

Challenges and Opportunities in the Teaching of the National Image of China in General Education Courses in Chinese University

—An International Media Communication Study from the Perspective of the “Belt And Road” Initiative

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Abstract—This paper aims at finding the challenges and opportunities in the teaching of the national image of China in college general education courses. It analyzes the international media communication of China’s national image from the perspective of the “Belt and Road” initiative and discusses its influence on the teaching of related contents in Chinese university. It identifies the challenges in material preparation, teaching guidance and cultural difference awareness caused by China’s disadvantageous status in the international discourse and proposes corresponding countermeasures. This paper further point out the potential opportunities found in the process of overcoming such challenges and concludes with an optimistic assertion that with proper measures taken, general education courses in Chinese university are the best platform to cultivate students with international perspective, critical thinking and cultural confidence.

Keywords—the “Belt and Road” initiative; national image; international media communication; general education

I. INTRODUCTION

As the Chinese government strongly advocates the “Belt and Road” initiative, improving the national image of China has become an increasingly important task for both the government and the academic circle [1]. Arguably, Chinese universities are entrusted with the task to cultivate students who could not only proficiently use foreign languages to acquire cutting-edge knowledge internationally, but also use English – one of the most internationally used languages – to tell stories of China to the world so as to demonstrate a real, multi-dimensional and comprehensive national image of China. The bi-lingual general education course is probably one of the most suitable and useful platforms to undertake this task because of its capacity for teaching the national image of China from the perspective of international media communication. Yet there are challenges in the process of teaching as well as opportunities.

II. THE CURRENT SITUATION OF THE NATIONAL IMAGE OF CHINA

According to the government, the national image of China is becoming more influential and increasingly recognized globally; China is regarded as a rising oriental super power with a long history and rich culture; Chinese people are considered diligent, hardworking and resilient.

However, a unilateral portrait is not enough for Chinese students to form a comprehensive understanding of China’s national image. In cross-culture communication, they have to be firstly introduced to the national image of China from the international perspective. Through studying how China is displayed and how Chinese stories are reported by western print media and digital media, they could develop an awareness of the current situation of China’s national image. More importantly, they could be lent with different perspectives on Chinese economy, society and culture.

While investigating foreign media’s report of China, this paper finds that the media of the major western countries have remained highly-interested in and closely-concerned with Chinese economy, culture and society, especially after the launch of the “Belt and Road” initiative. All G20 countries (China excluded) are, without exception, focusing on Chinese diplomacy and international relations with its neighbors and other major western countries and organizations such as the United State, Russia and the European Union; Economically, they are paying close attention to Chinese macro-economic policies, Chinese business tycoons and the Sino-US trade friction [2]. In Social and cultural fields, they have shown great interest in the international education and tourism in China.

Generally speaking, major western media have become friendlier in terms of their attitudes when covering Chinese stories of economy, society and culture since the launch of the “Belt and Road” initiative. Their reflection of China is turning toward a more positive angle. According to these media, China is viewed as both a competitor and a partner in international affairs, especially in the fields of economy and military

diplomacy. Moreover, China's elevating competence of science and technology is drawing more and more attention from western media. The number of In-depth reporting concerning China's economic reform, diplomatic achievement and social improvement is also increasing at a considerable rate.

By and large, main stream western media is adopting a neutral stance reporting heated social and economic issues in China and the majority of them give high regard to China's willingness of and commitment to a full-scale international cooperation. It is no exaggeration to say that China, as a rising power, is marching onto the center of the global stage where the spotlight of international media is concentrated.

III. CHALLENGES IN THE TEACHING OF CHINA'S NATIONAL IMAGE

Although numerous reporting on China's development and progress lend Chinese college students an international perspective on China's national image in the context of the "Belt and Road" initiative and provide Chinese universities with useful sources of information and materials for general education courses, teaching the national image of China and its international impression is not entirely without problems. On the contrary, there are plenty of challenges and obstacles.

A. *The Preparation of Teaching Materials*

Challenges are found in the choice of teaching materials and sources. In spite of fact that many western media have become more objective toward China, some major western media like CNN and BBC tend to be biased on reporting stories of China because of ideological differences. Consequently, the contents of their reporting and covering are sometimes partial and negative. In a few cases, facts are twisted either intentionally or unintentionally amidst their stories and students are likely to be misled by their untruthful stories about China. These media, however, are usually the sources from which the most influential and in-depth reporting comes. Teaching China's national image from an international perspective inevitably requires using excerpts of articles and digital materials from these influential media, otherwise the course resources would appear to be unsubstantial. The question of how to choose the appropriate material that could meet students' need for an international perspective and at the same time remain neutral and objective poses a serious challenge for college teachers.

This dilemma has a long historical background. The western world had realized the importance of building up national image long before China, and therefore took a series of action to forge and perfect the image they want to demonstrate to the world. China on the other hand, is lagged behind by western countries and is at disadvantage in terms of the power of international discourse and image building. It is not uncommon that Chinese media are out voiced by the West in some heated international affairs because of the lack of discourse dominance in international mass media and public opinions. Essentially, public opinions are under deep influence of information dissemination and media communication [3]. Therefore, the dissemination and communication of China's national image is fundamental to its international reflections and comments. The "Belt and Road" initiative has drawn a lot

of attention ever since its publication. While the initiative is embraced and supported by countries along the "Belt and Road", it also invites questions and challenges from western countries. They utilize the dominating dissemination power and mechanism of their media to openly voice objections and impose a certain degree of negative influence upon the initiative. The United States for example, has the most advanced system of media communication that infiltrates every corner of media platforms including film, radio, television program, newspaper, magazine, internet and mobile media. Its paramount influence is reflected by the exceptionally overwhelming dominance in the construction of the web media and its control over the content that disseminates and circulates the web. Popular social media platforms created by American companies like Twitter and Reddit claim the dominance in the online discourse and build up the image of the US by disseminating its culture and outputting its values. Under such circumstances it is difficult for Chinese media to gain advantage in the wrestle for the power of discourse in international political and diplomatic affairs.

As a result, demonstrating to the students how western media tell Chinese stories is particularly difficult because they have seized the initiative in international media communication with which stereotypical images of China are frequently built. Discretion and scrutiny is needed in the preparation of teaching resources and digital materials.

B. *The Guidance on Different Perspectives and Standpoints*

The second challenge is found in the teaching process. While the students are presented with all kinds of materials about China's national image, they might find some of them particularly unfamiliar or even incomprehensible, because even from an objective perspective, western media tend to see things differently from Chinese media where the students used to learn about China's national image unilaterally. For example, Chinese media remains optimistic about and confident in the development of the China's economic growth whereas some main stream western media have expressed repeatedly their concerns about the slowing down of the economic growth. Others warn about the potential risks in China's finance, national deficit and other areas. While Chinese media are celebrating the fast development of science and technology, one of the French media points out that high-technology means a non-green and non-environmental friendly industry [4]. It issues worries that China's high pace of economic growth is based on the continuous development of high-technology and such dependence might induce serious environmental problems.

Obviously Chinese media and western media have different angles reporting China, and the difference might create entirely different national images. For instance, in the point of view of Chinese media, China is a rising giant who marches forward in the fields of e-business, sharing-economy and artificial intelligence; in the portrait of some western media, China is a reckless explorer who has no regard for anything other than economy. Students are likely to be confused about the divergence of opinions and wonder about which image of China is real or more internationally recognized. In general education course where teaching hours

are usually limited compared with major courses, the question of how to guide students through vast materials reporting China's development and help them correctly recognize its national image and value is also a problem for college teachers to reflect on and solve.

C. The Awareness of Cultural Differences

The cultural difference is another challenge for students to realize China's national image with a global perspective. The "Belt and Road" connects the Asian and European continents, where cultures are different in many aspects [5]. The national icon of China for instance, is widely acknowledged as "Long" in Chinese culture, which represents authority, convergence and is viewed as an auspicious omen; the same icon on the other hand, is interpreted as "dragon" internationally, which in western culture is the symbol of evil and peril. Hence the icon of China delivers completely opposite message in different cultures. The task of helping students recognize the division of the shaping of China's national image caused by such cultural differences demands a better understanding of not only Chinese traditional culture, but also western mainstream culture.

Religion is another problem that creates conflicts and disputes over China's national image. Many countries along the "Belt and Road" have a profound religious background, whereas the majority of Chinese are atheist who adheres to the traditional values of Confucianism. Foreign critics on Chinese social and cultural problems sometimes come from the religious angle and students who lack understanding of western religious culture might fail to realize the nature of such disputes. The task of introducing Chinese students to and reconcile them (especially students come from minority groups with a religious background) with the basic western religious culture while instructing them to maintain a firm faith in Chinese traditional culture and core values is a challenge to be delicately tackled by college teachers.

IV. POSSIBLE COUNTERMEASURES

A. The Development of Language Skills

General education focuses on the education foundation of skills, knowledge, habits of mind and values. In the general education course that discusses the national image of China from an international perspective, most of the teaching materials taken from western media are in English and it is not feasible to translate them all into Chinese for the purpose of class teaching. Hence the discussion of China's national image under an international media communication context is inevitably to be conducted with both Chinese and English. This particular teaching mode demands bi-lingual competence from the students. Consequently, the development of language skills is the first step to help students know the world and further gain a global vision. In regard to this specific requirement, combining international media communication analysis with language skill teaching is a preferable measure. A language-based teaching mode allows students to develop their language skills in the process of learning materials about the national image of China.

B. The Censoring of Materials

The richness of teaching materials is important to general education. When choosing materials for teaching, sharing and

discussion, teachers need to examine their content, background, standpoint and inclination in advance. Objectivity is the most important criterion to assess whether the material is suitable for students to learn. Selecting materials concerning China's economic growth, scientific progress and cultural prosperity rather than the reporting on the political issues is also a useful measure to avoid controversies and disputes. The reporting and stories focusing on the fields where western countries share mutual-interests with China could help students learn to seek common ground while reserving differences. In addition, it also helps to use excerpts instead of full articles from western media when choosing reading materials. If video materials are required, proper video editing work can present to the students a neutral, objective and positive content in an appropriate length of time in class.

C. The Encouragement of Critical Thinking

With the same event, different perspectives could result in different stories. While the reporting and stories about China may differ in many ways, it is imperative that teachers encourage students to think independently about the issues in question instead of taking everything in the materials for the truth. Teachers should provide students with facts only and then instruct them to form their own opinions. Analyzing the differences between the Chinese mindset and western mindsets can help students understand why Chinese media and western media tend to report the same event differently. The cultivating of independent and critical thinking is the goal of general education as well thus it must not be neglected.

D. The Introduction of Cultural Backgrounds

The learning of cultures and values is an indispensable part of general education. Cultural differences cause different interpretations of the national image of China and sometimes impose extra difficulty in the learning of Chinese identity. Teachers should introduce basic cultural background knowledge to students and familiarize them with main stream western cultures and values. Greek mythology and Biblical stories for instance, are two suitable materials for teachers to share with students since they are the very foundation of the western culture. With elaborate illustration of the relevant cultural facts and knowledge, students' interest could be better aroused and their confusions answered. On the other hand, teachers should emphasize the significance of the output of Chinese culture and values, combining which with the requirement of the "Belt and Road" initiative to promote Chinese culture and values. It is necessary that the cultural confidence be kept at the center of cross-culture communication.

V. OPPORTUNITIES IN THE TEACHING OF CHINA'S NATIONAL IMAGE

The identification of the challenges in the teaching of China's national image and the attempts to solve them also provide college teachers with opportunities to cultivate students with an international vision and a Chinese soul.

Firstly, it is still the priority for Chinese college students to know how China is viewed internationally in spite of the occasional acquaintance with some negative reporting. With proper guidance by teachers, students could realize how

international media communication contributes to the shaping of the image of a state. Knowing that China is still at a disadvantageous position in international discourse, students would be better motivated to commit to the dissemination of Chinese voice and the output of Chinese value, which is in accordance with the requirements of the “Belt and Road” initiative.

By thoroughly analyzing the roots of disputes between Chinese media and western media, students could see beyond the conflicts in media reporting and uncover the wrestle of national strategic interests lying under the battle of media. Multi-angled reporting could train student’s critical thinking and provide them with international vision to understand that China is seeking peaceful development and mutually-beneficial cooperation with other countries. Such a perspective is particularly important since it is crucial to the understanding of the essence of the “Belt and Road” initiative, which is not a non-zero sum game but a desirable community of shared interest.

More importantly, by helping students understand the nature of the international controversies of China’s national image, teachers could encourage students to study and embrace different cultures thus promoting cultural diversity, which is essential to the promotion of the “Belt and Road” initiative. Acknowledging, recognizing and reconciling cultural differences could enhance Chinese students’ cultural confidence and better enable them to bring Chinese culture to the world while respecting those of the countries along the “Belt and Road” [6].

VI. CONCLUSION

China has long been demonized by western media and shaped as a country who strives for super power and world dominance. In recent years, the national image of China is improving internationally yet it is not without questions and challenges globally. In this regard, general education courses

in Chinese university are suitable for students to learn the national image of China and its global influence. Teaching college students the national image of China from an international perspective is in accordance with the requirement of the “Belt and Road” initiative to tell Chinese stories and promote Chinese culture. In spite of the challenges found in the teaching of the relevant content in general education courses, opportunities also arise that could help college students realize China’s growing influence over the globe and the great achievements accomplished in recent years. With the flexible and comprehensive use of the countermeasures in terms of language skills development, materials censoring, mindset cultivation and cultural background introduction, teachers could help students acquire an international perspective, develop the habit of critical thinking and enhance their faith in Chinese values and confidence in Chinese culture.

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