

Narrating China's Belt and Road Initiative

Abstract

This article studies the formation process of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – the most important Chinese foreign policy initiative under Xi Jinping. It argues that the BRI was put forward as a broad policy idea that was subsequently developed with relatively concrete content. During this process, the shifting international landscapes have gradually driven the BRI from a periphery strategy into a global initiative. By examining the case of Jiangsu Province, this article also shows how Chinese local governments have actively deployed their preferred narratives to influence and (re-)interpret the BRI guidelines of the central government in order to advance their own interests. As a result, this produces a variety of competing, ambiguous and contradictory policy narratives of the BRI within China, which undermines the Chinese central government's monopoly on the BRI narratives. This leaves the BRI as a very vague and broad policy slogan that is subject to change and open to interpretation. In this regard, the existing analyses – that consider the BRI as Beijing's masterplan to achieve its geopolitical goals – pay insufficient attention to the BRI's domestic contestation and overstates the BRI's geopolitical implications.

Belt and Road Initiative: Beijing's masterplan to achieve China's geopolitical dominance?

Under Xi Jinping's leadership, China has put forward a series of significant diplomatic initiatives. The most notable is the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI), comprising the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road, which was first proposed during Xi's state visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia in September and October of 2013, respectively. The BRI involves large-scale investment and infrastructure projects which aim to promote connectivity and cooperation between China and the rest of the world. In order to build a more favourable international environment to promote the BRI, China has deployed substantial resources to construct and disseminate its strategic narratives concerning the BRI. Under the state's call to 'tell a good BRI story', a large number of conferences have been organized and various delegations have been sent abroad. *China Daily*, for example, even published a series of online videos, in which the BRI has become a bedtime story for foreign children (China, 2017). Chinese official propaganda points to positive connotations such as 'win-win' and 'common development'.

Yet, those narratives have been widely challenged on the international stage. Instead of a "win-win" narrative, that of a "zero-sum" game tends to dominate the mainstream analyses of the BRI. Many international analysts point to the geopolitical nature of the BRI, implying China's expansionism is a challenge the US-led global order. The BRI is widely seen as China's ambitious global strategy to build a Sino-centric world order (Callahan, 2016; Leverett and Wu, 2017; Miller, 2017). Many argue that the BRI is China's Marshall Plan (Chen, 2014; Shen, 2016), but possibly much more ambitious; according to this view, China is able to leverage its economic strength to achieve geopolitical dominance. Some also revisit the historical origins of the Silk Road and Chinese history to argue that the BRI reflects China's goal of

reviving the ancient tributary system in which the Middle Kingdom dominates (Durani, 2016).

Collectively, those analyses point to a well-designed grand strategy of the Chinese central government to advance Beijing's geopolitical interests. However, as Jones and Zeng (2019) point out, the above analyses overestimate the Chinese central government's capacity to create and implement a clear, coherent, well-defined grand strategy. The BRI is never clearly defined; there is not even a correct, official map of the BRI (Shepard, 2017). With regards to a list of approved BRI projects, countries involved, the amount and sources of BRI funding and the agencies that run the BRI, there is either nothing available or information that is full of problems and contradictions (Shepard, 2017).

This paper aims to explain the BRI's vagueness and contradictions. It argues that these are primarily the result of the process by which policy concepts are formed in China. Instead of a 'well-designed' and 'clearly defined' masterplan that is envisioned and planned thoroughly, the BRI was put forward as a broad, vague idea without a specific blueprint at its inception. The relatively concrete policy content was subsequently added by various domestic and international actors and shaped by the shifting international landscapes. This has resulted in a BRI plan that is constantly evolving from a peripheral strategy targeting China's neighbouring countries to its current form as an extremely inclusive global initiative.

This also forces the Chinese central government to constantly rebrand its BRI narratives at different stages for public relations purposes. For example, the narrative - that the BRI as a global initiative is open to all countries - has gradually shifted away from the previous ancient Silk Road narrative which is embedded with rich history. As Ian Johnson points out, the BRI is not simply a project which was 'envisioned and planned thoroughly, then completed according to that design', as many see in the West (Johnson, 2017, 79). Rather, it is 'a soft opening', which occurs when 'projects are first announced to big fanfare, structures erected as declarations of intent, and only then filled with content' (Johnson, 2017, 79).

While almost all domestic political actors enthusiastically support the central government's call for BRI, this paper argues that those actors take advantage of the BRI to advance their own interests rather than the wider geopolitical interests of the entirety of China. Chinese provinces have deliberately constructed and disseminated their preferred policy narratives of the BRI within and outside of China. This pattern confirms Jones' (2018) regulatory state analysis, in which local and subnational political actors may choose to ignore or reinterpret central policy guidelines when those guidelines do not match their interests. Using state transformation theory, Jones and Zeng (2019) showed that the BRI is kept by the Chinese central government as a "loose policy envelope" that reflects domestic actors' struggle for power and resources.

Built upon this study (Jones and Zeng, 2019), this paper further explores the domestic dynamics of the BRI with a focus on policy narratives. It shows how local Chinese actors have used their competing BRI narratives to influence the formation of the central government's BRI guidelines. After the central government's BRI guidelines were finalised and released, dissatisfied local actors continued to openly produce their narratives to ignore and reinterpret those guidelines. As such, a variety of inconsistent, ambiguous, competing narratives have been produced within China.

This makes it impossible for the central government to forge a coherent Chinese policy narrative of the BRI. As a result, the BRI has been overloaded as a catch-all policy slogan to justify almost all relevant planned projects and economic plans put forward by various domestic actors.

The findings of this article point to the active, significant role of local actors in the BRI. The existing analyses, which consider the BRI as Beijing's top-down masterplan, assume that China is a monolithic state actor and thus pay little attention to the role of local actors and the diverse interests within the Chinese political system. They point to a relatively passive role of local Chinese actors who work in concert under the command of Beijing to advance the central government's strategic goals. This article, however, highlights the regional competition among Chinese provinces and local political actors' ability to (re)shape the central agencies' BRI plan. It demonstrates this by examining the case of Jiangsu, which is one of the most active, dynamic provincial actors to engage in the BRI. As I shall discuss, Jiangsu's provincial economic interests have driven it to actively produce and disseminate its own narratives to influence, (re)shape and even challenge some central agencies in Beijing.

Indeed, this phenomenon is not new. Similar patterns of the interplay of economic interests within the authoritarian system were found, for example, in the case of the Go West Campaign, a broad strategic initiative to develop western China put forth by the Chinese government in 2000 (Goodman, 2004). To some, the BRI has evolved from many ideas of the Go West Campaign (Ferdinand, 2016; Summers, 2016). Compared with this initiative, the BRI offers much greater international stakes; this is also why some called it the international version of the Go West Campaign (Zhao, 2016). The internationalisation of the party-state generated by state transformation affords local actors more influence on the international stage (Hameiri and Jones, 2016; Hameiri *et al.*, 2018), which undermines Beijing's efforts to articulate its preferred Chinese narrative. This is a relatively new challenge for Beijing, brought on by China's economic rise and further integration into the world.

This is not to say that the domestic competitive dynamic is purely negative for the Chinese government and its BRI projects. As has been widely examined in the literature on Chinese political economy, the competition among local governments induced by China's fiscal decentralisation or 'federalism with Chinese characteristics', is considered by some to be the key to China's market success and economic miracle (Qian and Weingast, 1995; Montinola, *et al.*, 1996). To some extent, this is a kind of democratic participation process, which helps to reinforce the legitimacy of the decision-making process within the one-party system. Nevertheless, when this Chinese style of federalism meets foreign relations, it does undermine the Chinese central government's monopoly on its foreign relations and, in this case, the BRI.

The analyses of this article are based on open source material in both English and Chinese and the author's fieldwork within and outside of China. The article is organised as follows: it first explores the formation process of policy concepts in China; afterwards, the active role of local Chinese provinces in the BRI are discussed; this is followed by a brief case study of Jiangsu.

The formation process of policy ideas and concepts in China

In China, when top leaders first introduce a new policy idea or concept, it is not always clearly defined (Zeng, *et al.*, 2015). The process by which China's academic and policy communities develop a policy idea with concrete substance and specific guidelines often occurs subsequently and incrementally. That is to say, leaders only offer a broad idea, and the job of developing the specific details of the idea is left to various political actors within the system. This allows room for such actors to influence the process of policy formation as they see fit, but it may also lead to a departure from the original vision of the top leader. This often produces a variety of ambiguous and contradictory Chinese narratives, as demonstrated by cases of policy concepts including "core interest" (Zeng, *et al.*, 2015; Zeng 2017a), "new type of great power relations" (Zeng and Breslin, 2016; Zeng, 2016; Zeng, 2017b), "global economic governance" (Zeng, 2019) and "internet sovereignty" (Zeng, *et al.* 2017).

Take, for example, the introduction of 'core interests', a policy concept referring to specific items that represent the non-negotiable bottom line of China's foreign policy. Driven by its significance, various actors/departments within China's political system have tried to interpret and define their own interests as being 'core' in order to gain more resources and power (Zeng, *et al.*, 2015). This has led to various irrelevant interpretations that go against the original policy goal. China's forestry sector, for example, made an effort to promote the 'grain for green' project – designed to retire farmland in order to address environmental problems such as soil erosion and flooding - as a national core interest (Zeng, *et al.*, 2015). This interpretation, based on its departmental interests, was a fundamental departure from the original intentions of Beijing, which wanted to use core interests to publicise the bottom line of China's foreign policy to an external audience.

Sometimes, Beijing cannot openly acknowledge its position that a particular case is not considered to be a core interest; if Beijing were to do so, it would have to face the anger of domestic nationalist sentiment. One such example is the South China Sea, in which Beijing must maintain an ambiguous position in order to prevent domestic criticism and maintain flexibility for diplomacy at the same time (Campbell, *et al.*, 2013); however, this comes at the expense of a coherent foreign policy narrative. As Beijing is incapable of openly disapproving of certain narratives and interpretations that go against its will, these conflicting and ambiguous messages confuse both domestic and international actors.

In addition, the central government in Beijing is neither capable of nor willing to eliminate differing opinions within the system. In many cases, the central government has allowed local actors to participate in the decision-making process, and it allows some level of contestation and openness, sometimes making necessary concessions to legitimise the system and reach consensus. Although this level of tolerance may reinforce the authoritarian system and the legitimacy of its decision-making processes, this article shows how the tolerance has also been exploited by local and subnational actors to advance their own agendas. In this regard, the authoritarian system is reinforced at the expense of the central government's efforts to coordinate Chinese foreign policies.

This article argues that the BRI follows the same pattern of policy formation. When the BRI was first proposed by Xi Jinping in 2013, it was an extremely vague policy idea, with neither a clear definition, nor a blueprint. It took a year and a half for the Chinese central government to release relatively more concrete BRI central guidelines— *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and*

21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (V&A) (China, 2015). During (and also after) this period, the job of developing this policy slogan with concrete substance was left to China's academic and policy-making communities. Soon after Xi's announcements, many Chinese university scholars and policy analysts in state-affiliated think tanks began to shift their research focus to the BRI. Various research projects on this topic have been funded, and many academic articles and research reports have since been produced. Given its importance, some even suggest that the BRI should be established as an independent academic discipline (Wang, 2017), similar, for example, to political science or economics. In fact, scholars in differing fields have tried to drag the BRI into their specialised fields and load it with their preferred interpretations.

This has led to a wide range of interpretations of the BRI within China. Some argue that it is China's diplomatic initiative towards developing countries (Zheng and Zhang, 2016), suggesting its goal is strengthening China's strategic ties with developing countries. Others consider it as 'the largest and the most influential economic cooperation initiative in world history' (Jiang, 2015), arguing that its focus is on regional economic integration. To Chinese military scholars, it is a call to develop the Chinese army, without which China would be unable to secure the growing overseas interests brought about by the BRI (Ghiselli, 2015). Given their expertise, many Chinese international relations scholars tend to interpret the BRI through a geopolitical lens; this goes against the official propaganda of Beijing, a point to which I shall return soon. In the end, some of the above studies were adopted into government policy,¹ but most were not.

Moreover, the BRI's evolving nature is also to blame. Beijing's policy goal for the BRI is dynamic rather than static, and that constantly alters it. The BRI has evolved through three stages so far (Zeng, 2017b). It was put forth in 2013 as peripheral diplomacy (stage 1), which was only about China's neighbouring countries. It soon evolved into stage 2 in 2014 to include Africa and Eastern Europe. A year later, in 2015, it reached stage 3 and became a global initiative open to all countries. This evolutionary nature has made it very difficult for Beijing to maintain a consistent policy narrative in terms of the BRI. The evolving process is driven, according to one of my interviewees, by the 'unexpected enthusiastic' feedback from international actors who want to be a part of the BRI initiative.² Their strong interest in the BRI and their demand to join it have encouraged China to expand its BRI rapidly.

In addition, shifting geopolitical landscapes also matter in the later development of the BRI. To some, the BRI was launched as a counter strategy to the US's 'rebalancing in Asia' and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) (Li, 2015; Zhang, 2016). These strategies, however, were unexpectedly abandoned by the Trump administration. In this new circumstance, both 'imagined enemies' of the BRI, Japan and the US, are welcome to be a part of it. This dramatic change has altered Beijing's policy and its strategic narratives, again demonstrating that the BRI is a constantly evolving, vague Chinese idea which often exceeds Beijing's expectations, rather than a well-designed, clearly defined grand strategy. So, the point to emphasise here is that international factors play a crucial role in shaping the BRI and making it depart from Beijing's original narrative.

The Chinese government clearly recognizes the power of strategic narratives. Indeed, there have been various reflections on how to construct more convincing and attractive BRI stories. Some Chinese scholars argue that the Chinese government should not embed too many historical elements into their narratives of the BRI, as this

would lead to a concern over the revival of the ancient tributary system (Zhao, 2015a). Others suggest that the local governments should avoid using the term ‘bridgehead’ to refer to their role in the BRI, since this kind of military terminology may increase other countries’ concerns over the BRI’s geopolitical and military ambition (Zhao, 2015b). However, this sober advice has been almost completely ignored by local governments, which are driven by their own interests. In order to highlight their critical roles in the BRI, many Chinese provinces have employed the term ‘bridgehead’ to brand their cities, as this article will later discuss.

Similarly, as previously mentioned, many Chinese academic writings interpret the BRI as a geopolitical strategy (Sidaway and Woon, 2017). This apparently contradicts the official stance of at least some central agencies in Beijing, which tries to avoid such geopolitical narratives of the BRI to create a more favourable international environment. For example, as a direct response to those geopolitical narratives, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi has commented that the BRI “is a product of inclusive cooperation, not a tool of geopolitics, and must not be viewed with the outdated Cold War mentality” (MFA, 2015).

In order to coordinate domestic narratives, the central government has also tried to maintain discipline in the core decision-making community. According to a scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS), her institute was not ‘allowed’ to openly discuss the ‘connotation or the grand implications’ of the BRI after 2015, when the V&A was released; they are now asked to focus on its specific implementations, such as in the economic and financial industries.³ This instruction may only have been effective for those authoritative think tanks. However, it did not prevent university researchers and local think tanks from continuing to produce their own interpretations of the BRI. Although these local think tanks have less direct impact on the decision-making of Beijing’s central agencies, their narratives continue to interact with international actors who are not fully able to differentiate between authoritative and non-authoritative Chinese voices. This is particularly true when these policy narratives serve the political interests of local actors; this is discussed in the following section.

Policy narratives from below

As previously mentioned, the process of fulfilling top leaders’ policy ideas has generated various interpretations and narratives which do not necessarily reflect the original intentions of the leaders. In this regard, the introduction of the BRI is similar to that of other policy concepts/ideas, such as “core interest” (Zeng, et al., 2015; Zeng 2017a), “new type of great power relations” (Zeng and Breslin, 2016; Zeng, 2016; Zeng, 2017b), “global economic governance” (Zeng, 2019) and “internet sovereignty” (Zeng, et al. 2017). A different understanding and evaluation of the international order and China’s power status, for example, has often led to very different, if not contradictory, interpretations and narratives of the official lines (Zeng, *et al.*, 2015).

Beyond this divergence of ideas, what makes the case of the BRI more complicated are the enormous business/economic interests — estimated to cost over \$1 trillion (Kuo and Kommenda, 2018). Such tremendous economic interests have motivated both international and domestic actors. Within China, various political actors have taken advantage of this initiative to maximise their individual interests.

This profit-seeking behaviour has led to intense competition within the Chinese political system.

Indeed, this competition started immediately after, if not before, Xi's announcement of the BRI in 2013. Taking the competition among Chinese provinces as an example, obtaining a larger place in a national project, such as the BRI, usually translates to economic benefits including receiving more policy support (such as financial support and tax relief) from the central government. Thus, local provinces have been very enthusiastic in echoing the central government's call for the BRI. Chinese provinces have made great efforts to lobby the central government, in which public relations campaigns play an important role.

As mentioned above, it took the Chinese central government a year and a half to release the BRI guidelines – the V&A – after Xi announced the vague idea of the BRI in late 2013. During this period, Chinese provinces took advantage of its vagueness to inject their own interests and visions into the V&A—a process of arguing their relevance with little similarity among their visions except that their specific province is *particularly* important to the BRI and, thus, deserves *more* support from the central government. In order to influence and (re)shape the BRI in their favour, Chinese provinces have carefully constructed and disseminated policy narratives to legitimise their political requests for the BRI. Various academic and media resources in their control have been intensively used for this purpose.

On the one hand, local university academic and policy analysts in local state-affiliated think tanks were encouraged to conduct research and provide reasoning to support their provinces' requests. This led to the aforementioned massive number of academic articles and research reports on the BRI, which provide a wide range of competing interpretations and narratives of the Silk Road. On the other hand, local provinces use their media resources, such as local newspapers, to launch public relations campaigns to disseminate their preferred policy narratives regarding the BRI. All official provincial newspapers have actively engaged with the topic of the BRI.⁴

The public campaigns launched by Chinese provinces have produced many competing BRI narratives. For example, they have further intensified the existing academic debate among Chinese historians over the historical origins of the ancient Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road; however, even before the BRI, this academic debate was complicated by pragmatic business interests because cities with richer historical origins were more likely to win heritage funds and develop their tourism industries. The announcement of the BRI further intensified the impact of economic interests on this academic debate.

Taking the origination point of the Silk Road as an example, both Shaanxi and Henan Provinces claimed their own cities Xi'an and Luoyang, respectively, as the origination point of the ancient Silk Road (Zhang and Li, 2014). Both provincial governments have spent considerable resources funding research projects supporting their claims and constructing policy narratives in their favour. The competition over the origination point of the Maritime Silk Road was even more intense and chaotic. Competitors in the south-eastern coastal provinces include Fujian, Jiangsu and Guangdong. Fujian Province, for example, uses the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) recognition to claim that its city Quanzhou is the origination point (Shi, 2014). As Quanzhou 'had always been a key port of the maritime Silk Road since the Song Dynasty', the Quanzhou party secretary

requested that the central government provide more policy support for Quanzhou's Maritime Silk Road activities (Shi, 2014). Instead of Quanzhou, Jiangsu Province's Deputy Director of the Department of Culture and Museum Director of Nanjing, Gong Liang, argues that 'the real origination point should be in Jiangsu' (Lu, 2015). According to Gong, it is Jiangsu that connects the onshore Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road, and the rise of the latter in Jiangsu led to the gradual decline of the former (Lu, 2015). The governor of Guangdong Province, Zhu Xiaodan, argues that Guangzhou is also one of the origination points (Zhu, *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, to Guangxi Province, it sees its city, Beihai, as the origination point.⁵

Those who were not so historically connected to the Silk Road also wanted to stay relevant. As a result, they made various attempts to redefine and expand the so-called origination point. New concepts such as the 'southern origination point', 'northern origination point', 'porcelain origination point' and 'tea origination point' were invented and put forth by various provinces to prove their relevance in this Maritime Silk Road plan. For example, China's north-eastern provinces, Shandong and Hebei, claimed their own cities Qingdao (Qiao, 2015) and Huanghua (Cui, 2014), respectively, as the so-called 'north origination point'.

Chinese provinces have also actively disseminated their BRI narratives to the international audience. For example, they have funded and organised numerous international seminars and conferences to discuss their roles in the BRI. International delegations are invited to these meetings, which often become opportunities for local provinces to disseminate their narratives. Similarly, the Chinese delegations from Sichuan and Guangxi, which I met in the UK, were keen to highlight the unique, key roles of their respective provinces in the BRI.⁶ While the larger impact of public relations campaigns may serve the interests of local provinces, such campaigns have been carried out at the expense of the central government's efforts to project its preferred narratives to the international audience. As will be discussed later, this remains the case, even after the release of the V&A.

In the end, some provinces' lobbying strategies were quite successful in injecting their agendas and interests into the V&A. Others, however, failed. After a year and a half of lobbying and public relations campaigns, the competition was concluded in the official BRI central guidelines – the V&A – and released on 28 March 2015. A total of 18 provinces were highlighted in this official document (China, 2015). This final version of the V&A is different from previous versions. For example, in late 2013, 15 provinces were invited to the BRI symposium organized by China's Development and Reform Commission (China, 2013); this indicates that only those 15 provinces were part of the BRI blueprint at that time. Later, some provinces that did not appear in this symposium, such as Inner Mongolia (China, 2013), managed to win places in the final version of the V&A. Others, such as Shandong, which engaged in a high-profile lobbying campaign, failed to be included in its entirety, although two of its cities were included (China, 2015). In this regard, Shandong is not completely excluded from the V&A; perhaps this indicates a compromise solution between the central and local governments.

The case of Jiangsu Province

The exclusion of Jiangsu province was more surprising and embarrassing, as it was universally considered to play a key role in the BRI. Unlike Shandong, Jiangsu

was invited to the aforementioned symposium in December 2013 (China, 2013). During his visit to Jiangsu in December 2014, Chinese President Xi Jinping pointed out that Jiangsu was the ‘intersection point’ of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road and that it should actively participate in the BRI (Jiangsu, 2015). Xi’s words further raised public and internal expectations about Jiangsu’s role in the BRI. Thus, Jiangsu framed itself as the intersection point of the BRI in its public relations campaign.

The Jiangsu provincial government also highlighted its city, Lianyungang, as the ‘east bridgehead’ of the BRI. On 10 January 2015, the Lianyungang municipal government discussed and approved a specific implementation plan to construct itself as the intersection point of the BRI (Yang, 2015). On 13 January 2015, a journalist from *Shanghai Securities* claimed that the draft version of the V&A had confirmed Lianyungang as the ‘node city’ (Zhu, 2015). On 25 March 2015, *Shanghai Securities* again confirmed this information, claiming that the port of Lianyungang was listed in the ‘only’ coastal port construction projects of the BRI (CNSTOCK, 2015). All of these news reports were proven wrong.

Even more embarrassing, two hours before the V&A was released by the central government, Jiangsu’s governor, Li Xueyong, delivered a speech on Jiangsu’s contribution to the BRI at the Bo’ao Forum — an important policy forum that was considered to be an indicator of China’s policy direction. In that specific year, the Bo’ao Forum gave Jiangsu some publicity spotlights by organising an exchange meeting exclusively for Jiangsu to promote itself. Contrary to all these media and public expectations, Jiangsu went completely unmentioned in the V&A, and not one of its cities, even Lianyungang, was mentioned. At the time, the failure of Jiangsu immediately hit the headlines of the Chinese official and social media (Xiaodan, 2015). It was considered to be the ‘saddest’ province in this round of the BRI competition (Xiao, 2015).

While the V&A concluded the central government’s plan for the BRI, it did not serve as the means of reaching consensus and, thus, a unified and coherent BRI narrative. Instead, its exclusion of certain provincial actors led to some counter-effects—the V&A was implicitly and explicitly reinterpreted by local actors. The most extreme case is that of Jiangsu, which was unexpectedly excluded from the V&A. Some Jiangsu officials openly said that they were struck by the fact that Jiangsu went unmentioned in the central guidelines and ‘their enthusiasm towards work is still in the process of slow adjustment’ (Ding, 2015b). Some prefecture-level cities even considered appealing jointly to the central government (Ding, 2015b).

In addition, a few officials and scholars openly questioned the V&A and challenged the fact that Jiangsu was not included. According to the deputy director of the Jiangsu provincial government’s counselling office, Liu Zhibiao, the exclusion of Lianyungang in the V&A is ‘mismatched, unwise and unusual’ (Xiaodan, 2015). Liu also quoted the comment of Zhang Bujia, a consultant to Jiangsu’s System Reform Society and President of the Provincial Association of Shareholding Enterprises, who said that “if there is no Longhai (traffic artery starting from Jiangsu linking Eastern and Western China) line, how come there is a silk road?” (Xiaodan, 2015). These comments were also openly endorsed by Gu Longgao, the Deputy Director of the Centre for Coastal Development and Bridge Studies at Jiangsu Academy of Social Science, who considered the exclusion of Jiangsu in the V&A ‘very odd’ (Wang, 2015).

The Jiangsu government downplayed the fact that neither the province nor any of its cities were mentioned in the V&A. According to the party secretary of Jiangsu, to implement the BRI strategy was not ‘a simple geographical concept’, and, thus, ‘there is no outsider in this national strategy’ (Wang, 2015). During its working meeting, the Jiangsu provincial leadership also used the aforementioned words of Xi Jinping during his visit to Jiangsu to legitimise the importance of Jiangsu in the BRI. It is argued that Jiangsu, as an ‘intersection point’ of the BRI, is in an explicit position given by the paramount leader, Xi Jinping (Jiangsu, 2015). As a result, Jiangsu Province continued to insist on its importance in the BRI, thus retaining its relevant projects and plans.

The reinterpretation process also happened simultaneously. In facing the widely discussed fact that Jiangsu went unmentioned, Jiangsu Province immediately put forth its interpretations of the V&A to justify its original plans. On 29 March 2015, one day after the V&A was released, the Lianyungang newspaper media group published an article in which a few Jiangsu officials were invited to give their interpretations of the role of Lianyungang in the V&A (Zhou, 2015). In this article, Gu Longgao argues that Lianyungang is still important in both the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road. According to Gu:

. . . the central guidelines explicitly pointed that ‘New Eurasian Continental Bridge is the first channel of Silk Road Economic Belt’. So far, at least four national documents explicitly mentioned Lianyugang as ‘the East Bridgehead of New Eurasian Continental Bridge’. Thus, Lianyungang is a well-deserved bridgehead city on the Silk Road (Zhou, 2015).

With regard to the Maritime Silk Road, although Lianyungang is not one of the many port cities mentioned in the V&A, Gu argues that this does not mean unmentioned port cities ‘have nothing to do with the Maritime Silk Road. It is because other port cities have their own Port trade circle and influence, and Lianyungang is no exception. With Lianyungang’s increasing influence in Central Asia and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, it will become an indispensable transport hub city of Maritime Silk Road’ (Zhou, 2015).

In other words, Jiangsu’s narrative of the V&A highlights other national documents, as well as Xi Jinping’s personal words, to support Jiangsu’s importance in the BRI, suggesting that the V&A is not the only authoritative source. So, the argument goes, even if Jiangsu goes unmentioned in the V&A, this does not mean that Jiangsu has no role in the BRI as Jiangsu’s geographic importance speaks for itself. This interpretation represents an obvious and open challenge to the authority and legitimacy of the V&A released by central agencies in Beijing.

Not surprisingly, although the V&A was not what Jiangsu expected, it has not significantly changed Jiangsu’s BRI plans. Jiangsu is sticking to its original BRI plans and narratives with minor modifications. This is clearly demonstrated in Jiangsu’s docking implementation plan to respond the V&A. In this plan, Jiangsu continues to frame itself as the intersection point of the BRI, and its cities - Lianyungang and Xuzhou - are put forth as the major node cities of the New Eurasian Continental Bridge Economic Corridor (Ding, 2015b). After the V&A was released in March 2015, Lianyungang’s implementation plan, for example,

only changed slightly from the previous version drafted on 10 January 2015. According to Gu Longgao, ‘no significant change would be made’ (Ding, 2015a).

Despite the fact that Jiangsu’s response clearly suggests tensions caused by the V&A, all of the above comments from Jiangsu were all made openly on Chinese media and not censored at the time of writing. Jiangsu’s response is exceptional. After all, only four out of 34 provincial units went completely unmentioned in the V&A (i.e., neither its province nor any of its cities was included). The response of the other three provinces (Hebei, Shanxi and Guizhou) were quieter than Jiangsu as they had not been invited to the symposium in December 2013 and thus had lower expectations of their role in the V&A. In addition, compared with Jiangsu, their lower level of economic development and globalisation has also made them less competitive in fighting for the central government’s favour.

A consequent question here is why Jiangsu was excluded from the V&A despite the fact that its role in the BRI was openly endorsed by the Chinese president, Xi Jinping. To some, Jiangsu’s Lianyungang was simply not competitive enough when many other provinces also branded their cities as the new bridgeheads and nodes of the BRI (Shiju, 2015). Others point to the fact that Jiangsu does not possess decent coastal cities and harbours, despite its long coastline (Shiju, 2015). However, there is so far no evidence available to prove or disprove these speculations.

In short, local state actors have deliberately produced and disseminated their preferred policy narratives to influence the central government and also public opinion. These local policy narratives often conflict rather than work in concert. In extreme cases, such as the aforementioned Jiangsu, local political actors may reinterpret and challenge the central government’s policy guidelines when they do not coincide with their interests. In this regard, the domestic competition dynamic among Chinese provinces has posed a challenge for the central government and its BRI. As Yu (2017) points out, this lack of central-local coordination looks remarkably confusing to international actors who have no clear idea about the exact Chinese agencies in charge of BRI and with whom to negotiate about the BRI project.

In the wider context of China’s political economy, this reflects China’s central-local relations. Thirty years of scholarship in China’s political economy has detailed how China’s market reform and fiscal decentralization have transformed the central-local relations by allowing greater local fiscal autonomy and significantly weakened the control of the central state in local economic activities (Wong, 1991; Breslin, 1996). The local economic policies pursued by local states to advance their own interests often undermine the economic and political interests of China at the macro level. With China’s globalisation, this central-local relation has a growing impact on China’s foreign relations. As the state transformation analysis observes (Hameiri and Jones, 2016; Jones, 2018), the “internationalisation” of local states has allowed its greater access to international society, and thus higher international influence and greater transnational economic interests. This often provides local states more capacity and motivation to conduct economic activities to advance their interests on the international stage. As a result, Chinese

provincial actors have played an increasing role in shaping China's foreign relations (Wong, 2018; Jian, *et al.*, 2010; Cheung and Tang, 2001).

This phenomenon has inevitable consequences for the central government's monopoly on China's foreign policy and do not necessarily serve China's national interests at the macro level. This is demonstrated by the case of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOE), which massively expanded overseas as a result of China's rise. As a majority of those SOEs are provincial-level SOEs and heavily influenced by local states, provincial governments become key players in China's overseas corporate engagement strategy. However, their interests often conflict with other relevant central agencies in Beijing including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Commerce and the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (Gill and Reilly, 2007). These conflicting interests combined with the profit-seeking corporate nature contribute in part to the vicious competition among Chinese SOEs in bidding on overseas infrastructure projects, which seriously damaged China's national image and interests.

The state transformation has also brought increased autonomy to SOEs, thereby reducing the central agencies' control over SOE overseas activities. As the study of Jones and Zou (2017) on Chinese SOEs in Myanmar shows, Chinese SOEs "clearly defied and subverted central regulations" for the sake of corporate profit, leading to the damage of official Sino-Myanmar relations, while central agencies in Beijing are struggling to deal with the situation. So, the points to emphasise are: (a) due to their own interests, like Chinese provinces, Chinese SOEs are not always under the full command of central agencies in Beijing; and (b) as provincial-level SOEs partly reflect the interests of provincial governments, their overseas actions can conflict with the goals of other SOE managing agencies in Beijing.

Conclusion

Previous literature notes the difficulty democratic states have in forging a coherent strategic narrative. Miskimmon's analysis, for example, shows how the European Union (EU) is incapable of finding a unified voice due to its governance mechanism (Miskimmon, 2017). What is often less noticed, however, is that authoritarian regimes also suffer from similar problems to some extent. The authoritarian system in China is often considered in the literature of international politics as a single monolithic political entity in which there is a unified and 'highly centralised' system (Hill, 2016, 243) for Beijing to mobilise in order to attain centrally established objectives. A significant portion of the literature on China studies, however, has pointed to fragmentation and decentralisation within the authoritarian system (Schurmann, 1966; Lieberthal and Oksenberg, 1988). The rise of globalisation has also contributed to this phenomenon and led to the internationalisation of China's party-state (Hameiri and Jones, 2016), which gives local actors the ability and willingness to shape China's foreign relations and undermine the central government's monopoly on foreign policy.

Even when it comes to significant national projects, such as the BRI, which are associated with the top leader Xi Jinping's personal authority and introduced into the Chinese Communist Party's constitution, Beijing's central agencies are often not fully

capable of coordinating political actors within China and producing one unified official Chinese narrative. It is particularly notable that all of this happened under Xi Jinping's leadership, during which period various significant reform projects had already been launched to centralise power and strengthen the authority of the central government (Wang and Zeng, 2016). During the era of Xi's predecessor, Hu Jintao, who was famous for power sharing and consensus building, the fragmentation of authority and diverse policy narratives were even more prevalent.

As a normative power, the democratic EU is proud of its diversity, multinational identity and democratic process, at least in its rhetoric; however, these values are less likely to be appreciated by the Chinese government. More importantly, because of the aforementioned conventional view of the Chinese political system as a single monolithic political entity, the conflicting messages sent from China, especially by the Chinese governmental entities, are more confusing on the international stage. International society has a more advanced understanding of and is more familiar with democracies such as the EU. People simply become accustomed to open, conflicting policy debates and take them for granted in Western liberal democracies. As a result, there is a slightly more sophisticated understanding of the differences between those views and, for example, the official policy of Brussels.

Yet, when it comes to the much more opaque authoritarian system in China, it often leads to confusion and (un)conscious misinterpretation. Certain views of Chinese local governments/ministries or scholars are more likely to be taken seriously and are sometimes mistakenly considered the central government's official stance.⁷ This can be due to the limited understanding of China's authoritarian system, even though the Western scholarship on Chinese politics has generated sound knowledge in this regard. To China's central government, this is quite undesirable for its strategic communication campaign.

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Note

¹ One of my interviewees at the Central Party School, for example, claims that his work has informed the policy-making of the BRI. The interview was conducted online on 24 May 2017.

² Interview with a director of a private Chinese think-tank on 24 May 2017

³ The interview was conducted online on 17 April 2017.

⁴ Confirmed by the author's brief search on China National Knowledge Infrastructure <http://www.cnki.net/> accessed on 26 December 2018

⁵ Meeting with the delegation of Guangxi's foreign office in November 2017 in London.

⁶ Meeting with the delegation of Guangxi's foreign office in November 2017 in London and that of Sichuan University in September 2018 in Lancaster

⁷ As mentioned above, in the case of China's core interests, the central government's ambiguous position combined with the diverse domestic interpretations from Chinese scholars and governmental agencies often lead to confusion on the international stage (Zeng, et al., 2015). Similarly, in the case of the South China sea, the Chinese government's ambiguous position towards the "nine-dashed line", together with the mixed signal produced by domestic actors' (including Hainan province) often lead to confusion and anxiety among the relevant international stakeholders (ICG, 2012).