



# China's Belt and Road Initiative: Ambiguous Model Veiled in Straightforward Pragmatism

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## Abstract

This article discusses the ideational motivations behind China's connectivity projects, most notably the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and aims to explore which values these infrastructure projects seek to promote. The article is based on various published sources, including Chinese official, and public policy statements. Specifically, those statements and policy papers are qualitatively analyzed through a reflection of their manifested message against the background of Chinese International Relations-related discussions on Chinese worldviews. Based on this analysis, the article argues that China's connectivity projects may be perceived as part of China's ideational competition with the West, culminating in the presentation of "Chinese values" as a viable alternative to "universal values."

**Keywords** Belt and Road Initiative · Silk Road · Chinese foreign policy · Tianxia · Narrative contestation · Soft power

## Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is considered the flagship of China's foreign policy under the leadership of Xi Jinping. The BRI is an ambitious connectivity program which has expanded into a global umbrella initiative after its launch as One Belt, One Road (OBOR)<sup>1</sup> which aimed at connecting China and Europe like a modern Silk Road. Its success is manifested by the need of both the EU and the USA to launch their own initiatives which have been hailed as BRI rivals. The EU published its Europe-Asia Connectivity Strategy in 2018, and in 2021, the Council adopted

<sup>1</sup> The Chinese abbreviation *Yi dai yi lu* (一带一路) remains unchanged and stands for *Sichou zhi lu jingji dai he 21 shiji haishang sichou zhi lu* (丝绸之路经济带和21世纪海上丝绸之路, "The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21<sup>st</sup>-century Maritime Silk Road").

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conclusions entitled “A Globally Connected Europe,” aimed at promoting the implementation of the aforementioned strategy [1]. In 2021, the EU also revealed its Global Gateway Strategy [2]. At the G7 Summit in July 2022, the USA launched its Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment [3].

Many different theoretical approaches have been used for the study of the BRI as illustrated by the next few, select examples: Lina Liu has analyzed China’s role as a rule taker or breaker with regard to the global order [4]. Andreas Grimmel and Li Yuan have analyzed the BRI form as a hybrid model of regionalism [5]. Mark Beeson and Corey Crawford have discussed the BRI from the vantage point of geoeconomics and hegemonic transitions [6]. Wang Zhaohui has applied relational theory as developed by the Chinese IR scholar Qin Yaqing to his study of the BRI [7]. William A. Callahan has followed a constructivist approach to shed light on the role of ideas and domestic politics behind the BRI [8]. Julie Chen has done work in rethinking the approaches suitable for studying the BRI’s impacts in the recipient countries [9, 10].

In the analytical framework of connectivity projects in Indo-Pacific by Bart Gaens, Ville Sinkkonen, and Henri Vogt [11], the BRI follows the logic of contestation in the sphere of the institutional framework of governance. This is because China has been creating parallel structures and alternative institutions to increase its global influence, which can be seen as “important (first) steps to shape the ecology of international order” in China’s preferred direction [11].<sup>2</sup> The BRI is, therefore, often regarded as an increasingly important element in the ongoing great-power competition and shifting regional and global orders. It also involves a “clashing of narratives” which Gaens, Sinkkonen, and Vogt name as one form of contestation. This is related to the BRI having a strong element of an imagined future, discussed in this article.

The clashing of narratives can be studied through the lense of narrative contestation, referring to different actors using rival narratives for the same story or causal chain [13, p. 12–13] which in the case of China and the “West” is the state, logic, and imagined future of the world order. According to Ronald R. Krebs, there may be four types of contestation. Two apply to contestation within the dominant narrative which clearly is not the case here, as there is no agreement on the agents, their purpose, or even what Krebs calls the scene, or the setting: should we look at the world as divided into nation states, or as an ideally unified, wholistic global community? The two remaining types refer to competing narratives and the emergence of a dominant narrative [13, p. 41–48]. With regard to the first, if national leaders “express themselves predominantly in argument, they miss an opportunity to advance a narrative project” [13, p. 46]. Krebs is referring to the national leader and her/his opponents, but the same logic applies by extension to narrative contestation across nations. The question to ask regarding China is, are the Chinese leaders and public intellectuals “seizing the opportunity,” to use Krebs’s words, and paving the way to the emergence of a new, dominant narrative?

This article is related to the normative, more specifically ideational aspect of the contestation. It discusses the questions, what is the ideational motivation behind

<sup>2</sup> The quotation is from Cooley & Nexon [12], 104.

China's connectivity projects (most notably the BRI), and what kind of values are the projects meant to promote? This article is based on Chinese official, public policy statements, but those statements are qualitatively analyzed by reflecting their manifested message against the background of Chinese IR-related discussion on the Chinese worldview. This helps to highlight the ideas and ideologies affecting China's decision making which the public rhetoric does not reveal. For instance, without knowledge of the discussion related to the concept of *Tianxia* in Chinese IR circles, it is not possible to grasp fully the practical implications that the related rhetoric may potentially have.

## China's New Silk Roads as Means for Pacifying Its Neighbors with Money

As a foreign policy tool, the BRI is part of China's "peripheral diplomacy."<sup>3</sup> Since 2014, China's "periphery" or neighboring countries have officially enjoyed primary status in China's foreign policy, reflecting the increasingly difficult relations with the other great powers. As the threat perceptions regarding the USA were becoming more acute, China resorted to strengthening friendly relations with its neighboring countries. Integrating its neighbors into a China-led economic sphere by offering "win-win" opportunities makes confrontation more costly and less likely. Economic cooperation has been considered the main tool for the peripheral diplomacy, but it is also tied with China's geopolitical goal of increasing China's weight both in the region and globally. In 2013, Xi Jinping called for the Community of Common Destiny to become rooted in the neighboring countries [14]. The New Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road were announced that same year. The said Community has since made its way in various speeches and documents describing China's global outlook.

The principles of the OBOR/BRI are laid out in the document "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road" published by the State Council and drafted by the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce in March 2015 [15]. It remains the only document on the BRI that contains some elements of strategy.

According to the document [15], the BRI consists mainly of connectivity projects which "will help align and coordinate the development strategies of the countries along the Belt and Road, tap market potential in this region, promote investment and consumption, create demands and job opportunities, enhance people-to-people and cultural exchanges, and mutual learning among the peoples of the relevant countries, and enable them to understand, trust and respect each other and live in harmony, peace and prosperity." The connectivity projects are aimed towards building "a community of shared interests, destiny and responsibility featuring mutual political trust, economic integration and cultural inclusiveness." Thus, economic cooperation is

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<sup>3</sup> See also [8].

presented as a way for promoting mutual trust and thereby increasing regional stability. According to the document, “[t]he Initiative is an ambitious economic vision of the opening-up of and cooperation among the countries along the Belt and Road. Countries should work in concert and move towards the objectives of mutual benefit and common security” [15].

The purpose of the OBOR seems initially to have been to support China’s economic growth by enhancing a China-centred economic integration in South and Central Asia, as well as improving logistical ties between the EU and China. The goal of the “belt” is to build roads, railroads, oil and gas pipelines, and power grids connecting China with Central Asia and Europe. The “road” is meant to connect China with South East Asia, South Asia, East Africa, and the Mediterranean through ports and other coastal infrastructure projects.

The OBOR was driven mostly by domestic interests, and this still applies to the BRI. This was very evident during the early phases [16]. The State Council document dedicates one chapter to identifying the characteristics of the Chinese regions which should benefit from the BRI in their opening up and development. The BRI was launched to alleviate the widening development gap between the coastal interior provinces by creating preferential transport corridors for new supply chains from the interior provinces both within China and across its borders. The OBOR built on previous, provincial level efforts aimed at linking border provinces, such as Yunnan and Xinjiang, with their foreign neighbors [17, p. 3]. Therefore, the OBOR/BRI in its initial stages focused on renovating and building roads and railways to reduce transit times and costs. Industrial parks and special economic zones then followed. There are also significant energy projects, such as in Laos, which are meant to benefit both the region and China.

From the onset, the BRI has also been used as a sought-after label that many actors in China want to have for their overseas projects. As a result, the BRI has become an umbrella term for various types of projects without a clear, unified objective. Due to the ambiguity of the initiative, it is difficult to assess its success. It is however known that many projects have failed to deliver the planned results, and there have been instances of vocal criticism against the BRI in China for wasting government resources. In essence, the BRI appears to be a slogan, not a strategy.

## Half-Hearted Challenges to the Western Ideological Dominance

The BRI is not just about the economy or geopolitics, it is also part of China’s ideological competition. As Xi Jinping said during the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2017, the Chinese model offers a new option for countries who want fast development while preserving their own independence. During that same conference, the BRI was also enshrined in the Party Constitution, stating that the Party “shall follow the principle of achieving shared growth through discussion and collaboration, and pursue the Belt and Road Initiative” [18]. According to Marcin Kaczmarek, “[u]nder the New Silk Road concept, China is trying to merge its traditional way of thinking about the external world (Sino-centrism and preference for bilateral relations with weaker states) with Western formats for

multilateral cooperation such as development banks and international organizations” [19, p. 7]. William A. Callahan has in turn stated that China’s peripheral diplomacy is not just about win-win cooperation in Asia but serves to promote “China’s new vision of global governance” [8, p. 3].

Indeed, the State Council document explicitly states that the BRI is a tool for promoting Xi Jinping’s most important foreign policy slogan, the building of a Community of Common Destiny at a global scale.<sup>4</sup> This slogan (*goujian renlei mingyun gongtongti*, 构建人类命运共同体) encapsulates China’s new vision for global governance which is built on existing China’s foreign policy values, in particular mutual non-aggression based on economic cooperation on one hand and political non-interference in each other’s internal affairs on the other. The document also calls for “tolerance among civilizations” (in Chinese, *wenming kuanrong*, 文明宽容) which is a reference to China’s antipathy to the universality of values, such as human rights.

Some nationalist scholars in China have expanded on the above-mentioned foreign policy vision, linking it with ambitions for China’s “civilizational rise” (*wenmingxing jueqi*, 文明型崛起). Professor Jiang Shigong from Peking University has stated that the rivalry between China and the USA is a competition of two theories of human rights, two sets of political concepts, and two visions of the global order [21]. Jiang has argued that China needs to understand that the USA has used the interaction between trade and human rights to build a “world empire,” and fight over the human rights discourse power with the USA. According to him, the Europeans promoted human rights to advance the rights of the capitalists at the expense of those whom they regard as “non-human” or “savages.” Jiang sees both human rights and free trade as tools of the imperialists, whereas China has supposedly historically followed the Confucian foreign policy of “(living in) harmony but not (forcing others into) conformity” (*he er bu tong*, 和而不同). Jiang seems to believe that the prevailing, Western understanding of human rights will necessarily change with China’s voice growing louder on the international arena [21].

How would China’s voice challenge the prevailing liberal international order which is often said to include spreading democracy and promoting human rights? The latest attempt comes in the form of “Whole-Process People’s Democracy” (in Chinese, *quan guocheng renmin minzhu*, 全过程人民民主) which is a relatively new concept, used by Xi Jinping in 2019 for the first time. According to an authoritative explanation published by Xinhua News Agency, the “process” refers to a system where the people are involved in the decision making all the time, and not only during elections which Xinhua’s expert claims is the “Western” way. The “holistic” nature means that the system is at the same time based on people and represents the will of the state [22].

While sometimes the concept is only referred to as “Whole process democracy,” its core lies in people’s democracy. In reality, the Chinese system has three distinct features which undermine the concept of “democracy.” First, according to its constitution (Article 1), the People’s Republic of China (PRC) “is a socialist state under the people’s democratic dictatorship led by the working class.” *Hongqi Wengao*,

<sup>4</sup> See also [20, p. 6].

a party-run theoretical magazine, published an article in October 2014 warning against replacing the people's democratic dictatorship with the rule of law, stating that this would be falling into the trap of "universal values," and would play into the hands of international capital but be detrimental to the Chinese people [23]. Second, according to its constitution (Article 3), China applies democratic centralism. In practice, it is a system not very unlike from "opinion poll democracy" in that the voice of the population both at the local and national level is heard but not necessarily listened to.

Third, the constitution further stipulates that the tool for democratic centralism is the People's Congress System through which the "people" are supposed to exercise power. Although the congresses at different levels should be "responsible to the people and subject to their supervision," the People's Governments are not subject to the supervision of the People's Congresses at the same level but rather to the People's Governments at the higher level. Only at the highest level, the Central Government is theoretically responsible for the National People's Congress (NPC). The representatives get their mandate through direct elections only at the lowest level of the People's Congresses. In the spirit of people's democratic dictatorship, the Communist Party screens and approves all candidates.

It must be considered highly unlikely that a "people's democracy" with a new, shiny packaging would fool anyone truly committed to bestowing more power upon the people. It is telling that China sticks to the concept of democracy, despite its criticism of the West dictating the terms of the international discourse, such as "universal human rights." It seems that the Chinese policy makers are not willing or able to replace the concept itself but content themselves with re-defining it. What matters is the act of challenging the West, not the content. China's voice thus persists in repeating slogans, and remains lacking in substance.

## BRI as China's Particularistic Universe

Xi Jinping has called for "telling China's story well" [24], referring to the need of increasing China's soft power and gaining support for the Whole-Process People's Democracy and the vision of a Community of Common Destiny. Naturally, the BRI should be an important tool for this purpose. The question remains, is "China's story" a Trojan horse for a "China model?" This is an important question because as Krebs has pointed out, good storytelling is actually the way to transform the dominant narrative [13, p. 44]. The answer may not be altogether simple, but what seems clear is that if the BRI is a test case for such schemes, it is not a very successful one.

Tim Rühlig warns against perceiving China simply as either aggressive or responsible or revisionist or pro-status quo. One needs to recognize the ambiguities in China's foreign policy, and the underlying domestic reasons. Rühlig's thesis is that "the PRC has no "China model" to offer – let alone an ideology to order the globe symbolically. ... Instead, its international affairs are shaped by domestic considerations and vulnerabilities" [25, p.9]. Grzegorz Stec has pointed out that the BRI "has constantly been in flux since first being introduced" [26]. Instead of a strategy or even a vision, the BRI should in his view be perceived as

a process. In a similar vein, Zenel Garcia and Phillip Guerreiro conclude that the geopolitical effects of the BRI “are incidental rather than its driving force” [17, p.6]. Julie Chen has warned of a major caveat in the BRI studies, namely that “they tend to leave researchers equating China’s geopolitical ambition with its actual impact” [10, p. 1165].

However, Stec leaves open the possibility that BRI could evolve into something more. Stec draws his conclusion from the general nature of Chinese foreign policy which tends to strategically “focus on general trajectories” [26]. These trajectories are related to China’s core interests, especially state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the leadership of the CPC. These in turn reflect the CPC’s historical narrative which is also at the core of China’s Dream: China must rid itself from all the humiliations caused formerly by imperialists and today by the advocates for containment of China’s rise, and thus secure its core interests into the future.

This historical narrative highlights the fact that nation-building is still an ongoing process in China, even though the Chinese empire fell more than a hundred years ago, and the PRC has existed for over 70 years. This is because national identity in a multi-ethnic state is hard to define, and because issues related to sovereignty and territorial integrity remain touchy, predominantly with regard to Taiwan and the South China Sea. Similarly, the ability to establish and maintain unity is the single most important criterion for measuring a ruler’s success. Qin Yaqing has summarized this insecurity as follows: “[T]he question regarding the relationship of China and the international system is essentially a question of “who is China?”” [27] When Xi Jinping talks about China and the world, he is also trying to answer this question by stressing China’s “Chineseness.”

Looking beyond the official rhetoric and at the texts of Chinese IR scholars, it is possible to draw the conclusion that the BRI is China’s effort to build its own “particularistic universe” in its neighborhood in Central and Southeast Asia [28]. China’s global goal, the “Community of Common Destiny,” is a long way off, and its meaning remains undefined. We can see from Xi Jinping’s speeches in Chinese that it is based on the ancient ideal of *Tianxia* (天下) [29]. *Tianxia*, literally “All Under Heaven,” is an ancient Chinese concept which, depending on the context, can be understood as referring to the empire, a sphere of influence, or even the world. Ideally, *Tianxia* is a community of values rather than a union by force. The concept is linked with the traditional belief in Heaven as an impersonal but moral actor, which grants a worthy ruler his mandate to rule, namely the “Heavenly Mandate.”

The many Chinese scholars who promote the existence of a Chinese way of foreign relations typically base their theorizing around the concept of *Tianxia*. In their writings, the *Tianxia* ideal is presented as an alternative to the contemporary international system, which is regarded as flawed and plagued by conflicting national interests. Seen from the “*Tianxia*-nist” perspective, the Westphalian system merely signifies a loose collection of states driven by their own national interests [30]. The concept is also used to promote “the democratization of international relations.” This has been part of China’s rhetoric during the last two decades. *Tianxia* has thus become a preferred term for multipolarism, with China as one of the poles. After all, popular usage of the word *Tianxia* indicates that there can be several *Tianxias* in existence at the same time, ours and theirs.



At the core of the *Tianxia* ideal is that must have a center around which everyone else rotates, drawn by the center's gravity stemming from its moral and material superiority. During the imperial era, the supposed manifestation of this ideal was the tributary system under which lesser states would recognize the superiority of the Chinese Emperor by bringing him gifts. The main challenge for the promoters of *Tianxia*-based systems is the difficulty of explaining away the intrinsic need of a center. After all, the system was supposed to consist of vassals under a suzerain, and as for the suzerain, there could be only one Emperor in the same way as “there are not two Suns in the sky” [31, p. 352]. Also the term “peripheral diplomacy” (*zhoubian waijiao*, 周边外交) implies that there is both a center and a periphery. Promoting this kind of idea would make China seem hegemonious which is exactly the opposite of China's preferred image. This is an inherent contradiction of the Community of Common Destiny.

Some scholars do not, however, shy away from promoting the existence of a center, or even the creation of “a new tributary system.” According to Qi Yihu, there is a center, and it is China. Qi argues that “China's refusal to engage in hegemony is not the same as a refusal to assume a kingly role,” meaning that China with its genuine benevolence will open the path for All Under Heaven toward justice and peace, and out of capitalist alienation and power [32]. Seen in this light, Jiang Shigong, mentioned above, is in effect saying that Xi follows the Kingly Way and consequently not only has domestic legitimacy but also international soft power.

Qi Yihu imagines a world where China Proper is at the core, the next layer of fealty consists of the border regions (Tibet, Xinjiang, Taiwan), the third of the neighboring countries in South East and Central Asia—the countries that happen to be central in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects, the fourth of friendly countries, and the fifth of enemy countries [32]. This kind of *Tianxia* could be described as a Sino-centric economic, or even geopolitical, order based on the model of China's imperial domination. Following Qi's line of thought, China can in effect be seen building its own “backyard *Tianxia*” with the help of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI is supposed to be mutually beneficial and based on win-win cooperation. With such a tit-for-tat principle at its core, it can be regarded as the modern equivalent of a tributary system.

Whether the ideal of *Tianxia* refers to the global community at large, in the form of the Community of Common Destiny, or just its periphery glued together with the help of the BRI, it is by nature particularistic, based on Chinese traditions, thought, and values. The particularism is reflected in the so-called Chinese model mentioned above, as well as its ideational core which can be found in Xi Jinping's speeches. Xi has been promoting the idea of a “Chinese way of governance” (*Zhongguo zhi zhi*, 中国之治), or more literally “China's rule” or even “Chinese (world) order.” The concept mirrors titles of emperor's reigns, and could thus also be interpreted as “the reign of (modern) China”, i.e., the CPC reign. The phrase started circulating in 2019 [33]. In early 2022, Xinhua reported how Xi's speeches help explain to foreigners the “advantages of the Chinese system (*Zhongguo zhidu*, 中国制度) and the key points of China's governance (*Zhongguo zhili*, 中国治理), such as people being the masters in their homeland and high-quality development,” demonstrating how the Chinese way of governance (here to be read as “Chinese orderliness”) is the opposite of the “chaos in the West” (*xifang zhi luan*, 西方之乱) [34]. A further elaboration of the concept's content is missing from



this news report. From other sources, it can be inferred that the Chinese way of governance means whatever the CPC has done over the past decades to make China as prosperous and strong as it today is. According to the Chinese online encyclopedia Baidu, the Chinese way of governance means “a system of governance unforeseen in history, a manifestation of Chinese wisdom, filled with Chinese characteristics, and needed for solving global challenges.”

So from the Chinese model, we are down to Chinese wisdom. Strategically, it may be wise for the CPC to leave its definition ambiguous. In Chinese academic writings, the closest thing to capture “Chinese wisdom” is perhaps a term coined by the prominent, critical-Marxist philosopher Li Zehou, *shiyong lixing* (实用理性), perhaps best translated as “pragmatic reason.” Li and others have presented the term as China’s “national wisdom,” the most profound mental construct affecting the Chinese culture [35, 36]. Undoubtedly, the term is also meant as a counter balance to Kant’s “practical reason.”

The term refers to the alleged Chinese tradition of objective, practical, and result-oriented deliberation preceding action. According to Li, pragmatic reason can be partly seen as a positivist-realist worldview, but it also includes the understanding that practical results are not the sole standard of human behavior. Li attests that ethics should not be subordinate to politics, and believes that moral principles were traditionally based on the Way of Heaven (*Tiandao*, 天道). Li understands Heaven partly as the laws of nature, but also as something akin to a supernatural force.

In Li’s view, the Way of Heaven is what is needed to restrain politics. Like Liu Xiaoying who thinks that God was invented in the West for the purpose of restraining politics, and that China would need to have something similar, Li seems to regard Heaven as something permanent and purposeful that would prevent people from striving only at short-term gains and benefits [36]. In essence, therefore, pragmatic reason would ideally mean a pragmatic adherence to the rationale of Heaven.

One might compare the “Western” thought that there was “the Word” (God) in the beginning with the “Chinese wisdom” which emphasizes “the Reason” (Heavenly purpose) as the basis of everything. However, the nature of reason (*li*, 理) has been understood in various ways in Chinese philosophy. Some Neo-Confucians in the Song dynasty argued that reason is the same as its homonym *li* (礼), propriety. This led to the conclusion that when a human being discards her desires and maintains her role, she follows the heavenly principle. In a similar way, it could be explained that the “propriety-reason” was what kept the China-centered imperial system in place. Extrapolating this line of thought into the realm of the *Tianxia*-based IR theories, building the “Chinese order,” characterized by pragmatism and particularism, fulfills the Heavenly reason today.

## China Creates Distrust of the West but Gains Little Trust in Itself

While the BRI, and its supporting institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), may be perceived as steps towards shaping the international order in China’s preferred direction [12, p. 104], they do not yet directly challenge the existing “Western” system on a global scale, but rather complement it. Nevertheless,

as discussed above, they may be interpreted to signify an effort by China to make its neighborhood its own backyard. It seems nevertheless doubtful that these efforts are working beyond the creation of economic ties. According to the State Council document, one of the cooperation principles of the BRI is the creation of people-to-people bonds which should provide public support for implementing the projects [15]. Therefore, the BRI should include promoting cultural and academic exchanges, youth and women exchanges, and media cooperation, as well as cooperation between different non-governmental organizations. However, the public support is often missing.

While opinion polls show that China is enjoying considerable approval in Africa and Latin America [37], the situation is different closer to China. In Europe, China's soft power is rapidly waning. The cooperation with China has been put under tightening scrutiny, and China's initiative for cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe has shrunk from 17+1 to 14+1. It is likely that critical attitudes influence policies also in Southeast Asia where China is often seen to have hegemonic tendencies, and many BRI projects have run into difficulties. China's soft power is also weak in Central Asia. As Julie Chen has noted, the awareness of the existence of the BRI projects in Central Asia is almost non-existent outside small elites. According to one of her studies focusing on the BRI, "[i]ts soft power objectives of catching the attention and possibly winning the hearts of the locals have not been fully realized" [38]. This is due to the nature of many of the BRI projects which require a lot of interaction between Chinese actors and local actors in host states. This in turn shapes the projects, sometimes making the end result more "local" than "Chinese" [10].

This finding seems to support Maria Repnikova's conclusion that "China's pragmatic soft-power approach risks collapsing into mere transactionalism, with any benefit to China contingent on others' receiving material benefits." She argues that China's approach to soft power focuses all in all more on pragmatism than on values. This is manifested by China's development aid and other China-funded projects, as well as education programs. However, "although such economic inducements themselves are not exercises of soft power, they enhance China's soft power by bolstering the country's image as a bastion of generosity, opportunity, competence, and pragmatism," Repnikova writes [37].

In the end, it is a certain shared pragmatism or even opportunism that makes China's rhetoric resonate with many "non-Western" audiences. When China champions the non-universality of human rights and democracy, and points out the hypocrisy of the international system where "bigger states tend to be more sovereign than others," it is simply telling its audiences what they want to hear, as Rühlig notes. Therefore, even without a long-term strategy or a model, China is able to undermine the trust in the existing international system and institutions [25, p. 4].

The CPC regards many aspects of the international system as a threat to its stability, and reacts to the threat by rhetoric stressing China's growing strength and future greatness. The different actors involved in the implementation and formulation of China's foreign policies adapt the rhetoric to advance their own agendas. While the BRI with its "win-win" approach fits the purpose of spreading China's soft power, the outcomes are a hit-or-miss. China has succeeded in spreading distrust to the existing world order, but seems less efficacious in promoting itself as a trustworthy global actor through its hollow slogans.

## Conclusion

While the BRI may not have much appeal beyond the marketed “win-win” benefits, it has been chosen as the flagship of China’s foreign policy, even for China’s soft-power ambitions. Being the brainchild of Xi Jinping, it is loaded with prestige and cannot thus be easily abandoned in the foreseeable future. The label of a BRI project is highly sought-after by Chinese enterprises and other actors, and the Chinese diplomats can be expected to market the BRI in their respective host countries. Even if it is questionable whether BRI can regain such a momentum it enjoyed during the first years following its launch or not, the BRI may have success even as a soft-power project where economic promise feeds political opportunism. The problem for China is that its soft power does not have much content, and therefore, may not carry very far.

According to Krebs, a solid narrative should first make clear the agents, or the key actors in global politics. While the Chinese official statements and academic theorizations wish to see more agency for China, they deplore the dominance of the “West.” There should also be a clear scene, or an understanding of the international setting [13, p. 13]. The Chinese *Tianxia* ideal does not work very well as a scene, because it describes an idealized past and an imagined future, but there is a blatant disconnect with the present—and realistically also with the past—actualities. From the point of view of narrative contestation, it may be concluded that China is not able to bring forth a worthy contestant to the prevailing narrative of the global order, because the voices from China are mostly just arguing against the rightfulness of the prevailing global order instead of truly “seizing the opportunity” and bringing forth a new, convincing and confidence-engendering story.

In sum, this article suggests that China’s connectivity projects may be perceived as part of China’s ideational contestation with the “West,” culminating in the presentation of “Chinese values” as a viable alternative to “universal values.” However, the content of the said Chinese values remains ambiguous, and the governments and other actors are mostly drawn to the Chinese projects by pragmatic reasons. It may be argued that the hollowness of China’s value base does not meet what Krebs calls the “public demand for meaning-making” and thus fails to restore “ontological security” which would make the different audiences subscribe to the narrative [13, p. 45]. This being the case, there might be leeway for other contesting connectivity projects, such as those of the EU, to increase their attractiveness in the long run.

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## Declarations

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