

Understanding China's cultural barrier from its depiction in the Anglophone sphere

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On 14th of May, the Financial Times has published an article titled 'One Belt, One Road, and Many Questions', questioning whether OBOR is exporting China's economic issues to the global stage. In a rare display of immediacy, the ambassador to Britain, Liu Xiaoming responds with a letter to editor three days later, writing that 'the Belt and Road is a two-way traffic and definitely not exclusive... it is an initiative about open, inclusive and win-win co-operation.' OBOR has often been seen with suspicion by the 'western' media and response from China has always been passively allaying them. Negative coverage of OBOR was all too readily interpreted as manifestation of sino-phobia, much to the detriment of a further understanding of the cultural barrier China is facing. On Financial Times, Wanning Sun, a Professor at the University of Technology Sydney, commented on China's projection hostility:

"Beijing feels its international reputation does not match up with the greater economic power it now has, it feels western media is biased and is doing everything it can to address the issue."

As two of the most influential organ in the anglophone sphere, negative coverage of OBOR from Financial Times and The Economist can be bisected into the following: local protest and opposition against China's infrastructural projects, and; financial risk such as debt bubbles inherent to said projects. Public sentiment, though can be suppressed with an iron fist when necessary in China, cannot be said the same in other countries. For instance, in the Myitsone Dam project with Myanmar: As Chinese firms ignored local issues such as relocation of and settlement with the affected, public outcry fermented into widespread protests in Myanmar and ultimately led to the indefinite suspension of the project. The same happened in Chinese purchase of port Colombo, and was almost aborted with India's interference.

In fact, China has already sensed its deficiency in 'soft power' and had spent a great sum to improve its image. China expert David Shambaugh has estimated that in 2014, Beijing has spent more than a hundred billion dollars on public diplomacy and official advertisement. Apart from setting up Confucian institutes and sponsoring universities to teach Chinese and Chinese culture, most of the money were used to purchase foreign media outlet and training of pro-china journalists. According to an investigation by Reuters, the state-owned China Radio International had control on 33 foreign broadcasting agencies. However, despite of Beijing's efforts, the results has been less than satisfying. According to a research titled 'Soft Power 30' by USC Center on Public Diplomacy, China was ranked at 25, way below its regional neighbours such as Japan, Singapore and Korea.

As early as 2011, He Qinglian pointed out the crux of Chinese weakness in soft power, 'In these years Beijing has been advocating for soft power, yet its understanding of the term still limited to the dollar

and megaphone.’ The Chinese railway project in Kenya, commonly dubbed as ‘the lunatic express number 2’, reflects He’s observation to an unsettling degree. In the waiting hall of the terminal station, sit the bust of Mao Zedong and betrayed a lack of understanding of local culture. In the budget, the project costed doubled the closest market quotation.

The aforementioned Soft Power 30 study divided soft power into six sub-categories: Government, Engagement, Education, Enterprise, Culture and Digital. Following this framework, the reason behind China’s lack of soft power becomes more apparent. Included in the ‘enterprise’ category, was the element of social responsibility, yet when Beijing sculpted foreign landscape with steel and concrete during the course of OBOR, it had completely ignored the livelihood of local communities. In the Burmese city Kyaukpyu, while China had spent close to 10 billion dollars to build a deepwater seaport and a natural gas pipeline, little was used to compensate local fishermen who had lost their livelihood. In the nearby Maday island, while 3000 were employed under the pipeline project, only 47 were Burmese. It is only natural for the locals to see Chinese corporations as colonizers lishing their natural resource.

Ultimately, the ‘soft-obstacles’ of OBOR can only be solved as a cultural problem, rather than an economical one. Armed with cultural icon such as the Hollywood and Silicon Valley, the United States commands the flow of international culture and in ‘Soft Power 30’, it was indeed ranked as first in the sub-categories of Culture, Education and Digital. Perhaps the States can serve as an example for Beijing to solve its image crisis.

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