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Une comparaison des discours chinois et européen sur « Initiative Route et Ceinture »

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Comparing Chinese and European Discourses regarding to the “Belt and Road Initiative”

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- 1 Since the arriving of Xi Jinping to the decision-making level of the Chinese Communist Party (CPC) in 2012, Beijing formulated the reinvention and reorganization plan of the former Silk Road in 2013 and integrated the investment-oriented going out strategy to promote the Chinese version of the economy and industrial globalization. This plan was first initialed as “One Belt One Road” (OBOR) (一带一路, *yi dai yi lu*), and then relabeled as “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) (一带一路倡议, *yi dai yi lu chang yi*) in 2017. The project claims to be an all-around cooperative relationship between China and 68 countries along the so-called new Silk Road, from China to Europe, by road, and by sea.

From the BRICS to the Belt and Road initiative (BRI), China’s hybrid competitive regionalism

- 2 The official and unofficial utterances on the topic of BRI between the Chinese and European media are the focus of this paper, by using two different frameworks to examine Sino-European discussions on the BRI. This essay is not to discuss China’s diplomacy and soft power. It intends to focus on how Beijing promotes its ambitious globalization program to the international community and the European media’s attitude toward the BRI. It allows to understand China-EU’s different perceptions and opinions on the BRI. Through the content analysis of media framing, this study also examines the effectiveness of China’s global communication strategy in promoting the BRI.
- 3 We propose to mobilize the organization of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), older than the BRI project (2009 versus 2014), as a framework. The BRICS is

a cooperative project intending to change the international order. It is a symbolic construction established under the political pressure of its most active members, namely China, Russia and India. The project represents geopolitical ambitions of these emerging countries to promote an alternative regime of the Western world (Arifon & Dwyer, 2017; Gallarotti, 2016; Liu, 2017).

- 4 China also shows its attempt to promote an alternative political project during the uncertain era after the 2008 economic crises through the BRI. Therefore, both BRICS and BRI could be considered as a counterweight for the future of the world. Raising this question is increasing the cultural and political diversity of globalization (Ferdinand, 2016; Shi, 2018).

The BRI in Chinese eyes: which content for which object?

- 5 In a communication perspective, the BRI could be analyzed as a top-down process which is similar to the BRICS. By borrowing this perspective, Chinese officials consider the BRI as a neo-approach of China's globalization. For instance, Chinese official arguments frame the BRI as another version of globalization, which represents the shared future and happy life (Huang & Wang, 2019). Similar cases are also emphasized in China's BRICS-themed discourses (Dwyer, 2017; Thusu, 2017). Here is a map describing the general scheme of the BRI project.

Figure 1. China's new silk roads. Transport infrastructure



- 6 According to Wang Yiwei (2017, p. 25), "the Belt and Road Initiative makes China stands in the international moral high ground as it focuses on three missions, namely, common modernization of countries along the routes, common revival of civilizations as well as

inclusive globalization, and aims to forge the community of common future integrating civilization, international and civil order”. However, international scholars point out that the Chinese government practices strict public opinion censorship and guidance on their media and scholars’ opinions to positively promote China’s image in the external propaganda activities (Arsène, 2011; Huang & Wang, 2019; Li, 2015). Therefore, it is necessary to rationalize and explain the BRI in a seductive aspect by analyzing China’s discourses or narratives.

Two theoretical frameworks and two methodologies

A comparative approach

- 7 Based on the previous finding on the BRICS (Arifon & Dwyer, 2017), the BRI could be seen as an object with commercial and industrial purposes for improving trade but also for its communicative and symbolic dimensions (Castells, 2008). By comparing European and Chinese perspectives on the BRI, we plan to elaborate images and representations from both sides. Research in a comparative approach reveals differences and similarities. From the standpoint of multilateralism (Keohane, 1984; Telo & Keohane, 2013), scholars argue that the European Union approach—and its extension to Europe—represents a laboratory exploring how multi-level cooperation and transnationalism can go beyond the Westphalia sovereignty, to deepen cooperation. Frankopan (2015) develops a vision, including arguments and stories from the West and the East and presenting how Central Asia was and will become the center of the world. Besides, Brook (2010) reads Western and Asian sources on the eve of the globalization during the 17th century and details the stories from both sides and the perceptions linked to them.

A communication perspective: discourse analysis

- 8 In a communication approach, this article intends to mobilize “framing” and “narrative” to develop the discourse analysis. Framing involves “a few aspects of a perceived reality and connecting them in a narrative that promotes a particular interpretation” (Entman, 2010, p. 391). It can perform four functions: “define problems, specify causes, convey moral assessments, and endorse remedies” (*ibid*, p. 391).
- 9 Entman emphasizes the framing bias and points out the two most relevant elements. For him, content bias identifies “consistently slanted framing of mediated communication to promote the success of specific interest, party or ideology in competition to control governmental power” (Entman, 2010, p. 393). To be more precise, a bias can be noticed only when slant holds over time, revealing an intentional mechanism or structure by the media.
- 10 The second dimension of bias concerns decision-making process. As Entman argues, “the media’s decision-making biases guide routine information processing by individual journalists and, manifested as tactic norms and routines, by news organizations” (Entman, 2010, p. 394).
- 11 According to Bläser (2005, p. 289), “information and specialized knowledge are both indispensable for the construction and exertion of framing power”. If we reveal framing strategies in politics, one should consider a diachronic process, such as the end of an electoral campaign, or after the end of a mandate. In other words, the long-term is

necessary to point out such a process. Besides, to complete the framework on framing, political power should be analyzed. For instance, by comparing several transnational televisions and networks, Koch and Mattelart (2016) indicate the importance of framing and culture in the communication process.

- 12 Discourse analysis, as a qualitative research method, is frequently utilized to find the latent meaning of texts. The critical discourse analysis of Fairclough and the frame analysis of Van Dijk are the two main approaches in discourse analysis. Van Dijk (1999) states that “structures of news discourse have particular social, political, or ideological implications. Not only can the text be analyzed but also the ‘relations between structures of text and talk’ and ‘of their cognitive, social, cultural, or historical “contexts”.” The literature on representation studies focuses on the use of the theoretical approach. For instance (Goldberger 2004) uses frame analysis from a social constructivist standpoint to analyze how United States news magazines represented immigrants in the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks.
- 13 Additional framework on the narrative is also relevant. Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle define a narrative as “frameworks that allow humans to connect unconnected phenomena around some causal transformation” (quoted in Schmitt, 2018, p. 490). Political actors produce a narrative, composed of actors, events, plot time, setting and place, to give coherence to an action or a policy. In his essay, Schmitt considers different types of narratives by distinguishing system narratives, identity narratives, and issue narratives. He suggests, “to relate the study of strategic narratives with the study of political myths” (Schmitt, 2018, p. 492). Even if such a connection remains sensitive, a narrative should be understood in terms of content, *i.e.*, how the structure of the story overlaps existing ones, common background of shared cultural references of a society? At least in Western Europe, considering the literature and the research on orientalism for centuries, we argue that the resonance between the myth and the narrative could be sufficient. Regarding this statement, the evidence appears: the narrative that China tells Europe and to the world fulfills the mentioned elements as discussed later.

Press analysis method

- 14 The research period runs from January 1, 2016, to February 28, 2018, which ensures to collect a significant amount of news articles. This long-term observation also covers the first session of BRI’s summit in China in May 2017. We provide a discourse analysis based on four leading European newspapers: *Le Monde* (France), *The Guardian* (United Kingdom), *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (Germany), and *El País* (Spain). These newspapers are seen as “media of reference” in their countries, and they are members of the International Consortium of investigative journalists (ICIJ)¹. By using “*Factiva*” and “*Europresse*”, we have collected news coverage with keywords in English, French, German, Spanish and Chinese: “Belt and Road initiative”, “one belt, one road”, “silk road”, “21st-Century Maritime Silk Road”, “OBOR”, “BRI”, “*Seidenstrasse*”, “*Neue Seidenstrasse*”, “*El cinturón y la ruta*”, and “*Iniciativa del cinturón y ruta de la seda*”. We collect a total of 450 articles in the western press. 74 were not relevant such as the articles mentioning “Silk Road”, the dark net website proposing illegal drugs and arms, or the ones related to the “Silk road ensemble”, a classical music group.
- 15 On the Chinese’s side, we collect news from three newspapers. First, the *People’s Daily* is China’s largest newspaper and the most authoritative one. Second, the news agency

Xinhua is the dominant channel related to the Communist Party and the Chinese central government. Third, the *Global Times* is an English-language newspaper under the *People's Daily* and is the primary English newspaper in China.

- 16 We have conducted several semi-structured interviews with former and current officers of the EU institutions and with a member of the Chinese's mission to the EU in Brussels. These interviews will be used to complete the data collection from the media scope and to confirm or not, media opinions of both the EU and China on the BRI.

Twitter discourse analysis method

- 17 To complete our analysis, we examine some discourses on the BRI on Twitter. The rapidity, efficacy, and real-time communication model of social media become a crucial aspect for computer-mediated communications at the digital age (Correa, Hinsley, & De Zuniga, 2010; Powell, 2009). Social media allow different users to build their own network environment with low operating costs. The users can share text, pictures and photos, videos and links to other applications and groups of users (Lin & Lu, 2011, p. 1152). It provides, on the other hand, a platform for the effective delivery of information. By using functions such as retweet, comment or mention, information can be continuously forwarded and spread on Twitter.
- 18 Due to the severe Internet and social media censorship in China, international mainstream social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook are strictly blocked in the Chinese mainland (Arsène, 2016). Meantime, due to the registration rules of China's social media accounts² and the language barrier, China's domestic Weibo (Chinese version of Twitter) is challenging to serve the government's international communication needs. Therefore, Twitter has begun to be widely used in the process of international political communication of Beijing's official institutions (Huang & Arifon, 2018). Previous research confirms that China is mobilizing Twitter as an essential channel in its public diplomacy to positively promote China to the world in a fast and flexible manner (Chen, 2015).
- 19 Regarding the above reasons, it is vital to analyze the Twitter discourses on the subject as a supplement to traditional media discourses analysis. This supplementary study permits to understand how Beijing discusses the BRI-related issues on Twitter and China's attitudes and methods.
- 20 In practice, this study not only provides a content analysis of Chinese diplomatic Twitter accounts, it also pays attention to the news stories released by Chinese state-owned media on Twitter. We choose four Twitter accounts, including two Chinese diplomatic missions to international organizations based in Europe (i.e., China's Mission to Geneva for the United Nations Office at Geneva [*@ChinaMissionGva*], China's Mission to the European Union [*@ChinaEUMission*]) and two Chinese state-owned media (i.e., Xinhua [*@XHNews*] and China Global Television Network [*@CGTNOfficial*]) to collect BRI-themed tweets.
- 21 This study mainly adopts a quantitative approach. We use the Twitter monitor platform TwitterDeck and the Twitter API to collect tweets. We also mobilized the text mining tool *ConText* for data analysis (Diesner *et al.*, 2015). The *ConText* is developed by the University of Illinois to explore text corpus from natural language text data, it also provides to analyze text data and network data. Furthermore, this programming allows to achieve the "sentiment analysis" (Kharde & Sonawane, 2016; Ray & Chakrabarti, 2017) of the text

data and to discover the subjective attitude of information publishers on specific topics. In fact, as an application of natural language processing, computational linguistics, and text analytics, the sentiment analysis identifies and extracts subjective attitudes of words from the source materials. “It is the computational study of people’s opinions, appraisals, attitudes, and emotions toward entities, individuals, issues, events, topics and their attributes” (Tripathi, Vishwakarma, & Lala, 2015, p. 668). This algorithmic method helps us to distinguish the tone of a semantic statement, generally positive, negative or neutral. This analysis permits to understand the overall attitude and high-frequency words used by the Chinese official Twitter accounts on the topic of the BRI. It also affords insights on the importance of Chinese officials’ focus on this topic.

Comparing Chinese and European opinions on BRI

- 22 In order to look at the BRI with Chinese’s eyes, we have gathered arguments of two Chinese’s civil servants, reflecting the way China presents the concept, and the characteristics of the concept. Shi Wei, a former responsible for the BRI at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People’s Republic of China, puts the focus of China’s globalization efforts on one term: “connectivity, by road, sea, and by telecommunication”. It is divided into two parts: “hard connectivity, which includes infrastructure and transports, and soft connectivity, which involves rules, standards and customs”³.
- 23 Wang identifies fears and threats related to the BRI/OBOR (2017, p. 158). He explores the problems of misperceptions related to the BRI to be compared with the results of our corpus.
- “The initiative is a westward strategy,” arguing that China wants to move to the West.
 - “The Belt and Road initiative belongs to China,” and not to the other participating countries.
 - “The initiative pays more attention to the “Belt” than to the “Road”, mentioning that the focus is on sea solutions implementation, rather than road ones.
 - “The initiative is an attempt to bring back the ancient order in the name of civilization revival.” Wang refers to the ancient system of tribute from vassal countries to the Chinese’s empire. “Economic dependence” is the current version.
 - “The initiative is an effort to export excess capacity,” seeing the BRI as a Chinese version of the Marshall plan, trying to improve its exports.
 - “The initiative is a Chinese version of economic imperialism, or globalization 4.0, the Chinese version of globalization.”
 - “The initiative is a resurrection of China-Centrism” where it is said that the BRI is an attempt to promote Chinese standards.
 - “The initiative is all about China’s neighborhood diplomacy.”
 - “The initiative is a closed loop,” which shows the topic is difficult to be understood.
 - “The initiative seeks military expansion in the disguise of economic cooperation.” Wang argues that the initiative should not repeat the old path of Western expansion.
- 24 Chinese officials and official scholars display in an implicate manner the legality of the Belt and Road Initiative. For them, China uses this project to stand together with other countries for defending globalization and multilateralism, promoting China-World Alliance and win-win cooperation, and demonstrating the image of China’s friendship. However, what is the Belt and Road in the eyes of the media ? In other words, how do the media in the EU and China frame the Belt and Road Initiative?

The BRI according to the European press

- 25 During the period of the research, European media have gradually focused on the BRI issue in specific periods: during the first BRI’s summit in China in May 2017, during foreign officials’ visits in China (Theresa May, Emmanuel Macron in 2018) as well as essential Chinese events (the Communist Party Congress in October 2018).
- 26 Among the 376 articles, we elaborate on six categories of European news stories:

Geopolitical concerns

- 27 A large number of the EU’s news stories show the concern on the BRI’s consequences. In general, European media worry about China’s geopolitical and economic domination in Asia and the potential of “China’s Threat” to the EU:

“BRI would shift the geopolitical center of gravity from the Atlantic to central Asia, placing Iran, India and Turkey at its core” (Wintour, 27/06/2017, *The Guardian*).

“US doesn’t lead the world anymore” (Leach, 28/09/2017, *The Guardian*).

“China is mounting the first global challenge to the US since the collapse of the Soviet Union” (Elliott, 27/10/2017, *The Guardian*).

“Does spring 2017 inaugurate ‘China’s century?’” (Frachon, 09/06/2017, *Le Monde*).

“Behind the initiative is a geostrategic interest that materializes President Xi’s favorite motto: ‘The Chinese Dream’. The challenge is to impose the footprint of Beijing around the world” (Quesada, 27/11/2017, *El País*).

Strategic concerns

- 28 The EU countries’ leading news explain their fear of China’s strategic presence in several territories, notably the Chinese investments in the Balkans (*i.e.*, from the port of Athens to the railways in ex-Yugoslavia), but also in Africa and Central Asia:

“The port of Piraeus is the ‘dragonhead’ of this strategy as far as the seaway is concerned” (Guillot, 14/08/2017, *Le Monde*).

“China’s activism should alert Europeans on the risk of geo-economic encirclement weighing on the EU” (El Ferdaous, 06/11/2016, *Le Monde*).

“The growing presence of China in Africa is a threat to French influence” (Le Belzic, 08/01/2018, *Le Monde*).

“China feels that its political and cultural influence needs to grow proportionately, starting with its periphery in south-east and central Asia. [...] Though the initial focus of the Belt and Road is naturally on China’s immediate periphery, Europe lies as its final goal and main justification” (Maçães, 31/01/2018, *The Guardian*).

Economic concerns

- 29 The EU media critic China’s rising influence in the world economic order and express their worries by highlighting the potential of China’s economic power menacing the economy and industries in the EU-friendly countries:

“These investments are part of a larger strategy to enter the European market, since 11 of these States are members of the EU. China intends to use them as a base to expand to other activities in the continent” (Sahuquillo, 27/11/2018, *El País*).

“Critics have said the project is designed to pull other countries in the region deeper into China’s sphere of influence, and that it could give unfair preferential treatment to Chinese contractors” (Phillips, 27/11/2018, *The Guardian*).

Political issues

- 30 A part of the EU news on the BRI issue mentions the wariness on China’s political designs, objectives, and impacts; a large number of new European stories imply that Beijing seeks to export its political values, norms, and model:

“It is part of a push to cement China’s position as the undisputed power of Asia” (Phillips, 27/11/2018, *The Guardian*).

“Infrastructure project which has political designs to bring neighboring countries closer into Beijing’s orbit” (Phillips, 30/01/2018 a, *The Guardian*).

“Some suspect [BRI] is a ploy to extend Beijing’s global political and economic reach” (Phillips, 30/01/2018 b, *The Guardian*).

“BRI is a fundamental change in the way that strategic business is done” (Karp, 23/01/2018, *The Guardian*).

“Xi signaled China’s willingness to reshape the entire world around its own needs” (Mason, 22/08/2018, *The Guardian*).

European dimension

- 31 China’s BRI project has the potential to touch the European’s interests in several industries. Through the observation of news collected in the corpus, several verbatim show the doubt and mistrust of European elites on the project “China 16 + 1 ⁴”, because this project seeks to diverge Western European countries’ interests by exporting Chinese infrastructure to Central Europe with a low price:

“Beijing’s goal is essentially geopolitical: to strengthen its influence in this region between Asia and Europe” (Kauffmann, 30/11/2017, *Le Monde*).

“Chinese interests in Serbia inevitably intersects with those of the European Union. [...] It is clear that in the region, where there were two actors that seemed preponderant, Europe and Russia, there is now a third party, China” (Sahuquillo, 27/11/2017, *El País*).

“The East and the Balkans have been a priority for China for years. [...] The former commercial corridor [...] has Eastern Europe as one of its key communications links” (Phillips, 12/05/2017, *The Guardian*).

Questioning the project itself

- 32 A series of European media articles are questioning China’s vague statements on BRI projects and mention that China’s specific purposes, detailed plans, and operating rules of BRI are still unclear:

“Member states wary of Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road initiative without guarantees on transparency, sustainability and tendering process” (Phillips, 16/05/2017, *The Guardian*).

“‘Global standards and cyber security’ a concern.” [...] “It is generally about adhering to international standards, making sure there is transparency in the supply chain, [...] ensuring the tendering process is fair and equitable” (Elgot & Phillips, 31/01/2018a, *The Guardian*).

Doubt over the capacity of China to obtain all of its projects

“Experts say that nearly four years after the initiative began most projects remain on the drawing board” (Phillips, 12/05/2017, *The Guardian*).

Suspicion on China’s official discourse on BRI: despite China’s effort to present BRI as a peaceful and win-win project, the European press sees it as political rhetoric.

“Childish imagery being used to promote the project was ‘China’s way of saying that people shouldn’t be afraid of its rising economic and diplomatic and political influence in the region’” (Phillips, 12/05/2017, *The Guardian*).

“Beware, say the officials: the ‘new silk roads’ are certainly a Chinese economic expansionism that doesn’t hide itself, but they are not American-style political expansionism!” (Frachon, 24/11/2017, *Le Monde*).

- 33 A few articles are neutral, mainly describing the initiative and its potential impacts. Even fewer materials have a positive stance towards the Belt and Road Initiative, arguing it would have a beneficial economic impact, namely on emerging Asian and African countries, but also for European companies that could invest on infrastructure building. It must be noted that the authors of these “sympathetic” articles are in great majority business people or consultants in the public or private sector.
- 34 Most of the results, though expressing awe at the BRI’s size and ambition (Leach, 28/09/2017, *The Guardian*), display worry and unease about the project. Articles use terms such as “wary”, “concern”, “suspicion”, revealing a long-installed fear of the initiative, partly due to its inaccuracy and unpredictability, and partly to China’s new global stance. Keywords such as “strategic”, “influence”, “power” and “shift” also indicate a general sense of concern at the BRI’s global impact on multiple levels. President Xi Jinping aims to shift the world’s geopolitical center of gravity towards China also generates concern, as shown by the following excerpt: “Xi offered an imposing but extremely authoritarian vision of the world” (Kettle, 20/10/2017, *The Guardian*).

The BRI according to the Chinese press

- 35 Since the Belt and Road Initiative is initiated by China’s government, the official Chinese media used a large amount of resources to report and promote the project (see Table 1).

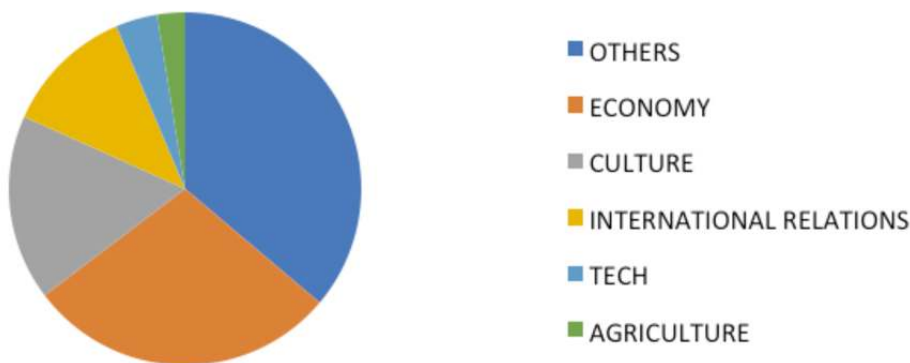
Table 1. Number of news on “Belt and Road Initiative” in Chinese media

News organizations	2016-2017	2017-2018
People’s Daily (Overseas Edition)	110	91
Global Times (English Edition)	249	690
Xinhua News	12,575	18,767
Total of news articles	12,934	19,548

- 36 According to the figures 1 and 2, the most significant part is “others” which include general topics such as “China is facing challenges with an open mind”, “Interconnection creates more opportunities for the world” and “China and neighboring countries can have a win-win situation with China’s sincerity”.

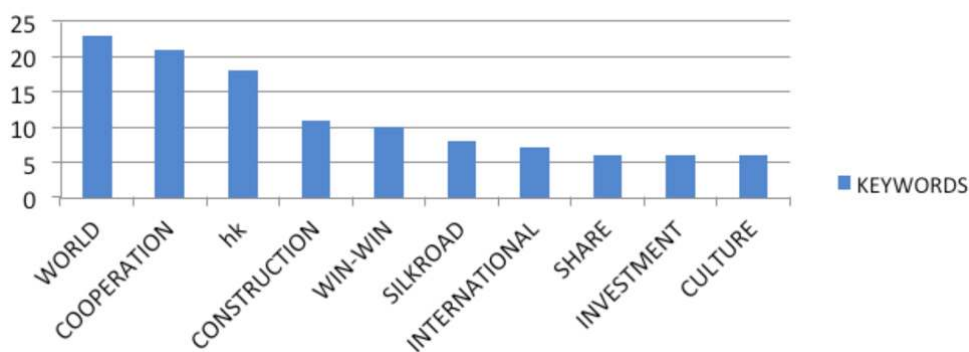
- 37 The second largest is about trade and economy, which include international trade and investment and cover topics like “bilateral investment has stepped into a new stage”.
- 38 Culture is the third largest as it’s linked with topics of Chinese language learning, movie, education and media reports, etc.
- 39 International relations have not been paid much attention compared with others.
- 40 Technology, agriculture, travel and military are the least. According to the keywords graph, the most mentioned words are “world”, “cooperation”, “Hongkong”, “construction” “and “win-win”.

Figure 1. Categories of news on *People’s Daily*



Source: www.people.com.cn/

Figure 2. Keywords data



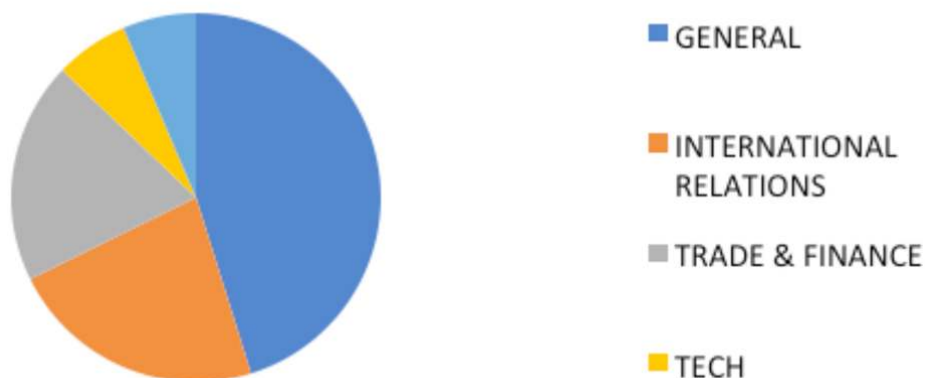
Source: www.people.com.cn/

- 41 On the BRI issue, *The Global Times* (see Figure 3) uses the keywords “cooperation” and “belt and road initiative” commonly to emphasize equality and mutual benefits. The ties between European and Asian countries are mostly mentioned shaping China’s image as defending globalization and global free trade, that is why the terms like “shared benefit” and “boost global trade” are also among the key phrases in the news stories.

Figure 3. Keywords quoted by *Global Times*

Source: www.globaltimes.cn

Figure 4. Categories of news on Gt



Source: www.globaltimes.cn

- 42 According to the figure 4, the news is mostly about general topics like “Belt Road, milestones for China”, “China’s Belt and Road initiative to be further fleshed out in 2017”, etc. The second-largest part is international relations like “Time for Europe to better position Belt & Road”, “Lebanon keen on the rosy prospect of Belt and Road initiative”. Trade and finance are also often mentioned.

don't have answers by reading the news. Thus, this way of reporting is not persuasive enough, as it doesn't focus on detailed stories and lacks personalized images.

- 47 Second, in the phase of interpretation, hidden ideological considerations emerge through intertextuality analysis. Chinese newspapers use more indirect discourse than direct discourse and usually put the essential comments, attitudes and judgments inside quotation marks. Besides, semi-specified sources, which only give the ambiguous or partial origin of the quotation, are high in the news reports.

Chinese official discourses analysis on BRI in Twitter

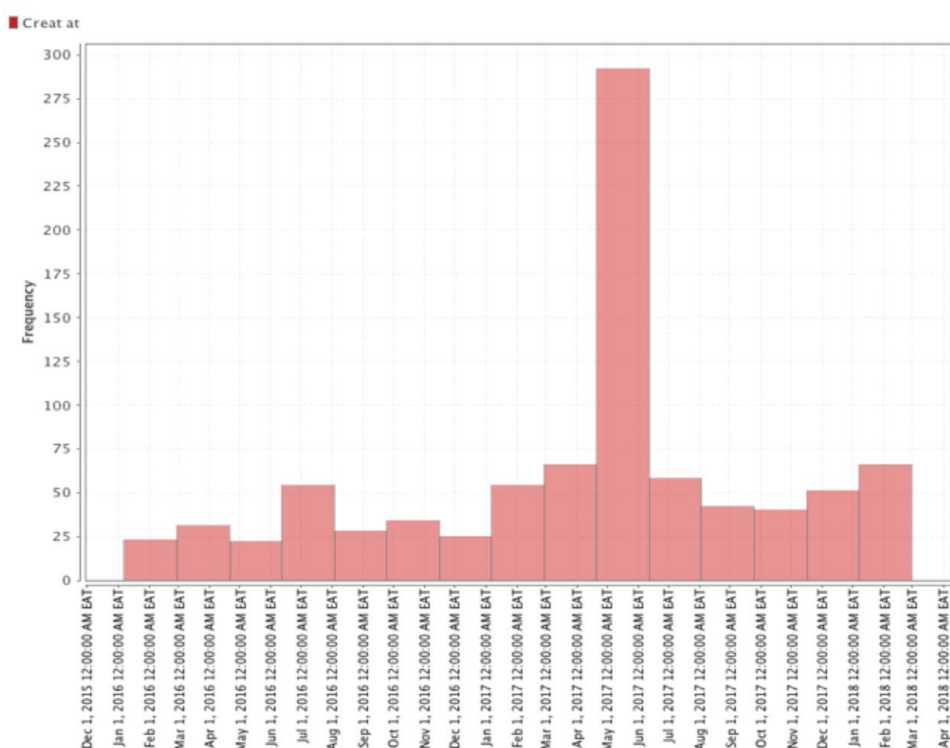
- 48 A total of 871 BRI-themed tweets are collected (see Table 2). As a national news agency, Xinhua News Agency (@XHNews) released a total of 398 tweets. Since the BRI involves a large number of the European countries, the Mission of the People's Republic of China to the European Union (@ChinaEUMission) has a high degree of publication ($n=237$) on this topic during the observation period.

Table 2. Statistics of BRI-themed tweets posted by Chinese state-owned media and embassies on Twitter

Account	@XHNews	@ChinaEUMission	@CGTNOfficial	@ChinaMissionGva	Total
Tweets	398	237	209	7	871

- 49 According to our observation, the frequency of Twitter publication is positively related to China's political dynamics on the Belt and Road Initiative. For instance, the most focused tweets on the topic have emerged from the end of April to the end of May 2017. This phase is the stage for China's Belt and Road Forum in May 2017 in Beijing. As one of China's major home-country diplomatic activities in 2017, China's media and embassies' Twitter published information ceaselessly on the Belt and Road. In line with our statistics, from April 16 to May 31, 2017, a total of 304 tweets were posted through five accounts, and the volume of tweets in this month accounted for 34.3% of the total for the past two years (see Figure 6).
- 50 The release of these tweets follows at least three stages of dissemination: 1) the warm-up phase of the Forum; 2) the concentrated release of news for showing up the advantages of the BRI; 3) the concentrated presentation period of the forum results. Before the forum, tweets issued by Beijing's official channels are mainly focused on the background and the introduction of the Silk Road. China's official communication not only engages in highlighting Beijing's economic result in past years and its achievements since the Reform in 1978, but it is also a concrete practice for China's public diplomacy to build a harmonious atmosphere for the forum. Second, the tweets during the forum are mainly based on "Live Tweet" to report on China's positions and other aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative in real time. Beijing tweets positive opinions pronounced by different political and business leaders to endorse its geopolitical project. Third, after the forum, the Twitter contents focus on the display of "forum results". China's state-owned media post a series of tweets by explaining specific agreements reached between other countries and China on the Belt and Road initiative.

Figure 6. Frequency of Twitter publication of 5 monitored accounts



- 51 Besides, the contents published by these accounts are not all the same: Xinhua News Agency posts tweets that involve all aspects of the news on the Belt and Road issues. Aside from textual contents, it also published pictures, videos, links to external websites, etc. The CGTN as China’s English language speaking TV station for foreign audiences, releases most of its contents on audio and video news, as well as interviews with international politicians and scholars. As China’s diplomatic Twitter account for the European Union, the Chinese Embassy in the EU’s tweets mainly concern the bilateral and multilateral relations between China and countries along the “Silk Road” in Europe. It publishes as well as economic information to point out the benefits of the Chinese-EU cooperation.
- 52 Moving on text mining, after removing a series of meaningless stop words, by using *ConText*, high-frequency words in the corpus of tweets are identified. “China,” as the original country of the Belt and Road Initiative is the most mentioned in the corpus. The hashtag *#Beltandroad* is a famous label quoted by Chinese official Twitter. Simultaneously, Chinese President Xi Jinping also has relatively high exposure in these tweets. Also, “global”, “cooperation”, and “development” seem to be the keywords in China’s BRI Twitter communication (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Corpus Statistic – Term Frequency

Term	Frequency
China	952
#BeltandRoad	752
Initiative	281
Mission	259
initiative	132
cooperation	124
#China	114
countries	89
President	79
chinese	76
Forum	75
#beltandroad	73
Road	72
Xi	50
development	50
global	42
#Xijinping	40

53 If more detailed attention is paid to the theme of these tweets, under the BRI framework, the Chinese government and the media focus on promoting a series of topics, like “development”, “cooperation”, “initiative”, “investment”, “ties”, “countries”, “trade”, “service”, “relations”, “opportunities”, “international”, “connectivity”, “world”, etc. (see Figure 8).

Figure 8. Main topics of Tweet



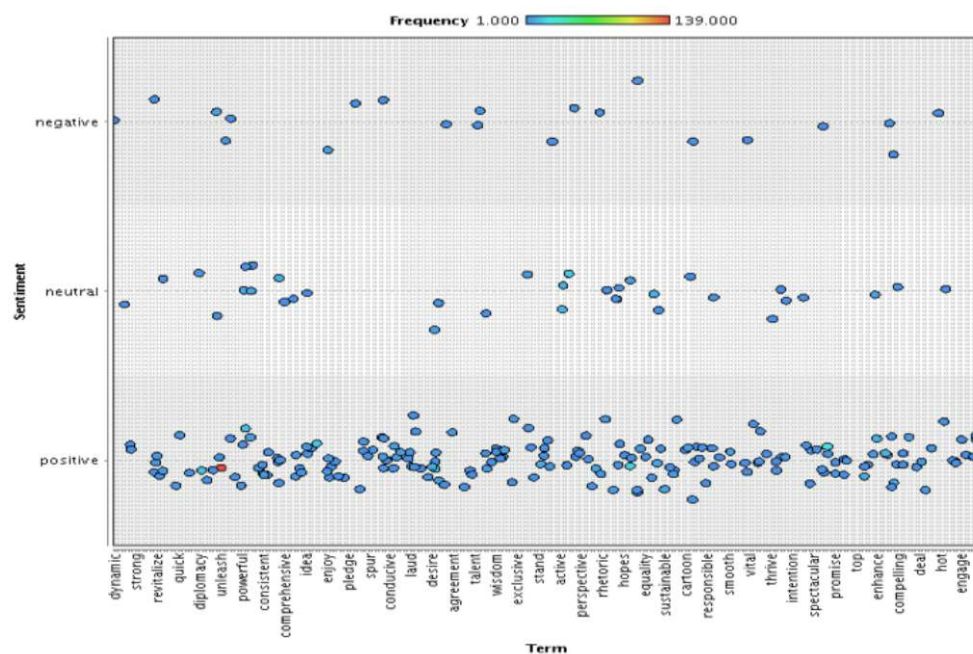
54 These keywords show China’s “Major-Country” diplomacy defined by Chinese presidents Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping as the “equality, mutual trust, inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutually beneficial cooperation” (Hu, 2012) that can “forge a new form of international relations featuring mutual respect, fairness, justice, and win-win cooperation” (Xi, 2017).

55 Besides, we use *ConText* to identify emotionally tagged words for sentiment analysis. This process permits to determine Chinese media and embassies’ subjective attitudes and

emotions on the BRI Twitter communication. After the process of system tokenization and filtering stop words, etc., 256 terms were selected and analyzed. According to sentiment analysis’s grid, 195 positive terms, 40 neutral terms and 21 negative ones have been identified.

- 56 As figure 9 highlights, Chinese media and embassies tend to use positive reporting and positive orientation as the core of the BRI-themed communication on Twitter. In terms of word choice, most words are positive or ambiguous and the government seldom uses derogatory words. The terms most commonly found on Chinese official Twitter include (Figure 9): cooperation (positive, 139); boost (positive, 22); great (positive, 21); benefit (positive, 17); support (positive, 15); central (neutral, 15); benefits (positives, 14); important (positive, 13); key (neutral, 11); open (positive, 11); relations (neutral, 10).
- 57 Through the statistics and comparison of the above terms, we lay also points out that the focus of the Belt and Road Twitter communication is mainly in the field of economic cooperation. The word “cooperation” has been highly promoted by the Chinese government with other positive terms, such as “boost”, “benefit” and “open”. It shows that the main aspect in the communication process is the “mutually beneficial and win-win cooperation” as the core idea of the BRI which serves the basic strategies of China’s “major-country” diplomacy.

Figure 9. Frequency of sentiment analysis



- 58 By mobilizing quantitative data, we highlight China’s Twitter communication strategy on the topic of BRI: China intends to build an image of openness, equality and inclusiveness on its BRI efforts. By utilizing positive terms like “cooperation”, “boost”, “open”, China intends to promote its proper globalization model to the world.
- 59 The findings are similar between the Chinese press and media of the previous section and the Twitter accounts. Words and topics highlighted are identical, whether it is effective public diplomacy or an active framing policy supported by the central government.

Discussion: the BRI, China’s solo dance in international media communication

60 With only four years, analysis on the BRI as a hybrid competitive regionalism (such as the BRICS) cannot be appropriately discussed, but similar trends, approaches and questions emerge. More research and information should be gathered before drawing a clear picture of the topic. An article in the German newspaper *Handelsblatt*⁵ underlines the issue raised in terms of unbalanced trade, topics confirmed during an interview at the European Action external service in April 2018. Elements of analysis can be summarized as a lack of reciprocity in the trade dispositions between EU and China. Three other documents related to trade, connectivity and a joint EU response to the BRI were released in 2018 arguing on lack of mutual understanding⁶.

Framing and narrative

61 To conclude on the framing and narrative results, we provide the following table 3.

Table 3. China strategic narratives (inspired from Schmitt, 2018, p. 10)

	System narrative	Identity narrative
Main narrative	US anti-multilateralism is detrimental to a multipolar order.	China and Europe or the EU have a shared history and myths that could be revived.
Sub narratives	Another approach to development than capitalism exists.	China has a great civilization to offer.

62 A large number of scholars have pointed out the close link between the Party-state, Xinhua—the official news agency—and the discourses in the media of the country (Edney, 2012; Li & Chitty, 2009; Yi & Melissen, 2011). In such context, we consider that the arguments elaborated by China’s media are suffering from one bias: the framing is decided by the ruling party cannot be challenged by the media. In other words, dominant statements guide the way media are authorized to reports official statements issued by the government. It explains the similarities between mainstream media and social media inside and outside the country. The analysis of Chinese media and Twitter accounts reveals similar findings between the press and Twitter. The corpus of words is comparable—almost identical—as well as the tone, mostly positive focusing on a win-win dimension between Europe and China. Criticism is seldom found.

63 Our findings in the European press are reflecting the discourse of officials through Chinese media and acknowledging that news is framed according to the central government statement. Although large numbers of articles have not defined the content of the BRI in a precise way, they have underlined the enormous dimensions of the project. The BRI is sometimes seen as a form of hegemony since it raises rules and standards, and the importance of finance and debts.

64 The European press is mostly controversial and reflects a particular fear of China. The categories elaborated after the analysis of articles indicate how the media contributes to

the framing of the concept: there are geopolitical, strategic, economic, and political issues. Although we cannot discuss the framing of each European newspaper, we argue that the reference newspapers in each selected country are mostly balanced between critical analysis and pro-liberal approach.

- 65 The European dimension and the questions on the implementation are also raised. We have also noticed some economic and financial arguments. We can point out two elements. There is one exception in our corpus: some authors, mostly consultants, and some articles, primarily German ones (7 among 40), are underlying the benefits of the BRI for the economic and liberal dimensions. Interviews with European civil servants in charge of the BRI at DG MOVE (mobility and transports) provide more details. While discussing with their Chinese counterparts, they face difficulties in having more detailed data and contents on the BRI. Moreover, on a similar register, there is much to say on the proposals and solutions made by the European Commission regarding connectivity and European Neighborhood Policy (Arifon, Huang, Zheng & Melo, 2019).
- 66 China relies on the myth of the Silk Road, seen as a way for trade and exchanges even if the term was coined during the 19th century by a German geographer, Ferdinand von Richthofen. It is both an identity and an issue narrative. On that, the European Council for foreign relations argues: “under Xi Jinping, China focuses on its narratives rather than showing convergence with global values” (Godement & Vasselier, 2017). On the identity side, it excludes the USA from the story and focuses on issues such as connectivity and trade, excluding social dimensions. And the positive motto of the Chinese government completes the framing in a coherent manner (cooperation, win-win, voluntary basis...) as our results reveal it.

It is a solo dance

- 67 In conclusion, we argue that the communication of China regarding the BRI in the eyes of European media is like a “solo dance”. It is a solo dance because media in the EU don’t follow it (they don’t « dance » with China), and because the only voice comes from the ruling party. The actual narrative appears as the following: “the globalization developed under the Euro-American-dominated world and their rules are not successful. The BRI will be a positive solution for all the partners involved.”

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NOTES

1. “Our network of trusted members encompasses more than 220 of the best investigative reporters from 83 countries and territories. We also partner with more than 100 media organizations, from the world’s most renowned outlets, including the BBC, *the New York Times*, *the Guardian* and the *Asahi Shimbun*, to small regional nonprofit investigative centers.” Source: www.icij.org/about, consulted September 13th, 2018.
2. In China, the Internet implements a real-name registration system. Most social media platforms, such as Baidu and Weibo, require users to provide valid Chinese identity documents and Chinese mobile phone numbers to authenticate users.
3. Interview with Shi Wei, April 19, 2018, Brussels.
4. The 16+1 format is an initiative by the People’s Republic of China aimed at intensifying and expanding cooperation with 11 EU Member States and 5 Balkan countries in the fields of investments, transport, finance, science, education, and culture. In the framework of the initiative, China has defined three potential priority areas for economic cooperation: infrastructure, high technologies, and green technologies. Source: <http://ceec-china-latvia.org/page/about>, consulted 11 July 2019.
5. EU ambassadors band together against Silk Road (<https://global.handelsblatt.com/>) April 17, 2018, consulted April 29, 2018.

6. www.merics.org/en/blog/responding-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-two-steps-european-strategy, consulted, September 12th, 2018.
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ABSTRACTS

This essay analyses both of Chinese and European discourses under the framework of Belt and Road Initiative. It intends to compare different opinions in the context that rhetoric prevails over substance and a political project over economic gain. As one of the most important international projects designed by the Chinese president, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) combines China's ancient Silk Road history with Beijing's contemporary “going out, going global” strategy. It attempts to defend China multilateralism while projecting the Chinese dream. The time frame of this research is from January 2016 to April 2018. We collected BRI-themed news published in four top European reference press and two Communist Party of China's reference organs by using media monitors (i.e., Factiva, Europresse, TweetDeck). Combined with the Twitter discourses analysis of Chinese media and diplomatic institutions in the same period and semi-structured interviews with Chinese-European officials, this paper analyzes in a comparative perspective the content of Chinese-European media framing and perceptions on BRI topics.

Ce travail analyse les discours chinois et européen sur le projet de connectivité « Initiative route et Ceinture » lorsqu'une rhétorique l'emporte sur un contenu et un projet politique sur des gains économiques. Désigné par le président chinois comme l'un des plus importants projets de coopération internationale, « l'initiative Route et ceinture », combine l'historique route de la soie et la stratégie de « sortir du territoire » pour installer le multilatéralisme et promouvoir le rêve chinois. La méthodologie utilise Factiva et Europresse pour recueillir la couverture média sur la BRI en français, anglais, espagnol, allemand et chinois. Nous étudions quatre journaux de référence européens entre janvier 2016 et avril 2018, deux sources chinoises (China Daily et Global Times), ainsi que le discours sur des comptes Twitter des autorités chinoises. Des entretiens semi-directifs complètent l'ensemble. La recherche s'inscrit dans une approche comparée des perceptions européennes et chinoises sur la BRI. Une divergence de perceptions est le facteur clé à prendre en compte.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Belt and road initiative, Chine, Europe, influence, discours, médias sociaux

Keywords: china, Belt and Road Initiative, European Media, Influence, Discourse

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