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Languages: A Prerequisite for the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract: The Belt and Road Initiative, with its profound significance, requires language as a prerequisite for the interconnections between China and countries along the road. Thus, language awareness is required and needs to be strengthened. A planning and administrative agency should be established to formulate top-level designs and specific language policies. Also, the recruitment of language specialists should be accelerated, and language skills and training should focus on business, economics, trade, and related knowledge that will enhance the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative. With its bright future, the Belt and Road Initiative gives both teaching practices new challenges and new opportunities.

Keywords: the Belt and Road Initiative, languages as a prerequisite, Chinese teaching, foreign language teaching, commercial Chinese teaching

The Belt and Road Initiative, or BRI, with its profound significance, was based on the judgment of the world situation and the pursuit of goals for peace and development. This paper discusses the essential role of language in the practice of the initiative and how to give it full play, with the aim of motivating the Chinese linguistics community to make appropriate and necessary contributions.

The Belt and Road Initiative and Its far-reaching Influence

In September 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping first advocated jointly building the “The Silk Road Economic Belt” during his official visit to Kazakhstan. A month later, in his official visit to Indonesia, President Xi proposed to build the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”. The “One Belt,

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One Road” concept was thus formed by integrating the two ideas. At its core, the Belt and Road Initiative suggests the intention of common development featuring peaceful cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning, and mutual benefit. The goal is to achieve shared growth through discussion and collaboration, encourage pragmatic cooperation with countries along the road to create a community of shared interests, of shared responsibility and of a shared future on the basis of mutual trust, economic integration and cultural inclusiveness.

To that end, President Xi Jinping pointed out that the countries along the road should make joint efforts to achieve a five-pronged approach, namely the policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and strengthened people-to-people ties (Zhang, 2014).

The ultimate purpose of China’s Belt and Road Initiative is to realize peace and development worldwide. It is a common truth that China has always been an advocate of peace. As far back as the Western Han Dynasty, some 2,000 years ago, Zhang Qian was assigned to Central Asia as a messenger of friendship. Later in the Tang Dynasty, the esteemed Buddhist monk Xuanzang was sent to India for scriptures, and Jianzhen, another Buddhist master, went to Japan for preaching. During the Ming Dynasty, Zheng He made seven voyages to countries in West Asia and Africa. China was a well-developed power in the world during these ages. Chinese messengers always brought Chinese goods, culture and the goodwill of friendship, and reaped various local commodities, culture and friendship. These visits were made to build friendship and seek opportunities for common growth.

Zhang Qian, Xuanzang, Jianzhen and Zheng He were true messengers of friendship, and by implementing the BRI concept we are proudly carrying forward the cause of our ancestors.

The Belt and Road Initiative is undoubtedly farsighted and of far-reaching significance. Throughout human history, countries interact through war, peace, and trade during the development course of the world. Wars break out because the power of nations changes with sharp, irreconcilable contradictions. Wars are generally followed by periods of peaceful international order and new rounds of economic development. However, intentionally or not, emerging powers tend to challenge the existing world hegemonism, trying to break the old interest sharing systems to build a new one. This in turn triggers new international contradictions and sometimes even wars. We have endured devastating consequences of the two world wars and countless regional wars and our world cannot withstand another world war. We are living in an information age of big data, cloud computing, networking, globalization and the Internet of Everything, where humans enjoy rapid development of science and technology and are preparing themselves for explorations into outer space. In such an era, countries will fight in a fundamentally different way. There will be no cold weapons or gunpowder assisted attacks. Instead, nuclear weapons or more devastating space and information weapons will be used such as electromagnetic pulse weapons and laser weapons based on a “supercontinuum source”. In case of an insane world war today, there would be no winners or losers because we would all be sent to our doom. Under the balance of terror in the new era,

war is an outdated means of rebalancing, which does not function anymore. It is predictable that major military powers, such as the United States, Russia and China, will not arbitrarily provoke a nuclear war today, and it is tantamount to bailing water against the tide for non-nuclear countries to challenge their nuclear equipped counterparts. For that reason, the world will be evolving in an environment of global peace and development, which is the shared wish of all.

Moreover, globalization is a strong, irreversible trend in the age of information. It has gradually expanded from economic fields to all aspects of human life. It is impossible for any one country to rescue a global financial crisis, control global environmental pollution and ecological calamities, suppress the outbreak and spread of infectious diseases, combat terrorist activities, respond to climate change worldwide, and form global climate governance etc. These require the cooperation of all the countries in the world. Globalization has also played a role in curbing the potential outbreak of world wars. For any country, especially a developing country, the best and most practicable path for development is to boost the economy and to alleviate poverty via cooperation with other countries. It is for this reason that the Chinese government has proposed the BRI concept based on its understanding of world development. Therefore, it has clarified the goal of common development at the very first time, which features peaceful cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning, and mutual benefit, and sticks to the principle of achieving shared growth through extensive consultation, joined contributions, and shared benefits in order to bring new business opportunities and economic benefits to the countries along the road.

However, countries urgently in need of economic growth should be supported by the following two factors: numerous international consumer markets and a bilateral system where transactions and settlements in trade are done in bilateral currencies. In fact, the Belt and Road Initiative is of great significance because it tries to break the restrictions of the existing settlement system, which is exclusively dominated by US dollars, by promoting regional economies through bilateral cooperation and creating a larger international consumer market. According to the investigation of some large overseas enterprises by Chinese authorities, in view of the turbulence of global stock markets, foreign exchange markets and bulk commodity markets, a growing number of countries and enterprises hope to escape the settlement system based solely on the US dollar. They are willing to settle in bilateral currencies to ensure their economic interests. That is why the BRI concept garnered immediate embraces from many countries in Asia, Europe and Africa.

This initiative, put forward by China, moves the “cheese” of the United States who will certainly be very upset, considering its own national interests. That is easy to presume because the power of the United States relies largely on the dominance of its dollar in the world and the trade rules based on it. We knew that the then US President Nixon cut the link between the dollar and gold on August 15, 1971 and announced the US dollar as the settlement currency in global oil trading. This actually established a universal rule of global trade and enabled the United States to be completely aware of the trade between any two countries, which thus consolidated the dollar hegemony in the international economy. It is therefore foreseeable and now clear that the United States will continue

to stand in the way of China. The issues concerning the South China Sea (and the so-called “South China Sea Arbitration”) and Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea are all related to the United States.

Nevertheless, a Sino-US war is unlikely although the United States will be a troublemaker for some time to come before both sides eventually return to cooperation.

Language Serves the Implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative

Language is an irreplaceable support in the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative. This argument was first brought up by Professor Li Yuming (2015, September, 25), who published the paper “*The Belt and Road*” Needs Language as Pavements. I agree with Professor Li. Many scholars published papers to support Professor Li’s point of view, because language understanding does play an irreplaceable role in realizing effective bilateral communications. It is not exaggerated to say that language is the foundation of the “Five-pronged approach”. Without language understanding, it would be difficult to communicate over policies, which further impacts the infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, and financial integration, as well as people-to-people bonds.

So, to ensure the important role of language in the Belt and Road Initiative implementation, three suggestions are offered as follows:

First, language awareness, especially for leaders at all levels should be enhanced. Linguists alone are unable to fulfill such a massive mission. It is necessary for leaders, especially top leaders, to develop and enhance language awareness. They should recognize the importance of language abilities for both individuals and the nation. They must know that the language ability of a nation is relevant to the improvement of its soft and hard power, as well as its national security. We should have a global perspective and an international vision in this regard. We must know that in the information age, a nation’s language ability is directly proportional to its ability to obtain information, to reserve, utilize and protect information resources, and to develop international space, and international competitiveness. A strong support of language skills is vital in any international dialogue, as well as the attainment and maintenance of international interests (Zhao, 2015).

The fierce international competition today involves the competition of language talents, language-oriented technologies, and even language awareness and language planning. We can see that some developed countries have already considered language as a strategic factor. The United States, for example, carried out a series of major language-related programs, such as A Call to Action for National Foreign Language Capabilities (2005), Defense Language Transformation Roadmap (2005), Language and Regional Expertise Planning (2006), and National Security Language Initiative (2006), and DoD Strategic Plan for Language Skills, Regional Expertise and Cultural Capabilities 2011-2016 (2011). This has shown how language is valued in the United States. On the contrary our national leadership and non-linguistic academic communities are not sufficiently active in promoting language awareness for the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative. This is well supported by the following facts:

Since 2013 when the BRI concept was first introduced, language has not been mentioned in important documents about the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, or in monographs by non-linguistic scholars and experts, such as *Annual Report on the Belt and Road Initiative* and *A Data-Based Explanation of the Belt and Road Initiative* published in 2016 by the Commercial Press. To date, only the linguistics community has taken action and organized six related academic conferences or forums, all in 2015, along with many published articles (Wang & Tan, 2016). We are also gratified that the Department of Western Region Development of the National Development and Reform Commission convened the Belt and Road Initiative Language Resource Symposium on December 11, 2015, in order to study the progress in building language resources in countries along the road. However, lacking language awareness remains a general problem in China. Therefore, it is necessary for the government, especially relevant leaders, to develop and enhance language awareness (Zhao & Huang, 2016).

Second, the state should take quick action to instruct relevant departments and experts to develop an overall language plan for the Belt and Road Initiative, especially a training plan for language talents, which should include how to accelerate the training of domestic talents who have a good knowledge of the languages of the countries along the road, as well as the training of local talents who have a good command of Chinese.

Third, China should set up a BRI language management institution for the language planning. It should manage, supervise and execute various tasks as defined in the plan, so that language can truly pave the way for the Belt and Road Initiative.

Cultivating Language Talents Through Better Language Education

To give full play to the role of language in the BRI implementation, it is of special importance to promote language education and make efforts to cultivate versatile language talents. Language teaching is therefore a priority task.

In terms of national or official languages, at least 50 to 60 are spoken by the more than 4 billion people in the 50 to 60 Asian, European and African countries that will benefit from the BRI (Wang & Wang, 2016). As language can create emotional bonds, the most ideal way to build a closer bilateral relationship is to communicate directly using the national or official language, providing that both sides have people who speak the language of the other side, i.e. China should have a group of skilled linguists who speak local languages while countries along the road should develop people who have a good command of Chinese.

In China, colleges have not yet opened education programs for some national or official languages, such as Tetun in East Timor; the official languages of five Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan); Tamil and Dhivehi in South Asia; Kurdish, Georgian, Armenian and Azerbaijani in West Asia; Amharic, Tigrinya, Somali, Kirundi, Rwanda and Creole in East Africa (Wang & Wang, 2016). Though some national languages

have been taught in colleges, the training lacks a top-level design for education of non-global lingua franca, and has been organized in a less scientific mode with students far from sufficient (Wen, 2016). When looking at the language education of countries along the road, Chinese is generally not the first foreign language taught in their schools, some of which have not started teaching Chinese at all.

In view of the above situation, the following must be done to truly leverage the role of language.

First, we should speed up the teaching of all languages of the countries along the road. We should cultivate versatile individuals who not only master the local language, but also have a profound understanding of the local social customs and cultural elements and can therefore seamlessly communicate in cross-cultural circumstances (Zhou, 2016). This requires the following two secondary tasks:

A. Investigation and research should be done regarding the languages of countries along the road to find out how many languages have been included in the degree education system and how many graduates there are each year, if all teachers are competent and qualified, and if there is any flaw that should be cleared.

B. Language majors not yet offered by colleges should be opened as soon as possible and training courses should be provided on the basis of the above research. Before launching such courses, it is advisable to send a certain number of young students to these countries to learn their languages locally.

Second, there should be more support to Chinese language training programs for countries along the road. This also requires investigations to discover which countries have already launched Chinese training programs. For countries where Chinese is taught, we should learn about the status of their language teaching systems and whether Chinese teaching has been included as part of their national basic education. On the basis of the results, colleges shall be required to undertake the mission of teaching Chinese and the state governments shall give their full support. It is also important to actively train local Chinese teachers to achieve the localization of Chinese language teachers. Before this can be done, we could attract young students from these countries to study Chinese by granting them scholarships.

Third, great efforts should be made to improve business Chinese teaching. Considering the priority of economic growth in the initiative, the teaching of business Chinese should be a crucial addition to the teaching of basic Chinese. As Professor Liang Haiming (2016), chief economist of China Silk Road iValley Research Institute put it, “In the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, financial languages are more needed in the dialogue with the international community.” Teaching of business Chinese should be well prepared. To begin with, colleges must build an efficient curriculum system and think about the teaching content (what the base and main lines are, and how to align them with actual business needs). At the same time, we must accelerate the cultivation of versatile talents in a composite mode combining knowledge in “Internet + language teaching + business”. Two-way thinking should be stressed here and should not be underestimated.

For business professionals, we must improve their language skills, which shouldn't be neglected. According to a survey released by the European Commission, 11% of SMEs are suffering economic loss due to language barriers and lack of cross-culture communication skills.

Although the above survey covered only Europe, the results are representative. In developing language talents, whether domestic or foreign, we must develop an effective way to equip people with general business and financial knowledge. We suggest that teachers of the Chinese language keep their knowledge updated and learn about business to stay qualified in teaching business Chinese.

Fourth, we should continue to strengthen the modernization and information construction of language teaching. As the first step, a resource database should be established by bidding to include languages of all the countries along the road, as well as language teaching resources. Second, we should keep an open mind and accelerate the development of various products for language teaching that can achieve complementary functions such as textbooks and supporting materials, audio and video courseware for distance learning, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), and related online libraries of language teaching resources as well as electronic bilingual dictionaries and portable multi-language translators. Furthermore, we must be forward-looking, attaching importance to the development of "cyberspace", and actively exploring new models of "Internet + language services", including online language service platforms, Internet + call center language services, and mobile language services.

Language teaching has great potential given the brilliant future of the Belt and Road initiative.

The Belt and Road Initiative has built a tie that links Asian and European countries and stretches to the Middle East, Africa and the rest of the world, garnering general appreciation and support from countries that firmly believe that this road will strengthen multilateral trade, development and friendship. Many countries have vigorously participated in the initiative and sufficient funds have been raised through the newly established BRICS Development Bank (New Development Bank) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. On October 8, 2015, China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS) (Phase I) was officially put into operation, which not only facilitated bilateral currency trade settlements in the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, but also marked a key milestone in the process of CNY internationalization. The Belt and Road Media Community was founded on April 18, 2016, planning to officially establish B&RTV (an entity of the multinational media network) in 2017 to motivate countries along the road to open a unified TV channel according to the principle of achieving shared growth through extensive consultation, joined contributions, and shared benefits and initiate cooperation in cross-border TV broadcasting.

The Belt and Road Initiative brings challenges as well as opportunities to language teaching. Only if we Chinese language educators work together to address these issues can Chinese educational community grasp the opportunity that comes along and contribute to a promising future of the Belt and Road Initiative.



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