Research Trend of ‘Belt and Road Initiative’: A Comparative Literature Review on Japanese, Chinese and English Academic Articles

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I. Introduction

‘The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road’, simply named as ‘the Belt and Road’ or ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ is introduced by Chinese president Xi Jinping in September 2013. The ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ immediately attracts great attention in economic circle and political circle as the initiative is cultural, economic and political. Furthermore, it does not only influence to participating counties, but also to non-participation counties. It is believed that since 2013, scholars from different academic disciplines start to study ‘Belt and Road Initiative’. This paper aims to study how ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ is being discussed in academia, especially in Japanese, Chinese and English academic articles. In other words, it is to examine and compare the research trend of ‘Belt and Road Initiative’. The reasons why this paper focuses on Japanese, Chinese and English academic articles are first, Japanese academia has a long history in studying China, Japanese academia can give an East Asia perspective towards ‘Belt and Road Initiative’. Second, since ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ is introduced by Chinese government, it is necessary to examine how Chinese academia discusses ‘Belt and Road Initiative’. Third, English is the most frequently used languages in academic publish and authors are from all over the world, therefore, English academic articles can provide a wider and objective perspective towards ‘Belt and Road Initiative’. In sum, this paper first analyzes the characteristics of academic articles in each language, and then compares the research trend on ‘the Belt and Road’.

II. Background of ‘the Belt and Road’

On 7th September 2013, Chinese president Xi Jinping announced the idea of ‘the Silk Road Economic Belt’ during his visit in Kazakhstan. Nearly a month later, on 3rd October 2013, Xi announced the idea of ‘the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road’ during his visit in Indonesia. The idea of ‘the Silk Road Economic Belt’ and ‘the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road’ comes from ancient Silk Road. However, this new Silk Road is not built by merchants or traders, rather it is a strategy introduced by Chinese government. In other words, it is Chinese government orientated. According to the official homepage of ‘the Belt and Road’, the principles of ‘the Belt and Road’ are open for cooperation, harmonious and inclusive, market-oriented and mutual benefit (State Information Center of People's Republic of China). Although the idea of ‘the Belt and Road’ is introduced in 2013, the actual practice starts after the establishment of Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which means after December 2015. It is because infrastructure construction in developing countries is one of the main themes of the initiative and AIIB provides funding
to those developing countries and relevant projects. Beside infrastructure development, policy coordination, trade, financial integration, cultural exchanges are also the themes of the initiative. Until 2017, there are 70 countries cooperating with China under the initiative. Most of the countries are developing countries in Central Asia and East Europe.

III. Research Method

This study is a comparative literature review on Japanese, Chinese and English academic articles published between 2013 and July 2017. Academic articles are collected through search engines in various academic journals databases by entering keywords, ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’, ‘21st Century Maritime Silk Road’, ‘One Belt One Road’, ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ and ‘New Silk Road’, etc. in Japanese, Chinese and English separately. Japanese articles are collected from CiNii, a Japanese scholarly and academic information navigator. Chinese articles are collected from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), a Chinese national academic database. English articles are collected from JSTOR, SAGE Journals, ProQuest, Elsevier, Taylor & Francis Groups, academic journals database providers. Articles which are analyzed in this study are those published by July 2017 and whole article is accessible through the library of TOYO University. However, some articles which are printed in academic journals are excluded. They are articles which are less than 5 pages in Japanese or Chinese, printed in single column and less than 3 pages in English. Within 3 languages, the Chinese academic articles vary dramatically in quality. After screening, this study selected 99 articles from 5330 found articles. For English academic articles, this study only can access 114 articles from 122 founded articles. Thus, this study is done base on 13 Japanese articles, 99 Chinese articles and 114 English articles.

IV. Characteristics and research trend in Japanese academic articles

This study has collected 13 Japanese articles from CiNii. All 13 articles are published between 2015 and July 2017. Although the initiative of ‘the Belt and Road’ is introduced in 2013, there is no Japanese academic article discuss or analyze ‘the Silk Road Economic Belt’, ‘the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road’ or ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ in 2013 or 2014. However, there is an increasing trend in studying ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ because 3 articles are published in 2016 and 6 articles are published in 2017 within 7 months.

Although all articles are written in Japanese and are published by Japanese academic institutes, not all authors are Japanese and attach to Japanese academic institute. According to the name and title of the authors, it is possible to identify the background of the authors. Among 13 articles, 7 articles are written by Japanese and 6 are written by Chinese. Within the articles that are written by Japanese authors, 3 articles are written by the same person. And for the articles written by Chinese authors, 3 articles are submitted by authors who are not attached to Japanese institute (2 is from mainland China, and 1 is from Taiwan). This implies that studies on ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ are limited in Japan. This situation also implies that Chinese scholars have interest to publish academic articles in Japanese academic institutions or to encourage, to promote ‘the Belt and Road’ studies in Japanese academia.

Besides the background of the authors, from the publisher of the articles, it is clear that ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ is not a common research topic in Japanese academia. Among the 13 articles, 9 articles are published by private research institutes, 3 are published by research institute attaches to university and 1 is published by academic society. The
articles that are published by private research institutes, 4 are published by ‘The Economic Research Institute for Northeast Asia’, another 4 are published by ‘The Japan Research Institute, Limited’, and 1 is published by ‘Institute for International Trade and Investment’. These private research institutions are economic research institutes; therefore, ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ is one of their research interests.

Based on the discipline of the academic journals and the content of the articles, 13 articles are basically from 6 disciplines. They are Area Studies (1 article), Development Economics (1 article), Regional economics (1 article), Risk and Crisis Management (1 article), International Economics (6 articles) and International Relations (2 articles). In other words, most of the articles are from the discipline of Economics.

The main characteristics of the content are first, mentioning AIIB; second, are in questioning stand. Within 13 articles, 8 articles have mentioned AIIB. AIIB is a multilateral development bank that provides loans for infrastructure building; it has an important position in turning ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ into practice. Although most articles mentioned AIIB, their objects are different. For example, discussing the trade relation between China and its neighboring countries under ‘the Belt and Road’, examining the economic influence of ‘the Belt and Road’, analyzing AIIB, questioning the effectiveness of ‘the Belt and Road’, etc.

In sum, Japanese academic articles related to ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ are limited and mainly focus on economic aspects. In November 2017, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe agreed with Chinese president Xi to develop Japan-China business during a meeting in Vietnam (The Mainchi, 2017). This action implies Japanese government has a will to encourage Japanese firms to cooperate in ‘the Belt and Road’. The involvement of Japan in China’s ‘the Belt and Road’ will increase the demand on ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ research. ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ is not just an economic or political strategy, it also includes cultural exchanges. However, cultural exchanges between Japan and China start from 1972 and have a deep foundation. Therefore, in the coming years, research related to ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ will still focus on economic aspects in Japanese academia.

V. Characteristics and research trend in Chinese academic articles

When searching ‘Yidai-yilu’ (the Belt and Road) in China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), 5330 relevant academic articles are published by July 2017. However, these 5330 articles are varying in quality. In order to analyze the characteristics and research trend in Chinese academic articles, 99 articles are well selected for this study after strict screening.

The collected 99 articles are published between 2014 and July 2017. From the distribution of the 99 articles by its published year, it seems that the number of articles has increased sharply in 2015, dropped suddenly in 2016 and increased again in 2017. However, this cannot reflect the reality as these 99 articles are well selected. In order to provide an accurate trend, all the found articles (5330 articles) are also included in figure 3. From the distribution of 5330 articles, it shows an increasing trend of academic publish from 2014. Although the collected data stops in July 2017, by the end of July 2017 there are already 1851 articles published which is 86% of those published in 2016 (2142 articles).

Based on the discipline of the academic journals and the content of the articles, 99
academic articles are from 22 disciplines. They are Policy Studies (16 articles), International Relations (16 articles), International Trade (10 articles), Economic geography (7 articles), Asian Studies (6 articles), International Economics (5 articles), International Laws (5 articles), Educational sociology (5 articles), Social Research (5 articles), Crisis Management (4 articles), Public Policies (3 articles), Monetary Economics (2 articles), Geopolitics (2 articles), Environmental Economics (2 articles), Accounting (2 articles), Architecture (2 articles), Logistics (2 articles), Civil Laws (1 article), Transportation engineering (1 article), Management (1 article), Tourism Geography (1 article), and Environmental Science (1 article). The largest share of the selected Chinese academic articles is from the discipline of Policy Studies (16%) and International Relations (16%). In other words, 32% of the selected articles are from the discipline of Political Sciences.

All the well selected articles use the term ‘Yidai-Yilu’ (the Belt and Road) in the title of the article and all are published by research institutes in University. Although this study clarifies the 99 articles into 22 disciplines, the content of the articles are in great variation. For example, analyzing how ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ can improve the development and economic situation of China and related countries, discussing how importance is ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ to China, providing suggestions to different issues faced by ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, etc. Since the practice of ‘the Belt and Road’ starts after the establishment of AIIB, most of the articles are basically explaining the idea or concept of the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, rather than analyze or examine the subject. Almost all articles emphasize ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ is a win-win game (games without losers, it is one of the principles of the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’) and how it is beneficial to the partner countries. Additionally, most articles try to link the subject internationally, but most of them end up with China-centered conclusions. Therefore, the main characteristic of Chinese academic articles is positive attitude towards the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’.

On the whole, the selected Chinese academic articles primarily from the discipline of political sciences. This suggests that Chinese academia mainly focuses the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ in political perspective rather than economic direction. Since selected articles generally analyze or discuss ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ in a positive way, it can conclude that the selected articles are subjective. One of the reasons is ‘the Belt and Road’ is a national strategy that Chinese scholars spontaneously support the initiative. Therefore, it is predictable that academic articles published in Chinese in relation to ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ continue to be positive. Considering ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ concurrently serves as a foreign policy (including both political and cultural factors) and an economic policy, the research trend of ‘the Belt and Road’ in Chinese academia will mainly remain in economic perspective; at the same time, the demand from cultural perspective is increasing.

VI. Characteristics and research trend in English academic articles

This study has collected 122 English academic articles related to ‘the Belt and Road’, which are published between 2014 and July 2017, unfortunately, this study only can access 114 articles. All these articles are from peer-reviewed journals. Most of these English academic articles are published in 2016. However, there is an increasing trend of publishing English academic articles related to ‘the Belt and Road’ since 2015. By July 2017, 40 academic articles are published, which is 80% of 2016. This suggests that at the end of 2017, the number of English academic articles related to ‘the Belt and Road’
Considering English is the most common language used in academic publishing, authors of these 114 articles are from all over the world. Although it is difficult to identify the nationality of the authors by surnames, titles or the location of their attached institutes, despite the author is a co-author or a single author, by referring to the surname 53.5% of the articles are contributed by authors who have Chinese surname. This suggests over half of the articles are contributed by authors who have Chinese background. And this also reflects scholars who have Chinese background are interested to study 'the Belt and Road'.

Depend on the journal's discipline and article’s content, this study has classified the collect 114 articles into 8 disciplines. They are Agricultural Science (4 articles), Area Studies (11 articles), Earth Sciences (6 articles), Economics (36 articles), Geography (7 articles), Law (1 article), Sociology (2 articles) and Political Sciences (47 articles). Among 114 articles, the largest share is Political Sciences (41%), following by Economics (32%) and Area Studies (10%). This shows most English academic articles analyze 'Belt and Road Initiative' from the perspective of political or economic.

If organize the articles into a more detailed disciplines, 18 sub-disciplines can be identified. They are Agricultural Economics, Asian Studies, Cultural Studies, Development Economics, Economic Geography, Energy Economics, Environmental Science, Financial Economics, Geopolitics, International Economics, International Law, International Relations, Policy Studies, Political Economy, Resource Economics, Social Geography, Transport Economics and Transportation Engineering. Within the 18 sub-disciplines, the discipline of International Relations has the largest share (22%), following by Policy Studies (15%) and Asian Studies (10%). It may related to 'Belt and Road Initiative' is both an economic and political strategy and the theme of the initiative is to improve cooperation between countries.

The content of the 114 articles are great in variation. Although China does not show a definite stance to exclude U.S. from 'the Belt and Road', 7 articles in the field of International Relations focus China-U.S. relations under the practice of 'Belt and Road Initiative'. These articles assume 'Belt and Road Initiative' can empower China and affect the position of U.S. as the World political or economic leader. In other words, some International Relations scholars believe 'Belt and Road Initiative' could increase China’s international political power and China’s responsibility in global governance. Besides articles from International Relations, articles from Asian Studies, Policy Studies and Political Economy also analyze how 'Belt and Road Initiative' affect China’s position in the world. Since, 'Belt and Road Initiative' is not just a foreign strategy or a political strategy, there are certain articles discuss the economic effect of 'the Belt and Road'. Yet, 'the Belt and Road' starts its practice after the establishment of AIIB, recognized outcomes are still limited. Therefore, it is still difficult to assess the economic effects; as a result, most arguments are remaining in prediction.

Besides the discipline and content, wording representing 'the Belt and Road' or 'Belt and Road Initiative' are rich in diversity. Although official English translations are posted in the official homepage ‘Belt and Road Portal’ (hosted by the Central government of China), most English articles present 'the Belt and Road' or 'Belt and Road Initiative' differently. For the official names, 'the Belt and Road' and 'Belt and Road Initiative' are announced in mid-2017. Before that, ‘One Belt One Road’ or ‘OBOR’ are the official names of the
initiative. Additionally, ‘the Silk Road Economic Belt’ and ‘the 21th-Century Maritime Silk Road’ are the official name of the land project and maritime project respectively. Among the 114 articles published between 2013 and July 2017, ‘the belt and Road’ are mostly represented by ‘One Belt One Road’ 1 (75 times), following by ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ (74 times) and ‘21st-Century Maritime Silk Road’(47 times). This shows although some articles only focus on analyzing ‘the Silk Road Economic Belt’ or ‘the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road’, most authors mention the land project and maritime project together.

All in all, English academic articles mainly discuss ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ from political or economic aspects. However, cultural exchange is considered as an important part of cooperation. Therefore, it is expected to have more studies on culture exchange between China and Central Asia or Middle East countries in the near future. Especially, the Chinese government set up a study abroad or study in China policy to attract oversea students to study in China, at the same time, to send Chinese students to study in ‘the Belt and Road’ participating countries in 2106. Nonetheless, studies from economic and political perspectives will remain as the major area in studying ‘the Belt and Road’.

VII. Comparative Studies on Japanese, Chinese and English academic articles

‘The Belt and Road’ is a cultural, economic and political initiative which across Eurasia continent and its related oceans. The impact of this initiative is still unpredictable as it is not only related to 71 participating counties (by the end of 2017), but also to their neighboring countries or traditional trade partners. After comparing the characteristics and content of Japanese, Chinese and English academic articles, this study concludes as the following.

First, this study finds research trend on ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ in Japanese, Chinese and English are slightly different. Japanese and Chinese articles mainly focus in economy, but English articles focus more in politic.

Second, the quantity of academic articles published in Japanese, Chinese and English between 2013 and July 2017 is in a huge gap. Although this study has some regulations in selecting academic articles, only 13 articles can be found in Japanese. Comparing to the Chinese (5330 articles without screening) and English (122 articles, including those author cannot access), publication of Japanese academic article related to ‘the Belt and Road’ is far behind. Figure 9 shows the number of selected articles by their published languages and published period. In other words, it suggests that ‘the Belt and Road’ is still not a popular research topic in Japanese academia but a hot topic in Chinese academia and has attracted certain attention in the global.

Third, the quality of academic articles written in Japanese, Chinese and English are varied. Academic articles that are written in Japanese are mostly discussing the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ from economic aspects. On the other hand, academic articles that are written in Chinese are mostly explaining the idea or concept of ‘Belt and Road Initiative’. More evaluations, examinations, analysis are found in English academic articles. All in all, quantitative and qualitative researches on ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ are limited in all 3 languages. This is because the initiative has just started; it is difficult to produce qualitative research in a short period.

Forth, the variety of discipline is different. Among the 3 languages, academic articles
written in Chinese have the highest variety in discipline. Japanese articles are typically from Economic. Cultural, Environmental, and Transport related disciplines can only be found in Chinese and English articles. This result may relate to the attitude of Japanese government towards ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, as Japanese government does not show intention to join ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ until December 2017. Still, economic and political influences from ‘the Belt and Road’ not only occur in participating counties, Japan is affected indirectly from its trade partners who have joined ‘the Belt and Road’. This can explain why Japanese academic articles mainly focus on economic aspects.

Fifth, wide variation in wording representing ‘the Belt and Road’ is found only in English academic articles. Since Japanese language uses Chinese characters and is influenced by Chinese language during ancient period, wording representing ‘the Belt and Road’ in Japanese articles is the same as those in Chinese articles. For English articles, even Chinese government has announced official English translation of ‘the Belt and Road’ and ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, most English articles use different wordings, such as ‘One Road One Belt’, ‘Belt and Road Strategy’, ‘New Silk Road’, ‘Maritime Silk Road’ to represent the initiative. This suggests authors of English articles pay not much attention to the official wordings.

Sixth, the attitude towards ‘the Belt and Road’ in 3 languages are different. Japanese articles basically in question stance and Chinese articles typically positive and China-centered. However, English articles do not show a united attitude. This may because authors of English articles are from all around the world and the influence of ‘the Belt and Road’ to their research interests and areas are different. Therefore, it can say that English academic articles can provide a more objective perspective than Japanese and Chinese academic articles.

Seventh, the present of authors who have Chinese background in Japanese and English academic publish is conspicuous. Among 13 Japanese articles, 6 articles are written by Chinese scholars who are from mainland China and Taiwan. Within 114 English articles, 61 articles are written or co-authors with authors who have Chinese background. This shows that almost half of the Japanese and English articles are contributed by authors who have Chinese background. This implies that scholars who have Chinese background consider ‘the Belt and Road’ is an interesting topic for research or Chinese scholars are more willing to promote research on ‘the Belt and Road’ in different academia.

VIII. Conclusion

To conclude, the recent research trend on ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ by July 2017 in Japanese, Chinese and English academic articles is centered on Economic and Political perspectives. It is believes that this result is closely related to the idea of ‘the Belt and Road’ as it emphasizes on cooperation, trade and infrastructure development. The limitation of this study is the number of academic article published between 2013 and July 2017 varies largely in 3 languages, especially the number of Japanese articles is not comparable to Chinese and English. By comparing academic articles published in Japanese, Chinese and English, it is clear that ‘the Belt and Road’ is not yet a hot topic in Japanese academia and only attract certain attention in global academia by July 2017. Since cooperation, trade, infrastructure development projects related to ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ start in 2015, the influence of ‘the Belt and Road’ will appear gradually in different fields, such as environment science and area studies. This study believes that ‘Belt and Road Initiative’ will attract more attention in different disciplines and academia
in the near future.

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