used to generate descriptive statistics, such as percentage to provide clarity with respect to illustrations and trends. It was followed by presentation of the results in the form of comparative tables. For documents, the study made use of the content analysis technique by considering manifest content from documents adhering to the conceptual framework. The analysis focused on examining evidence for coherence, essence, and trends to explain conditions in the 10-year research period. The outcomes are presented in the form of descriptive analysis and statistics.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Chinese policy through foreign aid

In the 2010s, China provided the most aid among the top five donors (Japan, South Korea, US, Canada and China). Aid funds peaked at the beginning of the 2010s (Table 1). However, Chinese aid differed from aid provided by other donors because only about 8% was in the form of grants and the rest in the form of loans. By comparison, South Korean grant aid accounted for 63%, almost all Japanese and French aid was in the form of grants and other donors provided 100% in grants. Under its loans scheme, China supported the second highest number of projects (22.95%), the highest being the ADB (35.96%). China mainly supported infrastructure development, including road and bridges construction, electricity, irrigation, dams, and buildings.

There were only 14 Chinese grant programs (21.54% of total projects from China), most provided in late 2018 and 2019, supporting projects such as the construction of nursing buildings, schools and educational facilities; establishing training centres and vocational education centres; the construction of an indoor stadium, ancient site renovations in Siem Reap, bomb disposal, preparation of the domestic transport system master plan and improving public transport systems, census, agriculture and bio-fertilizer, and assistance with Cambodia's elections, including procuring ballot boxes and setting up polling booths.

**Table 1: Number of China's projects and aid budget for Cambodia**

Year	Total projects	Emerging projects	Budget (US\$)	Remarks
2010	13	5	1,239,099,365	1. Some projects in 2010 are brought over from previous years, and there are ongoing aid programs that will be carried out until 2023. 2. For ongoing projects, the consideration is the total budget included in the first year that has been allocated. 3. Projects after 2019 are listed in the category of total projects since they continued from the previous years. 4. There are 14 projects with unspecified operating years, which are classified under the Pipeline category and excluded from this list.
2011	21	12	673,193,648	
2012	26	8	756,578,402	
2013	31	1	400,000	
2014	32	5	132,586,979	
2015	32	6	377,370,749	
2016	28	5	384,402,991	
2017	31	9	657,283,574	
2018	26	8	480,921,272	
2019	23	6	502,050,888	
2020	17	-	-	
2021	11	-	-	
2022	6	-	-	
2023	2	-	-	
<b>Total</b>	<b>299</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>5,203,887,868</b>	

Source: Compiled and calculated by the author from the Cambodia ODA Database

\*For CNY, the exchange rate is 1 USD = 6.88 CNY (<https://www.xe.com/currencyconverter/> 16 Jan 2020).

This data revealed that after 2010, China expanded its role in Cambodia through a large number of foreign aid policies. This finding is in line with those of Reilly (2015), which indicated that, since 2004, China has been a major annual financial contributor to Cambodia. Particularly during 2010-2012, provision of funds increased at a much higher rate than in previous years. Most of the aid was for infrastructure construction and economic development, with only minor assistance for social development. Ciorciari (2013) found that in 2011 China invested ten times as much as the US, bringing Cambodia's GDP to US\$13 billion. Increased aid to Cambodia by China since 2004 is in line with increased Chinese aid in other jurisdictions (Yang & Mam, 2015).

As noted above, although Chinese aid has brought benefits to the recipient countries (Sullivan, 2011; Yang & Ma, 2015; Zhang, 2018), most aid was in the form of loans for economic development (Griffiths, 2011; Pheakdey, 2012; Sun, 2014). There has been debate about whether China's aid has had negative social impacts on the recipient countries. That is, although China's "no strings attached policy" was accepted by the elites of the recipient countries, many of China's investment projects have caused dissatisfaction or harmful effects on local people (Chan & Chung, 2015; Weston et al., 2011). Specifically in Cambodia, although Chinese aid has been well received by political and business leaders, the terms and management of aid remained questionable, particularly regarding transparency and accountability, as well as the increasing doubts of China's hidden agenda (Pheakdey, 2012; Sullivan, 2011). In effect, foreign aid had two impacts: the positive impact can be measured and included, for example, in the higher rate of completing basic education (though subject to certain conditions); the negative impact is that the funds acquired had no significant effects on the domestic growth of recipient countries (Chan & Chung, 2015).

### Proportion of China's aid for education

There were eight categories of expenditure for education during 2010–2019, as shown in Table 2. Most of the funds were spent on basic educational development. In the 2010s, 25 international development partners provided educational aid, with the total aid budget increasing steadily every year. The top five contributors together accounted for 63.81% of the aid. Aid from China accounted for only 1.15% of the total aid budget but increased to 2% in the period 2010-2022. China ranks eighth among 16 countries providing bilateral aid to Cambodia, as shown in Table 3.

**Table 2: Education aid budget to Cambodia classified by type during 2010-2019**

Project type	No. of projects	Budget (US\$ 000)	%
1. Basic Education	20	269,210.91	24.34
2. Schools and Facilities	19	130,061.64	11.76
3. Secondary Education	13	84,997.41	7.68
4. Sector Policy	11	42,853.62	3.87
5. Teacher Training	11	44,607.45	4.03
6. Tertiary, Vocational and Higher	60	251,007.74	22.69
7. Sector Wide Approach Program (SWAP)*	6	203,639.39	18.41
8. Others such as NGO collaboration, volunteer programs, research cooperation, etc.	13	79,752.42	7.21
Total	153	1,106,130.58	100

Source: Compiled and calculated by the author from the Cambodia ODA Database

\*SWAP or Sector budget support is the unit service and mechanism of MoEYS budget allocation for effective international education aid management

**Table 3: Aid financing of international education partners in the 2010s**

All education aid providers			Bilateral aid		
Aid Provider	Budget (US\$ 000)	%	Country	Budget (US\$ 000)	%
1.EU	187,985.02	17.27	1.Japan	127,099.90	25.06
2.ADB	147,867.95	13.59	2.Sweden	91,527.46	18.05
3.World Bank	139,866.20	12.85	3.Australia	80,673.40	15.91
4.Japan	127,099.90	11.68	4.South Korea	75,351.09	14.86
5.Sweden	91,527.46	8.41	5.US	54,684.55	10.78
Total of top 5	694,346.53	63.81	Total of top 5	429,336.40	84.66
Total remaining providers	393,870.22	36.19	Total remaining countries	77,772.84	15.34
Total of 25 providers	1,088,216.75	100	Total of 16 countries	507,109.24	100
*China	12,568.14	1.15	*China	12,568.14	2.48

Source: Compiled and calculated by the author from the Cambodia ODA Database

Most of China's education aid (99.71%) was focused on the Schools and Facilities sector including a technical vocational education and a training centre in Sihanouk province, which operated between 2015 and 2017 and was coordinated and supervised by the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training. Such sponsorship may be because Sihanoukville, under BRI cooperation, has become a destination for Chinese investments in Cambodian economic zones comprising factories, housing, hotels, and restaurants and casinos. In addition, China invested 4.2 billion US\$ in power plants and offshore oil enterprises as well as helping in the construction of a four-lane highway, worth two \$US2 billion, connecting Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh (Chheng, 2017). Another scheme, operating between 2019 and 2022, is the Project for School Facility Improvement in Cambodia, which is being directed by the Ministry of Economy and Finance in collaboration with MoEYS. This project included funds to build 26 secondary school buildings and three teacher-training centres in Phnom Penh, Kampong Cham province, and Kandal province. The projects funded by China were approved by the Ministry of Economy and Finance, possibly because that Ministry was responsible for managing the development and implementation of foreign financing policies. China's practice, as noted by the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (2015), was to focus on collaborating directly with the responsible government agency rather than at the local level. Cheng (2015) found that China usually deals directly with the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

In essence, although China is the main contributor to the aid budget overall, it offers little help for improving education as a proportion of its aid budget compared to other providers (King, 2010). Reilly (2015) also who found that China's educational aid was the second lowest amount of all of China's foreign aid to Cambodia—the lowest being for environmental conservation. Up to 2004, China had funded only one project for education by building an electronic library at the Royal Academy of Cambodia. Most multilateral education aid has been provided in partnership with ADB and the World Bank. An interesting observation is that most Chinese aid concentrated on building schools, donating equipment and teaching materials, exporting Chinese teachers, sponsoring teacher training and internships, and providing scholarships for students from developing countries to study in China (Niu, 2014; Yang & Ma 2015). The majority of China's aid was equipment based, while enhanced skills assistance, such as teacher training, was minimal (Yang & Ma, 2015).

China's educational aid to developing countries in general has been fiercely criticized. China's aid assistance grew rapidly and steadily in the period studied but it was provided at the government level rather than at the local level. The Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (2015) noted that China was more concerned with facilitating its investors than helping to develop soft resources such as education, management and good governance. Likewise, Yang and Ma (2015) believe that Chinese aid had several shortcomings as it focused on higher and vocational education, the results of which were clearly visible and more beneficial to China. In the view of Nordtveit (2011), China was incapable of providing professional education aid because it has no agency to coordinate the provision of overseas aid and is incapable of addressing the needs of recipients. Countries, such as those in Africa, benefited the least (only 1%) from education assistance, even though this aid was required by the majority of recipient countries. China's aid focus was also inconsistent with Cambodia's policy of accelerating people's access to basic education in accordance with the global community EFA policy. The Cambodian government has recognised the need, as seen by its Education Strategic Plans since 2010 (MoEYS, 2010; MoEYS, 2014; MoEYS,

2019). As Sato et al. (2011) noted, many existing aid providers to Cambodia aimed to achieve new development goals in the education and health sectors, China was focused on improving the transportation system.

Yang & Ma (2015) found that China had been widely criticised by Western observers, who viewed Chinese foreign aid as a means to access the recipient country's natural resources. Some observers even claimed that Chinese foreign aid disrupted the economic development of recipient countries and destabilised social development. In the case of Africa, which received the most educational aid from China, it was found that China gained indirect economic benefits from the aid. For example, Africans, who studied Chinese at Confucius Institutes, worked as interpreters for Chinese companies operating in Africa.

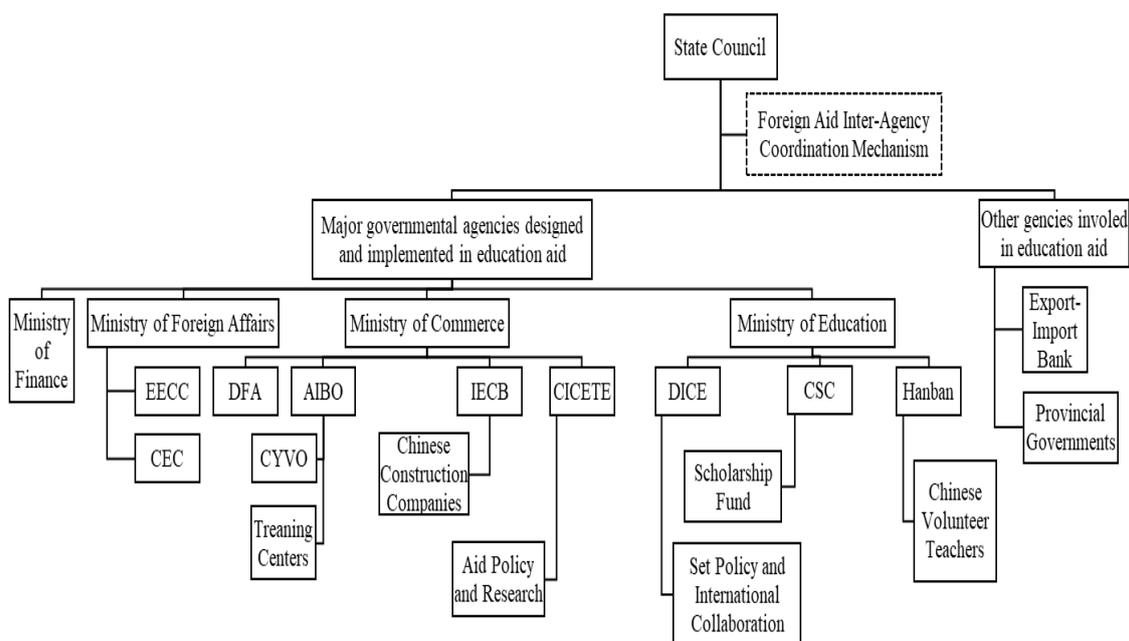
### **China's unique approach to managing educational aid**

Reilly (2015) found that the value of China's educational aid to Cambodia had been underestimated because China neither reported to the Cambodia ODA Database regarding the provision of some educational aid, such as scholarships, nor formally reported any projects on training and volunteer recruitment. Therefore, compared with aid from Japan and South Korea, the top education donors to Cambodia, there was not much difference in value. Similarly, Cheng (2015) affirmed that China, instead of cooperating with the CDC as an agency of Cambodia ODA management, conveyed most of its aid directly through the Ministry of Economy and Finance and other line organisations, maintaining that this method would be more efficient and effective. However, this direct interaction by China challenged the Cambodia ODA management. Sato et al. (2011) reported that emerging donors, such as China, were providing aid in an ad hoc manner since there was no central coordinating aid organisation in China. Rather disparate Chinese organisation provided aid and focused on issues that aligned with their interests. Yoshimatsu (2015) observed that China was restructuring economic and political order through its ways of operating. China's educational aid data were reported by the Chinese authorities responsible for each activity. Chinese overseas offices carried out the responsibilities.

A significant increase in aid to ASEAN countries occurred with the introduction of BRI, which is based on cooperation on a multilateral basis, laying the foundation for equal international relations, adhering to the principles of creation and sharing, and fostering mutual benefits to pave the way for the borderless economy. BRI supports large-scale infrastructure development, facilitated cross-border trade and investment, integrated financial processes, and promoted cultural exchange (Kohli, 2018). The assistance, in BRI form offered attractive programs and scholarships to students from all over the world to study in Chinese universities. In addition, Confucius Institutes were established, of which there are now as many as 500 branches located in 120 countries. The intention of these institutes was to familiarise foreigners with Chinese practices and culture (Su & Flew, 2021). However, Yagci (2018) questioned whether BRI has resulted in win-win cooperation and common development for all, since China has benefited greatly from BRI from the provision of loans to develop infrastructure, encouraging Chinese private companies to invest abroad, and seeking export markets for products and technology. In addition, China has used Soft Power to expertly provide education assistance to expand its influence around the world. Sparks (2018) was of the view that China may not be able to use Soft Power quite so effectively in countries that

have restricted freedom of the press as people had difficulty accessing public information and were unable to express their opinions freely. Moreover, the use of Soft Power against intellectuals, tribal groups, ethnic minorities, and ethnic groups with strict cultural, language, and religious beliefs can be challenging because these groups have been considered obstacles to policy implementation.

China has a unique approach and agencies to implement educational aid, with top-down decision making by the central government authorizing relevant agencies. To strengthen coordination, a liaison mechanism was developed in 2008 to serve as a central operation among the Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Finance, and Export-Import Bank of China. The liaison mechanism was subsequently upgraded to a Foreign Aid Inter-Agency Coordination Mechanism in 2011 (Yang & Ma, 2015). China designed a structure of more than ten agencies responsible for education aid, as shown in Figure 1. A key agency responsible for managing inclusive international aid policies is the Ministry of Commerce, which coordinates and works with other departments (Yang & Ma, 2015; White paper, 2011). In the area of education, Reilly (2015) observed that China has provided aid in the following ways: 1) scholarships to international students, including building alliances with various universities; 2) technical and vocational education training (TVET) and teacher training; 3) teaching Chinese in developing countries, with support from various agencies through volunteer teachers; 4) school construction and educational materials; and 5) working with multilateral organisations. The Ministry of Education normally worked on scholarship programs through CSC and participated in aid policymaking through DICE. The ministry also supported TVET and teacher training. Hanban (see Figure 1) also played a vital role in promoting Chinese language teaching through Confucius Institutes around the world.



**Figure 1: Agencies involved in China's education aid**

Source: Adapted from Reilly (2015), Yang and Ma (2015), China Daily (2011)

EECC = Embassy's Economic and Commercial Counsellor; CEC = Culture and Education Counsellor; DFA = Department of Foreign Aid; AIBO = Academy for International Business Officials; CYVO = Chinese Youth Volunteers Overseas; IECB = International Economic Cooperation Bureau; CICETE =

China International Center for Economic and Technical Exchange; DICE = Department of International Cooperation and Exchanges; CSC = Chinese Scholarships Council; Hanban = Office of Chinese Language Council International.

In addition, Chinese provincial governments have expanded their roles in international education aids. The Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, for example, developed cooperation in education exchange programs with foreign countries, scholarship support, attracting students from ASEAN, and training for the recipient countries. Since 2011, the Guangxi government has sent 935 volunteer Chinese teachers to countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Cambodia, and Laos (“Guangxi invite ASEAN”, 2016). Since 2010, the Guangxi government has provided scholarships to Cambodian students and research grants for cooperation and knowledge exchange for fostering a good relationship between China and Cambodia (Study in China Admission System, 2019). Over the past 20 years, more than 2,000 Cambodians have graduated from Chinese higher education institutions, and China has continued to increase scholarships for Cambodians through the Confucius Institutes and Chinese universities (Xia, 2017).

### **China approach to foreign aid and BRI**

Compared to other OECD-DAC donors, China provides foreign aid differently to BRICS countries in terms of value and extent (Bräutigam, 2011). As Isaksson and Kotsadam (2020) pointed out; 1) China adhered to the principle of non-interference in the recipient country's internal affairs, 2) China tended to syndicate trade interests with accommodative financial assistance on the win-win principle, 3) Chinese ODA process was driven by demand, and 4) China was likely to maintain control over projects. Tjonneland (2020) also argued that Chinese ODA operated differently from Western donor countries: 1) attached great importance to bilateral projects, 2) mainly related to Chinese goods and services, 3) most assistances cannot be classified as OECD-DAC aid, 4) implemented by many agencies and organisations, and 5) no transparency in budget allocation and no clear classification of public aid distribution to countries. Oh (2019) revealed that about 24% of Chinese ODA distributed to the health and education sectors is considered controversial and questionable. While de Medeiros Cavalho (2015) found that, although China had allocated an ever-increasing amount of social assistance, it still prioritised the development of economic infrastructure at a higher degree than Japan, reflecting China's development support model promoted through economic growth.

China's aid to Cambodia has had both positive and negative effects. Miller (2017) showed that Cambodian reliance on Chinese investments has led to the expansion of Chinese communities in Cambodia. Cambodia needed money to develop the country and China is considered a friend that comes with money. Sato et al. (2011) showed that Cambodians were more satisfied with the format of assistance given by a new provider like China than those of existing providers because the assistance received was consistent with the needs of development in Cambodia. An advantage was also the flexibility in how money is spent, which reflected a good understanding of Cambodia's context. Salem (2020) found that the “no strings attached policy” made Chinese ODA highly desirable in Pacific countries while Yang and Ma (2015) found that China played the most unique role in Africa. Conversely, Ky et al. (2012) argued that China appeared to have reshaped Cambodia's ODA by granting loans with relief terms specifically

aimed at infrastructure only. Yang and Ma (2015) concluded that, although overall China's education aid had a positive effect on developing countries, particularly Africa, the recipient countries tended to receive Chinese ODA unequally, depending on the level of international relations. Thus, China's declaration of impartial education aid without political implications may not be entirely true.

China has expanded its aid because of the BRI. Chen (2018) revealed that during the implementation of the BRI, Cambodia received opportunities from China for economic and social development. Chheang and Pheakdey (2019) found that from 2004 to 2017, China awarded scholarships to more than 1,000 Cambodian students to study in China and provided more than 700 short-term scholarships for training. Other aid included the establishment of a development research centre and a Silk Road policy for the benefit of Cambodians. Cheng (2015) also revealed that the Cambodian government encouraged international providers to exert influence in education more than in other sectors. As a result, there is a lot of aid fragmentation in education.

Prime Minister Hun Sen called China “Cambodia’s most trusted friend” and openly praised Chinese aid as an unconditional offer, unlike Western countries that often came with demands for restructuring or national reform (Pheakdey, 2012). China thus has been very successful in building government-to-government relations with Cambodia (Ciorciari, 2013). The country’s think-tank, CDRI, received financial support from the Chinese Embassy in Cambodia to set up a Chinese Studies Centre to promote and support education and research on the relationship between Cambodia and China (Leng & Chhem, 2018). CDRI also received cooperation from many Chinese agencies, such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and Chinese universities. Chinese students came for internships at the institute, and some institutional staff were funded by the Chinese government to study for master and doctoral degrees in China, while some academics from CASS were appointed to the CDRI board of directors 2018-2019 (CDRI, 2019).

### **Chinese-style partnerships and Chinese language are welcomed**

The World Bank (2008) reported that Non-DAC/Emerging Donors such as China, India, and South Korea, were becoming more important and there was a rapidly increasing rate of aid. China clearly expressed the importance of mutual benefits as the priority and viewed itself as an equal partner rather than an ordinary donor (Brautigam, 2011). China stated mutual benefit as actual conditions (Yang & Ma, 2015). China’s use of strategies to participate in human development, to offer assistance for education with which it had cordial relations had greatly improved China's image (Yang, 2015). China’s increasing educational aid recognised that Cambodians had the greatest trust in school and hospital institutions (Leang et al., 2018). Cambodians viewed education as the key factor in building peace, creating political stability, economic growth, and sustainable development (Vuthy, 2008; Vann, 2015).

However, China’s aid practice has not been successful in all countries and has been criticized in some. In Vietnam, although China has been the longest provider of aid and has provided the largest amount, its efforts have not been appreciated by the Vietnamese government because Chinese aid was used by China as a coercive bargaining tool in the Sino-Soviet conflict (Yang & Ma, 2015). As of 2015, the Confucius Institute has been working with colleges and universities in 133 countries. It has been criticised for being a proactive agent of the Chinese government in providing a

“correct” political viewpoint about China, promoting economic expansion, developing a blameless image, and spreading the influence of China. Importantly, there was the threat that the academic freedom to criticize China would be compromised in exchange for the required resources or grants (Yuan et al., 2016). In the end, although educational institutions were established by China and the first group of students had graduated, in some (unofficial) situations, China’s executives viewed China’s efforts to boost the country’s image as failures. Chinese officers in Ethiopia were unable to maintain relations in the way that they had expected (Niu, 2014).

Historically, Cambodia has been influenced by traditional donors, such as the French Schooling Model during the Sihanouk regime, and the involvement by UNICEF and the International Red Cross during the reconstruction of education during the post-Khmer Rouge era. Later, in the 1990s, UNESCO took the leading role in reforming Cambodia's education system. Since the 1990 World Conference on EFA, access to basic education was expanded, and illiteracy was virtually eliminated. UN agencies, International Organizations and NGOs all took part in driving and promoting Cambodia to achieve EFA (Dy & Ninomiya, 2003). Since 2000, The World Bank has led the fundraising program called EFA-Fast Track Initiative, to ensure the achievement of the EFA in developing countries, promotion of the right of children to access basic education through the coordination of various donor countries. Therefore, Western notions of education remain current in Cambodia's mainstream practices, including in development, which promotes decentralisation and capacity building. The World Bank initially embarked upon the EFA to reach marginalised people. Japan was enthusiastic about cultivating basic education in rural areas of Cambodia in close collaboration with NGOs. Sweden paid attention to children’s rights, vulnerable children, democracy, gender equality, inclusive education, and child-centered learning (Kaewkumkong, 2020).

Another significant trend in the 2010s was the expanding influence of the Chinese language, which seems to bring Cambodia closer to China. Pheakdey (2012) noted that the popularity of the Chinese language in Cambodia was greater than in other countries in Southeast Asia. Bruthiaux (2008) agreed that the language that played a vital role for most people in the Mekong sub-region was Chinese. The Cambodian market required people with a command of the Chinese language. As China has invested in more businesses, more Cambodians have applied for Mandarin Chinese classes (“Chinese language”, 2011). Many students from Cambodia were expected to and applied for a scholarship to learn Chinese as part of their studies (Reilly, 2015). Cambodia is officially supported by the Confucius Institute for the teaching and learning of Mandarin, with many language teachers sent to work in Cambodia. The Institute also works with the Royal Academy of Cambodia, organising training for state personnel to learn Mandarin and recruiting Cambodian students to receive scholarships to study in China every year. Thus, the Chinese language is still essential to aid development in Cambodia and became a means of communication and understanding of the projects that China is supporting. Essentially, the Chinese language helps to smooth the implementation of Chinese projects in the country (Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, 2015). China has also established research institutes and study centres to promote academic and cultural exchange and has responded to the growing interest in learning Chinese. In Cambodia, Mandarin is the most popular foreign language second only to English (“Who knew learning”, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

China's development aid was initially focused on economic benefits and security; however, it subsequently began to expand to cover other sectors, including education. In the 2010s, China was one of five countries with the highest number of development projects in Cambodia. Importantly, China contributed the largest amount of aid funds compared to other countries but provided the least proportion aid funds as grants. China gave more grants in the late 2010s for school construction and school facilities, creating study training and vocational education centres. Nevertheless, China provided little aid to education in Cambodia compared to its overall aid budget and compared to other education aid providers. But China's aid to education is increasing and it should be noted that China has provided assistance in educational activities that were not recorded in the Cambodia ODA Database, such as training and providing Chinese volunteers and scholarships. The budget for these activities was as high as the aid from Japan and South Korea, which are the top donors of education aid.

China provided educational aid through multilateral cooperation which focused on helping the CLMV countries as well as BRI project. China's foreign aid to Cambodia, therefore, is seen in a more positive than negative light. The Cambodian government had good diplomatic relationships with the Chinese government. There are, however, several concerning issues regarding the provision of Chinese aid, notably how China has not yet been able to manage providing education aid in a coordinated way and the believe that Chinese aid is provided to garner political influence rather than as an aid to further develop Cambodia.

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