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The ‘Chinese Dream’ and ‘Belt Road Initiative’: Narratives, Practices and Sub-state Actors

The ‘Chinese Dream’ (CD) and the ‘Belt Road Initiative’ (BRI) are signature programs of President Xi Jinping. Much of the scholarship on these two projects have concerned itself with either domestic propagandistic effects or external foreign policy impact. These concerns are underpinned the literature’s focus on material expressions of such projects, be it through infrastructural construction in the case of the BRI or propaganda tools in the example of the CD. Yet, an important but understudied element of these two projects are the narratives that they tell and the impact of these narratives. In that regard, this paper complements existing studies of the CD and the BRI by reading the projects as grand narratives. Drawing on international practice theory, I trace an explicit link between narratives and practices to demonstrate how narratives activates, anchors, produces and contests political practices of some sub-state actors in China. That is to say narratives: (1) serve as signposts for sub-state actors’ orientations in clarifying what are relevant/irrelevant and appropriate/inappropriate practices; (2) provides ‘background’ stock of information where actors draw to legitimize their practices when they speak of the BRI and CD; and (3) create conditions for both the creation of new practices and contestation of existing ones. I then argue that four narrative-practice processes are seen in the Chinese example: *contestation*, *sustenance*, *activation* and *production*.

Keywords: Narratives, Chinese dream, Belt and Road Initiative, China, Practice theory

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Introduction

The 'Chinese Dream' (CD) and the 'Belt Road Initiative' (BRI) are signature programs of President Xi Jinping. Much of the scholarship on these two projects have concerned itself with either domestic propagandistic effects or external foreign policy impact. These concerns are underpinned the literature's focus on material expressions of such projects, be it through infrastructural construction in the case of the BRI or propaganda tools in the example of the CD. Yet, an important but understudied element of these two projects are the narratives that they tell and the impact of these narratives. Focusing on Chinese sub-national actors, I draw an explicit link between practices on one hand and narratives on the other to demonstrate how narratives, activates, anchors and contradicts practices. Adopting an expansive definition of narratives, I refer to it here as "a particular way of talking about and understanding an aspect of the world" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 1) where narratives tells a "story or tale about something – it links events or happenings in a coherent way and conveys them to the audience" (Reeves, 2004, p. 9). Thus, narratives mobilize symbols, texts, speeches and imagery among others to present a story serving a particular purpose.

In that way, narratives: (1) serve as signposts for actors' orientations in clarifying what are relevant/irrelevant and appropriate/inappropriate practices; (2) provides 'background' stock of information where actors draw to legitimize their practices; and (3) create conditions for both the creation of new practices and contestation of existing ones. Next, engaging with the scholarship on practice theory, I then argue that four narrative-practice processes are seen in the Chinese example: *contestation*, *sustenance*, *activation* and *production*. This is done, primarily, through an analysis of discourses from official government sources, state sanctioned narratives and a survey of the existing literature on the CD and BRI narratives. This is supplemented by 8 interviews with Chinese scholars and diplomats in Beijing in 2017 and 2018. While the importance mobilizing historical narratives to serve political ends in China is well recognized, these tend to focus on purely geopolitical effects at the state or international level (e.g. Mayer, 2018; Kaczmarek, 2017). By contrast, I tune into sub-state actors and show how the BRI and CD narratives creates conditions to anchor competitive, political and economic practices between provinces; engenders opportunistic scholarly practices that focus on volume; and functions as a self-justificatory mechanism for diplomatic practices that,

nevertheless, contradicts and undermines itself. Doing this responds to the growing call to attend to sub-state actors in China's international relations so as to open up the black-box of the state (eg. Krolkowski, 2008, p. 129; Cornago, 2010).

The twin initiatives are readily associated as signature programs of China's President Xi Jinping, with much material and symbolic capital expensed to support and promote them. With regards to the Chinese dream, it is understood as realizing the twin goals of China becoming a 小康社会(*xiao kang she hui*) - "moderately well-off society" by 2021 (on the 100th anniversary of Chinese Communist Party) (新华网, 2017) and the full modernization of China where it is a "strong, democratic, cultured, harmonious and modern socialist country" by 2049 (on the 100th anniversary of the People's Republic of China) (新华网, 2017). Xi stressed that a strong military is tied to the CD – in essence, a 'Military Dream'. Indeed, the military wasted no time in marrying the CD narrative with its own agenda. The Liaoning, China's first aircraft carrier, carried the words '中国梦, 强军梦' in November 2013 which translates to '*Chinese Dream, Strong Military Dream*' (China Daily, 2013).¹ There is also an attempt to tie in social issues with the Chinese dream. Then Vice-Premier Zhang Gaoli, for example, said that "the China dream belongs to every Chinese person, including the 85 million people with disabilities" (China Daily, 2013). According to Beijing Review, the CD encompasses past and present accomplishments such as the economic advances it experienced and the return of Macau and Hong Kong alongside China's scientific and social progress (Beijing Review, n.d.).

In an interview with the Wall Street Journal, Xi was quizzed directly on the CD and responded vaguely: "The Chinese dream is as much the dream of every Chinese as it is the dream of the whole nation. It is not an illusion, nor is it an empty slogan. The Chinese dream is deeply rooted in the hearts of the Chinese people" (Wall Street Journal, 2015). It is important to note that Xi himself, interprets the CD differently at different times. In a speech delivered in the headquarters of UNESCO in 2014, Xi mentioned that "the realisation of Chinese dream is the development of material civilisation and spiritual civilisation" and that China wants to "create a colourful civilisation for mankind and provide the correct spiritual guidance and strong

¹ Translation my own.

motivation” (2014). Echoing the cultural aspect of the China Dream, Liu Yandong, China’s then Vice-Premier, in an elaboration of the CD, asserted that China should “build up its cultural strength in pursuit of the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation” and highlighted the importance of cultural exchange (Zhang, 2014). Furthermore, both she and Xi, in another setting, emphasized that the CD can only happen with technological and scientific innovation (Xinhua, 2014). There are many more other versions of the Chinese dream that are (re)articulated both by Xi and elites which includes higher education (Xinhua, 2013), patriotism (Huaxia, 2015) and philosophy and social sciences (Huaxia, 2016) to name but a few, thus showing quite clearly, the polysemic quality of the CD.

The BRI, as a label, has undergone at least two transformation. In its first discursive form, it was initially articulated as the ‘Maritime Silk Road’ (Wu & Zhang, 2013) and ‘Silk Road Economic Belt’ by Xi Jinping (Xi, 2013). It was subsequently, officialised and named ‘One Belt One Road’ or OBOR. However, this moniker was subtly dropped in favour of ‘Belt Road Initiative’ around 2015/2016 because of fears of confusion (and associative geopolitical baggage) arising from the use of the word ‘one’ in the ‘One Belt One Road’ brand (Interviewee 1, Personal Communication, July 2018; Shepard, 2017). In its current form, the BRI can be understood as a “programme to connect Asia with Africa and Europe via land and maritime networks along six corridors with the aim of improving regional integration, increasing trade and stimulating economic growth” (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, n.d.), with an emphasis particularly on large-scale infrastructure projects. An archetype of the BRI initiative is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which included the expansion of Gwadar Port, a 1100 kilometre highway between Karachi and Lahore and around USD \$35 billion dollars in developing energy infrastructure in Pakistan (Deloitte Insights, 2018). The expansive and fluid nature of the BRI has caused considerable concerns over its foreign policy elements, with some states highlighting it as a form of ‘debt trap diplomacy’ and others going as far as to characterize the BRI as a ‘new form of colonialism’ (Hornby, 2018).

The two grand projects are intertwined such that the BRI “echo the so-called ‘China Dreams’ of the great revival of the Chinese nation” (Hong, 2017, p. 358; see also Sidaway & Woon, 2017). The importance of the two narratives are also materially reflected in state instruments. The revised Constitution of the Communist Party adopted at the 19th National Congress in

2017 mention both the China Dream and the BRI (Communist Party of China, 2017). It has to be noted that beyond official speeches and narratives, symbols play an important role in invoking imaginaries of grandeur, past and present, such that “typical images and ornaments” used to “represent the BRI visually in reports and at banquets, theatrical performances and state summits feature camels, Admiral Zheng He’s treasure fleet, and other symbols of the old Silk Road” (Mayer, 2018, p. 1229). With that in mind, it is apt to look at these two narratives to assess its impact on sub-state actors in China. It has to be stressed that, in spite of official articulations of the CD, multiple interpretations, official and unofficial, exists in the scramble for prestige and resources (Xinhua, 2016). The BRI, too, has a polysemic and enigmatic quality; for the BRI, “ambiguity is deliberate to the way BRI has been rolled out, as a work in progress” (Graham, 2018; see also Pitlo, 2015).

While there has been a surge of interest and academic research concerning the BRI and CD; there is a surprising lack of attention towards the consequences of the stories of these grand undertakings on the concrete practices of political actors. Indeed, concrete practices and the interplay with these narratives have largely escaped empirical scrutiny and this paper acts as a corrective in that regard. The paper is organized into four sections. In the first section, I unpack the BRI and China Dream as narratives and survey existing literature discussing the BRI and CD. In the second section, I engage with the literature on narratives and practice theory in IR and why a suture between practices and national narratives is long overdue. In the third section, I discuss the empirical effects of the BRI and the CD on the practices of Chinese officials and scholars. Finally, I conclude the paper and highlight other fertile areas to extract more value from the narrative-practices link.

The Chinese Dream and the BRI Narratives

The discursive aspect of the BRI for international politics has already received some attention. Dadabaev writes how:

the Silk Road is not a foreign policy doctrine but rather a discursive strategy of engagement that largely exists in the realm of narration. This narration is also a matter of social construction that is subject to change depending on the international

environment of the country (China, Japan, Korea, etc.) that produces such narratives, the alternative narratives that compete for wider international acceptance and the country's vision of "self" and the "other" in the international context. (Dadabaev, 2018, p. 31)

Also focusing on Chinese discourses on the BRI, Sidaway and Woon suggest that it "signals new modalities and geographies of interimperial reworking and comparison" where "Chinese discussions of OBOR creatively appropriate what originally emerged within European narratives in the age of empire" (2017, p. 599). Liu, Dunford and Gao call the BRI narrative an "inclusive globalization" and also add that it is "designed as an immanent critique of the neo-liberal globalization of the last thirty to forty years, inclusive globalization embodies fundamental similarities and fundamental differences with the former" (2018, p. 1208). The foreign policy dimension of BRI has, of course, garnered the most attention in IR. Indeed, Hong notes how the BRI initiatives "are a reflection of China's ascendance as well as her growing power in the global arena" (2017, p. 355). Focusing also on geopolitics, Nordin and Weissman, maintain that the BRI "reinforce Chinese government narratives that portray China as the new trailblazer of global capitalism, which it will lead better than the United States, specifically illustrating and justifying a new Sinocentric order in and beyond east Asia" (2018, p.232). Missing from these narrative-focused discussions, however, are the changes wrought in the social realities of sub-state actors in China.

For the CD, many scholars have discarded, rightly so, the exercise in trying to find *the interpretation* of the Chinese Dream and focus, instead, on the CD as a discourse. Bislev (2015), (through an online analysis of *Sina Weibo*²) for instance, points out that the CD discourse changed when it interacted with the public as it searched for parts of the dream that had "greater resonance" with citizens. He further suggests that the CD is a public communication campaign and contributes to the 'creation and maintenance' of an imagined community and that it is "very special because it is a potentially all-encompassing term that invites multiple interpretations quite unlike something as delimited and well defined as *the Three Represents*" (2015, p. 586). While his analysis of the discourse through online reactions and discussion is

² China's close equivalent of Twitter.

a valuable addition to the understanding of the CD, it mistakes the *impression* that the public can co-craft the CD as actual ability to co-craft the message. The CD narrative, as I shall argue, has clear limitations on how far it can be stretched as it remains under solid control from the Party. Wang Zheng (2014) notes that ‘national rejuvenation’ is not novel with leaders from Mao to Hu variously using it. It has also been rightly concluded by others that the “Chinese Dream functions as a somewhat ambiguous metanarrative into which one can insert any positive developments while neglecting others” (Mahoney, 2013, p. 27).

Mahoney places the Chinese dream discourse in its historical and political narrative in China and avers that it must be interpreted in that context. He argues that the CD is a ‘framing discourse’ as others (Bondes & Heep, 2013) have argued and that the discourse is an attempt at ‘rectifying’ - bringing factions to heel; curbing corruption and ensuring party discipline (Mahoney, 2013, p. 30). This article agrees with Mahoney in that the “Party is attempting to do this and is using the metanarrative of the Chinese Dream as a rallying point” (2013, p. 30). However, where Mahoney uses a Gadamerian approach³ and draws from post-structuralists such as Derrida and Lyotard, the approach here is more grounded and less esoteric. It understands CD as hermeneutics less theoretically and more loosely as an ‘interpretive device’ that is used by the Party, the State and its organs to advance or defend its interests. Finally, a more critical reading of the CD sees some observers interpreting it as a sophisticated propagandistic tool to make pliant citizens (Xuecun, 2013). Xuecun further claims that there is a shift from a coercion to skilful persuasion in getting people’s ‘buy-in’. Be that as it may, this reading underrates the exacting aspects of the CD as the high permeability and social acceptability (at the micro, meso and state level) produces a coercive effect while making it difficult to voice dissenting visions of the CD. Yet, even in the discussions above about the BRI and CD rhetoric, none of them looks at the process through which such narratives brought about a change in practices. Before delving in the empirics, I shall briefly deal with the literature on narratives and international relations.

³ This approach, according to Mahoney informs the user ‘that interpretation is an art, and that no method can accurately yield the truth...’ and that one should ‘...pay careful attention to the historically situated narratives that helped produce it.’ He insists that only this method would reveal “intertextual situatedness, and thereby reveal a more clearly conceptualized “hermeneutic circle,” and therefore make possible a more informed reading” (p. 16).

Narratives and practices in International Relations

The 'Practice Turn' gives IR a timely and much-needed stimulant with its focus towards the mundane, unconscious and repetitive activities of actors in international relations (e.g. Hopf, 2017; Cornut, 2015). Adler and Pouliot offer this definition of practices, which this paper shares: "practices are socially meaningful patterns of action, which, in being performed more or less competently, simultaneously embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world"⁴ (Adler & Pouliot, 2011, p. 4). The agenda of the 'practice turn', however, has hitherto been concentrated on *identifying practices* and mapping out the *empirical and theoretical effects* of these practices in and on international relations.⁵ Much less, in contrast, has been said on how practices get sustained and reproduced. Under what conditions can 'new' practices emerge? How are practices sustained? A pivot to narratives, I argue, can help us better answer these questions.

In that regard, it is well understood that narratives are essential in international relations. Without narratives and stories, political action is impossible (Fierke, 2002; Squire et al, 2015). Indeed, scholars in IR have studied narratives and political action fruitfully. Jackson's (2006) work on post-war Germany and the international order is one such exemplar. Studying the rhetoric constructing the 'western civilization', he persuasively argues how narratives about what constitutes a 'legitimate western civilization' played an essential role in post-war Germany reconstruction and conciliation, particularly its relationship with the United States and its entry to NATO. Thus, his account of reconstruction "explains how the reconstruction policies concretely pursued were legitimated: how they were made acceptable, and alternative policies made unacceptable, to a variety of audiences". Pushing back against systemic-structuralist argumentation, he also "preserves human agency by highlighting the role of social activity in forging and sustaining those patterns of legitimating rhetoric" (2006, p. 16).

⁴ There are contending visions of what 'practices' are in IR. To that debate, see (Bueger & Gadinger, 2015). Yet, Adler and Pouliot's operationalization remains the most influential in IR.

⁵ Exceptions include (Neumann, 2002) and (Bueger & Gadinger, 2018, pp. 69-79) but even these attended towards theoretical fleshing.

That states construct and weave narratives into national consciousness have not escaped scholars. Subotic writes how “state narratives are constructed through an active and elaborate process that involves multiple political and cultural agents” (Subotic, 2016, p. 615). Indeed, with the BRI and CD, there is a deliberate and assiduous effort in promoting it within and without. She further adds that

Over time and with infinite iteration by narrative “entrepreneurs”—political leaders, elite intellectuals, education establishment, popular culture, the media—and everyday social practice, a particular state narrative template (of past events, or of the general place of the state in the international system) fixes the meaning of the past and limits the opportunity for further political contestation (Subotic, 2016, p. 615)

Seeing narratives as stories, Ringmar underline how:

We do this as we tell *stories* about the metaphors that we have come to embrace. First we see something as *some-thing*, in other words, and then we construct a narrative about this something. In this way narrative becomes the process through which human beings make sense of the unfolding of their lives. (1996, p. 451)

Domestically, narratives, like the CD and BRI, are seen as important tools in nation building and national myth-making. Berenskoetter (2014) observe how ‘biographical narratives’ forges a nation’s identity in the world. For Devetak, there is an unbreakable link between events and narratives: events do not have meaning outside of the narratives that inform it: “narratives, or stories, are therefore essential to the process of understanding events” (2009, p. 797). Using the September 11 attacks as an example, he suggests that, as an event, it “is conceived as much more than simply an act of terrorism. There are always other meanings ascribed to it, meanings that draw on prior moral and political scripts or narratives, and that predispose towards particular policy responses” (2009, p. 804). In a similar way, practices do not have self-evident meaning and ‘force’; it relies on narratives to give it meaning *ad actum* and *post factum*. Indeed, narratives give practices the stability it needs to take hold and ‘stick’ over time (Rouse, 1996, p. 27). Mayer writes how states have persistently and historically relied on narratives to reach domestic and international goals. He calls this move “historical

statecraft” where the “systematic application of representations of the past (real or imagined) in order to frame and legitimize foreign policy, naturalize a certain image or role of a country, and stabilize collective identities on national, regional and global levels (‘communalization’)” is seen (2018, p. 1222).

Other theorists have thus pointed towards the link between narratives and practices. For instance, De Certeau (cited in Neumann, 2012, p. 60) speaks of how “stories ‘go in a procession’ ahead of social practices to open a field for them”. Marrying strategic action and narratives, Miskimmon et al write how “strategic narratives are a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors” (2017, p. 6). Turning again to Jackson, he suggests that

Allusions (or at least their component parts) were not dreamt up on the spot, but preexisted the concrete situation and were available for deployment at this moment. These allusions were *metaphorical*, in the technical sense in which a metaphor is a “carrying across” of meaning from one object or situation to another, and form the *basis for actions* based on the situation (2006, p. 29)⁶

Yet, there exist no proper, systemic empirical recovery of how narratives contest and sustain practices (or actions)⁷ despite the mutually dependent nature of narratives and practices, clarified here by Bueger and Gadinger (2018, p. 70):

Practice theorists adopt a processual understanding of narrative and emphasise that narratives or ‘stories’ function as the social bond, or ‘glue’ that gives practices stability over time and space. Narratives, in this sense, are a form of configuration device by

⁶ Emphasis added.

⁷ Stein’s (2011) chapter on background knowledge brought into the foreground attempts to explain the stability and contestability of practices. Focusing on ‘learning’ and ‘community of practice’, she explains how “changes in the structure of global politics and deep unease within the humanitarian community itself about its practices in a changing world came together to provoke a conversation about standards of practice, a conversation that is fraught with doubt, questioning, and tension” (Stein, 2011, p. 104). While she invokes ‘conversations’ within the community, it is not an explicit exposition of narratives. My focus here is on grand narratives created by the state-actor and its subsequent effects on sub-state actors.

which actors make sense of the world and order it in a specific way. They order a heterogeneous world into more-or-less coherent configurations.

It is important to state here that *creating* and *telling* narratives are, in themselves, social practices. Yet 'narratives' can be distinguished from practices insofar as it is latent and not brought into practice yet. This is akin to Adler and Pouliot's 'background knowledge and discourse' (2011, p. 17). Importantly, as pointed out by Bueger and Gadinger (see also Neumann, 2002, p. 637) *narratives configure practices*. However, as I will show, not only do they "give practices stability", they can also *destabilize practices*. I then go full circle and argue how these practices can, in turn, (and at the same time) also stabilize and destabilize the very narratives that implicate them.

Let me say a few words about the operationalization of 'narratives' here. Oftentimes, the concepts 'discourse' and 'narratives' are used interchangeably or utilized with any unpacking (e.g. Mayer, 2018; Ferdinand, 2016; Wang, 2014). It is useful then to distinguish between 'discourse' and 'narrative'. Discourses can be understood as "frameworks through which we comprehend the world meaningfully" (Hutchinson and Bleiker, 2017 p.503). For Foucault, it is the boundaries of where thoughts and speeches end (1991, pp. 59-60). "Discourse gives rise to social rules that decide which statements most people recognise as valid, as debatable or as undoubtedly false" (Bleiker, 2003). Of course, this short exposition cannot do service to debates over the meanings of discourse and how to deploy it meaningful to IR. Suffice to say, discourse, broadly speaking, is concerned with language and communication, both verbal and non-verbal as "systems of signification" that both sustain and give meaning to social life (e.g. Milliken, 1999, p. 231).

The conception of 'narrative' here, however, is less of a pre-determined existing 'frame' that structures social reality. Rather, it is more dynamic and aimed towards a specific purpose. It is deliberately expansive so as to better capture the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the BRI and CD projects, the tools that support it and how it interacts with practices. It broadly follows Kenneth Burke's '*dramatistic pentad*' (1945) of *agent* (who tells the narrative?), *agency* (what ways is it told and how is it received?), *scene* (where is this told?), *act* (how and

when is this told?) and *purpose* (what for?) in narratives. Done this way, the strategic imperatives, agency and fluidity of the BRI and CD stories can be better appreciated.

The BRI and CD Narratives and effect on practices

Scholarly practices in China

One combined effect of these two narratives is the shift in scholarly practices to “jump into the BRI and CD bandwagon” (Interviewee 2, Personal Communication, July 2018). The same interviewee notes that while

scholars have been opportunistic in the past to get into whatever was fashionable, the BRI and CD, especially BRI now, is different because they are really receiving much more national attention and resources than anything before that and because of that, the scholarly attention is also unlike anything in the past. (Interviewee 2, Personal Communication, July 2018).

Looking at the CD, Peters correctly observes how

Narrative and narratological approaches to the study of narrative depend on the weaving of all the elements of a culture into new semiotic forms in a wide variety of media that can reach the people and help them interpret their experience... Narratives can create and transmit cultural traditions, and build the values and beliefs that define our cultural identities. While narrative is an instrument of self-creation, at the same time narrative can be a vehicle of dominant ideologies and an instrument of power (2017, p. 1303).

Indeed, one such exercise of power is the development of a slew of political and economic entrepreneurs – state-sanctioned and otherwise - jumping onto the BRI and CD bandwagon. For example, with regards to the CD dream, ‘model dreamers’ are selected to visit workplaces and inspire others with their dreams (The Economist, 2013). A cottage industry of sorts has also emerged with propaganda posters on the CD being sold and stars being made from

singing ballads about the CD.⁸ Universities have incorporated the CD narratives into their training of young academics and parents and children across China were also mobilized to “praise, depict and realize the Chinese Dream” (The Atlantic, 2013) in effect making sure that the socialization and internationalization of the ‘dream’ starts young. Most importantly, there has been an ‘explosion’ of CD-related publications, more than 10,000 CD related works in 2013 compared to a negligible amount before Xi’s articulation (Lee, 2016) demonstrating how scholars are orienting their intellectual production.

The flexibility of both stories has important effects as well. This elasticity is seen most apparently when institutions and individuals are implicated as co-authors in the CD. One example of this is manifested in the array of CD related activities such as essay-writing contests in schools and a nationwide photography contest funded by state organizations such as Xinhua News and Chinese Academy of Social Sciences to tease out “what the dream actually entails”. There is even an active dedicated website (open also to non-Chinese nationals) run by CCTV⁹ that encourages people to upload their version of the CD and what it means for them. So, while there are various, disaggregated, practices at the individual level, these are supported by institutionally layered state-sponsored actors that preserves the ongoing collective communication and mass participatory activities. Significantly, this institutional meso-layer also acts as a filter to discipline and keep discussions of dreams within acceptable boundaries. At the state level then, the constant (re)articulation of the CD allows societal bonds to strengthen according to the vision of the party and permits the stressing of vague national Chinese dreams such as ‘patriotism’, ‘unity’, ‘Solidarity’ and ‘rejuvenation’ (Buckley, 2016).

A simple search for academic articles from 2012-2017 is revealing¹⁰:

⁸ For instance, Chen Sisi, a member of the military song and dance group shot to popularity with her song ‘Chinese Dream’ and has acquired over 1.2 million followers on Weibo. See <http://weibo.com/chensisi>

⁹ <http://english.cntv.cn/chinesedream/index.shtml>

¹⁰ These were entered into Google Scholar search engine for the mandarin terms “中国梦” and “一带一路” which corresponds to China Dream and Belt and Road Initiative. The search was executed on 27th October 2018.

While by no means a scientific mapping of Chinese knowledge production on CD and BRI, the graph above, nevertheless, tells us a couple of things. First, that BRI articles have increased steadily year on year and its popularity among Chinese scholars have far exceeded the CD. Second, the CD narrative has waned in popularity as resources have been diverted to promoting the BRI – confirming what Chinese scholars have told me. Yet, the CD narrative remains an important albeit diminishing story in China.

Two things can be evinced from the above analysis of scholarly practices. First, there is a clear shift on knowledge production practices towards BRI and CD – particularly so for the BRI. This has resulted in a deluge of such scholarly materials, particularly in China, without, necessarily, an increase in quality.¹¹ Second, and more pertinently for international relations, this overemphasis on CD and especially BRI (owing to its clearer foreign policy dimensions), has led to a co-related increase in attention and awareness of the BRI project; in essence compelling state-actors to react to the BRI as an emerging geo-political fact and to formulate responses to attend to it. As an important node in the BRI, in those narratives, “we scholars can help promote the image of the BRI and through our work can convince other scholars,

¹¹ I must add that I am not claiming that the surge in Chinese CD and BRI research are of a low quality but simply to say that there is an emphasis on “seizing the opportunity to catch the CD/BRI train” (Interviewee 2, Personal Communication, July 2018).

think tanks and government to join in. Everyone wants to help!” (Interviewee 3, Personal Communication, July 2017). This “everyone wants to help” logic of course, masks the personal, self-interested reasons for participating and attempting to participate in the BRI related activities.¹²

Entrenching Provincial Competition

The Chinese economic reforms led by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s introduced market principles, which brought with it a decentralization of economic activities into the hands of provincial government. Thus, by the early 1980s, “many state-owned enterprises controlled by the central government were delegated to local governments” (Montinola, Qian, & Weingast, 1995, p. 61). This devolvement of economic initiative to provinces resulted in fierce competition between local jurisdictions as each tried to out-do one another (Montinola, Qian, & Weingast, 1995, p. 59). One such competitive practice that emerged was the establishment of trade barriers within provinces¹³ where the World Bank, in a report on China’s domestic market, observes how:

Links with the overseas exterior appear to have been easier to develop than links with other provinces, both in terms of the mobility of goods and some factors, particularly capital investment. There has been some tendency for individual provinces to behave as separate countries, rather than as parts of a single large country (World Bank, 1993).

To that end, provinces around China has been quick to rally commercial, academic and political actors to kick-start many BRI related projects and practices, each trying to outdo the

¹² That scholars are under the command and serves the need of the Chinese Communist Party is no surprise. For example with regards to the ‘overreach’ of BRI and its link to the China-US tradewar: “think tanks serve their direct supervisors’ interests, top leaders relying on those experts for an accurate analysis of what foreign businesspeople were thinking and feeling about the rising China-US trade tensions were inevitably frustrated” (Cai, 2018).

¹³ These protectionist practices against competition can created unintended outcomes. One example is the production of hogs in Jiangxi province which served the demands of hog consumption in the richer Fujian and Guangdong provinces. The Jiangxi government artificially suppressed prices sold within the locality for welfare purposes but created a situation where households could resell it profitably to Fujian/Guangdong province. Thus, in 1985, Jiangxi province set up ‘tax offices’ at borders to tax hog sales. As a result of this, hog production fell dramatically (Montinola, Qian, & Weingast, 1995, p. 66).

other. For example, Guangdong province has quickly latched onto the BRI narrative by positioning itself as a gateway and a hub in the BRI project, manifested in the number of conferences themed around the BRI as “it reflected a frenzy among local Chinese authorities, companies and institutions to translate China’s biggest economic diplomacy push into workable projects to serve the country’s national interests” (Leung, 2017). What is more, in

Fujian province, a maritime Silk Road tourism expo opened for the third consecutive year last month. In Shanghai, a research centre for the sea route – the “road” in the formal name for the trade and infrastructure plan, the “Belt and Road Initiative” – was founded last year. And in Nanjing, authorities are showcasing an exhibition of chinaware along the trade route and are eager to apply for World Heritage status for the maritime Silk Road (Leung, 2017).

Beyond economics, the relatively autonomous nature of the provinces ensured that “in insulated regions beyond the reach of the central government, local officials can take advantage of their power for personal gain” (Montinola, Qian, & Weingast, 1995, p. 66). Indeed, Choi, in tracking the careers of provincial leaders, found out that in the fight to gain a seat in top national leadership (identified as membership into the elite 25-member Politburo), factional ties and the economic performance of the province itself proved decisive (Cho, 2012). Little wonder then, that with 34 provincially administered units jostling for only 25 spots (and even then, spaces up for grabs are dependent on current members retiring), competition is fierce.

Fast forward to 2012, when Xi took control of the Party and the country, he initiated a series of measures meant to curb the excesses and autonomy of local governments and centralize control (Loh, 2018), therefore, effectively neutering the political rivalry that punctuated much of the Hu-Wen administration. The emergence of the BRI then, served as a competition-justificatory device where, as a largely Xi-directed project, provinces could legitimately compete openly, without being fearful of sanctions (Interviewee 4, Personal Communication, July 2018). Its amorphous quality suits these actors as different government ministries and provinces “grab the resources associated with BRI by grabbing the concept of the BRI” (Yan, 2015). Important as these may be, it is not only the concrete resources – funding, budgets,

infrastructure¹⁴ – that matters. One scholar noted how “the prestige that is attached to a province and to its Party Secretary and Governor matters a lot. Through the BRI and the seal of approval by the central government, the provincial leaders can show their ‘closeness’ with the government. It can help with their careers” (Interviewee 5, Personal Communication, July 2018).

In her study looking at the domestic, bureaucratic politics of the BRI, Yu writes how “besides setting broad policy priorities, the top leadership can determine the survival of any particular institutions” and by the same token “the Party will ‘award’ or ‘punish’ the challengers according to the situation and policy domains. This case has also largely applied to the pursuit of BRI” (2018, p. 228). In that way, while they compete, provinces can also form alliances with

certain central ministries to bid for project approvals, while other provincial governors and some CEOs of the State Owned Enterprises have taken to bypassing central ministries and communicating directly with the members of the Small Leading Group to gain their approvals (Yu, 2018, p. 229).

Seen in this light, the narrative of the BRI serves as a rationalization of provincial’s competitive practices – in actuality, such competitive and cooperative practice draws on the BRI narrative for sustenance and in deciding appropriateness. The CD, similarly, provides fertile grounds for provincial competition due to the open-ended nature of the concept. As a New York Times editorial notes, the expansive nature of the CD narrative is such that there are provincial versions of the dreams - ‘*Henan Dream*’ and the ‘*Guangdong Dream*’- and theme based dreams such as ‘*sports dream*’ and ‘*aircraft carrier dream*’ and even a ‘*pregnancy dream*’ for a hospital specializing in infertility treatment (Xuecun, 2013). This shows how various state-aligned interpretations of the CD narratives can lead to actors’ subsequent attempts to outshine each other. Indeed, the litany of activities enacted to eclipse one another range from “opera and drama competition” in Guangxi province to the hosting a China Dream

¹⁴ Although it certainly is significant. Yu reminds us how “Nearly 32 provinces across China are also participating in ensuring their preferred projects being chosen. In doing so, each provincial government will receive a generous budgetary support in developing the chosen projects” (2018, p. 229).

speech contest in a prison in Eastern Jiangsu province (MacLeod, 2014). One observation here is that while various interpretations can co-exist and can be complementary, there are clear contradictions too. For example, in pursuit of technological innovation to realize the CD, China is inviting foreign scientists to it grow the technology industry (The Economic Times, 2015). However, this is at odds with Xi's and government leaders' proclamations about the CD and how China's scientific innovation must be 'independent'. From a domestic politics perspective, the CD and BRI examples highlights how, in spite of Xi's calls for unity, conformity, discipline and his obvious disdain for politicking (Lam, 2018), sub state actors, particularly provinces, will continue to opportunistically compete and try to outdo each other as they parasitically latch unto these grand narratives.

Diplomatic Practices

The discussion above has centred largely on productive effects of narratives insofar as they are able to both anchor and breed practices. Yet, narratives can unsettle and challenge existing practices. In this section, I crystalize this process and show how the BRI narrative challenges and contradicts diplomatic practices.

One meta-logic of the BRI narrative is the story of its benign, open and harmonious nature. Indeed, fears about how the original "One Belt One Road" may be (mis)conceived as a geo-strategic project with only 'one road' led it to being re-labelled as the more comprehensive and accessible-sounding 'Belt Road Initiative'. Positive rhetoric from official media, government documents and scholars mark much of the BRI narrative produce. An official action plan on the BRI states how "It is open to all countries and international and regional organizations for engagement and honors mutual respect and market operation to seek common prosperity". Furthermore, Xi himself stresses that "the programs of development will be open and inclusive, not exclusive. They will be a real chorus comprising all countries along the routes, not a solo for China itself" (The State Council, 2015). Such positive-promotional strategies include the practice of selecting positive stories by 'neutral' non-Chinese scholars and officials to enjoin a legitimacy that China cannot derive from purely domestic voices (e.g. Loh, 2017, pp. 127-129). Government media highlighted, for instance, how others (in this case an Italian diplomat) sees China's BRI as "an important opportunity

for all countries in the world to prosper together”, adding also that the BRI “covers many comprehensive areas including culture and infrastructure and serves to benefit all of the world” (Han, 2018).

For the CD, representations of this narrative when Chinese leaders undertake diplomatic activities are used in looser terms. When Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited four Latin American countries – Brazil, Colombia, Peru and Chile – in 2015 he referenced the CD dream saying: “it will also help Latin American understand the Chinese Dream and promote mutual learning in the fields of culture, education, and society. Finally, it will fulfil a joint Chinese, and Latin American, Dreams” (Mao, 2015). Fu Ying, then Vice-Foreign Minister of the PRC, likewise claimed that “the Chinese dream is also part of the dream of many in the developing world who now have a great opportunity to grow their economy” (China Daily, 2013) in a nod to the multifaceted yet unspecified ways in which the CD can be used externally. That being said, this under-specified but nonetheless implicit logic of peacefulness and benignity is challenged, much like the BRI narrative is as well, by its diplomatic practices. Take the case of Confucius Institutes: considered a vital prong of the foreign policy element of the CD, Confucius institutes overseas (ideally) help spread Chinese soft power in a positive way (Kwok, 2018). Yet, these institutes have been used by PRC diplomats, sometimes overtly and other times covertly, to influence universities, monitor overseas Chinese students and shape attitudes towards ‘controversial’ issues like Tibet and Taiwan (Lloyd-Damnjanovic, 2018). This generated worries in campuses and governments such that Confucius institutions around the world are rapidly being closed due to fears of influence (Volodsko, 2015).

In that way, despite the rhetoric, diplomatic practices of actors frequently transgress and contradict these narratives. While the fact that political actors lie or that their actions conflict with their rhetoric is well acknowledged, in the cases here, the material and symbolic investment that has gone into these twin narratives exceeds that as simply a propagandistic tool (its propaganda value notwithstanding). Neither is it purely a matter of diplomatic actors being disingenuous, which would entail a presupposition of actors’ intentions. Rather, actors’ practical commitment to both the benign narrative and the assertive diplomatic practice makes it difficult to reconcile the two *in practice*. Thus, while the official BRI narrative

frequently expounds its openness and peacefulness,¹⁵ diplomatic activities often exhibit assertiveness (e.g. Qiu, 2017; Loh, 2018; Bandurski, 2018). Indeed, in field interviews in China, non-western diplomats repeatedly point to these qualities. One Southeast Asian envoy told me how: “their diplomatic behavior is getting more and more assertive, I think this is the general consensus the diplomatic community here [in Beijing] shares” (Interviewee 6, Personal Communication, July 2017).

Another diplomat revealed how: “it is difficult to get them [Chinese diplomats] into a room and they are courteous and professional enough, but they are never really open and can never really speak their mind” (Interviewee 7, Personal Communication, July 2018). A Western diplomat explains: “I think they do believe in them [BRI], it is just that they often fail to see how their behavior are construed by others as ‘assertive’ or ‘bullying’ and how, to many, their activities does not square with rhetoric” (Interviewee 8, Personal Communication, July 2018). The CD articulation is similar from the BRI in enunciating a vision of global harmony and peaceability with a key foreign policy official, introducing phrases like “energetically working to stabilize and advance friendly and good-neighborly relations in surrounding areas”, and “non-conflict and non-confrontation” among others in his speech on the Chinese Dream (Yang, 2013).

Yet, the practices enacted jars with the narrative as we see that the BRI has had significant unintended, self-defeating effects. For instance, while the BRI has been couched in terms of benignity, much wariness within Asia – the central node of the BRI – against it remains. This skepticism “among Asian nations about China’s real motivation and intentions could deter these countries from cooperating fully with OBOR initiatives on infrastructure development, which could jeopardize the operations of the AIIB and the implementation of China’s grand plans.” (Hong, 2017, p. 364). What is more, it has been observed that “China’s (very) assertive and at times aggressive policies related to territorial claims in the East and South China Seas

¹⁵ Xi Jinping highlighted its ‘openness and inclusiveness’, ‘mutual learning’, ‘mutual benefit’ and ‘peace and cooperation’ (2017), phrases that are symptomatic of other official speeches, documents and reports. While not claiming to undertake a comprehensive or methodical textual coding of these phrases, a brief read of over 20 official speeches and documents on the BRI throws up identical or similar characteristics.

have been an instrument to help “resurrect” Chinese power as declared in the “China Dream”” (Berkofsky, 2016, p. 66).

It is, at the cost of belabouring the point, not merely about Chinese officials being insincere about the narratives but how narratives are simultaneously drawn upon, which, for its part, both supports and undermines certain practices that concurrently supports and thwarts the very narratives that support them. I hasten to add that the three narrative-practices examples above are not meant to be exhaustive nor presented as the archetypical examples. They are illustrative and serve simply to shed light on the process through which narratives can affect practices. From the above empirical instances, I make a more general theoretical claim that narratives can affect practices by way of *contestation*, *sustenance*, *activation* and *production*. I wish to make clear that these are not mutually exclusive and some narratives can both contest and sustain existing practices (such is the case in diplomatic practices underlined in this paper). In that way, searching for which of the four processes takes shape can only be answered by the empirical specificities of the case itself, and not with a conception of an underlying causal mechanism. All in all, the narrative-practices dynamic can be visualized this way in table 1:

Table 1
Forms of Narrative – Practice Interaction

	Contestation	Sustenance	Activation	Production
Description	Challenge current practices and undermines its performance	Create conditions to maintain the ongoing enactment of practices. Forms the ‘background stock of knowledge’ that practitioners draw on.	Animate ‘latent’ practices that were previously inactive or discarded.	Creates the conditions for new practices to emerge.

Effects	Appearance of inconsistent practices or incompetent performances.	Reinforces and entrench existing practices, thus increasing its longevity.	Resuscitate certain set of practices into the foreground quickly and visibly.	Opens up avenues for change, particularly if new practices replace rather than complement.
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Conclusion

In this article, I sought to show why reading the BRI and CD as narratives is important and complementary to existing approaches. Specifically, the articles show the impact of national narratives on sub-state actors' political realities. Such interpretations are important if we were to more accurately grasp the CD and BRI particularly as China devotes ever-growing resources to the BRI. Relatedly, I tried to demonstrate in empirically concrete ways how narratives entangle with practices. The point here is not to definitively (and simplistically) state the narratives give rise to (new) practices but rather, to bring into sharp relief that ways narratives implicate practices – an observation that is theoretically acknowledged but not frequently empirically documented in the practice theoretical literature. In that connection, using the CD and BRI narratives, I observe how these two grand narratives – owing to their polysemous and enigmatic qualities - creates an opening for practices to take hold. In particular, I outlined three such practices: opportunistic BRI and CD knowledge production practices; renewed provincial competition practices and the simultaneous reliance on and undermining of the BRI/CD narrative in diplomatic practices.

Through these empirical instances, one observes how practices that were 'latent' gets reactivated in the case of the provincial competition; how narratives and practices can be self-effacing in diplomatic practices; and how 'new' practices can emerge from the narratives as shown in the scholarly practices vignette. More broadly, this paper gives an instance where strategic narratives engendered and promoted by the Chinese state (are almost frictionless, non-contestable and not contested) brought new dynamics to the practices of diverse sub-

state actors. The CD and BRI narratives are therefore one of Xi's and the CCP's major strategy in that consolidation drive; the CD and BRI is both a means to an end and an end in itself. Compared to Mao who used violence and upheaval and Deng who used economic growth and the Renminbi to buy loyalty (both of which has its limits), Xi's turn is to narratives and stories for social control and this may prove to be the most "sustainable, influential and powerful" modality yet (Brown, 2016). An interesting line to pursue, which I do hint at but do not have the space to elaborate, would be to trace how the practices themselves then feedback to the narratives. This could provide clues as to how practices of sub-state actors affect the telling and creation of grand narratives at the national level.

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