

“Belt and Road” Initiative: Reports from Oversea Media and Publicity

Caihong Zhang

School of Foreign Languages, Xi’an University of Science and Technology, Shaanxi 710054,

China

zhangcaihonghappy@163.com

Abstract: Since the “Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” (“Belt and Road”) initiative was put forward in 2013, China has gained much international attention which is an opportunity and a challenge as well to Chinese media. How to take the opportunity to let the world know China better and give recognition to the new Silk Road? This article analyzes the contents of world’s leading media’s reports on China’s “Belt and Road” initiative and those of the alongside countries on China’s land and maritime Silk Road. By reflecting on the current situations outside China, the author of this paper comes up with some proposals on how to improve the initiative’s publicity abroad so that misunderstanding could be reduced, China’s image will be rebuilt and the “One Belt and One Road” vision can be fulfilled.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, media’s report, publicity, China’s image

1. INTRODUCTION

The “Belt and Road” initiative has been one of the ten hot words in China’s media reports since the “Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” has been put forward by Chinese president Xi Jinping in September 2013. After one year of modulation and discussion, the “Belt and Road” initiative has stepped into the stage of implementation in 2015, especially after the “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” was issued by China’s “Two Ministries and One Commission” with State Council authorization.¹ However, to this big issue of China, media outside the country: western ones and east ones are quite different in report contents and shown different interests.

It is well known that people’s opinions to a phenomenon or event are very often influenced by media’s reports from newspapers, radio broadcasting, televisions, internet information, and mobile network etc., especially those of the leading ones. Reports from media decide, to some degree, what people know and how they understand the outside world which is beyond their contact. This is true to China’s “Belt and One” initiative. Whether the audiences in the world

¹ “Two ministries” refer to Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of People’s Republic of China. “One Commission” refers to China’s National Development and Reform Commission.

know and what knowledge they have about this road and maritime Silk Road project depend on media's reports. This will, without any doubt, have impact on the initiative's implementation and China's image building in the international community, especially in the countries and regions alongside this Silk Road. From this point, it is important for Chinese media to be aware of the reports from the outside world and the needs of the oversea audiences concerning the "Belt and Road" initiative so as to decide how to react in international communication, how to meet the demands of the target audience in other countries and how to make China better understood in the procedure of the initiative joint-establishing.

2. "BELT AND ROAD" INITIATIVE REPORTS FROM MEDIA OUTSIDE CHINA

According a Chinese scholar's study, a variety of attitudes has shown towards "Belt and Road" initiative in media's reports outside China: being supportive, neutral, doubtful, and negative. (Tan Qian, 2015) The author of this article collects reports on China's "Belt and Road" initiative from several top western media and oriental ones in newspapers, radio broadcasting, televisions and networks, aiming at coming up with some suggestions to Chinese media on international communication. Considering the limited space, the author of this paper only chooses reports in English as study object which are from LexisNexis Academic database (from September 1, 2013 to September 1, 2015) selected by using "One Belt and One Road", "Belt and Road", "the Silk Road", "China" etc. as the key words in segment search. Of all the results, reports in newspapers, press releases, web-based publications, magazines and journals are the subject for this study. It is hoped that the different attitudes from different media both from the west and east outside China will be authentically shown and analyzed.

2.1 Reports from Western Media

Media from America and Britain have played an important role in shaping public opinions because of their ubiquitous news agencies in the world, advanced communicating weapons, sophisticated skills in reporting etc.. They usually represent the mainstream opinions of the western media. From the data collect from LexisNexis, it has been found that the leading newspapers, magazines and web-based publications in the two countries take a large percentage in report numbers. *The Times*, *Financial Time*, *The Gardina*, *The Observer*, *The New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* are the ones having most reports about China's "Belt and Road" initiative. Take British *Financial Times* as one example, China's new Silk Road has been paid close attention since it was put forward in 2013. Reports with titles like "Now China Begin to Make the Rules"², "A Development Bank Made in China"³ and "China's Silk Road Plan is Already Taking Shape"⁴ were published following the proceeding of the initiative.

² Philip Stephens, MAY 28, 2015. *Financial Times*.

³ David Pilling, May 28, 2015. *Financial Times*.

⁴ April 15, 2015. *Financial Times*.

While reports like “*New Silk Road is a Chance not a Threat*”⁵ and “*US Offers Only Sour Grapes in Opposition to AIIB*”⁶ and “*US Attacks UK ‘Accommodation’ with China*”⁷ indicate the attitudes of western scholars and politicians in a clear way.

However, Besides the most approving voices of the “Belt and Road” initiative that it may support the global economy and offer an opportunity of integrating the Eurasian market and development, some western media reports also shown doubt and negative opinions about China’s intention and abilities to fulfill this new Silk Road. Philip Stephens, a columnist for FT (*Financial Times*) once wrote with an ironic tone in an article, saying Xi Jinping’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative is being talked about by everyone in China, but “no one seems to know precisely what it means.” (2015) Moreover, some journalists interpreted China’s land and maritime Silk Road in a hostile way. For instance, the news commentary website *World Post* of the *Houffington Post* from America once published an article written by Richard Javad Heydarian entitled “*The End of China’s Peaceful Rise?*”. In the article, China’s initiative of establishing the “Belt and Road” is considered as a threatening thing to its neighborhood countries and was rejected by countries such as Philippine, Singapore, Vietnam and Indonesia. Negative words as “ambitions” “assertiveness” and “undermine” were applied many times to describe China’s “Belt and Road” initiative. (Zhou Cui, Kang Jian, 2016).

2.2 Reports from alongside Countries on the “Belt and Road” Initiative

There are about sixty countries along China’s land and maritime Silk Road which may get involved in the establishing of the “Belt and Road” initiative so far. They are located in the north, south, east and west parts of Asia. According to the data from LexisNexis, many media in these countries have reported China’s new Silk Road initiative, whereas some never reported. For the sake of convenience in analysis, this article only chooses the media which are influential and having big audiences in countries of India, Russia and Pakistan.

India was one of the important joint points and destinations in ancient Silk Road which connected the western and eastern world. China and India are neighbors whose economies, cultures and safety are closely linked and interweaved. President Xi had expressed the ideas of inviting India to take part in the establishing of the “Belt and Road” Silk Road, to which the Indian Prime Ministe Narendra Modi responded with some hesitation at the beginning. For the Indian media, their interest for reporting China in politics grew rapidly after the meet of two countries’ leaders under the aegis of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization from May 14 to May 19, 2015. The opinions of the media, of course, are quite divided.

Generally speaking, the Indian media look at China’s “Belt and Road” initiative in three major ways: the understanding and admire opinions; the hesitant emotions and the unfavorable and hostile feelings. Here, articles published in *The Times of India*, the most read English newspaper, are selected to analyze. Some reporters view China’s new Silk Road as a

⁵ May 24, 2015. *Financial Times*.

⁶ May 23, 2015. *Financial Times*.

promotion of its own interest, which should be understood. “China’s growing military prowess is also just another tool for Beijing to realize its strategic goals” and “it’s not its interest to have conflict”. In this regard, India should seize the opportunities, “engage China confidently” and “develop its own strategic depth in Central Asia”.⁸ Some think the launch of the AIIB “exemplifies” China’s “new diplomatic and economic muscle”. Beijing is offering a platform which New Delhi should use, making its concerns known and should not “repeat the mistake it made earlier with the West by insulating itself and being the perpetual outsider.”⁹ Some treat China as one opponent and the “Belt and Road” initiative tool to “legitimize geographic stretch”. For this, India should ally Japan and US to evolve a better understanding to tackle China in Asia” (Seema Sirohi, 2015)

In the north part of Asia and east part of Europe lie Russia, Ukraine and their neighboring countries. Most media reports in this area show a supportive attitude towards China’s “Belt and Road” initiative. A few as *International Living* still express the worries that China may threaten Russia’s status in Eurasian Union, saying the two may have interest conflicts in politics, economy and energy.(2014)

Countries alongside China’s land and maritime Silk Road as Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Turkey etc. gave a positive response to China’s “Belt and Road” initiative. For example, *The Daily Mail*, a national English Daily in Pakistan reported the *China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Project* in details and is having cooperation with China’s media. Yet, media from other countries in this area still do not have adequate knowledge about the initiative, for which Chinese media need to do a lot of publicity.

3. HOW TO PUBLICIZE THE “BELT AND ROAD” INITIATIVE

Chinese media have done a lot of work in publicity of the “Belt and Road” initiative via international reports in newspapers, magazines, the Internet and mobile media in the past several years. Of all the oversea media, *China Daily*, *Xinhua News Agency*, *China Radio International (CRI)* and *Shanghai Daily* are the most famous ones. For a long time, China’s media have not been very successful in attracting the target audience abroad because of the very passive reaction to social events, the overly prim ways of reporting, lacking of knowledge of the outlandish cultures and international experiences etc..

Because of the different social systems, histories and values, people tend to judge others from their own perspective, which is especially true in media reports. Chinese people’s voices are scarcely heard and their images as well as the country’s image have been built mostly by the western leading media. Despite the efforts made in recent years by Chinese media, the westerners still have little interest to listen to China’s voices and still have very negative

⁷ March 13, 2015. *Financial Times*.

⁸ Rudroneel Ghosh, *Elephant in the room: Deciphering China’s rise as a military power. The Times of India*. July 10, 2015.

⁹ TOI Edit, *Great China Stonewall: Modi encounters Lakhvi barrier with Xi Jinping, but New Delhi must keep pushing. The Times of India*. July 10, 2015.

impression on China. When the new Silk Road was put forward, America and some of its allies, who usually consider China's rise as a threat, took a disproving view on this initiative, regarding it as a "territorial dispute with its neighbors" and may "challenge U.S.-dominated rules and order".(Fu Ying, 2015)

The Fact that China's media have not worked efficiently in the publicity of the "Belt and Road" initiative is another reason for the status quo. For instance, many oversea reports have been done in English or other international languages only. For those alongside countries, where non-general languages are popular, lacking of knowledge for the initiative is not hard to imagine. Besides, the publicity for this initiative outside China is not rich enough. Having little knowledge of the target audience in the alongside countries is another reason causing the obscurity and of the "Belt and Road" initiative in international communication. What's more, communicating strategies of Chinese media need to be improved compared with those of the western media.

4. WAYS OF INTERNATIONAL PUBLICITY ON THE INITIATIVE

China has taken over Japan becoming the second largest economy, yet the economic rise has not brought it a parallel political influence in international affairs. Its foreign policies are still over-interpreted, lacking western recognition. The voices made by Chinese media are still not being paid proper attention and are considered too different, too assertive or too aggressive to believe or accept. As to this, Chinese media has more to learn and do.

Publicity is an important part in international communication which makes mutual understanding easy. What to publicize for the "Belt and Road" initiative abroad and how are the questions for Chinese media to think about.

First, to realize efficient publicity and report, China's media need to meet the demand of the target audiences by selecting contents which are of their interest and importance. Most Chinese media have realized the importance of telling "China stories" to the world outside but tend to neglect the listeners' interest there. To get to know their demands about China's land and maritime Silk Road, paying attention to media's reports of western world and neighboring countries is necessary. By doing so, the oversea audiences' concerns and worries will be known and how to do the follow-up work in publicity and reporting would be clear.

For a long time, China's rise has been seen as a threat to some countries despite Chinese presidents' promises of a peaceful development on many occasions. The proposal of the "Belt and Road" by Xi is also regarded as a challenge by some countries to the world order with America as the leader since World War II, and will threat China's neighbors. In this situation, reports on the contents of the initiative, its vision and purpose become necessary. What the realization of the initiative may bring to the world, especially the alongside countries are the issues the audience are interested in. So publicizing systematically to the outside world the land and maritime Silk Road project by concerning the target audiences' interest and importance is

what Chinese media need to do urgently.

Secondly, how to publicize the “Belt and Road” initiative to gain recognition and accommodation in the world outside is another question for Chinese media to consider in international communication. This issue is involved in ways reports are written and the ways they are disseminated. The suspicions of some target audiences have for Chinese media are “closely related to the fact that our publicizing work has long been involved in not telling the truth.” (Chu, Shulong, 2015) To report truth and avoid dissembling is the most crucial element deserving observation in media. The truth of “Belt and Road” initiative is presented in the truth of narration without interpretation, the account of it with substantial accuracy, and the impartial and comprehensive reports. Apart from that, the languages and the translated version applied in the initiative reports should be direct, straightforward and authentic rather than overbearing much poetic verses. Furthermore, the way they are reported should be of proximity, especially to those poor countries and region which China offers help.

With the development of new media, means for communication have been revolutionized. Internet and mobile phones become the most convenient tools for people to connected and react to the world. Therefore, in order to achieve the communicating aim of gaining a wide support in publicity for the “Belt and Road” initiative, Chinese media have to cooperate with their counterparts abroad.

Third, to work and respond actively is another thing Chinese media need to do in “Belt and Road” publicity in international community. Lack of explanation and “nose for news” are other shortcomings for Chinese oversea publicity. To report the events actively and react instantly with its audiences is quite important in this information time. To make sure that cooperation is taken smoothly and misunderstanding is clarified immediately in the establishing of the new Silk Road is what Chinese media should do. By doing so, efficient publicity could be gained.

5. CONCLUSION

As Mark Beeson, professor of International Politics at the University of Western Australia once said in his essay entitled *China's Place in Regional and Global Governance: A New World Comes into View* that Chinese influence “in and on multilateral institutions needs to be recognized and accommodated in the West.” It’s almost without doubt that Chinese policies also need to be recognized by the Western audiences before they exert an international or regional impact and would be implemented smoothly. In the case of “Belt and Road” initiative, Chinese media are responsible for its publicity in gaining a massive support in and out of Asia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was supported by program of the “Prosperity and Development of Philosophy and Social Sciences” in Xi’ an Science and Technology University(Item number: 2014SX10).

REFERENCES

- [1] Chu Shulong. The China Story and China's International Image [J]. CIR. Nov. 2015:14-27.
- [2] David E. , Sanger and Edward Wong. As Obama Plays China Card on Trade, Chinese Pursue Their Own Deals [N]. The New York Times. May 13, 2015.
- [3] Fu Ying. How Chinese and Americans Are Misreading Each Other -- And Why It Matters [N]. World Post. 09/09/15.
- [4] Jane Perlez, Bree Feng. China Gains New Friends in Its Quest for Energy [N]. The New York Times. September 24, 2013.
- [5] Mark Beeson, Fujian Li. China's Place in Regional and Global Governance: A New World Comes Into View [J]. Global Policy. Issue 4. Nov.2016: 491-499.
- [6] Seema Sirohi. India, Japan and US must evolve a better understanding to tackle China in Asia IST in Letter from Washington[N]. India, World. ET. July 8, 2015, 6:38 am.
- [7] Simon Denyer. China Charting Two New "Silk Roads", Bypassing U.S [N]. The Washington Post. October15, 2013.
- [8] Tan Qian. Exploration of International Communication for "Silk Road Economic Belt" [J]. China Radio & TV Academic Journal. 2015(8):79-82.
- [9] Zhou Cui, Kang Jiang. How Leading Media in US Construct Framework for China's "Silk Road Economic Belt" [J]. Modern Communication. 2016 (6): 163-165.