Analysis on the Influence of Cultural Differences between China and Bolivia on Overseas Chinese Construction Enterprises

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Abstract

Under the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese enterprises continuously step out of China and develop a large number of overseas engineering projects. But cultural differences have an important impact on the development of overseas engineering projects, during the process of integrating with the local Humanistic environment. Taking "the Two-San Project" and "the Yucumo Project" of China Construction Group in Bolivia as examples, this paper analyzes the cultural collision and conflict, caused by cultural factors, including American construction standards, "design and construction concurrence" mode, language barrier and so on. Based on the concept of building a community with a shared future for mankind, we suppose that the strategies to strengthen cultural exchange and integration, measures to prevent risks, and cultural diversity to be advocated will facilitate the orderly, healthy and sustainable development of Chinese enterprises' overseas investment cooperation.

Keywords

Belt and Road, International project, Cultural integration, Influence factor

1. Introduction

Since the Belt and Road Initiative was proposed, we had signed cooperation documents with more than 180 countries and international organizations, developing actively global partnerships and making remarkable achievements. Since the Belt and Road strategic plan was implemented, Chinese enterprises had stepped out of China and hidden for international projects, being satisfied the interconnectivity needs of countries along the Belt and Road. The interconnectivity of infrastructure will be beneficial not only to our Chinese people, but also to the people from all over the world, and thus promote the common progress of mankind. As an economic cooperation, Chinese foreign engineering contracting also involves in cultural exchanges and integration with the countries along the belt and road. There are abundant researches on the cultural impact of international project contracting cooperation on countries along the "One Belt and One Road", but there are few researches on the cultural integration of Bolivia and South America. Bolivia is a representative country in the South America, where the complex and diverse languages, coupled with the cultural differences between Inca civilization and Chinese civilization, will inevitably impose a certain influence on the development of highway engineering projects (Wei, 2018).

This paper studies the current situation of the contract cooperation about "San Jose De Chiquitos-San ignacio De Velasco Project" (the Two-San Project) and "La Construcción De La carretera Yucumo-San Borja Project" (the Yucumo Project), which are under implementation. Emphasis will put on the cultural differences and cultural inte-
migration between China and Bolivia. We sort out the risk factors existing in the project, enhance the risk awareness, and form a set of social risk identification, assessment and prevention measures in order to ensure the smooth performance of the ongoing highway project. In addition, it can also avoid risks and accumulate experience for highway engineering projects to be entered into Bolivia and provide reference for Chinese enterprises' overseas engineering projects in similar countries (Yu & Gu, 2016).

2. The Influence of Cultural Differences Encountered in the Process of Project Promotion

With the Chinese enterprises expanding in the field of infrastructure construction, cultural exchanges between China and Bolivia are becoming more and more frequent. Although cultural factors have no direct effect on the use of technology, they have indirect and even decisive influence (Ni, 2019). And so, it is helpful for Chinese enterprises’ going out healthily and effectively to have a good understanding of the cultural environment of Bolivia and the risks, brought by cultural differences. Meanwhile, Chinese culture is promoted to go out, which will realize the coordinated development of China's hard power and soft power (Fei, 1997).

2.1 Cultural influencing factors in the application of traditional American standards

Bolivia is mainly based on American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials and American Society for Testing Material, for Bolivia's highway specification system is not perfect. Most local people are accustomed to using American standards and Bolivian standards. For example, the Chinese personnel found that the slope retaining wall was thin in an overpass project, which was not qualified in accordance with Chinese standards, but the local engineers felt that it was qualified in accordance with American standards, and most local people agreed with the local engineers.

The Chinese managers on the construction site lack an adequate understanding of these two specifications, which has affected production performance and technical innovation to some extent. For example, American standards are used for inspection and acceptance. First of all, the classification of soil quality in American standards is different from that in Chinese standards. The soil quality is divided into A1, A2, A3.... A6 according to expansion coefficient and other indicators in American standards, the compactness standard is defined on the basis of the soil quality, but it is divided into sand and soil and etc. in China, and so it is difficult to make a horizontal comparison in the construction index.

2.2 Project risk under the "design and construction concurrence" mode

The fundamental basis of "design and construction concurrence" is contract, whose terms stipulate the contractor's obligations of engineering design. Due to the complexity of the project and many uncertain factors, the design work can not be in place in one step. As a matter of fact, real-time change design is constantly revise and improve the design in the process of construction. Compared with the complete design and construction drawings provided by the owner at the bidding stage of domestic projects, the drawings determined by both sides are only preliminary design drawings. More detailed drawings need to be drawn during construction, and part of the design work should be carried out during construction, which brings a variety of problems to China during this period, such as bearing the wages of all the workers to wait for work on both sides and delaying the construction to varying degrees. The completed drawings can only be constructed after being signed by the supervisor. However, because the supervisor is sometimes not on site or signs late, we will not timely get feedback and modification information, which affects the construction progress. As a result, the supervisor often attributes this to the responsibility of the construction side. Although there are restrictive clauses in the contract, the actual contractual obligations are not strictly performed, and it is difficult for China to achieve the claims. In view of the construction delay caused by concurrent design and construction, Chinese enterprises can passively increase the number of designers in the team to meet the deadline, facing the risk of shrinking the profit space of enterprises.

2.3 Cultural differences linked by labor unions and influencing factors

Different from the labor union in China, which provides services for the employees, reflects the employees’ opinion and protects the employees’ rights and interests, it is stipulated that the company with more than 20 employees can set up a labor union in Bolivia, and the labor union is elected by the workers (Sun, Qin, & Dong, 2022). After the election, the signed documents are submitted to the Ministry of Labor for the record. The labor union is up against our enterprise, and the management personnel have no right to participate in. The Two-San Project estab-
lished the labor union, but the Yucumo Project did not. The strong labor union supported by the Ministry of Labor and the Bolivian General Labor Union organizes a strike to talk about the conditions, and the reasons for the strike are mainly concentrated on these aspects, such as catering, accommodation, transportation, contracts and managers' attitudes.

According to the census statistics in 2022, there are 11.832 million people in Bolivia. The fact is that the less labor force and poor substitutability lead to Bolivian’s working without enthusiasm. In addition to this, they have signed the indefinite contracts with the project department, and they cannot be dismissed easily. Under such circumstances, it is difficult for Chinese personnel to control their emotions when they knew that Bolivians had not finished their work on time. The Bolivians, therefore, organized a strike, and the Chinese personnel promised to correct the attitude and had to make an apology. Some Chinese personnel who were particularly responsible were particularly disliked by the Bolivians and even asked to leave the construction site.

2.4 Influencing factors of environmental protection requirements in the process of project promotion

With Bolivia known as the plateau country, the temperature in Bolivia is determined by the altitude. With the decrease of altitude, more than 10 animal and plant ecological layers and a variety of ecosystems are formed. It is the climatic conditions that create a diversity of animals and plants, the beautiful natural landscape and fresh air. The Bolivian government attaches great importance to environmental protection, and the law enforcement is very strict. In addition to the government's decree, we also need to meet the environmental protection requirements of the community residents and indigenous residents. The utilization plan of roads and raw materials shall be jointly formulated by forest engineers and environmental protection engineers and approved by Forest Bureau and Environmental Protection Bureau. Prior to obtaining the environmental protection certificate, forced construction will face the risk of confiscation by the government, and ordinary violations will be fined 3%-10% of the total price of the project. The environmental protection department in Bolivia does not get involved in the environmental supervision of the project, but the project department employs special environmental supervising engineers to be responsible for environmental management. They have high requirements for environmental protection. For example, as the roadbed was soaked by rain for a long time, the surface on the road had silt. This needed to be treated at his own expense. A loach appeared when dredging the surface silt, environmental engineers sent warning letters, three warning letters would fine more than 30,000 RMB.

2.5 Analysis on the dilemma of language communication in the process of project promotion

The official language of Bolivia is Spanish, and construction documents, such as drawings and test reports, are written by Spanish. In the process of promoting the construction of the Belt and Road, we need the translator and interpreter to push forward the development of highway engineering projects. On the construction site, those who master Spanish are not proficient in technology, and those who know technology do not grasp Spanish, only relying on sketches-oriented drawings to direct the employees, but having no idea about the specific details.

Considering the cost of the project, the shortage of translation and interpretation talents is far from meeting the practical needs. In addition to going to other departments and ask a translator or interpreter for help, the engineer have to often use body language to communicate with Bolivian people to improve their foreign language. The level of translation and interpretation talents is low and uneven on the whole, moreover, the improper translation and interpretation of certain special terms leads to poor communication between the Chinese side and the Bolivarian side. Therefore, a joint management team was established between China and Bolivia on site. The Chinese side takes the lead in technical guidance and the Bolivian side cooperates in organization and coordination to ensure the normal operation of the project.

3. Optimization Strategy of Project Promotion Based on Cultural Differences

On the basis of cultural factors mentioned above, like American standards, language dilemma and environmental protection, we try to put forward the optimal strategies to avoid risks, ensure benefits and make profits, such as promoting Chinese engineering construction standards, improving foreign language application capacity, and enhancing the environmental awareness of Chinese employees in Bolivia.

3.1 The significance of promoting continuously Chinese construction standards

During the course of the project development, it is of utmost importance for China, the United States and Bolivia
to learn from each other. Diverse civilizations, through mutual learning, may become a bridge of friendship among peoples and a driving force for social progress. There is something to be worth learning from American, such as the road design ideas in the American Design Guide, management experience in related fields and centralized processing mode in American steel mills.

It is difficult to popularize our construction standard in Bolivia at present, but it can be turn into reality. First of all, under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, the fields for Chinese enterprises to enter Bolivia are expanding, and the people's livelihood is improving. More and more Bolivians come to recognize Chinese standards and are even proud to have been employees of Chinese enterprises. Secondly, through online investigation, it was learned that there were some problems encountered in the construction of the project. The Bolivian experts copied the American construction standards, but they lacked experience in solving the problems. At the moment, the Chinese engineers proposed some solutions, which were proved feasible by the Bolivian experts, and the problems were solved according to the design of the Chinese personnel. For example, at the suggestion of Chinese engineers, geogrids are added to prevent uneven settlement and cracks on the road surface. Finally, local bidding documents were prepared by local engineers, most of whom had returned from studying in the United States and naturally preferred American construction standards. If the Chinese standard wants to enter Bolivia, we should publicize and promote the Chinese standard in the bid stage. We may also encourage local students to come to China and study. These "folk ambassadors" will tell Chinese stories well and spread Chinese culture, so that Bolivians can know a real, three-dimensional and comprehensive China well and pave the way for the introduction of Chinese standard into Bolivia. And thus, international speech right, matching our scientific and technological strength and comprehensive national strength, will be formed.

3.2 Integration and optimization of Chinese management mode

The owner and supervisor do not interfere with each other, and the owner cannot directly talk to the contractor, which leads to the improper behavior of the supervisor from the perspective of management system can not be corrected in time, such as the supervisor not strictly performing the contractual obligations and even deliberately shirking the responsibility. When employees on both sides work together, cultural collision and conflict will occur due to cultural differences and cultural qualities. Therefore, we should be firm in our cultural confidence among the cultural collision.

Managers need to strengthen communication. Cultural exchange and integration, in fact, is the ideological work of a human being. Through interaction with Bolivian employees, we can share the Chinese culture with Bolivian supervisors, engineers and the public, such as diligence and courage, solidarity and unity, unremitting self-improvement, honesty and responsibility, advanced management experience and excellent technical achievements. The construction of the Belt and Road is to realize the common progress of mankind. As a new carrier of cultural exchange, Chinese enterprises represent the Chinese image and show the true features of socialism with Chinese characteristics in our own quiet way.

3.3 Share management experience in labor union

Faced with such a country with different civilizations, Chinese companies in Bolivia must get united, help each other, work together and draw lessons from experience. For example, we carry out democratic management, and the meetings can be hold regularly as a way to collect rationalization proposals and understand the demands of employees. We should also pacify the members in labor union and pay attention to their moral trends so as to eliminate the strike in the bud. Another important measure is that we can put those troublemakers on the blacklist to avoid being hired by Chinese companies and thus control the labor and employment risk.

The most fundamental principle of the Belt and Road Initiative is extensive consultation and joint contribution, and it is a more inclusive environment. Cultural exchanges should be carried out in the way preferred by Bolivians and cultural conflicts should be minimized. In order to promote the integration of Chinese employees and Bolivian employees, they can feel different languages, cultural backgrounds, thinking modes and ways of communication through group games, among which Chinese people and Bolivians friendly cooperated and interacted with each other. And then, employees on both sides have reached a consensus on these aspects, including respect, honesty, hardwork, sense of responsibility, which will be applied to their own work and life to improve the localization management level. Mutual learning among civilizations will form cultural integration.
3.4 Gradually enhance the environmental protection awareness of Chinese employees in Bolivia

As the data of measurement, an environmental report made by the construction party every month shall be submitted to the environmental supervision engineer for examination and approval. There are many indigenous villages along the The Two-San Project, and many farms stand nearby. Therefore, it is necessary for us to understand the operation mode of these villages and strictly abide by the principles of their cultural content and behavior mode before further carrying out relevant work. Yucumo with a rainforest climate is located in a natural reserve, where otters and crocodiles are abundant. The animal migration plan should be submitted to the supervisor, including the construction of culverts to ensure the passage of wild animals and the measures to release the crocodile and other protective. When cultural relics are found along the construction lines, the construction should be stopped in time, and we assisted local administrative departments of cultural relics in carrying out protection work on basis of the respect for their cultural traditions and customs. In regard to environmental protection, the Bolivian government requires that environmental protection should be implemented in every link and stage during the road construction, and Chinese enterprises have done it, which is bound to promote the sustainable development of Chinese enterprises' infrastructure projects in Bolivian.

3.5 Continuously improve Chinese employees’ ability to apply the foreign language

Bolivia, a less developed capitalist country in South America, has actively learned from China's experience in poverty reduction, and its absolute poverty rate has fallen below 20 percent in 2019. It is really difficult to develop the highway engineering projects in Bolivia, due to lack of funds, labor shortage, especially in technology and difficulties created by local social organizations. Chinese enterprises were able to successfully complete the construction, mostly because the funds had been supplied by China. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic period, Chinese enterprises advanced the project funds to promote the project progress when the local government was short of funds.

The limited number of translators and interpreter in China give priority to interpretation in emergency situations, and then work overtime to complete the translation work. Chinese engineers and managers take advantage of the real language learning environment in Bolivia, and interact with Bolivians to continuously learn and accumulate the language. Being simple and enthusiastic, Bolivian people like to chat with Chinese people to deepen mutual understanding. They are very fond of Chinese electronic products, such as smart phone, tablet PC and laptop. Contemporary cultural products, such as TikTok and Little Red Book, are also very popular in Bolivia. Chinese employees teach them to download and use these apps and discuss strange person and thing with us. They chat, make friends and get information through these apps, and see the real China through these apps to enhance emotional communication and promote spiritual connection. Mutual understanding among the people in both countries would lay a cultural foundation for peace and development between China and Bolivia.

4. Conclusion

Cultural differences are one of the important factors for smooth implementation of the project, so it is necessary to continuously strengthen the attention to the culture of the host country to help the sustainable development of overseas Chinese enterprises. At the same time, we should promote cultural diversity and develop cultural diplomacy for the purpose of creating a better international environment for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

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