

Discourse Analysis of Xinhua News Agency's Social Media Content: A Review of Xinhua's Reporting Perspectives of China's Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract—The use of digital media has gone through a major transition in China in the last decade. To study how China's major official media outlet, Xinhua News Agency, interacts with social media, this paper examines the measures Xinhua has taken to promote the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through digital channels. As an important part of the Chinese diplomacy, on the one hand, the Belt and Road Initiative shows Chinese leadership is calling for a proactive role in international relations; on the other hand, its establishment has caused contentions in the international media sphere. Based on Foucault's approach on discourse, this paper examines the Chinese state media's handling of the case on social media platforms Twitter and Sina Weibo in both the Chinese and English languages.

Index Terms—Belt and Road Initiative, strategic communication, social media

I. INTRODUCTION

In September 2013, Chinese president Xi Jinping outlined China's "Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Belt" (Belt and Road) Initiative (BRI). Providing a historical tie between China, Central Asian and European Countries, this initiative is to reinvigorate the ancient Silk Road with a modern network of high-speed rail, motorways, pipelines, ports, fiber-optic cables as well as information exchange. The projects set from the initiative are to connect China with the Baltic region of Europe, the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia and Russia, and also to connect China with South-east Asia and the Indian Ocean to the South Pacific.

Reviewing Chinese leaderships' communication strategy since 1961, China has pursued a media policy that aims "to treat the external communication and internal communication differently" [1]. Through enhancing the capacity of media outlets, since 1998, the Chinese government adopts a "going out" (*zou chu qu*, 走出去) strategy in its external communication. In the context of global communications expedited by digital media, social media platforms have become indispensable to news organizations. In the last decade, various Chinese state media outlets including Xinhua News Agency, CCTV and *People's Daily* have been through transitions from traditional mass media to digital media. Since 2015, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become the focus of Chinese diplomacy and Chinese state media outlets have since rigorously reported on the development

and regional impacts of the BRI. Chinese policy makers aim to transform China into a global power as the initiative strives to bring together China's domestic interests and development of its neighboring countries.

To review how the state media outlets take on this diplomatic mission to promote the Belt and Road Initiative, it is important to conceptualize the institutional changes that influence the way that messages are sent. This paper examines the discursive patterns that Xinhua News Agency (Xinhua) adopts in promoting the BRI on social media platforms Twitter and Sina Weibo (Weibo). The paper compares the differences and similarities of Xinhua's messages from the two social media platforms, and explores the intentions and functions of the deployed rhetoric devices and highlighted perspectives. The paper further serves to examine whether Xinhua performs different functions toward domestic and international audiences on different platforms, and if so, where the strategic differences lie in these social media messages.

Michel Foucault's approach on discourse directs our attention to the relative authority of particular discourses in a given social cultural context. From a perspective of broader power/knowledge relations, discourse analysis is a way of understanding how knowledge is constructed and how power produces reality. Foucault compares disciplinary power to how power was exercised traditionally. He explains that traditionally, power was "what was seen" and paradoxically "found the principle of its force in the movement by which it deployed that force" [2]. Disciplinary power "is exercised through its invisibility" and "imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility" [2].

As Foucault states, "Discursive practices are not purely and simply ways of producing discourse. They are embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behavior, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them" [2]. Based on Foucault's framework of discourse, many theorists from more recent Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) relate discourse with knowledge and examine the different power relations between discourses and social practices.

Thus, before diving into Xinhua's social media messaging on the BRI topic, this research examines the BRI discourse in a broader social and cultural context by reviewing the relevant media policies and foreign policy papers.

II. POLICY REVIEW

A. Media Policies

Under the media policies in China, the central government aims to present a "strong cultural country" (*wenhua*

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qiangguo, 文化强国) by advocating the “socialist core values” through the media outlets and strengthening the mainstream ideology within China [3]; and also to develop an “internet superpower” (*wangluo qiangguo*, 网络强国) through regulating the administrative licensing for the Internet service providers and Internet content providers and managing the information flow from both within and outside China [4]. The implementation of the media policies indicates the directives of the internal and external communication strategies from the central level.

The objective of the internal communication according to Xinhua is to guide public opinion, consolidate the Party leadership, and learn from foreign culture and advanced technology. In this regard, the media policies are implemented mainly by regulating the staff from the state-owned mass media and the government officials and strengthening social and public surveillance [5]. The aim is to guide public opinion by “spreading the main melody” and “positive energy” [6]. The internal communication strategies have been expanded into a five-year plan for “deepening” reform, including establishing domestic cultural production through media conglomeration and also improving media organizations’ operational system through continued capitalization and adaptive communication technologies [7].

As for the external communication, with a focus on cyber security, the media policies tend to regulate the private sectors as well as the individual internet users [8–11]. This may be due to the fact that the most internet enterprises are private, rather than state-owned and therefore the regulations focus on the role and obligations of Internet Service Providers (ISPs), Internet Content Providers (ICPs), etc. [12]. Compared to this, the state media outlets play an important role in “equating Chinese people, the state, and the nation as a whole,” in order to support the government’s position [13]. For instance, while implementing strict management principles, Xinhua receives major financial support annually from the government, with a goal of strengthening China’s soft power so as to play a part in the global communication.

B. Foreign Policy

Comparing China’s foreign policy papers and documents on the BRI over the past decade, the research identifies more similarities than differences. First, similar terminologies are adopted. For instance, terms such as “互利共赢” (*huli gongying*, mutual benefit and win-win cooperation), “合作” (*hezuo*, cooperation), “命运共同体” (*mingyun gongtongti*, a shared destiny) appear in both foreign policy papers since 2012 and the BRI documents. These terms have been highlighted as the main concepts. Used in the contexts of economic cooperation, information exchange and political consensus, such terms indicate the Chinese government’s intentions to improve its overall foreign relations.

Secondly, the government’s foreign policies and relations with different regions are identifiable from the BRI documents. The government holds differentiated perspectives towards different partners. In China’s policy papers on the European Union (EU), by emphasizing the common interests with the EU and recognizing the differences between the two cultures, the government holds that “with no fundamental conflict of interests, China and the EU have far more agreement than differences” and as the “two major forces for

world peace”, they share “strategic consensus on building a multi-polar world” [14]. In the policy papers on Arab and African countries, through highlighting the friendship and history with these countries, the government states the importance for cooperation. In both policy papers, the government qualifies the relations with these countries as “brothers, friends and partners no matter what happens on [sic] the world arena” [15, 16]. For instance, “Over two thousand years ago, land and maritime Silk Roads already linked the Chinese and Arab nations” [16]. In the policy papers on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the government refers to the relationship with the ASEAN countries as “neighbors” and indicates the importance for economic collaboration, cultural exchange and political dialogue [17]. It is worth noting that the cooperation projects with different partner countries in the foreign policy papers are in line with the projects in the Belt and Road Initiative. In turn, the BRI is also addressed with high importance in each of the policy papers. Overall, the terms and expressions in the policy papers show that the government maintains a closer attitude towards the Arab countries and African countries than the EU and the ASEAN countries. Regarding the Arab countries and African countries as “friends and “brothers” implies that the government perceives its relations with these regions as already “developed and mature” partnerships, and the relations with the EU and ASEAN countries as the ones yet “to be developed and explored”. Compared with the government’s foreign policy towards the ASEAN countries which emphasizes China’s centrality in the region, the government addresses the collaboration in global governance in its foreign policy towards the EU.

Shown from the policy papers, the central government enhanced its international communication power through institutional changes. The responsibilities for local communication were lifted from the central to the local administrative levels, and the tasks for international communication have been since carried out from the central level. In conclusion, for internal communication, public opinion and sentiment are ensured at the central level by adopting differentiated measures towards the domestic audience; in terms of external communication, the central government has implemented a more centralized strategy to strengthen China’s voice. However, the centralized management of external communication does not necessarily mean that a monolithic tone is used towards all international audiences. The nuances of the relations with different geopolitical regions potentially influence the tones and attitudes held in the communication.

III. CONTENTIONS OVER THE INITIATIVE

In the last decade, various media outlets from within and outside China have focused on political and economic goals of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its influences on different geopolitical regions. The media debates between the English language media and Chinese state media outlets are over the comparison of China’s BRI with America’s Marshall Plan. Joint with social media, the reports, comments and tweets from different media organizations have played out a “battle field” over China’s ambitions.

Shown from various examples, English news organizations BBC, *Guardian* and CNN have compared the Belt and Road Initiative to the United States' post-war policy, the Marshall plan. In response, Chinese official media outlets such as Xinhua, CCTV and *People's Daily* have responded to the comparison by listing the incomparable elements of the two policies. The following sources are topic related news reports collected from different media outlets, including both English and Chinese news websites. These reports are titled with a comparison of the Belt and Road Initiative and Marshall Plan, or an implied controversy in the BRI.

Articles from several popular English media websites are titled as "The New Silk Road: China's Marshall Plan?" [18], "China's 'Marshall Plan'" [19], "China's Ambitious 'Silk Road' Plan Faces Hurdles" [20], "Where all Silk Roads lead" [21]. In contrast, examples of related articles from several major Chinese media are titled with "China's silk road proposals not Marshall Plan" [22], "Closer Look: So China's Silk Road Fund Is Marshall Plan Redux? Not Really" [23], "Silk Road initiatives not China's Marshall Plan: spokesman" [24]. The different conceptions over the BRI formed into two dichotomies. The debate about China's current foreign policy may have started under the influence of the Cold War mentality, but the debate eventually leads to the questions such as whether and how China would shape the global governance.

In this respect, scholars from within and outside China have taken on different analytical perspectives on whether digital media have an influence on the government's communication strategies. The Chinese government's external communication policy is to influence public opinion in a target country in order to influence diplomacy with that target country and avoid the situation where other actors set the political agenda in a way that negatively influences Chinese interests. Gabriel [25] argues that public opinion of foreign policy is formed by four types of audiences: the general public, people caring about current affairs, public opinion leaders, and elite policy-makers. Wang [26] highlights the importance of target audience analysis, mentioning that the latter two types of audiences Almond discusses, often from the middle class or important social strata, are significant in forming the public opinion as they can greatly influence the general public. Media critic Guo [27] concurs that the Chinese government should consequently consider external communication through "elite influence". Thus, the target audiences of Chinese news outlets are the opinion leaders and policy-makers in a foreign country, who are believed to eventually determine the whole society's opinion of the Chinese government.

Since the BRI involves China's foreign affairs and diplomacy, its online news reports often associated with reporting on China's foreign policy and international news. The Chinese media portrayal of the initiative has been influential as to how the domestic and international audiences conceptualize the government's strategies.

IV. DIFFERENTIATED STRATEGIES IN PROMOTING THE BRI

This paper looks into Xinhua's social media performances dating back to early 2013 and examines whether its communication strategies shifted in time. It also bears the

question as to whether Xinhua performs different functions toward national and international audiences on different platforms, and if so, then where the strategic differences lie in these posts. This research compares the similarities and differences of Xinhua's strategic communication and identifies the intentions and functions of certain linguistic patterns. Based on quantitative and qualitative combined analysis, the findings contribute to expanding our understanding of how Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) influence China's official news agency in terms of China's communicative strategy.

A. *Quantitative Outlook*

To obtain an outlook of Xinhua's activities on Weibo and Twitter, this research zooms in on the selected 623 messages on the topic of China's BRI from its registered accounts (288 messages in English and 335 in Chinese). On Weibo, the registered accounts are Xinhua net, Xinhua net English, Xinhua iReport and Xinhua International. Xinhua's tweets on Twitter are collected from its official account, New China. Through examining Xinhua News Agency's performance on social media platforms Weibo and Twitter, the research explores the various perspectives Xinhua adopts to promote the Belt and Road Initiative.

The messages from Weibo and Twitter are divided into different thematic categorizations. The categorization is based on the themes the tweets and posts most frequently discuss in the context of the BRI. They are: diplomacy, economy, culture, reviews, and other. This is to analyze from which perspective Xinhua emphasizes the importance of the BRI the most, and whether there is a significant difference in which perspectives Xinhua uses to talk about the BRI in internal and external communication.

To avoid overlap, it is important to clarify the definition of these categories. The category of diplomacy includes the messages on government officials' visits abroad; the visits of officials from other countries in China; international conferences that emphasize the governments' participation; and the political speeches and opinions by officials. In the second category, economy, the messages are about investments, contracts, banking activities, projects, products, and information services, and about international conferences, such as the Asia Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) and Boao Conference. There is some potential overlap with the diplomacy category, among the messages on the international conferences that also involve governments' attendances. Of those, the ones with a stronger feature on economic collaboration and investment than on the political significance are put into the category of economy. The third category, culture, includes messages about the history of the ancient caravan route known as the Silk Road and the preservation of cultural heritage in the areas this route covered, among which cultural traditions in those areas that are still active until today: food culture, religious activities, and various international cultural activities and festivals. I put messages in this category where culture is the dominant topic. For instance, a tweet based on food export but emphasizing the promotion of Halal food and Muslim culture is put in the category of culture rather than economy; a post discussing China's relationship with African countries from a historical perspective belongs to the category of culture instead of

diplomacy. The fourth category is made up of reviews and comments. The messages in this category include experts' opinions and Xinhua's editorial comments on the BRI as well as government officials' quotes. By reading through all the messages, I find that the experts' opinions and the editors' comments or interpretation of the officials' quotes often lack detailed information, and these messages tend to be very general and positive. This is a reason to offset them from the other categories, that are markedly different in style and tone. The last category is named "other." Coincidentally, this category contains the least number of messages. This category holds messages that pertain to the BRI, but are not written from a diplomatic, economic, or cultural viewpoint and/or do not convey a "commentary" style. These messages include messages about education, health, entertainment, weather, etc. This category is not further examined in this research.

The categorizations based on topics demonstrate that Xinhua emphasizes different themes on Weibo and Twitter [28]. The results of the categorizations are shown in Figs. 1 and 2.

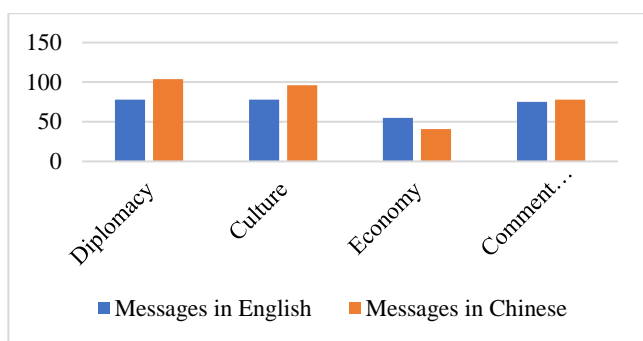


Fig. 1. Percentages of messages from each account based on themes.

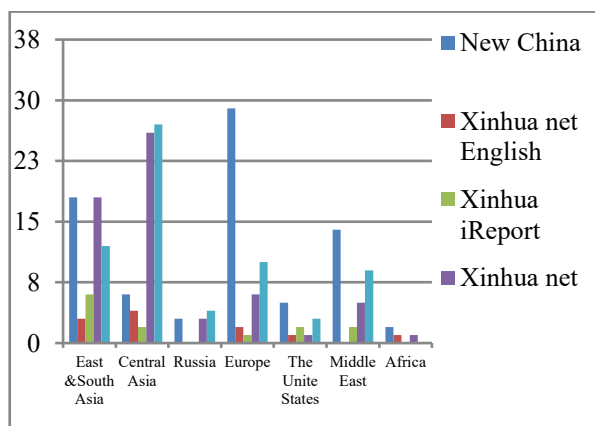


Fig. 2. Message distribution according to geopolitical regions.

Followed with in-depth qualitative examination, the research draws these observations. First, the messages are focused on diplomacy and culture than on the economy and commentaries. Secondly, the related topics gets intensified during the BRI formation period in late 2013 and the policy implementation period in early 2015, implying that its communication strategies coincide with the central government's decision-making. Lastly, the categorizations also suggest that Xinhua highlights China's relations with European countries on Twitter from the aspect of economic cooperation, and provides a stronger emphasis on the relations with Central Asia on Weibo from the aspect of

culture and history. Its thematic preferences reflect the BRI agenda to create more business opportunities with European countries, and to develop the infrastructure in Central Asian countries. It could be interpreted that New China, managed by Xinhua's Overseas Department, functions through "advertising" towards the English-speaking audiences; Xinhua net and Xinhua International tend to mobilize the Chinese domestic audiences in the discourse of "reviving the past glory with neighboring countries".

B. Use of Languages

In order to zoom into the linguistic features of the social media messages, I used the software Yoshikoder 6.5.0 to identify and compare the keywords/ terms from both the English text and Chinese text. The open-source software Yoshikoder can recognize Chinese terms (/expressions) [29]. The selected corpus includes 189 messages from Xinhua's Twitter account with total 2249 English words and 151 posts from its Weibo account with total 8642 terms (/expressions) in the Chinese text.

Regarding the digital tool Yoshikoder, it demonstrates considerable advantages. Digital tools have become increasingly powerful in the field of current media studies, despite their drawbacks. Nevertheless, the limitations, challenges and errors produced by using these digital tools should be closely kept in mind. In treating the corpus as primary sources, I kept both Weibo posts and Twitter tweets in their original formats as they appeared on social media platforms. This means that I kept the hashtags (#) and mentions (@) "as is." This has implications for the word count. In English tweets, hashtags such as #beltandroad and #silkroad occur. Here, the individual words ("belt," "and," "silk," and "road") are not divided by spaces that function as word boundaries in text-processing software. Therefore, the software Yoshikoder counts them as a single word, not as multiple words. The Chinese case is different, as word divisions are not formed by spaces, as each character counts as a word or term in itself. Furthermore, the software does not always recognize Chinese political terminologies and certain cultural jargons. Thus, by referring to the original context, with the aid of Yoshikoder's concordance functions, I then could identify the nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs with high frequencies that describe the topic of the BRI.

In this respect, I agree with Richard Rogers that while researchers could think along with the digital tools they use, they must stay aware that the outcomes of digital research practices have a certain validity in research development, but this does not make them universal truths [30].

The research results show the keywords/ terms that have been used with high frequencies on Twitter and Weibo. Keywords that differ markedly are: "initiative", "benefit(s)", "investment" and "trade" on Twitter; and "建设" (*jianshe*, construction), "共同" (*gongtong*, together), "战略" (*zhanlue*, strategy) on Weibo. The different keywords reflect the divisions in terms of topics and themes. Through a thorough analysis based on the contexts these terms appear, it suggests that: Xinhua adopts the word "战略" (*zhanlue*, strategy) on Weibo rather than on Twitter to point out the importance of the initiative [28]. On Twitter, Xinhua tends to emphasize the benefits that will be brought about by the initiative, whereas on Weibo, Xinhua tends to highlight the spirit of

“togetherness/ mutuality /multi-lateral” (*gong*, 共) that can push the initiative forward. Furthermore, it also illustrates that Xinhua addresses China’s intention to seek potential partnerships for economic cooperation and information exchange on both platforms. Nevertheless, by putting a stronger emphasis on economic aspects on Twitter, Xinhua demonstrates a more defensive and reactive communicative approach towards international audiences.

The comparisons of the Chinese and English keywords that contain similar meanings show that similar words are often used in different contexts and form different collocations. The comparisons also show that several political terminologies, such as “务实合作” (*wushi hezuo*, pragmatic cooperation), “新常态” (*xin changtai*, new normal), “新佳话” (*xin jiahua*, new story), and colloquialisms such as “高大上” (*gao da shang*, high and noble) and “干货” (*ganhuo*, real stuff) have not found their way into its Tweeter’s messages translated into English, as their usage would require lengthy explanation of their background—something that does not fit in the space of a single tweet. This shows that when the need for an explicit context—because the frame of reference is absent in translation—clashes with technical limitations, this too can result in differences between Chinese and English discourses.

Furthermore, on both Weibo and Twitter, Xinhua’s messages imply similar distinctions of the in-group and out-group. The in-group is China and the other countries form the out-group. In the cases of rhetorical devices, Xinhua deploys different metaphors, symbolisms, personifications, and parallelisms on Weibo and Twitter. In terms of discursive mechanisms, Xinhua tends to take a normative stance in China’s foreign relations, through the use of specific rhetorical figures on Weibo. On Twitter, however, some of the terms and rhetorical figures Xinhua uses, carry an ambiguous and counter-intuitive meaning.

Overall, the analysis shows that on the one hand, by adopting colloquial terms, sensationalist rhetorical devices, and the use of eye-catching imagery and infographics, Xinhua adjusts itself to the taste and expectations of its target social media users. On the other hand, Xinhua’s obvious and deliberate use of “down-to-earth” (*jie diqi*, 接地气) language online insinuates that it is, in reality, not necessarily a form of grassroots reporting that takes its shape naturally. In other words, the state media actor intends to shape the dominant discourse by adopting it.

V. CONCLUSION

Through policy changes, the Chinese central government aims to construct its soft power in terms of the internal and external communication. Xinhua’s social media coverage on the BRI constructs the national identity and to contribute to promoting its foreign policy. Media production, carrying a variety of ‘socially determined goals’, “is organized in class relationships that define the process by which some human subjects, on the basis of their position in the production process, decide the sharing and uses of the product in relationship to consumption and investment” [31]. This paper demonstrates how the BRI narratives in English and Chinese differ in multiple aspects.

Tapping into the Xinhua’s reporting perspectives on social media platforms Weibo and Twitter, the approach of discourse analysis provides a general picture of how Xinhua forms its communicative strategies under the overarching regulations and guidelines. In terms of discourse of the BRI, this research shows that Xinhua’s communicative strategies on social media turn out to be the extensions of the government’s communicative schemes. Towards international audience, Xinhua adopts a “centralized” way to tell a “good China story” to international audiences can be understood to avoid target conflicts in terms of content and reporting style. In the corpus analysis, the comparisons of the Chinese and English keywords show that the words contain similar meanings are often used in different contexts and form different collocations.

In sum, Xinhua’s communication strategies are not formed under fixed rules or guidelines from the government, but shaped by various factors which do not necessarily correlate with each other. The different discourses on the Belt and Road Initiative from the Chinese and English social media platforms, are not only led by the central government’s intentions on soft power construction and the interpretations of the editorial staff from the official media outlet, but also are determined by the technical forms of media, the nature of linguistic features, the schemata of the Weibo and Twitter messages, as well as the overseas and domestic journalists’ interpretation of the government’s media policies.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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