



Bridging inter-narrative tensions

Emplotting Chinese state identity in BRI narratives for domestic and foreign audiences

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Abstract

This thesis contributes to the literature on strategic narratives by investigating how China navigates tensions between its projected identities in Belt and Road Initiative narratives relating to Italy, the United Kingdom, and India aimed at domestic and international audiences. Using a modified version of Colley's (2019) method of narrative analysis, the thesis traces how Chinese state identity is emplotted in narratives aimed at domestic and international audiences, respectively. It proceeds to discuss how tension can arise from the distinct choices of inclusion and omission of events as a result of the differing aims and contexts of the two categories of narratives. Finally, it evaluates how the emplotment mechanisms of omission/silencing, linking, sharpening, clarifying, and flattening can be used to ease these tensions through selective de-emphasising of narrative elements.

Keywords: *strategic narratives, state identity-building, China, Belt and Road Initiative, narrative emplotment*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In a new media ecology (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle 2013, 148-175), increasing attention has been brought to the importance of understanding how states engage in persuasion by means of “soft power,” “public diplomacy,” and “strategic narratives” (e.g. Lams 2018, Rawnsley 2015, Wellings, et al. 2018, Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle 2013, Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle 2017, Colley and van Noort 2022). However, there has been relatively little attention devoted to understanding the interplay of narratives states project domestically and those projected at international audiences. This is in spite of the fact that it is hardly a new observation that the domestic politics and foreign policies of a state are interrelated, as seen for example in Rosenau’s (1969) “linkage politics” or Putnam’s (1988) “two-level games”. Like policies have domestic and foreign interests and implications, so to do narratives (Szostek 2017).

However, there is a curious tension between the formulation of identity and the attempt to project influence through the use of narratives and other forms of discourse. Actors narrate themselves in ways that keeps their sense of self intact (Somers 1994, 624). This is not a fixed identity that is set, but rather a processual and relational identity that an actor takes on in particular contexts (Somers 1994), and these particular contexts include circumstances in which states wish to influence the world in ways that may appear to contradict their own previously established sense of identity. This entails certain challenges for states, which must balance a sense of autobiographical continuity with material interests, including physical security (Subotić 2016). If states do not manage this tension carefully, they face the problem of creating a “say-do gap” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle 2013, 177) - a mismatch between what a state says and what it actually does - which can mark them as hypocrites.

But there is even more at stake than that. Subotić (2016) argues that states rely on the selective activation of their identity narratives in times of crises, which enables them to adopt appropriate policy measures whilst maintaining a sense of continuity as an actor. This continuity is key; if a state loses that, it stands to lose its very being as an intelligible political community (Bacon 2012, 776). However, it is an oversimplification to say that only one national identity narrative exists at any one time. Not only is there no sole narrative arbiter of a homogenous national identity (Colley 2019, 20), even political elites may find it suitable to switch between emphasising different aspects of national identity in different contexts. However, if a “say-do

gap” risks having a state receive the label of hypocrisy, how do states manage the risk of creating a “say-say gap” and losing credibility when narrating itself and its actions in front of different audiences whilst having different persuasive priorities?

This thesis investigates how China executes a kind of selective activation in its biographical narratives at an everyday level, and how it protects its autobiographical continuity (Subotić 2016) in an ongoing policy initiative which is to be legitimated for both domestic and international audiences. Specifically, it looks at strategic narratives in Chinese-language and English-language news articles on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in relation to India, Italy, and the United Kingdom (UK), respectively. The research problem it discusses is how Chinese national identity narratives aimed at domestic and foreign audiences are credibly emplotted in ways that mutually support and bridge one another – reinforcing state autobiographical continuity - despite being utilised to accomplish different purposes in different narrative contexts.

This thesis explores China’s ability to constitute itself as an actor with different aspects of its identity narrative(s) emphasised in front of different audiences. It looks at the narrative possibilities of and limitations to the narrative bridging that serves to maintain a coherent sense of self. This is important, because a state’s ability to narrate itself coherently is a foundation for legitimising its foreign and domestic policies. The limitations of what would make a coherent narrative of action and self constitute important parameters in any state’s room for manoeuvre in its foreign policy.

To this purpose, the research question of this thesis is:

1. *How does China’s portrayal of itself as an actor differ in domestically aimed narratives and foreign-aimed narratives, and what can the similarities and differences tell us about its ability to use narrative emplotment to balance domestic and foreign interests?*

To aid focus in the research, this question is broken down into additional clarifying questions which structure the analysis and discussion chapters of the thesis:

2. *How is China’s identity emplotted in the domestic narratives?*
3. *How is China’s identity emplotted in the foreign-aimed narratives?*
4. *In what ways are the domestic-aimed and foreign-aimed identity narratives in tension with one another?*
5. *In what ways are emplotment mechanisms used to bridge the narratives?*

2. THEORY

In this chapter, the narrative theory underpinning the thesis is outlined. The first section covers the narrative ontology and the conceptualisation of narrativity the thesis draws on. The second section explores the levels of narrated reality and the constraints it places upon narrators. Finally, it outlines the nature of autobiographical continuity and how state narrators must consider take it into consideration as they create issue-specific narratives.

2.1. Narrative

According to Somers (1994), narratives constitute a type of social ontology, in which people and other actors essentially narrate the world, and themselves, into being. This is not to say that material factors do not play a role in the make-up of reality, but rather that actors' understanding of material reality is mediated through the stories they tell (Somers 1994, 627-629). In this narratively constituted world, actors narrate themselves into being. The reason narratives are so significant, then, is that we must understand the narratives actors tell in order to better understand who they consider themselves to be. If we do so, we gain insight into what is 'in character' for them to do. By studying the narratives of political actors, we can understand their priorities and motivations and, according to some, make more informed attempts at predicting future policy directions (Bacon 2012).

Narratives make for a distinct way of understanding the world and the actors in it (Somers 1994, Patterson and Monroe 1998, Colley 2019, 1-10). Narrativity is characterised by four aspects: relationality of parts, temporality-sequence-space, selective appropriation, and causal emplotment, (Somers 1994, Patterson and Monroe 1998). Relationality refers to how disconnected events must be put into relation to one another in order to acquire meaning, with temporality-sequence-place referring to precisely in what ways elements of the plot relate to one another (Patterson and Monroe 1998, 324-325). Selective appropriation denotes the process choosing which events to include into, and which to omit from, the narrative (Somers 1994, 616-617). Causal emplotment is the narrative feature in which elements of a storyline are put into causal order, which is also a major aspect of how isolated events can be connected and made sense of (Somers 1994, 616-617, Patterson and Monroe 1998, 324). Essentially,

narratives are sequential accounts with actors, settings, and plots that connect temporally, spatially and/or causally (Colley 2019, 6).

The plot is central to what makes narratives unique as a form of communication and understanding of the world, and it is the appropriation of specific developments and their linkage into a desired plotline that renders a narrative whole and coherent (Colley 2019, 6-9, Bacon 2012, 771). As a result of narrating selectively appropriated events into a plot, narratives can then be used to indirectly forward arguments (Colley 2019, 23-34, Subotić 2016, 612). Colley refers to the transmission of these arguments as “evaluations” of meaning and reminds us that narratives not only represent the world in particular ways but also contain normative messages that can reveal the attitude of the narrator and will further be interpreted by the audience. When narrators are deliberately trying to spread particular views and normative content with the intention of influencing the beliefs and behaviour of other actors, this can be referred to as ‘strategic narratives’ (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, Introduction 2017)

2.2. Levels of narratives

Of course, narratives do not exist in a vacuum where actors can narrate themselves in whatever haphazard manner they might wish to and still be intelligible or taken seriously. There are several constraints narrators must act within, including the constraints of how they understand themselves. Somers (1994) outlines how the ontological narratives of individuals draw upon public narratives, as they make use of wider social narratives to make sense of their own experiences. This could, for example, refer to how a public narrative of China’s 5,000-year history as a harmonious civilisation might be incorporated by an individual Chinese person’s self-narrative as cultured and valuing order. Conversely, individual ontological narratives might become public narratives if repeated or echoed by enough people that it becomes part of collective memory (Colley 2019, 20). Just like how the relationality of parts is what renders isolated events meaningful in a narrative, narratives gain meaning in relation to other narratives. This means narratives must be understood in their cultural, political, and social context (Somers 1994). This context is in large part shaped by the deepest layer of narratives, called “meta-narratives” or “master narratives,” with the latter term being used in this thesis.

Master narratives are essentially grand-scale, dominant discourses so deeply embedded within society that they appear as common sense (Somers 1994, Patterson and Monroe 1998, 325-326). A master narrative might be “clash of the civilisations” or “liberal progress”, and act as a

lens through which more specific, smaller-scale narratives are interpreted (Somers 1994). Because these master narratives are so fundamental to our understanding of the world, their particular influence on our thinking can be difficult to notice, and they are therefore slow to change. This fact puts considerable constraints upon states as narrators. In their investigation of how a group of other countries adopted elements of COVID narratives propagated by the United States (US) and by China, respectively, Hagström and Gustafsson (2021) show that specific narratives must build on existing master narratives to be intelligible. The master narratives function as resources to craft persuasive narratives, but therefore, they also severely limit what messages states can hope to effectively spread (Hagström and Gustafsson 2021). It is difficult for states for states to project persuasive narratives, as these are necessarily derived from their own creative resource yet must also resonate with audiences in other states, who will make interpretations based on their own master narratives (Hagström and Gustafsson 2021).

2.3. The autobiographical continuity of states

States can also be understood as having master identity narratives that shape how their elites and citizens understand their political community and its relation to the world (Berenskoetter 2014). Similarly to how an individual narrates itself into being, so does a nation-state (Colley 2019, 18-22, Patterson and Monroe 1998). National identity is determined by the shared stories of past, present and future, and it is in these stories citizens learn how they all fit together (Patterson and Monroe 1998, 322). The nature of commonality that binds the “imagined community” together (Anderson 2006) is explained in these stories.

Governments try to shape the nature of these narratives that contain the collective memory of who “we” are, but because they are master narratives, no one actor can fully control this intersubjective process of telling and re-telling of identity (Berenskoetter 2014, 279, Colley 2019, 19-20). This is especially true in the information age, where an expanded media ecosystem has de-centralised narrative power (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle 2017, 10-13). The amount of control a state can exert over its biographical narrative is dependent on the configuration of the state and its institutions, such as the education system and media, and how authoritative and skilled narrating agents, such as intellectuals, creators in popular culture, and journalists fit into it (Berenskoetter 2014, 279).

Having narrated themselves into being in a particular way, states risk destabilising their very ‘actor-ness’ and recognisable existence as a polity if this narrative becomes too incoherent

(Bacon 2012, 776). Put another way, states have a vested interest in retaining their ‘autobiographical continuity’, as it is precisely this continuity that allows for their continued existence (Berenskoetter 2014, Subotić 2016). A narrative *becomes* common sense, or a master narrative, if it is repeated by enough actors and a critical mass of society buys into it. At that point, narrators have partially trapped themselves into making use of this narrative to make sense of the world as alternative narratives stop making sense (Subotić 2016, 615), like the master narratives described above. That being said, these master identity narratives are “sufficiently vague to exist alongside more specific, derivative narratives that can be either layered or interwoven, and that can be strategically employed without hurting the coherence of the basic discourse” (Berenskoetter 2014, 279). This is a crucial formulation to understand the abilities and limitations of states to project strategic narratives.

As the biographical narrative lays the foundation of the political community, political elites influencing it are able to effectively legitimise their governing positions and constitute the “national interest”, thereby legitimising their actions (Berenskoetter 2014). As the identity and character of an actor in a narrative is found out by its actions in the unfolding plotline, and these actions are in turn what makes the plot, “characterisation and plotline are two sides of the same coin” (Szostek 2017, 579). This means that one cannot say that either interest or identity precedes the other in a narrative, and they are instead co-constituted. Strategic narration, then, is the attempt to influence both at the same time.

Subotić (2016) argues that when tension arises between material interests and the necessity to protect this autobiographical continuity, states try to resolve this tension by selectively (de-)activating elements of the biographical narrative to explain or legitimise their policy choice. This entails narrating a Self for whom the desired or necessary action appears a more natural, or at least less ontologically fraught, direction. Importantly, as mentioned, political elites cannot immediately re-write the master identity narrative, but rather selectively activate elements of it to create *issue-specific* narratives that support the master narrative, and in turn supported by it. This is possible because all narratives, including master identity narratives, contain contradictions and tensions which narrators can exploit to create suitable issue-specific narratives and simultaneously use “skilful rhetoric” and silences to obscure (Berenskoetter 2014, 279-280, Subotić 2016, 611, 622).

3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

This chapter outlines relevant previous research to contextualise the study. First, it explores previous studies, focused on the Russian context, which compare strategic narratives aimed at domestic and foreign audiences. Second, it looks at China's master identity narratives and the domestic narrative context. Third, it outlines ways in which China employs narratives for foreign policy purposes. Finally, it discusses examples of how the Chinese state has balanced domestic and foreign interests in strategic narratives.

3.1. Comparing domestic and foreign-aimed narratives: studies on Russia

It is clear that state narration of foreign policy is an important factor in identity projection and targets both domestic and foreign audiences (Szostek 2017, Turner 2019, Ventsel, Madisson and Hansson 2021, Liao 2017). Despite this, there is little research investigating the similarities and differences of state narrative projection to these audiences. Szostek (2017) conducted a study of the domestic and foreign purposes of Russia's strategic projection of its identity narratives as well as their effects. She argues that Russia employs "promoting" and "defensive" identity-building practices in a mixture of instrumentalist, issue-specific narrative persuasion and master identity narrative building. "Promoting" narration included instrumentalist encouragement of foreign investment and master-level narrative attempts at reassuring the Russian public that Russia is a "normal" state in international society and simultaneously attempts being acknowledged as such by other states (Szostek 2017).

Szostek found that "defensive" narration involved using anti-Western strategic narratives to protect Russian identity claims. This was successfully received by the domestic population, but negatively impacted Russia's image among the international audience (Szostek 2017). However, even this negativity was construed as affirming to the Russian public and elites. Whilst their first choice might be for Russian identity to be that of an approved-of great power, they "experience greater affirmation of their desired international status by defying Western criticism than by pursuing Western approval on Western terms" (Szostek 2017, 572). It is therefore clear that recognition of one's identity by a foreign Other is a complex aspect of identity and the projection of identity narratives.

Szostek's (2017) study does not clarify the relationship between language and audience, and seems to be based on Russian-language material only, though this is not clearly established. Instead, her analysis presupposes that the narratives she analyses have overlapping domestic and foreign audiences, and are, to some extent, aimed at both, or at least projected with the knowledge that they can or will reach the other. State strategic narratives are "motivated at least in part by the desire for recognition – domestically and internationally – as a particular type of self" (Szostek 2017, 572). Ventsel, Madisson and Hansson (2021, 271) add that the two categories of narratives "cannot diverge completely in their aims; they must complement each other" and it is in the construction, emphasis, and linguistic tropes of the narratives that differences can be found.

Whilst Szostek focuses mostly on the *purposes* of the strategic narratives, Ventsel, Madisson and Hansson (2021) make a comparative study of the textual *strategies* employed in Russian English-language and Russian-language blame narratives. The specific topic of concern revolves around China-US contention over Huawei's involvement in building 5G infrastructure. They describe four main blame narratives which effects the US as the antagonist, comprising the US spreading misinformation, the US being a hypocrite, the US pressuring its allies, and US allies blaming the US for pressuring them, respectively (Ventsel, Madisson and Hansson 2021).

Crucially, whilst inter-narrative coherence across the two linguistic categories of narratives is maintained, they can identify two key difference. The first was that Russophone media further emphasised the pressure the US supposedly put on its allies to reject Huawei, a pressure that was portrayed as infringing upon the sovereignty of its allies (Ventsel, Madisson and Hansson 2021, 286). The second was a further emphasis on creating a positive image of Chinese 5G technology in the Russophone narrative (Ventsel, Madisson and Hansson 2021, 286).

3.2. Chinese domestic foreign policy narratives

The Chinese master identity narrative is in large part based on the idea of going from "victimhood" at the hands of the West and Japan to resurgence and finally retaking its rightful place at the top of the global hierarchy under the auspices of the CCP (Liao 2017, Liao 2013). This narrative centres around China's "century of humiliation," which started with the Opium Wars and ended with the 1949 Communist victory in the civil war after having driven out the

Japanese invaders and continues with the CCP heroically leading the Chinese people into prosperity (Liao 2013).

This narrative forms a nationalist basis for the legitimacy of the CCP, who during the reform and opening up era have needed to shore up ideological support due to the tensions between Communist ideology and the elements of capitalism that have flourished and the occasionally resulting social suffering throughout the transition (Liao 2013, Liao 2017). The CCP have gone through extensive efforts to ensure that this narrative lies at the foundation of how the Chinese people understand their history and present, including starting “patriotist education campaigns” during the 1990s, and of course, strict control over media and the education system (Liao 2017, Zhao 2013, Gries 2020, Lams 2018, 406). Crucially, these party-led narrative attempts to define Chinese patriotism as including loyalty to the CCP, which is to be understood as an inextricable part of the Chinese nation-state (Burcu 2022, 15-17, Liao 2017, 129).

Despite this careful cultivation, this master narrative of nation-state, based on a notion of “consensual patriotism” in which the CCP are legitimate because they are stewards of the Chinese *nation*, also leaves the party-state vulnerable (Liao 2017, 129). This vulnerability lies in the potential for nationalist criticism of the CCP’s performance as protectors of the nation. Most criticism is routinely handled by extensive censorship and propaganda programmes, but alternative, nationalist narratives of foreign affairs which articulate counterclaims to the state’s hegemonic narrative and push for political representation in national affairs, are more difficult to dismiss (Gries, Steiger and Wang 2016, Zhao 2013). The slight liberalisation of media in recent decades has furthered this development, particularly as ultranationalist perspectives on foreign affairs is a viable strategy for the new commercial media to increase sales without the risks involved in writing about sensitive domestic issues (Zhao 2013, 544).

Studies like Gries, Steiger, and Wang (2016) and Burcu (2022) therefore indicate that, at least in some cases, Chinese domestic public opinion can put pressure on the government’s foreign policy. In particular, policies in response to territorial sovereignty and Japan seem to rally populist outrage (Gries, Steiger and Wang 2016, Burcu 2022). That means that the CCP is not simply a hegemonic voice narrating what a passive audience believes. Instead, more meticulous narrative governance is necessary. This is particularly true as this nationalist avenue of voicing dissent can also become an avenue of contestation between competing bureaucratic institutions (Jones 2017). This echoes Putnam’s (1988, 428-433) point that in addition to convincing

international and domestic audiences in two-level game negotiations, different framings are also used to convince other decisionmakers within a disaggregated state.

3.3. Chinese foreign policy narratives aimed at international audiences

The Chinese state has also put immense effort into narrating itself for a foreign audience in recent decades. Expanding its news coverage by making Xinhua into an international news agency (Shambaugh 2015, 102-103), exporting television news through CGTN, and so on are part of an explicitly articulated attempt at increasing China's soft power, and "telling China's story well" (Lams 2018, 493-495). However, this might more accurately be called an attempt at growing its "sharp" power, as rather than merely trying to grow its cultural and political powers of attraction, China is making large-scale efforts at dismantling and silencing dissenting voices abroad (Walker 2018). These attempts go beyond propagating China's preferred identity and issue narratives. The CCP is also attempting to forward its own vision of the international system, a vision that entails a "community of shared future for mankind" which rejects the US-led global order (Turner 2019, Song 2022).

As part of these macro-strategic narrative efforts, more specific types of discursive strategies are also employed for a variety of purposes. The CCP has spent considerable resources in projecting public diplomacy and news coverage "rectifying" what they consider to be the world's misconceptions about China (Rawnsley 2015). This is partially in response to suspicions of Western cultural imperialism and attempts at limiting China's strength (Rawnsley 2015, 279-280). Rectification is a strategy that plays across different levels of narrative, and closely relates to resisting the narratives thought to disadvantage China projected by and in other countries (e.g. Yu 2022). Conversely, "antagonistic" strategic narratives (Wagnsson and Barzanje 2021) can be used to undermine and/or manipulate foreign entities. In general, cultivating a good image abroad also facilitates and encourages potential partners to engage in collaboration, trade, and economic exchange with China (e.g. Colley and van Noort 2022, Xin and Matheson 2018).

3.4. China's balancing of foreign policy narratives

Balancing domestic and foreign audiences can be difficult. As described above, the CCP is sometimes backed into a corner by domestic pressures and so find it difficult or impossible to

pragmatically pursue otherwise desirable foreign policies (Liao 2017, 129). On the other hand, regardless of whether China “actually” is or behaves in an assertive/revisionist or accommodationist/peaceful manner (e.g. Scobell 2014, Li 2013, Johnston 1995), the victimhood revanchist narrative has led many Western commentators and political leaders to doubt China’s intentions and deem it threatening (Lams 2018). This is clearly not conducive towards them cooperating with China and affiliating with its initiatives. As mentioned, China tries its best to “rectify” this, but its attempts have not necessarily been efficacious, at least not in many Western countries. Of course, looking at the list of countries that have affiliated to the BRI (Belt and Road Portal 2022) as an example makes it clear that many countries have, and do, indeed find Chinese narratives persuasive, or alternatively, do not find them objectionable enough to refuse to join.

It also seems clear that Chinese narrators adjust strategic narratives in response to this delicate domestic-foreign balance. According to Song (2022), keeping domestic legitimacy is the prime macro-strategic concern for Chinese foreign policy narrators, but that still leaves some room for manoeuvring. For example, the CCP famously changed their official rhetoric, re-conceptualising China’s “peaceful rise” as China’s “peaceful development”, having deemed “rise” as seeming potentially threatening to foreign observers (Liao 2017, 120). This move still maintained continuity with the basic storyline of “national rejuvenation” as China’s historical trajectory (Lams 2018, 401-403). As a result, the decision to change “rise” to “development” would not necessarily entail any large domestic audience costs.

But even foreign policy decisions regarding more domestically sensitive issues such as territorial sovereignty are not always clearcut and easy to pinpoint as definitively prioritising domestic legitimacy over foreign reception. They therefore require careful narrative governance, rather than merely giving up on the foreign audience. Raymond and Welch (2022) argue that while China has a reputation for aggression in the South China Sea territorial disputes, this was only true up until 2013, when the Permanent Court of Arbitration in the Hague delivered a verdict in favour of the Philippines in the *Philippines vs China* case submitted by the Philippines. After this, China has scrupulously avoided escalations so as to abide by international norms. However, this has not been recognised by most parties, likely as a result of China’s own silence on the topic. Raymond and Welch (2022) conclude that this silence is the result of not wanting to aggravate populist nationalism at home. It appears then that silence as well as change in conceptualisation can be used to navigate tensions between audiences and have indeed been used for such purposes.

Another example of re-conceptualisation is described by Colley and van Noort (2022). They note that China needed to mitigate the tension between its BRI narratives that resulted from wanting to appear as the “heroic central character” domestically but as a reliable “collaborative partner” to the countries it wanted to join the BRI. The domestic narrative again might give potential partners the idea that China is an expansionist power, especially as counternarratives depicting the nature of the BRI as controlling and exploitative emerged. The Chinese leadership tried to resolve this tension by characterising “itself as a learner, on a journey of continuous progress and development, rather than a country seeking to impose its preferred solutions to the world’s problems”, which appeared humbler and more palatable to other countries, whilst “China as a learner” was still a familiar and appealing master narrative trope within China (Colley and van Noort 2022, 56).

These instances raise many interesting questions. The contexts of foreign-aimed and domestic narratives are different, and the goals of these narratives will also slightly differ, meaning that tension arises regularly, as is clear in the case of the BRI. The examples of silence and narrative re-conceptualisation given here are fairly spectacular, but this tension presumably exists, to lesser or greater degrees, in almost all foreign policy narratives. While it is uncertain to what exact extent foreign audiences consume domestic content, and, perhaps more pertinently, to what extent the Chinese population consumes foreign narratives, clearly the CCP itself considers some measure of inter-narrative coherence important. This thesis looks at how narrators of the accepted national identity narrative manage this tension in an ‘everyday’ manner, in regular newspaper articles touching on the BRI and the relationship between China and each of the three countries.

4. METHOD

In this chapter, the first section outlines the reasons for choosing the case of the BRI in general, and India, the United Kingdom and Italy in particular. The second section discusses the selection of sources and the specific parameters of the material. The final section explains the method of analysis and how it relates to the research aims.

4.1. Case selection

The BRI is an appropriate instance of narrative governance to investigate because it is highly significant, yet less sensitive than issues such as Taiwanese autonomy or the maritime disputes

in the East and South China Seas. As was discussed previously, narrative projection is likely to tip over firmly in favour of the domestic audience and related interests in matters relating to territorial integrity and sovereignty. However, the BRI is a key concept within Chinese foreign policy and is understood as such in reference to both domestic and international audiences. It is tied to President Xi's personal legitimacy and is tied in with other key political concepts such as "China Dream" and "national rejuvenation" (Lams 2018), representing a great part of the foreign-facing aspects of this holistic view of China's path forward. This means that BRI narratives represent genuine and serious attempts at persuading not just the domestic public, but also international partners. It is precisely the balancing of these two distinct but related interests through narrative governance that is the target of this research project.

The three countries chosen represent countries that have had differing responses to the BRI, and therefore represent an interesting variety of specific instances of the wider BRI narrative, but also provide varying strategic narrative contexts for Chinese narratives to play out in and face. This gives the samples a good chance of demonstrating different challenges to keep inter-narrative coherence. India has overall been quite mistrustful of the BRI and has never affiliated with it, for reasons relating to border issues with China, the flagship BRI project the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) running through part of the disputed Kashmir territory, and rivalry with China and fearing a loss of influence to China in the Indo-Pacific Ocean (Colley and van Noort 2022, 135-171). India as such as reasons to doubt the material benefits of joining the BRI, as regional security and Indian influence might be threatened, and additionally would endanger its sense of national identity (Colley and van Noort 2022, 135-171), not the least through being forced to acknowledge and legitimise Pakistani administration Kashmir.

The UK in 2019 came close to joining the BRI, approving of the possibility of economic opportunity and of itself as a special partner to China in the West, also assisting in matters of financial and legal standards (Colley and van Noort 2022, 104). The UK was ambivalent, because it sympathised with China's emphasis on stable trade, but did not condone China's resistance the liberal order and human rights regime, in addition to wanting to preserve its special relationship" with the US (Colley and van Noort 2022, 104-113). Other issues included safety concerns about infrastructure, including Huawei, and China's unfair trading practices (Colley and van Noort 2022, 104). Italy did sign a BRI Memorandum of Understanding with China in March 2019, but this was a very controversial decision, opposed by its allies the European Union (EU) and the US as well as one of its own ruling parties (Colley and van Noort 2022, 79-93). The debate drew on economic factors such whether joining would develop Italy's

ports, close the trade imbalance with China, and so on. It also drew on identity factors, as some Italians romanticised the ancient Silk Road connecting the Roman Empire to Han China, in addition to high anti-EU populist sentiment at the time (Colley and van Noort 2022, 79-93).

4.2. Selection of material

The material is gathered from the English-language version of *Global Times*, hereafter abbreviated as GT, and the Chinese-language newspaper *China Youth Daily* [*zhongguo qingnian bao*], hereafter referred to as CYD. The newspapers were selected based on the several criteria. These included impact and circulation numbers, the availability of advanced search functions on the respective websites, and the amount of relevant material available. CYD is owned and run by the Communist Youth League (CYD n.d.). GT is a commercial newspaper specialising in foreign affairs and known for its nationalist tone, owned by the CCP flagship newspaper, *People's Daily* (Burcu 2022, 16, Reporters Without Borders 2019). These constitute “public political narratives” (Bacon 2012) because they are public and they are approved of by the CCP censors, and therefore considered to be at least acceptable and compatible with the party's views.

In the case of each of the three country-related BRI narratives, a search was conducted in each of the two newspapers using the advanced search functions. This meant searching for the relevant country name, in the relevant language, in the Title search box whilst simultaneously, the search box for the general text was filled out with ‘Belt and Road’ or its Chinese name, ‘一带一路 [*yidaiyilu*]’, as pertinent. That meant only articles with the relevant country name in the title and with ‘Belt and Road’ in the text proper should appear. The search was limited to the year 2019 to achieve an appropriate sample size. The year 2019 was chosen because it was the year of the Second Belt and Road Forum, by which time the BRI had been ongoing for quite some time and had been criticised from many corners, and China had in turn adjusted its narration to a more sophisticated merging of domestic and foreign narratives in response (Colley and van Noort 2022).

After removing irrelevant hits, such as articles on road accidents in India, and duplicate articles, a further number of articles were removed on the basis of being externally authored and labelled as opinion pieces. However, articles involving external authors were kept in the sample if published under the *Comments / Expert Assessment* or *Comments / Insider's Eye* sections for

GT and *Perspectives* [*guandian*] for CYD because these were judged to be sufficiently cloaked in the voices of the newspapers themselves. The searches produced duplicate articles, especially in CYD, so after confirming duplication, the article that appeared first in the search list when organised in chronological order was chosen for closer reading and citation. This method yielded a total number of 7 India-related, 8 UK-related, and 41 Italy-related articles in CYD, and a total of 17 India-related, 10 UK-related, and 23 Italy-related articles in GT. Whilst this thesis makes no closer analysis of this fact, it is notable that a great number of the news articles appear to have been sourced from other news outlets, especially Xinhua and CCTV, and that these articles made up a significant portion of the articles, particularly in the CYD sample.

4.3. Method of analysis

The method of analysis used draws on Colley's (2019) method for narrative analysis. He revised Gabriela Spector-Mersel's method of analysing identity narratives to apply to the British war narratives told by ordinary British citizens and comparing and analysing how different interpretations of British military history lead to different identity narratives. In identifying them, he could also compare the overlaps and the differences, as well as how well these narratives resonate with the public political narrative. Colley's (2019, 2017) method of analysis involves identifying actors, settings, and evaluations in addition to emplotment mechanisms. There are seven emplotment mechanisms he identifies: inclusion, linking, sharpening, clarifying, omitting, silencing, and flattening. The main purpose of this analysis is to identify emplotment mechanisms to understand how these are used to layer, emphasise, and de-emphasise narrative elements. However, plot cannot be separated from characterisation and setting, and so these are analysed together, and the narrative as a whole leads to an evaluation, essentially the point the reader is meant to take away from the text (Colley 2019).

Therefore, the method used in this thesis when analysing the articles is to ask questions of the articles on these 10 different areas. However, due to the difficulty of making a clear analytical distinction between omitting and silencing in an analysis that exclusively focuses on specific samples of primary source material, the choice was made to combine these for this thesis. For Colley (2019, 31), the key difference between "omitting" and "silencing" is that omissions can be the result of ignorance or because something is considered obvious and therefore unnecessary to include, whereas silencing is contingent upon the narrator being aware that there might be something contradicting one's own point in the event that one leaves out. For the purposes of this thesis, however, "omission" refers to the simple exclusion of events, actors, or

information, whereas “silencing” refers to the content or message that is being silenced through the omission.

The questions asked of the articles upon reading them are based on Colley’s (2017, 18-35) definitions, but are formulated by the author. They are:

1. Inclusion: What events are included in this narrative? What belongs to the ‘past’, what belongs to the ‘now’, and what belongs to a projected ‘future’?
2. Linking: How are the events linked? What are the temporal linkages? What are the causal linkages? What are linkages of similarity or repetition?
3. Sharpening: What, if anything, is emphasised to reinforce identities or the point?
4. Clarifying: What is being explained in-depth? What is explained as ‘actually’ meaning something different than what many others think it means?
5. Flattening: What is brought up to be refuted, contradicted, or de-emphasised?
6. Omitting/silencing: What events are being left out due to being considered irrelevant? What is being left out due to being considered contradictory to the narrative?
7. Setting: Where is the narrative set? What characterises the world?
8. Actors: Who are the actors? What are they like? What are their relationships to one another?
9. Evaluation: What is the problem? What is the solution? What is the desired outcome?

Using this framework is likely to allow for a better understanding of how China employs emplotment mechanisms as a narrative strategy to manage common narrative resources and avoid disruptions in autobiographical continuity that would emerge as a result of conflicting narratives. After analysing each article in accordance with this framework, the analyses are summarised as a synthesised domestic narrative and a synthesised foreign-aimed narrative. These two categories of narratives are then compared to each other, with the focus on where gaps between them arise and how these gaps are handled.

5. ANALYSIS

This chapter is split into two sections. The first discusses the emplotment mechanisms used in the sample of 56 Chinese-language CYD articles that sketch out China's identity. The second analyses how the emplotment techniques characterise China in the sample of 50 English-language Global Times articles. The analyses in these sections are based on the full respective samples. However, due to space constraints, the samples will be summarised, with focus on the most common and/or significant ways in which the emplotment mechanisms are used to forward aspects of Chinese identity in each sample. In particular, the "included" events will be those deemed most key for understanding the domestic and foreign-aimed synthesised narratives as wholes. Furthermore, the discussion of omitting/silencing centres on similarities and differences between the two samples, and not omissions in general. When specific points or quotes are taken from a specific article, that article is cited. Otherwise, representative examples are cited for the convenience of the reader. For the full list of articles included in the sample, see the Appendix. Translations from Chinese to English for this section have been made by the author of this thesis.

5.1. China in 2019 *China Youth Daily* BRI narratives

5.1.1. Inclusion: past, present, and future

The story of China starts thousands of years ago, with the earliest signs of Chinese civilisation dating back to the Stone Age (Hao, Sun, & Li, 2019) and traces a continuous entity until today, though the ancient past focuses on about 2,500-600 years ago. For at least 2,000 years, China has had friendly relations and exchanges through the Silk Road across Eurasia (e.g. CYD, 2019b; Yuan, 2019; Yang, 2019). During this long history, China established its peaceful essence (Ju 2019f) and contributed amazing inventions (Zhang & Gui, 2019) and a generally rich culture to the world. Having established this *ancient* past, the narrative jumps to a *recent* past. This past comprises the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC), the 1978 beginning of the reform and open up policy and the subsequent CCP-enabled "economic miracle" [*fazhan qiyi*] (Han, 2019), and the continuous firm commitment to peaceful, non-aggressive development throughout (Ju 2019f). As a culminating point of this trajectory, the BRI was launched in 2013.

The present sees that peaceful development coming into fruition, as a China is becoming a superpower (CYD 2019o) that wishes to make use of its technological and economic potential to world through the BRI and other companies and projects, but this will only be possible if China and its allies fight back against rising protectionism, unilateralism, nationalism and xenophobia (e.g. Ju, 2019d; Yuan, 2019). The present sees a “turbulent global situation” [*fengyunjidang de guoji xingshi*] (Yang, 2019), but China, promoting civilisational dialogue and the BRI is a positive influence for greater mutual understanding and peace (Yuan 2019). This is currently a struggle, as some Western countries, though mostly the US, engage in problematic and discriminatory behaviour, particularly on 5G construction (Zhang J. , 2019; Ju, 2019e).

However, most countries in the world see the benefits and good Chinese initiatives and skills bring and are inspired by the Chinese vision and wish to join in its journey of peaceful development. Unfair practices and conflict can be avoided through better mutual understanding and respect, and so China therefore arranges the Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilisation (Zhang and Gui 2019, Yuan 2019) to promote civilisational exchanges in the hopes of promoting mutual learning, regional stability, and peace and realising the community of shared future for mankind. In general, the Chinese leadership works hard to improve bilateral and multilateral communication, exchanges, and cooperation, including on the BRI, through state visits, for example to Italy, Monaco, France, and India, and various conferences and forums, including the Second Belt and Road Forum held in April.

The future sees China successfully improving bilateral relationships and multilateral global governance. Having become closer with several European countries, including Italy and the UK, China will be able to deepen economic relations with the EU and have increasing number of EU countries join the BRI (e.g. Zhang J. , 2019; Hou, 2019). Asian regional dialogue and understanding will lead to more free flows of trade, capital, labour and technology, and mutually assist development and promote a harmonious coexistence (Yuan 2019). China-India relations will improve, and “the dragon will dance with the elephant” [*baimai longxiang gongwu*] and jointly spread stability in an uncertain world (e.g. Gao, 2019).

On a global scale, by granting other countries access to its massive market in the continuing process of China’s opening up and through investing in infrastructure and logistics through the BRI, China is contributing to global economic growth. China becomes an influential superpower (CYD 2019o), and the choice faced by other states is whether to join the BRI to

jointly profit along with China, as China's partner, or to be left behind. China and its allies will protect free trade and multilateralism, and work for reform in global governance (e.g. CYD, 2019q). The BRI, as a concrete expression of these values and a platform for their realisation, will contribute to economic development, peace, and stability. Through the BRI and civilisational dialogue, the community of shared future for mankind will be realised.

5.1.2. Linking: temporal, inter-entity, and causal

Temporal linkages establish continuity within the Chinese identity. In doing so, they establish China as an identifiable continuous entity and affix the essentialised characteristics of this entity. By linking contemporary China to an ancient China from 5,000 years ago (e.g. CYD, 2019d), China is established as the longest, continuous civilisation in the world, therefore has a unique, even uniquely large, repository of wisdom. It is hinted that, as China has been civilised for the longest time, it is therefore, in some respects, the most advanced in its civilisation. It has long been at the height of civilisation, contributing great inventions (Zhang & Gui, 2019) and rich culture (e.g. Hu, 2019) to the world, thereby making it natural to think this is what China is doing again. This is particularly emphasised through the repeated linking of the ancient Silk Road with the BRI. The Silk Road gained its name because China's silk and other wares were desired by distant lands and meant significant economic and cultural exchanges. Today, countries sign up to the BRI with equal or greater enthusiasm for what China has to offer.

By linking China to other countries through their supposed common characteristics, China's identity is further revealed. With both Italy and India, China shares the quality of being an ancient and venerable civilisation (e.g. CYD, 2019b; CYD, 2019q). Like Italy, China is committed to undergoing a "national rejuvenation" (Chen & Jianmin, 2019) and has much to offer others by virtue of being a "big cultural power" [*wenhua daguo*] (e.g. CYD, 2019c). With India, China shares the responsibilities that come with being an Asian power, a representative of emerging economies, and being the only two countries stewarding the interests of over a billion people each (Li and Wang 2019, CYD 2019p). With all three countries, and with the EU, China shares a deep commitment to safeguarding multilateralism and free trade and a wish to reform global governance whilst strengthening the UN-centred, rules-based global order (e.g. CYD, 2019q; CYD, 2019j; Ju, 2019e).

Relatedly, the BRI is itself intimately connected with peaceful development and the portrayed need to protect multilateralism and free trade - if a country strives for such global norms, then

they should want to join the BRI. This linkage is at the core of the majority of the articles. These values and the BRI are in turn linked with civilisational dialogue and the community of shared future of mankind (e.g. Yuan, 2019). China is further clearly linked to Asian regional society and developing countries (e.g. Gao, 2019), as well as to the “East”, in opposition to the “West” (CYD 2019b).

The core causal chain in the narratives can be summarised as joining the BRI and cooperating with China bringing prosperity, stability and even peace, not just in bilateral relationships, but also regionally and globally. This chain starts with the ancient wisdom of the Chinese civilisation, which enables unique innovations, as outlined above, and is added to by how the impeccable leadership and aspirations of the CCP produced the “economic miracle” of the PRC (e.g. CYD, 2019i). China’s economic successes and now expanding international influence and ability to assist other countries in developing their economies are due to the proven qualifications of the CCP’s revolutionary leadership (CYD 2019q). The BRI is the distillation of these experiences and a concrete expression of China’s “new model of international relations” [*xinxing guoji guanxi*] (CYD 2019b). This will in turn lead to inter-civilisational dialogue and mutual understanding, learning, and respect. This will strengthen multilateralism and free trade and promote peaceful and stable development in the world, ultimately realising the community of shared future for mankind.

5.1.3. Sharpening

A very frequent sharpening technique employed in these narratives is making use of the foreign gaze to reinforce the sense that China and its concepts and initiatives are worthy of admiration and are universally recognised and welcome. Politicians and experts are quoted in longer interviews, such as when Italian President Mattarella expresses that “Italy trusts that China’s rejuvenation makes a new historical contribution to world peace and prosperity” [*yidali xiangxin zhongguo de fuxing jiang wei shijie heping yu fanrong zuochu xin de lishi gongxian*] (Huang, Huo, & Luo, 2019), which corroborates the Chinese account and even draws on the CCP concept of “rejuvenation” [*fuxing*]. The pinnacle of this technique of sharpening are 7 articles dedicated to demonstrating that people from “all walks of life” or “all circles” [*gejie*] eagerly await Xi’s visit to their country and deepening bilateral ties and BRI cooperation. The foreign, admiring gaze on China, as such, used to sharpen a wide array of positive characteristics. These include, for example, China’s uniqueness and highly moral character (CYD 2019o, Zhang and Gui 2019).

As mentioned above, the inclusion of and linkages to China's past in this establishes certain characteristics as Chinese, and essentialises, thus sharpening, the resulting Chinese identity traits through the idea of continuous civilisation. The inclusion of a glorious past also sharpens China's uniqueness, its "cultural power" and attraction. It also sharpens the plotline of "rejuvenation," making China's development, rise, or increasing international power appear natural and inevitable, as well as rooted in "deep wisdom of ancient civilisation" [*gulao wenming de shenhou zhihui*] (Lu, 2019). Italy returning 796 lost Chinese cultural relics mirrors China's resurgent international ability and influence, and so reinforces the narrative of rejuvenation (e.g. Lu, 2019). Another, very simple, sharpening technique concerns how the brilliance of initiatives like the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) are reflected back onto China due to the emphasis on how they are "China-proposed" [*zhongguo tichu de*] (e.g. Yuan, 2019).

Xi's personal prestige and leadership credentials for China and the world are also sharpened in a several ways. These include Xi's mastery of the use Chinese allusions, equated with the wisdom of the Chinese people and ability to govern well, sharpening the idea of him as a competent leader and excellent representative to spread the good China has to bring to the rest of the world (CYD 2019d). Xi is tightly linked to the BRI, for example in a quote from Foreign Minister Wang Yi: "wherever Xi Jinping goes, the 'Belt and Road' east wind blows, and the rewards of pragmatic cooperation appear" [*xi jinping zhuxi zoudao nali, "yidaiyilu" de dongfeng jiu chui xiang nali, wushi hezuo de guoshi jiu shouhuo zai nali*] (CYD 2019i). His presence is historical, his analysis incisive, and his leadership visionary (e.g. CYD, 2019q). The foreign, admiring gaze is also used here (e.g. Ma, 2019; CYD, 2019p), and the honours bestowed upon him, and by extension on China, by foreign dignitaries are enumerated (e.g. CYD, 2019q).

5.1.4. Clarifying

A very significant clarification, which lies at an abstract, comprehensive level of the narrative, is that of China's view on the conduct of international relations. This clarification is not immediately obvious but is rather an important aspect of the overall evaluation which suffuses all the narratives. Simply put, it clarifies what should be considered the appropriate conduct of international relations. "Civilisational dialogue" [*wenming duihua*] (e.g. Lu, 2019) is the way to peace and prosperity. This concept is part of the great emphasis on dialogue and cultural and people-to-people exchanges and plays a core role in clarifying the vision entailed by China's

“new model of international relations,” of which the BRI is a concrete expression. Having established that civilisations are continuous and unique, “civilisations” [*wenming*] are more than states and less fungible than “cultures” [*wenhua*].

By emphasising inter-civilisational rather than simple interstate dialogue, mutual respect and learning, as well as multilateralism, become characteristics of the relationships between non-fungible, essentialised entities. These civilisations should not be expected or encouraged to commit to common values or principles outside of respecting this mode of interaction. Whilst it is never explicitly stated, norms with universalist pretensions, such as human rights or democracy, are therefore inappropriate in the realm of these inter-civilisational relationships, as they will simply cause aggravation and clash with the repeatedly emphasised “mutual respect and trust” [*huzun huxin*] (e.g. CYD 2019i) necessary in the globalised world. The cultural exchanges that are necessary for “true development” [*zhengzheng de fazhan*] (Chen, 2019) are mostly about learning to understand and accept one another, and “mutual respect” [*xianghu zunzhong*] entails not interfering with what can be classed as separate civilisational values. Instead, “pragmatic cooperation” [*wushi hezuo*] is consistently emphasised, rejecting “ideological competition” [*yishixingtai bipin*] (Ju 2019f).

It is in these terms that the fact that China is actually very responsible and peaceful is clarified. Western “China threat theory” [*zhongguo weixie lun*] is based on “groundless misunderstandings and worries” [*moxuyou de wujie he danyou*], (Ju 2019f). Firstly, it is ridiculous to accuse China of aggression, as China is firmly committed to peaceful development and the PRC has not once started a conflict. Ever since Sun Zi proclaimed that it is good to fight cautiously or not at all 2,500 years ago, “peace has already been integrated into the bloodline of the Chinese nation” [*heping zaoyi rongrule zhonghua minzu xuemai li*]. Secondly, the world has already become the community of shared future that necessitates joint efforts, “win-win spirit” [*huligongying jingshen*], and mutual understanding and learning, and so while China is determined to walk its own path, it will not stupidly insist on “engag[ing] in so-called ideological competition” [*bu gao suowei de yishixingtai bipin*] (Ju 2019f). Thirdly, China is not out to “replace” [*qudai*] anyone in the global order, and actually, China is too preoccupied with achieving prosperity for its own people for that (Ju 2019f). The BRI is the realisation and practice of these principles, and is somewhat defensively clarified to be “open and transparent” (CYD 2019e), with the added clarification that for countries like Italy, joining the BRI will strengthen, not weaken, their sovereignty (CYD 2019a).

To be sure that the causes of China's development are understood clearly, it is helpfully "deciphered" by Xi for the Italian audience as being unprecedented, hugely globally significant and impossible without the CCP's leadership (CYD 2019i). The Chinese party-state's contribution to the world is its own national rejuvenation, but also peaceful development and a global Community of shared future for mankind, epitomised in the BRI. But it is not only due to CCP leadership; it is also because of its "inclusivity" [*baorongxing*] of Chinese civilisation its long-term rapid development has been possible (Yuan 2019). Civilisation appears almost like a resource, and China, as the "only continuous civilisation dating back five thousand years" [*guoqu wuqian nian lai weiyi yanxuzhijin de wenming*], has unique abilities to promote development, development that not only relates to the free flows of goods, capital, skills, and personnel, but also learning and integration among civilisations, which will bring harmonious global co-existence (Yuan 2019).

5.1.5. Flattening

The narratives discuss at length what China's partners and world stand to gain from the BRI, in terms of economic and growth and cultural exchanges, but there is little discussion or mention of what China stands to gain by more countries signing BRI agreements with it. Whilst Chinese self-interest is acknowledged in the oft-repeated variations on the phrase "win-win" [*huligongying*] cooperation, Chinese self-interest is flattened by the contrast in this lacking explanation. The resulting impression is that China is the superior partner who blesses its partners with its vision, cooperation, culture, access to China's markets, skills, capacities, and even money from its tourist population (e.g. Ju, 2019c).

Another significant flattening is opposition to the BRI and cooperation with China, which appears very rarely, is never outlined properly and is immediately blamed on a third-party source – the US. The UK appears to have concerns about allowing Huawei to participate in the construction of 5G infrastructure, and this potential resistance is flattened by calling on the country to respect its own "autonomy" [*zizhu duli*], its tradition of "independent thinking" [*duli sikao*] in regards to dealing with China, and not abandoning its free trade principles (Ju, 2019d). Clearly, the UK must not fall to the pressure put on it by external sources. When the US opposes Italy joining the BRI, Italy's persistence in joining is even hailed as a triumph of the attractions of the BRI (Ju, 2019a). This single mention of opposition appears pathetic and pointless, and China's and the BRI's triumph is instead sharpened for having recruited a 'Western' G7 ally of the US to the BRI. Western/American concerns about Chinese aggression is also flattened

through accusations of US hypocrisy via comparison of nuclear policy, history of initiating conflicts, and defence budgets (Ju, 2019d).

5.1.6. Omitting and silencing

There is a striking lack of substantive criticisms of China, the BRI, or other Chinese enterprises, initiatives, or concepts in these narratives. That is, concerns are completely omitted, and when the existence of objections is acknowledged, they are not actually outlined. They are simply referred to, after which they are clarified and flattened in accordance with above sections. In these narratives, there exist no possible legitimate views explaining why countries would not join the BRI. These omissions silence the idea that there could be anything whatsoever about the BRI, China's international engagements, or domestic politics that could be worthy of criticism.

The India articles provides clear examples of this when reporting on how Xi meets with several heads of states, separately, in the same articles. When Xi has met with the heads of states of Kazakhstan and Nepal, the BRI is one of the main talking points of the relationship and will bring prosperity to Asia (e.g. CYD, 2019p). But the paragraphs describing Xi meeting with Modi in the same articles simply do not mention the BRI. The resulting silence on the topic of India and the BRI is therefore glaring, as the relationship is depicted as currently harmonious and deepening, with common priorities of economic development and regional stability. This omits not only China's repeated wish that India *would* join the BRI, but also silences India's objections to doing so. The very idea that China or its projects could have legitimate faults or that anyone might have deep-set concerns about them is silenced. In these narratives, any real material or security issues are mostly omitted, and when tension does seep into the narrative, it is implicitly characterised as the result of a lack of mutual understanding.

This kind of omission is also codified in the use of the terms “pragmatism” [*wushi*] and “pragmatic cooperation” [*wushi hezuo*], which are peppered across the narratives. For example, the EU and the UK are thought to be becoming more “pragmatic” and “rational” [*lixing*] in their policies towards China (Zhang J. , 2019; Ju, 2019e). This “pragmatism” is linked with participation in the BRI and the Second Belt and Road Forum, as well as allowing Huawei to be involved in constructing 5G networks. This indicates that a current lack of cooperation has been caused by a European *lack* of pragmatism. However, the ways in which Europe has been

unpragmatic and irrational are omitted. The reasons for hesitation these European entities have had in cooperating with China are silenced.

Another omission is why multilateralism and free trade are under such threat. Vague mentions of turbulence and uncertainty are made, but not explained. From context, it is clear that the China-US trade war has a large impact on Chinese foreign policy at this time, but the US is never directly accused of being a participant in these trends, which it certainly is in the *Global Times* articles. Of course, the China-US trade war is not the focus of the narrative, but the omission silences the idea that the trade war has anything specifically to do with China and so protects the image of a universally admired China. Similarly, periods of hostility or even poorer relationships between China and partner countries are omitted, with China and Italy apparently having enjoyed a continuous friendship for 2,000 years (e.g. CYD, 2019b). While post-Wuhan meeting China-India relations have entered a “new stage” [*xin jieduan*] (e.g. Li & Wang, 2019), the background of that meeting, the 2017 Doklam border standoff, is never acknowledged, unlike in the *GT* articles. Harmony is emphasised through these silences.

5.1.7 Chinese identity in CYD BRI-narratives

An ancient civilisation with great wisdom, China is a facilitator and guide that promotes inclusive and patient civilisational dialogue and pragmatic multilateral cooperation to achieve a harmonious and prosperous world. Currently undergoing national rejuvenation, China sets an example for developing countries, and wants to generously share its hard-earned experiences for the benefit of the world. As a responsible member of regional and international society, China wants to improve global governance. The BRI is the crystallisation of these efforts, made possible by the immense economic and technological potential of China, which is unleashed by the CCP and plays an important role in the world reaching the community of shared future of mankind. Whilst China is sometimes misunderstood by others, its self-interest is exclusively funnelled into “win-win” cooperation, facilitating mutual success, common prosperity, and peace. This is recognised by the vast majority of the world.

5.2. China in 2019 *Global Times* BRI narratives

5.2.1. Inclusion: past, present, and future

Here, the ancient past of the Chinese civilisation is established to have thousands of years of history, complete with exchanges with other civilisations or places (GT 2019a, GT 2019u), but this is not emphasised to at all the same degree as in the CYD articles. Similarly, whilst the reform and opening up policy is mentioned, the recent past does not play a very large role either. The current era has seen the 2013 launch of the BRI, which has developed with huge success. China has improved relations with European countries, with Italy already a member of the AIIB and now affiliating with the BRI, and the UK now cooperating with China on an array of economic and financial initiatives relating to BRI cooperation, including the AIIB and cooperation on green financing (e.g. Sun, 2019a; Sun, 2019d). A major difference with the CYD narratives, is the inclusion of tensions with India in conjunction with the construction of CPEC (e.g. Xiao, 2019a), and the 2017 China-India “border stand-off” at Doklam (Yang & Cao, 2019), but here too the China-India relationship is said to have improved after the 2018 Wuhan meeting.

Unlike in the CYD narratives, conflict and tension are fairly rife in the present. The ongoing China-US trade war was unilaterally and unprovokedly started by the US (Hu, 2019d). Nationalism, populism, and self-centred actions are said to be on the rise (e.g. Global Times, 2019n). To counter this, China works with its allies to uphold multilateralism and free trade (e.g. Sun, 2019a). It is also mentioned that China promotes dialogue between civilisations (GT 2019n). Simultaneously, the BRI and China’s prestige are entering a new era as Italy, as the first member of G7 and the biggest EU country yet, joins the BRI. This is a vindication, especially triumphant due to American opposition of closer China-Italy ties (e.g. Chen, 2019). The changed post-Brexit landscape encourages hope China can make closer ties with the UK and the EU, though US pressure might cause its allies to treat China unfairly (Cui 2019). Additionally, anti-China elements in Hong Kong trample upon law and order whilst Western media and politicians fan the flames due to either malice or lack of understanding (GT 2019r).

Tensions remain in South Asia, particularly in the wake of a Pakistan-associated terrorist suicide attack in India-held Kashmir (Hu, 2019b) but also generally due to CPEC. As China refuses to “take sides” in the Pakistan-India conflict (Hu, 2019a), Modi is boycotting the Second Belt and Road Forum held in April (Hu, 2019c) and is working with the US to “contain” China in the Indo-Pacific, even though India knows better than to do so (Yang & Cao, 2019). Despite likely being able to close the trade imbalance with China due to the China-US trade war (Hu,

2019d), India is concerned about China and the BRI, and acts “defensively” to invest in ports as China does the same (Xiao, 2019a) and refuses to join the BRI because the fear of losing influence in South Asia to China (Hu, 2019e).

The future, in light of these tensions and challenges such as climate change and the stability of the financial system (e.g. Global Times 2019n), has spots of ambivalence. On the one hand, the BRI will bring economic growth and peace as more countries, including more European countries and India, join. This will strengthen the global rules-based order and trade (e.g. Global Times 2019o), and civilisational dialogue will promote mutual understanding and peace (GT 2019n). The West will properly understand the BRI and China, and China and its like-minded allies will defend multilateralism and free trade. India too will eventually join the BRI as it simply offers the best solution to economic woes and development plans (e.g. Hu, 2019b). On the other hand, if India does *not* join the BRI, it dooms its own economy and selfishly disrupts regional and global development (e.g. Li, 2019). India *has* shown itself to be capable of reckless unilateralism (GT 2019v) and “has an addiction to feeling insecure” that hinders it from seeing clearly (Xiao, 2019a), so it the possibility looms over the narrative. In addition, the US and the “West” – with different connotations than “Europe” or “the EU” – appear confusingly malicious and irrational.

5.2.2. Linking: temporal, inter-entity, and causal

Temporal linkages to emphasise Chinese identity aspects is used much less in these narratives, but similar linkages as in the CYD linkages are occasionally done. For example, China is the “birthplace” of Eastern civilisation (GT 2019h), and the Silk Road linked to the BRI, with China and Italy being its historical endpoints (e.g. Global Times, 2019e), suggesting continuity with contemporary BRI cooperation. The most consistent linking between China and other entities is again a commitment to multilateralism and free trade, which permeates all the narratives to varying degrees. There are fewer linkages on the basis of China and a partner country both being ancient civilisations being made, though they occur with India and Italy (e.g. Global Times, 2019u; Global Times, 2019e). China and India are linked as are major powers, Asian neighbours, “representatives of emerging economic and strategic partners” (GT 2019s), and “emerging giants” (Hu, 2019c). The BRI is again linked to the same multilateralist, anti-protectionist stance on global governance, making joining in its construction a natural extension for partners sharing these views.

The main causal chain of the narratives is that the BRI will not only lead to economic growth, but also ameliorate challenges in global governance. A key difference here lies in the emphasis on civilisational dialogue – whilst this is included, it is de-emphasised in favour of focusing on economic benefits. The BRI, as a multilateralist platform will promote a rules-based “global ecosystem” that people work together to support (Sun 2019a), will lead to interconnectivity on the Eurasian continent, bring benefits to these respective peoples and improve the stability, sustainability, and development of the world economy. Originally, it is China’s economic development, combined with its responsible international citizenship and innovative ideas, that provide other countries with this opportunity. The BRI is also capable of turning South Asia into a “mega region powering global economic growth” (Xiao, 2019a), and naturally would benefit all regions it is present, in addition to the entire world.

As the first G7 country to join, Italy is “indisputably adding new strength to BRI-enabled international cooperation” (Bi, 2019) and is providing a leading model for China-West relationships (e.g. Global Times, 2019i), strongly indicating that other countries will follow. The BRI would then more effectively be able to spread economic growth and peace through the world, as it establishes a mode of multilateral interaction that fosters economic interdependence (Hu, 2019a).

Some subplots establish other interesting causalities, for example that with a greater EU presence in the BRI, the law enforcement, environmental protection, and trade standards would increase (GT 2019c). This is quite a rare inclusion, as it is the one time the BRI itself, and through it, China, are admitted to lack anything other than more participants. On a more negative note, the US-China trade war has caused uncertainty and a lack of vitality in the global economy, and this in combination with Brexit has put the UK in a pressured situation that causes it to behave unfairly towards China, which will have negative consequences for the UK and the world (Cui, 2019). Similarly, India is currently trusting and relying on the US geopolitically and economically, which causes it to keep China and the BRI at a distance, but this is causing economic underdevelopment (Li, 2019). The US is therefore the cause of a lot of uncertainty and problems.

5.2.3. Sharpening

More so here than in the CYD articles, a very obvious and frequent sharpening is the simple emphasis on the Chinese origin of initiatives that are portrayed as excellent, for example the

“China-led” AIIB and the “China-proposed BRI” (e.g. Bi, 2019; Hu, 2019b). Putting it even more explicitly, countries should open themselves to “China-enabled success” (Xiao, 2019b). The brilliance and revolutionary nature of the BRI too is sharpened. It is “a circle of virtuous, satisfying and diffuse growth” (Bi, 2019) and likely even “a new global path of concrete multilateralism” (GT 2019m). It is a platform capable even of resolving or ameliorating even the most intransigent issues, like Kashmir (Hu, 2019a).

Whilst used much less than in the CYD articles, the foreign gaze is used to sharpen the idea that the BRI desired and attractive (Bi, 2019), and that foreigners admire China’s ancient culture (GT 2019k). Italians are really wanting to study Chinese language and culture, having “Mandarin fever” (GT 2019e, Chao 2019), and this sharpens the idea that other countries admire China, that China’s culture is worthy of study, and that the country is influential.

Whilst both CYD and GT articles emphasise multilateralism and free trade a lot, GT makes more references to the *threat* constituted by unilateralism and protectionism. This sharpens the general sense of necessity for deepened cooperation with China, as well as the idea that China is a leading champion in the fight to safeguard multilateralism and free trade. Relatedly, China’s benevolence, pragmatism, and leadership are sharpened via contrast to other entities more frequently in the GT articles. For example, India is welcome to “steal the limelight” in fixing the South Asian economy, even though China is clearly the initiator and it is Chinese companies doing the construction (Hu, 2019e). The CYD articles never make such a directly derogatory mention of a potential partner, so sharpening by contrast is done less explicitly there.

5.2.4. Clarifying

The GT articles contain a more diverse range of clarifications on the theme of Western misunderstandings and/or slander of China. For example, it is clarified that Western commentators condemning Italy joining the BRI was essentially a misunderstanding of what it is about. Actually, the BRI is an “important international public good that China contributes to global cooperation for common development” and over 150 countries and international organisations understand this, which has led to 6 trillion dollars in trade (Chen, 2019). The BRI is not exploitative, as actually, Chinese culture lacks the concept of colonisation (GT 2019m). Similarly, China does not actually want the UK to “take sides” between itself and the US, and instead understands the difficult position Brexit has put it in (Cui 2019). Regarding the Hong Kong protests, it is clarified that Western media and politicians collude with anti-China

elements in distorting the ongoing protests in Hong Kong, as, in fact, the protestors are not peaceful or pro-democracy, but instead “violent offenders” with “sinister intention” (GT 2019r). Actually, China has good intentions for Hong Kong and plans for example to connect it to the BRI, which will let this “‘oriental pearl’ [...] once again shine brightly” (GT 2019r).

In sharp contrast with the CYD articles, where there is zero mention of any potential partner country having domestic opposition to the BRI, the GT India articles are peppered with an array of clarifications as to why India is wrong about the BRI and why it is in its best interest to join. For example, the BRI is “a perfect fit for its development woes” (Xiao, 2019a), as is shown in neighbouring countries, where China-invested projects are boosting employment figures and growth, and it can save India from its “middle-income trap” (Li, 2019). Another aspect of this is that China is not trying to push India out of influence in South Asia and is no threat to India’s influence. On the contrary, if India were to join the BRI, it would be able to exert even more influence in the region (Hu, 2019e). There are no economic downsides to joining the BRI, and actually, India is being irresponsible by not doing what’s best for its domestic population and economic growth by joining the BRI (Ma, 2019). Actually, Modi’s proposed model of development for India is inspired by the Chinese model of development, focusing on large-scale infrastructure construction (GT 2019w). However, Modi’s execution is flawed (GT 2019w), and so India should change course and let itself be helped by China and take part in the BRI (Xiao, 2019b).

Other clarifications on how other actors are making poor choices include how despite the US-China trade war, China is doing fine, this is actually an opportunity to strengthen ties with other countries. China welcomes the opportunity for India to close their trade deficit with China, and to further develop trade with BRI countries to fill the gap, and the trade war by the US is therefore only bad for the US (Hu, 2019d). Another example concerns how India revoking Kashmir’s special status is “geopolitical trickery and unilateralism” that will inevitably prove to be a poor strategy for India as a regional power (GT 2019v). This sort of nationalist behaviour will only be bad for everyone and force increasing radicalism, so playing nice would actually be a much better plan for India (GT 2019v). To reiterate, this marks a certain difference with the CYD narratives, as those contain relatively few mentions of anyone ever really making bad choices.

5.2.5. Flattening

There are many more examples of flattening opposition to China and the BRI in the GT articles than in the CYD ones. At least six types occur, some of which are contradictory. The first is to blame resistance on uncertainty or lack of understanding and communication (e.g. Chen, 2019). The second is to emphasise that opposition to a specific element of relations with China, such as joining the BRI, is insignificant. Examples of this include when claiming that “common interests are far greater than differences” in the China-India relationship (GT 2019s), or how trade and investment is increasing, so it is not sensible to focus on “negative sentiment” toward the BRI in the context of the China-India relationship (Hu, 2019c). The third form of flattening is to characterise the opposition as the result of US pressure or trickery (e.g. Li, 2019; Global Times, 2019l; Cui, 2019). As outlined above, this is the primary commonality in flattening across CYD and GT narratives.

The fourth type is to claim the doubts are temporary, as the BRI will prove its benefits and convince other to join (e.g. Hu, 2019b). The fifth is dismiss other countries not wanting to join the BRI as *their* problem, as China is unconcerned either way and they are the ones losing out (e.g. Hu, 2019b). The sixth is to very vaguely acknowledge concerns, but to render them illegitimate without explaining them. An example of this includes calling aspects of the UK’s China policy “short-sighted” and “risky” (Cui, 2019). Another is characterising India’s discomfort with the security and political dimensions of the BRI as “Sinophobic”, “unsubstantiated concerns” that causes India to turn “a blind eye to a vast variety of BRI-enabled opportunities” that would significantly boost India’s growth, which demonstrates India’s “narrowmindedness” and “addiction to feeling insecure” (Xiao, 2019a).

5.2.6. Omitting and silencing

Like in the CYD articles, the norm for articles is to omit objections to the cooperation with China and joining the BRI, though more are included. However, the actual, substantive content of concerns about China and the BRI is still almost completely absent from the narratives. If they are included, they are alluded to in a vague manner before being flattened as outlined above. In the Italy and the UK articles, any domestic opposition to cooperation with China is still entirely omitted, and the allusions to opposition that are included are attributed to the US. Even these objections attributed to external forces are not clearly detailed, such as when a White House spokesperson expresses that “the BRI was unlikely to help Italy economically and could

significantly damage the country's international image” (Chen, 2019). Whilst the objection itself is registered, its content is half omitted, as there is no explanation of *why* participating in the BRI might pose a problem for Italy’s international reputation. By avoiding a direct explanation, the narrative silences any characterisation other than its own, thereby protecting China’s image and its vision.

Whilst GT narratives acknowledge that “India has long objected to the China-proposed Belt and Road” (Hu, 2019f), there is still a similar process of omission and silencing going on. Perhaps the most concrete statement of what these objections actually consist of is “sovereignty concerns related to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor” (Xiao, 2019a). In another article, the fact that Indians are “vulnerable” in regards to Kashmir is alluded to (Hu, 2019c), but there is no real explanation of China’s and CPEC’s roles in exacerbating tensions between India and Pakistan. The idea that there are any *good* reasons for India, or any other country, not to partner with China is therefore silenced.

Whilst the narrative allows that at least India does have some concerns with domestic origin about the BRI, the reasons for that are still not belonging with China itself, but are instead attributed to the relationship with Pakistan, the US, or India’s own insecurities. Strikingly, border tensions between China and India themselves are omitted except the one mention of Doklam, which is understood to belong firmly in the past (Yang & Cao, 2019). Any potential that India has its own reasons to feel threatened directly by China is silenced, resulting in the impression that no one could ever legitimately feel threatened by China.

A very significant trend in omission in the GT articles, as compared to the CYD articles, is a great deal of the CCP rhetoric and concepts. There is no mention of key concepts like national rejuvenation, or even the new model of international relations, though the “community of shared future” (sans “for mankind”) appears in two articles (GT 2019n, Yang and Cao 2019). The CCP, the entity inextricably linked to the Chinese nation-state in the CYD narratives, is unobtrusive here.

5.2.7. Chinese identity in GT BRI-narratives

China is a facilitator of and huge contributor to regional economic development and stability and a benevolent yet pragmatic member of international society. In contrast to how other actors behave unilaterally at times, China is a responsible actor that strives to protect multilateralism, free trade, development, stability, and peace in Asia and worldwide. The BRI is an expression

of these commitments and has the capacity to promote peace and economic growth in the world. China champions developing countries and reform of the norms-based global order. Other countries sometimes misinterpret or suspect China's intentions and fail to realise the wonderful nature of contributions China makes to the world. China works hard through dialogue to rectify these misconceptions of itself and its ideas. China patiently awaits the day when these reluctant countries inevitably realise their mistake.

6. DISCUSSION

In this chapter, research questions 4 and 5 are discussed with reference to the previous chapter. The first section explores gaps between the two categories of Chinese identity narratives as resulting from different emplotment choices. The second elucidates how emplotment mechanisms have been used to bridge gaps that otherwise could cause inter-narrative tension. The third section presents the conclusion of the thesis. The final section looks at possible avenues for future research.

6.1. Emplotting inter-narrative gaps

As becomes clear in the above analysis, emplotment mechanisms are in fact used in both the process of making narratives diverge and in the process of making them converge in the crafting of narrative identity. It is difficult to fully distinguish emplotment mechanisms from one another, as they all work in tandem, and might be more usefully construed as one or the other depending on the context of the analysis and the narrative layer under scrutiny. Fundamentally, however, it is the emplotment mechanisms of inclusion and omission, which together make up "selective appropriation" (Somers 1994), that determine the starting points of two narratives relative to one another. A narrator may then employ other emplotment mechanisms to latch onto and bridge the gaps left between the two sets of selectively appropriated events, or, alternatively, leave the gaps.

Therefore, what one might call the fundamental differences between the CYD and GT narratives lie in their mismatching inclusions and omissions. The CYD narratives prefer the inclusion of only events that affirm Chinese greatness, with little to no space for chords of disharmony in the well-curated image of an admired and earnest China that the rest of the world agrees is a shining example of a civilisation and an inspirational member of the international community. On the other hand, the GT narratives acknowledge relatively freely that the world

is not a harmonious place, and that voices objecting to China can be found. This is done through the inclusion of voices opposing China's vision, its reliability, and motives.

Whilst unable to access the thought processes of the narrators, it is reasonable to assume that this difference in the selectively appropriated events is partially due to the distinct contexts of the narratives. Put in narrative ontology terms, the master narratives and other narrative resources specific narratives are crafted from are different, meaning that in order to construct persuasive (Hagström and Gustafsson 2021), or potentially even coherent, narratives, not just issue-specific narratives but also identity narratives must change accordingly. Due to its entrenched control over history education and information flows, it is easier to craft specific narratives that both conveys the desired message and adheres to the Chinese master narrative to a domestic audience. Additionally, there are fewer rogue elements and counternarratives in general to compete with, so to include events to refute them might be considered to give them more of a platform than necessary. Simple omission of contradictory points of view is naturally very powerful when no alternative sources of information exist. On the other hand, narrating the same harmonious world to an international audience is likely to appear quixotic.

This also relates to the differently emphasised priorities of the two sets of narratives. The CYD narratives appear to be more focused on what Szostek (2017) refers to as "promoting" identity-building, whereas the GT narratives focus comparatively more on "defending" the identity-building. The CYD narratives are more "promoting" in that they are positively constructing a particular identity for China and adjust the inclusion of events to create a world that allows China to assume that identity. This entails silencing anything that runs contrary to this view. The GT narratives, on the other hand, spend comparatively more effort on "defending" the Chinese identity construct from disagreeable or contradictory interruptions. This is done through "rectification" (Rawnsley 2015), narrating blame (Ventsel, Madisson and Hansson 2021) and through employing antagonistic strategies to undermine and manipulate other entities (Wagnsson and Barzanje 2021).

This is not to say that the GT abandon the effort at "promoting" identity-building. However, this is de-emphasised for two reasons, the first being an international audience's lack of interest and ability to comprehend China's own markers of excellency. That is, whilst a Chinese person might be suitably impressed by Xi's ability to use express ancient Chinese wisdom through the use of allusions and proverbs (CYD 2019d), thus sharpening the sense of his competency and venerability, a foreigner might not necessarily understand how this is relevant to his leadership

ability. The second reason is that due to the difference in prioritised goals, leaving space for “defensive” identity-building is necessary.

Practically, one of the ways this “promoting” identity-building is emplotted in the CYD articles is through more linkages with the full CCP conceptual architecture. The focus on the ancient, unique Chinese civilisation is a crucial aspect of the “century of humiliation” and “national rejuvenation” plotlines (Liao 2017, Lams 2018) in the Chinese master identity narrative. As explained in the above analysis, it creates the foundation and context for explaining civilisational dialogue as a desirable mode of international relations and how to realise the “community of shared future for mankind” (Y. E. Yang 2021). The CYD articles also continuously link the BRI with the established concept and historical trajectory of “peaceful development” (Liao 2017). In Subotić’s (2016) terms, *more* elements of the master identity narrative are “activated” at the same time. This, of course, feeds back into, maintains, and develops this master narrative. The BRI emerges as a mutually reinforcing plotline with these plots. Another plot this reinforces is that of “consensual patriotism” (Liao 2017, 129), strengthening CCP domestic legitimacy.

It should be noted that not all narrative gaps are necessarily sources of tension. This point is analogous to Colley’s (2019, 31) original distinction between “omitting” and “silencing” – some things are simply left out because they are deemed irrelevant rather than because they are contradicting the point of the narrative. For example, neglecting to include the launch of the Chinese “Marco Polo” opera in Italy as part of cultural exchanges between the two countries (Yin 2019) in the GT articles is unlikely to be because it was thought to trouble the projected identity narrative.

6.2. Emplotting inter-narrative bridging

Having discussed some of the differences in selective appropriation and the probable reasons for why there might be incentives to create the gaps in between the CYD and GT narratives as a result of different contexts and purposes, this leads to the question of how the tensions caused by these gaps are minimised. Whilst the CCP may have been largely omitted from the GT articles for several reasons, including simple prioritisation of purpose, a possible reason includes a desire to de-emphasise political differences in favour of “pragmatic” economic cooperation. If so, and the omission is due to a desire to avoid creating tension with the audience, the “activated” CCP element in the CYD narratives become a potential source of

tension with the GT narratives. But as already seen, this tension is very simply de-emphasised through omission. This does not necessarily entail a “silencing,” however, as the CCP are still an important part of the same master identity narrative, even if “de-activated” in the GT iteration.

As noted, omission/silencing is heavily used in the CYD narratives in particular, with the effect of emulating or incarnating the master identity narrative more fully. This can also be seen in the number of articles per country in the two samples. 2019 marked Italy signing onto the BRI, resulting in 41 CYD articles and 23 GT articles for the samples. This was an opportunity to sharpen the inevitable success and welcome of the BRI and China, and especially the CYD articles seized the opportunity to enhance the narrative glory of China, with 28 articles published between the 20th and the 27th of March in conjunction with Xi’s visit to Italy and the signing of the BRI Memorandum of Understanding. In sharp contrast, only 7 CYD articles relating to India appear in the sample, despite 17 GT India articles appearing. As the analysis above showed, even the 7 CYD India articles that appeared silenced the country’s opposition to the BRI. Simultaneously, many of the most clear examples of “defensive” identity-building appeared in the 17 GT articles precisely as refutations of India’s behaviour. The UK sample, with 8 CYD articles and 10 GT articles, is an interesting mix, and notably contains that wildly “defensive” CYD clarification of “China threat” theory.

The “defensive” articles appear to have two intertwined purposes - protecting China’s identity through antagonism against those who could be perceived to slight it (Szostek 2017) and/or antagonistically trying to manipulate India’s and the UK’s behaviour (Wagnsson and Barzanje 2021). In either case, emplotment mechanisms are used in interesting ways to ensure that China’s identity narrative is protected, even as the narrative engages with negative sentiment. After including a negative point, this is dealt with in various ways. Using linking, an objection or concern can be linked with a disreputable entity or event, such as when for all three countries, objections to cooperating with China are linked with external sources.

Linking is also used to establish hypocrisy, as in the example linking high American military spending with hypocrisy in regards to China. Causally, those who cause bad things are characterised as antagonists through their actions, like when the US “unilaterally” initiates the US-China trade war and cause uncertainty and trending protectionism (Hu, 2019d). Bad things also ensue when going against Chinese judgment, such as when India’s revocation of Kashmir’s special status is a poor strategy as a regional power (GT 2019v). By making subplots out of

such linkages, the main narrative is protected through the deflection of attention towards blaming others, comparable to the blame narratives investigated by Ventsel, Madisson, and Hansson (2021).

Sharpening is a very versatile emplotment mechanism which, in a somewhat oversimplified translation, allows the narrator to adjust the *level* of “activation” of master narrative elements. This is in addition to sharpening whatever kind of point is being made. For example, in the one instance where the 2017 Doklam border stand-off is mentioned, this awkwardness is de-emphasised by the sharpening of the importance of the subsequent Wuhan meeting, which “repaired” China-India bilateral relations (Yang & Cao, 2019). This allows the GT narrative to realign with the CYD narrative in the focus on the relatively harmonious present.

Clarifying and flattening are perhaps the most intuitively obvious examples of how emplotment mechanisms can bridge tensions between narratives. “Clarifying” is the narrative epitome of rectification as a strategy. As outlined in the GT narratives analysis section, the GT narratives can clarify away Western “misunderstandings” of China as well as Indian misconceptions about the BRI, revealing that, actually, there is no problem with China at all, if only the other party would listen. This helps to dissolve the tension between the GT inclusion of the “misunderstandings” and the general CYD omission of the same.

Flattening, whilst diminishing the significance of the problematic inclusion rather than dissolving it, works similarly in allowing for the acknowledgment of the issue but its simultaneous dismissal. As is evidenced by the wide range ways in which flattening is used in GT, it is also very versatile and makes for nimble and quick ways to detract from disagreeable views. Its use also appears more ad hoc and chaotic than most of the other emplotment mechanisms. Because of this, flattening appears in some ways to be the most aggressive emplotment mechanism used to ease tensions through invalidating foreign objections. The articles focusing on the “repaired” India-China relationship that silence the BRI and bilateral tensions mixed with these veritable barrages of flattening makes for a synthesised narrative that is reminiscent of gaslighting behaviour. Whereas the clarifying generally takes on a veneer of rapprochement with the implication that clearing up the misunderstanding will fix the issue, some of the examples of flattening used are very hostile, whilst others yet affect an air of nonchalance in saying or implying that China is fine and India is the one losing out. These are then also mixed with articles that use silencing. This makes for “defensive” narratives that

appear quite incoherent and/or manipulative. However, this point hardly threatens inter-narrative coherence any more than GT's own intra-narrative coherence.

6.3. Conclusion

This thesis aimed to investigate in what ways states in general, and China in particular, manage tensions that arise through emplotting identity narratives differently in narratives aimed at domestic and international audiences. States strategically narrate themselves for both domestic audiences and for international audiences but do so with different purposes in mind. They must also keep the different narrative contexts of their audience in mind in order to craft narratives capable of persuading the respective audiences. Whilst simultaneously trying to adjust to these separate contexts and purposes, they must also maintain their own autobiographical continuity. Failing to properly balance any one of these aspects is associated with various costs. As such, this thesis set out to further our understanding of how emplotment mechanisms are used to create and bridge inter-narrative gaps, thereby expanding the narrator's room for manoeuvre in propagating more efficacious strategic narratives that better balance its interests in all three aspects.

The thesis conducted an analysis of how Chinese state identity is emplotted in samples of Chinese-language and English-language BRI-narratives from Chinese newspapers. In doing so, it has shown that domestic and international narratives are emplotted differently, and that this does result in tensions. First, it answered the question of how Chinese identity is emplotted in the narratives aimed at a domestic audience. This China is a responsible and generous ancient civilisation currently "rejuvenating" and wanting the world to share in its peaceful development and realising the "community of shared future". Second, it answered the question of how Chinese identity is emplotted in the narratives aimed at foreign audiences. China here is a responsible member of the international community, looking to increase global economic growth and improve global governance, though it is not infrequently misunderstood or betrayed by the unilateral actions of others.

Third, the thesis looked at how gaps and tensions arose between the narratives aimed at domestic and foreign audiences. This happened as the domestically and internationally aimed narratives diverged in context and aims, and therefore included and omitted different sets of selectively appropriated events. The domestic narratives put more emphasis on "promoting", or positively constructing, the Chinese state identity. They also prioritised activating more

elements of the master identity narrative, including more CCP-linked concepts. The foreign-aimed narratives instead focused on “defensive” identity-building, which entailed including more disagreeable voices in order to “rectify” what was said. This includes creating antagonistic subplots that create gaps with the domestic narratives, which commonly depict a world in which China is (near-)universally understood to be worthy of admiration.

Finally, the thesis discussed how emplotment mechanisms were deployed in ways that de-emphasise the tensions that can arise from inter-narrative gaps. This discussion covered the ways in which omission silences disagreeable inclusions, how linking can be used to discredit entities or create antagonistic subplots, and how sharpening can be used to fine-tune the level of narrative element activation. It also covered how clarifying can dissolve inter-narrative tension by explaining how an apparent problem is actually not a problem. Finally, it explained how flattening is used on an ad hoc basis to diminish the level of *significance* apportioned to disagreeable inclusions.

This thesis has made a contribution to the literature on strategic narratives by making an addition to the understudied field of interaction between different strategic narratives projected by the same state. Specifically, the analysis has clarified the mechanisms through which gaps between narratives aimed at domestic and international audiences are created to in accordance with the purpose and context of each. It subsequently demonstrated the mechanics of how the resulting inter-narrative tension is de-emphasised so as to protect autobiographical continuity.

More specifically, this thesis clarifies how an authoritarian state balances the inter-narrative tension resulting from narrating themselves as free of fault whilst pursuing strategies of rectification and antagonism, which by default must include the possibility of state antagonism. Though beyond the constraints of this thesis, these findings might also have interesting implications for other literatures, for example the notion of receiving recognition from the Other within ontological security studies. The thesis has further made an empirical contribution to Chinese foreign policy narratives by analysing the structure of particular Belt and Road Initiative strategic narratives.

6.4. Limitations and further research

This is an exploratory study with the aims of beginning to sketch out how potentially divergent identity narratives, adjusted to different domestic and international contexts by the same state

narrator, are bridged through narrative techniques. It is a qualitative study based on a relatively small sample and not intended to represent China's BRI narratives as a whole. Rather, it made an in-depth investigation into the employment mechanisms used in creating gaps and bridging those gaps in comparable narratives aimed at domestic and international audiences. The thesis does not examine how the necessity of deliberate narrative bridging might change across different sets of circumstances. Neither does it evaluate how effective this bridging is for its intended audiences. Instead, it looks at how the bridging efforts of state narratives have actually been attempted in narratives for which it has been established that divergence was a problem.

Further, the thesis did not consider changes over time. This is a promising avenue of research, as it would be interesting to explore whether evaluations of the effectiveness of the messaging occur over time and if there are any subsequent changes as a result. Analysing changes over time might assist in our understanding of how strategic narratives evolve, but also perhaps the extent to which narrative bridging is a considered and deliberate aspect of state strategic communication. Another potential avenue of future research would be to pursue the preliminary finding that certain employment mechanisms can be associated more with defensive versus promoting identity-building.

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