

Study on the Impact of Intellectual Property Law Differences on Chinese Infrastructure Enterprises along the "Belt and Road" Route

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Abstract: This paper studies the impact of the differences in intellectual property laws of countries along the "Belt and Road" on the internationalization of Chinese infrastructure enterprises. Firstly, it discusses the intellectual property challenges faced by infrastructure enterprises in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, and then it examines the differences in the intellectual property laws of the countries along the route in terms of the legal system, the current protection status, and international cooperation. The study shows that the diversity of legal systems, the different scope of protection, and the differences in law enforcement have a significant impact on the technological innovation, trade secret protection, brand building and legal risk response of enterprises. Through theoretical and case studies, the article reveals the constraints of the differences in intellectual property laws on enterprises' internationalization strategies, and puts forward targeted suggestions, aiming to provide reference for enterprises to formulate their intellectual property strategies, and at the same time enriching the research on enterprises' internationalization and intellectual property management under the Belt and Road Initiative.

Keywords: "Belt and Road"; Infrastructure Enterprises; Overseas Technology Protection; Intellectual Property Disputes; Patent Layout; Data Security; International Cooperation.

1. Research Background

Since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has achieved remarkable results in international cooperation. By the end of 2023, China had signed more than 200 cooperation documents with 150 countries and 32 international organizations, covering areas such as policy communication, facilities, trade flows, financial flows and people-to-people exchanges, etc. The total import and export volume between China and the Belt and Road countries reached 19.47 trillion yuan in 2023, accounting for 46.6% of the total foreign trade value, a record high. In 2023, China's total import and export volume with Belt and Road countries will reach 19.47 trillion-yuan, accounting for 46.6% of China's total foreign trade value, a record high.

In the field of infrastructure construction, the business of Chinese enterprises in the countries along the "Belt and Road" has grown. In 2023, the newly signed contracted project contract value of Chinese enterprises in these countries amounted to 1,655.65 billion yuan, and the completed turnover was 988.21 billion yuan, which demonstrated strong international competitiveness. [1]

However, differences in intellectual property laws have become an important challenge to the internationalization of Chinese infrastructure companies. IP protection rules vary significantly from country to country, with some countries being lax in their scrutiny and others strict in their requirements, which has increased compliance costs for enterprises and may lead to IPRs, affecting market competitiveness. From 2013 to 2023, China's patent applications in countries along the Belt and Road will total 70,000, with an average annual growth rate of over 20%. [2] Meanwhile, the number of intellectual property cases involving countries along the Belt and Road is growing rapidly, with trademark rights accounting for 88.7% of the cases.

This study explores the impact on the internationalization of Chinese infrastructure companies through the differences of intellectual property laws in the countries along the "Belt and Road". Theoretically, the study will enrich the research on enterprise internationalization and intellectual property management under the "Belt and Road" initiative; practically, it will provide references for infrastructure enterprises to formulate effective intellectual property strategies, and help them cope with the challenges brought by the legal differences.

2. Literature Review

2.1. "The Belt and Road" Initiative and the Internationalization of Infrastructure Companies

Since its introduction, the "Belt and Road" initiative has become an important platform for international cooperation and globalization. Zhang Xiangchen (2022) points out that the expansion of Chinese infrastructure companies in countries along the Belt and Road Initiative is not only a response to national strategies, but also an inevitable choice for internationalization. The investment of infrastructure companies in railroads, ports, energy and other fields has significantly increased China's influence in the global infrastructure market. However, the complexity of politics, economy and culture of countries along the routes also brings multiple challenges to enterprises, such as policy instability and market access barriers (Sun Jichao and Wu Tingting, 2020).

Chen et al. (2019) found, based on an empirical study of listed infrastructure companies, that the Belt and Road Initiative significantly accelerated the internationalization process of enterprises, but there is a nonlinear relationship between the speed of internationalization and firm performance, and too rapid expansion may lead to resource

fragmentation and management risk. This finding echoes the theory of "too much speed is not enough" proposed by Fang, Hong and Min (2017), which emphasizes the need for firms to balance the speed of internationalization with their risk control ability.

2.2. International Comparison of Intellectual Property Laws

Intellectual property law is an important factor affecting the internationalization of enterprises. There are significant differences in the IPR protection mechanisms of different legal system countries: civil law countries (e.g., Germany) focus on the systematicity and stability of statutory law, while common law countries (e.g., the U.S.) rely on the flexibility and adaptability of case law (Chen Tautao et al., 2017). In addition, intellectual property rules in legal system countries (e.g., Saudi Arabia) are often closely associated with religious culture, forming a unique legal framework.

Along the Belt and Road, the level of IPR protection varies. For example, ASEAN countries have strengthened regional collaboration through the ASEAN Framework Agreement on Intellectual Property Cooperation, but some countries still have problems such as insufficient enforcement and lengthy judicial procedures (Wang Yan, 2017). Although Latin American countries have generally acceded to the Paris Convention, the efficiency of law enforcement is low in trade secret protection and patent infringement litigation, which has resulted in compliance costs for enterprises (Chen Tao-tao et al., 2017).

2.3. Internationalization and Intellectual Property Management of Infrastructure Enterprises

The intellectual property issues faced by infrastructure enterprises in the process of internationalization are industry-specific. Technology export is the core of infrastructure projects, but differences in patent protection in countries along the route may lead to technology leakage or infringement risks. Taking the Middle East countries as an example, Zhang Chuchu (2021) points out that local mandatory requirements on technology transfer may weaken the technological advantages of Chinese enterprises. In addition, trademark and brand protection are equally critical. Wang Jing (2023) found through case studies that there is trademark snatching in some of the countries along the route, and enterprises may face brand infringement laws if they do not layout in advance.

In terms of intellectual property management strategies, Zheng Qinqin and Li (2009) emphasize the importance of internal resource integration and believe that enterprises need to build professional teams to cope with transnational legal risks. However, most of the existing studies focus on macro strategies, and there are insufficient micro mechanisms on how specific legal differences affect corporate decisions.

2.4. Deficiencies in Existing Research and Research Gaps

Although the literature has extensively discussed enterprise internationalization and intellectual property protection under the Belt and Road Initiative, there are still the following limitations: first, most of the research focuses on macro policies or single country cases, and lacks a systematic comparison of intellectual property laws of the countries

along the route; second, there are fewer researches focusing on the specificities of the infrastructure industry, especially in the areas of technology adaptation and trade secret protection. Secondly, there are fewer studies on the specificities of the infrastructure industry, especially in the areas of technology adaptation and trade secret protection; thirdly, the existing literature is mostly from a single perspective of jurisprudence or management, with insufficient interdisciplinary integration, making it difficult to comprehensively reveal the comprehensive impact of legal differences on business practices. Therefore, this study will take Chinese infrastructure enterprises as the core object, systematically categorize the intellectual property laws of countries along the "Belt and Road", protect the current situation and international cooperation mechanism, and focus on the three major dimensions of technology export, brand building and legal risk, so as to fill in the gaps in theory and practice, and to provide a basis for enterprises to formulate differentiated intellectual property strategies.

3. Differences in Intellectual Property Laws in Countries Along "the Belt and Road" Route

3.1. Classification and Characteristics of Intellectual Property Legal Systems of the Countries Along the Route

The IPR legal systems of the countries along the "Belt and Road" are diversified due to historical, cultural, political and economic differences, mainly covering civil law, common law and legal systems. [3] These legal systems have significant differences in the focus and protection of intellectual property rights, which have an important impact on the business of Chinese infrastructure enterprises in the countries along the Belt and Road.

Civil law system: with statutory law as the core, the legal provisions are systematic. In terms of intellectual property protection, there are clear legal norms for patents, trademarks and copyrights. Patent protection emphasizes the normative nature of the application, examination and authorization procedures; trademark protection focuses on the registration system, and it is difficult to adequately protect unregistered trademarks; copyrights arise automatically based on the completion of the creation, but the term of protection and the limitation of the rights are clearly defined. For example, Germany has strict requirements for novelty, creativity and utility of patents, and France fully protects the moral and economic rights of copyright.

Common law system: case law as the main source of law, focusing on the fairness of individual cases. In patent protection, the judicial practice of the "principle of equivalence" has a greater impact on the determination of infringement; trademark protection emphasizes the use and identification function, and unregistered trademarks can be protected if they have a certain degree of popularity; copyright protection relies on jurisprudence, and is more flexible in judging originality. For example, the United Kingdom takes into account the use of trademarks and consumer awareness in trademark infringement cases, and the jurisprudence in patent litigation in the United States is of great significance in guiding the infringement determination.

Legal system: The Law and Hadiths are used as the legal basis, reflecting the integration of religious teachings and

modern laws. Patent protection may be limited by technological innovations that go against the teachings; trademark protection avoids the use of religiously taboo logos; and copyright protection emphasizes respect for knowledge creators while following religious teachings. Iran, for example, incorporates Shariah principles into its IP legislation and practices to ensure that laws are consistent with religious values.

These differences in legal systems pose a challenge to Chinese infrastructure companies, requiring them to develop targeted IP strategies to deal with the laws of different countries in the course of internationalization.

3.2. Status of Intellectual Property Protection in Countries Along the Route

"The Belt and Road" Initiative covers Asia, Europe and Africa, and there are significant differences in the level of economic development and legal systems of the countries along the route, leading to complexities in the setting of laws and regulations and the actual implementation of intellectual property protection for infrastructure technologies. [4] The following are the differentiated status quo and challenges in the main areas: patent protection, developed countries (such as Singapore) have built a relatively complete patent system, giving strict protection to invention patents, utility models and design patents, and introducing a fast-track review mechanism to shorten the authorization time. In contrast, the patent systems of some developing countries are not yet perfect, and the examination efficiency is low, which affects the timely protection and application of innovative technologies. Regarding trademark management, there are differences in registration principles and examination standards among countries. EU countries mostly adopt the principle of "first to register", while countries such as the United States pay more attention to "first to use". In addition, the validity period and renewal regulations of trademarks are also different, requiring enterprises to follow different rules in different countries to safeguard brand rights and interests. As for copyright protection, the duration of protection and the limitation of rights for copyrights vary from country to country. Some countries allow the reasonable use of design drawings and technical documents under certain conditions to promote the dissemination of technology, while others emphasize the protection of authors' rights and interests and strictly restrict the use by others. Law Enforcement and Judicial Practice, developed countries, with their mature legal systems and rich experience in law enforcement, have been more vigorous in combating IPR infringement. For example, Germany, when dealing with infringement cases, may pursue criminal liability in addition to demanding high compensation. On the other hand, due to the shortage of law enforcement resources and unsound legal system in some developing countries, the efficiency and effectiveness of handling infringement cases are poor.

In summary, the differentiated status quo of IPR protection in the countries along the Belt and Road poses a challenge to Chinese enterprises participating in the construction of the Belt and Road. Enterprises need to accurately grasp the rules of each country, make a good layout of intellectual property rights in advance, and reduce the legal risks in order to ensure the smooth progress of internationalization.

3.3. International Cooperation and Agreements on Intellectual Property Rights of Countries Along the Route

In the process of Chinese infrastructure enterprises' "Belt and Road" overseas expansion, the protection of intellectual property rights in the countries along the route has formed a unique pattern relying on international cooperation agreements and regional mechanisms. The Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property, as the cornerstone of transnational protection of industrial property rights, with its principles of "national treatment" and "priority", enables Chinese infrastructure enterprises to apply for patents and registered trademarks conveniently in the 177 contracting countries, and ensures that their rights and interests are not discriminated against. The principle of "national treatment" and "priority" enables Chinese infrastructure enterprises to apply for patents and registered trademarks conveniently in 177 contracting countries, ensuring that their rights and interests are not discriminated. At the same time, the Berne Convention provides automatic protection for design drawings, technical documents and other literary and artistic works in the field of infrastructure, safeguarding the rights of the creators. China is a party to the Berne Convention together with many other countries along the route, which ensures that the copyright of the works is solidly established when they are circulated among countries.

Regional cooperation mechanisms are also flourishing. In the ASEAN region, the Framework Agreement on Cooperation in Intellectual Property Rights has built bridges between China and ASEAN countries in the areas of patent examination and collaboration, trademark information sharing, etc., and has promoted technology exchanges and brand promotion. In the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), unified patent examination standards and trademark registration rules have simplified the process of IPR matters for Chinese infrastructure enterprises in the Union and reduced the cost of rights protection.

In addition, China has deepened IPR protection with countries along the route through bilateral cooperation agreements. For example, the cooperation agreements on infrastructure construction signed with Serbia and Cambodia include clear provisions on IPR protection, covering the authority to use technology, the definition of attribution and the handling of infringement, so as to ensure smooth cooperation in all aspects. The State Intellectual Property Office (SIPO) has signed IPR cooperation agreements with 57 co-construction countries, and has carried out Patent Prosecution Highway (PPH) cooperation with 18 countries and regions to accelerate the patent examination process.

Although these cooperation frameworks have achieved remarkable results, problems such as large differences in the legal systems of the countries along the route, uneven law enforcement, and weak awareness of intellectual property rights in some countries still exist. Chinese infrastructure companies need to study the local rules in depth, layout in advance, make full use of the international cooperation mechanism, and safeguard their IP rights and interests in order to realize sustainable development.

3.4. Differences in the Legal Environment of Intellectual Property Rights of Countries Along the Belt and Road Summary

The differences in the legal environment of intellectual

property rights of countries along the Belt and Road are significant, which are mainly reflected in the legal system, the scope of protection, the strength of law enforcement and international cooperation.

The legal systems of the countries along the Belt and Road are diverse, including civil law system, common law system, Islamic law system, etc. Different legal systems have obvious differences in legislation, judiciary and administrative enforcement, and enterprises need to adjust their strategies according to the local laws. The scope of IPR protection also varies from country to country, with some countries covering only traditional types, and some countries including new types, such as geographical indications and layout designs of integrated circuits, which affects enterprise innovation and market expansion. The difference in law enforcement is also significant. Some countries are strict in investigating and dealing with infringement and the cost of infringement is high, while some countries have weak law enforcement and frequent infringement, which makes it more difficult for enterprises to protect their IPRs. In terms of international cooperation, some countries are actively involved in international treaties and their IPR systems are in line with international standards; some countries have limited cooperation and their systems are greatly influenced by domestic factors, so enterprises face challenges in cross-border protection and dispute resolution.

Enterprises need to study the legal environment of target markets in depth, lay out in advance, and formulate targeted intellectual property strategies to reduce risks and realize sustainable development.

4. The Impact of Differences in the Legal Environment of Intellectual Property Rights in Countries Along the “Belt and Road” on Chinese Infrastructure Enterprises

4.1. The Impact of Differences in the Legal Environment of Intellectual Property Rights on the Technological Innovation of Infrastructure Enterprises

During the promotion of the “Belt and Road” initiative, Chinese infrastructure enterprises are actively carrying out infrastructure construction in the countries along the routes, but the differences in the legal environment of intellectual property rights of various countries have had a multifaceted impact on the technological innovation of the enterprises.

The degree of patent protection in the countries along the route is uneven. Developed countries have complete patent protection system, strict examination standards, longer protection period, and strong penalties for infringement. This is both an opportunity and a challenge for Chinese infrastructure enterprises to export technology. On the one hand, strict patent protection incentivizes enterprises to increase technological investment, obtain high returns by virtue of innovative achievements, and enhance market competitiveness; on the other hand, high standard examination and complex application procedures increase the difficulty and cost of obtaining patents, which may delay the timing of technological protection and impede the export of technology. On the other hand, patent protection in developing countries is relatively weak, with low examination efficiency, vague definition of infringement and insufficient

law enforcement, which leads to easy infringement of enterprises' technological innovations and weakens their willingness to export advanced technologies to these countries.

In addition, there are obvious differences in technical standards and patent layout among countries. In terms of technical standards, countries have different standards for building materials, construction techniques, safety norms, etc., which increases the complexity of technological innovation and application for enterprises. In terms of patent layout, some countries have formed patent barriers in key areas, and Chinese infrastructure enterprises may face infringement risks and restrictions on technology development and application when entering these markets. This requires enterprises to thoroughly study the patent layout of target markets, reasonably plan their own patent strategies, break through the barriers through independent R&D, cross-licensing and other ways to realize technological innovation and market expansion.

4.2. Legal Application and Settlement Mechanism of Intellectual Property Disputes

Under the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese infrastructure enterprises are actively carrying out infrastructure construction in countries along the route, but the differences in the legal environment of intellectual property rights in different countries have brought about various impacts on their technological innovation and market expansion. Properly resolving intellectual property disputes and building an effective resolution mechanism are crucial to protecting the legitimate rights and interests of intellectual property rights holders and promoting technological innovation and sustainable development of the infrastructure industry.

The degree of patent protection in the countries along the route is uneven. Developed countries have complete patent protection system, strict examination standards, long protection period, and strong punishment for infringement, which not only incentivizes enterprises to increase technology investment, but also increases the difficulty of patent application and maintenance. In developing countries, patent protection is relatively weak, the examination efficiency is low, and the definition of infringement is ambiguous, which leads to easy infringement of technological innovations and weakens the willingness of enterprises to export technology. The Patent Law of the People's Republic of China is the main legal basis for solving patent disputes, stipulating the conditions for granting patent rights, the scope of rights, and infringement liability, etc. Patentees may request infringers to bear civil liabilities such as stopping infringement and compensating losses.

In the field of infrastructure, there may be disputes over the copyright ownership of engineering design drawings, construction plans, software and other works, especially in the case of cooperative creation or job creation by multiple subjects. The Copyright Law of the People's Republic of China specifies the content of copyright rights, the term of protection, and the liability for infringement, etc. The copyright owner may request the infringer to bear the responsibility of stopping the infringement and compensating for the loss through legal channels. In addition, the protection of trade secrets is also crucial. If a party obtains, uses or discloses another person's commercial secret by unfair means,

it constitutes infringement. The Law of the People's Republic of China Against Unfair Competition provides for the protection of trade secrets, specifies the types of infringement and legal liabilities, and the right holder may demand that the infringer assume responsibility for stopping the infringement and compensating for damages.

In terms of resolving intellectual property disputes, negotiation and mediation are commonly used methods, which are flexible, efficient and confidential. Arbitration and litigation are also important means of resolution, with arbitration being a quasi-judicial means of dispute resolution and litigation being the final means of resolution.

Infrastructure enterprises also face many potential legal risks, including contract management, bidding, labor and employment, and environmental compliance. In terms of contract management risk, enterprises need to improve the contract management system and clarify key terms to avoid disputes. In terms of bidding risk, enterprises need to strictly comply with the Bidding Law and standardize bidding behavior. Labor risk, enterprises need to strengthen labor management and provide necessary labor protection measures to avoid work-related accidents. With regard to the risk of environmental compliance, enterprises need to strengthen their awareness of environmental protection, go through environmental impact assessment procedures, and ensure compliant operation.

In order to cope with these risks, enterprises need to bear certain compliance costs, effectively reduce potential legal risks, reasonably control compliance costs, and achieve sustainable development by strengthening contract management, standardizing bidding behavior, improving labor management, strengthening environmental protection awareness, and strengthening intellectual property protection. In the future development, infrastructure enterprises should continuously improve their legal risk prevention ability and compliance management level to adapt to the increasingly strict legal regulatory environment.

4.3. The Impact of Differences in the Legal Environment of Intellectual Property Rights on the Brand Building of Infrastructure Enterprises

Under the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese infrastructure enterprises are actively engaged in infrastructure construction in countries along the route, but the differences in the legal environment of intellectual property rights of various countries have brought challenges to the brand building and market expansion of the enterprises.

(1) Legal Differences in Trademark Registration and Protection

The legal differences in trademark registration and protection are mainly reflected in the differences in the registration process and principles, as well as the differences in the scope of protection and enforcement efforts. In the registration process and principle differences, different countries on the trademark registration of the “first to apply” or “first to use” principle may lead to the failure of enterprise brand protection strategy. For example, in countries adopting the “first to use” principle, trademarks that have not been registered in time but have been actually used may be snatched by others; while in countries adopting the “first to apply” principle, the risk of snatching is higher. If infrastructure enterprises do not register their international trademarks in advance, they may face the risk of their brands

being misappropriated.

In terms of the differences in the scope of protection and enforcement, certain countries have vague classifications of trademarks or insufficient protection of service marks, which makes it difficult for infrastructure companies to fully cover their design and engineering services. In addition, inefficient law enforcement may weaken the actual protection effect of trademarks and affect the stability of corporate brand value.

(2) Risks of brand infringement and counterfeiting

Risks of brand infringement and counterfeiting mainly include insufficient legal deterrence and the magnifying effect of project cycle and brand dependence. In terms of insufficient legal deterrence, counterfeiting of an infrastructure company's brand may be rampant in countries with weak intellectual property protection. For example, local vendors use similar trademarks to undertake projects, leading to customer confusion and damaging corporate goodwill. Low fines or lengthy judicial proceedings may make the cost of defending a company's rights higher than the benefits, forcing it to give up on pursuing liability.

In terms of the amplification effect of project cycle and brand reliance, the long cycle and large capital investment of infrastructure projects make brand reputation key to obtaining cooperation opportunities. If the brand is infringed due to the loose legal environment, it may directly trigger the trust crisis of the partners, and even trigger the risk of contract violation.

The core threat to brand building of infrastructure companies due to differences in the legal environment of intellectual property rights is “uncertainty”. Enterprises need to transform the risk of legal differences into international competitiveness of their brands through forward-looking layout, localized compliance management and technological empowerment.

4.4. Differences in the Protection of Trade Secrets and Enforcement Practices

Infrastructure enterprises are crucial in the construction of the economy, and their projects often involve huge investments, long lead times and complex technologies. As core assets, trade secrets cover a wide range of aspects, but there are differences in the protection of trade secrets among infrastructure enterprises of different sizes and business areas.

Large infrastructure companies have a comprehensive protection system, can develop confidentiality system and training staff. On the other hand, small enterprises with limited resources and inadequate confidentiality system are prone to leaking trade secrets. Different business areas of the enterprise protection focus is also different, construction engineering enterprises focus on construction technology, investment and operation enterprises are concerned about the return on investment, etc..

Although there are relevant laws and regulations in China, the complexity of commercial secrets of infrastructure enterprises brings challenges to law enforcement, such as difficulties in defining and collecting evidence.

In order to cope with the risk, enterprises should strengthen personnel training and improve the awareness of confidentiality; improve the management system and sign confidentiality agreements; strengthen technical protection to ensure network security; and strengthen the management of mobile devices. Through these measures, enterprises can effectively protect trade secrets, enhance competitiveness and realize sustainable development.

5. Conclusion

The “Belt and Road” initiative provides a broad development space for Chinese infrastructure enterprises, but the significant differences in the legal environment of intellectual property rights in the countries along the route also bring multiple challenges to the international development of enterprises. This paper analyzes the impact of the differences in the legal environment of intellectual property rights on enterprises from four aspects, namely, technological innovation, trade secret protection, brand building and legal risks.

It is found that the differences in the level of patent protection, technical standards and legal systems of the countries along the route have a direct impact on the enterprises' technological innovation ability, the strength of trade secret protection and the stability of brand building. At the same time, the uncertainty of the legal environment also increases the legal risks of enterprises, especially in terms of IPR dispute resolution and infringement compensation. These issues are not only the practical difficulties faced by enterprises, but also the deep-rooted conflicts that need to be resolved in the process of promoting international cooperation under the “Belt and Road” initiative.

In the future, as the Belt and Road Initiative progresses, the legal environment for intellectual property rights in the countries along the route is expected to be gradually improved,

providing more stable and predictable legal protection for enterprises. Chinese infrastructure enterprises should seize this opportunity to enhance their core competitiveness through strengthening technological innovation, optimizing intellectual property management and upgrading their brand building capabilities, so as to contribute more to the construction of the “Belt and Road” and at the same time realize their own sustainable development. This process will not only help promote the economic development of the countries along the route, but also provide a new example for the coordination and cooperation of global IPR protection.

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