

# ***Exploring Different Attitudes Towards China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Underlying Factors***

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**Abstract:** At present, countries with different cultural backgrounds in the world have different interpretations of China's Belt & Road Initiative, and these interpretations have affected the realization of the goals of the Belt and Road policy and international relations. Therefore, this study will devote itself to studying the different attitudes towards China's Belt and Road Initiative in the different social contexts of China and the social contexts of the United States. Moreover, it will take the different attitudes presented as a starting point to explore the specific reasons behind the differences in attitudes. Focus on the two questions "How do China and the United States view the Belt and Road Initiative in the general political and social environment of China and the United States" and "How have these attitudes and differences been caused, and what are their underlying factors?" Therefore, from the perspective of the Belt and Road Initiative in this article, it could be further explored that the cultural differences reflected China's ideology and ideology from America and understand these cultural differences. The research will be conducted by screening the literature. Finally, it is concluded that American thinking is more inclined to force the maximization of interests at the level of values, while Chinese thinking is more inclined to interests that must contain moral benevolence and righteousness. Therefore, different thinking at the philosophical level has contributed to the differences between the two sides when they look at the Belt and Road Initiative.

**Keywords:** the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese philosophy, US ideology

## **1. Introduction**

In 2013, Nazarbayev University had a speech given by Chinese President Xi Jinping named "Promoting People's Friendship and Creating a Better Future" in Kazakhstan. It is the first time to reveal China's proposal of the "Silk Road Economic Belt of the twenty-first century" (as SREB below) to the world. Within one month, another speech at the Indonesian National Assembly also presented by President Xi as "Together to build up a China-ASEAN Community of Broad Future to All Human-beings", proposing to jointly build the "Maritime Silk Road at twenty-first Century" (as MSR below). The SREB and the MSR have been combined and referred to as the "Belt and Road Initiative" (as B&R below) since then [1]. The concept of B&R was conceived from the version of the Chinese Silk Road in ancient times. The Silk Road used to be the main road for China's foreign exchanges, colluding with changes in the field of trade and culture among countries along the route [2]. Today's

China is also trying to collude and connect countries along the B&R route through the famous Silk Road like in ancient times, so as to achieve business promotion and development.

From the perspective focused on China and America, this article will provide a unique way to analyze the thinking that B&R has brought to the scholars and public opinion of the two countries, as well as the different ideologies and logic hidden behind this perspective. Therefore, through the One Belt One Road policy, it is interesting to analyze further the cultural differences between China and the United States when they look at policies and then have a deeper understanding of the thinking logic of China and the United States. At present, most of the studies on B&R have a strong subjective awareness, emphasizing their own views and understanding of B&R policy, and looking forward to the political future of B&R. However, few scholars have analyzed the logic behind these subjective ideologies and the role of cultural differences between China and America in influencing the ideology of B&R. This article uniquely presents the opportunity for B&R to objectively analyze the respective attitudes of China and America towards B&R, as well as the reasons for this attitude. At the same time, it will be analyzed from the perspective of political theories rather than from the perspective of international relations or political policy.

This article will use the keywords “the Belt and Road Initiative”, “Chinese philosophy”, “US ideology”, “the formation of Chinese ideology”, and “the formation of American ideology” to search Google Scholar for relevant articles from 2010 to the present as research references. After using PRISMA guideline to screen, 20 articles were finally analyzed.

## **2. Comparisons of Ideologies Between China and the U.S.**

### **2.1. Ideas for “One Belt One Road” Policy**

#### **2.1.1. China’s Society and Popular Views**

Chinese President Xi emphasized that “The connectivity and cooperation are what we expected to be deepened benefited from B&R. It could be foreseen that B&R would lead to a win-win situation which means each country could benefit from it and develop in various areas together” [3]. In 2019 when he attended the opening ceremony of the second B&R International Cooperation Summit Forum that it was not difficult to see from President Xi’s expression that his understanding of the B&R focuses on providing a platform for cooperation between different countries in the world to create greater value from the limited environment of each country. Many Chinese scholars hold the same views as President Xi. Their understanding of B&R is more biased towards China seeking cooperation with other countries. Therefore, for Chinese scholars, the development of B&R greatly benefits the world.

Chinese professor Chen Xiangming mentioned in his book *The Belt and Road Initiative as Epochal Regionalization* that he believes B&R reflects a new interpretation of globalization, and Professor Chen holds a positive attitude towards this concept. Chen Xiangming is a professor who has been working in America’s universities for decades, and he has been putting his efforts into studying Belt and Road Initiatives since the beginning of the program. He believes that because China leads this new globalization, it is different from globalization in the traditional sense of the West. Under the promotion of China’s B&R, countries along the route can achieve balanced development rather than sticking to the exploitation of underdeveloped countries in the globalization dominated by Western countries [4].

Similarly, Jin Liquan, president of the AIIB, also expressed similar views. He believes that the multiple challenges currently facing the world have had a tremendous impact on many developing countries, and the global development gap has further widened. B&R is to increase global cooperation and help different countries achieve equal development [5].

And this point of view coincides with Professor Chen's point of view on the new type of globalization leading by China. From their perspectives, B&R must be positive to all the countries participated in the project, and China would invest the initiative for humanity and globalization reasons. As Jin Liquan said, "Facing the global challenges that mankind is facing, the solutions we need must turn to continuous global economic integration and firm multilateralism" [5].

### 2.1.2. America's Society and Popular Views

At present, in the well-known Western media, it is obvious that B&R is regarded as a new type of debt-trap kind of diplomacy initiated by China. Although this wide-ranging propaganda move can be seen as a means of political attack, at the same time, more American scholars generally accept this point of view and take debt trap diplomacy as a research object, using B&R as an example. The reasons behind this phenomenon are worth thinking about.

In the article by journalist Griffiths published by CNN, the analysts use a large amount of data to point out the debt traps that B&R may bring to some developing countries and use these traps to justify the analysis with numbers. The author concludes that although the official government of China and cooperating countries were denying the "debt trap" created by the Chinese government, it is obvious for some countries to tie closely with China economically due to the intervention through Belt and Road Initiative [6].

Moreover, although some authors do not clarify their understanding of the Belt and Road in their articles, this understanding is usually pejorative, or that the Belt and Road project is a debt conspiracy. For example, Statista data journalist Katharina Buchholz analyzed China's debts to other countries, among which she analyzed the Belt and Road project as the most important link [7]. In general, most of the analysis in the United States starts with the B&R project from the perspective of gaining benefits. China's adoption of B&R must be to achieve debt control purposes or consider it as a diplomacy movement.

## 2.2. Reasons for the Popular Attitudes in Two Societies

### 2.2.1. Reasons for Contributing to China's Attitudes

Through the above-mentioned different performances, it is obvious to see the difference in thinking between China and the ideologies of the United States in thinking about B&R. China prefers to think that B&R is an initiative that is possible to use to benefit all mankind. This point can be analyzed from the Chinese philosophical thinking system.

Regarding Chinese philosophical thinking, Confucianism is inevitable to be mentioned. For the Chinese, Confucianism has completely created China's unique way of thinking and logical thinking in the thousands of years of existence. Confucianism was the national ideology generally chosen by Chinese emperors during the feudal period. In Max Weber's book *The Religion of China*, he explained in detail the importance of Confucianism to the development of Chinese society and how Confucianism shaped modern Chinese society [8]. Although he did not experience this era, he proved the inevitability of Confucianism and the choice of modern Chinese society. In this case, it is better to understand the rhetoric of the Chinese government on the initiative of B&R, as well as the understanding of Chinese scholars on B&R.

In the book, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, the famous Chinese philosopher and scholar Feng Youlan describes the two most important concepts in Confucian thought, Ren (仁) as benevolence and Yi (义) as righteousness. The initiator of Confucianism is Confucius, and Confucius' interpretation of benevolence and righteousness is that everyone in society has certain things to do, and they must do it for the sake of doing it because it is morally right to do these things. If doing these

things is only out of immoral considerations, even if you do what you should do, this behavior is not Yi (义). The concept opposite to benevolence and righteousness is Li (利) benefit [9]. Therefore, in the Chinese concept, make a move, especially a move like B&R that concerns many countries worldwide. The Belt and Road Initiative must not only be about interests but must also be combined with Chinese humanitarianism to make it a meaningful move for China. And a move that is entirely about profit must not last long because it is morally wrong. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why when the Chinese express their views on the Belt and Road, they will add the common interests of the countries along the B&R route and do not emphasize the promotion of China economically or the mastery of China diplomatically. Therefore, only with the support of humanitarianism and globalization can the Chinese be persuaded to undertake large international projects like B&R.

### 2.2.2. Reasons for Contributing to America's Attitudes

On the contrary, the thinking in the United States is more inclined to compare B&R to a transaction. Therefore, in a transaction, there must be a party that benefits more and a party that is benefited and exploited. Under this kind of thinking, mutual benefit and win-win can exist, but B&R must have greater interests for China than it appears on the surface, so China has taken a lot of trouble to make this move internationally.

Interestingly, this concept in the United States is the opposite of Confucianism in China. As mentioned above, benevolence, righteousness, and benefit in Confucianism are completely opposite concepts. The American way of thinking is just based on benefits since it has caused a complete misunderstanding appears on China's beliefs and American thinking on B&R. It is also understandable why China's public understanding held a positive attitude towards the Belt and Road Initiative, while the United States has an opposite and negative attitude towards B&R.

Most of the American theories are based generally on their unique religious and philosophical influences. Also, Max Weber explains this phenomenon in another of his books *the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber believed that capital accumulation was influenced by Puritanism, once the largest religion affecting the United States [10]. Under this thinking, pursuing interests and the desire for capital accumulation is particularly important for the United States. The pursuit of interests is the mainstream in American society, and without the drive of interests, it is completely unreasonable to launch an initiative similar to B&R. Therefore, under the ideology of American society, it is not shameful to pursue profit maximization and the capital obtained will form greater benefits in the future.

## 3. Discussion

To sum up, the difference in cognition and evaluation of B&R between China's social understandings and the popular view in the United States stems from differences in philosophical thinking. Especially in terms of the logic of creating benefits, China believes that some moral values must accompany the benefits obtained. Therefore, it is a win-win situation for China and the relevant countries in commerce. Created more international cooperation and exchanges. However, in American values, the maximization of interests does not need to be accompanied by too much moral value, so China's propositions for B&R seem hypocritical and even unrealistic.

It is evident that China and the United States do not fully understand each other, which will affect world issues, and may cause unnecessary differences and conflicts. Therefore, more studies are needed to understand the cultural and ideological differences between these two countries. As an entry point, B&R reflects that China and USA have profound differences due to their diverse philosophy. Therefore, the author hopes to gain a deep understanding of the conceptual differences between China and the United States through similar and more academic discussions in this article.

## 4. Conclusions

Taken together, this article sheds light on the differing thinking between China and the United States on B&R. China regards countries along the route as a community and holds the idea that mankind could share the future together. The United States generally believes that maximizing economic interests is the basis for launching large-scale initiatives such as B&R, which conflicts with China's moral theories. However, the conflicts arising from different thinking come from different ways of thinking under different philosophical thinking. The Chinese generally believe there needs to be strong moral reasons behind the emergence of large interests. However, for Americans, there is no need for any so-called moral drive, but the maximization of interests is morality or justice. The research generated for this article could be further explored on other reasons for thinking, such as whether other philosophical backgrounds contribute to this difference in thinking. The limitation of this study may be that it is mainly summarized through the analysis of existing literature. Therefore, future scholars can analyze the words of leaders on social media and speeches at events or conduct a content analysis of news reports to explore the different reasons for cultural differences further.

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