

BULGARIA, “BELT AND ROAD” INITIATIVE AND THE ROLE OF THE CONFUCIUS INSTITUTES

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“Far away”, “exotic”, “mysterious” and “unintelligible” – epithets like these come to mind to most Europeans, when it comes to China. If we talk about distance, the great Chinese country is actually far away either from Europe or from America, but this is also true for many other regions, which, however, do not seem as mysterious and unknown. J. Roberts writes that during the 18th century some French *philosophers* used to perceive China as a model which Europe should better imitate and offered that certain features of Chinese society should be introduced into European, while in the 19th century admiration was replaced by indulgence. Western travelers love to discover “inconsistencies” in China, as though they are a bad thing. The question is: Who needs similarity – the Chinese or Westerners?

The reason that the West looks at China as “unintelligible” is rooted in the fact that Chinese civilization is the only one in the world that remained almost unaffected by Western thought and this is the only big region on Earth unviolated by the Westerners. It is difficult for the Western man to admit that in fact the Chinese nation once was the most advanced and exceeding all others in the world, and managed not only to be equal to the Roman Empire but also exceeded medieval Europe in many aspects. In the middle of the 20th century the British historian Joseph Needham and his associates edited the series “Science and Civilization in China”, and those over 14 volumes shed new light on the contribution of the Chinese culture and science to the global civilization, clearly proving that it goes far beyond the four great inventions — the paper, the compass, gunpowder and printing.

Defined as a bridge between civilizations, cultures, religions and traditions, this unique road with a total length of 12,800 km created conditions for trade, communication and intercultural exchange of knowledge, information and human experience. With its functioning since the 2nd century BC during the Han Dynasty, it became a bridge between Chinese and Western civilizations, an “information highway” of the ancient world and through trade people around the world communicated and understood about the development and existence of each other. “The road” connected three continents – Asia, Europe

and Africa – starting from China, crossing Afghanistan, India, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey and reached Rome, Italy at the end. Symbolizing communication and cooperation between the East and the West, the Silk Road Spirit is a historic and cultural heritage shared by all countries around the world.

The Silk Road was not a trade route that existed solely for the purpose of trading silk: many other commodities were also traded – from porcelain, gold and ivory to exotic animals and plants. Of all the precious goods crossing this area, silk was perhaps the most remarkable for the people of the West. According to J. Bloom, however, the most important commodity on the way from China to the West was paper – the Chinese invention that changed the course of civilization and contributed to its development more than any other good. The importance of the Silk Road for the integration of history, culture and economy and its importance since ancient times are the basis for the promotion of the dialogue and communication between the East and the West. We cannot also deny the fact that the diverse face of Chinese culture from the Tang era was the result of its mixing with external influence from the West (Europe and Central Asia) and from the South (India), and in turn this new culture later spread and passed on to Korea to the north and Japan to the east. From India, the Chinese people learned how to produce sugar from sugar cane and along the Silk Road plants such as spinach, garlic and peas were imported, so they were grown on Chinese soil. The attitude of the Chinese and their policy towards the foreigners were not ordinary and permanent at all. Best for the foreigners was to adopt to Chinese customs and to adapt to the way of thinking and lifestyle of the Chinese people, which at the same time was not always allowed. For example, in an imperial decree from 779, it was prohibited to the Uighurs living in the capital to get dressed in Chinese national garments, as well as to marry Chinese girls and make sex with Chinese prostitutes. Stereotypes like “rich Persians” (therefore jealous) and “black” Malaysians (therefore ugly) existed of course, in order to preserve the national dignity¹. Nowadays this policy towards the foreigners has changed and since the „opening“ of China and the reforms, Chinese government has been doing its best to attract foreign experts in all fields in order to share experience.

The concept of “Belt and Road” (B&R) today takes a different form from that of ancient times, due to modern transportation technologies. A route, which in the past took years or even decades to cover, now takes only a few hours, since new methods of transportation have removed the barriers to direct trade between countries all over the world.² The new “Silk Road Economic Belt”

¹ Шедер 1981: 40-41.

² Wang Zhongdi 2016: 17.

and “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” initiatives were introduced by President Xi in the end of 2013 during his visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia, respectively. “We will connect Asia and Europe”, said Xi Jinping then and that his dream for the future is the revival of the Silk Road and the revitalization of Eurasian civilizations. These initiatives are expected to feature prominently in China’s 13th Five-Year Plan, which will run from 2016 to 2020 and guide national investment strategy throughout that period. Only for 30 years, since the opening of China, the country has developed from a poor inward-looking agricultural country to a global manufacturing and geopolitical powerhouse. „The idea of one belt and one road is based mainly on the economy, but has political and strategic components and implications,” said Zhuang Jianzhong, vice director of Shanghai Jiao Tong University’s Center for National Strategy Studies. „It aims for the joint development, common prosperity and for energy security, too.“

The Chinese government drafted and published a document, entitled „Visions and Actions on Jointly Building Belt and Road,“ issued on March 28, 2015, with included detailed information about the various aspects of the envisioned process, involving economy, finance, culture and security. The „framework“ of the project includes linking Asia, Europe and Africa by means of the Silk Road Economic Belt through China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe, a link through Central Asia and West Asia to the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean, and a sea-land corridor linking China with Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean, and through the South China Sea to the South Pacific. Further corridors will be developed through China–Mongolia–Russia, China–Central Asia–West Asia and China–Indochina Peninsula. There will also be a China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and a Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar Economic Corridor. Economic priorities involve coordinating, enhancing and accelerating trade and transportation, eliminating obstacles on the borders with regard to customs and multimodal transport, promoting connectivity of energy infrastructure, enhancing cooperation in oil and gas, in hydropower and in nuclear energy, and collaboration among the nations in developing new industries, setting up science centers and cross-border economic and investment zones. The cultural exchanges are equally important with the promotion of student exchanges between the „Belt and Road“ countries promoting tourism along the Belt and Road as well as sports exchanges; cooperation in the area of medicine and in the control of epidemics and other medical emergencies in the region as well. Joint labs and research centers will be set up to promote innovation in science.³

Key to “One Belt, One Road”’s success is the development of an unblocked

³ <https://larouchepac.com/20150331/china-presents-action-plan-one-belt-one-road>

road and rail network between China and Europe. The plan involves 65 countries, representing one third of the world’s total economy and more than half of the global population as China’s ultimate goal is to extend the initiative to Africa and Latin America. One of the most prominent Chinese researchers of OBOR – prof. *Wang Yiwei* discussed that this is a massive undertaking and there are many associated risks, the biggest of which is the financial risk but also political, geopolitical, cultural, religious, etc. risks. He says that “Belt and Road” Initiative aims to help other countries to achieve the goals set down by UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and in terms of building infrastructure, China’s *BeiDou* Navigation Satellite System will provide coverage for countries involved in OBOR by 2018 and global coverage by 2020 when global networks will no longer have to rely on the internet.⁴ China initiated OBOR to enhance the world’s understanding of the country, so that it can form a community consisting of countries along the B&R that share common interests, based on the principles of equality, mutual development, mutual benefits and common prosperity. And for this purpose, the first thing China should do, according to him, is to respect others’ cultures and not seek to exclude, overpower or replace them with their own, because once we start to appreciate each other’s cultures, the world will become harmonious.⁵

The “One Belt, One Road” strategy emphasizes international cooperation according to the following five priorities: 1. Policy coordination; 2. Facilities connectivity; 3. Unimpeded trade; 4. Financial integration (linking economies through institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the BRICS New Development Bank, and the Silk Road Fund); 5. People-to-people bonds (providing public support for implementation).⁶ The Initiative is in line with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter as well and upholds the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: mutual respect for each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.

China has signed five cooperation documents related to the Belt and Road Initiative with five Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries in November 2015, making a leap forward in synergizing its development plan with those of of CEE countries. Chinese President *Xi Jinping*, together with five lead-

⁴ Wang Yiwei 2016: 25.

⁵ Ge Jianxiong 2016: 27; Fei Xiaotong.

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.”

ers from Poland, Serbia, Czech, Bulgaria and Slovakia, witnessed the signing of five MoUs on jointly promoting the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road initiative, and now China expects the active participation of CEE countries in the development of the connectivity-based structure.

Bulgaria's relations with China date back to October 4, 1949. Bulgaria was the second nation to officially recognize the People's Republic of China. In fact it wanted to be the first, but conceded that privilege to the former Soviet Union. In gratitude the Chinese government allocated a large slice of property on *Xiushui Beijie* next to the Silk Market to establish its diplomatic mission, where the Bulgarian Embassy is still located. Even though Bulgaria was the most loyal Soviet satellite during the Soviet-Union period, relations with China remained strong. Shortly before the end of the Cold War, General Secretary Todor Zhivkov visited China and was greatly impressed by *Deng Xiaoping's* reforms, while acknowledging the deteriorating economic system in Eastern Europe. Yet the year of 2015 witnessed a new stage in Sino-Bulgarian relations. During Chinese Foreign Minister *Wang Yi's* visit to Bulgaria in mid-October, the two sides discussed broad prospects for more intensive cooperation under the „B&R“ Initiative. Shortly after, a second forum on cultural cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries was held in Bulgaria, at which the two sides discussed challenges regarding the management of cultural heritage and the exchange of cultural values, and decided to promote cultural diversity and state-to-state dialogues to remove those barriers. „High-level exchanges in 2015 are the best illustration of the improvement in bilateral relations,“ said the Bulgarian Ambassador in China – Mr. Plamen Shukyuriev. „The visits of the Bulgarian President Rosen Plevneliev, the Chairman of the National Assembly Mihail Mikov and the Prime Minister Boyko Borissov, have all marked important milestones in our relations.“ Collaboration under both „One Belt, One Road“ and “16+1” initiatives, as well as the EU-China Connectivity Platform, were stressed in the dialogues.⁷

As it was mentioned above, in November 2015 the Bulgarian Prime Minister Borisov made his first visit to China to attend the fourth Leader's Meeting of China and Central and Eastern Europe in Suzhou when China announced a credit line of US\$10 billion to co-finance projects in infrastructure, green economics and technology in the region. Bulgarian minister of foreign affairs Daniel Mitov said that the two sides agreed to boost trade exchange between Sofia and Beijing, setting a goal of US\$ 2 billion a year. The Bulgarian State Agency for Investment Promotion organized an “Invest in Bulgaria – Expand in Europe” conference on the sidelines in Shanghai to facilitate connections

⁷ <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/962747.shtml>

between Chinese and Bulgarian business. China is especially interested in Bulgarian agriculture, tourism, light industry and automobile production: Great Wall vehicles have been produced near Lovech, Bulgaria since 2011. A European-Chinese economic zone was set up in Plovdiv region. Chinese business people are also taking note of the Bulgarian IT sector. One of the largest Chinese cyber security companies is investigating opportunities for cooperating with Bulgarian partners.⁸

When Borisov met Premier *Li Keqiang* and President *Xi Jinping* in China, he announced that Bulgaria will be a beneficiary of China’s Belt & Road Initiative. According to the Chinese media, some projects will likely be undertaken by China, such as: a bullet train that helps restore the ancient Silk Road through Bulgaria; a tunnel under the Shipka Pass, connecting North and South Bulgaria; investments for building the Kozlodui nuclear power station, etc. The Bulgarian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Internal Affairs Rumiana Bachvarova said that an important result from the visit of the Bulgarian Prime Minister to China was the signing of the bilateral Memorandum on Jointly Promoting the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, with which Bulgaria formally joined the participating states in the “One Belt, One Road” Initiative. This Memorandum created the general framework of the future bilateral cooperation and proved Bulgaria was ready to play an active role in the development of the transport corridors along the New Silk Road.⁹

Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba is considering of building a logistical base nearby the Bulgarian coastal city of Burgas, announced Stamen Yanev, director of the Bulgarian Investment Agency, following a meeting with the Chinese company. Burgas has the second biggest harbour in Bulgaria, and would be connected to the Chinese city of Zhengzhou by a train line operated by the state-owned Chinese company Zhengzhou International Hub Development and Construction and the Bulgarian logistical firm Despred, which signed an agreement.

Burgas would be the first European destination of the cargo line, which would begin in the Chinese province of Henan and would have to run through a gamut of countries including Kazakhstan, Russia, Georgia and Turkey or Ukraine.

China’s state-owned CITIC Group proposed to invest USD 100 M in a plant for the production of aluminium car wheels in Bulgaria, announced the Bulgarian government in Sofia after a meeting of CITIC Group President

⁸ <http://english.cntv.cn/2015/12/10/ARTI1449740120863744.shtml>

⁹ http://www.standartnews.com/english/read/bulgariachina_relations_set_to_prosper_-10485.html

Wang Jiong with Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. So we all hope that through mutual understanding and peaceful cooperation most of these projects will be realized. Cultural integration is a prelude for OBOR, however, it is a silent partner but plays an important role of facilitating economic cooperation and trade by enhancing mutual trust and understanding and avoiding cultural differences and conflicts.

“Language is the best key for understanding one country”, says Chinese President – Mr. *Xi Jinping*. And his words can be completed with those of the Director of International Cooperation and Exchange Department at Chinese Ministry of Education – Mr. *Xu Tao*, who states that for the implementation of OBOR Initiative, language is particularly important, because it is first needed for communication. „We help people from OBOR countries learn Chinese, they help us study their language – this is to take respective advantage of each other in order to achieve the win-win result”.

Prof. *Li Yuming* – Beijing language and Culture University Party Committee Secretary says that „B&R“ Initiative’s way will be paved by languages. “It is sure that the English language can be used as the common language for basic communication during the OBOR initiative implementation, but such a language can just express the meaning, cannot express the feeling; it can only tell the facts, it cannot reach the heart. According to the statistics, there are nearly 50 official languages used by the countries along the road and about 200 dialects and small languages in the region. These 50 or 200 languages, are still used as languages of expression, and shall be included in an „B&R“ language planning project”, he says. So “Beijing Advanced Innovation Center for Language Resources and Intelligence” was founded on 18 July 2016 in Beijing Language and Culture University, with main purposes: creating Language Resource Library, Museum of Language and Culture, and language experts by gathering research and innovation, science incubation, industry services, professionals and training, international exchange and cooperation for an integrated innovation platform.

„Since the establishing of the Confucius Institute Platform, we have achieved fruitful results for 12 years: more than 5 million registered students; over 100,000 culture exchange activities held with more than 60 million people attending; more than 170,000 teachers, students, principals and officials from over 120 countries came to visit China; 200,000 local Chinese teachers participated in trainings, and every year organized the „Chinese bridge“ competition for high school and university students from more than 100 nationalities with over 600,000 participants.”, says the Deputy Director of Hanban – Mr. *Ma Jianfei*. Together with all mentioned above, the main role of the Confucius Institutes

is to explain and popularize Chinese culture with facts and avoid exaggerations, to help other people understand China and Chinese people understand other people's culture, making sure that everybody is acquainted with the cultural differences. When introducing Chinese culture, the Confucius Institute should seek to integrate Chinese culture with local cultures by respecting and learning from the local cultures. As a Chinese national strategy for spreading of Chinese language and culture abroad and international platform for Chinese language teaching, the CI has a significant role for the international dialogue and culture exchange.

We should agree with prof. Plamen Legkostup, who writes in his paper: "The project of Hanban called *Confucius Institute* is the road, along which the world gets to know Chinese language and culture, and it is also the bridge, through which, after science and arts, business and economics walk"¹⁰.

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¹⁰ Легкоступ 2016: 17.

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