

The “Chinese Dream”: An Analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative

Four hundred years ago Sir Walter Raleigh asserted that “whosoever commands the sea commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself.”¹ In the present time of extensive economic globalization and deepening interdependence, this reality seems more than ever to determine and sharpen geopolitical tensions. The post-cold war world order, with the United States as sole hegemon, is slowly changing.² As scholars, politicians, diplomats, and citizens are increasingly noticing, the world’s economic center of gravity is shifting east.³ With this evolution in power dynamics, the US and China are at a standoff, with dominance in north and southeast Asia at stake. The US and Europe are still trying to understand and meet these changes, whereas Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, appears to have taken Sir Walter’s proverb to heart.⁴ In 2013, Xi Jinping announced his vision of the Belt and Road Initiative at the University of Astana, in Kazakhstan. Just like the Silk Roads of yesteryear, which for more than 2000 years were the arteries of the prosperous civilizations of Asia, the BRI’s aim is to bind west, south, and east Asia with Europe and Africa in a web of infrastructural connectivity, commerce, political cooperation, and military and energy security.⁵ This may be history’s biggest cultural and political project, encompassing more than sixty countries and with an estimated cost of between six and eight trillion U.S. dollars, and will arguably have fundamental regional and global implications for decades and even centuries to come.⁶

Given the sheer size, the economic, cultural, and military ramifications, and geopolitical importance of BRI, it is not surprising that the West is scrambling to understand these developments and to identify a strategy to react. “The Great Game,” as Kipling put it in 1901, is set to begin once again.⁷ There is, however, a significant difference between the nineteenth century battles between the British Empire and Russia, and the current struggle

between the West and East: while the West understood Russia's aims and ambitions, it does not seem to have any clue how to respond to this new challenge to its power. As Henry Kissinger noted in 2015, "We can't handle these challenges. We are not good at it, because we don't understand their history or culture."⁸ The Silk Roads are nevertheless rising once more,⁹ and they will continue to do so, whether we understand them or not.

This paper poses the following question: What is China's vision behind the Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia? Is Xi Jinping doing something that Westerners and traditional IR simply cannot understand? The aim of the paper is therefore twofold. First, by analyzing Xi Jinping's speech at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China and various visual materials—all depicting the dream behind the BRI—this article describes the BRI through the eyes of those envisioning it. Second, the history of Chinese thought grounds this study, hence this paper aims to provide an opportunity to examine the capacity of Western International Relations (i.e. traditional liberalism and classical realism) to explain Chinese policies and actions.

The Silk Roads: The World's Central Nervous System?

To understand a vision is to unravel its history and its future. An answer to the question being raised all over the world, "What does China think?" should therefore start in its past. "What past?" one may ask, since due to what Edward Said famously named "Orientalism" (the idea of Western "natural superiority" and the perception of inferiority or even unimportance of the East) most have deemed this past unworthy of serious study.¹⁰ Interestingly, a scientist (an anthropologist *avant la lettre*) whose name has been forgotten once said the following about the West: "I want to write and learn about all cultures on the planet, but not about those barbarians in the West, I am not going to squander any paper on them." Long before the birth of the great trading city of Amsterdam, or the universities of Oxford and Paris, or even before the palaces of Rome and the places of worship of Greece,

cities and civilizations beyond our imagination emerged from the spine of Asia. For more than three thousand years, these civilizations of the East—from the Persians, the Mughal Empire in India, the Mongols, or the Han-dynasty, to the great cities of Babylon, Tashkent, and Bactria—overshadowed the West in any conceivable respect. The scientist may have been right about the West at that time, but, as Peter Frankopan would say, the West's one-sided view of the East's past is certainly wrong now.¹¹ Given this rather ill-considered ignorance, it is not surprising that the old powers are still in doubt how to respond to the Chinese challenges to their might.

The Silk Roads, contrary to what the name seems to visualize, were not roads at all, but rather a vibrant organism edified by interconnecting civilizations. This network, just like in a body, emerged from trade-pathways nourishing the world (blood vessels), intertwining political, cultural and religious beliefs (nerves), a monetary credit-system infrastructure and progressive tax legislation (fuel), mighty urban centers (Merv, Samarkand, Kashgar, Kabul, and Shenzhen: organs) and intellectual safe havens in Baghdad, Bukhara, and Balkh (cortex).¹² These cities, whose name most have forgotten, were famed for their tolerance, trade, advancement of ideas, science, religion, and decadence. This immense network, which started with a road linking 600 B.C. Persia (in Asia Minor) with the heart of Asia, expanded during the Han Dynasty (200 BC).¹³ The growing ambitions of the Han emperors lead to the acceleration of the interlocking of the world. Under China's control, millions of barrels of silk (obviously), gunpowder, paper, jade, and spices went West, while gold, silver, slaves, and weapons went East.¹⁴ The greatest appended value of the Silk Roads were however not these commodities, but rather the exchange of culture, philosophy, science, and religion that followed to traders on their paths. The Silk Roads were therefore not only a catalyst of prosperity, but also of cooperation and tolerance despite differences in race, language, and belief.

While this was indeed a time of relative peace, China's exploration and conquests also lead to the (military) expansion of its physical and intangible horizon to the borders of Asia and beyond: thereby forcing the title "Middle land" or "Land under Heaven (*Tianxia*)," which China, still uses to define itself.¹⁵ This all-inclusive *Tianxia*-system encouraged a conversion of differences. However, not all states and cities wanted to be under imperial control.¹⁶ *Tianxia Yitong*, or "uniting the world through conquest" reflects the other side of the peaceful appearance of the Silk Roads.¹⁷ To be accepted in this system, cultures, cities, and people had to conform, which signified not only a material, economic, and geographical unification, but also a convergence of the world of thought (read: the imposition of Sino cultural and political values). This *Tianxia*, following from the Chinese power reflected by its grip over the Silk Roads, therefore meant and means above all, "China."

The Road to Regaining China's Lost Historical Greatness: The Belt and Road Initiative

In part as the result of the success of the Silk Roads of old, China has long seen itself as the world's preeminent civilization. Rightly so, libraries worth of historiography would suggest.¹⁸ However, in the early modern era, the world's center of power shifted to the West. In less than ten years, Christopher Columbus connected the Americas with Europe and Vasco di Gama opened the waterways into Southeast Asia and Indo-China. These discoveries not only turned our understanding of the world upside down, but also had a remarkable effect on the political, intellectual, and economic center of gravity.¹⁹ Europe, which was once just insignificant smear at the corner of Euro-Asia, transformed into the heartland of trade and science, as well as religious dominance and violence.

The rise of the West and European imperialism was met with little opposition: China fell behind in its desire to directly dominate the world. As an extension thereof, this led to the diminishing of Chinese technological, economic, and military supremacy. This imbalance in power, capability, and will culminated in China's loss in the Opium Wars, leading to what is

now been called “the hundred years of humiliation.”²⁰ In this period China lost multiple wars, was conquered and occupied, shame replaced pride, and China lost its perceived meaning. This (inter)national conception and perception of insignificance did not end until the 1945-1949 communist civil war. Shortly thereafter, in 1953, Mao Zedong launched the Chinese dream, a giant project to revitalize the nation trying to regain China’s lost historical greatness.²¹ While echoing his forebears, Xi Jinping strives to rebuild its dominance and power in the East. By 2049, the one hundredth anniversary of the People’s Republic, he feels the world order of the past, with China as its leading civilization in the east, has to be restored.²²

This ‘Hundred Year Marathon to Power’ is not, however, without its complications. To name just a few: China’s dependence on energy supplies calls for securing Chinese dominance in the region; the need for the creation of a healthy external market for Chinese surplus goods asks for the deepening of global economic integration; and the growth of Chinese interests in the world demands for enormous technological advancements, the development of strong maritime and ocean forces, and an increase in military capability.²³ To realize the goals set in 1953, all of those needs need to be met. Following *Shi* (the leading Chinese strategic concept), by duplicating the Silk Roads of old, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) seems to be a holistic instrument to create these possibilities and momentum.²⁴ As President Obama stated in 2012, “The world is transforming before our eyes.” What exactly is this BRI and why will it have such an impact on the constellation, structure, and division of powers?

Not more than six months after becoming president (and one year after Obama’s prediction) Xi Jinping announced in Kazakhstan his vision to reshape the political and economic landscapes of Euro-Asia and Africa.²⁵ The proposed BRI, encompassing a land- and maritime corridor connecting the regions of Asia with the world beyond, represents more

than a simple network of infrastructural partnerships across economic and judicial sectors.²⁶

In its broadest definition, the BRI aims to stimulate political, economic, and cultural development across an immense region, which accounts for 64 percent of the world population and 30 percent of the global GDP, through the cultivation of five central links: “policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people bonds.”²⁷ While the immediate consequences of the BRI are indeed infrastructure connectivity, the long term goals cover much broader areas, such as industrial and energy cooperation, development aid, shared financial investments (both private, as well as through the Silk Road Fund and Asian Infrastructure Bank), cultural enmeshment, and political collaboration.²⁸ China promotes the BRI as the resurrection of the idyllic Silk Roads “where there was no place for orthodoxy and singlemindedness,” thereby taking on the role of developer of prosperity, welfare and peace in a new multipolar world.

China is portraying the BRI as a liberal, open, and U.N. norm-conforming project towards the creation of a diplomatic space wherein “win-win” cooperation, in contrast to the “western zero-sum game,” is possible. The ambivalence of both the US and its allies (as well as the Indo-Pacific ASEAN countries) to China’s hidden motives is however, given China’s geopolitical history, not beyond reason. While framing the BRI as a “positive endeavor to seek new models of international cooperation and global governance,” China seems to no longer intent to downplay its global status.²⁹ By analyzing the geopolitical implications of China’s grip over the Land and Sea Belt, the “string of pearls” thesis, posits that the military buildup in the South China Sea and diverse ports all around the world is directly challenging the current American led international system.³⁰

While China promotes the BRI as a joint initiative in the interest of the world community, the initiative’s ultimate goal could be interpreted as creating a “Sinocentric community of shared destiny.”³¹ Harvard’s China scholar Fairbanks once said that China’s

sense of self is based on the cultural difference that exists between itself and its surroundings.³² To the Chinese, the “Middle Kingdom” (*Zhongguo*) means civilization itself: whereas shared destiny, mutual respect and equality are indeed the aim, some may be more equal than others.³³ The diplomacy directed to the “periphery” (*zhoubian waijiao*) assumes a hierarchical “tributary system” with China at its core.³⁴ Particularly marking is the comment made by former Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi underlining this idea of regional order: “China is a big country and other countries are small countries, and that’s just a fact.”³⁵ Those who side with China will thus be favored, those who, on the contrary, are hostile “will be faced with much more sustained policies of sanctions and isolation.”³⁶

With these two possible interpretations of the BRI, one must ask: is the aim of the BRI to promote cooperation and harmony in Southeast Asia, or is the BRI’s goal purely one of power? What is China’s true goal? The apparent incongruence between the motives of both development and security questions the Western conception of the reality of international relations, with clear boundaries between liberal and realist thought. Engagement and coercion seem to be inherently contradicting, yet the BRI entails and promotes both. This western struggle of comprehension aside, the centrality of the BRI to China’s diplomacy and foreign policy and therefore its significance for the world order is beyond question.

The connections, cities, routes, cultures, and civilizations on the Silk Road, the West has spent almost no time on understanding, are rising once more.³⁷ In this sense, Southeast Asia becomes a moving theatre of a power struggle that will change and reshape the international system in the twenty-first century. The direction and meaning of this development however remain unclear and will depend on how China will engage with its neighbors, as well as the reaction of the West.³⁸ Given the divergent possibilities as derivative of the West’s interpretation of these developments, one may ask, is it not worth it to try to understand the BRI through the eyes of those envisioning it?

Methods

To get a grasp of the Chinese prospective and vision and to start the search for an answer of the fundamental question of the applicability of Western IR in Asia, this article analyses two central policy reports that showcase the Chinese ideological perspective and policy goals.

The first report is Xi Jinping's three-and-a-half-hour introduction speech at the 19th CPC National Congress (given March 18, 2017) entitled: *To secure a decisive victory in building a moderately prosperous society in all respects and strive for the great success of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era*.³⁹ In this landmark address, given at the most internationally followed Chinese political event (held once every five years: it is therefore the first one after the announcement of the BRI), Xi Jinping displayed his vision for the rejuvenation of Chinese power and the realization of the Chinese Dream.⁴⁰ A policy report regarding the vision behind the BRI (*yi dai, yu lu*) will support this study of the Chinese Dream (*zhongguomeng*).⁴¹ The appreciation of the discourse of the Chinese BRI vision can however only be realized by broadening the perspective towards the Sino global and historical ambitions. Furthermore, a vision can only be understood through its own language. This analysis will be integrated within an overview of the Chinese history of thought.⁴²

These sources form a junction, with, as multiple commentators have put forward, the seemingly contradictory coexistence of variants of realist and liberal paradigms.⁴³ To get a sense of this paradox and intertextuality, where multiple theories are connected within a broad network of constitutionalized “Chinese Thought,” one must explore the translation of the vision into actions. What are these actions exactly? If the subject was the rising levels of exchange, it would have been wise to research ethno-linguistic changes or material infrastructural differences through satellite footages. If the goal was to understand the growing financial interdependences due to the BRI, some may say that analyzing exchange-

rates, the solvencies of states or even the rise of crypto-currencies would have been the way to go. The aim is however not to understand these material consequences of the BRI, but rather to vividly portray the intentions, the vision, and the evoked emotions.

These ideas are best represented by art. Art and images are not only political forces but “bring to consciousness the reality of the fiction of reality, that what we take to be reality is a work of art.”⁴⁴ They communicate, depict, and legitimize political action and at the same time serve as “visual quotations,” capturing the visions reality and assumptions.⁴⁵ With this in mind, this article analyzes three artworks that function as visualizations of, or even elaborations on, the collective fabric called the Chinese vision.⁴⁶

By invoking the historical imagery of the ancient Silk Roads and Chinese philosophy, the Chinese government has invested in connecting deep history (through festivals, museums and language centers) with the present society.⁴⁷ This tendency has only been magnified by the digitalization of our consciousness: people rely more and more on visual representations to understand and believe, but also to articulate their goals.⁴⁸ Images and art not only tell us something about the world, but also about how we want the world to be. Alex Danchev even went as far as to say that “it is given to artists, not politicians, to create a new world order.”⁴⁹

Consider Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*, an iconic anti-war statement made after the first ever terror-bombardment in Europe in 1937. Picasso, in line with the Cubic-style most people remember him by, did not seek to capture the “real” aspects of war, but rather the emotional, traumatic, and ideational effects of violence. It thereby became one of the most influential reminders of the dangers of war.

Just like every form of representation, it could be argued that the statements, artwork, and images that are issued by the Chinese government are merely in part a representation of the “real” actions. It is thus important to understand that media can be and are an effective propaganda instrument.⁵⁰ Images give a representation of the world, but are not per se

authentic: they can deceive while giving the impression to reveal the world as it is.

Sometimes, as David Perlmutter notes, “people can succumb to the seductiveness of the real, to the point that they forget that [the hand of the artist or] the lens is directed by a human eye [and mind].”⁵¹ Evidently, the cases of the use of art and visuality as propaganda instruments is beyond count. In this digital age, most have seen ISIS pictures justifying slaves and violence. However, visual propaganda is not merely of this time; two of the most cited examples are Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi-era films and 1920s and 1930s Russian socialist realist art. With documentaries such as *Der Sieg des Glaubens* and *Triumph des Willens*, showcasing Nazi-rallies, Riefenstahl transformed Goebbels propaganda into a coherent and systematic mythology: it was “fascinating fascism” as Susan Sontag stated.⁵² Moreover, as Socialist art shows, realism does not have to be an attestation of reality; it can also be used to communicate a political and ideological narrative by presenting an idealized vision as a reality already achieved.⁵³

Bias deriving solely from purposiveness of the statements and artworks raises questions of credibility if the goal is to give an adequate account of the current reality of the BRI. With the question being about the vision itself, these documents can be valuable precisely because of the bias they reveal.⁵⁴ Since the statements are quite manifest in their intentions of power, it would be unwise to disregard them as simply a facade. These statements can thus be seen as manifestations of Chinese ambitions and they will be analysed as such.

As stated above, a vision can only be understood through its own language. The Sino-discourse will therefore be central to this analysis, illustrating the perceptions underlying the vision behind the BRI. Consequently, reflexivity is the key to ground the meaning of the statements within the context of this dream.⁵⁵ To achieve this iterative approach, the in vivo coding of the statements are cross-referenced with the images and the Chinese history of

thought.⁵⁶ The first level in-vivo coding of the reports entails that language of concepts of the statements is used to categorize and comprehend the meaning of the texts. For instance; what is the meaning of “*Tianxia*,” what does Xi Jinping mean with “harmonious society” or what does “equality” entail? By integrating within this analysis a selection of images, this article identifies and grounds the core themes of the vision, thereby producing (second level) axial code that can bridge the gap between the individual IR paradigms and the Chinese Dream.⁵⁷ As stated by Xi Jinping, “realizing our great dream demands a great project.”⁵⁸ Thus, by understanding this project through this discourse analysis, we can comprehend the dream.

Analysis

Xi Jinping ends his speech (statement 1) with the following remarks: “[While] the wheels of history roll...we will navigate the great ship bearing the great dream of the Chinese people to conquer the waves and reach our destination.”⁵⁹ This Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation and socialism with Chinese characteristics in a new era has been perceived by some, both in surrounding countries as well as in the West, as an immediate threat to the regional power constellation and global order.⁶⁰ Others, in Eurasia and beyond, do not see this new assertiveness as an aspiration to achieve direct hegemony and have answered China's call to “build a prosperous, stable and harmonious community with a shared future.”⁶¹ Following Western philosophy and political theory, both strategy paradigms (realist and liberal) cannot be true at the same time.⁶² As the, at least for westerners, “self-evident” Aristotelian syllogism portrays: “A cannot be B.” Interestingly, Lao-Tze posited around this same time the opposite: “If A is connected with non A, and if A is always changing into not A, then A is no longer in contradiction with non A.”

This speech seems to propagate both; herein lies the paradox. How can a country speak of being a “torchbearer for fighting global poverty, liberalization, universal development and common prosperity,” and at the same time strive to be the “leading

economic power” with unmatched “composite strength?”⁶³ How can you speak of “the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, safeguarding global peace and the democratization of the international affairs,” while also building a powerful and world class military “that is ready to fight and win?” Finally, how can someone “boost cultural openness, amity and people-to-people exchanges characterized by harmony” and yet, “oppose all statements and actions that undermine, distort or negate” their narrative?⁶⁴ The answer, lying in history, is embodied by the visuals below.

Figure 1 (see appendix) illustrates the cultural and economic soft power metaphor of the Silk Roads of old times, used by China to evoke images of a past age characterized by “peaceful trade, cultural exchange and common prosperity.”⁶⁵ In line with the Chinese school of realist art, the painter displays traders from all over the world, traveling and singing together. This image seems to imply that just like the Silk Roads, the BRI is not a place for orthodoxy, single mindedness, or superiority, but one of deep economic integration, shared growth, cultural development and understanding. Not the sword, but trade emblemized this past “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui*) in the East.⁶⁶ By making the parallel with the ancient Silk Roads, the BRI is shown as a “logical outcome of the evolution of history,” enabling society to create a “democratic international system.”⁶⁷ The BRI, as a mirage of the painting, hence shows a part of the Chinese idealized conception of the future: a multipolar world wherein divergent civilizations, “in great unity” (*datong*) cooperate peacefully.⁶⁸ Unlike the American Dream, this Chinese dream is not territorially bound. Rather, the nature of a trade route transcends ethnicity, as shown by the painting. This makes the art piece an emblem of ambition for a “world society,” fitting both Chinese thought as well as Western ideals.

Figure 2 (see appendix) tells a different story. The late Liu Xiaobo’s (winner of the Nobel Peace prize in 2010) submission of an art piece for the BRI exhibition was not only

denied, but he himself was, featuring the Chinese crackdown on dissent, thrown in jail for undermining the state authorities (“inciting subversion of state power” to be precise).⁶⁹ The incarceration of Xiaobo diverges from the Western interpretation of “the return to the lost paradise of *Tianxia wei gong*” (a community of all under heaven), a world of liberal equality and openness.⁷⁰ He was, as the Nobel Price Committee put it: “sentenced for the crime of Speaking.”⁷¹ For more than half a century, Liu fought for democracy and freedom in China. Liu demanded, through his artwork, activism, and philosophical writings, that the Chinese authorities adhere and obey Article 35 of the Chinese Constitution, which posits that every Chinese citizen has the freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, and of demonstration. Liu Xiaobo, Excerpt of “I Have No Enemies: My Final Statement” (Nobel Lecture in Absentia, December 10, 2010):⁷²

I look forward to [the day] when my country is a land with freedom of expression. For, freedom of expression is the foundation of human rights, the source of humanity, and the mother of truth. To strangle freedom of speech is to trample on human rights, stifle humanity, and suppress truth. I hope that I will be the last victim of China’s endless literary inquisitions and that from now on no one will be incriminated because of speech.

The announcement that Liu Xiaobo, whilst jailed, had won the Nobel Prize was met with celebrations of intellectuals and activists in China; leading to a crackdown on dissent, that, given the expansion of the surveillance apparatus and social credit system, does not seem to be set to stop any time soon.⁷³ After seven years of imprisonment, Liu was granted medical parole in late May 2017 and died shortly after. However, antithetical to his hopes in the “Last Statement,” he was not the last victim: writers, artists, activists and politicians are at this time still incarcerated for exactly the things the idyllic Silk Roads as well as the BRI are said to stand for: freedom of thought, tolerance of expression and cultural understanding.⁷⁴

The BRI, and as extension thereof the Chinese Dream of a “harmonious world,” should thus be judged within the context of authoritarian “national rejuvenation”: the ambition to regain its global power (*quanqi qiangguo*) and return at the center of Asia and

the civilized world. Dissent, whether that is in the international society or in China itself, does not seem to be taken lightly.⁷⁵ In this sense, *tianxia* represents a hierarchical mode of transnational governance based on a tributary system with China as its cultural core.⁷⁶ Again, Western international relations theory seems to fail to comprehend these ordering principles, lacking understanding of the paradoxical nature of the BRI and Chinese culture. Whereas, Rome and its hegemon successors in the West followed the principle of *orbis terrarum* and relied on direct and military control, the Chinese *tianxia* narrative represents a soft power approach respecting territorial sovereignty.⁷⁷ This is based on symbolic recognition of Sino authority, leading to the assimilation of Chinese cultural standards. This Sino-paradigm, encompassing both pragmatic economic principles and toughness on cultural and ideological issues, represents therefore at the same time opening up and conservativeness.

Therefore, statement 2 functions as an illustration of *tianxia*, the combination of seemingly contradictory principles.⁷⁸ To legitimize the vision behind the BRI, statement 2 draws on two different parallels: both the prosperous ancient Silk Roads and the contemporary U.N. Charter, addressing both the Chinese Dream (*zhongguomeng*) and Western liberal ideals. On the surface, it seems to have a very liberal objective regarding ASEAN: “jointly creating an open, inclusive and balanced regional economic cooperation architecture that benefits all.”⁷⁹ As the statement argues, by integrating their economies within the Chinese “liberal’ affairs” ASEAN countries would “flourish,” build political trust and “amity.”⁸⁰ Underneath this narrative however seems to lie the ambition of Chinese expansion in South-East Asia, making the simultaneously existing realist perspective evident. While all participating countries can benefit, China will most likely benefit the most in terms of wealth accumulation and military capabilities.⁸¹ Indeed, Xi Jinping explicitly and openly states the “national interests first” policy.⁸² The objective is to move closer to the center stage by “taking advantage of international transport routes,” constructing major (military) seaports,

leading the new technological revolution and controlling trade standards and flows (including through the South China Sea).⁸³ Despite the Western conception that realist and liberal paradigms cannot coexist, Chinese maritime military expansion and economic flexibility shows the parallel realist undertone of the BRI conjoined with the use of ASEAN and liberal norms to push the BRI forward.⁸⁴

The Japanese newspaper *Nikkei* highlights this coexistence of paradigms, as can be seen with Figure 3 (see appendix).⁸⁵ In Western media, China is usually portrayed as either a dragon, representing the realist goals, or a panda, referring to the liberal principles of non-aggressiveness and cooperation. The fact that this cartoon depicts a Panda displaying strength and not the dragon shows that *Nikkei*, contrarily to the artificial western dichotomy of realism and liberalism, connects the soft power approach of the “Panda Diplomacy” with the realist ambitions of China. The red color of the carpet can be interpreted as a representation of the Communist Party which is at the forefront of restoring the ancient Silk Roads (the arteries of the East) through the BRI. Figure 3 therefore embodies Xi Jinping’s ambition of using the BRI as the “red carpet to power” by “fully leveraging its comparative advantage” and increase its “power to shape.” By visualizing China as a huge powerful panda determined to advance the BRI (represented by the rolling out of the carpet), *Nikkei* questions China's intentions to be a fair partner. The size asymmetry between the big Chinese panda and other Asian countries, represented by the tiny people, suggests that these states are not in a position to effectively bargain with this huge entity, eroding their agency and autonomy.⁸⁶ Moreover, even though the people are gesturing the panda to slow down, an inference can be made that it will continue to move and the people will be forced to get out of the way or otherwise will be crushed by the carpet. With the economic integration and expansion of the BRI, ASEAN countries would become heavily dependent on China and the Chinese economy. This can be

seen as a contemporary form of the tribute system, combining open economic policy and a strongly hierarchical international division with China as the central regional super power.⁸⁷

Conclusion

The Belt and Road Initiative, as shown throughout this analysis, is the foreign policy expression of the Chinese Dream combining liberal ideas of universal development with the ambition to regain China's position at “the center of the world stage.” The leading principles of Chinese thought, portrayed by concepts like harmony seem, not only to accept, but represent this duality of thought ingrained into the Chinese vision. Simply looking at this vision through traditional Western theoretical glasses would, however, inherently lead to the denial of the possibility of the project being both liberal and realist at the same time.

The analysis of Jinping’s speech, the BRI policy report and the presented images brought therefore a crucial ontological challenge to light.⁸⁸ Merely using in vivo coding (thematic coding) and by approaching this question through a positivistic paradigm using definitive concepts, thus would lead to a flawed interpretation of the essence of the Chinese Dream. The evaluative meanings of concepts like “harmony,” “power,” “hegemony,” and “democratization” vary extremely with the persons and culture producing or receiving them.⁸⁹ These concepts, and even the texts (both Xi Jinping’s speech as the BRI policy report) for that matter, are in other words not individually meaningful.⁹⁰ The struggle with the capabilities of content analysis therefore brought forth both the inherent intertextuality of these texts, as well as the philosophical difference between the West and East. Different philosophical glasses and historical understandings would henceforth lead to very different conclusions. This epistemological challenge of analysis (understanding the vision through the eyes of those dreaming it) asked to follow up on this primary coding with a discourse analysis by cross-referencing the in vivo coding with both the Chinese history of thought and images.⁹¹ This iterative approach (evaluative assertion analysis) integrated the description of

the BRI within an overview of the Chinese philosophical perspective, thereby producing an interpretive notion of the collective and social fabric of reality called the Chinese Dream.⁹²

To fully use and benefit from the capabilities of phenomenological research and to get a notion of the materialized vision of the BRI, it would be advised to incorporate in future BRI-research a multifactorial ethnographic study. This reflexivity, the action of submerging into your object of analysis and to look at it through its own eyes, is needed to comprehend both material and tangible aspects of the Chinese Dream. This level of complexity does not mean that we should not try to understand the project. It merely means that we should place it in context.⁹³ A vision, an ambition or culture can only be understood through its own language of thought.

While for most in the West this liberal and realist composite is a direct contradiction, this duality of reality seems not even to be perceived as a paradox in Chinese thought. The changes in China over the centuries as well as the Belt and Road Initiative itself, veering between economic openness and cultural assimilation, show therefore that the political reality is far more complex than the black and white traditional theoretical IR divide.⁹⁴ This makes “Is the Chinese dream a representation of a liberal or realist thought?,” while often posed, the wrong question to ask. The answer is after all nor neither, nor only one of them. This analysis shows that there is no single story of politics. This leads to the following question: “How can you get a sense of the Chinese world view when your philosophical, psychological and theoretical understanding of the world is in stark contrast with your object of analysis?” To understand the Belt and Road Initiative we should stand on the shoulders of Chinese philosophers and practitioners of the Chinese Dream, thereby ensuring that our understanding and findings represent the vision rather than our own beliefs and bias.⁹⁵ Indeed, the BRI seems to grow into one of the most ambitious geo-economic and cultural visions of our recent history. It is however at the same time the least understood global governance strategy of our

time. The BRI's envisioned connectivity is after all more than the mere issue of hardware—physical infrastructure.⁹⁶ The vision finds above all else its expression in the interconnection of software and the enmeshment of ideas, culture, diplomacy, and institutions.⁹⁷ While this article is a first step in the development of a grounded understanding of the intangible Chinese vision, there is still a long way to go. It is therefore primarily a call to academia as well as politicians to approach Asian politics, the Chinese Dream and BRI through Asian thought. In any case, China now, as Xi Jinping has said, “stands tall and firm in the East.”⁹⁸ As China aims to regain its control over South-East Asia, one should look at China's past in the region to come to an understanding of the future of the regional order. The Silk Roads are indeed rising once more.⁹⁹ And they will continue to do so, whether we understand them or not. Hence, is it not then not worth to at the very least *try* to understand the BRI through the eyes of those envisioning it?

Appendix



Figure 1 The painting (shown at the exhibition at the National Art Museum of China in Beijing in 2018) was a special dedication to the Belt and Road Initiative.



Figure 2 The photo is from the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Liu Xiaobo at the exhibition 'Be Democracy' at The Nobel Peace Center (2014).

Figure 3 This image is from the Japan-based newspaper *Nikkei* website. The image is related to a news article titled "China runs into Belt and Road barriers in South Asia. Countries try to stop Beijing's advance without provoking hostility." Published on February 5th 2019.



ENDNOTES

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- ² Rob Wijk, “De Nieuwe Wereldorde: Hoe China Sluipenderwijs de Macht Overneemt” *Amsterdam Balans* (2019).
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- ²² Xi Jinping, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era.”
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- ²⁴ Rob Wijk, “De Nieuwe Wereldorde,” *Amsterdam Balans* (2019).
- ²⁵ Tim Winter, “One Belt, One Road, One Heritage: Cultural Diplomacy and the Silk Road,” *The Diplomat* (2016).

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Yiping Huang, "Understanding China's Belt & Road Initiative: Motivation, Framework and Assessment," *China Economic Review* 40 (2016): 314-321 & Michael D. Swaine, "Chinese Views and Commentary on the 'One Belt, One Road' Initiative." *China Leadership Monitor* 47.2 (2015): 3.

²⁸ Fan Zhai, "China's Belt and Road Initiative: A Preliminary Quantitative Assessment," *Journal of Asian Economics* 55 (2018): 84-92.

²⁹ Stephen Aris, "One Belt, One Road: China's Vision of" Connectivity," *CSS Analyses in Security Policy*, 195 (2016).

³⁰ David Shin, "Military and Security Relations: China, Africa and the Rest of the World," In: Robert I. Rotberg. *China into Africa: Aid, Trade and Influence* (2008).

³¹ Wijk, De Nieuwe Wereldorde, 17 & Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era."

³² Robert Kaplan, "The Return of Marco Polo's World," Random House (2019).

³³ John Fairbanks, "Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast" (1953).

³⁴ William Callahan, "China's 'Asia Dream': The Belt Road Initiative and the New Regional Order," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 1–18 (2016).

³⁵ John Pomfret, "U.S. takes a tougher tone with China," *Washington Post* (July 30, 2010).

³⁶ Yan Xuetong, "China's New Foreign Policy: Not Conflict but Convergence of Interests," *Huffington Post* (January 28, 2014).

³⁷ Peter Frankopan, *The New Silk Roads: The Present and the Future of the World*, London: Bloomsbury (2018).

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³⁹ Xi Jinping's report at 19th CPC National Congress will henceforth be called statement 1. Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era."

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⁴¹ The policy report "Visions and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" issued by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs was the first of many extensive policy statements portraying the vision behind the BRI. Henceforth this will be called statement 2. Nele Noesselt, "One Belt, One Road: A New Roadmap for a Sinocentric World?" *The Asian Forum* (2016) & Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road."

⁴² For this overview of the Chinese history of thought we used: Noesselt, N. (2016). "One Belt, One Road: A New Roadmap for a Sinocentric World?"

<http://www.theasianforum.org/one-belt-one-road-a-new-roadmap-for-a-sinocentric-world/>.

⁴³ Peter Cai, "Understanding China's Belt and Road Initiative," Lowy Institute (2020).

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⁴⁵ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux (2003).

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- ⁵⁴ Alan Bryman, "Social Research Methods," Oxford: *Oxford University Press* (2018).
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- ⁵⁶ Sarah Tracy, "Data Analysis Basics: A Pragmatic Iterative Approach" Chapter 9 in *Qualitative Research Methods: Collecting Evidence, Crafting Analysis, Communicating Impact*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell (2013).
- ⁵⁷ Ibid. By systematically ordering the in vivo coding using the central concepts of the history of Chinese Thought, we categorized the statements conceptually, thereby producing secondary axial code.
- ⁵⁸ Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era."
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- ⁶⁴ Ibid.
- ⁶⁵ Retrieved from http://english.scio.gov.cn/beltandroad/2018-01/15/content_50227811_6.htm & Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road,"
- ⁶⁶ Robert Kaplan, *The Return of Marco Polo's World*. New York: Penguin Random House (2018).
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⁷⁴ Elizabeth Economy, “30 Years After Tiananmen: Dissent Is Not Dead,” *Journal of Democracy*, 30(2) (2019).

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⁷⁶ Amitav Acharya, “Imagining Southeast Asia.” In *The Making of Southeast Asia: International Relations of a Region*. Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press: 51-93 (2012).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

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⁸¹ Kaplan, Return to the World of Marco Polo, 4.

⁸² Jinping.

⁸³ Wijk, De Nieuwe Wereldorde, 204.

⁸⁴ David Kang, “Getting Asia Wrong: The Need for New Analytical Frameworks.” *International Security*, 27(4): 57-85 (2003).

⁸⁵ Image is retrieved from: <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Asia-Insight/China-runs-into-Belt-and-Road-barriers-in-South-Asia>. *Nikkei* is a Japan-based newspaper. It is important to note that Japan is one of the main competitors that China is facing, hence Japan sees China’s actions, including the BRI, in light of the realist competition (for power and influence) between these two countries. This makes *Nikkei* an interesting source of the realist underpinnings which are part of China’s BRI.

⁸⁶ Despite the incurring debt crises and the exacerbation of domestic divides, a dire need for infrastructure, job-creation and foreign investment will likely lead to the continuance of Asia’s acceptance of Chinese state-owned enterprises connected the BRI, thus allowing China to continue to gain both politically and economically.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ As is said in the analysis, it could be argued that because these statements are issued by the Chinese government, they are just in part the representation of the “real” actions. These documents are however valuable precisely because of the bias they reveal.

⁸⁹ “May you live in interesting times.” Using western perspective without understanding the context would lead to a positive understanding of this proverb, while in reality it is a curse.

⁹⁰ James Gee, "Context" and "Discourse Analysis." Chapters 7 and 8 in *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis : Theory and Method*, 3rd ed. New York, NY: Routledge (2011).

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⁹² Cynthia Hardy, Bill Harley, & Nelson Phillips, "Discourse Analysis and Content Analysis: Two Solitudes?" Consulted on June 28, 2019, https://wcfia.harvard.edu/files/wcfia/files/870_symposium.pdf.

⁹³ "Shall I refuse my dinner because I do not understand the process of digestion?" (Heaviside 1912).

⁹⁴ The Communist Party "created a unique hybrid," "an autocracy with democratic characteristics" (Chen 2019). Chen, Regional Responses to China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative.

⁹⁵ This does not mean that the Chinese and Western political realities by definition are inherently different. An interesting parallel for future research could and should be made between the Marshall plan and the BRI. Was the Marshall plan not as much a project of economic cooperation and welfare as it was a realist initiative of power play? Maybe there is just a difference of analysis of thought, which would ask for a review of our understanding of the world. Up until now, traditional Western thought has failed to adequately explain Asian politics.

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⁹⁸ Jinping.

⁹⁹ Peter Frankopan, *The New Silk Roads: The Present and the Future of the World*, London: Bloomsbury (2018).