

China's "Two Sessions" in 2017

—Analysis of English Public Opinion in Southeast and South Asia

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Abstract

Being an important political event, the National People's Congress and the Chinese Political Consultative Conference (also known as "Two Sessions") have drawn attention worldwide. Since neighboring China and playing significant roles in Chinese "the Belt and Road" initiative, countries in Southeast and South Asia have delivered reports specifically about heating issues over "Two Sessions". The overall features of public opinion are as follow: 1) the number of reports increases as time passes; 2) reporting focuses lie mainly on economic and political fields and factual reports account for more than half of the whole coverage; 3) national differences exist in reporting focuses, accompanied by prominent nationally public opinion tendencies; 4) domestic media diversify with one and another about focuses of coverage. After research, this paper suggests that, to improve its power of discourse in international public opinion, China should strengthen its publication with English media by keeping an eye on public opinion tendency as well as standpoint of diversified media overseas.

Keywords

2017 "Two Sessions", Southeast Asia, South Asia, English Public Opinion

1. Introduction

The annual National People's Congress (NPC) and the Chinese Political Consultative Conference (CPCC), also known as "Two Sessions", is an access for the world to know China comprehensively. From March 2nd to 15th, President Xi Jinping's speech, government work report and several press conferences have become the focus of international media. As important cooperators in China's "the Belt and Road" initiative, Southeast and South Asian countries have conveyed highly concern over Chinese "Two Sessions", delivering reports and rele-

vant interpretations accordingly.

This paper selects seven target countries in Southeast and South Asia, and analyzes the reports on Chinese “Two Sessions” in their English newspapers respectively. These countries include: five Southeast Asian countries—Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and two South Asian countries—India, Pakistan. Two factors have been taken into consideration when we choose these countries as objects of analysis. On one hand, these seven countries have comparatively economic strength and bond tightly with China’s “the Belt and Road” initiative. Thus, they are of great importance to China’s diplomacy and will pay close attention on changes in China’s political, economic and cultural areas as well. On the other hand, in these seven countries, English media hold important impact on public opinion due to the popular usage of English language.

International news reports are often accompanied by national standpoints and imprints. What are the heated topics over “Two Sessions” for different countries? How will the angle of report be chosen? All these questions can reflect a country’s public opinion and tendencies to some extent. However, the academia and media place too much emphasis on Western reports about “Two Sessions”, while giving countries in South and Southeast Asia the cold shoulder. Generally speaking, these countries and China are closely intertwined over common interests as well as conflicts of stake. Hence, this paper focuses on seven target countries and analyzes their reporting characteristics of public opinion during “Two Sessions” in detail.

2. Analysis of the Overall Number of Reports

From March 2nd to 16th, we collected 104 pieces of reports from mainstream English media in those seven countries, based on two major new databases—Press reader and LexisNexis. The specific distribution of the news has been shown in **Figure 1**. After analyzing the reports, it’s indicated that Malaysia (29), Singapore (19) and India (19) express highest concern over “Two Sessions”, and the number of media in Malaysia and India outweighs the other five. There are four Malaysian media (*The Star Malaysia, New Straits Times, The Sun, The StarBiz*)

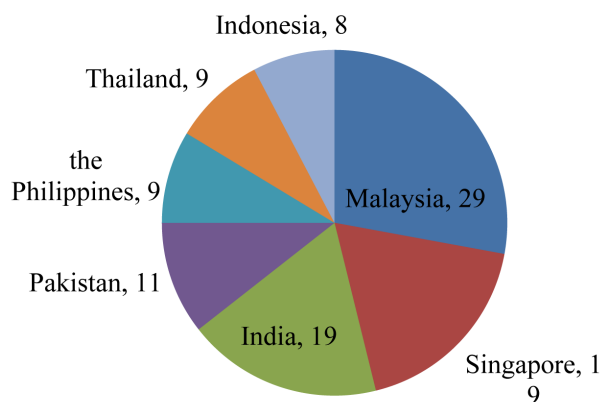


Figure 1. Distribution of report number.

and seven Indian media (*The Indian Express*, *The Hindu Business*, *The Sunday Guardian*, *India Today*, *Economic Times*, *Business Standard*, *Hindustan Times*). Indonesia has the least number of reports but showed its concern on “Two Sessions” on March 3rd by a piece of predictive news.

The overall number of reports is less on the earlier stage than that on the later one. The volatility has become obvious as time flowed. It’s worthy of noting that news media focus most on the government working report, Foreign Minister press conference and Premier Li Keqiang’s press conference. Accompanied by these three events, the number of reports reaches three small peaks respectively. The largest number of report appears on the second day after “Two Sessions” commencement. The contents are mostly concerned with Premier Li Keqiang’s press conference and comprehensive review over “Two Sessions” (see **Figure 2**).

3. Analysis of Reports on Important Issues

3.1. Mainly Focus on Economic and Political Fields

This paper divides the content of reports into eight categories including economics, politics, people’s livelihood, diplomacy, law, military, finance & tax, and others. According to the statistics, focuses of public opinion fall mostly on economics, politics, people’s livelihood and diplomacy. Furthermore, reports on economics and politics account for more than half of all coverage (see **Figure 3**).

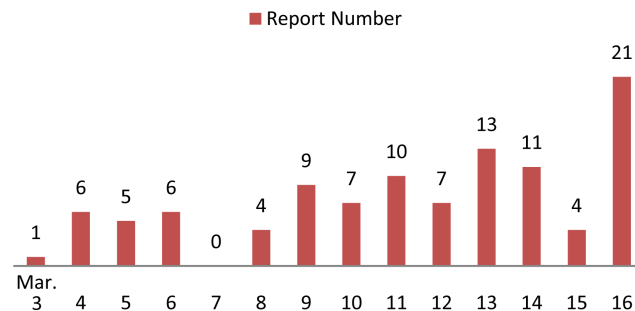


Figure 2. Time distribution of report number.

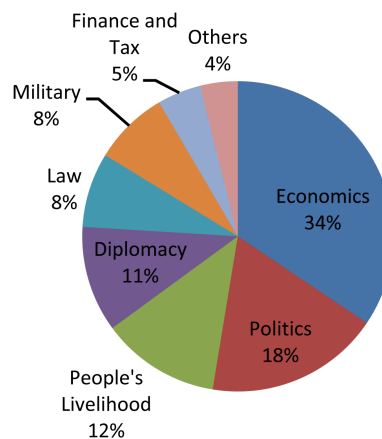


Figure 3. Distribution of focused issues.

Economic heating issues include development of economic environment, finance industry, international trade and “Made in China 2025”. Topics such as China’s GDP growth target, Chinese economic growth incentive, Sino-US trade relations and “Made in China 2025” exert as a majority. Most of the public opinion indicates that Chinese economy functions as an incentive for the world’s growth, stating in an objective and positive tone. For example, *The Star Malaysia* reported on Mar. 12th in “China sends out positive signals” that “China has sent out stabilizing messages to the world on its economic, investment and foreign policies”, then it quoted remarks from former Malaysian investment banker Ian Yoong saying that “China is ready to take over the mantle from the US as the dominant superpower”.¹ Nevertheless, some reports that cover China’s debt and financial risks, foreign exchange control and “Made in China 2025” plan and other issues harbor pessimistic and subjective attitudes. For example, *Bangkok Post* aired on Mar. 16th in “Li expects no hard landing for economy”—an article in part commenting on the relationship between government debt and the future financial crisis, proposed that “Many already believe that a massive bank bailout may be inevitable”.²

Political heating topics are “anti-corruption, anti-split” program, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Tibet issues. Malaysia has four articles concerned about Hong Kong and Taiwan issues (including the connection between mainland and Hong Kong bond markets, “Guangdong, Hong Kong and Macao” Gulf region, etc.). Singapore has five, one of which reported the plan to “enhance communication among Hong Kong and Taiwan youth”. These pieces of news are mostly recorded type of report and embedded with an overall objective attitude, comment and content. However, when interpreting certain specific issues, some countries proceed the news inevitably from their own standpoint. Certain stereotypes about Chinese political structure and system can be trailed in some reports, such as news on “Leung Chunying as vice chairman of the CPPCC”. This will be explained in detail in “Tone and Tendencies of Public Opinion” part.

3.2. Differences in National Concerns

Though similarities exist in the coverage of the “Two Sessions”, each country differs with one and another over key issues it concerns (see **Figure 4**). For example, Malaysia disposes more of its report over Chinese economy, financial and foreign policy, while Singapore focuses mainly on people’s livelihood (such as health care system and rural education reform) and legal system construction (such as National Intelligence Law). India likes to keep a watchful eye on Chinese military defense, but the same interest doesn’t appeal to Singapore and Thailand—these two countries pay least attention on military issues. As for Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia, their number of reports ranges from eight to eleven individually, which is less than the other three countries, so reports in these countries have a more focused concentration instead of a widespread focus on myriads of issues.

¹The Star Malaysia, “China sends out positive signals,” March 12, 2017.

²Bangkok Post, “Li expects no hard landing for economy,” March 16, 2017.

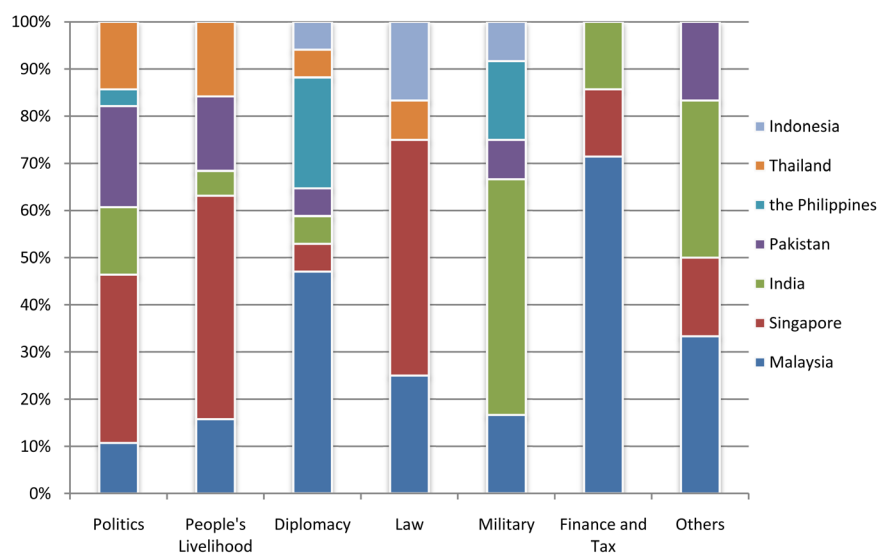


Figure 4. Distribution of key issues concerned among nations.

3.3. Tone and Tendencies of Public Opinion

In all news, the purely factual reports account for 66.9% of coverage. That is to say, nearly 67% of news is reporting on the truth or citing statement from the conference, only supplemented by interviews and comments from journalists. However, it's worthwhile to notice that there are still 18.2% of reports with negative comments or views. In this sense, foreign media reports are on the one hand, in affirmation of China's contribution to the world's growth, while, on the other hand, hold reservations in their attitude.

Among Southeast and South Asian countries, Pakistan holds typically positive attitude towards China. Several of its reports are concerned about President Xi Jinping, accompanied by positive comments. For example, *Pakistan Observer* spoke highly of President Xi Jinping, claiming that "His welfare measures have got massive appreciations across China and in the world abroad"³, then it quoted news from Chinese *Xinhua News Agency* saying that "Xi's experience, commitment, determination and ability to govern and lead have become something of a rarity on the global political stage"⁴. Pakistan has two pieces of news focusing on "the Belt and Road" initiative as well, stating in an affirmative tone. On Mar. 13th it released news "Belt, Road initiative provides opportunities to Chinese firms, local businesses" and stated clearly that "It is not just China but other countries which see the opportunities provided by the Belt and Road Initiative as it could play a major role in revitalizing the struggling world economy"⁵. All these reports reflect good relationship between China and Pakistan. The Pakistani media have not only brought objective introduction about "Two Sessions" to the public but cultivated a positive image of China, making for friendly cooperation between the two countries.

³Pakistan Observer, "Xi: Zinjiaog to have 'great wall of iron' for stability," March 11, 2017.

⁴Pakistan Observer, "Xi Jinping: Leader of China's great revival," March 14, 2017.

⁵Pakistan Observer, "Belt, Road initiative provides opportunities to Chinese firms," March 13, 2017.

As for other countries, though they mainly adopt purely factual report, when it comes to specific issues that relate to their interests, negative exaggeration tends to appear. India, the Philippines and Thailand hold an obvious tendency in terms of the percentage of negative reports. However, if we rank these countries according to their total amount of negative reports, India will top the ranking, followed by Malaysia and Singapore. Due to geopolitical and historical factors, these countries have frictions with China more or less over border, economic and military issues. On military issues, for example, conflicts over South China Sea have once deteriorated the relationship between China and the Philippines. When it comes to economics, Singapore harbors longstanding grudge against China's policy that aims to impairing the impact of Malacca Strait on Chinese marine transportation, thinking it cripples its economic interests. Thai people, on the other hand, feel threatened by the expansion of Chinese corporation in Thailand. The typical "suspicion and fear towards great power" (Zhang Xizhen, 2016) keep countries in Southeast and South Asia always alert to the policies in countries like China that may afflict them. Thus, the presupposed attitude of reports during "Two Sessions" period looms up mainly in military, political and economic fields. More details are as follow.

India is most "active" when reporting military issues, which is in coherence with its style (Li Bo, 2010). There are ten negative reports in India, accounting for 52% of its whole coverage, half of which are relevant to military topics. *The Times of India*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Indian Express* and *The Hindu* all have reports about China's defense budget and military expenditure. From title to its context, India compared China with America as well as itself, clearly expressing its "worries" about China's defense force. For instance, *Times of India* commented on Mar. 5th that, China's modest increase in defense spending contrast with America's 10% rise "is seen as a second attempt by President Xi Jinping to assume moral high ground"⁶ after Xi's insistence on the path of globalization. *Hindustan Times* questioned Chinese government about not including specific figures of military expenditure in its news "China's defense budget is three times that of India", saying it was "surprising" and "the Chinese government has been criticized about not being transparent enough with information about its expenditure in defense sector".⁷ *The Indian Express* even claimed that "The increased Chinese defense spending is bound to augment its defense capabilities and widen the military power differential with India", and "That stern warning should be taken seriously by the government, which should not be fooled by the 7 percent increase in China's defense spending. India cannot afford to take a chance."⁸ All these reports have a similar writing style: they extract a portion of content in "Two Sessions" and then declare the point of view in its introductory part with intense political character. The reasons are obvious—due to frictions of border between China and India, Indian government and media are vigilant

⁶The Times of India, "China raises def spend by 7%, lowest in 10 yrs," March 5, 2017.

⁷Hindustan Times, "China's defense budget is three times that of India," March 6, 2017.

⁸The Indian Express, "China's upping of its defence spending sends signals that other countries, including India, can ill afford to ignore," March 16, 2017.

about the improvement of China's national power (including defense and military force) as well as the promotion of China's international status. Besides India, the Philippines also remark on China's military issues in *The Philippine Star* and *The Manila Times*. Though the expressions are not as fierce as the Indian ones, they also deliberately described America's "rejection and dissatisfaction" about China's military construction on South China Sea, stating the Philippines' grudge on this issue by taking advantage of American standpoint.

On political issues, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand all have reports that reflect their presupposed prejudice. *The Star Malaysia* in Malaysia, *The Straits Times* in Singapore, *Bangkok Post* in Thailand have reported on "Leung Chunying as vice chairman of the CPPCC" and cited skepticism over Leung's "double identity" from *Hong Kong South China Post*. *Bangkok Post* even claimed that vice chairman of CPPCC is one of "largely ceremonial posts", which "require them (the officials) to attend meetings but do little else".⁹ Moreover, Malaysia and Singapore have commented on the relation between Chinese government and businessmen, saying "(Xi's) time in office has already been exceptionally good for the country's wealthiest politicians" (*The Star Malaysia*)¹⁰, and the growing percentage of billionaire representatives in "Two Sessions" "tells us that political power and money have remained tightly intertwined in China" (*The Strait Times*, quoted views from a professor of Chinese politics Jean-Pierre Cabestan at Hong Kong Baptist University)¹¹. These reports concentrate on dissecting Chinese political structure and operating mechanism of "Two Sessions" but neglecting the contents of the sessions to some extent. As for anti-terrorism in Xinjiang, India and Singapore show similar concern. They both referred to "a video purportedly by the Islamic State", and claimed that "Rights groups say the unrest in Xinjiang is more a reaction to repressive government policies" (*The Strait Times*)¹²—this is a longstanding bias over Chinese national and religious issues.

Negative reviews on economic issues are either from India about "BRICS plus" or from the Philippines and Malaysia about "Made in China 2025". *The Times of India* was highly skeptical about "BRICS plus". Analysts and professors that were quoted in the news said "China is trying to expand its influence by inviting its allies, and the move might result in the dilution of the role played by India and other countries in the bloc of five countries—Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa... India will be the worst-affected. After expansion, the organization will lose its focus and coherence on development issues and become more like a political platform for China." Besides, they also expressed that "China might find it difficult to obtain India's approval to the idea of BRICS Plus".¹³ Furthermore, when reporting on "Made in China 2025", *The Manila Post* (the Philippines) and *The Sun* (Malaysia) have included reviews from Eu-

⁹Bangkok Post, "HK leader given role in political body," March 14, 2017.

¹⁰The Star Malaysia, "Over 100 billionaires among top legislators," March 5, 2017.

¹¹The Strait Times, "Richest lawmakers' fortunes have grown since Xi's rise," March 4, 2017.

¹²The Strait Times, "Xi calls for 'great wall of iron' to safeguard Xinjiang," March 11, 2017.

¹³The Times of India, "China's 'Brics Plus' could be a huge minus for India," March 9, 2017.

ropean Commerce Chamber, defining “Made in China 2025” as “Beijing’s mercantilism” and “Beijing’s lackluster market reforms” (*The Sun*)¹⁴.

In general, the angle and context that were chosen by India, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand when reporting specific economic, political and military issues are different from China’s angle and context. Apart from the vested political and economic interests, it’s because that these Southeast and South Asian countries are holding some stereotypes over Chinese national defense, political system, Hong Kong administration, nation and open-door policy issues, and these stereotypes, to some extent, caters to the standpoints from Western media. After analyzing the origin of reports (see **Figure 5**), we found that Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Thailand have adopted or quoted part of reports from Western media, and those reports are more or less related to the topics embedded with negative standpoints. For example, one of the Philippines’ reports on South China Sea was originated from *Reuters*; the remarks on “Leung Chunying as vice chairman of the CPPCC” in Malaysian and Thai media were originally published on *Associated Press*; the reports about “China’s billionaire in politics” in Malaysia and Singapore were from *AFP* and *the New York Times* respectively.

4. Analysis on Reporting Focus and Standpoint

After research, we have found that except Singapore and Indonesia, there are more than two media reporting on “Two Sessions” in the other five countries. Also, it’s widely found that, different media have diversified focus despite their same nationality.

In Malaysia, *The Star Malaysia* resorts to follow-up strategy to report on “Two Sessions”, offering on time news with various focuses. It has a comparatively objective standpoint but tends to fall negative when reporting relation between government and businessmen, and Hong Kong issue. Reports from *The New*

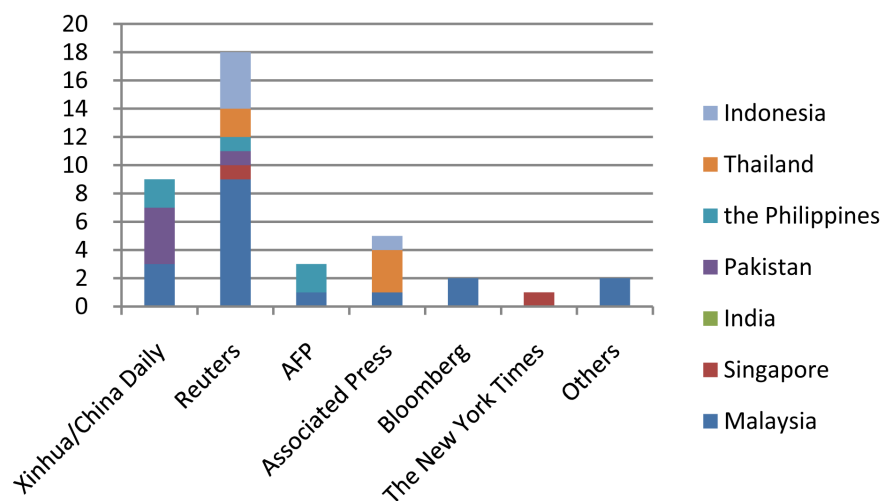


Figure 5. The origins of reports from news agencies/foreign media.

¹⁴The Sun, “Made in China’ proposal slammed,” March 8, 2017.

Strait Times start to amount during the late period of “Two Sessions”, embedded with intense political character on legal issues (“Zhou Shifeng case”) and South China Sea conflicts. *The Sun* concentrates on comments and remarks that had less relevance to “Two Sessions”. *The StarBiz* mainly focuses on economic topics and delivers mostly purely factual reports. The reports that were quoted from western mainstream media accounts for 51.7% of its whole coverage, indicating the great impact western public opinion has over Malaysia.

The Star Philippines and *Manila Post* relay three reports that were originally published on *AFP* and *Associated Press* about South China Sea issues, China’s economic challenges and “Made in China 2025”. Similar to Malaysia, this indicates that the Philippines hold some presupposed attitude and some of their tones are influenced by western public opinion. However, the Philippines’ Mandarin media remain neutral and post objective news about China on time. For example, *World Daily* (a Mandarin newspaper in the Philippines with largest circulation) sent out an article about CPPCC inviting representatives from overseas United & Promotion Union to discuss about China’s “anti-split” issues, declaring their rejection against Taiwan independence affirmatively.

As for Thailand, *Bangkok Post* has widely-spread focuses, concentrating on livelihood and legal issues (“Zhou Shifeng case”) and economic problems. Some of its reports are negative. For example, when depicting Chinese Internet censorship, it pointed out that China’s authoritarian government plays a great role in global internet governance based on “restrictions and regulations rather than the principle of free-flow of information found in democratic societies”¹⁵. The focus of *The Nation* falls on Hong Kong and Taiwan policies, China’s economy and environmental improvement. The majority of its reports are factual news.

Among Indian media, the attitude of *The Indian Express*, *The Times of India*, *The Hindu* and *The Hindustan Times* is comparatively negative, dedicating to exaggerating China as a threat. *The Standard Business*, *The Sunday Guardian* and *The Hindu Business* are, on the contrary, more objective, reporting with factual record.

Due to the differences in editorial policy and specific domestic environment, different English media will choose various angles thus result in diversified conclusions. Nonetheless, this gives China an inspiration on how to develop localization when launching international publication.

5. Conclusion

In accordance with overall statistics, these seven countries in Southeast and South Asia all convey objective and factual report during “Two Sessions”, though accompanied with some negative reviews. Instead of paying attention on the sensational issues that caused great discussion in China, part of their focuses lie on the sensitive issues that embrace prejudice and diversification. This diversification reveals three factors: 1) relationship between China with Southeast and South Asian countries is both cooperative and competitive; 2) certain countries

¹⁵Bangkok Post, “Senior China govt adviser criticises web censorship,” March 5, 2017.

hold longstanding bias over Chinese political structure and ideology; 3) how certain media pose self-orientation and tendency in their reports.

All these seven countries are cooperators in China's "the Belt and Road" initiative and exert great influence in Southeast and South Asian districts. Therefore, how to cultivate a positive image in Southeast and South Asian districts and shift the focus of the public to the win-win cooperation is worthwhile for China to ponder on. Surprisingly, there were only four reports about "the Belt and Road" initiative (2 from Pakistan, 2 from Malaysia), accounting for a small portion during "Two Sessions" period. However, these two countries are "old friends" in "the Belt and Road" initiative. Their concern over the issue, to some extent, reflects their passion and affirmation to the initiative.

English media is an important platform for international publicity. Having reports being adopted by foreign media can partially reflect international acceptance and reliability of this publisher. During "Two Sessions" period, only Pakistan, the Philippines and Malaysia adopted reports originated from *Chinese Xinhua Agency* or *China Daily*, and the percentage of these reports accounts for 36.4%, 22.2% and 10.3% in each country respectively. On the contrary, when it comes to political, diplomatic, military and democratic issues, a majority of countries have adopted the news originated from Western media while dwarfing the power of China's English publication. We suggest that China can improve the nation's English media by comparing various tones of public opinion in different countries and different standpoints of their local English publication. With increasing acceptance and credibility of its English publication among foreign media and public readers, China can enhance its power to portray a friendly image in public opinion and therefore further promote the win-win cooperation between countries accordingly.

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