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How to Tell a Good Story of the Belt and Road Initiative?

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SYNOPSIS

*China has been using grand narratives in an attempt to achieve heart-to-heart connectivity as it continues to meet the challenges arising from its Belt and Road Initiative. But **XUE GONG** notes that the big story of the BRI has generally not been well received owing to various realities on the ground.*

COMMENTARY

Celebrations in China to mark the 10th anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – Beijing's most ambitious foreign economic policy – ended earlier this month. In Chinese numerology, 10 is often considered a "full" number and it means perfection. Official narratives lauded the BRI as an achievement. But has China told the BRI story well?

The achievements of the BRI are mind-blowing if one looks at the growth of trade, investment, and financing along the BRI route. But the Chinese leadership wants more than just growing numbers of economic achievements. President Xi Jinping himself has shown strong interest in achieving heart-to-heart connectivity with the international community (*xin lian tong*) by building "ren tong gan" (identification and acceptance) and "gong ming gan" (resonance).

To achieve the two forms of emotional identification, the Chinese government has adopted a grand narrative approach. Introduced by Jean-François Lyotard, the notion of grand narrative involves big stories or principles to legitimise a vision of history or an ideology; in this case, a grand narrative would legitimise the mission, vision, values and measures to achieve the BRI. This all-encompassing approach can be quite

appealing to a rising power like China because big-story telling plays an important role in promoting high levels of emotional identification.

The heads of delegations who participated in the third Belt and Road Forum (BRF) for International Cooperation, 17 October 2023. China has embedded several elements into its grand narrative of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), such as presenting the BRI as an open concept, benign, and a new model for international development cooperation, in order to win stakeholders' hearts and emotional identification with the project.
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An Open BRI

From the start, China's grand narrative has been deeply embedded in the BRI. One prominent feature of the BRI narrative is that it is an open concept.

An open BRI means that it entails an adaptive nature – the ability to adjust to local demands and practices. To substantiate the open concept, China branded it an integrative BRI, calling for support from all sectors, including the private sector and societal actors. The need for adaptability is why Chinese infrastructure financing is fast-tracked and was welcomed by host countries within just the first few years of the BRI's launch.

Nonetheless, because of its wide-open nature, the BRI became a brand that virtually any player could leverage to its own advantage. Chinese firms, whether state-owned or private, were able to shape the concept to their liking. Therefore, in the first few years, BRI investments to the tune of billions of dollars were recklessly poured into projects ranging from hydropower in Latin America and real estate in Southeast Asia to the purchase of football clubs in Europe.

But with the passage of time, the wide-open nature that was supposed to help China build a positive image in international development was increasingly seen as a stumbling block in the achievement of the country's foreign policy goals. For example, the Forest City residential property project that Chinese private investors proudly undertook as a BRI project in Malaysia is now seen as a ghost city, raising alarms about China's investment spree.

A Benign BRI

The other element of the BRI's grand narrative is that it is benign. China's leaders project the connectivity plan as intended to construct an international community with a shared future that can deal with growing geopolitical tensions.

But such a grand narrative was not well articulated when the connectivity plan was first conjured up by Beijing in 2013. At a time when the BRI was still known as "One Belt One Road" (OBOR), the rest of the world was grappling with the implications of the Chinese proposal and its geographical reach. Without sufficient details at that time, many perceived that the belt and road would lead to China.

It took four years for China to rechristen the OBOR as the Belt and Road and project it as an economic development initiative that would create new trade corridors across Asia, Europe, and Africa. This time, the idea behind the grand narrative was to position China as the architect, engineer and the public goods provider in economic development and integration. The idea seemed to work. More than 150 countries and over 30 major international organisations signed up to the BRI.

But the West still displayed strong distrust of the BRI and China in general. Policymakers, scholars, and media, particularly in the United States, pushed back against the BRI by propagating the notion that it involved "predatory economics" and a "debt trap". Under this "debt trap" narrative, Beijing was said to have deliberately set out with a grand strategy to lure BRI countries into its geostrategic sphere by offering them financing for large-scale projects. Despite scholarly efforts to investigate and debunk such myths, tales of debt traps along the BRI financing route have persisted and put a dent in China's image. BRI participating countries like Myanmar, Malaysia, and the Philippines have also vocally expressed their concerns over debts to China.

Touting the BRI as one channel for generating stability and prosperity, actors like Chinese embassies, Chinese state-backed companies, business associations, and the Chinese media have since been mobilised to convey messages depicting the true BRI spirit. But as geopolitical tensions where China has a huge role to play loom large – including tensions involving the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait, as well as the Russia-Ukraine war and the India-China border dispute – it is difficult to expect that goodwill and positive language on economic development cooperation can moderate those hard-core security challenges. Moreover, China's growing inclination and capability to use coercive measures to protect its interests make the grand narrative about building a shared future less convincing.

A China Solution

The third feature of the grand narrative is that the BRI constitutes China's wisdom to present a new model for international development cooperation through "discuss, build and share together" (*gongshang gongjian gongxiang*).

Stressing China's identity as part of the Global South, China projects the BRI as anchored on several unbending guiding principles: non-interference, non-conditionality, respect, and mutual gains. Unlike traditional donors like the OECD countries, China claims that it does not force host countries to adopt any specific type

of governance. It attributes the BRI's wide acceptance to the flexibility of the initiative, which eschews imposing any pre-set standards for developing countries.

Beijing also likes to boast about its efficacy in bringing about inclusive and sustainable development outcomes. In this narrative, participating countries are reminded that they comprise essential nodes in the BRI network, which was started and led by China. The underlying message is that the Chinese economy is here to sustain, and it will continue to support, the "China Solution and Wisdom" to world development.

While China's grand narratives could appeal to local elites who prefer fast-tracked projects, the message of the narratives may be distorted and even lost in the country during the implementation stage. The majority of BRI projects follow an elitist top-down approach while highly fluid and fragmented at the bottom. Consequently, concerns have been aired that the elite-oriented approach has been conducive to corruption, as Malaysia's East Coast Railway Link project has demonstrated.

Also, BRI projects involve non-binding MOUs to define hard rules and standards for project execution. But local institutions and civil society in the host country may interfere with state-backed BRI deals. In this complex process, Chinese business actors find it challenging to apply their progressive domestic sustainable practices to foreign contexts, given China's non-interference principle. Hence, Chinese companies' default behaviour in executing BRI projects is to "make-to-order", which may reinforce the already poor governance standards in host countries and ultimately undermine the sustainability and developmental motivations of BRI projects.

Conclusion

Despite China's growing ability to weave a grand narrative, conflicting views on the BRI for the past 10 years suggest that people are still concerned and doubtful about the big story revolving around China's role in global governance.

But China is not tone-deaf. To respond to some core questions on sustainability issues, the Chinese government keeps adding new elements to the narrative, from building an "open, green and clean" BRI to the more recent "small but beautiful".

While the BRI can contribute to world economic recovery, as World Bank research shows, the BRI grand narratives that China hopes will achieve worldwide acceptance have encountered complex challenges, with the process being influenced by many geopolitical, ideational, cultural, and social factors overseas. Moreover, China's decelerating economic growth saps not only domestic enthusiasm for the BRI but also the resources that Beijing can devote to BRI projects.

At this critical point, when China needs a supportive international environment as it competes economically with the United States, Beijing has greater motivation than ever to present the BRI and its global role in general as peaceful, sustainable, development-oriented, and civilised. Therefore, China has sought to expand the BRI by launching three initiatives on global development, security, and civilisation. The language of the three initiatives is similar to that of the BRI with regard to its openness, aim of building a community with a shared future, and the idea of a China solution for global governance.

But to ensure that the grand narrative resonates with its audience, China needs to recognise that words alone are not enough. China is already good at talking big; now is the time to talk small but concrete.

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