Research Trend of ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ in English academic articles

Nancy, L.S. LEUNG
(Visiting researcher, Asian Cultures Research Institute, TOYO University)

Background of ‘Belt and Road Initiative’

The idea of ‘the Silk Road Economic Belt’ is first introduced by Chinese president Xi Jinping in September 2013, during his visit in Kazakhstan. In October 2013, Xi announces the idea of ‘the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road’ during his visit in Indonesia. In February 2014 the ideas of ‘the Silk Road Economic Belt’ and ‘the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road’ are officially named as ‘One Belt One Road’ and ‘One Belt One Road Initiative’. However, in the middle of 2017, the official names change to ‘the Belt and Road’ and ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ respectively.

Research Trend of ‘Belt and Road Initiative’

1. Research Method

Academic articles are collected by using search engines in academic journals database providers such as JSTOR, SAGE Journals, ProQuest, Elsevier, Taylor & Francis Groups. Due to time limitation, this study only includes those academic articles which are published by July 2017 and are accessible through the library of TOYO University (whole article can be access). However, articles published in academic journals which are printed in single column and less than 3 pages are not included. Besides, introductory essay, working papers are not included in this study.

2. Number of Academic articles and Publication period

This study has collected 122 ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ related academic articles which are published by July 2017 and 114 articles are accessible through the library of TOYO University. Since the idea of ‘the Silk Road Economic Belt’ is first introduced in September 2013 and most of the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ projects starts after the establishment of AIIB (December 2015), academic articles analysing or discussing ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ are very limited in 2013 (1 article) and 2014 (1 article is published between 2014 and 2015), but increase sharply from 2015. In 2016, the number of academic articles is a double to 2015. By July 2017, there are 40 academic articles related to ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ (Figure 1). The sharp increase implies that ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ attracts certain attention in English academia.

3. Academic Discipline

Base on the journal’s discipline and article’s content, this study has classified the collected 114 articles into 8 academic disciplines. They are Agricultural Sciences, Area Studies, Earth Sciences, Economics, Geography, Law, Sociology and Political Sciences. Among 114 articles, the largest share
is Political Sciences (41%), following by Economics (32%) and Area Studies (10%) (Figure 2). ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ is seen as an economic policy towards China, to solve internal economic issues such as excess production capacity and to develop the western part of China. At the same time, ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ is also seen as a foreign police, for example, to increase China’s leadership in global governance and its political influence towards developing countries.

Viewing from a more detailed sub-discipline level, 18 sub-disciplines are classified. They are Agricultural Economics, Asian Studies, Cultural Studies, Development Economics, Economic Geography, Energy Economics, Environmental Science, Financial Economics, Geopolitics, International Economics, International Law, International Relations, Policy Studies, Political Economy, Resource Economics, Social Geography, Transport Economics and Transportation Engineering (Figure 3). Within the 18 sub-discipline, International Relations has the largest share (25 articles, 22%), following by Policy Studies (17 articles, 15%) and Asian Studies (11 articles, 10%). Since ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ aims to increase cooperation in infrastructure, security and economic development between China and participating countries, it is not surprise to find most of the articles focus on the relations between China and partner counties, China and its neighboring countries, China and United States (US) or China and European Union (EU).

4. Wording

The official name ‘the Belt and Road’ or preferred translation ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ are announced in 2017. Before that, ‘One Belt One Road’ or ‘One Belt One Road Initiative’ are used. ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ is representing 2 projects, ‘the Silk Road Economic Belt’ (land project) and ‘the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road’ (maritime project), therefore, ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ and ‘21st Century Maritime Silk Road’ are commonly used to represent the initiative (Figure 4). Although 2 projects are commonly mentioned together, it is rare to name the initiative as ‘Silk Road Economic Belt & 21st Century Maritime Silk Road’. Besides that, some articles focus on land route only mentioned ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ and articles focus on maritime route only mentioned ‘21st Century Maritime Silk Road’. Until 2016, ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ is being used more frequently than ‘One Belt One Road’. Between 2015 and 2016, ‘New Silk Road’ is commonly used to represent the initiative apart from ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ and ‘One Belt One Road’ (Figure 4).

The wording represent ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ is rich in variations. Moreover, different wordings are used to represent ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ in an article, e.g. ‘One Belt One Road’, ‘One Belt One Road Initiative’ and OBOR are commonly used together. Among the past and present official names representing the initiative, ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ (18%), ‘21st Century Maritime Silk Road’ (11%) and ‘One Belt One Road’ (10%) are frequently used (Figure 5). However, the way it is presented in the articles is depended to the authors. For example, adding the word ‘and’, comma (,) or hyphen (-) between ‘One Belt One Road’ such as ‘One Belt and One Road’, ‘One Belt, One Road’, ‘One-Belt-One-Road’, ‘One Belt-One-Road’, are commonly found. Since the idea of ‘Belt and Road
Initiative’ is generated from the ancient Silk Road, ‘Silk Road’, ‘New Silk Road’, ‘Modern Silk Road’, ‘New Silk Route’, ‘New Maritime Silk Road’, ‘Maritime Silk Route’, ‘Two Silk Roads’ and ‘Chinese Silk Road’ are commonly used to represent the initiative too. Besides, short forms, such as ‘One Belt One Road’ as ‘OBOR’, ‘Belt and Road’ as ‘B&R’, ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ as ‘SREB’, ‘21st Century Maritime Silk Road’ as ‘21st CMSR’ or ‘MSR’, ‘New Silk Road’ as ‘NSR’ and ‘Belt Road Initiative’ as ‘BRI’ are also commonly used. Furthermore, others expressions such as Chinese pronunciation ‘yidai yilu’ (pinyin), an inversed expression ‘One Road, One Belt’, ‘Eurasian Silk Roads Initiative’, are also found to represent ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ in some articles. Apart from ‘Belt and Road’, the word ‘Initiative’ is commonly replaced by similar wordings such as ‘strategy’, ‘project’, ‘vision’, ‘concept’, ‘program’, ‘policy’, ‘framework’, ‘agenda’, ‘plan’ and ‘proposal’.

5. Summary and future directions

Among 114 academic articles related to ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, 25 articles (22%) are in the discipline of International Relations. Within the 25 articles, 7 articles are discussing the power relation between China and US. Although geographically ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ has not much relation towards US, ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ has both direct and indirect economic and political influences to US. First, most of the articles discuss ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ will empower China and affect the position of US as the world leader. Second, ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ will affect U.S.’s political and economic interests in Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Middle East and EU. Third, ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ will affect the relations between US and ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ participating countries. Other articles in International Relations discipline examine the relation between China and other counties, such as South Korea, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, EU, etc, in terms of trade, development and political influence. However, not all 25 articles in International Relations discuss the relationship between China and other countries under ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, 7 articles mention ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ once or twice only. This implies that in the field of International Relations, ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ is seen as an influencing policy, but since the outcomes of ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ are still limited for analyze, it is difficult to examine the influence of ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ at the moment.

Apart from International Relations, in the discipline of Asian Studies, Policy Studies and Political Economy, how ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ will influence China’s position in world and trade relations between China and other countries are also discussed. In the discipline of Economics, most articles explore how ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ is beneficial to China and participating countries and how it can help to develop less developed regions/areas. In sum, most of the articles evaluate the concepts or background of ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, both quantitative and qualitative studies are limited. Furthermore, most discussions are remained in assumption or prediction level. This is because the practice of ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ started in late 2015, most of the infrastructure projects, trade projects are still under constructions or discussion.
In the coming years, when more ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ related projects are completed, it is expected that the number of quantitative and qualitative studies related to ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ will increase. Considering cooperation is one of the main concepts in ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, mainstream research is expected to remain in the discipline of International relations. At the same time, studies from economics perspective will increase because infrastructure development is directly related to economy.

**Figure 1 Number of Academic articles by publication period**

![Number of Academic articles by publication period](image)

**Figure 2 Disciplines of the 114 academic articles**

![Disciplines of the 114 academic articles](image)
Figure 3 Sub-discipline of the 114 academic articles
Figure 4 Words representing ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ in time period

- others
- Yidai-Yilu
- Belt and Road
- One Road One Belt
- One Belt One Road
- New Silk Road
- Silk Road Economic Belt & 21st Century Maritime Silk Road
- 21st Century Maritime Silk Road
- Silk Road Economic Belt
Figure 5  Wording used frequency in articles to represent 'Belt and Road Initiative'

All figures are compiled by author.