

## Confucius on the Road : the Mechanism of and the Interplay Between the Confucius Institute and the Belt & Road Initiative

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# Confucius on the Road: the Mechanism of and the Interplay Between the Confucius Institute and the Belt & Road Initiative

「一帯一路」構想における孔子学院の役割に関する一考察

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Keywords: Confucius Institute, Belt & Road Initiative, Chinese as a global language, China studies,  
soft power

## 1. Introduction

The global linguistic landscape is undergoing unprecedented transformation. On the one hand, English still seems to remain as a language with dominant global influence, justified by historical causes and existential evidence (e.g., Crystal, 2003 & 2006; Pinner, 2016). On the other hand, the past several decades have also witnessed the rising global influence of certain languages, among which the Chinese language has especially drawn global attention, due to the continuing growth of China's global influence in trade, international politics, tourism, and finance (Gil, 2021; Zhou, 2007 & 2022).

With respect to the global influence of the Chinese language and culture, the Confucius Institute (hereafter CI), China's overseas educational and cultural promotion program, has always been at the center of observation, and has been subject to both applause and criticism. Much of the observation has been upon its role in implementing China's cultural diplomacy, and in building China's soft power with the aim of elevating China's global image (e.g., Keimetsuwe, 2022; Masukata, 2021; Lo & Pan, 2014; Lueck, Pippas & Lin, 2014; Sterling, 2018; Zhou & Luk, 2016).

However, the past couple of years have witnessed a rapid increase in the number of studies on the operation of the CI in the context of the Belt & Road Initiative (hereafter BRI), a global infrastructure development initiative launched by the Chinese government in 2013. Mostly illuminating in terms of both cultural/language policy and educational practice, these studies have offered diverse, and sometimes also conflicting views of the presence and potential of the CI amidst China's BRI global project (e.g., Jun, Wang & Cho, 2020; Lai, 2017; Li, 2021; Sawehel, 2023; Wang, 2017).

### 1.1 Confucius Institute & Belt Road Initiative

Initially established in 2004 and administrated by *Hanban*, a state agency of Chinese government, the Confucius Institute has been operating since 2020 under the Chinese International Education Foundation (hereafter CIEF), founded in the same year. Under the authorization of CIEF, the CI now operates as a nonprofit institution administrated by Chinese and foreign partners in compliance with the principles of mutual respect and friendly consultation (CIEFa & b). Over the past twenty years, the CI has developed into the flagship to promote Chinese language and culture overseas.

The BRI is a global-scale cooperation project initiated by China in 2013 that seeks to connect Asia and beyond via land and maritime networks with the aim of improving regional integration, increasing trade and stimulating economic growth. Despite various and sometimes differing perspectives and views, the BRI has been well-received especially by most developing countries including 52 African countries (Belt & Road Portal a).

### 1.2 Focus of Inquiry: The Interplay Between the CI and the BRI

This paper attempts to observe the global influence of the Chinese language from a socio-linguistic perspective by looking at the CI as a vital instrument and the BRI as a crucial platform. Specifically, it discusses the mechanism of the CI and the BRI, examines the interplay between the two, and explores the potential of the interplay in sustaining the global spread of the Chinese language and elevating China's global image. Concerns, criticism, and significance will be discussed in order to clarify the role of the CI in conjunction with the BRI.

The rising global position of Chinese is an emerging linguistic phenomenon that moves this issue to the center of academic inquiry and public interest alike, but research and resources in this area of inquiry are still scarce in terms of quality and quantity compared with that in the field of English as a global language. It requires, therefore, informative and insightful research and professional development activities (e.g., Gil, 2021, Zhou, 2007 & 2022).

This paper argues that, despite some skepticism and concerns around the world mostly in some European and North American countries, the Confucius Institute seems to have kept a satisfactory record of development over the past ten years in its strategic deployment along with the Belt & Road Initiative. Some of the contributing factors, in this respect, may include, but not be limited to, the central governance and the overall national strategic planning, the all-out efforts to implement projects and programs, and the inclusive nature of both the CI and the BRI, inscribed in their missions and evidenced in practice. It suggests that the development of the CI as well as the BRI especially in many of the developing countries indicates that China's vision of "a global community of shared future" has a great appeal to many people in these countries and around the world.

### 1.3 Components of Paper

This paper mainly draws upon findings of research studies and educational practices related to the CI in the context of the BRI, as well as relevant government and legislative documents. Such inquiry may

shed light upon how distinct institutions/instruments such as the CI and the BRI interweave, interact, and inform each other in specific historical contexts. It may also help deepen our understanding about the role of language in the global structure, and remind us to be more responsible and responsive to the changes and challenges in an increasingly globalized world in terms of language/cultural policies and educational practice. Above all, this paper may benefit our discussion on the global position of Chinese with an aspiration to envision Chinese as a global language.

Section 2 illustrates briefly the state and mechanism of the CI and the BRI. It is followed by a critical observation in Section 3 upon the interplay between the two, attempting to illuminate some of the contributing factors that have enabled the development of the CI amidst the BRI and thus helped enhance the global influence of Chinese. Section 4 is devoted to a discussion of the problems, concerns, and criticism engendered by the progress of CI and the BRI. The conclusion summarizes major points and arguments of the paper with some observation on the significance and challenges of the interplay between the CI and the BRI in relation to the prospect of the global influence of China as well as the Chinese language.

## 2. Present State and Mechanism of CI and BRI

The year 2023 is an important historical point of time for China as well as the world, as it marks the 10th anniversary of the Belt & Road Initiative. Among all the celebration events and activities, making reflections on the past and projections of the future, the 3rd Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, held in Beijing in October this year, is the climax showcase of the anniversary commemoration (see *Xinhua News*). In view of the significance of these events in terms of time and space, it is necessary to have a close look at the present state and mechanism of the CI and the BRI.

### 2.1 The State and Mechanism of the CI

Confucius (551 to 479 B.C) is the believed founder of Confucianism, a philosophical system originally developed from the teachings of himself and his disciples. Its focus is primarily on unity, morality, respect for authority, and the importance of hierarchical relationships. The ultimate aims of Confucianism are the cultivation of civilized individuals and establishment of a harmonious society and world peace. Over centuries, Confucianism has had a tremendous influence on the culture and history of China as well as East Asian countries and regions.

Adopting both the name and the fame of Confucius, the Confucius Institute is a strategic project encompassing rich and diverse educational and cultural programs with the aim of elevating the global influence of the Chinese language and culture. Established in 2004, the CI was initially administered strictly by the Chinese government with the mission to “promote the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language and for different exchange and co-operations ... with the world” (as referred to in Zhou, 2007). By 2007, there were already at least 180 Confucius Institutes in 55 or more countries including 10 in Japan. In the same year, the entire CI project was reorganized and a new headquarters of the CI was established in Beijing, perceived to be a critical step to tighten the central control over the operation in all institutes

worldwide and to ensure the efficiency of its mission accomplishment. As a result, the CI underwent large expansion in succeeding years, and by 2017 the number of CI reached 525 around the world (as referred to in Miura, 2019).

Despite its acceptance in many parts of the world since its start, the CI also met with concerns and criticism mostly in Europe and North America over its direct affiliation with the Chinese government as well as its curriculum content intended, in President Xi's words in 2013, to "give a good Chinese narrative" (see Wang, 2018; also Lo & Pan, 2016; Lueck, Pippas & Lin, 2014; Sawahel, 2023; Zhou & Luk, 2016). In response to the skepticism and criticism, the Chinese International Education Foundation was founded in June 2020, and the CI became, and has remained, its affiliate. A non-profit charitable social organization registered at the Ministry of Civil Affairs of China, the Foundation is dedicated to "supporting projects of Chinese international education worldwide, promoting people-to-people exchanges, enhancing understanding among countries, and thus contributing to mutual learning and exchanges between the diverse civilizations in the world and to building a community of shared future for mankind" (CIEFa). Accordingly, the Confucius Institute presents itself as a nonprofit institution "jointly hosted by Chinese and foreign partners, with the aim of communicating in Chinese, deepening international understanding of Chinese language and culture, and promoting people-to-people exchanges between China and the rest of the world." As of 2019, the total number of Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms around the world reached 1,722 covering at least 162 countries and regions on 6 continents (CIEFb).

## 2.2 The State and Mechanism of the BRI

The Belt & Road Initiative, known as One Belt One Road in China, comprises the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road," and is a project initiated by China in 2013 aimed at tightening trade and economic ties between China, Asia, Europe and Africa via land and maritime networks. Named after the mythical historical Silk Road of almost 2000 years ago, the Initiative is reflective of a strong connection between the present and the past, the reality and history, as well as China and the rest of the world. Moreover, the BRI, in President Xi's words, "is not simply a linear economy but a cooperative initiative that features openness and inclusion" (Belt & Road Portal b), and the spirit of the BRI "is the pursuit of common prosperity and respect for diversity" (Belt & Road Portal c).

The BRI was incorporated in the UN General Assembly Resolutions in December, 2016, demonstrating the international community's support of the Initiative. On January 18, 2017, in his speech at the United Nations Office, Geneva, President Xi proclaimed that the BRI "aims to achieve win-win and shared development" (Belt & Road Portal b). The five major cooperation priorities of the BRI include policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-people bonding (Belt & Road Portal d).

From a geopolitical perspective, the BRI is viewed as an indication of China's desire to achieve historical national revival in all aspects at the global level, as it forms a central component of Xi's "Major Country Diplomacy" strategy, which calls for China to play a leadership role for global affairs in accordance with its rising power and status (e.g., Smith, 2021). Like the CI, the BRI has been at the center

of debates since its launch. Supporters praise the BRI for its potential to boost the global GDP, and particularly in developing countries (see *World Bank HP*; also *Xinhua News*). Nevertheless, there has also been some criticism over human rights violations and environmental impact, and even economic imperialism (e.g., Sawehel, 2023). Despite these differing perspectives, the BRI, in large part, has gained a high reputation, especially in most developing countries. As of September 2023, 152 countries and over 30 international organizations on 6 continents are listed as having signed up to the BRI, including 52 in Africa (see *Belt & Road Portal*); among all these participating countries, more than 130 countries had confirmed their attendance at the 3rd BRI Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing in October, 2023 (Belt & Road Portal e).

### 3. Interplay Between CI and BRI

Over the past twenty years, China has been engaging in an unprecedented all-out project in terms of policies and programs with the aim of promoting Chinese and enhancing its cultural influence across the globe. Among all these, the most critical strategic move, in terms of scope, scale and speed, is the development of the Confucius Institute programs along with the extension of the Belt and Road Initiative. It can be observed that the BRI has been serving as a strategic platform and the CI as a major player, the joint effort of which facilitates the spread of Chinese and enhances the global image of China among the countries and regions along the Belt and Road and beyond (e.g., Miura, 2019; Yang, Jia & Li; 2019; Zhou, 2022). It would be, therefore, fruitful to examine the interplay between the CI and the BRI in order to understand the principles and practices of China in its attempts to elevate its global image through its soft power.

#### 3.1 Central Governance and All-Out Implementation

China joined WTO in 2001, and has now become the second largest global economy with a GDP increase from 1.21 thousand billion in 2000 to 19.37 thousand billion in 2023 in US dollars (see *IMF*, n. d.). The Chinese government has responded to this historical opportunity to embark on its national rejuvenation, two specific exemplifications of which are the CI and the BRI.

In 2001, the *Law Regarding the National Common Language and Characters of the People's Republic of China*, China's first charter of language, went into effect, signifying the beginning of a new historical period for the development of the Chinese language in terms of language policy, language regulation and language use. Moreover, the *Law* also paved the way for the Chinese language to display and expand its influence across the globe, which has a profound impact on the global ecology of languages (Wei, 2005). The CI met with skepticism and criticism especially in the Western media for years over its too tight connection with the Chinese government (e.g., Fan, 2015; Yang & Liu, 2014; Zhou & Luk, 2016). After years of efforts to ease the tension over this issue, the CI has now been placed under the Chinese International Education Foundation, a newly established non-profit organization based on the partnership of domestic and international academic institutions and business sectors. Given the context in China, one would still tend to query the influence on the CI from the Chinese government, but this new approach of

operation seems to have helped make the CI more acceptable to the global community.

The BRI has also been under the strong governance of the top leadership of China. President Xi first depicted in November, 2012 his vision of the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation as the greatest dream of the Chinese people in modern times (*The Chinese Dream*, n. d.). In 2013, the subsequent year, Xi proposed the “Silk Road Economic Belt” in Kazakhstan in September, and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” in Indonesia in October. A leading committee was formed in 2014 and publicized in February 2015, reporting directly to the State Council of China (see News Ifeng.com, 2015). The BRI forms the key component of China’s foreign policy in the 21st century, as it was incorporated into the Constitution of the Communist Party of China in 2017 during the party’s 19<sup>th</sup> Congress.

Over the past ten years, the role of the CI on the platform of the BRI has attracted special attention from academics and the public alike. As early as 2017, when the first Belt & Road Forum for International Cooperation was held in Beijing, we began to see discussions and proposals with respect to the role and practice of the CI in the context of the BRI, most of which recognized the importance of the CI in enhancing understanding about China among the people along the Belt & Road (hereafter B&R) countries and regions by providing relevant consulting services, Chinese language/cultural programs, and other opportunities for people-people interaction (e.g., *The roundtable*, 2017; Wang, H., 2017).

Relevant research has indicated a variety of perspectives, either focusing on the overall approach of the CI in its interplay with the BRI (e.g., Kawashima, 2018; Li, 2021; Pan & Wang, 2019; Wang, X. P., 2017) or practices in specific B&R contexts (Masutaka, 2021; Miura, 2019; Lai, 2017; Liu, 2017; Ootsuka, 2016; Wang, Han, Fidrmuc & Wei, 2021; Wang, 2023). In spite of skepticism or sometimes mixed views over the rise of China’s overall global influence especially from a geo-political or ideological perspective, much of the literature depicts the relatively constructive role of the CI in the internalization of Chinese enterprises along the Belt & Road countries and regions, as well as describing the enthusiasm and practices among local people related to learning Chinese language and culture.

As a major step to further elevate China’s global image, in early 2019, the Chinese government promulgated the *Implementation Plan to Accelerate the Modernization of Education 2018-2022*. Education Action in accordance with the BRI is designated as one of the ten major tasks, in which the CI is expected to further expand in scope and speed, as well as to enhance the quality in management and resources (*Implementation Plan*, n. d.).

### 3.2 Shared Principles and Goals

It is beyond any doubt that the BRI serves China’s national interest in both the short and long term, but the general acceptance of the CI among the peoples along the B&R may mainly be attributable to the fact the principles and goals of the CI and the BRI are largely reflective of global reality and responsive to global needs. Global challenges, such as issues of poverty and inequality that hinder the social development toward a fair and just world, call for economic development through mutual and multilateral cooperation. The BRI is essentially designed and operated as a cooperation initiative for economic growth through trade and infrastructure, evident in view of its five major cooperation priorities: policy coordination, connectivity

of infrastructure, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-people bonding (*Belt & Road Portal* d). Despite some problems and even criticism, the achievements of the BRI over the past ten years have enabled the World Bank to predict that, through successful implementation of BRI projects, by 2030, the income of the world will increase by 0.7% to 2.9%, 7.6 million people will be elevated from extreme poverty, and 32 million people will escape moderate poverty (referred to in j-people.cn, 2023).

The goal to achieve economic growth and prosperity through joint efforts is certainly appealing and, therefore, has helped made the Chinese language and culture attractive to local people. In its mission statement, the CI emphasizes its aim of “promoting people-people exchanges between China and the rest of the world” (CIEFa). Much has been reported on the achievements of the CI in the countries and regions along the B&R, especially about its role as footholds to enhance the communication and understanding between Chinese individuals and local people jointly engaging in trade and infrastructure building (e.g., Lai, 2017; Liu, Cai & Zhang, 2016; Wang, Han, Fidrmuc & Wei, 2021; Wang, 2023).

Discussions, at least in Chinese media since 2019, about the CI in the context of the BRI shifted to narratives centering on building a “Global Community of Shared Future,” a vision which Xi first raised when addressing Moscow State Institute of International relations in 2013, and again advocated in his opening remarks at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Belt & Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing in April, 2019 (*Belt & Road Portal* f). This vision is believed to constitute the spirit and core of the BRI and the CI (e.g., Sun, 2019); it is in this context that the CI is expected to help foster a common sense of belonging by serving as a bridge between China, the countries and regions along the B&R, and the whole world (e.g., Dong, 2018; Li, 2019; Tu, 2022; Wang, Z. M., 2023).

### 3.3 Openness & Inclusion

The spirit of the BRI, in Xi’s words, is “the pursuit of common prosperity and respect for diversity” (Xi’s opening speech). It not only reflects Chinese traditional wisdom, “美美与共和而不同”, meaning “live in harmony by celebrating the commonalities and respecting the differences,” but also appears to coincide with the belief in cooperating for the common good especially in an era of globalization. According to Xi, the principles of the BRI include openness to all other countries for cooperation, no setting of any high threshold or confinement to a certain scope, and no targeting any country or region.

This nature of openness and inclusion is especially appealing to developing countries, which occupy 85.54% of the whole world population (*World Data*, n. d.). These countries cover the whole of Central and South America, the whole of Africa, almost all Asian countries and numerous island states. Out of approximately 200 countries, as of August, 2023, 152 countries have signed up with the BRI, including 52 African countries, 40 Asian countries, 9 South American countries, and 11 Oceanian countries (see *Belt & Road Portal*).

In the case of the CI, CIEF, which administrates the CI, operates “in the spirit of openness, innovation, collaboration, and symbiosis”, and “aims to strengthen cooperation with friends and partners from all walks of life, ...to [help] more and more foreign learners of Chinese to fulfill their dreams” (CIEFc). The achievements so far seem convincing, as the current 162 countries or regions where the CI operates include



550 Confucius Institutes and 1172 Confucius Classrooms covering 37 Asian countries, 47 African countries, and 5 Oceanian countries (see CIEF HP).

#### 4. Challenges & Prospects

Despite the steady progress in implementation, the past decade has also seen challenges arising from skepticism and criticism over the CI and the BRI, as well as practical concerns and problems in implementing the CI in the context of the BRI. For instance, the diverse and sometimes differing views over the BRI in particular indicate that while many countries and regions welcome the BRI viewing it as a win-win initiative, some are concerned about losing their own rights and interest (e.g., Masutaka, 2021; Liu, 2017; Ootsuka, 2016; Wang, Han, Fidrmuc & Wei, 2021; Wang, 2023).

##### 4.1 Geopolitical Consideration & Ideological Concern

If China wishes to achieve its national rejuvenation, it is desirable to secure a favorable global environment. In this respect, the BRI can be viewed as an all-out initiative for China to open up wider to and to connect closer with the rest of the world. Nevertheless, although it is defined and designed as a cooperation initiative, as stated in its principle and mission, it still gave rise to some geo-political concerns especially among the developed countries. Major European countries and G7 countries in particular basically view the BRI as China's intention to exert its global influence, and therefore have displayed skeptical, rejective or overcritical attitudes toward it.

The Confucius Institute has received criticism mainly from the governments and the media of some Western countries due to, in the eyes of some critics, the control by the central government, and in the opinion of some others, suppression of academic freedom (e.g., Jakhar, 2019; Liu, 2019; Lo & Pan, 2014; Zhou & Luk, 2016). Skepticism and criticism have been prevailing especially in the U.S.A. and some European countries. For instance, in the first several years subsequent to its launch, the CI recorded a high number of institutes in the United States, accounting for 72 out of the global total of 329 in 2010, and 110 out of about 400 in 2017, but the number has dropped down to 19 as of now (Miura, 2019; also see CIEF HP).

As a response to some of these concerns and skepticism, the CI underwent major reorganization in 2020, and since then is operating under CIEF, a non-profit organization based on the joint partnership of Chinese and international academic institutions. Nevertheless, given the complexity of the issue from a geo-political perspective, it seems still a time-consuming and challenging task for China to engage and convince the rest of the world of its intentions, to eliminate misunderstandings, and to counterattack malicious attacks; first and foremost, China needs to take further action to gain more support from the people in those countries and regions along the Belt & Road routes where Confucius Institutes are in operation.

##### 4.2 Problems & Concerns in Implementation

In recent years, many concerns have been raised and problems have also been seriously discussed in

relation to how to increase the attractiveness and accountability of the CI in the context of the BRI both in policy making and educational practice. Many of the concerns and problems are related to the planning of deployment of CIs, as well as the effectiveness of operation and management. Based on a critical review of relevant research, Pan & Wang (2019) proposed 3 practical and “win-win oriented” ways to further enhance the operation of the CI. The priority of all, in their view, is to have a more balanced deployment of CI in the countries along the Belt & Road routes, merely due to the vastness of space, complexity of external environmental factors, and varieties of cultural ecology. The second proposal is to enhance local teacher training and develop learning/teaching resources including online resources (also see Sun, 2019). The third is to increase acceptability among local people through providing services to explain and promote the principle and mission of the CI and the BRI, as well as other related consultation.

Moreover, some scholars focus more on the localization of the CI to meet the specific needs of relevant countries or regions (Huang, 2018; Li, 2020; Liu, 2021); still some others see the potential of the CI in the context of the BR from a perspective of cultural studies, exploring the possibilities of exporting Chinese cultural products (e.g., Li & Liu, 201; Pan & Wang, 2019).

Much has been done to advance the cooperation between local CIs and Chinese partner institutions, as well as to strengthen the support by the latter. The past couple of years have seen an active participation of the CI Alliance of Teacher Institutions in China in terms of teacher training, teaching material development, and enrollment of more students from countries along the Belt & Road routes to study and live in Chinese institutions (e.g., Wei & Feng, 2019; Yu, 2018). Another effective approach is to introduce and intensify CI-plus programs, such as CI+ professional training, CI+ digital innovation, CI+ agriculture, CI+ textile industry, to accommodate specific situations and meet particular local needs (e.g., Wei & Feng, 2021; Yu, 2018).

## 5. Conclusion

This paper focuses on the rising soft power of China through the development of the Confucius Institute in the context of the Belt & Road Initiative. It illustrates the current state of the CI and the BRI, examines the interplay between the CI and the BRI, and discusses some of the contributing factors that sustain the development of the CI in the countries and regions along the Belt & Road routes. Some of the challenges are also discussed for future observation and study.

The significance of the interplay between the CI and the BRI can be observed especially in terms of the rising global influence of Chinese language and culture. The strategic planning underlying the combination of these two instruments can be viewed as an exemplification of promoting *soft power*, as in Nye’s theory of international politics (Nye, 2005; also see Lo & Pan, 2014), which involves “the strategic use of diplomacy, persuasion, capacity building, and projection of power and influence in ways that are cost-effective and have political and social legitimacy” (Crocker, Hampson & Aall, 2007:13). Nye has been a keen observer and critic of China’s diplomatic strategy including the BRI (Nye, 2015); nevertheless, over the past ten years, the world has witnessed successful performance, in large part, of the CI along with the BRI in accordance with China’s vision of constructing “a global community of shared future.”

To the Chinese government and Chinese people, the BRI serves as a key external component of the *Chinese Dream*, a commitment to bringing prosperity and happiness to the country, the nation and the people. Nevertheless, it is essential that this vision of national rejuvenation and the BRI in particular should promote open, innovative and inclusive development that benefits all; that is, it would only be meaningful and sustainable if they accord with and serve the overall interests of the global community. In this regard, it is of critical importance that the CI plays a careful and constructive role in encouraging mutual understanding among people and elevating China's global image in countries along the Belt & Road routes.

The prospects of the CI and the BRI will be dependent on various factors, the core of which is whether or not China is able to achieve its dream through peaceful expansion, which is already incorporated into both the Constitution of CCP and the state Constitution, by creating a security environment featuring fairness, justice, joint efforts, and shared interests. The CI, in particular, is worth observing in terms of policy-making, operational management, and educational practices. It is conceivable that subsequent to comprehensive reflections and reviews of the BRI during the 3rd Belt & Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing in October, 2023, a more focused vision of the CI is to be defined, and a renewed roadmap is to be laid out for working toward "a global community of shared future," a global vision that China, in commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the vision in September, 2023, delineated anew to the world with its proposals and actions (see The State Council). It is essential that the world should continue to be observant of China's words and deeds.

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