



China's National Image through the Lens of Belt and Road: A Qualitative Analysis of Global Perceptions

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Abstract

This study examines the two viewpoints of China's national image—self-formation and external-formation—within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Through qualitative data gathered from 24 semi-structured interviews with participants from 15 nations, the research highlights four thematic domains that shape views on China: political, economic, socio-cultural, and adaptive approaches. Results indicate that although China employs the BRI to showcase soft power and leadership focused on development, global perceptions are still mixed, shaped by media narratives, geopolitical conflicts, and cultural gaps. The research indicates a more sophisticated and equitable approach in China's image-enhancement activities.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative; national image; self-shaping; other-shaping; qualitative research; soft power; global perceptions.

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1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), initiated in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, is a broad international development and infrastructure plan aiming to improve regional connectivity and economic integration among Asia, Europe, and Africa. Conceived as a land-oriented "Silk Road Economic Belt" and a maritime "21st Century Maritime Silk Road," the BRI signifies China's boldest effort to transform its worldwide economic and geopolitical presence. Beyond just a physical network of trade routes, the BRI functions as a crucial tool for improving China's global reputation and advocating its concept of a collaborative and multipolar world system [1,2].

China's involvement with BRI partner nations is closely linked to its endeavors to influence its national image both domestically—via state narratives and official communication—and internationally, through global collaboration, commerce, and cultural diplomacy. This twofold framework of national image—self-representation (how China shows itself) and other-representation (how others view China)—is crucial for comprehending the worldwide reaction to the BRI [3]. Although China advocates the BRI as a means for "win-win cooperation," infrastructure advancement, and shared progress, reactions from global stakeholders differ greatly. These views are shaped by political agendas, media stories, historical connections, and encounters with projects related to the BRI [4,5].

Given this complex and sometimes contradictory reception, it becomes critical to go beyond official statements and examine how China's BRI-related activities are interpreted by individuals in diverse geopolitical contexts. To explore this dimension, the present study adopts a qualitative approach centered on semi-structured interviews. These interviews aim to capture the nuanced, lived experiences and perceptions of international stakeholders—including civil servants, academics, media professionals, and private sector actors—from 15 countries across multiple continents.

By analyzing this diverse dataset, the study provides empirical insight into how China's national image is co-constructed through both deliberate strategy and international feedback. This research contributes to the growing discourse on public diplomacy, image-building, and international cooperation by highlighting the real-world impacts of China's grand narratives through the lens of those most directly affected.

2. Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research approach grounded in interpretivist traditions to investigate worldwide perceptions of China's national image within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This method was selected to reveal profound, detailed understandings of how people from various areas view China's strategic engagement and public diplomacy initiatives via BRI. A qualitative design is especially suitable for research intending to interpret significance, evaluate personal experiences, and gather varied perspectives that could be hidden in quantitative methods.

2.1 Research Design and Rationale

The core method of data collection involved semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility to probe deeper into participants' thoughts while ensuring consistency across key thematic areas. This method allowed respondents to express nuanced opinions and to elaborate on personal and professional encounters with BRI-related developments. Interview questions were designed to elicit perspectives on China's political intentions, economic influence, cultural outreach, and strategic adaptability, aligning with the study's focus on self- and other-shaping dimensions of national image.

2.2 Sampling and Participants

A purposive sampling approach was implemented to guarantee that participants possessed pertinent exposure to or experience with the BRI, whether via government roles, academic studies, journalism, or private sector engagements. In total, 24 informants from 15 different countries were interviewed, showcasing a wide range of geopolitical and cultural backgrounds. The areas covered were Southeast Asia, East Africa, Western Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. This diversity across regions offered a comprehensive view of the worldwide response to the BRI. The pool of participants consisted of:

- Government employees and decision-makers (7)
- Scholars and researchers focused on international relations or studies of China (6)
- Journalists and media experts (5)
- Stakeholders from the private sector and business leaders involved in projects related to BRI (6)

This varied stakeholder representation improved the study's capacity to incorporate both official institutional perspectives and grassroots-level perceptions of China's global image.

2.3 Data Collection Procedures

Interviews took place over six months, utilizing video conferencing tools like Zoom and Microsoft Teams because of geographical spread and COVID-19 factors. Every interview ranged from 45 to 75 minutes and was carried out in English or, when needed, in the participant's mother tongue with the help of an interpreter. Every interview was audio-recorded (with the participants' consent), transcribed word-for-word, and anonymized to maintain confidentiality.

Apart from primary interview data, the study included secondary sources such as policy documents, government white papers regarding BRI, content from official Chinese media, and coverage from international news outlets. These materials were employed to corroborate interview findings and to frame participant narratives within larger political and media contexts.

2.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was performed utilizing a two-cycle coding approach, consistent with recognized qualitative analysis methods. During the initial cycle, open coding was used to recognize early concepts and common themes throughout the transcripts. During the second cycle, axial coding was employed to categorize these codes into broad thematic groups, which constituted the foundation for the main findings of the study.

The analysis process utilized NVivo software, which aided in the systematic coding and retrieval of qualitative data. To improve credibility, intercoder reliability assessments were performed with a second analyst evaluating a portion of the transcripts.

Four primary themes arose from the data: (1) diplomatic narratives and politics, (2) development and economic collaboration, (3) engagement in socio-cultural activities, and (4) adaptation strategies and managing perceptions. These themes constitute the framework of the findings section and illustrate the intricate and frequently conflicting views of China's image in various global areas.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

The study followed standard ethical protocols for qualitative research. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interviews. Participants were assured of the voluntary nature of the study, the confidentiality of their responses, and their right to withdraw at any time. Ethical approval was granted by the institutional research board of the author's university.

3. Findings

3.1 Theme 1: Political Narratives and Diplomacy

Many respondents recognized China's proactive use of the BRI as a diplomatic strategy to improve its global political status. Informants from Southeast Asia and Africa indicated that China's investments are seen as acts of diplomatic goodwill and efforts to build partnerships. This corresponds with studies indicating that the BRI acts as a key component of China's "grand diplomacy," enabling Beijing to create a worldwide narrative of harmonious collaboration and shared progress [6,7].

Participants from Western Europe and South Asia expressed skepticism, viewing China's political motives as either strategic overreach or a form of soft imperialism. These apprehensions resonate with wider critiques present in global discussions, especially in U.S. media representations that depict BRI as a means of geopolitical growth rather than selfless collaboration [8].

3.2 Theme 2: Collaboration and Advancement in Economics

The economic advantages of BRI were the most commonly mentioned benefit throughout all areas. Participants from East African and Southeast Asian nations emphasized the concrete enhancements in infrastructure, including roads, ports, and train networks. This aligns with findings indicating that the BRI has increased bilateral trade levels and minimized logistical obstacles, particularly in developing countries [9].

However, worries arose—mainly from Western participants—regarding financial transparency, the danger of debt bondage, and insufficient local ownership. These issues are evident in recent policy critiques that suggest that although China offers funding, the conditions of involvement frequently lack clarity and may result in strategic dependencies [10,11].

3.3 Theme 3: Socio-Cultural Engagement

China's cultural diplomacy efforts under the BRI—particularly Confucius Institutes and educational exchanges—were generally viewed in a positive light by respondents from Central Asia and the Western Balkans. These stakeholders appreciated China's efforts to promote mutual understanding and people-to-people ties, resonating with findings that cultural diplomacy plays a critical role in shaping perceptions of the BRI, especially in Central and Eastern Europe [12,13].

However, in parts of Europe, participants criticized these efforts as superficial or overly scripted, lacking genuine cultural dialogue or deeper integration. This aligns with studies indicating that Confucius Institutes have sometimes been perceived as instruments of state influence rather than cultural bridges [14].

3.4 Theme 4: Strategic Adaptation and Image Management

Many respondents observed that China has adjusted its BRI narrative over time, evolving from a purely infrastructure-driven agenda to one that now incorporates sustainability, digitalization, and green development. This shift has been received positively in regions with strong environmental or governance concerns, showing China's capacity for rhetorical and strategic flexibility [15].

Yet, inconsistencies in local implementation and mixed messaging were frequently flagged by interviewees. Several participants noted gaps between official BRI rhetoric and on-the-ground realities, especially where projects have faced delays or failed to meet local expectations. This supports recent research arguing that the BRI suffers from conceptual ambiguity and uneven execution across different national contexts [16].

4. Cross-Regional Differences in Perceptions

Perceptions of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) diverge significantly across global regions, influenced by distinct geopolitical relationships, developmental priorities, and media narratives. These regional variations are crucial to understanding the effectiveness—and the limitations—of China's efforts to project a positive national image through the BRI.

In Africa, views of the BRI are generally favorable. Respondents highlighted visible improvements in transportation systems, energy infrastructure, and job creation as major benefits. These tangible developments have strengthened China-Africa relations and supported China's portrayal as a development partner committed to South-South cooperation. However, not all sentiments are positive; some African stakeholders expressed apprehension about long-term debt sustainability and potential environmental degradation associated with large-scale Chinese-funded projects [17,18].

In contrast, Southeast Asia presents a more mixed reception. Countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam have benefited economically from infrastructure investments and enhanced trade connectivity. Nonetheless, political wariness persists. Interviewees frequently expressed concerns over sovereignty, territorial integrity, and increasing Chinese influence in domestic affairs. These anxieties reflect broader regional skepticism about China's long-term intentions and strategic ambitions in Asia [19,20].

In Europe, the dominant perception of the BRI is one of skepticism. Critics often point to a lack of transparency, strategic ambiguity, and unequal access to Chinese markets as evidence of an imbalanced relationship. There is also concern about potential geopolitical manipulation and growing economic dependence on China. These critiques have led to the formulation of alternative Western initiatives such as the European Union's "Global Gateway" project, aimed at counterbalancing China's influence in the Global South and within Europe itself [21,18].

Meanwhile, in the Middle East, perceptions are generally pragmatic and economically driven. Gulf states such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have welcomed Chinese investment, particularly in energy infrastructure, logistics, and digital technology. These nations often view China as a strategic partner capable of advancing their national development visions. Nevertheless, concerns remain over the potential for financial over-reliance and limited political reciprocity [22,23].

5. Discussion

The study's findings indicate a fundamental disconnect between China's intended self-image under the BRI—as a responsible global leader offering win-win cooperation—and the diverse perceptions held by international stakeholders. While many countries welcome the economic gains from infrastructure and investment, deeper concerns persist about political motives, transparency, and long-term dependencies. In several Western narratives, the BRI is equated with debt-trap diplomacy and authoritarian statecraft, complicating China's efforts to build a universally positive image [18,24]. China's cultural diplomacy strategies, such as the establishment of Confucius Institutes and academic exchanges, have made notable inroads in Asia and Africa. However, in Europe and other liberal democracies, these institutions are often met with suspicion and seen as vehicles of ideological influence rather than genuine intercultural engagement. This weakens their soft power potential and limits their contribution to China's international image [25]. Nevertheless, China has demonstrated adaptability by evolving its BRI narrative to include green development, digital connectivity, and public health cooperation—particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. While these shifts signal strategic flexibility, their impact remains limited due to persistent gaps between rhetorical commitments and on-the-ground implementation [26].

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the BRI serves as both a vehicle for development cooperation and a strategic communication platform through which China seeks to shape its global image. However, the success of this endeavor has been uneven across different regions. While African and Southeast Asian countries generally acknowledge the

developmental benefits of the initiative, European nations remain wary of its political implications. The Middle East, for its part, adopts a largely pragmatic stance rooted in economic utility.

To enhance the effectiveness of the BRI in building a more favorable and consistent national image, several measures are recommended. First, China should increase transparency in project financing, governance mechanisms, and environmental impact assessments to address concerns around accountability. Second, reciprocal cultural exchanges that go beyond government-sponsored institutions should be promoted to foster genuine intercultural understanding. Third, engaging local communities in project planning and decision-making will help build trust and ensure that development meets local needs. Finally, China must carefully calibrate its political messaging to avoid the perception of unilateralism or strategic dominance, particularly in politically sensitive or historically colonized regions. Ultimately, the success of the BRI as a tool for global image-building depends not only on the scale of infrastructure projects but also on China's ability to listen, adapt, and engage with a diverse and often skeptical international community.

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