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### Getting undergraduates ready for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through an overseas experiential learning project, China and the world: Ancient and modern silk road

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# Getting Undergraduates Ready for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Through an Overseas Experiential Learning Project

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Prior to starting up PIL Logistics, he was the Executive Director for the parent company, Pacific International Lines, from 1993 to 2004. His responsibilities in PIL Logistics include providing strategic direction to guide the business into the future planned goals, objectives and tactical plans. He refines Go-To-Market strategies including value propositions, services, solutions, marketing and branding. He also oversees and identifies new areas of growth for the company and builds international strategic partners to facilitate the growth of the company.

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**Abstract:** In this paper, we explain how an experiential learning course and study tour to Gansu Province (People's Republic of China) enabled undergraduates at the Singapore Management University (SMU) to acquire 21st-century competencies and higher-order thinking skills by analyzing and evaluating specific aspects of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and China–Singapore (Chongqing) Connectivity Initiative – New International Land–Sea Trade Corridor (CCI-ILSTC) with emphasis on developing viable Go-To-Market (GTM) strategies aimed at selling Gansu produce in four Southeast Asian markets. We share how the course was designed to support the attainment of key learning goals and discuss how we turned pedagogical aspirations into concrete learning outcomes. We introduce key aspects of the so-called “SMU-XO” project that the students conducted in partnership with an industry partner, Pacific International Lines (PIL), and discuss how the project work helped learners to gain global competency by (i) examining critical issues related to BRI such as multi-modal infrastructure connectivity, (ii) appreciating the local perspectives of project stakeholders in Lanzhou and Shanghai and (iii) successfully interacting with people from different cultures, namely China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand.

*Keywords:* Experiential learning; Singapore; China; Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

## **Introduction: China's Belt and Road Initiative – Connecting China Regionally and Globally through Infrastructure, Trade and Investments**

The impetus of the SMU-XO China course which takes center stage in this paper is China's *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI) and the desire to help local undergraduates to analyze and evaluate the antecedents and potential linkage effects of this gigantic new development strategy proposed by the Chinese Government in 2013 under the leadership of Chinese President Xi Jinping (Evers, 2014; Habib and Faulknor, 2017; Chay, Low and Menkhoff, 2020).

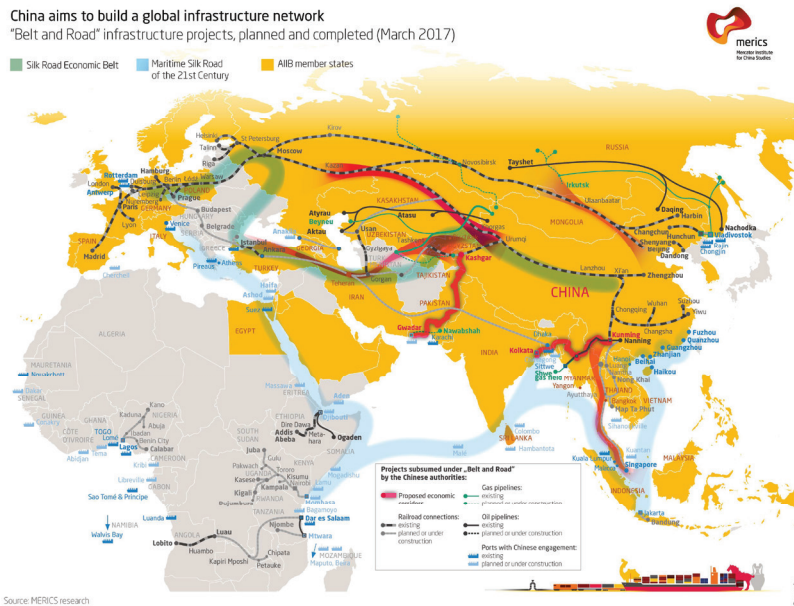
BRI has a strong focus on greater connectivity and cooperation across Eurasia, East Africa and dozens of partner countries within both the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the so-called “21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” (MSR). Observers have categorized some of these policy initiatives as infrastructural cluster strategies aimed at



linking harbors, freight forwarding, railways, energy pipelines, industrial estates and urban centers in order to achieve socio-economic progress (Menkhoff and Evers, 2012; Evers and Menkhoff, 2018).

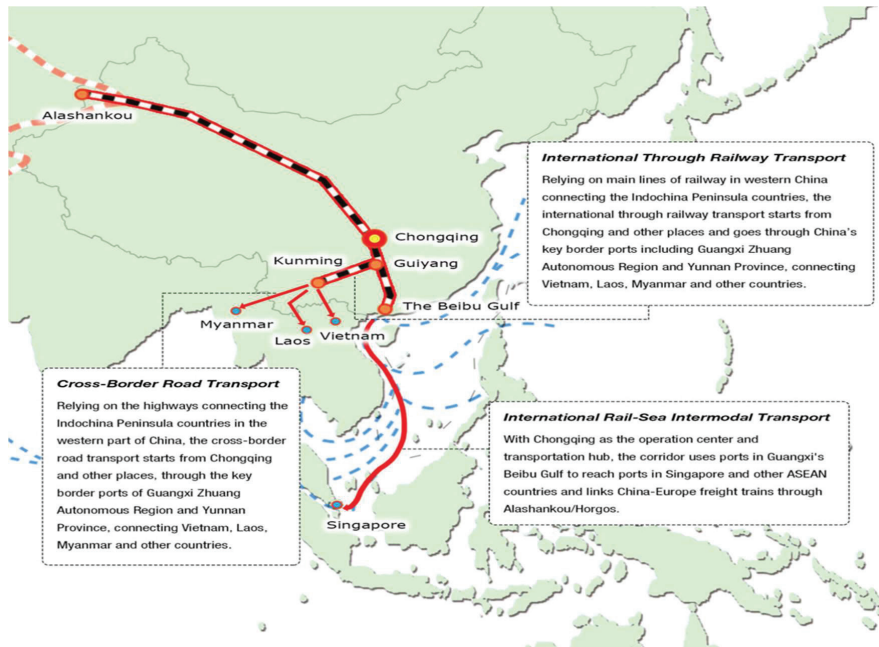
SREB's overland infrastructure network includes the "New Eurasian Land Bridge" (NELB) which consists of several rail corridors linking Yiwu in Eastern China with European destinations such as Duisburg (Germany), Madrid (Spain) or London (UK). SREB spans five economic corridors: China–Mongolia–Russia, China–Central Asia–West Asia, China–Pakistan, the China–Indochina peninsula and Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar.

The complementary "Maritime Silk Road" envisages the development of key seaports along traditional and new sea routes to Southeast Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean Region with good connectivity to land-based transportation routes (see Figures 1 and 2).



Source: Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS). The authors gratefully acknowledge the permission of MERICS (Berlin, Germany) to reprint the map in this paper.

Figure 1. China Aims to Build a Global Infrastructure Network: "Belt and Road" Infrastructure Projects, Planned and Completed (March 2017).



Source: Li (2019). The authors gratefully acknowledge the permission of iChongqing to reprint the map in this paper.

Figure 2. Route of the CCI-ILSTC.

The term “silk road” was “invented” by the German geographer Ferdinand Freiherr von Richthofen (1833–1905), who after traveling around China for five years started his academic career as a Professor of Geology at the University of Bonn, where he produced a massive five-volume work on China and outlined his idea of the *Seidenstraße* in a widely read journal article (von Richthofen, 1877). He argued that after the seventh century, when silk production became known in Europe, the silk roads stopped functioning. *Der Begriff transkontinentaler Seidenstrassen hat für die fernere Zeit seine Bedeutung verloren* (the concept of transcontinental silk roads has lost its significance for the distant future).

According to the *Joint Communiqué of the 2nd BRI Summit in Beijing* in 2019, “Belt and Road Cooperation” is aimed at “shaping a brighter shared future”:

*"To sustain interconnected growth, we support comprehensive and multi-modal infrastructure connectivity, fostering economic growth and improving the standards of living catalyzed by infrastructure investment. We support policies and activities that help land-locked countries to transform into land-linked ones, including by strengthening connectivity and cooperation on transit arrangements and infrastructure"*

(Xinhua, 2019)

Port development with "Chinese engagement" from Port Klang in Malaysia to Sri Lanka to Gwadar in Pakistan to some gulf state ports to Piraeus in Greece, among other things, provides a string of valuable pearls in the form of harbors from which adjoining areas can be serviced through feeder vessels or railway lines by Chinese Government-linked companies.

According to a research conducted by the East Asia Institute, 138 nations in five continents had signed various BRI collaboration agreements with China as of the end of 2020. Since its launch, China has spent about "US\$690 billion in overseas investments and construction contracts for BRI projects in more than 100 nations" (Yu, 2021).

In Southeast Asia, BRI is regarded as a new force for regional economic integration — filling a vacuum created by the abortion of the Trans-Pacific Pact (TPP). To foster increased investment in countries along the BRI, the Chinese Government set up the Silk Road Fund (US\$40 billion) in 2014.<sup>1</sup> In 2016, China established the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), "a multilateral development bank with a mission to improve social and economic outcomes in Asia and beyond."<sup>2</sup> Its headquarter is in Beijing. AIIB has currently about 100 approved members from various parts of the world: "By investing in sustainable infrastructure and other productive sectors today, we will better connect people, services and markets that over time will impact the lives of billions and build a better future."<sup>3</sup>

An important question is how BRI will impact Sino-Southeast Asian economic ties in general and maritime clusters in particular with special reference to Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia (Evers, 2014, 2016).

Table 1. Examples of BRI Projects in ASEAN Countries.

ASEAN Country	BRI Responses and Project Examples
<i>Singapore</i>	Singapore is a founding member of AIIB and partners China in third-country BRI projects. A relevant example of a government-to-government project between Singapore and China is the <i>China–Singapore (Chongqing) Connectivity Initiative (CCI)</i> launched in 2015.
<i>Malaysia</i>	The newly expanded <i>Kuantan Port</i> is a 60–40 joint venture between Malaysia’s IJM Corporation and China’s Guanxi–Beibu Gulf Port Group. The new breakwater and deep-water terminals have doubled the capacity of the port, allowing very large and heavily loaded ships to berth (Maelzer, 2019). According to media reports, the <i>Melaka Deepwater Port</i> project has been terminated (Sukumaran, 2020).
<i>Indonesia</i>	As part of Indonesia’s “Global Maritime Fulcrum” (GMF) program (Pradhan, 2016), ports are modernized and new ones are being developed to enhance connectivity and international competitiveness. An example is the <i>Java Integrated Industrial and Port Estate (JIPE)</i> near Surabaya, comprising port facilities, industrial parks and residential areas (Goulard, 2021a).
<i>Thailand</i>	Chinese state-owned firms are building a (long-delayed) 253-km <i>high-speed line</i> between Thailand’s Capital Bangkok and the northeastern city of Nakhon Ratchasima. This railway line will eventually link Thailand with the Lao People’s Democratic Republic Capital Vientiane and China’s Yunnan Province, “where it plugs into China’s own extensive high-speed rail network” (Strangio, 2020).
<i>Vietnam</i>	Vietnam supports the BRI and the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, but concerns remain due to recent tensions over the South China Sea disputes (Hiep, 2018). A collaborative BRI project example is the <i>Cat Linh–Ha Dong metro line</i> in Hanoi.
<i>Brunei</i>	<i>Muara Port</i> , Brunei’s largest port, is operated by a joint-venture company formed by Chinese and Bruneian investors. It is seen as a “flagship project under the framework of the Brunei–Guangxi Economic Corridor” (Goulard, 2021b).
<i>Philippines</i>	The Philippines participates in China’s BRI and is a full member of the China-led AIIB. The Duterte Administration has signed 13 bilateral cooperation agreements with China “and USD 24 billion worth of Chinese funding and investment was pledged” (Estrada, 2017).

Singapore and China enjoy a strong and mutually beneficial relationship. China is Singapore's largest trading partner, while Singapore is China's largest foreign investor. Building on a strong foundation of existing bilateral economic cooperation, Singapore and China are collaborating on the long-term development of the BRI (Zhao, 2015; Today, 2017). As Ambassador Koh (2015) has argued, "the modern Singapore is a major shipping nation and port state. It is only logical that Singapore should be an important hub in the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road." There are opportunities for both public and private sector organizations, policy-makers, entrepreneurs, academicians, etc. According to Singaporean media reports, China's investments in Singapore "amount to about one-third of its total investments in Belt and Road countries. Singapore's investments in China accounted for 85% of total inbound investments from Belt and Road countries" (Shanmugam, 2017).

### **China–Singapore (Chongqing) Connectivity Initiative**

In October 2015, Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and Chinese President Xi Jinping jointly launched the *China–Singapore Connectivity Initiative* as the 3rd government-to-government project between Singapore and China. Also known as the *Chongqing Connectivity Initiative – New International Land–Sea Trade Corridor (CCI-ILSTC)*, it serves as a platform for BRI cooperation, the Yangtze River Economic Belt and the Western Region Development strategies.

The CCI-ILSTC leverages on the synergistic strengths of Singapore and China as globally connected countries to promote connectivity in four sectors, namely (i) financial services, (ii) aviation, (iii) multi-modal logistics and (iv) information communications technology. The CCI-ILSTC aims to contribute to China's efforts to accelerate the economic development of Western China. It connects Chongqing (a dynamic provincial-level municipality at the confluence of the Yangtze and Jialing Rivers in Southwestern China) to Qinzhou (Beibu Gulf, Guangxi Province) in the south by rail, and from Qinzhou to Singapore and beyond by sea.

The CCI-ILSTC promotes greater connectivity and economic development between Singapore and China, and between ASEAN and China. It is envisioned as a strategic, multi-modal and multi-faceted economic link between the New Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road via rail and sea (which makes Singapore a key node on the BRI) — which make up the BRI.

With its operating center in Chongqing, the CCI-ILSTC is positioned as an open and inclusive platform which has grown to “13+1” members including 12 Chinese Western Provinces (Chongqing, Guangxi, Guizhou, Gansu, Qinghai, Yunnan, Ningxia, Xinjiang, Sichuan, Shaanxi, Tibet and Inner Mongolia), Hainan Province and Guangdong Zhanjiang.

Southeast Asian products can enter Western China through the CCI-ILSTC, not only saving time but also potentially overall costs. Conversely, Western China products can take a much shorter time to reach Southeast Asia through this route. CCI-ILSTC will reduce the time taken for goods traveling from Singapore to Chongqing from three–four weeks to about a week.

### ***Lanzhou, capital of Gansu Province: A key BRI transport link***

Historically, Lanzhou (the Capital of the Northwestern Chinese Province of Gansu located by the famed Yellow River) has played a key role in the ancient Silk Road. Policymakers are hopeful that Lanzhou can position itself as a key transport link and manufacturing hub within the BRI.

Owing to its size and geography, Gansu produces a wide range of fruits and vegetables. Gansu also produces 1.1 million tons of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) a year. In view of its distance from the coast, it is a challenge for producers to bring their products to the overseas market. For sales to the international market, it relies on traders located at the coastal cities in China.

With the growing economic partnership between Singapore and Gansu Province, Singapore was designated as the *Country-of-Honour* at the 24th Lanzhou Investment and Trade Fair in July 2018. As Singapore’s Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean noted at the opening ceremony of the trade fair, Singapore and China (as globally connected countries) are

“natural partners” for the long-term development of the Belt and Road Initiative (Siong, 2018).

Gansu's Lanzhou International Land Port (LILP) is directly involved in the development of the CCI-ILSTC, linking four major cities south of Lanzhou by a railroad to the port city of Qinzhou and beyond: “Being an international trade and commodity distribution center facing Europe, Mid-west Asia and South Asia, the port is an important platform for westward opening-up in Gansu Province” (China.org.cn, 2018).

Lanzhou and Shanghai (the commercial hub of China) were selected as the two travel destinations of the course aimed at enabling the students to (i) appreciate the regional and global reach of China's Belt and Road Initiative and (ii) to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the CCI-ILSTC project which is potentially a new high-growth opportunity for Singapore.

PIL Logistics started engaging Gansu in early 2017. After a year of market study, PIL Logistics identified the opportunity to fill the gap between the producers and the international market. In July 2018, AnTing Trading Co., Ltd. was set up as a subsidiary of PIL Logistics China. In November 2018, witnessed by the Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing and the Gansu Governor, the Gansu Province, the Gansu Department of Commerce signed four Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) with PIL Logistics. One of the MOUs is to drive the international trade of Gansu's agricultural produce and TCM to Southeast Asia.

### **Project Partner Pacific International Lines**

Curated site visits in Lanzhou and Shanghai as well as the SMU-XO project assigned by the CEO of PIL Logistics [Pacific International Lines (PIL)<sup>4</sup> — see above and below] allowed students to acquire in-depth knowledge about the opportunities and challenges associated with the BRI initiative and its impact on Sino-Southeast Asian ties in general and local communities in particular.

Participants were given the opportunity to engage in discussions with business leaders, entrepreneurs and government officials to understand both the BRI vision and implementation challenges.

Table 2. Demography of Students Participating in the SMU-XO Course (China).

Demography of Students Participating in the SMU-XO Course (China)			
N	Gender	Affiliated Schools	Year Enrolled in the School
23	10 females 13 males	4 Economics 15 Business 1 Accountancy 2 Social Sciences 1 Law	6 in 2015 11 in 2016 6 in 2017

In the following, we describe how we conceptualized, designed and conducted the SMU-XO China course (Term 2, Academic Year 2018–2019). By doing so, we follow the *case study method* in the tradition of Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (1994) to explore the BRI issue within the context of relevant concepts related to experiential learning and the classification of educational objectives (Bloom, 1956; Kolb, 1984; Conran, 2019).

### Getting Singaporean Undergraduates Ready for China’s Belt and Road Initiative: Experiential SMU-XO Learning Approach

At the Singapore Management University (SMU), all students must complete a Global Exposure experience prior to graduation such as participating in short-term, faculty-led SMU-XO course. SMU’s distinctive and holistic undergraduate education is enhanced by focusing on *experiential learning* from addressing real and current issues faced by various organizations and sectors.



### **SMU's Vision**

To be a premier university, internationally recognised for its world-class research and distinguished teaching.

### **SMU's Mission**

To create and disseminate knowledge. SMU aspires to generate leading-edge research with global impact as well as to produce broad-based, creative and entrepreneurial leaders for the knowledge-based economy. SMU is committed to an interactive, participative and technologically enabled learning experience. Towards this end, it will provide a rewarding and challenging environment for faculty, staff and students to kindle and sustain a passion for excellence.

Source: <https://www.smu.edu.sg/about/overview>.

### ***SMU-XO (SMU-X overseas)***

This SMU-XO course combines academic with experiential learning by getting students to work on real-world projects by collaborating with organizations. It represents paradigm shifts in the traditional approach to teaching and learning from being teacher-centered to students taking ownership of their own learning.

By collaborating with various organizations, our students will have experience working across a wide variety of industries. Real-world projects help to motivate students, who, in turn, put in more effort and commitment. Central to each SMU-X course is a real-world project that is integrated into the curriculum. Students will be introduced to the project challenge by a project champion from an industry. Over a semester, students will analyze issues and apply their disciplinary knowledge and skills to solve the challenge. The interdisciplinary and multi-perspective approach of SMU-XO allows students to better appreciate the applicability and relevance of the course to their future careers. Working in diverse teams with peers from different disciplines and backgrounds, students enhance their intercultural understanding and communication (Menkhoff *et al.*, 2018).

Key pedagogical principles of the SMU-X approach include (i) project-based learning, (ii) interdisciplinary learning, (iii) active mentoring and (iv) a tripartite learning loop for the faculty, student and industry partner. Students work in multi-disciplinary groups under dynamic and unpredictable circumstances.

Students have to deal with situations within their projects but such uncertainty and ambiguity within a safe learning environment encourages students to embrace uncertainty. Project partners (the client) and faculty mentor the students who in turn build resilience and practical skills that go beyond hypothetical classroom exercises.

### *Learning objectives*

To appreciate and explain:

- the programmatic focus of BRI (beyond infrastructure investments or power grids) and the potential impact on selected partner countries who are involved in it;
- how BRI-related infrastructure projects in selected regional land corridors/belts are funded;
- how the BRI initiative is governed both within the People's Republic of China as well as by policymakers and leaders within the selected BRI partner countries;
- the impact of Chinese capital and infrastructure investments on Sino-Southeast Asian economic relations with special reference to Singapore as well as Southeast Asia's maritime trade routes;
- the role of Shanghai (the commercial hub of China) regarding BRI and related opportunities for Singapore;
- the role of BRI-enabled infrastructure connectivity for regional development within selected areas in the People's Republic of China and Southeast Asia;
- how the CCI-ILSTC project can become a new high-growth opportunity for Singapore.

Students were introduced to some of the key BRI players in the People's Republic of China and Singapore to establish some network contacts.

### ***Teaching and learning approach***

Prior to the trip, students were exposed to lectures covering a diverse range of topics which included the political and economic implications of the BRI, Go-To-Market (GTM) strategic framework by instructor, briefings and mentorship by PIL's CEO and senior management team and the business experience of a traditional Singaporean Chinese medicine manufacturer who is active in China.

The site visits in Lanzhou and Shanghai were facilitated and hosted by SMU-XO Partner Organization PIL Logistics (see footnote 4) incorporated in Singapore in 1967. The collaboration with PIL Logistics enabled the class to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the CCI-ILSTC project and to assess its transformational growth potential via a concrete business-centric SMU-XO project assigned by PIL Logistics.

Students worked individually and in project groups comprising 4–6 participants on applied research projects assigned by PIL Logistics. Groups were required to do research on specific course topics and had to present and defend their findings in class and in the headquarters of PIL (both in Singapore and in Shanghai). This included the preparation of background papers to be distributed to all students.

Students were tasked with specific pre-trip project topics related to conceptual, geographical, politico-economic, business, technological and cultural issues pertaining to BRI and the travel destinations Lanzhou and Shanghai. Examples include a regional analysis of Gansu Province and examining the BRI involvement of the four selected Southeast Asian economies.

Groups were assigned specific tasks with regard to economic analyses, specific company cases and the preparation of organizational visits in Lanzhou and Shanghai.

Besides the final presentations, students had to submit individual reflective "Lessons Learnt" articles to illustrate their most valuable learning points.

### ***Assessment approach***

Students were assessed based on the quality of their contributions made to team-based *pre-trip project reports* (including presentations), team-based

*project works* as assigned by PIL Logistics and a final reflective *Lessons Learnt* article.

Besides documenting their critical understanding of various BRI-related issues through class projects and presentations, students were required to tackle various individual tasks and to demonstrate strong class participation both in class and during the visit program in Lanzhou and Shanghai.

Individual assessment made up 60% in total, consisting of class participation and attendance (20%) and a final reflective “Lessons Learnt” article (40%) of about 850 words. Group assessment made up 40% in total, consisting of pre-trip project presentations (10%), the final group project presentation and a final report (30%).

There was no final examination in this pass/fail course. All classes and the actual trip were compulsory. Students were informed that those who do not undertake the trip and/or miss seminars and site visits in Singapore and the People’s Republic of China would run the risk of failing the course.

### ***PIL Logistics’ SMU-XO project challenge***

Following the MOU signing with Gansu Provincial Government, Mr. T. S. Teo, CEO of PIL Logistics Pte. Ltd., met with the SMU LKCSB instructors (Thomas Menkhoff and Andrew Chin) to co-create an experiential learning project for the SMU students.

Mr. Teo personally shared the Business Challenge with the students at SMU. He challenged SMU students to work on innovative and pragmatic GTM Strategies to sell Gansu produce (agricultural products, fruits and TCM) to Southeast Asia. After a few rounds of exchanges, Mr. Teo, instructors and students agreed to focus on the GTM strategy of four Southeast Asian countries, namely, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia. Mr. Teo also invited his business partner in Lanzhou to interact with the SMU students.

In line with the project challenge, SMU students had to make an economic case for each of the four countries, in the order of priority, based on a decision matrix, covering the “5W1H” (what, who, where, when, how and why) but not limited to just these factors: *mapping of the*

*buyer market information; defining the value chain Gansu offers; trading mechanisms; and omni sales channels.*

SMU students were split into four groups. Each group conducted primary research and secondary research to better formulate their respective GTM strategy. Students maintained close interactions with Mr. Teo and his manager throughout the course to optimize the information exchange to facilitate pragmatic innovation in the GTM strategies. Students went on to make cold calls to identify potential partners in these four markets to validate their GTM strategies.

Before flying into China, students presented their interim GTM Strategy presentation to Mr. Teo who gave his frank feedback and his advice for the students.

#### **PIL Logistics' SMU-XO Project Challenge**

The key challenge of the project was to assist PIL Logistics in determining a GTM strategy for new markets in SEA for Gansu products. These consist primarily of agricultural products such as fruits, vegetables and medicinal herbs. This is in tandem with the ongoing BRI, as many of the infrastructural developments are complementary with the logistical requirements of PIL Logistics.

When the students arrived in Lanzhou, they were immersed in several experiential learning activities, including the Yellow River culture, interactions with MPA (Master in Public Administration program) students from Lanzhou University and site visits to agricultural farms, processing factories, an agricultural product sales company and infrastructure (port) facilities to better understand the industry value chain, ecosystem and infrastructure connectivity challenges.

#### ***SMU-XO project and learning outcomes/lessons learnt***

The trips to Lanzhou and Shanghai complemented the students' research work in Singapore, enabling them to close information gaps on certain issues which students could not fully comprehend and experience in Singapore.

Students applied their new learnings to finalize their respective GTM strategy assignments before presenting the results to leaders of PIL Logistics at PIL's China HQ Building in Shanghai.

The final presentations went well and involved interactive exchanges between PIL Logistics management and SMU students. PIL Logistics gave students very favorable feedback on their GTM strategies. SMU students gave excellent feedback as the trip to Lanzhou and Shanghai totally changed their perception about China and the BRI, and that in turn opened their eyes to new opportunities in China as discussed below.

The visits helped the class to realize that PIL Logistics is in a good position to capture value in the supply chain with regard to exports of TCM and agricultural products from Gansu.

### **Personal Reflection of a Student Who Participated in the SMU-XO Project**

As a big China enthusiast, the SMU-XO — China's Belt and Road Initiative course presented an amazing opportunity for in-depth, first-hand exposure to the dynamic and fast-growing Chinese economy. The module was held in conjunction with PIL Logistics — the lead logistics provider of Pacific International Lines — to deep dive on the Belt and Road Initiative and trade opportunities between Western China and Southeast Asia.

As part of PIL Logistics' joint trade venture with the Chinese Government to develop a trade ecosystem between Gansu Province and Southeast Asia, we were tasked to evaluate the attractiveness of four markets (Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam) and build a Go-To-Market plan for Gansu's specialty products, notably agricultural produce and Traditional Chinese Medicine.

My team oversaw the Malaysia market, leveraging insights and data from primary and secondary sources across desktop research, class seminars, field trips and guest lectures hosted by industry experts. The overseas visit to Gansu was an invaluable opportunity to interact first-hand with stakeholders across the value chain, enabling us to build a holistic and in-depth understanding of the project from both producer and end consumer perspectives.

The module concluded with a final pitch to PIL's management team at the Lanzhou main office where we presented our analysis of:

- (1) Malaysia's market potential
- (2) Product-market fit and
- (3) A high-level marketing proposal exploring key consumer segments, channels and potential partnerships.

We received positive feedback from PIL Logistics, with management noting that our work provided them with a clear view of each market's potential and qualified leads to tap on.

After the project, I was offered a 6-month internship with PIL Logistics to refine and implement the Go-To-Market strategy for Malaysia and Singapore. I also had the opportunity to shadow C-suite on business meetings and conferences with potential partners across China and Southeast Asia such as the 2019 Singapore FinTech Festival.

As a sophomore year student then, the module equipped me with invaluable exposure to the Chinese economy, international trade and logistics industry, serving as a major stepping stone into the business world.

The project partnership with PIL Logistics allowed the students to interact with various stakeholders in China. Such opportunities would not have been possible if not for the business influence that PIL Logistics enjoys in China.

Our qualitative evidence in the form of students' lessons learnt reports and post-course evaluation suggests that the participation in the SMU-XO course enabled students to internalize several "higher-order thinking skills" related to Bloom's hierarchical ordering of cognitive skills ("Bloom's taxonomy" is named after American Educational Psychologist Benjamin Samuel Bloom, 1913–1999). Table 3 exemplifies students' learning outcomes in relation to Bloom's learning objectives ranging from lower-level cognitive skills such as *remembering* to more complex, higher-order skills such as *evaluating* and *creating* as applied to our SMU-XO course (Bloom, 1956).

Table 3. Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Objectives Applied to SMU-XO Course.

Bloom's Learning Objectives	Examples and Learning Outcomes
<i>Creating</i>	Generating new GTM strategies for Gansu agri-produce in four Southeast Asian markets, including a list of potential customers
<i>Evaluating</i>	Evaluating Gansu's prospective role in the BRI
<i>Analyzing</i>	Organizing information about four potential markets in ASEAN (Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines and Vietnam) for agri-produce from Gansu Province aligned with PIL Logistics' GTM strategies
<i>Applying</i>	Using buyer and supplier market information and to translate that into new trading mechanisms and business opportunities
<i>Understanding</i>	Making sense of theoretical knowledge obtained during the pre-trip learning phase in Singapore and concrete in-market exposure to BRI/PIL's project stakeholders in Lanzhou and Shanghai
<i>Remembering</i>	Understanding BRI's connectivity agenda and function as well as its regional/global reach. Finding information about potential new markets in ASEAN countries (Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines and Vietnam) for agricultural produce from Gansu Province



In the following we present edited feedback provided by students who participated in the SMU-XO course to shed more light on the specifics of these learning outcomes.

### Examples of Lessons Learnt by Students

- First-hand insights into China's socio-economic conditions at province-level (Gansu Province).
- Understanding the importance of competition in business.
- Appreciating the connectivity role of the China–Singapore (Chongqing) Connectivity Initiative – New International Land–Sea Trade Corridor as economic booster for Lanzhou/Gansu Province and beyond.
- Acknowledging the status of Gansu Province as optimal producer of agricultural produce (e.g. fruits/cauliflower).
- Developing more accurate mental models of China's BRI.

Through the trip to Lanzhou, students realized that Gansu is one of the poorer provinces in China which underlines the urgency to link the province with more export markets both within and beyond China:

*“Even though China has been developing at an unprecedented rate, there are still parts of the country that are being left behind.”*

(comment of a student)

Interactions with agricultural producers in Lanzhou such as *Kang Yuan Co-operative Farm* provided learners with first-hand insights into Gansu's agricultural scene and recent government initiatives aimed at improving farming efficiency by providing technological expertise and subsidies. In view of Gansu's socio-economic development challenges, BRI is regarded by many stakeholders as a welcome development tool which can help to alleviate poverty and enhance living standards. Through the Kang Yuan farm visit, students managed to expand their knowledge about the rationale and benefits of China's collective farming system:

*“By collaboratively pooling resources and capabilities, the general standards of farming can be raised which in turn allows smaller farms to enjoy high(er) yields. Furthermore, farmers can hedge against adversities and risks in the farming process.”*

(comment of a student)

Another takeaway was the insight that *coopetition* can bring tangible benefits to seemingly competing companies involved in BRI:

*“When it was revealed to us that Kang Yuan is shipping directly to Malaysia, our group immediately thought that PIL (as a perceived competitor) would not be able to gain any business advantage. However, we subsequently learnt that there are different complementary roles and networks that can be tapped upon, providing a win-win situation on both ends. More than a mere logistic provider, PIL can act as the bridge for Gansu Province and export markets in SEA through the wealth of contacts and connections PIL has accumulated over the years.”*

(comment of a student)

By visiting the *Lanzhou International Land Port* which links four major cities south of Lanzhou by a railroad to the port city of Qinzhou, students witnessed first-hand the connectivity function of CCI-ILSTC. Through this development, it is hoped to bypass some of the sea routes toward South East Asia and to significantly shorten the transport time. This is especially significant for Lanzhou-based businesses as many of their exports comprise fruits and vegetables, which have a short shelf-life. Government officials in the LILP were optimistic that the Southern Corridor would help to boost the economy of Gansu. As a student noted,

*“The impact of this is that previously unexportable goods due to their perishable nature can now be exported, which opens up more doors for trade. This is even more important against the backdrop of rising trade tensions between US and China as China will have to look outside of the US to boost its economic growth.”*

The site visits enabled the course participants to appreciate that Gansu is an “optimal producer of agriculture”. Due to its vast highlands and climate conditions, Gansu can harvest and export cold climate produce all year round. With regard to fruits, for example, the combination of low temperature, dry air conditions and strong sunlight makes Gansu’s Fuji apples “sweeter, crunchier and of better colour” (a student) as well as of higher quality compared to other regions. The presence of seamless cold chain integration in Gansu ensures good transportation within China, which also makes it easier to export them:

*“With the CCI-ILSTC, Gansu is in a prime position to export its high-quality cold climate produce to SEA countries.”*

(comment of a student)

Cauliflower (one of Gansu’s specialties) became one of the student’s favorite dishes:

*“We learnt that because of the favorable growing conditions such as the high altitude, cauliflower was optimal and required little pesticides. As such, the cauliflowers were indeed of a higher caliber ....”*

(comment of a student)

As another student remarked,

*“Admittedly, I had my reservations about Chinese produce due to the negative publicity in the media. However, through this direct exposure not only to the products but also to the processes and sources, I am convinced that such biases are unfounded. Therefore, one of China’s biggest challenges is changing consumers’ mindsets.”*

(comment of a student)

In view of the at times negative image of agri-produce from China, some students felt that Singapore can act as a “stamp of approval” to change consumers’ perspectives toward China’s farm products due to its “trustworthy and credible position in the political realm which extends to businesses as well”.

## Cold Plasma: A New Approach Toward the Decontamination of Foods

Cold plasma is a new “nonthermal food processing technology that uses energetic, reactive gases to inactivate contaminating microbes on meats, poultry, fruits, and vegetables” (Niemira, 2012). Instead of using antimicrobial chemical agents, this novel type of sanitizing method utilizes electricity and a carrier gas, such as air, oxygen, nitrogen or helium: “The primary modes of action are due to UV light and reactive chemical products of the cold plasma ionization process.”

Cold plasma technology can reduce pathogens such as *Salmonella* (a type of bacteria that causes food-related illnesses), *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 (which can lead to diarrhea, stomach cramps and fever), *Listeria monocytogenes* (gastrointestinal symptoms may include nausea or diarrhea) and *Staphylococcus aureus* (a type of germ that some people carry in their noses; can cause skin infections, pneumonia, heart valve infections, etc.).

Besides decontaminating foods, the use of cold plasma can be instrumental in extending the shelf-life of foods. It offers innovative alternatives to using harmful agricultural pesticides and fertilizers. For an overview about the current status, emerging issues, regulatory context and opportunities of cold plasma with respect to primary and secondary food production, please refer to Bourke, Ziuzina, Boehm, Cullen and Keener (2018).

For CCI-ILSTC to be successful and sustainable, it is critical that Gansu’s pre-harvest and post-harvest systems are operating effectively. The term “pre-harvest” refers to the type of technologies used for agricultural raw materials production, including soil cultivation, crop care and harvesting. “Post-harvest” technologies for harvesting agricultural commodities (e.g. fruits and vegetables) such as cold plasma (to ensure microbial quality) or traceability systems (enabling growers to track the produce from the field to the buyer) are important to guarantee high yields of high-quality products (in terms of appearance, texture, flavor and nutritive value), to ensure food safety, and to reduce losses between harvest and consumption.

The latter aspect implies effective collaborative communication by all participants across the entire post-harvest system comprising growers, packhouse operators, distribution center managers (who ensure low levels of product losses and zero recalls), consumers (who want safe, nutritious and good-looking products) and marketeers (Banks, 2014).

As stressed by The Global Agenda Council on Logistics and Supply Chains, there is room for improvement “in all sections of the food supply chain and this includes how products are moved to market – that is, the role of logistics and transportation” (Manners-Bell, 2012). Once existing inefficiencies in the movement and storage of foodstuffs are eliminated, food wastage can be cut and more people can be fed: “The real challenge is getting these products from farm to fork (or chopstick) with the minimum of waste” (Manners-Bell, 2012).

China's BRI is rapidly picking up pace contrary to what is often presented in the media. Gansu's agricultural scene has a significant competitive advantage compared to that of other regions, and PIL is strategically well positioned to capture key parts of the value chain for agricultural goods and TCM from Gansu Province. In fact, PIL Shanghai has managed to be the first company to ever attain authorization for Halal certification of Gansu's produce from the Malaysian authorities. With Malaysia being a huge and significant market in SEA, this means new business opportunities for PIL in the near-term.

While Thailand maintains a strong and dominant position as a key agriculture producer in the world, students stressed that it lacks the ability to harvest cold climate produce and thus strongly relies on imports to feed the domestic demand for apples, cabbages, broccolis and cauliflowers:

*“By pinpointing and targeting key importers/distributors and modern grocery retail players in Thailand, PIL will be able to create demand for Gansu's numerous produce.”*

(comment of a student)

To sum up, the SMU-XO course to Lanzhou and Shanghai helped many students to expand their horizon and to appreciate China's rapid transformation toward a global leader in infrastructure:

*"This course has certainly been a fulfilling one filled with insights, opportunities and warmth. I have learnt so much, yet there is still more to be explored. Although the course has drawn to a close, it sparked a lot of interest to further my knowledge of Chinese business and the country's political landscape. The trip proved to be an invaluable experience and a bittersweet end to my varsity education in Singapore Management University."*

(comment of a student)

A key takeaway is students' deeper understanding of China's (regional) development challenges which was perceived as "value-added", e.g. with regard to personal growth and future work opportunities. As one student put it,

*"This trip can be summarized with one phrase, '往前一小步, 文明一大步', meaning all it takes to change society is with a single step. With this mentality, I hope to continue to learn more about China and to find more opportunities for personal growth."*

(comment of a student)

*"This trip has provided many insights, both about the BRI and the broader socio-economic trends within China. Moreover, having witnessed first-hand the progress of Shanghai's economy, it has inspired me to think bigger and potentially consider a future working stint in China. Hence, I am grateful to have embarked on this learning experience that allowed me to explore, compare and even challenge my views to gain a better understanding of this rapidly growing market."*

(comment of a student)

Students' post-course evaluation comments and feedback provide some initial evidence for the hypothesis, that the "deep" design (Bergsteiner and Avery, 2008; Panina, 2019; Chong, Gan and Menkhoff, 2021) of the SMU-XO course with its overseas exposure to Lanzhou and Shanghai (see Table 4) was instrumental in imparting "global competency" into the students.

Table 4. Design Choices of “Deep”-Study-Tour SMU-XO Course (China).

Design Categories	SMU-XO Course (China)
<i>Country/City</i>	Lanzhou (Gansu Province) and Shanghai
<i>Range of organizations</i>	Agriculture, higher education, infrastructure (railway/ports)
<i>Length of tour and individual visits</i>	Nine days with 1–2 visits per day
<i>Range of pedagogical techniques</i>	Lectures, guest presentations, applied project works
<i>Intensity of preparation</i>	Pre-trip presentations and reports
<i>Quality management/selection of students</i>	Selection based on applications and motivation
<i>Feedback and (de-)briefings</i>	Feedback by corporate partner, PIL Logistics and instructors Post-trip reports/wrap-up session

According to a study by the OECD and Asia Society (2018), key dimensions of global competency include: (1) the capacity to critically examine issues such as trade, poverty, migration, inequality, environmental justice, conflict, cultural differences and stereotypes; (2) the capacity to understand and appreciate different perspectives and worldviews; and (3) the ability to interact positively with people of different national, social, ethnic and religious backgrounds, as well as those of different genders.

Table 5. Global Competency Acquisition through SMU-XO Course (China).

Dimension No.	Global Competency (Outcomes)
1	Students can analyze and explain why <i>connectivity</i> is of strategic importance for BRI and the socio-economic development of Gansu Province.
2	Students can analyze and explain (from the different perspectives of stakeholders in Lanzhou, Shanghai, Singapore, etc.) why <i>multi-modal infrastructure connectivity</i> is critical for the long-term success of BRI.
3	Students successfully interact with PIL Logistics' top management team and “people from <i>different cultures</i> ”, namely China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia and Thailand as part of their project works.

Table 5 exemplifies how the participation in the overseas SMU-XO course with its exposure to BRI-relevant sites in Lanzhou and Shanghai enabled students to acquire “global competency” (Chong, Gan and Menkhoff, 2021). All three dimensions are also captured in the lessons learnt comments made by students as highlighted above and below.

### *Lessons learnt comments*

“I found the lectures conducted in Singapore in the weeks leading up to our Lanzhou-Shanghai trip to be informative and insightful. In particular, the guest lecture on China’s development that ultimately led to the formation of the BRI provided me with a keen appreciation of how its conceptualization cannot be attributed to one particular event or factor – but rather, it is a myriad of different factors ....”

“In addition to the goal of enhancing development across the Western regions of China and its Tier 2 and 3 cities, the lectures also highlighted how China has been actively offering foreign aid to regions like Africa to support their infrastructural development, reflecting a change in China’s role within the global order.”

“All in all, I am glad to have signed up for this course, and I have many fruitful takeaways. I am excited to see how PIL will progress from the planning to the execution stage for Gansu’s produce, and I am positive that the company will be able to expand rapidly in this area.”

“This trip was my second visit to China after 10 years and beyond our desire to deliver value to PIL, I was personally excited to explore how China’s economy has progressed, especially after just taking a module in school on China’s history and socio-economic development.”

“BRI can be seen as one platform amongst many other international fora like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership where China has emerged as a paramount leader in shaping global relations and developments.”

“It was insightful to learn of the five key ‘flows’ that are integral to ensuring the success of the BRI, namely policy communication, infrastructure connectivity, free commercial flows, currency flows and connectedness with the people, highlighting the scale and complexity of this initiative.”



“One of my favourite quotes from this trip, shared by the director of one of our company visits, would certainly be: ‘Everything in China is possible, but nothing is easy’.”

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we summarized the teaching and learning experiences made during an experiential SMU-XO course aimed at examining the business-related components of China's BRI in general and the CCI-ILSTC in particular. The project challenge was to assist a Singapore-based company (PIL Logistics) in developing viable GTM strategies for new markets in selected Southeast Asian countries for Gansu agricultural products, including identifying potential local partners.

The course concluded with a successful final presentation to PIL's management team in Shanghai where the four student groups presented their GTM analysis, including the country's market potential, product-market fit, key consumer segments, channels and potential new partnerships.

In view of China's increasing economic influence in Asia and other parts of the world, we argue that first-hand knowledge about China's BRI together with experiential site visits in tier-1 and tier-2 cities on the basis of a concrete project assignment (as discussed in this paper) is essential in acquiring critical 21st-century competencies such as “global competency” aimed at making undergraduate students “future-ready”.

Key learning outcomes of the SMU-XO course with its exposure to Lanzhou and Shanghai can be summarized as follows:

- Students demonstrated the ability to solve a real-life client project (PIL Logistics) with the help of relevant conceptual frameworks related to innovative and pragmatic GTM strategies to explore how best to sell Gansu produce (fruits, agri-produce and TCM) to four Southeast Asian countries: Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia.
- Students demonstrated the ability to critically evaluate Lanzhou's role in CCI-ILSTC, which connects Chongqing to Qinzhou (Beibu Gulf, Guangxi Province) in the south by rail, and from Qinzhou to Singapore and beyond by sea.

- Students demonstrated the ability to conduct regional market analyses by organizing and assessing information about potential new markets and buyers in four ASEAN countries (Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia) for produce from Gansu Province that meet PIL's corporate GTM needs.
- Students demonstrated the ability to translate buyer market information into new trading mechanisms aligned with PIL's interests and the overall strategic direction of CCI-ILSTC.
- Students demonstrated the ability to relate theoretical knowledge obtained during the pre-trip learning phase in Singapore to the perspectives and needs of concrete CCI-ILSTC project stakeholders in Lanzhou and Shanghai, appreciating how SMU-XO client organization PIL can integrate itself into the BRI-propelled trade routes and value chains vis-à-vis private and public sector organizations.
- Through first-hand in-market exposure to Gansu's agricultural sector, BRI infrastructure components and host organizations in Lanzhou and Shanghai, students demonstrated the ability to (i) critically assess the ongoing transformations in the region triggered by China's increasing influence; (ii) reflect about (and correct) their pre-assumptions about China's rise and challenges associated with BRI implementations; and (iii) develop a keen(er) interest in taking up internships in Chinese/Singaporean business organizations, e.g. those with exposure to BRI.

China has advanced to become a global leader in infrastructure, with outstanding capabilities in port, rail, road and airport construction, telecommunications and operational management. Whether the US will be able to counter the BRI by promoting high-quality and environmentally sustainable infrastructure development plus infrastructure financing and solid construction remains to be seen (Yu, 2021; Choong, 2020).

The *Joint Communique of the 2nd BRI Summit in Beijing* in 2019 puts a premium on high-quality, affordable BRI infrastructure that is socially beneficial, affordable and sustainable: "We will strive to build high-quality, reliable, resilient and sustainable infrastructure. We emphasize that high-quality infrastructure should be viable, affordable, accessible, inclusive and broadly beneficial over its entire life-cycle, contributing to sustainable development of participating countries and the industrialization of developing countries. We welcome developed countries and

international investors to invest in connectivity projects in the developing countries. We emphasize the importance of economic, social, fiscal, financial and environmental sustainability of projects, while striking a good balance among economic growth, social progress and environmental protection" (Xinhua, 2019).

With sustainable financing, responsible investments by China's global infrastructure development champions and the support of local stakeholders and communities who benefit from connectivity-related investments, BRI will arguably become a sustainable win-win transformation for all partners.

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## Notes

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