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UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES  
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**STRATEGIC STUDIES PROGRAM**

UP CIDS DISCUSSION PAPER 2020-06

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The Belt and Road Initiative as a  
Pursuit for Major Power Identity

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ISSN 2619-7448 (PRINT)  
ISSN 2619-7456 (ONLINE)



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# Understanding China's Foreign Policy Discourse

## The Belt and Road Initiative as a Pursuit for Major Power Identity

Enrico V. Gloria<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT** ■ To understand China's foreign policy in the current era, one must look into the emphasis placed by its current leadership on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While current interpretations about the policy rationale for the initiative tend to focus on the logic of economic statecraft, this paper takes a different approach as it emphasizes identity manifested through discourse as its unit of analysis. In this way, the BRI is seen as part of a longstanding discursive agenda to present a positive and distinct major power identity for China relative to traditional major powers. The paper refers to social identity theory (SIT) as its theoretical framework to present how identity figures in China's foreign policy logic. Consistent with this framework, China's identity-building project is fulfilled through the socio-cognitive processes of categorization and self-enhancement, which in turn are represented in specific discourses constituting the BRI. More specifically, China adopts a discourse of shared legacy and popular support of the BRI to categorize between a perceived in-group and out-group. China also adopts the "Silk Road Spirit" discourse to present itself as a major power upholding morally acceptable norms in conducting international relations. These discourses of the BRI allow China to enhance its image relative to an out-group of traditional major powers. Referential and argumentation discursive strategies were uncovered to account for the discourses of the BRI constructed by China within official foreign policy documents. By way

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of conclusion, policy and research insights are drawn from the analysis presented.

**KEYWORDS** ■ Belt and Road Initiative, state identity, discourse analysis, foreign policy, social identity theory, "Silk Road Spirit"



## Introduction: Competing Logics in Making Sense of the BRI

What is China's motivation for pursuing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)? How does this grand initiative fit into China's overall foreign policy logic? To understand China's foreign policy in the current era, one must unpack China's emphasis on the BRI, which is an important barometer for comprehending China's current worldview. While this assumption can easily be dismissed as rendering Chinese foreign policy in very simplistic perceptions, the objective here is to stress the importance of the BRI in China's overall grand strategy.

For one, Xi Jinping saw it fit to initiate a Leading Small Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, placing the BRI as a "symbol of his vision and authority."<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the most recent National Congress of the Communist Party of China also enshrined the BRI in the Chinese constitution, thereby cementing its legacy in the political logic of the one-party state.<sup>3</sup> In addition to these domestic institutional innovations underlying the relative importance of the BRI, Beijing has also complemented the grand initiative with other global networks, such

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<sup>2</sup> Akio Takahara, "Belt & Road is Political Genius, and a Grand Mirage," in Aries A. Arugay, "Regional Perspectives on China's Belt and Road Initiative: Challenges and Opportunities for the Asia-Pacific," *Asian Politics & Policy* 9, no. 4 (October 2017): 647, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12346>. China has also stated that establishing the BRI's own Leading Small Group is indicative of the importance the government attaches to the project (see Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, *Building the Belt and Road: Concept, Practice, and China's Contribution* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd., 2017), 9).

<sup>3</sup> *Xinhua News Agency*, "'Belt and Road' Incorporated into CPC Constitution," October 24, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/24/c\\_136702025.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/24/c_136702025.htm).

as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the regularly-held Belt and Road Forum (BRF) for International Cooperation. Indeed, there is no denying that the current Chinese government under the leadership of Xi Jinping places great importance on the Belt and Road Initiative. As described by one Chinese diplomat, the BRI “is expected to occupy a significant chapter in diplomatic history, and become the brand of Xi Jinping’s thought on diplomacy.”<sup>4</sup> The ambitious project, which aims to link countries spanning the Asian, European, and African continents, continues to grow in terms of partnerships fostered, connectivity projects initiated, and the overall attention generated on its prospects for changing the international system.

Yet, despite the promise and consequential nature of the BRI with respect to China’s foreign policy direction, there remains a lot to be said in explaining what the project means for China and its role in the international system. In particular, mainstream interpretations of the project simply point to the BRI as China’s form of economic statecraft to effectively balance against the United States and, therefore, allow the former to strengthen its global influence. For this group of scholars, the BRI is interpreted from a realist logic, where China’s economic promise is seen as means “to restore China’s place at the forefront of international diplomacy and great power politics.”<sup>5</sup> These explanations operate within an important assumption that China’s national interests are simply informed by the need to tip the global power balance in its favor. Furthermore, China’s foreign policy is simply seen as an inevitable repeat of what other major powers had done in history.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Yongchen Zhao, “Dialectical Unity of Xi Jinping’s Thought on Diplomacy,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Grenada, March 19, 2019, [http://gd.china-embassy.org/eng/gywm\\_1/dsjhjwz/t1646405.htm](http://gd.china-embassy.org/eng/gywm_1/dsjhjwz/t1646405.htm).

<sup>5</sup> Mark Beeson, “Goeconomics with Chinese Characteristics: The BRI and China’s Evolving Grand Strategy,” *Economic and Political Studies* 6, no. 3 (2018): 13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20954816.2018.1498988>.

<sup>6</sup> Several scholars have particularly included this appreciation of Chinese foreign policy in their respective analyses. Refer to the following for specific examples: Beeson, “Goeconomics with Chinese Characteristics,” 13; Veysel Tekdal, “China’s Belt and Road Initiative: At the Crossroads of Challenges and Ambitions,” *The Pacific Review* 31, no. 3 (2018): 376, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2017.1391864>; Jean-Marc F. Blanchard and Colin Flint, “The Geopolitics of China’s Maritime Silk Road Initiative,” *Geopolitics* 22, no. 2 (2017): 234, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1291503>.

A second set of similar interpretations, which also operate within the rational choice logic of following a fixed national interest, highlights domestic politics and economics as fueling China's BRI ambitions. From unloading industrial overcapacity to controlling extremism in Xinjiang, these explanations tend to underscore the importance of securing order in China to ensure continued party legitimacy.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in Mingjiang Li's study drawing from first-hand knowledge of China's policymaking process,<sup>8</sup> it was highlighted that the BRI was conceived as a purely economic project first and was only later considered as part of a bigger geopolitical scheme. Lee Jones and Jinghan Zeng, on the other hand, point to the progress of the BRI as the result of competing "state capitalist interests" rather than a "coherent, geopolitically-driven grand strategy."<sup>9</sup> While mainstream explanations would refer to BRI as the usual geoeconomics, some are still cautious to claim primacy of one explanation over another. This means that the BRI is, by its very essence, a "multifaceted grand strategy."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> For a sample of explanations emphasizing domestic level factors, see Ely Ratner, "Geostrategic and Military Drivers and Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative" (Testimony before the US-China Economic Review Commission), Council on Foreign Relations, January 25, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/report/geostrategic-and-military-drivers-and-implications-belt-and-road-initiative>; Yu Hong, "Motivation behind China's 'One Belt, One Road' Initiatives and Establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank," *Journal of Contemporary China* 26, no. 105 (2017): 367, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2016.1245894>; and Michael Clarke, "Beijing's Pivot West: The Convergence of *Innenpolitik* and *Aussenpolitik* on China's 'Belt and Road'?" *Journal of Contemporary China* 29, no. 123 (2019): 345, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2019.1645485>.

<sup>8</sup> Mingjiang Li, "The Belt and Road Initiative: Geo-economics and Indo-Pacific Security Competition," *International Affairs* 96, no. 1 (January 2020): 186, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz240>.

<sup>9</sup> Lee Jones and Jinghan Zeng, "Understanding China's 'Belt and Road Initiative': Beyond 'Grand Strategy' to a State Transformation Analysis," *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 8 (2019): 1415, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2018.1559046>.

<sup>10</sup> Weifeng Zhou and Mario Esteban, "Beyond Balancing: China's Approach Towards the Belt and Road Initiative," *Journal of Contemporary China* 27, no. 112 (2018): 488, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2018.1433476>. See the following for similar arguments emphasizing the multifaceted nature of China's ambitions towards the BRI: Tekdal, "China's Belt and Road Initiative: At the Crossroads," 13; Clarke, "Beijing's Pivot West," 352; and Yong Wang, "Offensive for Defensive: The Belt and Road Initiative and China's New Grand Strategy," *The Pacific Review* 29, no. 3 (2016): 455, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2016.1154690>.

This paper aims to contribute to the debate of uncovering China's rationale for pursuing the BRI. Likewise, this paper wishes to offer unique research and policy insights based on an explanation that highlights the pursuit for positive *identity and status* as valid motivations for China's BRI. While the above mainstream explanations do have their merit, especially in terms of providing policy implications for decision-makers, it must be cautioned that these do not in themselves guarantee a comprehensive understanding of Chinese foreign policy. As one interpretation puts it, there should be an effort amongst observers of Chinese foreign policy "to bring in new dimensions to debates about the long-term, global ramifications of the BRI."<sup>11</sup> New perspectives are welcome to supplement mainstream explanations based on geoeconomic and geostrategic assumptions. More specifically, Christina Lai noted that in Chinese economic statecraft, the "international aspect of China's foreign narratives and behavior cannot be ignored when accounting for China's statecraft in Asia and beyond."<sup>12</sup>

In the grander scheme of things, this discussion paper takes the assumption that the BRI is not only pursued simply to overtake the United States as the leader of the current order, or to expand and consolidate China's influence; the BRI is also informed by the need to shape a positive identity for China that is distinguishable from how the world has perceived previous major powers. Major power competition in material terms is a probable result, but it is not highlighted as the primary motivation. The BRI can essentially be perceived as an identity project meant to present what China perceives its foreign policy as a major power is all about. The BRI is an important initiative in terms of constructing the "self" for China, which in turn shapes its overall foreign policy. Observers of Chinese foreign policy can better recognize the comprehensive nature of the Belt and Road Initiative and how it fits in China's overall strategy with this added understanding.

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<sup>11</sup> Tim Winter, "Geocultural Power: China's Belt and Road Initiative," *Geopolitics* (2020): 19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2020.1718656>.

<sup>12</sup> Christina Lai, "Acting One Way and Talking Another: China's Coercive Economic Diplomacy in East Asia and Beyond," *The Pacific Review* 31, no. 2 (2018): 184, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2017.1357652>.

This discussion paper specifically turns to social identity theory (SIT) in exploring the dynamics of state identity formation, and to discourse analysis for a systematic reading of the official texts describing China's foreign policy rationale. The paper proceeds with a discussion of the theoretical and methodological frameworks adopted, followed by a presentation of the analysis uncovered from publicly accessible primary sources. This discussion paper concludes with several policy insights based on the critical assumptions and findings presented.

## **Social Identity Theory as Framework**

What is social identity and what can it tell us about the behavior of states? Social identity is a term derived from social psychology and the study of intergroup relations. It broadly refers to self-image obtained from an individual's evaluation of his membership in particular perceived social categories.<sup>13</sup> It is identity or self-image that we construct based on our membership in groups. Building on this understanding of social identity, Henri Tajfel and John Turner posit that individuals and groups naturally aspire to maintain a positive social identity for themselves.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the evaluation of a social identity is dependent on significant comparisons being constructed between one's "in-group" and a relevant "out-group." For SIT, individual and group behavior are not simply driven by evaluation of respective scarcities in the material realm, but more by their pursuit for a positive social identity. And this pursuit is, by nature, evaluated comparatively with respect to a relevant out-group. Therefore, it is the understanding of SIT that prospects of conflict and cooperation are determined by focusing on individuals' and groups' pursuit for a positive and distinct social identity. Being perceived in a positive light compared to others is a basic social need.

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<sup>13</sup> Henri Tajfel and John Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, eds. Stephen Worshel and William Austin (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1986), 277.

<sup>14</sup> Henri Tajfel and John Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict," in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, eds. Stephen Worshel and William Austin (California: Brooks/Cole Publication, 1979): 38.

This social identity phenomenon of pursuing a positive and distinct identity is achieved via two socio-cognitive processes: *categorization* and *self-enhancement*. The first process “sharpens intergroup boundaries” through the assignment of stereotypes and normative perceptions.<sup>15</sup> It also pertains to situating the “self” and the “other” in an in-group and an out-group, respectively.<sup>16</sup> Self-enhancement, on the other hand, pertains to the process of making relevant comparisons between the self and the other “in ways that favor the in-group.”<sup>17</sup> The self-enhancement process accounts for the critical assumption of SIT that people and groups of people have a “basic need to see themselves in a positive light in relation to others.”<sup>18</sup> In turn, positive identity also means obtaining a higher social status or position within the “hierarchy of perceived prestige.”<sup>19</sup> To be able to identify social identity phenomena in action, the operation of these two underlying socio-cognitive processes must be observed.

This identity logic found among groups has been translated in the study of foreign policies as an alternative explanation to mainstream interpretations of state behavior. This discussion paper, therefore, builds on the existing literature that seeks to make sense of China’s major power behavior by looking at state social identity as the unit of analysis.<sup>20</sup> While SIT may have originated on the premise of wanting to

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<sup>15</sup> Michael A. Hogg, Deborah J. Terry, and Katherine M. White. “A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (December 1995): 260, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2787127>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Tajfel and Turner, “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior,” 277. *Identity and status* in this paper are often used interchangeably. The author deems such treatment consistent with the original operationalization of *social identity* and *status* by Henri Tajfel and John Turner. Ibid., 277–80.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Hays Gries, “Social Psychology and the Identity-Conflict Debate: Is a ‘China Threat’ Inevitable?,” *European Journal of International Relations* 11, no. 2 (2005), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066105052966>; Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, “Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy,” *International Security* 34, no. 4 (Spring 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.2010.34.4.63>; Deborah Welch Larson, “Will China be a New Type of Great Power?,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 8, no. 4 (Winter 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pov010>; James Jungbok Lee, “Will China’s

understand intergroup relations at the sub-state level, Tajfel and Turner made the criteria for all *social groups* to also include social groups based on “national or ethnic categories,” as long as members of that group “perceive themselves as members of the same category.”<sup>21</sup> Unlike the earlier works mentioned, this discussion paper dives deeper into the foreign policy logic of major powers as it focusses on a specific initiative or strategy such as the BRI to show how SIT assumptions in studying foreign policy can be “extended,” and therefore observed consistently or inconsistently within every aspect of major power behavior. Overall, this paper also seeks to add to the flourishing contribution of SIT in the discipline of International Relations as it outlines specific policy implications drawn from adopting this analytical framework.

Turning to the main question of this discussion paper introduced at the beginning, SIT can help observers unpack China’s motivation for pursuing the BRI, and therefore how the initiative fits to the overall foreign policy logic understood in terms of the pursuit for a positive identity or higher status. But is positive identity and higher status all there is to it as far as China’s overall motivation for the BRI is concerned? To reiterate, while material considerations and their geostrategic implications do tell us a lot about the cause and effect of foreign policy behavior, looking at identity and status can also enlighten us and complement our current understanding of China’s foreign policy. Therefore, the task for this discussion paper is to unpack the *categorization* and *self-enhancement* socio-cognitive processes of China

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Rise Be Peaceful?: A Social Psychological Perspective,” *Asian Security* 12, no. 1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2016.1140644>. It is interesting to note that as far as the author’s review of the related literature is concerned, all of these cited works on the application of SIT to explain state behavior had China as their chosen case studies.

<sup>21</sup> Tajfel and Turner, “An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict,” 40. Andreas Boje Forsby has also argued dissertation that “there are no inherent obstacles in the theoretical set-up of SIT that prevents it from being applied to the state-centric realm of international relations” Andreas Boje Forsby, “The Logic of Social Identity in IR: China’s Identity and Grand Strategy in the 21st Century” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Copenhagen, 2015), 83, [https://www.diis.dk/files/media/documents/activities/phd\\_dissertation.pdf](https://www.diis.dk/files/media/documents/activities/phd_dissertation.pdf). But it must also be noted that other scholars have cast doubt on the smooth translation of SIT into IR, citing the “multidimensional” nature of SIT as it originally focuses on both individual and group level behavior. Steven Michael Ward, “Lost in Translation: Social Identity Theory and the Study of Status in World Politics,” *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (December 2017): 821, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx042>.

as reflected in its emphasis on the BRI, to account for China's social identity phenomena of pursuing a distinct and positive identity.

## Discourse Analysis and Uncovering China's Social Identity

This research task is undertaken through a discourse analysis of a sample of publicly accessible government documents consisting of speeches, press interviews, reports, and white papers that are published in English. Discourse, as understood in this paper, refers to "structures of signification which construct social realities" for the Chinese government and its intended audience.<sup>22</sup> While structures of signification may take many forms, this discussion paper only focuses on official government documents as representations of China's official discourse. In terms of its emphasis on official discourse, this discussion paper also builds on earlier studies stressing the importance of official narratives in understanding Chinese foreign policy.<sup>23</sup> As Lams has observed in her study of strategic narratives by Chinese officials, these narratives are consistently employed with the objective of establishing a united understanding of China's "story," or in this sense China's social reality, which influences the actions of international actors.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, referring to official discourse in China's case may provide observers with a more comprehensive understanding of its foreign policy.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Jennifer Milliken, "The Study of Discourse in International Relations: A Critique of Research and Methods," *European Journal of International Relations* 5, no. 2 (1999): 229, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066199005002003>.

<sup>23</sup> Beatrice Galleli and Patrickl Heirich, "Building a Community of Shared Destiny: The Belt and Road Initiative in the Political Speeches of Xi Jinping," in *China's New Silk Road: An Emerging World Order*, ed. Carmen Amado Mendes (London: Routledge, 2018), 21; Lutgard Lams, "Examining Strategic Narratives in Chinese Official Discourse under Xi Jinping," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 23 (September 2018): 389, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-018-9529-8>.

<sup>24</sup> Lams, "Examining Strategic Narratives," 405.

<sup>25</sup> Other scholars have also focused on discourse in order to understand China's foreign policy logic under the current era. See, for example, Winter, "Geocultural Power," 1–24; Guilherme Vasconcelos Vilaça, "China and Global Governance: 'One Belt One Road,' the New Development Bank and the Concept of Market State," *Kultura-Historia-Globalizacja* 22 (2017): 241–58; Ying-kit Chan, "Zheng He Remains in Africa: China's Belt and Road Initiative as an Anti-Imperialist Discourse," *The Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 37, no. 1 (2019): 57–73, <https://doi.org/10.22439/cjas.v37i1.5906>; Ya Xiao, Yue Li, and Jie

While referring to the original Chinese versions of these official texts guarantees closer reference to the true intentions and thinking of the Chinese leadership, the widely-disseminated English translations are primarily intended for outside consumption and wider access. This means that these documents could more closely resemble the social identity China wants both potential partners and skeptics to appreciate. The official documents analyzed are composed of speeches and reports pertaining to (1) the BRI itself and (2) China's overall foreign policy direction. As for the selected official BRI documents, these are limited to those that specifically introduce and explain the BRI comprehensively (i.e., its principles and norms, rationalization, and overall direction). The general foreign policy documents, on the other hand, would have to do with a general clarification of China's role in the current global order. The sample of texts was limited to 25 documents for the first group, and 15 for the second, keeping data saturation in mind. Finally, the non-exhaustive list of documents selected are also complemented by insights obtained from news articles and academic literature.<sup>26</sup> Consulting various official sources together with insights and commentaries from the state media and scholarly literature assures "interdiscursivity" of the discourses observed (i.e., that the discourses on the BRI remains consistent throughout).<sup>27</sup>

But why discourse analysis? Discourse analysis proves particularly useful in discerning "identity construction."<sup>28</sup> Guided by the specific assumptions of SIT, the primary task of the analysis is to uncover the taken-for-granted discourses utilized by the Chinese government in

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Hu, "Construction of the Belt and Road Initiative in Chinese and American Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis Based on Self-Built Corpora," *International Journal of English Linguistics* 9, no. 3 (2019): 68–77, <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v9n3p68>; and Michael Swaine, "Xi Jinping's Address to the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs: Assessing and Advancing Major-Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics," *China Leadership Monitor* no. 48 (Winter 2015): 1–14, <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/clm46ms.pdf>.

<sup>26</sup> The official documents subjected to discourse analysis are listed in the Appendix.

<sup>27</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London: Routledge, 2003), 35.

<sup>28</sup> Wrenn Yennie Lindgren and Petter Y. Lindgren, "Identity Politics and the East China Sea: China as Japan's 'Other,'" *Asian Politics & Policy* 9, no. 3 (July 2017): 381, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12332>.

forwarding the BRI. In this way, one can uncover the categorization and self-enhancement processes that define China's social identity phenomenon. Looking for salient themes to uncover the two necessary socio-cognitive processes would allow for an appreciation of China's pursuit for a positive social identity through the BRI. Ruth Wodak has identified *discursive strategies* that could be investigated when doing a close reading of texts constituting discourse.<sup>29</sup> Focusing on these strategies, according to Wodak, can help unpack the "positive 'self' and negative 'other' presentation" reflected in the language.<sup>30</sup>

Given the objective of uncovering themes related to categorization and self-enhancement, the documents were read and investigated for "referential" and "argumentation" strategies.<sup>31</sup> Identifying China's referential strategy within the official discourse is useful for recognizing themes consistent with the categorization process, as it specifically focuses on the "construction of in-groups and out-groups."<sup>32</sup> To uncover this strategy at play, the following questions served as guidelines in doing a close reading of the texts: (1) *Which group of actors does China closely associate with?*; (2) *Which group of actors does China present as being different?*; and (3) *How does China justify these associations?*

On the other hand, the argumentation strategy is useful for identifying themes consistent with the self-enhancement process, as it specifically focuses on the "justification of positive or negative attributes."<sup>33</sup> For this strategy, these probing questions were referred to in conducting the discourse analysis: (1) *What languages (e.g., adjectives, metaphors, stereotypes) were used to aid China in its construction of a positive identity?*; (2) *How did China positively distinguish itself from its out-group?*; and (3) *How did China negatively portray its relevant out-group?* Overall, these guide questions are consistent with the key

<sup>29</sup> Ruth Wodak, "The Discourse-Historical Approach," in *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, eds. Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer (London: Sage Publications, 2001), 72-73.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

assumption that the BRI, as China's major foreign policy agenda, can also be seen as a status or identity-building project for China. Therefore, China's discourses of the BRI as presented in the documents analyzed are assumed to translate directly to representations of its perceived distinct and positive identity.

The succeeding section presents the findings of this discussion paper. The specific discourses uncovered pertaining to China's categorization process are discussed first. This gives a picture of what China's in-group and out-group looks like. This is followed by a discussion of how China has presented a positive identity of itself relative to an out-group through its emphasis on the perceived morality of the norms it advocates. By way of conclusion, policy and research implications are drawn from these observations.

## Discussion and Analysis

### China's Categorization Logic within the BRI Discourse

Analysis of the BRI documents reveal that China engages in the cognitive process of categorizing between an in-group and a relevant out-group. More specifically, China has maintained *a discourse of sharing a unique Silk Road legacy* among its partners in the BRI to stress unity and the natural relationship found within its flexible in-group. In addition to this, maintaining a *discourse of popular support* for the initiative presents a cohesive in-group membership that approves of and consents to the BRI.

These discourses of the BRI allows China to construct an in-group for itself. It also presents the BRI and its stated objectives as legitimate by virtue of its historical inspiration and its positive reception. Ultimately, constructing an in-group allows China to positively compare and present itself vis-à-vis its relevant out-group, as it aspires for a distinct and positive identity as a major power. It sets the stage for self-enhancement, where China makes the case for its positive identity relative to an "other." The discourse analyses reflected below present how the two specific discourses of *shared legacies* and *popular support* contribute to China's construction of its in-group.

*Neighbors vs. Distant Relatives:  
The Discourse of Shared Legacy under the Ancient Silk Road*

What does China's in-group look like under the Belt and Road Initiative? Has China presented a clear picture of what it considers as its own in-group? The official documents on the BRI would frequently emphasize solidarity among BRI supporters and potential partners as a way of identifying China's perceived in-group. The boundaries of China's BRI in-group can be perceived as flexible, as China has consistently emphasized that any interested country can join the project.<sup>34</sup> However, despite this blanket assurance of inclusivity, China has nonetheless referred to immediate partners in the "Asian, European, and African continents" as the inspiration for the BRI, especially given their shared legacies "rooted in the ancient Silk Road."<sup>35</sup> Making the distinctions more salient, China has also referred to interested developed countries as "third parties" in the initiative, which implies separation from the direct membership of the BRI in-group.<sup>36</sup> Hence at the surface, China's

<sup>34</sup> For a sample of official documents in the corpus highlighting this idea, see Jiechi Yang, "Jointly Build the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road by Deepening Mutual Trust and Enhancing Connectivity" (Speech at the Session of 'Jointly Building the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road' and Launch of the Year of China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation), Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China (MOFA PRC), March 28, 2015, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1249761.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1249761.shtml); Xi Jinping, "Promote the Belt and Road Initiative, Extend Reform and Development," in *The Governance of China*, Vol. II (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2018) 546-49; Qian Hongshan, "Remarks by Assistant Foreign Minister Qian Hongshan at the Belt and Road Side Event of the 72nd Session of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific" (Speech at 72nd UNESCAP Session), MOFA PRC, May 18, 2016, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1364753.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1364753.shtml); Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, *Building the Belt and Road*; Xi Jinping, "Toast by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China at the Welcoming Banquet of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation," *China Daily*, April 27, 2019, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201904/27/WS5d9d3688a310cf3e3556f508.html>.

<sup>35</sup> Xi Jinping, "Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" (Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation), *XinhuaNet*, May 14, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c\\_136282982.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm).

<sup>36</sup> Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, *Building the Belt and Road*, 57; Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, *The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Contributions, and Prospects* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press Co. Ltd., 2019), 30-33.

in-group is identified more by the values and norms exemplified by the ancient Silk Road which potential partners may ascribe to, rather than a discrete set of member countries. As China has stated, “the Belt and Road Initiative is rooted in profound civilizations and inclusive cultures.”<sup>37</sup> Yet, while the project is presented as being open to membership by anyone, China is also vocal in emphasizing solidarity among like-minded partners sharing a common history within the ancient Silk Road, which are composed broadly of its developing neighborhood.

This point of highlighting solidarity among like-minded peers is established through a discourse of shared legacy and history of countries within the ancient Silk Road. It is not uncommon in the official speeches presented by high-ranking officials to nuance reports and explanations with a historical background of the BRI. In one instance, Xi Jinping has noted that the BRI “evoke[s] the historical memory of participating countries”<sup>38</sup> and therefore, it is much easier for these countries to welcome and support the initiative. In another example, during the first BRF in 2017, Xi Jinping stressed the idea of a “shared legacy” as he referred to “our ancestors” possessing the same values and aspirations to conduct “friendly engagement” with other nations.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, the first speech delivered by Xi Jinping in Kazakhstan to formally introduce the Silk Road Economic Belt conveniently started with historical anecdotes highlighting the shared experiences of China and those situated in the ancient route.<sup>40</sup>

Specific sketches from history also help construct this discourse of a shared legacy. For instance, the stories of Zhang, Xian Xinghai, and

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<sup>37</sup> Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, *The Belt and Road Initiative*, 61.

<sup>38</sup> Xi, “Promote the Belt and Road Initiative,” 546–49.

<sup>39</sup> Xi, “Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road;” see also Xi Jinping, “Toast by H.E. Xi Jinping at the Welcoming Banquet in Honor of the Distinguished Guests Attending the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Burundi, May 14, 2017, <http://bi.chineseembassy.org/fra/sgxw/t1466731.htm>.

<sup>40</sup> Xi Jinping, “Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt,” in *The Governance of China*, Vol. I (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014): 315–19.

Bakhitzan Baykadamov, were recalled in several speeches to preface the points made earlier that the ancient Silk Road was a manifestation of their ancestors' common goal of achieving "shared peace and development."<sup>41</sup> Similarly, a historical anecdote made by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi narrating the pilgrimage of Xuan Zang to Gujarat, India during the reign of the Tang Dynasty, was mentioned in a speech delivered by Chinese diplomat Li Zhaoxing at an international symposium on the BRI.<sup>42</sup> These benign expressions of the BRI's historical roots have important implications for China's identity-building project. These are evidence of a discourse that emphasizes a natural affinity between China and its perceived in-group of like-minded neighboring countries. This discourse of a "shared legacy" articulates a strong and unique historical basis for situating China within an in-group of countries defined by common understanding and shared objectives, despite presenting flexible terms for BRI membership on the surface.

Beyond a direct identification of China's in-group, the official rhetoric and language employed constituting this discourse also provides evidence of China's reference to a possible relevant out-group. Identifying what it perceives as the "other" could be an alternative way of figuring out China's understanding of its in-group. For instance, following the presentation of historical anecdotes in the first speech on the BRI delivered in Kazakhstan, Xi Jinping also added a remark saying that "*a neighbor is better than a distant relative.*"<sup>43</sup> This implies that countries with shared legacies as enduring participants in the ancient Silk Road not only have a lot in common, but are also different from a certain group of "others." Relying on the in-group, as the narrative further implies, will provide more benefits to the group members than turning to a distant out-group. Clearly, the discourse of a shared legacy has also presented narratives of "us" and "them," which points to China's categorization logic.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 315–16.

<sup>42</sup> Li Zhaoxing, "Building the Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century with Open Mind and Bold Courage" (Speech at International Symposium on Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century), MOFA PRC, February 12, 2015, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zjyh\\_665391/t1237173.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zjyh_665391/t1237173.shtml).

<sup>43</sup> Xi, "Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt," 316.

Ensuring interdiscursivity of this categorization discourse, this particular phrase—“a neighbor is better than a distant relative”—was utilized in other official speeches describing other aspects of China’s foreign policy as well. For instance, in 2005, when Zheng Bijian sought to clarify the wisdom behind China’s concept of a “peaceful rise” that was popularized under Hu Jintao’s leadership, Zheng also referred to the same “neighbor-distant relative” rhetoric to describe the close and peaceful relations between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).<sup>44</sup> Likewise, China’s Vice President Li Yuanchao employed the same phrase in his speech at the third China–South Asia Expo held in 2015, to preface China’s commitment to fostering friendly relations with South Asian nations.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, identifying “close neighbors” vis-à-vis “distant relatives” is a staple narrative within China’s foreign policy discourse on neighborhood diplomacy. And given that this narrative has been present as well in the discourses surrounding China’s Belt and Road Initiative, such as the shared legacy discourse, it can be argued that China’s cognitive process of constructing a specific in-group for itself has consistently defined China’s foreign policy logic.

*A Growing Partnership:  
The Discourse of Support and Positive Feedback*

In addition to China’s discourse of a shared historical legacy, China has also referred to the BRI through a discourse of popular support. This particular discourse emphasizes solidarity and cohesiveness within its in-group. For instance, official speeches and reports always present statistics on how many countries and organizations have so far pledged to join and support the initiative. These statistics establish the point of popular support for the BRI, often with reference to how membership and support have grown since its inception in 2013. Moreover, the discourse of support also allows for a presentation of how members

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<sup>44</sup> Bijian Zheng, *China’s Peaceful Rise: Speeches of Zheng Bijian, 1997–2005* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005), 19.

<sup>45</sup> Yuanchao Li, “Toward Win-win Cooperation Through Amity, Sincerity, Mutual Benefit and Inclusiveness” (Speech at the 3rd China–South Asia Expo), China–ASEAN Business Council, June 12, 2015, <http://www.china-aseanbusiness.org.cn/index.php?m=content&c=index&a=show&catid=37&id=16459>.

of the identified in-group consent and approve of the grand initiative that China is proposing, which further presents an image of an overall cohesive in-group. Together with the shared legacy discourse described earlier, support from the in-group aids in achieving the overall objective of categorizing between an in-group and an out-group.

The language employed is indicative of the importance of legitimizing the BRI by referencing the persistence of popular support. Official speeches delivered during the relatively early stages of development of the project would simply indicate that the BRI is receiving “support” from other countries.<sup>46</sup> By 2015, the interest on the BRI is presented as a testament of China’s growing “appeal and influence.”<sup>47</sup> Speeches delivered in 2016 and 2017 emphasize “considerable attention” gained by the initiative, citing a growing range of partner countries and organizations (more than 70 in 2016 to more than 100 partners by the end of 2017).<sup>48</sup> By 2018 and 2019, this range would have grown to the latest figure of around 150 partner countries according to Xi Jinping’s keynote speech at the second BRF.<sup>49</sup> Growing “support” as a discourse stresses the narrative of a growing club and a solidifying in-group that China has initiated. Ultimately, this assures China of its own perceived in-group, which provides its foreign policy with the needed legitimacy based on popular support.

<sup>46</sup> Yi Wang, “Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press,” MOFA PRC, March 8, 2015, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1243662.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1243662.shtml).

<sup>47</sup> Yang, “Jointly Build the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.”

<sup>48</sup> Xi Jinping, “Promote the Belt and Road Initiative, Extend Reform and Development;” and Office of the Leading Group for the Construction of the Belt and Road, *Building the Belt and Road*, 1 include the quoted description in this sentence; the latter also indicates the count for BRI partners as of 2017; Hongshan Qian, “Remarks [...] at the Belt and Road Side Event,” MOFA PRC, May 18, 2016, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1364753.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1364753.shtml) indicates the count for 2016; Wang Yi, “Forge Ahead under the Guidance of General Secretary Xi Jinping’s Thought on Diplomacy,” MOFA PRC, May 14, 2017, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1489143.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1489143.shtml) and Xi, “Toast [...] at the Welcoming Banquet” account for the estimate for 2017; MOFA PRC, “Yang Jiechi on the Belt and Road Initiative and Preparations for the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation,” March 30, 2019, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1650535.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1650535.shtml) accounts for the 2019 estimate.

<sup>49</sup> Xi Jinping, “Working Together to Deliver a Brighter Future for Belt and Road Cooperation” (Speech at the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation), MOFA PRC, April 26, 2019, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1658424.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1658424.shtml).

To further ground this legitimacy, the discourse on support is also constituted by anecdotal narratives of partner countries enjoying concrete benefits under the BRI. In this way, the positive reception being stressed within the discourse is provided more credibility as it is presented to have direct attribution to the experience of partner countries and organizations under the BRI. For instance, the remarks provided by Executive Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng at the first meeting of the BRF Advisory Council presented specific stories showcasing how BRI projects in several developing countries have changed their situations for the better, while also emphasizing that these were “applauded” by its target recipients.<sup>50</sup> Other official speeches would refer to prior positive feedback made by specific personalities, such as political leaders and academics, to contribute to this overall discourse.

International support for the project is also qualified through explanations that highlight the BRI as representing a different and fresh approach to global challenges. In general, the assessment of China’s political elite points to a global order characterized by slow economic growth, development inequality, inadequate infrastructure, and a global governance “deficit” where “ideas of openness” are under attack.<sup>51</sup> This reading of the global order conveniently contextualizes China’s framing of the BRI as a “way to address the development issues in today’s world” and to improve the current global governance system.<sup>52</sup> Simply put, China’s discourse on the BRI states that the initiative currently enjoys popular support because it promises partner countries and partner organizations with new norms and approaches that should define the

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<sup>50</sup> Le Yucheng, “Remarks by Executive Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng at the Welcoming Dinner of the First Meeting of the Advisory Council of The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF),” MOFA PRC, October 15, 2018, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zjyh\\_665391/t1623914.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zjyh_665391/t1623914.shtml).

<sup>51</sup> See these documents for examples of anecdotes employed: Le, “Remarks [...] at the Welcoming Dinner;” and Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, *The Belt and Road Initiative*, 8–18.

<sup>52</sup> Xi, “Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.” The following documents provide a general assessment of the current global accord according to China: Xi Jinping, “The Belt and Road Initiative Benefits the People,” in *The Governance of China*, Vol. II (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2018); Office of the Leading Group for the BRI, *Building the Belt and Road*, 3; Xi, “Toast by H.E. Xi Jinping;” Le, “Remarks [...] at the Welcoming Dinner;” and MOFA PRC, “Yang Jiechi on the Belt and Road Initiative.”

way states conduct international relations—a fresh way of doing things that fits well with the “trend of our times.”<sup>53</sup>

In addition to the above Chinese perceptions, there are indications that China associates an outdated order to the Western major powers and how they have handled global governance. China as a major power simply wants to be distinguished from their tradition of handling global governance. For instance, in a state-sanctioned publication titled *China and Global Governance*, former Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) Vice Minister He Yafei provided an assessment of today’s global governance as “solely based on the needs of economic development in the West” which therefore “lacks cohesion and compatibility with developing countries.”<sup>54</sup> Speeches and reports by officials also reflect an outright identification or reference to the experience of Western major powers as cause for the overall ineffectiveness of current global governance.<sup>55</sup> In promoting the BRI, China therefore perceives itself as a distinct and proactive major power willing to offer its own wisdom on how to effectively approach global challenges. The BRI is ideally constructed as an example of a unique approach that receives legitimacy from international support, while being touted as the right direction given the changing “trend of the times.”<sup>56</sup>

China has maintained a discourse of popular support in presenting the BRI to highlight its categorization logic. This discourse is supported

<sup>53</sup> Le, “Remarks [...] at the Welcoming Dinner;” see also Xi, “Toast [...] at the Welcoming Banquet.”

<sup>54</sup> MOFA PRC, “Yang Jiechi on the Belt and Road Initiative,” par. 3. Reference to a changing “trend of the times” usually appears in China’s assessment of the current order. See, for example, Wang Yi, “Toward a New Type of International Relations of Win-win Cooperation” (Speech at the China Development Forum), MOFA PRC, March 23, 2015, par. 19, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1248487.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1248487.shtml); and Wang, “Work Together to Create,” par. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Yafei He, *China and Global Governance* (Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2019), 54.

<sup>56</sup> Yi Wang, “A Changing China and its Diplomacy” (Speech at the 4th World Peace Forum), MOFA PRC, June 27, 2015, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1276595.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1276595.shtml); Xiaoming Liu, “Understand the ‘Two Sessions,’ Build Up Consensus and Create a Bright Future,” *The People’s Congress Journal* no. 2 (2019), 41, <http://www.npc.gov.cn/npc/c16175/201909/58541b5bd2fc416481919ec3d259a1e3/files/3aa8b87afc19439fb8a0550e50d0cb22.pdf>.

by narratives emphasizing its growing membership of satisfied partners. In addition, popular support is qualified by providing a distinction between what China perceives as the promise of what is appropriate for the “trend of the times” versus an outdated order conveniently associated with traditional powers. This distinction, according to China’s story-telling, is the reason for the BRI’s continuous popularity among like-minded partners, therefore solidifying the in-group.

Overall, the presence of the above discourses of *shared legacies* and *support* from partner countries present evidence of China cognitively situating itself within an in-group of like-minded developing neighbors. Despite the relative flexibility of this in-group, it is clear that China sees itself vis-à-vis a relevant “other.” But categorization between an in-group and a relevant out-group is only the first step. The succeeding sections will discuss in detail how China has argued for its distinct and positive identity given its constructed “self” and “other” categories, consistent with SIT.

### China’s Self-Enhancement Logic within the Discourse of a “Silk Road Spirit”

How does China argue for a unique and positive identity relative to its out-group through the BRI? What discourse of the BRI has China utilized to argue for higher status? China turns to history and what it refers to as “Oriental wisdom” to argue for the benign nature and the unique identity of the BRI, which translates to China’s positive self-image. More specifically, China refers to the norms associated with the “*Silk Road Spirit*,” and adopts this as a systematic discourse to present a positive and distinct identity of itself. In articulating this discourse, China consistently reminisces about the legacy of the *ancient Silk Road* and argues for its continuity with the modern BRI. In this way, China presents a perspective of Silk Road history as replete with necessary inspirations the world can draw from to reform the global order. The BRI, together with its “Silk Road Spirit” norms, is presented as one of these significant historical inspirations.

This observation is uncovered from an analysis of official foreign policy documents. For instance, Foreign Minister Wang Yi mentions in one of his speeches that the BRI draws from “Oriental wisdom” to

contribute to the global objective of ensuring “common development and prosperity.”<sup>57</sup> Xi Jinping also describes the BRI as “a continuation of our [Asian] shared legacy and a right choice for the future.”<sup>58</sup> And within the official speeches and reports on the BRI, China collectively refers to the principles and norms behind the initiative as the “Silk Road Spirit,” thereby maintaining a consistent discursive connection with its historical equivalent. According to this narrative of continuing the “Silk Road Spirit,” the norms of *peace*, *friendship* (sometimes, “cooperation” is also used), *openness*, *inclusiveness*, *mutual learning*, and *mutual benefit* were practiced by people along the ancient Silk Road in the course of their exchanges and relations with each other.<sup>59</sup> These component norms are presented as the right way forward in addressing current challenges. By reflecting back on history to seek inspiration for reforming international relations, China is able to present “a Chinese approach of reforming the current global governance system.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the Silk Road Spirit discourse, through its component norms, not only promotes the narrative of a benign Chinese foreign policy, which has been a long-standing claim by Chinese leaders to dispel the “China threat” discourse.<sup>61</sup> It also tells the story of how

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<sup>57</sup> Yi, “Forge Ahead under the Guidance.”

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> These five specific norms attached to the “Silk Road Spirit” metaphor was first introduced by Xi Jinping in 2014. Xi Jinping, “Promote the Silk Road Spirit, Strengthen China-Arab Cooperation,” in *The Governance of China*, Vol. I (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), 344. Other documents soon incorporated the Silk Road Spirit to introduce the norms underscoring the BRI. See, for example, National Development and Reform Commission and State Oceanic Administration, “Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative,” *XinhuaNet*, June 20, 2017, par. 4, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/20/c\\_136380414.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-06/20/c_136380414.htm); and National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce, “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road,” China Internet Information Center, March 28, 2015, Preface, [http://www.china.org.cn/china/Off\\_the\\_Wire/2015-03/28/content\\_35182638.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/Off_the_Wire/2015-03/28/content_35182638.htm).

<sup>60</sup> Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, *The Belt and Road Initiative*, 45–48.

<sup>61</sup> The discourse of “China threat” broadly refers to hostile implications of China’s rise vis-à-vis the current regional power balance. For a quick summary on the history of the discourse, refer to Chengqiu Wu, “Barking Up the Wrong Tree? The Master Narrative of ‘China Threat Theory’ Examined,” in *Challenges Facing Chinese Political Development*, eds. Sujian Guo and Baoguang Guo (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007): 111–42.

being a peaceful major power throughout history is unique to China's experience.

But the norms making up the "Silk Road Spirit" are norms that could easily be argued as common practice, therefore not unique at all. In fact, the BRI, together with its core concepts, have already been recognized and incorporated in important documents within international organizations.<sup>62</sup> It is a set of norms that can easily be argued, as what China does, to be "shared by all countries around the world."<sup>63</sup> Yet in articulating China's discourse of the "Silk Road Spirit," comparisons with either an old order or an outdated wisdom in doing international relations is often inferred. This discursive practice effectively distinguishes between what China perceives as norms that it promotes, and those that are outdated and need to be replaced. Such a presentation is consistent with the logic of social identity in trying to enhance one's positive identity by positively comparing the "self" from a relevant "other."

Unpacking the arguments behind the discourse of the "Silk Road Spirit" involves unpacking the norms that make up such discourse. This allows for a presentation of how *self-enhancement* is undertaken to forward a positive identity. Referring to the official foreign policy documents analyzed, the succeeding sections provide China's specific storytelling on the component norms that make up the BRI and China's foreign policy in general.

To guide and simplify the discourse analysis of the norms embodied in the "Silk Road Spirit," the five component norms of (1) peace, (2) friendship and cooperation, (3) openness and inclusiveness, (4) mutual learning, and (5) mutual benefit or "win-win" can be classified into two broad groups of normative prescriptions on how major powers ought to conduct their relations with other countries. **TABLE 1** presents a summary of China's normative prescriptions under the "Silk Road Spirit" based on these assumptions.

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<sup>62</sup> Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, *The Belt and Road Initiative*, 8–18.

<sup>63</sup> National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Commerce, "Vision and Actions," Preface.

**TABLE 1** Summary of China's normative perceptions under the "Silk Road Spirit"

Major power conduct	Component norms under the "Silk Road Spirit"	Implicit norms and values to be replaced by the "Silk Road Spirit"
Group 1: Perception towards outcomes of uneven gains from global relationships	peace, friendship and cooperation, "win-win" or mutual benefit	war and colonialism, zero-sum politics, competition
Group 2: Attitude towards other actors given global anarchy	openness, inclusiveness, mutual learning, non-interference	superiority of a certain idea/culture, interference

The above summary allows for a simplified understanding of how to interpret China's emphasis on the norms that make up the "Silk Road Spirit." The second column contains China's preferred "Silk Road Spirit" norms. As the discourse analysis would show in the next sections, China's argumentations on these prescribed norms are characterized by a narrative of discounting what it perceives as outdated norms and values in international relations (third column). Often in the official documents analyzed, the argumentation and the languages employed would embody these comparisons. Taking the analyses altogether, the five component norms of the "Silk Road Spirit" can be summarized with respect to two aspects of major power conduct: (1) how major powers perceive outcomes of uneven gains from global partnerships or interactions, and (2) how major powers should treat other countries given the anarchic nature of the international system. These groupings are presented in the first column.

Overall, through *self-enhancement*, China undergoes what is consistent with the social identity theory by presenting a morally righteous image of itself through an emphasis on the norms and values of the "Silk Road Spirit" (the norms in the second column). This entails a consistent discourse of presenting the "Silk Road Spirit" as the better alternative to what China identifies as outdated norms and values that still constitute today's international relations connected with the traditional Western major powers (the norms in the third column). Just

like China's overall foreign policy discourse, China's "Silk Road Spirit" discourse is also understood as part of a bigger objective to present a positive and distinct identity for China with respect to its relevant out-group. Referring to SIT adds explanatory value to this assumption on China's foreign policy discourse. The analyses below argue for this appreciation of China's foreign policy discourse, specifically focusing on the "Silk Road Spirit" norms of (1) "win-win" or mutual benefit, (2) peace and cooperation, and (3) mutual learning.

### *Zero-sum Politics and the Norm of "Win-win"*

What is "win-win" according to China? How does the BRI embody "win-win" outcomes for everyone concerned? The "Silk Road Spirit" discourse of the BRI presents the initiative as a concrete method of promoting "win-win" approaches in doing international relations. At the heart of a "win-win" approach to international politics is the understanding that positive-sum benefits are possible in international relations. "Win-win" is consistently presented as the opposite of "zero-sum" politics. The latter is always perceived by China as defining the foreign policy of traditional major powers. For China, zero-sum approaches to interstate relations should be declared obsolete. This dynamic of emphasizing positive-sum relations over "Cold War politics" allows China to present a positive identity of itself at the expense of an out-group. China's BRI discourse simply presents an opportunity for China to showcase this narrative.

The idea is inescapable in China's overall foreign policy rhetoric. Within published official speeches and reports that seek to provide a comprehensive explanation of China's overall foreign policy, the idea of "win-win" tends to be synonymous with similar terms such as "shared benefits," "mutually beneficial cooperation," "common development," "common interest," and "all-win progress" to name some of the terms usually employed.<sup>64</sup> These are often identified as the right direction to

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<sup>64</sup> The respective citations of the quoted positive terms above are listed here in the same order: Wang, "Forge Ahead under the Guidance," par. 5; State Council Information Office, "China and the World in the New Era," White Paper, September 2019, 34, [http://english.scio.gov.cn/node\\_8014488.html](http://english.scio.gov.cn/node_8014488.html); Wang Yi, "New Starting Point, New Vision and

take in terms of forging a new type of international relations. In addition to this, distinctive comparisons with opposite ideas are also reflected within the official documents to emphasize the positive attributions made earlier. Some of the opposite ideas explicitly mentioned in the documents include “confrontation,” “lose-lose,” “Cold War mentality,” “zero-sum,” “beggar-thy-neighbor,” “exclusiveness,” and “interest maximization,” to name a few.<sup>65</sup>

Aside from the specific languages employed, China’s emphasis on “win-win” as a defining feature of its foreign policy is also presented through a differentiation between a new and an outdated order. The outdated order is typically presented as a result of how traditional major powers have shaped the international system through their zero-sum approaches. For instance, Wang Yi in explaining Xi Jinping’s foreign policy ideas to an international audience refers to win-win cooperation as a “fundamental principle” and a “new mentality” that would “replace the old mindset of zero-sum game.”<sup>66</sup> In this example, it was deemed necessary to describe China’s preferred approach by referring to what it is not, thereby conveniently portraying an “old mindset” in a negative light. Likewise, Le Yucheng, in a speech attributed to pursuing “shared interests” as an alternative to “seeking self-interests”, referred

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New Journey,” MOFA PRC, April 29, 2019, par. 6, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1660860.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1660860.shtml); State Council Information Office, “White Paper: China and the World,” 39; Wang Yi, “Work Together to Create a Community of Shared Future for Mankind,” MOFA PRC, May 31, 2016, par. 5, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1369269.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1369269.shtml).

<sup>65</sup> The respective citations of the quoted negative terms above are listed here in the same order: Xi Jinping, “Work Hand in Hand for Common Development,” in *The Governance of China*, Vol. I (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), 356; Wang, “A Changing China,” par. 18; Xi Jinping, “Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future for Mankind” (Speech at the 71st United Nations General Assembly), *XinhuaNet*, January 19, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-01/19/c\\_135994707.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-01/19/c_135994707.htm); Wang, “Work Together to Create a Community,” par. 5; Le Yucheng, “China’s Foreign Policy in a Fast Changing World: Mission and Responsibility” (Speech at the 8th World Peace Forum), MOFA PRC, July 8, 2019, par. 2, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1679454.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1679454.shtml); Wang, “Toward a New Type of International Relations,” par. 10; Le Yucheng, “China: A Source of Certainty and Stability in a Changing World” (Speech at the 9th Beijing Xiangshan Forum), MOFA PRC, October 22, 2019, par. 16, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1709807.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1709807.shtml).

<sup>66</sup> Wang, “Work Together to Create a Community,” par. 5.

to the latter as absent “in the genes of Chinese culture.”<sup>67</sup> The discourse emphasizes the positive characteristics of China’s foreign policy, while also identifying opposite values which can be attributed to an out-group of traditional major powers.

The distinctions also go beyond simple comparisons between China’s general perceptions of the old and the new. In other recent speeches, officials were more explicit in comparing China’s foreign policy principles with its relevant out-group by specifically pointing to “Western” legacies to stress their arguments. For instance, in a press statement released by foreign minister Wang Yi to expound on China’s foreign policy principles, he referred to “win-win outcome” as China’s “basic principle in handling international relations.” But more importantly, the statement was immediately followed by a description of “Western theories of international relations” as “worship[ing] the law of the jungle which leaves the weak at the mercy of the strong and regard zero-sum game and winner-takes-all as an unalterable tenet.”<sup>68</sup> The foreign minister also emphasized in another instance that China’s foreign policy simply “differs from the one followed by traditional powers in history” as it focuses on “maintaining a favorable external environment” to develop its economy and gain “greater standing and influence.”<sup>69</sup> The foreign policy discourse of Xi and his peers is indeed clear in distinguishing its own brand of “win-win” cooperation to the Western traditional powers’ perceived outdated practice of doing international relations. These observations provide explanatory evidence on how China has adopted a discursive logic consistent with social identity phenomenon as it presents itself in a positive light at the expense of an identified out-group of Western powers.

The same pattern can also be observed in China’s more specific BRI narratives of “win-win” under the “Silk Road Spirit” discourse, consistent with the task of establishing interdiscursivity of these

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<sup>67</sup> Le, “China: A Source of Certainty and Stability,” par. 16.

<sup>68</sup> MOFA PRC, “Build a New Type of International Relations Featuring Win-Win Cooperation,” June 20, 2016, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1376908.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1376908.shtml).

<sup>69</sup> Yi, “Forge Ahead under the Guidance,” part 2, sec. 4.

meanings. The discourse presents China as trying to “replace the old practice of ‘going [at] it alone’ and the mentality of winner takes all” while working with its partners in finding “a new path of win-win cooperation for the world” represented by the BRI.<sup>70</sup> This is the similar narrative that has been employed in the broader examples previously mentioned. The “Silk Road Spirit” discourse maintains that it is precisely because of this effort from China to spearhead a global initiative which seeks to “expand external cooperation” that the BRI is currently winning “support from a lot of countries.”<sup>71</sup> Indeed, China’s pursuit for a positive identity relative to Western traditional powers, through its emphasis on “win-win” logic, is also reflected in the official “Silk Road Spirit” discourse.

But it must be understood that the consistency of the “win-win” narrative in China’s foreign policy logic did not start with the BRI and China’s overall foreign policy discourse under Xi Jinping’s leadership. “Win-win” has ubiquitously defined China’s vision and discourse of its preferred global order. It is a staple within Chinese foreign policy discourse even before Xi Jinping’s leadership. Explaining the “roots of win-win,” Brantly Womack argues that the foundational ideas associated with China’s win-win policy is consistent with the *Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence*, which China co-authored with India and Burma, and subsequently introduced to the non-aligned developing nations during the Cold War.<sup>72</sup> Maintaining consistency between these two foreign policy principles indicates consistency in China’s perception of its position in the global order. Shu Guang Zhang, in studying declassified foreign ministry archives and diplomatic papers, alludes to

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<sup>70</sup> Yi, “Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press,” question 17.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, question 1.

<sup>72</sup> Brantly Womack, “Beyond Win-win: Rethinking China’s International Relationships in an Era of Economic Uncertainty,” *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (July 2013): 913, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2346.12051>. The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence are (1) mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, (2) mutual non-aggression, (3) non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, (4) equality and mutual benefit, and (5) peaceful coexistence. Chinese Consulate General in Karachi, “The Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: The Time-tested Guideline of China’s Policy with Neighbours,” MOFA PRC, July 30, 2014, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zwjg\\_665342/zwbw\\_665378/t1179045.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwbw_665378/t1179045.shtml).

the the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence as China's way to "expose and criticize US imperialism" while expressing solidarity with its in-group of developing nations.<sup>73</sup> Womack agrees with this assessment as he observes that China's identification with the "Third World" and critique of imperialism and hegemonism goes hand-in-hand.<sup>74</sup> China's discourse on the idea of a "win-win" approach to international relations is consistently presented as an alternative to an old order defined by zero-sum politics which it describes as a legacy of the West.

Ultimately, the BRI, despite its grandeur and the emphasis that it is receiving from both China and spectators, can also be understood as a continuation of China's discursive emphasis on "win-win." The norm of "win-win" is part of a consistent foreign policy discourse that argues for a different and positive identity for China. Hence, while the BRI may indeed help China achieve on the ground strategic and economic objectives, it remains consistent with the more persistent objective of presenting a higher and more benign image as a major power relative to traditional Western major powers.

### *Zheng He's Friendly Voyages and the Norms of Peace and Cooperation*

Closely related to the "win-win" logic is China's emphasis on peace and cooperation. This is explicitly included as one of the component norms making up the "Silk Road Spirit." And similar to the earlier narratives on "win-win," this is also discursively presented as an overall priority for Chinese foreign policy. It can certainly be argued that this is not a unique norm that can only be ascribed to China's foreign policy logic, as everyone wants peace. China's argumentation on these specific ideas, however, draws from its own history and understanding of itself. This is where self-enhancement for a positive identity plays out. That is, more than the norms of peace and cooperation itself, it is China's own unique presentation of referring to its own historical experience to argue for its

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<sup>73</sup> Shu Guang Zhang, "Constructing 'Peaceful Coexistence': China's Diplomacy toward the Geneva and Bandung Conferences, 1954–55," *Cold War History* 7, no. 4 (2007): 509, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682740701621846>.

<sup>74</sup> Womack, "Beyond win-win," 913.

peaceful and cooperative nature that serves the purpose of enhancing China's unique and positive identity.

For instance, the official BRI documents often highlight the innate peaceful nature of China by referring to how it has interacted with other civilizations throughout history. This is where China finds utmost utility in the famous story of Zheng He. China asserts that, just like the voyages of Zheng He to the "Western Seas," the BRI hopes to "build a bridge for peace and East-West cooperation."<sup>75</sup> This example exhibits how China constructs its peaceful nature by looking at history for contextualizing the enduring legacy of its benign nature. In addition to stressing the centrality of cooperation as promoted by the pioneers of China's in-group, the "Silk Road Spirit" discourse also refers to them as "friendly emissaries" rather than "as conquerors."<sup>76</sup> Their objectives were identified as simply to "trade along [the silk road] spreading amity and cracking down on piracy" and not to "invade, colonize, or swindle."<sup>77</sup> These attributions help us uncover the cognitive processes that defines China's social identity for itself, seeing how it stresses its peaceful attributes against familiar negative characteristics of "invading" and "colonizing" to emphasize the distinction.

On top of the usual reference to Zheng He's voyage, China's "Silk Road Spirit" discourse would also incorporate arguments emphasizing the in-group's "Asian values" or "Asian characteristics" as essentially cooperative and not competitive. This helps underscore the in-group's distinctiveness. In Xi Jinping's speech at the 2014 Dialogue on Strengthening Connectivity Partnership, he explicitly stated that there is a need to discover new "platforms of cooperation of Asian characteristics" which involves coming up with "new institutions and mechanisms," such as the AIIB and the BRI.<sup>78</sup> In

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<sup>75</sup> Xi, "Working Together to Build," par. 4.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Yang, "Jointly Build the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road," par. 4.

<sup>78</sup> Xi Jinping, "Connectivity Spearheads Development and Partnership Enables Cooperation" (Speech at the Dialogue on Strengthening Connectivity Partnership), MOFA PRC, November 8, 2014, par. 13, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/yjhzdzsrclrdzfshyxghd/t1210466.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/yjhzdzsrclrdzfshyxghd/t1210466.shtml).

another speech, Yang Jiechi provides a similar argumentation for the in-group by emphasizing that despite “suffering from the invasion and colonization of foreign powers,” Asian countries today still “sought to uphold the roots of their own values” as this particular in-group seeks to be innovative in their pursuit for common prosperity in the modern era.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, China’s foreign policy discourse of the BRI underscores positive aspects of the in-group’s history as a peaceful civilization to emphasize that it is different from the traditional major powers.

Ultimately, the emphasis on peace and cooperation within China’s overall foreign policy discourse reflects the consistent aspiration to be seen in a positive perspective relative to other major powers. As one speech elaborating on this has stated, China’s vision for the international system “reflects China’s keen sense of responsibility for the world as a major country to share weal and woe with other countries.”<sup>80</sup> China’s overall foreign policy discourse, which specifically includes the “Silk Road Spirit,” presents a positive identity by referring to international norms that are presented through value-laden comparisons of itself and its out-group.

### *Diversity of Civilizations and the Norm of Mutual Learning*

In another recurring instance of the Silk Road Spirit discourse of the BRI, China would specifically refer to the norm of mutual learning as appreciating diversity and relative equality among nations. According to China’s official discourse, mutual learning is a consistent practice by countries along the ancient silk route which resulted to the spread of valuable know-how such as “China’s four great inventions,” different religions, and other important discoveries.<sup>81</sup> For instance, Yang Jiechi recalled in a speech that the Silk Road legacy of “[embracing] foreign

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<sup>79</sup> Jiechi Yang, “Jointly Undertake the Great Initiatives With Confidence and Mutual Trust” (Speech at the Boao Forum), MOFA PRC, April 10, 2014, par. 7, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zjyh\\_665391/t1145860.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zjyh_665391/t1145860.shtml).

<sup>80</sup> MOFA PRC, “Build a New Type of International Relations,” par. 4.

<sup>81</sup> Xi, “Work Together to Build,” par. 6.

merchants and students...without reservation” as they shared among them the “most advanced commodities and technologies.”<sup>82</sup> This example supposedly emphasizes how the norm of mutual learning has been a long-standing in-group practice. Mutual learning is also contextualized in other BRI documents by referring to it as the replacement of “clashes” being a normal conduct of international relations in modern history.<sup>83</sup> Through its emphasis on the idea of mutual learning, China is able to present itself as an inclusive major power welcoming of diverse cultures.

In relation to this, beyond the “Silk Road Spirit” discourse, emphasis on the norm of mutual learning is also a recurring theme within China’s overall foreign policy discourse. This is typically invoked as a normative replacement to the perceived usual practice of confrontation and conflict promoted by traditional major powers. China would usually start with a claim that this principle promotes coexistence among “diverse civilizations.”<sup>84</sup> According to this narrative, exchanges among different cultures promotes overall progress as society learns from one another. And beyond learning from each other, emphasizing mutual learning for China also means “respecting the choices countries make of their own social systems and development paths, and replacing confrontation and conflict among civilizations with exchanges and mutual learning.”<sup>85</sup> Here, non-interference to domestic affairs becomes closely related with the liberal emphasis on encouraging diversity for the sake of mutual learning.

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<sup>82</sup> Yang, “Jointly Undertake the Great Initiatives,” par. 6.

<sup>83</sup> For documents that specifically referred to the distinction between mutual learning and clashes in international relations, refer to Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, *The Belt and Road Initiative*, 60–62; and MOFA PRC, “Yang Jiechi on the Belt and Road Initiative,” par. 6.

<sup>84</sup> Wang, “Work Together to Create a Community,” par. 6; MOFA PRC, “Build a New Type of International Relations,” par. 12; Xi, “Work Together to Build a Community of Shared Future,” par. 25; Wang Yi, “China’s Role in the Global and Regional Order: Participant, Facilitator, and Contributor” (Speech at the 4th World Peace Forum), MOFA PRC, June 27, 2015, par. 12, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t1276595.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t1276595.shtml).

<sup>85</sup> MOFA PRC, “Build a New Type of International Relations,” par. 12.

Indeed, China's consistent emphasis on mutual learning provides opportunities for it to invoke normative comparisons of itself with an outdated global order it associates with its out-group. The language that it uses also mirrors this assessment. Official documents would positively highlight terms such as "inter-civilizational exchanges," "dialogue and negotiation," "diversity of civilizations," "inclusiveness," and "non-intervention" to refer to the idea of mutual-learning and how it can be practiced today.<sup>86</sup> Likewise, these were often placed side-by-side or in direct comparison with terms and phrases such as "clash of civilizations," "use or threat of force," "confrontation and conflict," and the idea of having a "superior or inferior civilization."<sup>87</sup> Overall, an emphasis on mutual learning can be seen as another way for China to differentiate itself from traditional powers, which China perceives have forced their wisdom on other civilizations and intervened on their political systems.

Similar to the norms of win-win and peace and cooperation, reference to the norm of mutual learning has been a common presence in China's foreign policy discourse even before Xi Jinping's leadership. Overall, mutual learning has set the tone for China to positively represent itself as a responsible power upholding peaceful coexistence over intervention. The norm actually finds its origins in China's emphasis for non-intervention, as also enshrined in its Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. In the 1990s, Deng Xiaoping was already arguing for upholding non-interference as a key norm in international relations, where he stated that "it won't work to require all the countries in the world to copy the patterns set by the United States, Britain and France."<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> The respective citations of the quoted positive terms above are listed here in the same order: Wang, "Toward a New Type of International Relations," par. 4; Wang, "Work Together to Create a Community," par. 10; Xi, "Towards a Community of Shared Future;" Wang, "Toward a New Type of International Relations;" and State Council Information Office, "White Paper: China and the World," 9.

<sup>87</sup> The respective citations of the quoted negative terms above are listed here in the same order: Wang, "Work Together to Create a Community," par. 6; Wang, "Toward a New Type of International Relations," par. 24; MOFA PRC, "Build a New Type of International Relations," par. 1; and Xi, "Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road," par. 25.

<sup>88</sup> Deng Xiaoping, "China Will Never Allow Other Countries to Interfere in Its Internal Affairs," in *Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping*, Vol. 3 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2006).

And in Jiang Zemin's speech to the United Nations Millennium Summit 20 years ago, he also emphasized that "as there should not be only one color in the universe, so there should not be only one civilization, one social system, one development model or one set of values in the world."<sup>89</sup> Likewise, Hu Jintao also provided the same sentiment in a 2005 UN Summit, calling on all nations to "respect the right of each country to independently choosing its social system and development road and support the efforts of countries to realize rejuvenation and growth according to their own national conditions."<sup>90</sup> Interestingly, a similar narrative has been echoed by Xi Jinping in expounding on how "equal exchanges makes the world colorful" under the absence of hierarchy as embodied in the "Silk Road Spirit."<sup>91</sup>

From the metaphors employed to the emphasis on respecting diversity, this particular spotlight on mutual learning has been a consistent narrative within China's foreign policy discourse despite changing leaderships and specific priorities. Likewise, previous leaderships have also identified a potential out-group of traditional powers to differentiate China's preferred norms and values in international relations. Indeed, China has also invoked the concept of mutual learning as a replacement of perceived major power arrogance and interference when it comes to how domestic as well as international affairs and exchanges should be conducted. And, as elaborated earlier, the BRI is not foreign to this treatment. Through the "Silk Road Spirit" discourse, China is simply presenting itself as promoting a world order of diverse beliefs and practices, with the BRI as just one of the many examples to make this a reality. After all, mutual learning or respect for diversity is easily palatable to any international audience hence a quick assurance of a more positive assessment of China's identity.

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<sup>89</sup> Jiang Zemin, "Statement by President Jiang Zemin of the People's Republic of China at the Millennium Summit of the United Nations 6 September 2000," MOFA PRC, September 7, 2000, par. 17, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjdt\\_665385/zyjh\\_665391/t24962.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zyjh_665391/t24962.shtml).

<sup>90</sup> Hu Jintao, "Hu Jintao Delivers an Important Speech at the UN Summit," MOFA PRC, September 6, 2005, par. 8, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/ceun/eng/zt/shnh60/t212614.htm>.

<sup>91</sup> Xi Jinping, "Promote the Silk Road Spirit and Deepening China-Arab Cooperation" (Speech at the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum), China Internet Information Center, June 5, 2014, par. 8, [http://www.china.org.cn/report/2014-07/14/content\\_32941818.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/report/2014-07/14/content_32941818.htm).

Referring to SIT to guide the analysis of the official “Silk Road Spirit” discourse provides a fresh understanding of how China pursues a positive identity for itself. The “Silk Road Spirit” and the norms that it represents are consistent with the overall normative prescriptions of China on how international politics should be conducted. The BRI is therefore seen as a continuation of an overarching objective to present a positive identity of China as a different type of major power, as it discursively promotes what it perceives are right-minded norms that should define global politics. This also establishes the breadth of these systematically prescribed norms in China’s overall foreign policy discourse. Finally, enhancing China’s positive identity is further achieved as comparisons with an out-group of traditional major powers or an outdated order of international politics are utilized to argue for the perceived morality of China’s prescribed norms and by extension, of itself as a righteous major power.

## Policy and Research Insights

What policy and research insights can one draw from a discourse analysis of China’s foreign policy under BRI? And how does the added knowledge of recognizing identity and status as rationale for pursuing the BRI contribute to a more practical approach to responding to pressures brought about by the initiative? This policy paper highlights five specific policy and research insights.

First, this paper’s focus on documents and narratives provides China observers with helpful insights on the need to focus on official articulations of foreign policy rationale. It is easy to take these for granted as they are often too repetitive and vague on the surface, especially for China’s case. The common criticisms on China’s official foreign policy documents point to the inconsistencies between the official rhetoric and China’s behavior on the ground.<sup>92</sup> Simply put, it makes

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<sup>92</sup> Frances Mangosing, “Lorenzana Admits China’s ‘Bullying’; Says Beijing’s Peace ‘Rhetoric’ Just ‘Optics,’” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, July 30, 2019, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/178403/lorenzana-admits-chinas-bullying-says-beijings-peace-rhetoric-just-optics>; Do Thanh Hai, *Vietnam and the South China Sea: Politics, Security and Legality* (London: Routledge, 2016), 82–83.

strategic sense for China to pay lip service to peace and cooperation, while behaving aggressively towards its in-group. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that through these repetitive narratives, China has actively and consistently promoted a systematic discourse or image of itself and the international system. This may influence how various actors, such as potential partners of the BRI, might behave towards China and others. As famously described by Michel Foucault, discourse has the ability to “transmit, produce, and reinforce power.”<sup>93</sup> Hence, beyond an automatic rejection of official narratives as propaganda, as they are accused of simply not reflecting China’s actions on the ground, China’s consistency in insisting its narrative actually deserves scrutiny. Observers must also wonder about China’s systematic discourse of its perceived positive identity, the same way observers have remained perpetually curious about the material implications of its foreign policy.

Second, this paper’s emphasis on the pursuit of positive identity and status as informed by SIT provides additional insights in understanding China’s major power objectives. While it can always be assumed that the BRI is meant to consolidate China’s power and influence amidst major power competition, the focus on identity nuances as to how this perceived competition may look like. For one, China’s pursuit for a positive and distinct identity through its emphasis on the norms behind the “Silk Road Spirit” implies major power competition characterized by norm entrepreneurship. By promoting the BRI and emphasizing its component norms for the sake of status, China is also providing a different approach to doing global governance—one that it insists, differs from the failures and shortcomings of the current global order, and therefore appropriate given the “trend of the times.” In this sense, China’s Silk Road Spirit discourse of its positive identity that underscores certain norms may actually complement the logic of economic statecraft. The BRI may be successful on both supplanting US hegemony as well as presenting China as a different type of major power.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978), 101.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

Third, the official discourse of the BRI also provided evidence on how China argues for an in-group of like-minded neighbors and developing countries. One may recall a much earlier yet similar attempt to forge a non-aligned movement of “Third World” countries during the Cold War. Likewise, shared legacies and experiences have been the consistent basis for constructing China’s in-group. In doing so, the perceived collective experience of the developing world under colonialism and underdevelopment, is constantly being utilized by China to argue for resemblance and therefore its benign nature. China’s discourse of shared legacies in particular favors a reading of Eurasian history that is now being invoked to fulfill China’s major power objectives. Being aware of this bias within the seemingly benign narrative purported by China about the BRI allows observers to have a more balanced interpretation of the initiative and what it can be all about. Not barring the strategic use of China’s discourse of the BRI, one can also argue that China’s discursive argumentation for a positive identity also provides the developing world with much discursive leverage towards China. Clearly, the legitimate basis for the benign nature of the BRI and China’s positive identity, is the in-group’s approval. Without the satisfaction and approval of the in-group, China’s identity cannot be perceived in a positive light. The narrative of being consistent with the in-group’s solidarity ever since history can be put into question. Therefore, beyond producing and reinforcing power, this insight reflects the other side of discourse which also allows for the frustration of power to render it “unstable.”

Fourth, observers can trace a consistent theme of presenting China as a peaceful and responsible major power within the BRI discourse, as well as within its overall foreign policy discourse. This observed consistency also stretches to Xi Jinping’s predecessors, where one can argue that the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence has set the parameters for acceptable articulations of China’s foreign policy logic. The overall objective of China’s foreign policy discourse is to present itself as a benign counterpart to an out-group of traditional Western major powers and the norms they stand for. In addition to this, one can also identify China’s perception of the values and norms defining the global order and how various players are organized within that logic. This understanding of major power behavior can provide alternative insights on how related decisions towards the BRI can be undertaken.

Finally, and related to the previous understanding on major power behavior, a keen eye on China's official foreign policy discourse provides a barometer for China's integrity when it comes to its foreign policy initiatives. When China commits hypocrisy as it preaches about its benign nature but fails to fulfill it on the ground, placing the spotlight on this false virtue can certainly undermine China's identity-building project. And, for China, such a prospect may be a significant incentive to behave not just "peacefully" but prudently. Partners, observers, and other interested actors would benefit from couching criticisms and counterarguments towards the BRI in terms and norms that China has tried so hard to emphasize. ■

## Appendix

### List of Official Documents (Official Speeches, Official Interview Transcripts, Reports, and White Papers) on the Belt and Road Initiative and China's Foreign Policy

#### Legend:

CIIC = China Internet Information Center

MOFA = Ministry of Foreign Affairs

MOFCOM = Ministry of Commerce

NDRC = National Development and Reform Commission

SIC = State Information Center

SC = State Council

TGC = *The Governance of China* (Vols. I and II)

UN = United Nations

	Date	Document title	Document type	Author	Source
<b><i>Official Documents on the Belt and Road Initiative</i></b>					
1	09/07/2013	Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt	Speech	Xi Jinping	TGC, Vol. I, pp. 315–19
2	10/03/2013	Work Together to Build a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road	Speech	Xi Jinping	TGC, Vol. I, pp. 320–24
3	04/10/2014	Jointly Undertake the Great Initiatives With Confidence and Mutual Trust	Speech	Yang Jiechi	MOFA
4	06/05/2014	Promote the Silk Road Spirit, Strengthen China-Arab Cooperation	Speech	Xi Jinping	TGC, Vol. I, pp. 344–52
5	11/08/2014	The Belt and Road Initiative and Connectivity are Mutually Reinforcing	Speech	Xi Jinping	MOFA
6	02/12/2015	Building the Maritime Silk Road	Speech	Li Zhaoxing	MOFA

	Date	Document title	Document type	Author	Source
		of the 21st Century with Open Mind and Bold Courage			
7	03/08/2015	Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press	Press Interview	Wang Yi	MOFA
8	03/29/2015	Jointly Build the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road By Deepening Mutual Trust and Enhancing Connectivity	Speech	Yang Jiechi	MOFA
9	03/30/2015	Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road	White Paper	NDRC, MOFA, MOFCOM	MOFA, CIIC
10	04/29/2016	Promote the Belt and Road Initiative, Extend Reform and Development	Speech	Xi Jinping	TGC, Vol. II, pp. 546–49
11	05/18/2016	Remarks by Assistant Foreign Minister Qian Hongshan At the Belt and Road Side Event of the 72nd Session of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific	Speech	Qian Hongshan	MOFA
12	08/17/2016	The Belt and Road Initiative Benefits the People	Speech	Xi Jinping	TGC, Vol. II, pp. 549–53
13	05/11/2017	Building the Belt and Road:	Progress Report	Office of the Leading	SIC

	Date	Document title	Document type	Author	Source
		Concept, Practice and China's Contribution		Group for the Belt and Road Initiative	
14	05/14/2017	Work Together to Build the Belt and Road	Speech	Xi Jinping	MOFA, XinhuaNet
15	05/14/2017	Toast by H.E. Xi Jinping at the Welcoming Banquet in Honor of the Distinguished Guests Attending the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation	Speech	Xi Jinping	MOFA, Chinese Embassy in Burundi (accessible link)
16	06/20/2017	Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative	White Paper	NDRC, SOA	MOFA, CIIC
17	09/01/2017	Forge Ahead under the Guidance of General Secretary Xi Jinping's Thought on Diplomacy	Speech	Wang Yi	MOFA
18	10/15/2018	Remarks by Executive Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng At the Welcoming Dinner of The First Meeting of the Advisory Council of The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF)	Speech	Le Yucheng	MOFA
19	03/30/2019	Yang Jiechi on the BRI and	Speech	Yang Jiechi	MOFA

	<b>Date</b>	<b>Document title</b>	<b>Document type</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Source</b>
		Preparations for the 2nd BRF for International Cooperation			
20	04/22/2019	The Belt and Road Initiative, Progress, Contributions, and Prospects 2019	Progress Report	Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative	SIC
21	04/26/2019	Toast by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China at the Welcoming Banquet of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation	Speech	Xi Jinping	MOFA
22	04/26/2019	Working Together to Deliver a Brighter Future for Belt and Road Cooperation	Speech	Xi Jinping	MOFA
23	04/27/2019	Promoting High Quality Development of Belt and Road Cooperation	Speech	Xi Jinping	MOFA
24	04/28/2019	Remarks by H.E. Xi Jinping president of PRC at the Press Conference of the 2nd BRF for Intl Cooperation	Speech	Xi Jinping	MOFA
25	04/29/2019	New Starting Point, New Vision and New Journey	Speech	Wang Yi	MOFA

	Date	Document title	Document type	Author	Source
<b><i>Official Documents on China's Foreign Policy</i></b>					
26	03/27/2013	Work Hand in Hand for Common Development	Speech	Xi Jinping	TGC, Vol. I, pp. 355–59
27	04/27/2013	A Better Future for Asia and the World	Speech	Xi Jinping	TGC, Vol. I, pp. 360–67
28	03/25/2015	Toward a New Type of International Relations of Win-Win Cooperation	Speech	Wang Yi	MOFA
29	04/14/2015	Uphold the Authority of the UN Charter and Promote Win-Win Cooperation	Speech	Li Keqiang	MOFA
30	06/27/2015	China's Role in the Global and Regional Order: Participant, Facilitator and Contributor	Speech	Wang Yi	MOFA
31	09/28/2015	A New Partnership of Mutual Benefit and a Community of Shared Future	Speech	Xi Jinping	UN (accessible link)
32	02/26/2016	A Changing China and Its Diplomacy	Speech	Wang Yi	MOFA
33	05/31/2016	Work Together to Create a Community of Shared Future for Mankind	Speech	Wang Yi	MOFA
34	06/20/2016	Build a New Type of International Relations Featuring Win-Win Cooperation—China's Answer to the Question	Press Interview	Wang Yi, MOFA	MOFA

	<b>Date</b>	<b>Document title</b>	<b>Document type</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Source</b>
		"Where Are the International Relations of the 21st Century Heading?"			
35	09/27/2016	Improve Our Ability to Participate in Global Governance	Speech	Xi Jinping	TGC, Vol. II, pp. 487-93
36	01/18/2017	Towards a Community of Shared Future for Mankind	Speech	Xi Jinping	XinhuaNet (accessible link)
37	09/01/2017	Forge Ahead under the Guidance of General Secretary Xi Jinping's Thought on Diplomacy	Speech	Wang Yi	MOFA
38	09/27/2017	China and the World in the New Era	White Paper	SC	SC
39	09/28/2019	China Today: A Proud Member of the Global Community	Speech	Wang Yi	MOFA
40	10/22/2019	China: A Source of Certainty and Stability in the Changing World	Speech	Le Yucheng	MOFA

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The UP CIDS Discussion Paper Series is published quarterly by the  
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