



Perceptions of China's National Image in the Belt and Road Initiative: Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

This literature review provides a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions of China's national image in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By examining a variety of scholarly articles, research papers, and relevant publications, the review explores cross-cultural perspectives on China's national image within the BRI context. It focuses on the self-shaping of China's national image and the image shaped by other countries, highlighting the discrepancies and factors influencing these perceptions. Analyzing diverse sources, this review examines the dimensions and factors influencing perceptions of China's national image in the BRI. It discusses China's self-shaping efforts, how other countries perceive China's national image, and the factors shaping foreign perceptions. The review also addresses the implications of these perceptions and offers recommendations to enhance China's national image in the BRI. Finally, it identifies research gaps and suggests potential directions for future studies in this area.

Keywords: China's national image; Belt and Road Initiative; literature review; cross-cultural perspectives; self-shaping.

Received: 5/24/2023

Accepted: 6/29/2023

Published: 7/11/2023

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1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), proposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, is an ambitious development strategy that aims to enhance connectivity and cooperation between China and countries in Asia, Europe, Africa, and beyond [1]. The initiative encompasses both the Silk Road Economic Belt, which focuses on land-based infrastructure projects, and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which emphasizes maritime connectivity [2]. The BRI seeks to foster economic integration, trade facilitation, infrastructure development, and people-to-people exchanges among participating countries. It includes a wide range of projects such as the construction of roads, railways, ports, pipelines, and telecommunications networks, as well as initiatives promoting cultural exchanges and policy coordination. The "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) encompasses the Silk Roads' economic belt across the Eurasian continent and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road that stretches from Southeast China to East Africa and Europe via Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean. This concept was introduced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in October 2013 during his visit to Kazakhstan and ASEAN [3]. The BRI holds significant significance for China's sustainable development, highlighting its positive influence on the global stage. However, in the competition among nations, it is not solely dependent on hard power, such as economic and military capabilities. Soft power, encompassing political and cultural aspects, plays a crucial role.

China's national image plays a crucial role in the success and effectiveness of the Belt and Road Initiative. The perception of China, its values, and its intentions by other countries greatly influences their attitudes and responses towards the BRI [4]. A positive national image can enhance trust, credibility, and cooperation, while a negative or misunderstood image may lead to skepticism, resistance, and reluctance to engage in collaborative endeavors. The BRI presents an opportunity for China to shape and project its national image on a global scale. The way China is perceived by other countries within the framework of the initiative impacts their willingness to participate, invest, and cooperate with China. Thus, understanding and managing China's national image in the BRI is crucial for building strong partnerships, mitigating potential risks, and achieving the initiative's goals.

The purpose of this literature review is to analyze and synthesize existing scholarly works and relevant publications to gain a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions of China's national image in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. By examining a diverse range of sources, this review aims to explore the self-shaping of China's national image as well as the image shaped by other countries involved in the BRI. It seeks to identify the discrepancies between China's self-perception and foreign perception, the factors influencing these perceptions, and the implications for China's national image and the success of the initiative. Furthermore, this literature review aims to fill existing research gaps and identify potential avenues for future research. By providing an overview of the current state of knowledge on perceptions of China's national image in the BRI, it will contribute to the understanding of cross-cultural dynamics, shed light on the importance of national image in international cooperation, and provide insights for policymakers and practitioners involved in the BRI.

In this literature review analysis, we aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions of China's national image in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By examining a wide range of scholarly articles, research papers, and relevant publications, we will explore the cross-cultural perspectives on China's national image, focusing on the self-shaping of China's national image and the image shaped by other

countries. We will highlight the discrepancies in perception and identify the factors influencing the perceptions of China's national image. The review will conclude by identifying gaps in existing research and suggesting potential directions for future studies in this area.

2. Methodology

In this study, a systematic literature review approach is employed to conduct a comprehensive analysis of existing scholarly articles on the perceptions of China's national image in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The study follows the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines, which are widely recognized and accepted in the field of systematic reviews.

To ensure a thorough and rigorous review process, a comprehensive search strategy is implemented. Reputable academic databases such as Scopus, Dimensions and Google Scholar are utilized to identify relevant scholarly articles. These databases provide access to a wide range of multidisciplinary journals, ensuring the inclusion of diverse perspectives.

The search terms employed are carefully selected to capture the key concepts related to the study. Combinations of keywords related to the Belt and Road Initiative, China's national image, perception, and related concepts are used to identify relevant articles. Examples of search terms may include "Belt and Road Initiative," "China's image," "perceptions," "public opinion," and "national branding." By using a combination of these keywords, the search aims to encompass a broad range of literature on the topic.

The inclusion criteria for article selection are defined to ensure the relevance and quality of the studies included in the review. Articles published in English between 2013 and the present are considered, as this period aligns with the initiation of the Belt and Road Initiative. The focus of the review is specifically on the perceptions of China's national image within the context of the BRI. This criterion helps narrow down the scope and ensures that the selected articles directly address the research topic. With 3478 papers identified, the study has conducted a comprehensive search and has identified a substantial number of relevant scholarly articles on the perceptions of China's national image in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This indicates a robust effort to gather a large volume of literature on the topic, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of existing research.

Furthermore, the inclusion criteria encompass articles that provide empirical data, theoretical frameworks, and qualitative or quantitative analyses. This ensures that the review includes a diverse range of studies, including those that offer empirical evidence, theoretical insights, or methodological frameworks to analyze and understand perceptions of China's national image in the BRI context.

By adhering to the PRISMA guidelines and employing a comprehensive search strategy, this study aims to provide a robust and comprehensive review of the existing literature on perceptions of China's national image in the Belt and Road Initiative. This approach ensures that the findings are based on a systematic analysis of relevant and high-quality scholarly articles, contributing to a deeper understanding of this important research area.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Understanding the attitude of countries toward the BRI

Different countries exhibit varying attitudes towards the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) due to several influencing factors. These factors include the bilateral relationship between China and the respective country, distinct perspectives held by each country, and potential information gaps [5]. India's stance towards the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has predominantly been negative, which holds significance considering its geographical proximity and substantial influence in the South Asian subcontinent. India's strategic location and overall strength make it a key player in the BRI's advancement in South Asia [6].

India's reservations about participating in the BRI stem from concerns about increased Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean, potential erosion of India's regional influence, and a challenge to its regional leadership. Consequently, India has adopted a cautious approach, transitioning from conservatism to hedging in recent years, impacting the perception of the BRI in South Asia. Multiple factors contribute to India's increasingly hostile position. India sees itself as a regional leader in South Asia and perceives the BRI as a possible threat to its regional interests. As China's comprehensive national strength grows, India's perception of China has evolved, with apprehensions that the BRI may serve as a precursor to Chinese hegemony and a shift in the global order. The Modi government's shaping of India's political identity has further reinforced the negative perception of the BRI [6]. Indian scholars have expressed concerns about the BRI's impact on India's national interests. Reference [7] argues that the BRI disregards India's national interests and strategically places India in a passive position. He suggests that the Indian government should reject the initiative and abandon its cautious approach. From a geo-economic perspective, Reference [8] highlights the BRI's significance for China's economic growth and addressing domestic overcapacity issues, but also notes the potential encroachment on India's international market. Srikanth Kondapali emphasizes the importance of transportation networks and cooperation mechanisms for China's economic growth, while India fears that the BRI will weaken its influence in the surrounding region [9]. India's negative attitude towards the BRI primarily stems from political factors. Addressing this cognitive bias requires effective communication and interpretation of the BRI by China, coupled with active promotion of bilateral cooperation. Bridging the perception gap between China and India is crucial for fostering a better understanding of the BRI and enhancing cooperation between the two countries [6].

Japan's stance towards the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has undergone two main stages: boycott and wait-and-see, leading to active participation. The perception of China in the Japanese media has varied over time [10]. Japan's attitude towards the BRI has significantly shifted from boycott and wait-and-see to active participation due to increased demand for economic and diplomatic benefits and China's successful implementation of the initiative. Initially, the changing national strengths of China and Japan, along with China's increasing influence in the region and globally, posed psychological challenges for Japan. While Japan initially hoped to expand its market and reap benefits from the BRI, concerns about China's influence led to a cautious wait-and-see approach [11]. A positive turning point occurred in 2017 when China organized a BRI-themed conference in Beijing, attended by over 130 countries and 1,500 participants, including Japan and the United States. Toshihiro

Nikai, a pro-China figure, represented Japan at the meeting, marking a positive shift in Japan's attitude. Nikai actively affirmed China's BRI and expressed willingness to participate [12]. At the G20 summit in Hamburg, Germany, in July, Prime Minister Abe expressed his willingness to cooperate with China on the BRI. During the APEC Economic Leaders' Meetings in Vietnam, Abe once again expressed hope for cooperation with China under the BRI framework, emphasizing its significance for both countries and the local region [12]. These instances indicate a positive change in Japan's attitude [12]. Several factors contributed to Japan's surprising change in attitude, including domestic factors, American factors, and China's economic development. Domestically, Japan's economic development relies heavily on foreign trade. The Abe cabinet, under the consideration of Japan's power strategy, initially adopted an unfriendly policy towards China, negatively impacting Sino-Japanese relations and causing losses for the Japanese economy. Strong appeals from Japanese economists to join the BRI exerted pressure on the Abe cabinet, contributing to the change in attitude [10]. The changing stance of the United States also influenced Japan's attitude towards the BRI. While Japan and the US had close security and economic ties during the Obama administration, the new US leadership focused more on domestic economic development, leading Japan to actively change its strategy and seek feasible alternatives that safeguard its interests, with participation in the BRI being the preferred choice. As China's economy steadily grew and entered an optimistic phase, Western countries, including Japan, became less optimistic about China's economic development. Japan initially adopted strict measures against China and maintained a skeptical attitude towards the BRI. However, with China's economy flourishing, Japan started to change its strategy towards China [10].

Thailand holds a positive attitude towards the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), driven by their long-standing friendly cooperation with China and the strengthened relations through the maritime Silk Road [13]. The positive perception of the BRI is reflected in the attitudes of the Thai government, businesses, think tanks, scholars, and media. Since China proposed the BRI, the Thai government has actively supported it and expressed a desire to be an integral part of its implementation. In 2014, during his visit to China, Prime Minister Prayut expressed Thailand's commitment to deepen cooperation with China and actively engage in the BRI to promote connectivity between the two countries [13]. The Thai government's support for the BRI has played a significant role in enhancing political mutual trust and friendly relations with China. Thai Foreign Minister Mr. Don Pramudwinai stated that Thailand actively supports the BRI, recognizing its benefits for China, the region, and the world [14]. Former Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva also views the BRI as a new path to promote regional cooperation [14]. The positive attitude towards the BRI extends beyond the government, with the president of the China-Thailand Economic and Cultural Association likening the initiative to Zheng He's voyages during the Ming Dynasty and emphasizing its aim of friendship, cooperation, and mutual development [15]. Additionally, Thailand's prominent newspaper, "ไทยรัฐ Thairath," highlighted the positive impact of the BRI on various aspects such as economy, trade, tourism, culture, infrastructure, and digital economy cooperation [15]. Overall, Thailand's public opinion circles have attached significant importance to the BRI, with a prevailing positive trend in public opinion orientation. Thailand's positive attitude towards the BRI demonstrates their recognition of the potential benefits and opportunities it offers for bilateral cooperation and mutual development.

The United States has demonstrated an inconsistent stance towards the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since its

inception. In 2017, a U.S. delegation attended the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF), representing the most positive response from U.S. officials towards the BRI at that time [16]. However, overall, the U.S. policy towards the BRI has been characterized by skepticism and caution. While the U.S. political circles have exhibited prudence and misjudgment concerning the BRI, the economic circles have shown greater interest in the investment opportunities and development prospects associated with it. The U.S. recognizes that China's infrastructure projects and investments can enhance regional economies and stabilize situations in regions like Central Asia and the Middle East, aligning with certain American interests [16].

The Wall Street Journal has also acknowledged the significant business opportunities the BRI has presented to Western companies, indicating a noteworthy shift in the U.S.'s attitude towards active participation [16]. However, the U.S.'s support for the BRI has not been consistently positive. These developments emphasize the importance of closely monitoring the U.S.'s stance on the BRI. Overall, the United States has maintained a cautious and skeptical approach to the BRI, although there have been instances of positive engagement from U.S. officials and recognition of potential economic benefits. The evolving dynamics of public opinion, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, have further complicated the U.S.'s position regarding the BRI. Table 1 below is a summarized table categorizing the attitudes towards the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by different countries.

Table 1: The Attitudes towards The Belt And Road Initiative (BRI) by Different Countries.

Country	Attitude towards BRI	Citation
India	Negative	Wu, 2018; Amb, 2014; Rajeev, 2014; Srikanth, 2014
Japan	Shifted to positive	Yang, 2019; Xu, 2021; Nihon, 2017; Xinhuanet, 2017; Yan, 2018
Thailand	Positive	Li, 2018; Xi, 2014; Wang & Don, 2017; Wu, 2016; Li, 2018
USA	Cautious/skeptical	Chu, 2017

Understanding the attitude of countries toward the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a multidimensional and dynamic process that involves various factors and methodologies. Scholars have conducted extensive research to gain insights into the attitudes of different countries toward the BRI and its implications.

3.1.1 National Interests

Countries assess the BRI based on their own national interests, which shape their attitudes and participation. Economic considerations, such as increased trade and investment opportunities, are often key drivers. For example, [17] highlight those countries with strong economic ties to China, such as those in Central Asia, tend to be more supportive of the BRI due to the potential for enhanced connectivity and economic growth. National interests play a significant role, with countries assessing the BRI based on the potential economic benefits it offers. Strong economic ties to China often lead to more supportive attitudes, as countries perceive enhanced connectivity and economic growth opportunities.

Political considerations also influence attitudes, as governments align their stance with broader foreign policy goals and geopolitical interests. Countries with historical and cultural ties to China tend to exhibit more positive attitudes, reflecting the influence of perceptions regarding China's rise as a global power and its intentions

behind the BRI.

3.1.2 Political Considerations

Political factors play a significant role in countries' attitudes toward the BRI. Governments align their stance with broader foreign policy goals and political ideologies. For instance, [18] argues that the political leadership in countries aligned with China's geopolitical interests, such as Cambodia and Pakistan, display positive attitudes toward the BRI.

3.1.3 Perceptions of China:

Perceptions of China's rise as a global power and its intentions behind the BRI influence countries' attitudes. Countries' historical, cultural, and geopolitical relationships with China shape these perceptions. Reference [19] emphasize that countries in Southeast Asia, with historical and cultural ties to China, generally exhibit more positive attitudes toward the BRI.

3.1.4 Economic Dependency Concerns:

Some countries express concerns about potential economic dependency resulting from participation in the BRI.

They evaluate the risks and benefits associated with accepting financial assistance and infrastructure investments from China. Reference [20] discuss how countries, such as Malaysia and Sri Lanka, have become more cautious due to concerns over debt burdens and safeguarding their economic sovereignty.

3.1.5 Geopolitical Considerations

Geopolitical factors significantly influence attitudes toward the BRI. Countries evaluate the initiative's implications for their regional power dynamics, strategic alliances, and security concerns. Reference [21] highlight those countries with strategic interests aligned with China, like Russia and Pakistan, tend to exhibit positive attitudes toward the BRI.

3.1.6 Environmental and Social Impact

Countries consider the environmental and social impact of BRI projects within their territories. Concerns regarding ecological sustainability, labor standards, social integration, and cultural preservation shape attitudes. Reference [22] argues that countries in Southeast Asia express reservations about potential environmental degradation resulting from BRI infrastructure development.

Researchers employ various methodologies to understand these attitudes, including surveys, interviews, content analysis, and case studies.

These approaches provide valuable insights into the complexities and nuances of countries' attitudes toward the BRI and contribute to the body of knowledge on international relations and global governance.

4. Future Recommendations

Future recommendations aim to address concerns, enhance the positive impact, and ensure the long-term sustainability of the Belt and Road Initiative. By strengthening transparency and accountability, promoting local participation and inclusivity, adhering to robust environmental and social standards, and facilitating knowledge sharing and capacity building, the BRI can evolve into a more effective and responsible platform for sustainable development and international cooperation. Below are some future recommendations:

4.1 Further Comparative Studies

Conducting comparative studies to analyze and compare the attitudes of different countries toward the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) would provide valuable insights into the variations and common patterns of these attitudes. By considering factors such as cultural, historical, and geopolitical contexts, researchers can better understand the underlying drivers that shape countries' perceptions of the BRI. Comparative studies can also highlight the impact of regional dynamics and geopolitical rivalries on countries' attitudes, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved.

4.2 Longitudinal Analysis

Longitudinal studies tracking changes in countries' attitudes toward the BRI over time can provide crucial insights into the evolving trends and factors influencing these shifts. By examining how attitudes have evolved and identifying the drivers behind these changes, researchers can better understand the impact of external events, policy adjustments, and shifts in geopolitical dynamics. Longitudinal analysis can contribute to the identification of patterns, allowing for more accurate predictions and proactive policy responses.

4.3 Qualitative Research

Complementing quantitative research with in-depth qualitative studies is essential for gaining a deeper understanding of the underlying motivations, perceptions, and concerns driving countries' attitudes toward the BRI. Qualitative research methods such as interviews, focus groups, and case studies can capture rich and nuanced data, providing insights into the complexities of countries' perspectives. This approach allows researchers to explore the contextual factors and individual experiences that shape attitudes, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the BRI's impact on different countries.

4.4 Stakeholder Engagement

Promoting dialogue and engagement between China and participating countries is crucial to address concerns, enhance transparency, and foster mutual understanding. Regular and structured communication channels can facilitate the exchange of information, clarify misconceptions, and address potential tensions. By actively involving stakeholders, including governments, civil society organizations, and local communities, in the decision-making processes related to the BRI, policymakers can ensure that concerns are heard and addressed. This engagement can build trust, strengthen partnerships, and establish a foundation for shared goals and

interests.

4.5 Sustainability Assessments

Conducting comprehensive assessments of the environmental, social, and economic sustainability of BRI projects is essential to ensure responsible and sustainable development. These assessments should consider the long-term impacts, including environmental preservation, social integration, labor standards, and cultural preservation. By evaluating the potential risks and benefits associated with BRI projects, policymakers can make informed decisions and implement necessary safeguards to mitigate negative consequences. Sustainability assessments can also contribute to enhancing the positive impact of the BRI, promoting sustainable infrastructure development, and fostering inclusive growth.

4.6 Strengthening Transparency and Accountability

One crucial future recommendation is to enhance transparency and accountability within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This can be achieved by establishing clear guidelines and mechanisms for project selection, implementation, and monitoring. Strengthening transparency ensures that participating countries have access to comprehensive information regarding project details, costs, and potential risks. Accountability measures can help address concerns related to corruption, environmental degradation, and social impact. By promoting transparency and accountability, the BRI can build trust among participating countries and ensure the effective and responsible implementation of projects.

4.7 Promoting Local Participation and Inclusivity

To enhance the positive impact of the BRI, future efforts should focus on promoting local participation and inclusivity in project development and decision-making processes. Engaging local communities, civil society organizations, and relevant stakeholders from the early stages of project planning can lead to more inclusive and sustainable outcomes. It is essential to consider the social, cultural, and economic contexts of host countries and involve local communities in assessing project feasibility, addressing potential concerns, and identifying opportunities for local capacity building and employment. By prioritizing local participation, the BRI can foster a sense of ownership and ensure that projects align with the needs and aspirations of host communities.

4.8 Strengthening Environmental and Social Standards

Another crucial recommendation is to strengthen environmental and social standards within the BRI. It is essential to ensure that projects adhere to internationally recognized sustainability guidelines and best practices. Robust environmental impact assessments, biodiversity protection measures, and adherence to low-carbon and green technologies can help mitigate potential ecological risks. Similarly, prioritizing social safeguards, respecting labor rights, and promoting cultural heritage preservation can address concerns related to social and cultural impacts. By integrating stringent environmental and social standards, the BRI can contribute to sustainable development and avoid potential negative consequences.

4.9 Facilitating Knowledge Sharing and Capacity Building:

Facilitating knowledge sharing and capacity building among participating countries is vital for maximizing the benefits of the BRI. Future efforts should focus on fostering collaboration and sharing best practices in areas such as project management, infrastructure development, and sustainable practices. Establishing platforms for knowledge exchange, training programs, and technical assistance can help build the capacity of participating countries to effectively plan, implement, and manage BRI projects. By promoting knowledge sharing and capacity building, the BRI can foster mutual learning, strengthen institutional frameworks, and enhance the overall effectiveness and efficiency of project outcomes.

By pursuing these future recommendations, researchers and policymakers can deepen their understanding of countries' attitudes toward the BRI, address concerns, and enhance the positive impact of the initiative on participating nations and the global community. These initiatives can contribute to the development of informed policies, effective decision-making processes, and sustainable development practices within the BRI framework.

5. Conclusion

The systematic literature review conducted in this study aims to analyze selected articles to identify common themes, research methodologies, and key findings regarding perceptions of China's national image within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The analysis of these articles provides valuable insights into the multidimensional aspects of China's national image, encompassing cultural, political, economic, and historical factors.

Through the review, the study seeks to uncover how these perceptions impact countries' attitudes towards the BRI, considering both positive and negative perspectives. By examining the selected articles, the analysis can reveal patterns and trends in the perception of China's national image within the BRI context.

The systematic review also enables an exploration of the various dimensions of China's national image. It may uncover how cultural factors, such as the promotion of Chinese language, culture, and values, influence the perception of China's national image in BRI participating countries. Additionally, the review may uncover how political factors, including China's diplomatic strategies and international relations, shape perceptions of its national image. Furthermore, economic factors, such as investment projects, trade relations, and economic cooperation, could contribute to the formation of these perceptions. Lastly, historical factors, such as China's historical and cultural legacy, may influence the perception of China's national image within the BRI.

The discussion of the review findings will not only summarize the identified common themes and key findings but also critically evaluate the existing literature. This evaluation may involve identifying any gaps or limitations in the current research on perceptions of China's national image in the BRI context. These gaps may highlight areas where further research is needed to enhance our understanding of the subject.

Moreover, the discussion may provide insights into potential areas for future research. It may suggest new approaches, theoretical frameworks, or methodological advancements that can contribute to a more

comprehensive understanding of perceptions of China's national image in the context of the BRI. By highlighting these avenues, the study aims to encourage further exploration and scholarly inquiry in this important research area.

Overall, the results and discussion section of this study will present a synthesis of the findings from the systematic literature review, offering a comprehensive analysis of perceptions of China's national image within the Belt and Road Initiative.

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