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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Adaptive Governance at Work: How Chinese State Actors Respond to Overseas Pushback on the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract

Following a decade of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), how do Chinese state companies and governments react to international resistance to the initiative? Pushbacks against the BRI have been well documented, yet there is limited study on how China has responded to such resistance. Based on fieldwork in Kenya, Ethiopia, Zambia and China between 2014 and 2023, this paper presents two of the response mechanisms adopted by Chinese state actors in the face of institutional gaps and information deficits. The first is that Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) innovate public relations strategies and then promote these practices to Beijing for dissemination. The second mechanism allows information to be directly transmitted to Beijing, via the internal reporting system (*neican*), so that Beijing can respond promptly to overseas incidents. On a theoretical level, this paper contributes to the adaptive governance literature by analysing the overseas practices of Chinese state actors and underlining that host country social actors are key drivers of these changes. On an empirical level, this article focuses on the feedback mechanism of the Belt and Road Initiative in an attempt to fill the gap in related research in this field.

摘要

"一带一路"倡议提出已逾十年，面对来自国际舆论场的反对声音，中国政府和国有企业究竟如何应对？虽然学界对于"一带一路"倡议所面临的阻力已有详尽研究，但关于中国如何回应这些批评的探讨仍显不足。本文基于两位作者自 2014 年至 2023 年间在中国、肯尼亚、埃塞俄比亚、赞比亚等地所进行的田野调查，尝试归纳中国国家行为者面对制度差异和信息不足所采取的两种机制：一是中国国有企业（SOEs）在肯尼亚创新公共关系策略，并将这些做法推广至北京；二是通过内参将海外信息直接传递至北京，从而使北京能够及时做出回应。在理论层面，本文通过分析中国国家行为者的海外实践，丰富了关于中国适应性治理的研究谱系，强调东道国社会行为者是推动这些变革的关键力量。在实证层面，本文聚焦于"一带一路"倡议的反馈机制，以期该领域相关研究的空白。

Keywords: adaptive governance; Belt and Road Initiative; public relations; policy feedback loops; China in Africa
关键词: 适应性治理; 一带一路; 公共关系; 政策反馈循环; 中国在非洲

In the decade since the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was announced, Chinese overseas economic activities and the BRI narrative itself have generated extensive international resistance. At the micro-level, international criticism has centred around the unwelcome effects of development on host countries. Researchers find that some commercially motivated Chinese-sponsored projects have failed to meet common global standards for social and environmental inclusion and assessments.[1]

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1 Russel and Berger 2019.

Some argue that China's external finance and BRI projects have been concentrated particularly in the energy and resources sectors, and have generated severe environmental externalities.[2] At the macro-level, there has been resistance to China's "economic statecraft" as Beijing strategically uses economic resources to advance its foreign policy goals, leaving recipient countries concerned about potential infringements of their sovereignty and adverse effects on their interests.[3] Fears that the BRI facilitates Beijing's "economic statecraft" have proliferated in recent years. China has also been accused of practising "debt trap diplomacy"[4] and the "neo-colonialism" of developing countries.[5] Both terms have been dismissed by academia but remain current in the media and political debates.[6]

The question of how China addresses the pushback against the BRI in host countries is an under-researched area, given its empirical importance. In their management of overseas BRI activity, both the headquarters of state-owned enterprises (SOE) and the central government in Beijing must deal with challenges caused by institutional differences as well as information gaps.[7] The latter is exacerbated by the fact that information is filtered upwards and that officials in Beijing tend to overlook public media. The institutional differences manifest in the dual nature of Beijing's centralized but fragmented management of the BRI and its overseas institutions' insufficient capacity and resources.[8] These complexities are further amplified by the different political, economic and social landscapes of the host countries, which require adept navigation by the overseas Chinese state actors. Central directives issued in Beijing are often vague and broad – a strategic ambiguity that, while offering flexibility, places Chinese actors in host countries in a weakly regulated environment with limited legal and formal institutions to follow, compelling Chinese stakeholders to improvise and seek guidance from local/international lessons.[9]

Inspired by an empirical inquiry into how Chinese state actors address resistance to the BRI in host countries, we engage with the adaptive governance literature that primarily applies to analysis of China's domestic governance and policymaking. We also advance the limited existing literature on Beijing's use of policy feedback loops in adjusting policy guidance for Chinese enterprises domestically[10] and overseas.[11] We have inductively identified two mechanisms used by different Chinese actors in responding to local pushbacks and international criticism: public relations (PR) and corporate social responsibility (CSR) experimentation conducted by Chinese SOEs in the host countries, and the direct flow of information to Beijing from host countries via the internal reference system (*neican* 内参) and government-designated research activities. We find that Chinese state actors' experimentation in host countries is encouraged by the lack of policy guidance offered by Beijing to counter local pushbacks, as well as the constant interaction with host country actors, whose criticism, resistance and advice facilitate learning and adaptation by Chinese state actors.

The two mechanisms were revealed through the authors' field research, which took place in Kenya, Zambia, Ethiopia and China from 2014 to 2023. Our study primarily draws on data gathered from over 200 in-depth interviews with Chinese and African managers of SOEs, government officials, journalists, media managers, expert scholars and members of local civil society groups at various levels. These primary data are triangulated with government policies and institutional guidelines

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2   Kong and Gallagher 2021.
3   Reilly 2021.
4   Challeny 2017.
5   Brautigam 2020.
6   Ibid; Rithmire and Li 2019.
7   Leutert 2021.
8   Ye 2020.
9   Ibid.
10   Ang 2016a; Leutert 2021.
11   Ye 2020.

on the BRI, as well as SOEs' public relations and international communication materials, providing a comprehensive overview of the trajectory of the global image-building efforts of Chinese SOEs, including the strategies and tactics they employ to enhance their reputation in Africa.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. First, we situate our argument within the existing literature on China's adaptive governance and policy feedback loops. We then introduce our core argument on how Chinese enterprises and Beijing navigate information deficits and institutional gaps to address resistance to the BRI in Africa. The empirical section begins with a discussion of the informational and institutional challenges encountered by the Chinese state during the implementation of the BRI. This is followed by detailed empirical evidence showcasing the two response mechanisms that connect Chinese BRI projects in Africa to Beijing, through the internal structures of SOEs and the internal reference system of Chinese state media. Finally, we conclude and identify areas for future research.

China's Adaptive Governance and the BRI Feedback Loop

How do Chinese state actors address overseas resistance to the BRI and Chinese economic activities in general? We draw upon the adaptive governance literature, which has been instrumental in explaining China's domestic policy, institutional change and continuity, to analyse Chinese state actors' adaptation overseas.[12] We also advance the existing analysis of the BRI feedback loop by identifying two mechanisms that connect the overseas activities of Chinese companies to Beijing and address the informational and institutional gaps in Beijing's BRI management.

In explaining the Chinese party-state's ability to generate policy innovations in a rapidly evolving socio-economic environment, scholars emphasize its ability to adapt. Adaptability is key to systemic resilience, as it allows the system to absorb disturbances while retaining the same systemic functions and identity.[13] Decentralized experimentation is particularly important in the process of adaptation as central policymakers encourage local officials to explore new problem-solving approaches and then subsequently integrate the lessons learned from local experiences into national policy formulation.[14] This decentralized experimentation has decisively shaped China's policymaking in areas ranging from rural de-collectivization, opening up and reform, to state-sector restructuring and stock market regulation.[15] Yuen Yuen Ang argues that this decentralized free flow is combined with top-down oversight, a concept she describes as "directed improvization."[16]

Existing analyses focus both on institutional and agency perspectives of adaptability. Institutionally, Douglass North notes the importance of adaptive capacity in his explanation of developmental success, arguing that adaptive capacity facilitated by formal and informal institutions enables actors to experiment with a broad spectrum of options in both political and economic systems.[17] Various alternative options are necessary to resolve developmental blockages, tackle emerging challenges and grasp new opportunities. In analysing adaptive governance, Nassim Nicholas Taleb argues that innovative strength varies according to the opportunities afforded for "maximum tinkering," referring to an openness to random discoveries of novel solutions on the part of a state's institutions, processes and actors.[18] Systemic features such as a market or planned economy, democracy or authoritarianism are not determinant factors in the level of innovation. For the agency-oriented perspective, behaviour and cognitive processes are critical. Scholars emphasize the readiness of people to venture forth into unfamiliar environments in order to act, experiment

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12 Ang 2016a.
13 Heilmann and Perry 2011.
14 Heilmann 2018.
15 Zweig 2002; Young 1995; Walter and Howie 2006.
16 Ang 2016b, 17.
17 North 1990; 2005.
18 Taleb 2008, xxi.

and learn from changing circumstances.[19] Other influential work on China's adaptive capacity includes studies of policy experiments;[20] the generation and incorporation of societal feedback;[21] the Party's co-optation of private entrepreneurs;[22] bureaucratic initiatives in generating revenue;[23] and efforts to study the experiences of other countries.[24]

These studies predominantly focus on the adaptive governance of China's domestic politics and policy. A less explored area is how China adaptively governs its overseas activities. This is crucial as the BRI is a political initiative that is kept intentionally vague to allow agents room for experimentation in implementation.[25] The ambiguity, lack of central guidance and ad hoc experimentation can result in the profit-driven behaviour of Chinese firms generating additional pushbacks.[26] This was particularly the case when Chinese SOEs ventured into risky business environments in search of market opportunities in host countries, particularly developing ones, with relatively relaxed rules and a poor legal framework. The adaptability of Chinese corporate practices in host countries is generally understood in terms of host country actors actively shaping the behaviour of Chinese actors and Chinese-financed projects,[27] and the Chinese government and corporate actors learning from and responding to local conditions, with varying degrees of success.[28] The argument of host country agency essentially shows that, despite the power asymmetry with international powers like China, host country's elites, bureaucrats and civil society can still actively shape Chinese projects and actors for their own benefit. These studies challenge earlier perceptions that Chinese actors, particularly the government in Beijing, are inflexible and insensitive to the local concerns of host countries, presenting instead a more complex picture of China's engagement with the Global South. Absorbing the external criticisms of the BRI by the media, scholars, foreign diplomats and policymakers, the Chinese state is pressured to adapt and revise its approach to promoting the initiative.[29]

Scholars also identify Beijing's active use of policy feedback loops in adjusting policy guidance for Chinese companies overseas.[30] This feedback loop is facilitated by the flow of personnel, information and ideas between enterprises and different levels of the state.[31] In the BRI's feedback loop, adverse outcomes are transmitted back to the decision makers in Beijing and have resulted in the recalibration and adjustment of policy rhetoric and guidelines.[32] The cycle starts with the central government issuing broad directives, like the BRI. The rhetorical vagueness encourages bureaucracies and enterprise leaders to interpret, respond to and experiment with these broad directives, which then generates feedback on the implementation.[33] The feedback then flows back to the central government and state institutions through channels such as popular media, scholarly and policy forums, diplomatic institutions and think-tank reports in China.[34] These channels transmit the external criticisms of the BRI, and the attempts by Chinese organizations in host countries to respond to these criticisms, to the government agencies in Beijing. In response, the bureaucracies

19 Heilmann and Perry 2011.
20 Florini, Lai and Tan 2012; Heilmann 2008.
21 Dimitrov 2013; Mertha 2008; Nathan 2003; Tsai, Lily 2007.
22 Dickson 2016; Tsai, Lily 2007.
23 Duckett 2001; Lee 2014.
24 Shambaugh 2008.
25 Zeng 2020; Ye 2020.
26 Ye 2020.
27 Wang 2023; Li 2023.
28 Liu and Lim 2019; Lampton, Ho and Kuik 2019.
29 Ye 2021.
30 Ye 2020.
31 Leutert 2021.
32 Ye 2020.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.

recalibrate the BRI and promote new regulations to monitor its implementation.[35] Next, the central government endeavours to recognize, legitimize and diffuse successful organizational reform experiences through in-person exchanges and publications.[36] The feedback loop completes its circle when central agencies review the results of larger-scale experiments and implementations, assess their success and launch a new cycle of policy initiatives.[37]

In response to external criticism of the BRI in recent years, Beijing has endeavoured to shift the initiative towards moderation and soft institutionalism.[38] An announcement in 2020 stated that the initiative has evolved from an "abstract painting" (*xieyihua* 写意画) to a "meticulous drawing" (*gongbihua* 工笔画).[39] In Beijing, national agencies have established frameworks with international organizations to address external concerns about the BRI's financial and environmental risks.[40] Furthermore, Beijing has offered guidance to and organized initiatives for companies when responding to overseas pushbacks. These guidelines remain vague and are based on voluntary action, however, and thus still permit Chinese companies, embassies and media overseas a significant degree of flexibility to experiment with a variety of strategies in response to local pressures. A notable initiative is the "Tell the China story well" campaign launched by Xi Jinping 习近平 in 2013, which aims to enhance China's international discourse power and boost its international influence. Xi's instructions are broad and directional, and thus subject to the interpretation of the implementing agencies. These adjustments have achieved only limited success, largely because the implementation of the BRI faces fundamental challenges owing to the fragmented nature of Beijing's leadership, the various levels of bureaucracy, and the involvement of national and subnational business actors.[41] Beijing's policy adjustments are insufficient to induce any fundamental change in the behaviour of Chinese capital.[42]

There is scant empirically grounded academic work that illuminates how Chinese key stakeholders in host countries respond innovatively to such criticism and how these practices are transmitted back to Beijing through various channels. This paper fills this gap by articulating the response mechanisms used by key Chinese actors to manage pushbacks. Chinese SOEs are at the frontline of resistance. They actively experiment with public relations strategies, embarking on steep learning curves, often through active learning from local stakeholders. Chinese media groups also serve as information channels through which Beijing can respond to overseas pushbacks against the BRI.

Argument

Prominent BRI projects in host countries with relatively open media and civil societies have become the targets of both local and international criticism. Beijing, however, faces informational and institutional challenges in regulating Chinese enterprises' overseas activities and providing timely responses to external criticism. The profit-seeking nature of Chinese firms, whether state-owned or private, further exacerbates the issue, especially in developing countries with lax legal systems. When firms venture into the diverse contexts of host countries, they often face significant challenges due to their limited understanding of local formal and informal rules, which can differ greatly from those in China. Navigating these differences can be particularly problematic since broad initiatives like the BRI are managed from Beijing in a centralized yet fragmented way, making it difficult to

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35 Ibid.
36 Leutert 2021.
37 Ibid.
38 Ye 2021.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
41 Ye 2020.
42 Ibid.

respond to criticism and even crises promptly.[43] Overseas institutions such as embassies or Chinese media bureaus are often limited in capacity and resources. This raises a crucial question: how does China respond to resistance to BRI projects in host countries?

We identify two mechanisms that detail how different Chinese state actors respond to local pushbacks and international criticism. These mechanisms sometimes work in tandem to help Beijing overcome the problems of informational and institutional gaps regarding Chinese companies' overseas activities and local and international resistance to BRI projects.[44] The first mechanism involves Chinese SOEs experimenting in host countries. Even without instruction from the Chinese government or their own headquarters in Beijing, some Chinese SOEs respond to criticism from the media and civil society by adjusting their corporate behaviour and learning by experimenting with different strategies. As a result, there has been an increase in SOEs' interactions with communities in host countries, characterized by increased media engagement, more transparency and enhanced CSR activities that extend beyond their domestic philanthropy models. The second mechanism is the direct flow of information to Beijing via the *neican* system and government-designated research activities. The top leadership receives the relevant information, which is then forwarded to the pertinent ministries and companies so that a response may be composed and policy implementation adjusted. The issues with informational gaps are bypassed by sending information directly to the centre, which ultimately enables Beijing to formulate a timely response to overseas challenges.

In this paper, we trace the process of the two response mechanisms by following how Chinese actors deal with overseas criticisms. At the corporate level, we analyse how China Road and Bridge Cooperation (CRBC) Kenya experimented with public relations strategies to respond to local criticism of the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), a BRI flagship project run by CRBC. We selected the SGR project because it is a typical case that illustrates how a prominent overseas BRI project responds to the criticisms of host and international communities. The SGR is the largest and most expensive infrastructure project to be undertaken in Kenya since its independence, and the project has been under the spotlight of the country's vibrant media and civil society since its inception. Our second case illustrates how Xinhua's internal reference system has facilitated Chinese government intervention in the face of international criticism and local political resistance to Chinese mining investments in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). While a variety of organizations and individuals can submit *neican*, Xinhua is the largest and most influential producer of internally circulated materials. The DRC case was identified by our informants as being the most significant in terms of *neican* from Africa, having received a written opinion (*pishi* 批示) from Xi Jinping, which justifies the selection of this case. We also present a shadow case to illustrate how *neican* facilitated Beijing's intervention to stop the destructive and fierce competition among Chinese SOEs in Zambia.

The empirical data used in this paper are drawn from a decade of fieldwork in Kenya, Zambia, Ethiopia and China, spanning from 2014 to 2023. The authors conducted more than 200 in-depth interviews with Chinese and African journalists, government officials, media managers, expert scholars, SOE managers (CRBC managers in particular) and members of host country civil society groups at various levels. Extensive interviews give us a nuanced understanding of how Chinese actors develop response mechanisms in the face of external criticism in Africa. The duration of the fieldwork allowed us to track the changes in actors' behaviour over time, providing us with a time-sensitive perspective on the evolving practices of both Chinese and host country actors. We triangulated the first-hand data with Chinese government regulations on corporate overseas behaviour, institutional guidelines on the BRI and SOEs' public relations and international communication materials to gain a comprehensive overview of the trajectory of SOEs' efforts to build a global image, including the strategies and tactics employed to enhance their reputation in Africa.

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43 Ye 2021.

44 These are not exhaustive channels, nor do we aim to evaluate the effectiveness of each mechanism.

Information Deficits and Institutional Gaps

This section starts by explicating the informational and institutional challenges Beijing faces in regulating the overseas activities of Chinese companies and formulating timely responses to external criticism. The filtering of the upward flow of information is common in China, as, when reporting to superiors, bureaucrats are aware that their performance will be judged based on what they report.[45] This issue is not confined to SOEs or the party-state apparatus but is a pervasive challenge in the governance of complex organizations.[46] Similar to the domestic over-reporting of economic figures, negative news is also filtered to depict a rosy image of overseas work. This issue is particularly acute in the practices of overseas SOEs. For instance, while SOEs are required to report accidents and injuries that occur on their project sites, project managers and SOE offices overseas tend not to do so, unless it is necessary, as explained by one Chinese SOE manager in Ethiopia:

> If a local employee is injured, we try to handle it by ourselves and not to report it [back to headquarters]. If a Chinese person is injured, then we arrange for them to go to the hospital and report it upward if the situation is life-threatening. Regulations are regulations, but if we implement everything according to the regulations, this would [create] too much annoyance for the leaders.[47]

The media environment in host countries significantly influences how such incidents are perceived and handled. In more controlled media environments, such as in Ethiopia, these events might be downplayed, whereas in countries like Kenya, which is known for its watchdog journalism,[48] or Zambia, where populist politics often scrutinize the Chinese presence,[49] incidents could trigger investigative reports, attract international media attention and even generate anti-China sentiment.[50] In the latter scenario, the filtering of upward reporting by SOEs can mean that critical details take longer to reach SOE headquarters, Chinese embassies and the relevant bureaucracies in Beijing. Such delays can impede the ability of the relevant agents to provide prompt instructions and allocate resources for an effective response, potentially leading to delayed or sometimes absent responses to criticisms from host countries that require immediate action. For instance, a Chinese community leader in Zambia, keen on translating local news into Chinese to post on social media, was challenged when he translated negative reports about SOEs. He was contacted by the Chinese embassy and accused of stirring up trouble.[51] Such repercussions result when translated content reaches officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), or other ministries in Beijing, who were previously unaware of such content. Subsequent doubts arise about the accuracy of the embassy's reporting, exposing a major communication gap between local and central levels of government. Such instances underscore the complexities of managing informational gaps and addressing institutional disparities, especially in the context of managing the BRI.

When negotiating and implementing BRI projects, host country elites and civil societies encounter not a powerful and unified China driving the BRI but rather a fragmented one.[52] China's fragmented institutional landscape has its roots in economic reforms.[53] The power and policy interaction between political leaders, bureaucracies and enterprises has been termed "fragmented

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45 Xiao and Womack 2014.

46 In addition to upward filtering, information distortion in China also includes restricting the downward flow of sensitive general information. See Xiao and Womack 2014 for detailed discussion.

47 Interview with a Chinese SOE manager in Ethiopia, 28 July 2023, Addis Ababa.

48 Li 2023.

49 Hess and Aidoo 2014; Polus and Li 2023.

50 Hess and Aidoo 2014; Li and Wang 2022.

51 Interview with a Chinese community leader in Zambia, 9 December 2023, Lusaka.

52 Wang 2023; Ye 2020.

53 Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988.

authoritarianism."[54] The state remains behind the helm of China's globalization, particularly in the context of the BRI; however, the system comprises various actors, including political leaders, national bureaucracies, local governments and SOEs, who operate within a complex and interactive web of roles and relationships.[55] These disparate actors interpret and reinterpret the central strategy, proposing and implementing programmes and projects based on their power bases and interests.[56] In addition, the profit-seeking nature of Chinese companies adds principal-agent dilemmas to the government's BRI management: government bureaucracies headquartered in Beijing (the principals) grapple with the task of synchronizing their objectives and interests with those of the myriad Chinese corporations operating abroad (the agents).[57] The lack of top-down coordination and limited restraints on firms' activities further complicate the management of the BRI.[58] Politically connected Chinese SOEs and policy banks have encountered complex factionalism between the state and state capital at both central and provincial levels, as well as among interest groups within different state agencies and across SOEs. Consequently, this fragmentation means that overseas operations do not receive comprehensive cross-agency support from Beijing.[59] Fragmentation, however, also allows state actors in host countries the space in which to innovate. Actors in various overseas settings have the flexibility to implement broadly conceived policies with significant leeway while keeping Beijing informed.

The shortage of staff and resources is a persistent challenge for Chinese embassies and economic and commercial counsellor's offices in host countries, representing a second institutional gap in addition to institutional fragmentation. The lack of effective supervision makes it difficult to pre-emptively reduce potential pushbacks against Chinese projects and leaves embassies and counsellor's offices unable to provide support to Chinese companies amid criticism. Given the extensive scale of Chinese economic activities in many countries involved with the BRI, the economic counsellor's offices often struggle to track and assess the involvement of Chinese companies, particularly private ones. For instance, during our visits to the Chinese economic and commercial counsellor's offices in Cambodia, Kenya, Angola and Zambia, officials in each office repeatedly underscored that there are very limited staff in these offices. In a 2017 interview, the-then economic counsellor in Zambia revealed that, "Only 200 Chinese companies have registered with our office and the Chinese embassy. I heard the real number is much bigger, but most of the private firms just come without letting us know. So, we don't have much information about them, and it is also hard to grasp the full information as we have very limited staff here."[60] Often, it is these unregistered and unsupervised firms that are the cause of criticisms of Chinese corporate behaviour in host countries. Staff shortages mean that Chinese embassies simply do not have the capacity to cultivate favourable local public opinion towards China. In sum, when there is local resistance to Chinese SOE projects, the filtering of information that flows upwards can leave overseas offices without the timely guidance and support from Beijing that is needed to address this resistance. Institutional gaps, including Beijing's fragmented BRI management and personnel shortages in host countries, further compound the Chinese government's difficulties in directly addressing host country criticisms and providing prompt support to SOEs. This pushes the SOEs overseas to develop innovative strategies for responding to criticism. The following two sections detail the mechanisms used by a Chinese SOE and a new agency, respectively, that serve either as learning institutions or information channels for Chinese actors in host countries and in Beijing to address criticism of the BRI.

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54 Ibid; Mertha 2008; 2009.
55 Ye 2020.
56 Ibid.
57 Gill and Reilly 2007.
58 Brautigam 2021.
59 Ibid.
60 Interview with the-then Chinese economic councillor in Zambia, 26 February 2017, Lusaka.

Response Mechanism 1. SOEs' PR Experimentation and Diffusion

Chinese SOEs frequently find themselves at the forefront of external criticism of the BRI and Chinese projects in general. Prompt and detailed regulatory guidance from Beijing and Chinese embassies is rare, given the large and diverse challenges enterprises face. For enterprises, these "windows of vulnerability" sometimes transform into "windows of opportunity" for effective learning. They experiment with innovative solutions by drawing lessons from interactions with local stakeholders, and by mimicking local companies and more established multinational companies. The cross-border structures of these large Chinese companies, headquartered in China and with many overseas branches, facilitate the emergence and diffusion of new practices that deal with criticism. The first response mechanism features Chinese SOEs' ground-level experimentation in host countries and the upward diffusion of these practices through their internal structures to Beijing. We illustrate this with the example of CRBC's steep learning curve as it worked to complete the Kenyan SGR, a BRI flagship project. Since its inception, the Chinese-financed and constructed SGR has faced intense media scrutiny and was used as political ammunition by Kenya's political opposition. The constant political derailing of the project and negative media reporting forced CRBC to change its strategy for dealing with the media, from stonewalling to actively responding to negative news and experimenting with various public relations approaches. Since construction began in December 2014, the SGR has been politicized. Former president Uhuru Kenyatta championed the project and used it as campaign capital for re-election in 2017, while the opposition used the SGR as a tool to critique the incumbent government's agenda.[61] The criticism began with the government's misconduct and soon spread to the Chinese contractor. The project has been subject to scrutiny from Kenyan and international media regarding corruption, its environmental impact, the tendering process, land acquisition, the CRBC's labour practices, local procurement and subcontracting issues, and the project's long-term debt sustainability. By 2014, CRBC had already been operating in Kenya for three decades but had no experience of running such a high-profile project, a factor which sparked extensive political and media debate. Owing to its lack of experience in dealing with Kenya's watchdog press,[62] CRBC initially relied on its Kenyan government counterparts to conduct its media relations. The Kenyan Railway Corporation (KRC), Ministry of Transport, National Land Commission and even the President's Office dealt with the media on the CRBC's behalf, shielding the Chinese contractor from direct exposure: "They [the CRBC] fear meeting the Kenyan media, we also want to keep them back, let them concentrate on the work, and we do the talking," a former managing director of KRC explained.[63]

The KRC actively engaged with the Kenyan media to promote the SGR and directly address criticisms. It organized its own story on the SGR by taking all the major Kenyan media outlets on tours of the SGR corridor.[64] On 29 April 2015, for instance, the KRC invited the major Kenyan media outlets to visit the SGR construction sites and the factories producing the sleepers and girders to learn about the project's progress and employment conditions for local workers.[65] This strategy yielded favourable news stories within a day and was aimed at bolstering public confidence in CRBC's ability to adhere to deadlines and fulfil contractual obligations promptly.[66] The KRC's second media strategy was to produce documentaries about the SGR, which were broadcast in prime-time slots, to shape the official narrative of the project. This was a pricy commitment – 5 million Kenyan shillings per month for a prime-time broadcast.[67] The collaboration and advice offered by the Kenyan government entities enabled CRBC to learn and adopt effective PR tactics.

61 Wang 2022.
62 Li 2023.
63 Interview with a senior KRC manager, 30 June 2023, Nairobi.
64 Ibid.
65 CRBC 2015; *Business Daily Africa* 2015.
66 *Business Daily Africa* 2015.
67 Interview, senior KRC manager.

CRBC's initial involvement was in responding to requests from the KRC for information and video clips. CRBC went on to produce documentaries jointly with the KRC and then invested in producing its own SGR documentaries.[68]

In addition to accepting advice from its government counterparts, CRBC hired a handful of local PR companies to navigate the media landscape in Kenya. Through its interactions with these companies, CRBC gained knowledge from Kenyan PR experts on media engagement and effective PR tactics. CRBC contracted the PMS Group, a renowned and well-connected PR firm,[69] to assist in tasks such as drafting and distributing press releases to local and international media, organizing public events and promoting positive coverage in the local media.[70] The PMS Group subcontracted a media monitoring company to provide daily reports on SGR mentions and related company news. The PMS analysts were tasked with reviewing these mentions, highlighting negative coverage and, when necessary, assisting in crafting replies or drafting responses.[71]

Over time, CRBC's engagement with the Kenyan media increased as it gradually mastered the "rules" of the Kenyan media landscape. Initially, during the SGR preparation phase, CRBC had minimal interactions with local media and preferred to rely on the official Chinese media stationed in Kenya. However, as criticism of the SGR mounted, CRBC significantly increased its investment in public relations and established regular communication channels with mainstream Kenyan media. The company familiarized itself with Kenya's media regulations, such as "the right of reply," and established a robust network of local media contacts. It actively reached out to its critics in the media instead of maintaining the "closed-door attitude" that is common among Chinese companies in Africa.[72]

CRBC also employed a variety of creative methods to enhance its public image. In collaboration with the Kenyan Ministry of Transport and the KRC, it organized two national photo contests, in 2015 and 2017, encouraging photographers to showcase the SGR's progress and its contribution to communities. These two competitions invited the Kenyan public to vote online for their favourite photo and were covered extensively by Kenyan media outlets, including the Kenyan Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) and the *Daily Nation*.[73] The company has also embraced social media, creating a Facebook page, "SGR photography competition," in a bid to engage the younger generation of Kenyans.[74] In response to media and public concerns about the potential impact of the railway on wildlife and the environment, and to build community support, CRBC produced a series of animated films to demonstrate how animals would migrate through different corridors and to explain how the railway design would, in its view, protect the environment and care for the wildlife.[75] The company even published three CSR reports on the SGR in a bid to enhance the social and environmental transparency of the project.

The effectiveness of CRBC's experimental strategies led to their diffusion across the organizational structure, including up to the headquarters of SOEs. The China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), the parent body of CRBC, awarded CRBC with several prestigious accolades for its exemplary execution of the SGR project. The CCCC commended CRBC for its proactive efforts in amplifying its CSR engagement and its adeptness at navigating and addressing

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68 Ibid.
69 Multiple interviews with representatives of CRBC, Nairobi and Beijing, 2019 and 2022. Our informants at CRBC refused to divulge the exact number of local PR firms it signed contracts with, but they confirmed that contracts were signed with multiple PR companies, paid for by CRBC annually.
70 Interview with anonymous former PMS employee, 17 July 2023, Nairobi.
71 Ibid.
72 Zheng 2022.
73 See, e.g., Omuya 2017; Wanja 2017.
74 CRBC's SGR Photography Competition website, https://www.facebook.com/SGRPhotographyCompetition/. Accessed 26 January 2023.
75 Huang 2017.

international pushbacks.[76] Such internal recognition serves as a strategic mechanism to foster the transfer of learning and knowledge across the CCCC's subsidiaries. It aims to promulgate refined CSR practices and external communications and elevate corporate governance standards across the conglomerate's diverse portfolio of companies.[77]

To further incentivize and institutionalize successful PR and CSR initiatives, the Chinese central government has introduced recognition programmes such as CSR awards and competitions. These programmes are aimed at identifying and celebrating the most compelling "China story" narratives.[78] The successful SOE experimentation ventures are then shared by arranging "in-person exchanges and circulating written materials."[79] The diffusion of these practices is further accelerated through forums and workshops aimed at sharing knowledge and building capacity among SOEs. These events, which often involve experts from the media, academia and industry, provide CRBC and other Chinese stakeholders with insights into best practices and current trends in global communications. Workshops that focus on PR strategy and crisis management equip SOE personnel with the skills and tools necessary to manage complex international concerns and criticisms effectively. For instance, the Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies, a state-level think tank, has organized internal meetings and public activities aimed at enhancing the international image of Chinese SOEs and has provided valuable insights to Chinese policymakers.

Response Mechanism 2. Internal Reference

Another crucial mechanism that enables the central government to respond to overseas resistance is the internal reference system, or *neican*. Established during the civil war, *neican* has become crucial to the CCP leadership in overcoming the problem of distorted information within the bureaucratic system. *Neican* refers to a secretive information channel that enables the Party, government, media, academic institutions and think tanks in China to submit reports directly to the Party and government leaders.[80] Journalistic internal reports from *People's Daily*, CCTV and Xinhua News Agency circulate widely at the Party's central level and among state leaders.[81] Xinhua News Agency is the largest and most influential producer of internally circulated news-related material.

Xinhua's internal reports adhere to a strict format, comprising three sections and usually capped at 2,000 words. Each piece starts by outlining the identified problem and then analyses the underlying reasons for the problem before concluding with actionable recommendations. In cases of significant complexity, submissions may include multiple grouped reports. Xinhua produces approximately seven to eight pieces daily from its seven regional offices worldwide.[82] For instance, the African regional offices contribute a dozen articles per month. Negative news reports about China or Chinese companies produced by host country media or international media are summarized in short passages of a few hundred words and submitted through a different Xinhua *neican* publication.

The internal reports are read by the Standing Committee secretary, who ensures their prompt delivery to the relevant Party and governmental officials, who may annotate the documents with

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76 CCCC 2023.

77 Telephone interview with CRBC manager, 2 August 2023.

78 For instance, see "Fanrong zhilu, weilai zhicheng! Zhongjiao jituan liang anli ruxuan 2020 Zhonggguo qiye haiwai xingxiang jianshe youxiu anli" (Road to prosperity, city of the future! CCCC's two cases selected as 2020 outstanding cases of Chinese enterprises' overseas image building). *Pengpai*, 5 November 2020, https://m.thepaper.cn/baijiahao_9874839. Accessed 17 March 2024.

79 Leutert 2021, 105173.

80 Tang 2017.

81 In addition to journalistic internal reference, leaders also read internal publications created by central and state agencies and military agencies. See *Renmin zhoukan* 2016.

82 The 7 regional offices cover Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Eurasia, Middle East, Latin America and North America. Interview with anonymous source, Beijing, September 2017.

pishi.[83] *Pishi* are often candid comments and offer instructions on how an issue should be managed and by whom.[84] Once an internal report receives *pishi*, it becomes an official Party document (*wen-jian* 文件) which may then be used in policymaking and policy implementation.[85] Once the reports have received written suggestions, recommendations or instructions, they are immediately forwarded to the lower-level officials responsible for dealing with the issues. Often, this can lead to the prompt investigation of the exposed problem.[86] For instance, a *neican* annotated with Xi Jinping's *pishi* will be sent to the Standing Committee and then be directed down, layer-by-layer, until it is eventually implemented by Chinese SOEs.[87]

Although the authors of *neican* typically do not have direct access to any *pishi*, they will be rewarded if their reports receive such annotations. By the end of the year, Xinhua's headquarters calculates the number of *pishi* received for all *neican* reports in that year. Afterwards, it informs its employees about the distribution of prizes, bonuses or promotions.[88] The General Office of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council feedback directly to Xinhua's editorial department regarding the number of reports that receive *pishi*. For journalists, the number and level of *pishi* serve as key performance indicators in their appraisal, although they do not directly affect their salary.[89] Occasionally, Xinhua's editorial department presents "excellent article" awards.[90]

Chinese think tanks are exerting a growing influence over governmental decision making through their research reports and *neican*. The recommendations of official think tanks are often evident in the reports issued by the Party Congress, meetings of the Central Plenary Session, five-year plans and government work reports.[91] For instance, each institute within the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a leading official think tank, produces a range of internal reference materials.[92] Beyond think tanks, universities are also actively engaged in advising various governmental departments. A key performance indicator for Chinese university faculty is the number of *neican* produced that receives *pishi* from ministries, provincial-level authorities, or above.[93]

In interviews, officials, journalists and scholars highlighted the vital nature of the *neican* system in feeding back information, both domestic and international, to the central government and ministries in Beijing. To illustrate with an example, Beijing, acting upon information gathered through *neican* reports, intervened in the damaging and intense rivalry among Chinese SOEs as they competed for infrastructure contracts in Zambia. The fierce competition between the firms led to harmful and corrupt actions implicating both Zambian officials and individuals within Chinese SOEs and the Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM). In 2016, after receiving a *neican* on the severity of the problem, the MOFCOM Party Group dispatched an inspection team to Zambia to investigate and deal with the issue.[94] The inspection team spoke to representatives of SOEs, Chinese community leaders and officials from the embassy and economic counsellor's office in Zambia. Despite the challenges of gathering reliable and concrete evidence, the investigation uncovered the complicit

83 Tang 2017.
84 Tsai, Wen-Hsuan 2015.
85 Ibid.
86 Tang 2017.
87 Interview with anonymous source, Beijing, June 2023.
88 Tsai, Wen-Hsuan 2015.
89 For instance, it is mandatory for chief correspondents at Xinhua in Africa to submit a minimum of 8 internal references annually as part of their key performance indicators. While exceeding this minimum is encouraged, emphasis is placed on prioritizing quality over quantity.
90 Interview with a senior manager from Xinhua News Agency, Beijing, 2 September 2018.
91 *Renmin zhoukan* 2016.
92 Tang 2017; *Renmin zhoukan* 2016.
93 Interviews with Chinese scholars, Beijing, June 2023.
94 Multiple interviews with representatives of SOEs in Zambia, Lusaka, March 2017; personal communication with Chinese officials, Beijing, 2019 and 2023.

individuals working in the SOEs and the economic counsellor's office, who then faced internal criticism which damaged their prospects for promotion.[95]

Another significant case from our study underscores the central government's dependence on internal reports when formulating responses. After taking office in 2019, President Felix Tshisekedi of the DRC fulfilled his campaign promise to review and renegotiate foreign mining contracts that had been agreed by his predecessor, Joseph Kabila. Two major Chinese mining investors came under fire in this contract reviewing process. The DRC is the world's largest producer of cobalt and a major copper producer, with 90 per cent of its mining exports heading to China.[96] In May 2021, President Tshisekedi announced his intention to review certain mining contracts that were not delivering sufficient benefit to the DRC. His primary targets were the privately-owned China Molybdenum, which had purchased two mines from the US company Freeport-McMoran, and Sicomines, a joint venture set up between a Chinese SOE-private enterprise consortium[97] and two Congolese firms, Gécamines and Simco.[98] Subsequently, China Molybdenum and Sicomines encountered operational challenges, including the temporary suspension of the Chinese firms' management of the Tenke Fungurume copper and cobalt mine. The case attracted international attention through coverage by Western media outlets like Reuters and the involvement of legal experts and international NGOs.[99] The Chinese ambassador warned that the DRC "must not be a battlefield between major powers."[100]

In November 2022, Xinhua submitted a series of *neican* reports.[101] Following Tshisekedi's speech at the World Economic Forum in January 2023, Xinhua produced another *neican* to draw the senior leadership's attention to the issue. These *neican* received Xi Jinping's *pishi* instructing the Chinese companies involved to "strengthen research and accelerate progress." Xi's handwritten *pishi* was only eight Chinese characters long but was powerful enough to propel the Chinese to find a way to resolve the issue.[102] MOFCOM and the National Development and Reform Commission established a special group to manage the Sicomines issue, which required daily progress updates from Sicomines.[103] In March 2023, Deng Li 邓励, vice-foreign minister in charge of African affairs, led a delegation to the DRC and held a meeting with his counterpart, Christophe Lutundula, in Kinshasa. Although there is little public information about the meeting, our interviews indicate that this visit was pivotal to paving the way to resolving the dispute over the mining contracts.[104] Deng Li stressed that suspending DRC–China cooperation would be a lose-lose measure.[105] During this visit, Deng Li invited Tshisekedi to visit China in May of that year, and indeed, Tshisekedi paid his first state visit to China between 24 and 29 May 2023, during which he had meetings with Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang 李强. Although it was expected that the Congolese president would ask Beijing to renegotiate the contracts for the Sicomines deal, the actual negotiations were undertaken by a specific working group. The leadership meeting was to build rapport and goodwill between the two sides. After the Xi–Tshisekedi meeting, the Chinese Foreign Ministry announced that the two

95 Ibid.
96 Rolley 2023.
97 China Railway Group (Hong Kong) Ltd (CREC), China Railway Resources Development Ltd (CREC), Zhejiang Huayou Cobalt Company Ltd, Sinohydro Corporation Ltd and Sinohydro Harbour Company Ltd.
98 Landry 2018.
99 "EXCLUSIVE Congo reviewing $6 bln mining deal with Chinese investors – finmin." *Reuters*, 30 August 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/exclusive-congo-reviewing-6-bln-mining-deal-with-chinese-investors-finmin-2021-08-27/. Accessed 10 March 2024.
100 Ibid.
101 Interview with anonymous source, 18 June 2023.
102 The specific words Xi used could not be recalled by the interviewee.
103 Interview with anonymous source, 18 June 2023.
104 Ibid. Security cooperation was another discussion topic during Deng Li's visit, in addition to China's mining investments in the DRC (Forum des As 2023).
105 Ibid.

countries would upgrade their bilateral relationship from a win-win strategic cooperative partnership to a comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. The DRC case illustrates that the *neican* system serves as an important tool for various levels of Chinese government departments to address information deficits and enables information to be directed to the highest leadership, drawing attention to issues and facilitating quicker resolutions.

The effectiveness of the internal report system also faces inherent challenges, particularly with regard to the role of those responsible for producing *neican*. Agencies like Xinhua hold significant gatekeeping power, with the discretion to manipulate the information relayed to China's leadership and thus influence the narrative constructed at the highest levels. It is thus critical to recognize the pivotal role of individual agency within these processes. Despite the numerous issues surrounding the BRI projects that warrant *neican* reporting, there is a palpable hesitation among some journalists to proceed with such reports, encapsulated by the phrase, "do less to avoid making trouble for oneself" (*duoyishi buru shaoyishi* 多一事不如少一事).[106] This reticence stems from the understanding that all matters can be intrinsically linked to personal relationships, and there is a conscious desire to avoid offending others. This can further hamper the flow and integrity of information transfer, potentially detracting from the precision and comprehensiveness of the feedback provided to the central leadership. These dynamics suggest a complex interplay between institutional mechanisms and individual agency that can affect the overall effectiveness of China's response strategies to global perceptions and criticisms.

Conclusion

This paper offers the first empirically grounded explanation of the distinct yet interconnected mechanisms that Chinese state actors use to respond to local resistance and international criticism. These pushbacks find their roots in host countries' domestic politics and the competition for global power. In the Kenyan case, the Chinese-sponsored SGR was highly politicized, with the-then incumbent president Kenyatta using it as part of his electoral campaign capital and the opposition party criticizing the railway as a way to attack the Kenyatta government. This politicization is evident in the Kenyan media's scrutiny of both the railway project and the Chinese contractor CRBC. Although aware of the political controversy surrounding the railway, CRBC and the Chinese embassy lacked the capacity (and willingness) to tackle the criticisms voiced by the media. Our case study documents how they initially hid behind the Kenyan government and simply focused on the technical work of construction, but then actively learned and adapted PR strategies that would work in the Kenyan context. In the DRC, the new president Tshisekedi sought to distance himself from his predecessor, whose close connections with Chinese mining companies attracted both domestic and Western detractors. Tshisekedi's decision to review the Chinese mining contracts was encouraged by the scrutiny of Western media and legal entities. Both the Chinese companies and Xinhua were cognizant of the political motivations surrounding the decision to review the contracts, and as this issue required intervention from Beijing, the direct reporting mechanism of *neican* was deployed to attract the attention of top-level leaders.

The CRBC case in Kenya exemplifies a broader narrative of evolving strategies among Chinese SOEs in response to global criticisms. Through a process of experimentation and the diffusion of effective practices, direct engagement with local stakeholders, strategic silences on sensitive issues and the leveraging of diplomatic channels, Chinese SOEs like CRBC have demonstrated their adaptability by interacting with local stakeholders and actively learning and experimenting. The *neican* system reveals the strategic importance placed on managing overseas criticisms by the highest levels of the Chinese government. The involvement of Xi Jinping through his directives underscores the responsiveness of the central government in addressing challenges encountered in international

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106 Personal communication with a Xinhua journalist, Beijing, 13 August 2022.

projects. These mechanisms – combining corporate public relations, diplomatic engagement and top-level governmental oversight – reflect the complex dynamics Chinese entities navigate in global infrastructure development and international communications.

Theoretically, this paper contributes to the literature on China's adaptive governance by focusing the analysis on Chinese state actors' practices overseas and underlining host country social actors as key drivers of SOEs' behavioural changes. We find that decentralized experimentation, used to explain China's domestic economic policy, also elucidates Chinese SOEs' active learning and innovation overseas while implementing the BRI projects. Given the BRI's centralized yet fragmented management and the often inadequate and ad hoc policy guidance directed at Chinese SOEs' overseas activities, SOEs facing local pushbacks have to develop new problem-solving skills. They subsequently diffuse these local experiences to their headquarters in Beijing and then further afield to other firms through the government's promotion. We demonstrate that despite the power asymmetry between China and African host countries like Kenya, host country actors such as media outlets, editors and PR firms, etc. can still exert pressure on Chinese actors to behave in ways that benefit the host country's domestic development.

This paper also makes an empirical contribution by inductively identifying two mechanisms that enable Chinese state actors in host countries to respond to local pushbacks and to overcome the information deficits and institutional challenges that are present within the management of the BRI. Building on the BRI feedback loop identified by Min Ye, and the feedback mechanisms in China's domestic market reform identified by Wendy Leutert, we advance this literature by empirically identifying the agents (SOEs and Chinese state media) that facilitate the transfer of external information/feedback back to Beijing, and the specific responses from Beijing in reaction to such feedback (for example, awarding and diffusing corporate practices and the centre's direct intervention through sending bureaucratic delegations).[107] The authors' decade-long fieldwork, with balanced accounts from both China and host countries, has proved to be particularly valuable in this inductive exercise.

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107 Ye 2020; Leutert 2021.

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