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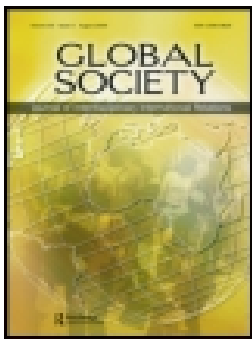
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# The Aesthetic Power of Ships in International Political Communication: Why Ships Matter in China's Communication of the Maritime Silk Road Initiative

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# The Aesthetic Power of Ships in International Political Communication: Why Ships Matter in China's Communication of the Maritime Silk Road Initiative

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## ABSTRACT



This article argues that closer attention to the objects visualised in China's international political communication of the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) will add new knowledge of China's global media strategies. Particularly, it contends that the creation of specific visual depictions of ships carries great significance in China's strategic narratives of the MSRI. The argument suggests that these visuals help Beijing to legitimise their maritime transport and foreign investments in ports as part of a liberal agenda and to forge its maritime identity as a peaceful trading country with historical roots. This approach is based on the premise that ships in international political communication have aesthetic power. Greater understanding of the social and compositional modalities of ships in China's communication provides valuable insights into how China tries to legitimise the MSRI, but also the complexity for China to avoid aesthetic vulnerability considering the existence of competing (visual) narratives.

## KEYWORDS

China; Maritime Silk Road Initiative; ships; strategic narratives; visual communication

## Introduction

In an era of global communication, “strategic narratives” are instrumental in achieving public support for foreign policies, and for creating a coherent identity-narrative. Strategic narratives are theorised as “a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013, 2; Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2017). While much attention has been paid to the formation and projection of identity and order narratives (Miskimmon and O’Loughlin 2017; Chaban et al. 2019; Chaban, Miskimmon, and O’Loughlin 2019), to a wide variety of issues (Epstein 2008; de Graaf, Dimitriu, and Ringsmose 2015; Bevan, Colley, and Workman 2020), to verbal and visual means of telling strategic narratives (Crilley, Manor, and Bjola 2020), and to what makes strategic narratives more persuasive (Ringsmose and Børgesen 2011; van Noort and Colley 2021), the relevance of objects in visual communication receives less scholarly attention. There is some

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research on the visualisation of infrastructures (roads, railways, bridges) (van Noort 2020a, 2020b; van Noort 2021), but ships remain under-researched in strategic narrative scholarship. While the material reality of ships is important to global politics, this paper draws attention to how and why states strategise visuals of ships in their international political communication.

It is argued in this paper that ships in international political communication have aesthetic power, because the representation of these type of objects can help states feel more secure. Visualising ships matter when states try to construct a shared meaning of maritime transport and foreign investments in ports, especially when maritime behaviours are perceived through a geopolitical lens or as a naval manoeuvre. Also, visuals of ship are significant when states try to historicise their maritime identity and use this self-representation to stabilise external interactions. This argument is demonstrated with a case study of China's digital communication about its foreign policy, the Maritime Silk Road Initiative.

Over the past five years, there has been a significant increase in research about how China forges strategic narratives about itself and its foreign policies (Lams 2018; van Noort 2019; Zeng 2019; Yang 2020). Scholarly attention is partly a result of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, encompassing the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2013; Wu 2013). This study focuses specifically on the MSRI. China proposes to "jointly build unobstructed, safe and efficient maritime transport channels" with partners abiding "by market rules and international norms" with a "primary role of enterprises" (The State Council the People's Republic of China 2017). According to the Vision document, better maritime transport channels facilitate "unimpeded trade" for the international community (The State Council the People's Republic of China 2017). China is drawing on liberal ideology that assumes that trade is inherently positive. Significant scholarly attention has been devoted to the construction and financing of ports and special economic zones along the "China-Indian Ocean-Africa-Mediterranean Sea Blue Economic Passage" (Blanchard 2017; Blanchard and Flint 2017; The State Council the People's Republic of China 2017). Ships are the core vehicles of this economic passage.

A project of this magnitude requires the collaboration, participation, and trust of international audiences, thus communication about the project is strategised to maximise opportunity, alleviate misconceptions (Department of Defense United States of America 2018; Yao 2019), and forge current and future collaborations. To achieve this, China seeks positive support from foreign audiences by communicating infrastructure narratives and Silk Road narratives (van Noort 2022). Infrastructure narratives promote positive perceptions of Belt and Road infrastructures, including of ports, and railways (van Noort 2022). This is because, objectively, these infrastructures improve the shipping of cargo. Consequently, infrastructure narratives are visually supported with images of cargo ships.

Silk Road narratives currently used in China's communications combine selective representations of the past to suggest a historical continuation of friendly and cooperative relations, and to forge China's identity as a benign international actor (van Noort 2022). For example, China tries to revive the old Maritime Silk Road with communications about the expeditions of Admiral Zheng He (international voyages during 1405–1433). This imperial fleet included the famous treasure ships, as well as supply

ships, troop transports, warships, and water tankers (Levathes 1994, Chapter 4). Thus, both historical and contemporary ships are strategically used in China's international political communication of the MSRI.

China's strategic narratives of the MSRI and themselves as maritime actor are supported by ship visuals. This paper explores China's international broadcasting outputs about the MSRI on social media, especially how images of ships are used to legitimise the policy's objectives and principles, and forge China's maritime identity. In identifying the social and compositional modalities of ships in China's digital communication, this paper demonstrates that there is aesthetic power in the visualisation of historical and contemporary ships. At the same time, the paper illustrates the complexity for China to avoid aesthetic vulnerability.

First, the paper contextualises China's communication of the MSRI. Then the historical context of China's maritime past is described, by considering major events during the Ming and Qing dynasties. In describing both periods, it offers the reader insights into China's selective use of history. Regarding MSRI communications, China selects representations from the Ming dynasty while avoiding events from the Qing dynasty; the latter comprises a period that complicates a desirable maritime identity. Next, the paper sets out the theoretical framework, integrating literature on strategic narratives, and aesthetic power. This section also conceptualises the aesthetic power of ships. After the visual methodology is explained, the results section presents how ships are communicated in China's international broadcasting about the MSRI. The results section first describes the representations of historical ships, and then it recounts the representations of contemporary ships. Next, it is discussed why China's digital communication presents both opportunities and challenges in terms of legitimising the MSRI and forging China's maritime identity. Overall, the paper argues that ships in international political communication have aesthetic power and demonstrates this with a case study of China's communication of the MSRI.

## Maritime Silk Road

China launched the Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) at a state visit to Indonesia (Wu 2013). In the "Vision for Maritime Cooperation" that was published in 2017, China explains its ambition to "build a peaceful and prosperous 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road" by "synchronizing development plans and promoting joint actions amongst countries along the Maritime Silk Road" (The State Council the People's Republic of China 2017). China's vision for ocean cooperation in the twenty-first Century is based on a commitment to provide technical assistance, information networks (including through their own satellite), bilateral and multilateral cooperation (The State Council the People's Republic of China 2017). China's vision for maritime cooperation is founded on well-established, and actively used maritime corridors. China draws on the liberal ideology that assumes that trade is positive, and that globalisation should be inclusive and beneficial to all (Office of the Leading Group 2017). The current size of China's commercial shipping is already substantial (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2019). As devised, the MSRI would further boost China's role in key ports along these corridors, as lender, developer, and strategic partner.

Communication about the Maritime Silk Road is used, in part, to ameliorate expectations among new or potential partners of the MSRI. China's strategic narratives have received mixed levels of understanding, ranging from full embrace to complete rejection (van Noort and Colley 2021). Partial and complete rejection are driven by geopolitical concerns and reservations about China's subscription to trade liberalisation. In this context, many Western and Indian analysts wonder whether China's maritime orientation would also have a strong naval component to it, and whether the MSRI represents two sides of the same ocean-going coin (Brewster 2017; Chung 2018; Singh 2019). As exhibited in this paper, China visualises commercial ships to highlight its commitment to free trade and eliminating trade barriers.

Aside from its economic endeavours overseas, China pursues maritime security, partly through organising multi-national naval activities. Visualisation of Chinese warships and reassuring statements are used by China to claim that the "PLA [People's Liberation Army] navy will always be a force of peace" (CGTN 2019c; CGTN 2019i). The coexistence of both commercial and navy ships in the visual domain explains how the meaning of the MSRI and China's rise is not straightforward; these ships embody different capabilities and attributes, no matter how much a warship is associated with peacebuilding intentions.

China uses the "Silk Road Spirit" metaphor to suggest that its initiative is built on "peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit" (The State Council the People's Republic of China 2017; see also Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2019, article 4). These positive qualities and attributes are assumed to have global efficacy. Additionally, the Silk Road trope is also used to forge China's historic maritime identity. By highlighting historical connection points, China attempts to stabilise its current foreign relations. Despite China's promotional push, there are debates about "whether China, conventionally viewed at home and abroad as a continental power, can transform itself into a continental-maritime power" (Erickson and Goldstein 2010, 32). Overall, this identity transformation is dependent on a narrative struggle to replace "dominant western-centric narratives" about China, and global history (Mayer 2018, 1218; Agnew 2012; Woon 2018). Digital communication about the MSRI is therefore also used to forge China's maritime identity for international audiences.

China's communication of the MSRI is firmly associated with the Maritime Silk Road history. Specifically, Beijing celebrates the voyages of Zheng He conducted during the early Ming Dynasty. The historical narrative "cherry picking" and "de-coupling" by China is made possible according to Mayer because "intellectual elites that inherit ancient empires can draw from large reservoirs of events, themes and figures to construct national identity, compose new ideologies and formulate foreign policy" (Mayer 2018, 1222; based on Wang 2018). But, as Mayer cautions, the "sidelining of controversial aspects of history or the selection of one-sided representations can, however, lead to unexpected controversies" (Mayer 2018, 1230). China faces the communication challenge to circumvent inconvenient historical periods such as the "Century of Humiliation". Moreover, scholarly and policy debates about the benignness of Zheng He's expeditions complicate the communication of a twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road (Wade 2004; Sen 2016). If the past is not perceived as a "win-win" for potential

BRI partners, communication about the Silk Road's revival fails to serve its purpose; to create a coherent and persuasive identity narrative.

Taken together, China's international communication of the MSRI draws on the liberal ideology and the history of the Maritime Silk Road to legitimise the economic rationale of the initiative and to forge China's maritime identity. There are various ways to visually substantiate these claims. In the case of this paper, I study how visuals of ships are used to provide the "evidence for claims and actions that are crucial for an actor [i.e. China] in telling a story and in trying to convince an audience" (Swimelar 2018, 182). The next part elaborates further on two periods of China's maritime history and the kind of ships associated with them; the Ming and the Qing Dynasty. This section contextualises China's communication of historical ships.

## Historical context

Two periods are considered for this study: the Ming Dynasty and the Qing Dynasty. China refers to Zheng He's treasure fleet which sailed during the early Ming Dynasty to contextualise the MSRI. Representations of Zheng He and his voyages are used to conjure up a memory of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning, and mutual benefit. For comparison, this paper describes another period that is ignored in China's communication about the MSRI. Specifically, British history during the Qing Dynasty is chosen as a historical period because it sets forth narratives of foreign occupation of China and retribution (i.e. to rectify historical wrongs). Explaining both periods aids the aim of this study; that selective representations of the past are used to forge China's maritime identity, but that they are exposed to counter narratives. Noticeably, other periods have also played a decisive role in China's maritime past, especially the Song and Yuan Dynasties, but these are fewer times mentioned in the communication of the MSRI. Representations of ships from the Ming and Qing eras forge different identity narratives. By explaining both historical situations, this paper tries to convey to the reader why some ship visuals contribute to China's aesthetic power, and why other images present China with aesthetic vulnerability.

## Ming Dynasty

During the early Ming Dynasty, in 1403, Emperor Yongle embarked on a mission to build and renovate over 1600 seaworthy ships in what was then the biggest shipyard of the world, Longjiang (Levathes 1994, 75). Of specific relevance are the building of the nine-masted treasure ships. Emperor Yongle instructed court eunuch and fleet Admiral Zheng He to command this fleet, which was incomparable to what any other power had in the world. In the period of 1405–1433, Zheng He's fleet made seven voyages along the South China Sea, via the Strait of Malacca, and the Indian Ocean, visiting a wide range of kingdoms (Levathes 1994). This costly enterprise served several objectives, including showing the superiority of Chinese civilisation, the righteousness of Emperor Yongle's reign, advancing stability and peace, and to foster legitimate trade (Levathes 1994).

The treasure ships were impressive for their time, due to their size, strength, and seaworthiness. Scholars suggest that the largest treasure ship was about "390 and 408 feet

long and 160 to 166 feet wide” (Levathes 1994, 80). The treasure ships were luxurious, beautifully carved and painted, carrying precious trading goods such as Ming porcelain and silks, while also being fitted with several cannon (Levathes 1994). Aside of the treasure ships, the fleet consisted of supply ships, troop transports, warships, and water tankers (Levathes 1994, Chapter 4). Following the seven voyages, and the death of Emperor Yongle and his two successors, the country faced many adversities. This situation severely affected China’s maritime ambitions, technological advances in shipbuilding, and overseas travels. By the sixteenth century, most oceangoing ships and shipbuilding knowledge were destroyed, thus allowing European powers to gain a dominant position at sea.

Zheng He and his treasure fleet have become an important symbol in communication about the MSRI. China’s media agencies frequently mention Zheng He’s travels in official publications and press releases about the MSRI, as well as in signed letters and op-eds to targeted audiences. For instance, President Xi Jinping’s said in his speech during the 2017 Belt and Road Forum:

Zheng He, the famous Chinese navigator in the Ming Dynasty, made seven voyages to the Western Seas, a feat which still is remembered today. These pioneers [President Xi also spoke about other Silk Road travelers] won their place in history not as conquerors with warships, guns or swords. Rather, they are remembered as friendly emissaries leading camel caravans and sailing treasure-loaded ships. Generation after generation, the silk routes travelers have built a bridge for peace and East–West cooperation. (Xinhua 2017)

Another example about Zheng He communication is illustrated with a 2019 op-ed by a Chinese Ambassador to the Maldives: “Since the voyages to the West by the great ancient Chinese navigator Zheng He more than 600 years ago, China as a friend from afar, has always been bringing peace and friendship to Maldives” (Zhang 2019).

In addition, Zheng He’s Treasure Fleet also plays a role in Beijing’s intercultural and archeological activities and heritage diplomacy more broadly (Winter 2019). China has boosted cultural and heritage collaboration to enhance the popularity and knowledge of the Maritime Silk Road, as well as the availability of material evidence. Tim Winter explored how “histories and cultural artifacts from the past are being excavated and symbolically coded in ways that help ensure cities and entire countries are tied into the new networks of trade being established under Belt and Road” (Winter 2019, 24; Winter 2020).

Despite China’s positive associations, there are scholarly disagreements about the peacefulness of Zheng He’s expeditions (Wade 2004; Sen 2016). Tansen Sen explained how some of the expeditions “included use of military force in what are present-day Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and India to install friendly rulers and control strategic chokepoints of the Indian Ocean” and “He intervened in dynastic politics of Sri Lanka and Indonesia and brought back prisoners to Nanjing, the Ming capital” (Sen 2014). The subordination of states to the Chinese empire (vassal states) further complicates the idea of equality assumed with a revival of the Maritime Silk Road (Winter 2019). These behaviours and relationships oppose China’s communication of peaceful diplomatic missions. Despite these debates, the acceptance of China’s superiority “was not, however, onerous or extractive” as foreign occupation during the Qing Dynasty was (Keay 2009, 22–23).



In sum, mixed views of Zheng He and his Treasure Fleet suggest that their visuals are not confined to positive meanings, but that they are subject to contestation. These tensions in China's strategic narratives of the past matter because it renders them as vulnerable. This complicates the persuasiveness of China's strategic narratives of the MSRI in international broadcasting.

### **Qing Dynasty**

The historical period in China marked by humiliation and oppression lasted “from the First Opium War of 1840–1842 through to the proclamation of the People's Republic of China in 1949” (Scott 2008, 2). If we look specifically at British actions in China, these were among other motives, guided by commercial interests and supported by government subsidies. Since the 1830s, the British government “had offered various programmes of assistance to liner shipping, including postal subsidies, contracts to carry government cargoes and Admiralty subventions” (Lin 2008, 154). British competitors in China included the United States, and to a lesser extent, Germany and France, which resulted in a “complex patchwork of shifting alliances and period of sharp competition” (Qing 2015, 542). The Yangtze River played a special role in British shipping; in addition to being the largest river in China, “along its shored were some of the main centres of production of the traditional Chinese export goods, silk and tea” (Qing 2015, 543). These goods were exported under very different circumstances than during the Maritime Silk Road.

A critical factor that shaped British history in China includes the technological developments in the area of “steamships, weapons, telegraphy, [and] new mass media” (Bickers 2011, 15). The steamships were technologically more advanced than the traditional Chinese vessels (e.g. junks and sampans). Consequently, technological innovations of the steamship that were developed during the nineteenth century boosted the competitiveness of British shipping-owners (Fenton 2008; Bailey 2017). British maritime strength in China strongly contrasted from that of Chinese shipping companies. The shipping industry in China, between the First Opium War and the end of the Qing Dynasty in 1911, can be defined in three phases (Qing 2015). During the first phase, between 1840 and 1872, there were no Chinese shipping companies. The second phase improved, with one Chinese company operating in China, namely the China Merchants' Steam Navigation Company. The third phase “began in 1898, when the government lifted its ban on Chinese nationals buying steamships and former steamer companies” and this lasted until 1911 (Qing 2015, 539).

Photo-collections by British sailors/merchants draw attention to the strength of British vessels in China (Bickers et al. 2007; University of Bristol 2019; Bickers 2020). On the one hand, China's traditional vessels captured on camera during the Qing era have aesthetic power; the junks and sampans (boats) romanticise and legitimise a maritime legacy and identity. On the other hand, China's vessels are visually undermined in a comparison with the powerful British steamships. The technological strength of the British steamships outshines the capabilities of China's traditional vessels, which would reinforce dominant western-centric narratives about (sea)power, those who (should) have it, and those countries subjected to it. Not surprising, images of this period are ignored in China's communication of the MSRI.

Below, the theoretical framework of strategic narratives and aesthetic power is explained to understand how Beijing's media productions are utilised to legitimise the MSRI and forge China's maritime identity.

## Theoretical framework

### *Strategic narratives*

Strategic narratives are understood as a “tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013, 2). Political actors form and project strategic narratives to shape a desirable identity, and to explain foreign policies, amongst other objectives. This case study specifically analyses how China projects a historically anchored maritime identity narrative and an economically motivated MSRI narrative. Visual materials, such as photographs, archival material, and video footage of ships, are used in China's communication efforts. This paper focuses on how representations of ships are tied to identity and issue narratives—two types of strategic narratives.

To avoid contestation, China needs to communicate clear and compelling informational content (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle 2013, 110). In this balancing act, political actors seek to reconcile information about current foreign policies, with visual strategic narratives about the past and the present. According to the “narrative turn”, narratives are used to give meaning to international relations, and to construct individual and collective identities (Roberts 2006). Margaret Somers explains narratives as “constellations of relationships (connected parts) embedded in time and space, constituted by causal emplotment” (Somers 1994, 616). According to this definition, China's plans for the MSRI are narrated as a sequence of events that are temporally, spatially, and causally constituted. In this way, China's maritime behaviours are presented as a continuation of the past, its vision of maritime cooperation is spatially situated in existing global shipping networks and flows, and the causation of the MSRI can be visualised with more trade and investments, and with BRI-partners praising the social and economic benefits of the global infrastructure development and economic strategy.

In order to better understand why China communicates strategic narratives of the MSRI, the discussion now turns to focus more specifically on aesthetic power.

### *Aesthetic power*

States develop and communicate strategic narratives in digital media to advance their aesthetic power. Steele explains aesthetic power as the process in which “centralized bodies of power utilize resources to apply a cosmetic image to the operation of power” (Steele 2010, 25). Aesthetic practices can help forge a national identity and self-representation. In terms of this case study, China is actively pursuing global media strategies to advance its international image, and to gain more voice. This builds on the objective of President Xi Jinping in 2014: “We should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world” (Xi 2014).

Aesthetic practices are one of the ways by states to engage in global politics. Aesthetic practices vary, from military parades to international sports events, to media

productions. This paper specifically focuses on state media, which in this case study is China's international broadcaster CGTN. Chinese authorities organise state media to project strategic narratives about China's identity and the MSRI. These narratives are communicated to make China feel more secure and in control of its self-image and international reputation of the MSRI.

An aesthetic representation differs from a mimetic one in ways that the latter seeks "to represent politics as realistically and authentically as possible, aiming to capture world politics as-it-really-is" (Bleiker 2001, 510). In comparison, even though a media production is still a form of realistic representation, its composition is shaped by the choices (i.e. angle, specific focus) that the production and editing team makes (see also Bleiker's discussion of photographs: Bleiker 2001, 513). Therefore, for the analysis herein presented digital media are treated as aesthetic productions.

There is not a lack of resources or willpower in China's pursuit to gain more aesthetic power. However, following Bleiker's seminal paper, an aesthetic approach "assumes that there is always a gap between a form of representation and what is represented therein," (Bleiker 2001, 510) because the representation is shaped by subjective decisions. This gap in the communication process is of specific importance as it is according to Bleiker "the very location of politics" (Bleiker 2001, 510). Moreover, the aesthetic power of the images itself "becomes vulnerable when its aesthetic vision becomes over-pristine" (Steele 2010, 41). Thus, while China is associating the MSRI with the Maritime Silk Road history and a liberal agenda, these aesthetic practices are potentially vulnerable due to the different ways that China and others perceive the country and its foreign policies.

China's aesthetic representations are "over-pristine" because they conceal controversies and criticisms and instead promote an appealing MSRI-picture. Beijing associates the MSRI with connectivity, peace, and prosperity, but its infrastructure plans and maritime endeavours are nevertheless associated with debt, land grabbing, and loss of sovereignty (Herrero and Xu 2019). Also, the geopolitical interpretation of an economic strategy is another complication undermining the aesthetic power of China's communication. While China's actions are defended as "top-level design of China's opening-up and economic diplomacy in the new era," (Liu 2016) they are understood by various states (especially India and the United States) as a geopolitical manoeuvre. Alongside, China's historical narratives are complicated due to the one-sided representations of the past. While convenient to Chinese authorities, carefully selected historical events are not necessarily how other states see them.

Having defined what is meant by aesthetic power and that Chinese authorities are seeking to advance theirs by projecting strategic narratives about themselves and the MSRI through their state media, the final section of the theoretical framework conceptualises specifically the aesthetic power of ships due to this object's ample representation in China's visual communication of the MSRI.

### ***Aesthetic power of ships***

Visuals of ships have aesthetic power because they "apply a cosmetic image to the operation of power" (Steele 2010, 25). Aesthetic representations of ships in international political communication have multiple functions, including normalise maritime activities,

appear compliant to international rules and norms (i.e. trade liberalisation), develop a state's maritime identity, and historicise maritime behaviours.

Aspects that enhance the aesthetic power of ships include their ownership, design, comparative technological superiority, and size. Ownership can be visually communicated by the name of the ship and/or its shipping company. A country gains more aesthetic power when it can visually communicate that it controls and owns a ship. Alternatively, if ships from various countries are represented, this can suggest coexistence and mutual benefits. The design of ships ranges from the mundane (i.e. cargo ships) to the extraordinary (Zheng He's Treasure Fleet). Noticeably, the aesthetic power of a ship design is culturally and historically dependent.

Aesthetic power derived from visualising comparative technological superiority requires some level of informed audience, or a multi-modal composition in which visuals are supported by informative texts and/or oral communication. Whether a ship has comparative technological superiority and can be interpreted as such is contingent on the context, that is time, place, and purpose. For example, British steamships were relative superior to Chinese vessels during the Qing dynasty in terms of their commercial and sea-faring capabilities. Steamship visuals would only have aesthetic power for countries such as Great Britain when linked to the nineteenth century and parts of the twentieth century. The size of ships is visually easier to identify, requiring less interpretation or prior knowledge of ships. The size of a ship reveals something of the economic (and sometimes political) weight of the ship's owner.

In addition, the suggested timeframe of the image is relevant because ships might only be considered symbolic and/or powerful in the past or the present. For instance, Zheng He's Treasure Fleet gives meaning to the maritime power of China during the early Ming Dynasty. Similarly, contemporary visuals of cargo ships routinise China's participation in the global economic order. Also, the location matters for the meaning of ship visuals. Visuals of commercial ships in foreign ports implies international trade, or military activity in the case of naval vessels. Lastly, if ships visuals can convey some form of causality, this can add to its aesthetic power. This would be applicable when a ship image is associated with a positive and beneficial outcome, either via visual components alone, or through a combination of visuals/text/oral communication.

The next section explains how China's aesthetic productions of the MSRI are analysed.

## Visual methodology

Since 2009, China launched an impressive "going-global" media strategy (Hu and Ji 2012; Sun 2015; Thussu, De Burgh, and Shi 2017). Backed with substantial resources, China enlarged its global media footprint. State media is strategically organised to improve "the image of China abroad by promoting a 'full' picture rather than a biased stereotype" (Hu and Ji 2012, 34). In response to the mixed understandings of the MSRI, China seeks to rebut claims about its maritime behaviours, and its maritime identity.

China's communication of the MSRI emphasises "maritime cooperation", "Blue Partnership", "ocean development", "blue economy", "ocean-based prosperity", and "maritime security" (The State Council the People's Republic of China 2017). Official MSRI documents do not mention the strength or quantity of China's maritime vessels. Having said that, videos on the social media channels of CGTN and Xinhua (under

the brand name “New China TV”) visualise Chinese maritime vessels at sea, and in ports (CGTN 2020; New China TV 2020).

A sample of 20 videos was chosen for this study. These videos are disseminated between the period of 2014 and 2019 on the YouTube channel of CGTN and selected on 7 October 2020. The selection was based on the keywords: “Maritime Silk Road Initiative”, and containing the words “Maritime Silk Road”, “maritime”, “sea”, “port” or “Zheng He” (also spelled as Cheng Ho) in the title of the video. Videos with studio interviews were excluded from the data sample, because these do not visualise Chinese international behaviours, including shipping vessels. The first 20 videos that the YouTube algorithm generated under the selection criteria, excluding the studio interviews, were chosen as the data sample. The publication dates of the videos ranged from 2014 to 2019. Thereby it can be assumed that the data sample is representative of China’s communication of the MSRI which was introduced end of 2013.

The selected videos were assessed using a visual methodology. The interpretation of Chinese videos focused on the site of the image itself, and considered both the social and compositional modality. According to Gillian Rose, the social modality engages the “range of economic, social and political relations, institutions and practices that surround an image and through which it is seen and used” (Rose 2016, 25). This approach therefore considers the visualisation of ships in relation to China’s identity formation, and legitimisation of the MSRI to foreign audiences. The compositional modality explored the content composition of the videos, focusing specifically on the type of ship, the setting (at sea, domestic or foreign ports), and any causality implied with the presence of the ships. The chyrons and the subtitles attributed meaning to the visual communication. According to Campbell “all media are mixed [because] the meaning of the image is gravely affected by the text” (Mitchell 2005; Campbell 2007, 372). The visual analysis considered the images, the oral communication (voice-over), as well as the verbal texts. While audience perceptions of China’s strategic narratives are essential in understanding their persuasiveness, this was beyond the scope of this study.

## Results

Having established the broad historical, theoretical, and empirical parameters of this study, the paper now turns to present the specific results of the data analysis undertaken for this study. These results are divided into two parts; the first part describes representations of historical ships in the data sample, and the second part gives details about the representations of contemporary ships. Each section comments on the compositional modality, listing the type of ships, the location, and the suggested causal effect that the Maritime Silk Road has (had). Subsequently, it considers the social modality of China’s communication of ships. Some of the videos depicted both historical and contemporary ships. These videos were then considered in both sections.

### *Representations of historical ships*

From the data, it is evident that various historical ships are visualised on CGTN. Ships are represented through paintings, illustrations, model replicas, and as shipwreck relics. It ranges from illustrations of junks in the documentary “Digging up secrets of the

‘Maritime Silk Road’” (CGTN 2019e) and “Tales from the Silk Road of the Sea” (CGTN 2019h), an old photograph of sampans (CGTN 2017d), the display of a thirteenth century Chinese ship dating to the Song Dynasty found near Quanzhou in the Quanzhou Maritime Museum with “Original length: 34.6 meters. Width: 9.82 meters” (CGTN 2015a; CGTN 2017d; CGTN 2019f), to model replicas and animations of various maritime vessels in the Quanzhou Maritime Museum (CGTN 2015a; CGTN 2015b; CGTN 2017d; CGTN 2019f). The ships that are represented are mainly junks, sampans, and treasure ships dating primarily to the Song and Ming dynasties, aside from photographed vessels.

In terms of the location, there is a range of places associated with these ancient and historical ships. The shipwreck relic and model replicas are mainly recorded in the Quanzhou Maritime Museum (CGTN 2015a; CGTN 2017d; CGTN 2019f). Quanzhou is described as the “starting point of the Maritime Silk Road” (CGTN 2015a). Another video explains how “Fujian province was one of the starting points of the ancient Maritime Silk Road” (CGTN 2017d). A prominent institution is the National Museum of China in Beijing that held the exhibition “Silk Road on the Sea” about China’s seafaring history (CGTN 2014). An illustration of a merchant ship at an international forum on Faxian Culture and Maritime Silk Road in Colombo, Sri Lanka emphasises the cultural and heritage legacy of the Maritime Silk Road (CGTN 2019d). Paintings, replicas, and illustrations of the imperial fleet and the treasure ships are recorded in Melaka, Malaysia (CGTN 2015b). The “Digging up Secrets” documentary recorded archaeological excavations in Ras al Khaimah (Rak), United Arab Emirates (CGTN 2019e). These are all places that have played an important role during the Maritime Silk Road. Thus, China’s communication of the MSRI tries to capture the shared legacy of the Maritime Silk Road history by drawing attention to both Chinese and international locations in which ships were found or are on display.

The causal effect implied by the representation of the historical ships is linked to China’s revival of the Maritime Silk Road. It suggests that the old Maritime Silk Road brought prosperity and peace; and so will its revival. The following statements are made in the videos: “Since ancient time, we already had a good Silk time trade relationship” (CGTN 2019e), and “Along the province’s coastline are small towns like this where people have traded with the outside world since around the Tang Dynasty” (CGTN 2017d). In the city of Quanzhou, “you can find many sites and museums that are testament to how China’s long history of trade has brought forth a dynamic exchange of goods and culture” (CGTN 2017d), and “The internationalization of what is often referred to as the great oriental port [Quanzhou] saw the development of naval technology, maritime trade management, and commercial systems.” Representations of historical ships are reminders of the friendly trade and cultural relations that China had with foreign states during the Maritime Silk Road.

This sentiment is further advanced through communication about the Chinese Buddhist monk Faxian, and Admiral Zheng He. One video celebrates the combination of Faxian Culture and the Maritime Silk Road with reporting on the first international forum on this topic in Sri Lanka (CGTN 2019d). According to one video, “Zheng He was much more than an explorer, but also a powerful force for international diplomacy, trade and collaboration” (CGTN 2015b). These and other commentaries emphasise the positive qualities and attributes associated with trade and people mobility during the Maritime Silk Road.

In terms of the social modality of China's communication of ships, there are several observations that can be made regarding China's attempt to forge a coherent maritime identity. The videos help verify China's identity as a peaceful and trading country during the Maritime Silk Road (China with Sri Lanka and Malaysia). Several Silk Road periods are recalled in these videos, including the Song and Yuan Dynasties when Quanzhou was a historical port, and the Ming Dynasty when Zheng He conducted his voyages. Moreover, the aesthetic power of the historical ships is applied by China to legitimise the revival of the Maritime Silk Road. It historicises the connections between different cultures resulting from overseas trade routes. Also, the visualisation of cultural and heritage collaboration contributes to an idea of a shared legacy. This is further advanced with the city of Quanzhou putting forward several UNESCO world heritage sites (CGTN 2017d), and archaeological cooperation between China and the UAE (CGTN 2019e).

### ***Representations of contemporary ships***

China also communicates about contemporary ships. The data sample primarily depicted commercial ships, while excluding military ships, such as aircraft carriers. The videos depict containerships, oil tankers, fishing vessels, a ship suitable for underwater archaeology (CGTN 2014), a cruise ship, ferries, and passenger ships (CGTN 2016c). One Chinese ship by COSCO, has according to the video a "total length of 399.8 meters, and a width of 58.6 meters" (CGTN 2018a). The main shipping companies depicted are COSCO, MSC, and Maersk; the videos thus represent both Chinese and international shipping companies. Similarly, the containers that are depicted on board the ships and in the ports belong to a broad range of Chinese and international companies including China Shipping, COSCO, Evergreen, MAERSK, CK Line, KMTCC, Hapag-Lloyd, and CMA CGM. Therefore, the videos reinforce China's commitment to "unimpeded trade" and trade liberalisation, and suggest a liberal agenda (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2019, article 6). Moreover, the association of the MSRI with a military/navy agenda is actively avoided through the exclusion of types of warships.

Regarding the location, the ships are anchored in several Chinese and international ports. In terms of Chinese ports, the videos depicted the Tieshan Port in Guangxi's Beihai city (CGTN 2017ef), and the Port of Ningbo-Zhoushan (CGTN 2018a). Internationally, one of the videos explains how "Since 2009, a handful of Chinese state-owned companies mainly led by COSCO and China Merchants Group have extended their terminal networks to more than 5 dozen ports around the globe. Particularly noticeable are those along the Maritime Silk Road" (CGTN 2016a). The Piraeus Port in Greece is often used to discuss the benefits of Chinese port investments and the MSRI (CGTN 2016a; CGTN 2016c; CGTN 2017c; CGTN 2018b; CGTN 2019a). One video explains how "The Piraeus Port is being elevated to an international transportation gateway" (CGTN 2016c) and the port is considered "a pivot point for China-Europe led sea transportation" (CGTN 2018b). Another international port depicted is the Gwadar Sea Port in Pakistan (CGTN 2016a). There are two videos that are recorded at sea, from on board a containership (CGTN 2018a), and a fishing vessel (CGTN 2016b). Location is relevant for the visual communication of ships to frame China's international port investments as a positive development.

Containerships were also recorded to contextualise the China-ASEAN Expo 2017, which was co-sponsored by China's Ministry of Commerce and the 10 ASEAN member states (CGTN 2017b). One video that depicts fishing vessels mentions the Meizhou Island in China, which is the birthplace of Mazu, the legendary guardian of the Chinese seas (CGTN 2019g). Another video reports Xi Jinping's visit to the Hepu Han Dynasty Museum that houses collections related to the Maritime Silk Road (CGTN 2017e). Therefore, communication about the history of the Maritime Silk Road is intertwined with that of bilateral and multilateral cooperation, maritime shipping, and harbour construction. This makes sense with China communicating a Silk Road "spirit" that historicises the past and contextualises the present.

The suggested causal effect of the *new* Maritime Silk Road in the videos is improved economic cooperation and free trade. In terms of free trade, CGTN communicates that "We never thought of dominating the [international, Italian] market, we rather have an open market based on the idea of mutual benefit" (CGTN 2018b). China advocates for more trade, not less: "Despite rising protectionism and uncertainties in several trade policies both China and ASEAN stress the need to reaffirm the importance of regional and global economic integration" (CGTN 2017b). With regards to port investments, "Harbor construction is very important for the maritime and open economy" (CGTN 2017f), which is "welcome by all who want to promote free trade" (CGTN 2017c), and "It could transform and revolutionize trade across this entire region" (CGTN 2019a). The revival of the Maritime Silk Road takes a central place in this communication: "What we should do now is open a new chapter for the Silk Road in the new century" (CGTN 2017f), and the "revival of the Silk Road will bring more opportunities for economic and cultural cooperation" (CGTN 2016b). Taken together, the revival of the Maritime Silk Road is associated with free trade and economic cooperation.

In regards to the social modality of China's communication of ships, the videos suggest economic benefits for both local and foreign participants. Videos reporting on the visit of Xi Jinping to the Tieshan Port aims to solicit support for the MSRI among local population to realise the dream for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (CGTN 2017ef). The opportunities of participating in the Maritime Silk Road are explained through stories of successful Chinese businessmen. For instance, "Lan's story reflects the vast developments of enterprises making use of the ancient Silk Road" (CGTN 2016b). Internationally, the videos are used to explain the mutual benefits of the MSRI, and to emphasise the importance of shipping for local employment, and use of local resources (CGTN 2018b). They normalise Chinese foreign investments in ports by anticipating more trade, and by visualising routine practices of container transportation (loading, unloading, and storage). The videos consider the potential of multimodal connectivity, linking deep seaports to highspeed connectivity (CGTN 2019a). Moreover, the videos try to stabilise relations between China and ASEAN countries, and China-Greece. The videos portray China as a global trading country, who is committed to the development of special economic zones, and other cooperation models (e.g. two countries two parks cooperation model) (CGTN 2017a).

Taken together, the aesthetic productions on the CGTN YouTube channel legitimise the MSRI as a benign liberal move, and present China as a maritime power with a history as a peaceful trading country.



## Discussion

China's visual communication of ships in MSRI videos poses opportunities and challenges. It is an opportunity when the visualisation of modern cargo ships and fishing vessels verifies China's commitment to market rules and international norms. The videos suggest China's dedication to free trade and mutual benefit. The aesthetic power of ships is derived from visualising Chinese and international ownership of commercial vessels. In many ways, the videos inform audiences that the MSRI is "business as usual". Also, visualising the location of foreign ports that service both Chinese and international shipping companies suggest the openness of maritime transport corridors and the shared benefits of new port investments. Communicating commercial shipping as routines suggests a continuity, not a change of international affairs. Therefore, visual communication of cargo ships on CGTN advances China's identity as a legitimate global trading country. It provides an opportunity for Beijing to present the MSRI as a benign liberal move. This is especially important considering the debate that the BRI is frequently interpreted as a challenge to the liberal rules-based order (Jones 2020).

However, the aesthetic power of ships in international political communication is negotiated in the digital sphere, and therefore affected by counter (visual) narratives. The communication of cargo ships and containers is a challenge if China's promotion of the MSRI is associated with military intentions, which various foreign officials and media reports insinuate (Russel and Berger 2020). These counter narratives undermine China's aesthetic practices. New ports, or a "string of pearls", in the Indian Ocean can serve both commercial and navy ships. Noticeably, some scholars see this link as a positive development (Chang 2018). Even though navy ships are absent from the videos in the data sample, mutual assurances from China about the economic rationale of the MSRI do not alleviate geopolitical concerns from countries including India and the United States. The seemingly peaceful maritime corridor is problematic because it hides naval activities that others find contentious. While visuals of commercial ships are not necessarily overtly contentious (only when they break down at sea), they coexist with China's communication about its naval vessels (e.g. CGTN 2019b), as well as foreign media reports about the PLA warships in the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea (The Maritime Executive 2018; BBC 2020). China's communication also ignores local protests against China's investments (Aneez 2017), and perceptions of debt and land grabbing (Herrero and Xu 2019). Thus, China's communication of the MSRI as an economic initiative is aesthetically vulnerable due to the mixed understandings that foreign audiences have of it.

The communication of historical ships is an opportunity when it forges China's maritime identity as a peaceful trading country. China's representations comprise both extraordinary ships such as Zheng He's Treasure Fleet, as well as everyday vessels including sampans. There are no physical traces (yet) of the treasure ships, but Chinese authorities have invested significant resources in maritime archeology to narrow this gap (*The Guardian* 2010; Chen 2017). Nevertheless, visuals of other shipwrecks from the Maritime Silk Road legitimise the era's revival, and China's maritime legacy. The selected videos referred to the thirteenth century Chinese ship dating to the Song Dynasty in the Quanzhou Maritime Museum. Elsewhere, China communicates about the Belitung shipwreck

(Xinhua 2017). In doing so, Beijing's media productions refer to ships from various historical periods, but primarily the Song and Ming Dynasties.

The aesthetic power of Zheng He's Treasure ships originates from their suggested function (i.e. peaceful diplomatic missions), their design, as well as their comparative technological superiority. The visualisation of various domestic and international ports and festivals celebrating overseas interactions further historicise China's maritime identity. There is an implied causality between the past and present; reviving the past suggests a guarantee of peaceful and mutual beneficial relations.

However, visuals of historical ships are a challenge to China's identity construction considering that it is based on selective historical representations. The association of China's maritime history with trade and peace is vulnerable when other states emphasise aggression, defeat, or international humiliation instead. For instance, the positive associations suggested by Zheng He's Treasure Fleet obscure media reports that doubt the peacefulness of his voyages and accurateness of China's claims (e.g. Walden 2019; Regencia 2020). Moreover, China's identity construction is undermined by the more recent history that links maritime history with foreign occupation. This time of history, referred to as the "Century of Humiliation" and the "international scramble for China", meant that "unequal treaties were forced on China at gunpoint by foreign imperialists" and that maritime transport was dominated by foreign powers (Bickers 2011, 5). A China that is led by a nationalist narrative (that deals with Qing history) suggests much more assertiveness and a desire to rectify wrong (Chong 2014). Thus, China's aesthetic practices are vulnerable due to the presence of different historical narratives that shape the country's external interactions.

Taken together, Beijing's aesthetic productions are strategised to forge China's maritime identity as a peaceful trading country with historical roots and frame the MSRI as a liberal benign move. However, China will not be able to control the productive imagination of its entire past and present globally. Developing aesthetic power through the communication of historical and contemporary ships is subject to counter (visual) narratives.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that visuals of ships have aesthetic power in international political communication and demonstrated this with a case study of China's communication of the MSRI. The study has shown how historical and contemporary ship images are projected in digital media to legitimise the MSRI as a liberal benign move and to forge China's own identity. Clearly, these efforts coexist with other media strategies and strategic narratives (van Noort 2022). At the same time, the case study also showed the complexity for China to achieve aesthetic integrity considering the observation of both opportunities and challenges in the communication of historical and contemporary ships.

The results suggest that objects such as ships matter in international political communication because they are used to conjure up positive qualities, norms, and attributes. Maritime vessels carry the dreams and desires of states in the past and the present, and their representation in the media seeks to normalise the presence and behaviours of these maritime vessels (and the Chinese state by extension, in this study). Despite political intentions or media resources, meaning attributed to ships is negotiated in a complex

media environment. Therefore, this study contributes to scholarly discussions about the politics of images, and how visuals support, complicate, and undermine strategic narratives (Bleiker 2018; Swimelar 2018).

It would be recommended to study how foreign audiences interpret China's communication of the MSRI. Also, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on China's communication of the MSRI requires further research, especially taking into consideration the impacts of the pandemic on global shipping (Kuo 2020).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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