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Carola Chiusi

Abstract

This paper investigates the soft power connotations of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a project launched by the Chinese government in the attempt to increase the country's connectivity with the rest of the world and revive the ancient Silk Road. After an overview of the academic debate concerning the BRI and a recollection of the history of China's public diplomacy in the post-Cold War era, the paper focuses on the relationship between the BRI and soft power examining official documents produced by Beijing and pertinent research literature. The name of the initiative, the narrative spread around it, its soft power components, the public and cultural diplomacy programmes implemented on the ground, and two delicate situations (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic and the Xinjiang crisis) are all investigated. The study shows that soft power is a crucial component of the BRI and that it should not be overlooked in favour of the project's geopolitical and economic implications. Such a co-dependency between the BRI and soft power poses a challenge to the Chinese government. While the initiative may boost Beijing's reputation abroad, foreign publics' positive perception of China is vital for the effective implementation of the BRI itself. The success of the initiative, however, risks being undermined by the negative repercussions of Beijing's behaviour in some critical policy areas.

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Introduction

In 2013, the president of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Xi Jinping, proposed the establishment of a 'Silk Road Economic Belt' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2013) and of a 'Maritime Silk Road' (Bhattacharya, 2016; Clarke, 2019a) to create "a transport network in the Eurasian area" as part of a diplomatic strategy for strengthening the international cooperation with China (Wang, 2015, p. 94). In the following years, the project assumed increasing importance both in China and in the rest of the world¹, with the name of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Due to its ambitious goals and global relevance, the BRI has been vastly analysed by scholars and pundits. In particular, the academic literature proposed three main interpretations of the BRI since the project appears to be motivated by: a) economic goals, b) China's geopolitical strategy, and c) the intention to foster Beijing's influence through soft power (Clarke, 2019a). Indeed, Chinese official sources (Li, 2017; Kugelman, 2019) and international scholars mainly depict the BRI as a project aimed to promote China's economic growth (Kaczmarek, 2015), solve overcapacity problems (Miner, 2016) and reduce development discrepancies between different areas of the country (Ekman, 2017). Yet, the BRI has also been defined as a geopolitical strategy that, pursuing the state's interests on its borders² (Ploberger, 2017; Clarke, 2019a), aims to restore China at the centre of the regional and global arenas (Mathews, 2019). This paper investigates the less considered soft power connotation of the BRI, examining how public and cultural diplomacy undertakings are used in this policy framework to present a positive image of China and its government.

Given the major role of the PRC in the international arena and the enormous reach of the BRI, it is crucial for public diplomacy scholars to shed light on the linkages between the initiative and China's contemporary soft power strategy. The main goal of this paper is to explore this topic, underlining not only the public diplomacy strategy intertwined with the development of the initiative but also how Beijing attempts to deploy the BRI's soft power to project a charming image abroad, especially in connection to issues that are negatively perceived by foreign audiences. For this scope, both the relevant academic literature and Chinese governmental documents produced up to the beginning of 2021 were analysed to bring to light the connections between the BRI and soft power.

Aiming to clarify the context in which the BRI was created, the paper opens with a brief presentation of how China has managed its soft power since the end of the Cold War. Then, the manuscript focuses on the soft power connotations of the initiative, showing how various elements of the BRI – its name, narrative and soft power components, as well as related public and cultural diplomacy initiatives – are used by Beijing to shape a positive image of China abroad, also in relation to delicate issues such as the management of COVID-19 and the situation in Xinjiang.

¹ According to a 2019 account, the reach of the BRI is massive, entailing at least sixty states and approximately two-thirds of the global population (Kugelman, 2019).

² In particular, the BRI is interpreted as a response to the American growing involvement in Central and South-East Asia with Obama's New Silk Road Initiative in Afghanistan and the Pivot to Asia strategy in the Pacific (Clarke, 2019a).

China's soft power: goals and evolution

To understand the soft power connotation of the BRI, it is important to provide an overview of how this project has a place in the history of Beijing's soft power. While it is not possible to trace the long and complex history³ of China's public and cultural diplomacy⁴ in these pages, it is important to underline that in the 1990s China adopted a more systemic approach to public diplomacy (Hall and Smith, 2013). In 1991, the State Council Information Office (SCIO)⁵ was established to present the country to outside publics, also through the publication of white papers aimed at displaying China's official stance on issues for which Beijing was criticised abroad (Zhang, 2008). Since the end of the Cold War, the PRC started to release these documents to "explain China's policy positions" and avoid misinterpretations in a context where the country was not fully understood by the international community (Wang, 2008, p. 268). It can be claimed that these papers were (and still are) part of Beijing's public diplomacy strategy since they were employed to project a positive image of China to people in other countries.

In the following twenty years, Beijing's economic growth and increased military assertiveness contributed to the idea of a Chinese Threat (Zhou and Esteban, 2018). As a consequence, China committed to the development of soft power tools to manage its reputation effectively (Shambaugh, 2015) and to make other countries acknowledge PRC's newly acquired relevance in the international setting (Sterling, 2018; Zhou and Esteban, 2018). In particular, Beijing developed its public diplomacy in five main areas: the involvement of Chinese nationals living in foreign states; the investment in the creation of international broadcasting; the 2004 formation of the Public Diplomacy Division (later renamed Public Diplomacy Office) inside the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; the establishment of numerous Confucius Institutes abroad; and, finally, the hosting of international events, such as the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing (Hall and Smith, 2013). Contextually, the relevance of soft power was recognised by Chinese political leaders⁶ (Rawnsley, 2008).

In 2013, the beginning of Xi Jinping's presidency represented a crucial turn for the development of Beijing's soft power strategy. The new leader prioritised public diplomacy initiatives in the country's agenda (Dorj, 2016) and announced a new commitment to increase Chinese soft power (Shambaugh, 2015). During the Central Foreign Affairs Meeting in November 2014, Xi Jinping affirmed that Beijing "should increase China's soft power, give a good Chinese narrative, and better communicate China's message to the world" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014, n.d.). In particular, his leadership focused on actively influencing the narratives that concern China at the international level, using what has been defined as "power of discourse", or *huayu quan* (Duchâtel, 2017, p. 59).

³ Li and Wong present a short summary of this evolution (2018), while Zhang provides an overview of Chinese public diplomacy from 1949 to the beginning of the new century (2008).

⁴ The Chinese adaptation of the English expression public diplomacy is "external propaganda", or *dui wai xuan chuan* (in opposition to the more developed "internal propaganda", or *nei xuan*); in the Chinese language, the term propaganda is perceived positively (Wang, 2008, p. 259).

⁵ The SCIO became one of the main actors of subsequent Chinese soft power efforts (Shambaugh, 2015; Dorj, 2016).

⁶ This was evident in Hu Jintao's statements at the 2004 Seminar on China's Public Diplomacy (Wang, 2008) and at the 17th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (Dorj, 2016; Albert, 2018), which were reiterated in 2012 (Li and Wong, 2018).

The achievement of this power, based on “persuasion”, is the main goal pursued by Beijing’s “propaganda work” (Rolland, 2020, p. 27), and it is important to notice that, since 2014, this commitment to soft power has been connected with the development of the BRI (Zhou and Esteban, 2018).

Coherently, in the following years, the Chinese engagement in soft power increased, as reflected by the report presented by Xi Jinping in front of the 19th Chinese Communist Party National Congress in 2017. On this occasion, the president emphasised the significant growth of “China’s cultural soft power and the international influence of Chinese culture”, while setting the future goal to “tell China’s stories well, present a true, multi-dimensional, and panoramic view of China, and enhance our country’s cultural soft power” (Xinhua, 2017, n.d.). Meaningfully, the BRI was presented as one of the main achievements of Chinese diplomacy and as one of the main priorities to foster “international cooperation” through investments and “people-to-people connectivity” (ibid.).

Considering the current goals of China’s soft power, the country’s first objective is to erase the negative reputation it has abroad. Moreover, the PRC is employing its soft power to increase its relevance at the global level. In this respect, the BRI became one of the core concretisations of Xi Jinping’s strategy of the “new round of opening to the world”, or *xin yi lun duiwai kaifang* (Cohen, 2015, p. 3). In this framework, the president presented the BRI as part of the “China Dream” of national rejuvenation (Ohashi, 2018, p. 86) aimed at restoring China’s glory and overcoming the “Century of Humiliation” started when colonialism stripped the country of its international status (Li and Wong, 2018, pp. 36–37). Coherently, Xi Jinping underlined the necessity to build a “Community of Shared Destiny” that, beyond infrastructural connectivity, would entail the exchange of ideas and values (Callahan, 2016, p. 2). In this context, the BRI became the instrument employed by the PRC to connect such a community (Rolland, 2020), using public diplomacy to foster the acceptance of this project (Ekman, 2017). Still, as observed below, China has not yet reached its full potential in the ability to influence other states, since this community lacks common values on which the cooperation should be based. The success of the BRI will depend, in this sense, on China’s ability to propose – besides economic interests – a shared cultural and identity framework to engage participants and overcome criticism (Zhao, 2019).

The BRI and China’s soft power

The BRI and its denomination

As anticipated, the BRI was for the first time presented to the world through two speeches delivered by Xi Jinping in which the Chinese leader announced the development of land and maritime corridors to strengthen cooperation with China (Wang, 2015). While the initiative was gradually open to Asian and European countries, also through the establishment of parallel bodies such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Zhou and Esteban, 2018), the BRI became one of the most important Chinese foreign policies, as attested by the chapter dedicated to the initiative in the country’s 13th Five Year Plan in 2016 and by its inclusion in the Constitution of the Chinese Communist Party on the occasion of the 19th Congress in 2017 (Zhao, 2019). Only the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 seemed to pose a major challenge to the development of the BRI (Zou, 2020).

At this point, it is interesting to analyse the peculiar history of the denomination of the BRI. In 2013, the project was originally described as a New Silk Road, but the initiative was officially denominated ‘One Belt, One Road’ in English (Li, 2017), a translation of the Chinese expression *yi dai yi lu* (Magri, 2017). In Chinese the term ‘belt’ is connected with the concept of “bringing someone/something along”, and the one of ‘one road’ is not only a reference to the Silk Road but also to the idea of “an entire journey”, presenting the initiative as a tool that “brings the world together on a journey toward harmonious development” (Sidaway and Woon, 2017, pp. 601–602). Moreover, in English, subsequent documents changed the ‘One Belt, One Road’ denomination to BRI. This change was done not only because various diplomats proposed alternative English translations for the original Chinese expression, but also because the project evolved into comprehending many different routes and not just one single road (Li, 2017).

In general, China demonstrated to be particularly attentive in the choice of this denomination. For instance, the name Silk Road was not employed for various reasons: the expression Silk Road has a German⁷ and not Chinese authorship; moreover, this word was already used in diplomatic campaigns of other countries in the last thirty years⁸ (Li, 2017). Probably China intended to distance itself from these antecedents. Furthermore, it is interesting to notice that, in referring to the BRI, Chinese authorities use the term “strategy” when addressing the Chinese public but prefer the less aggressive one of “initiative” with outsiders (Bhattacharya, 2016, p. 322; see also Li, 2017; Zhao, 2019).

The narrative of the ‘Silk Road Spirit’

The Chinese leadership proved to understand the relevance of “strategic narratives” and put much effort into the determination of the best way to promote the BRI (Zeng, 2019, p. 4). The main concept that characterises the narrative surrounding the initiative is the historical Silk Road and, since its conception, the project has been presented as an attempt to revitalise these ancient commercial routes. Therefore, it is not surprising that in various countries the BRI has assumed the name of “New Silk Road” (Silin *et al.*, 2017, p. 2), while official Chinese documents mention the Silk Road and its historical significance. As a matter of fact, the use of this Silk Road rhetoric in China predates the BRI. Since the early 1990s, Beijing used the idea of reviving the Silk Road through the construction of bridges to connect Eurasia (Dadabaev, 2018), as it is also evident in the 1993 Western Development Strategy (Zhou and Esteban, 2018) and the 1999 Go Out policy (Magri, 2017).

More recently, the concept of the Silk Road was associated with the BRI, given that in the PRC the ancient Silk Road is connected with a very positive image of China, portrayed as a strong and united power at the centre of a massive network of trading routes (Kaczmariski, 2015). Moreover, the idea is that while the ancient Silk Road allowed the connection of

⁷ The term Silk Road, in original *Seidenstraße*, was coined by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877 (Li, 2017; Silin *et al.*, 2017). Then, in 1903, the French sinologist Chavannes was the first to include sea routes under the concept of the Silk Road (Liu and Dunford, 2016).

⁸ The concept of the Silk Road was employed in the construction of diplomatic initiatives by Japan, South Korea, the United States, and India (Wang, 2015; Pantucci and Lain, 2016a; Dadabaev, 2018). For a detailed presentation of the use of the term Silk Road in diplomacy after the end of the Second World War, see Winter (2020).

ancient cultures, today the new routes are meant to give China instruments to open up to the rest of the world (Wang, 2015), reviving routes to foster once again the connections between Asia and Europe (Li, 2017). Therefore, the reference to the concept of the ancient Silk Road itself can be considered “a discursive strategy”, which is based on a narrative that shapes how the state perceives itself and others in the international arena (Dadabaev, 2018, p. 31).

This reference can also be used to build the “metaphor” of the ‘Silk Road Spirit’ (Liu and Dunford, 2016, p. 4), as outlined in the document “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road”⁹, published in 2015 to delineate the guidelines of the BRI. The concept of the ‘Silk Road Spirit’ was firstly codified in its pages, where it is specified that the spirit of “peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit” was developed more than two thousand years ago when “the diligent and courageous people of Eurasia explored and opened up several routes of trade and cultural exchanges”; the same spirit is expected to be revived in the 21st century through the establishment of the BRI¹⁰ (NDRC, 2015, n.d.). Such a ‘Silk Road Spirit’ is important because it is used to rhetorically justify the BRI. This idea allows the initiative to become a “cultural metaphor” that connects all the economic ventures designed as parts of a new Silk Road (Sidaway and Woon, 2017, p. 593). Simply put, the reference to the concept of the Silk Road is “the story China is now telling the world to boost its soft power” (Mathews, 2019, p. 4), demonstrating that the “cultural capital” at the basis of the country’s soft power comes not only from its successful economic model but also from its past (Rawnsley, 2008, p. 284).

Furthermore, the image of the Silk Road as a path that starts in China to reach the outside world is not only considered particularly appealing for the Chinese domestic public (Cui, 2018) but also useful to open communications with external actors (Kaczmarek, 2015). In this sense, the Silk Road rhetoric is unique and beneficial as it allows underlining the shared historical heritage of different states (Dadabaev, 2018). The Silk Road offers the possibility “to find points of cultural connection through the language of shared heritage to gain regional influence and loyalty” to countries involved (Winter, 2016a, p. 10). In the particular case of the PRC, the BRI exploits common heritage as a tool to build a positive image of China (Sterling, 2018). Hence, the use of the concept of the Silk Road can be considered part of a “discursive strategy” that allows engaging outsiders (Dadabaev, 2018, p. 31).

In practice, the BRI is presented in a positive way both for domestic and foreign eyes through the allusion to the Silk Road history (Kaczmarek, 2015). The main narrative used in connection with the BRI is that both economic and cultural connections help develop prosperity, as demonstrated by the history of the ancient Silk Road (Winter, 2016b). However, the reference to the Silk Road implies a precise and intentional framing of history, underlining its peaceful elements, but omitting the negative ones – such as diseases, disputes, wars, etc. – which are also correlated with the ancient routes (Winter, 2020). This attitude can be considered an attempt to control the narrative around the initiative since China assumed an active role in communicating the BRI in a reversal of previous narrations of the Silk Road. While at the times of the ancient Silk Road merchants brought back to Europe goods and astonishing stories about China – as in the case of Marco Polo – now the PRC is an active agent in

⁹ From this point onward, the expression “Vision and Actions” will be used to indicate this document.

¹⁰ These same concepts were reiterated by Xi Jinping during the 2017 first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (Xinhua, 2017).

shaping the narrative of the BRI for the goal of opening itself to the world and establishing a wider Eurasian market (Wang, 2015).

Another element to consider is that the ‘Silk Road Spirit’ narrative can be seen as the evolution of the approach based on “harmony” often used in the PRC (Nordin and Weissmann, 2018, pp. 240–241). The official discourse created by Beijing around the BRI emphasises the importance of intercultural dialogue, respect of diversity (Dobra-Manco, 2014) and cooperation with international organizations (Benabdallah, 2019). In this way, the BRI is presented as a project that upholds values shared at the international level. However, at the same time, the BRI allows Beijing to emphasise traditional Chinese values and culture (Naseem and Javaid, 2019). It could seem that the BRI entails two contradictory purposes, namely the respect of international peaceful cooperation and the enhancement of a Chinese model that opposes the Western *status quo*. However, as accounted in the next section, this potential incongruence is solved by the fact that China’s goal is presented as the one of peacefully modifying the state of global relations to achieve the abovementioned community of common destiny under its guidance.

The soft power components of the BRI

The BRI is often considered a strategy meant for accomplishing “the great power dream” of China, that is, establishing an international order centred around the PRC (Bhattacharya, 2016, p. 312). As such, the BRI is often presented, especially by Xi Jinping, as a nationalistic enterprise (Nordin and Weissmann, 2018). While the PRC depicts itself as a “new type of great power”, the BRI is used to create empathy with those states and actors involved in the plan (Benabdallah, 2019, p. 103). Although this behaviour created the suspect that China’s goal was to export its development model in opposition to the Western one (Fukuyama, 2016), Beijing proved to be able to challenge the existing system through the alignment with international institutions, thus increasing its perceived legitimacy (Benabdallah, 2019). As mentioned above, China’s initiative combined two goals that appear contradictory: the proposal of a Chinese-led international community and the enhancement of the country’s reputation as a cooperative international actor. Remarkably, the abovementioned “Vision and Actions” document both underlines the goal of building “a community of shared interests, destiny and responsibility” and affirms that the BRI is based on the values of cooperation, inclusiveness, and respect for international rules (NDRC, 2015, n.d.).

In general, the BRI is aimed at portraying China as a “new type of rising power”, or *xinxing daguo*, so to reduce the perceived threat in other countries and avoid negative outcomes, such as the perils of a Thucydides trap dynamic (Bondaz, 2015, p. 6). Hence, the BRI is a foreign policy aimed at projecting “an image of China as a benevolent, responsible global player” through soft power and cultural diplomacy strategies (Dobra-Manco, 2014, p. 34). Indeed, the soft power element of the BRI has been interpreted not only as a source of improvement of China’s image abroad but also of increased relevance within international organizations (Cui, 2018).

The idea of the BRI as a tool for rallying soft power, and not only as an economic instrument, is explicitly evident in governmental documents, such as the 2015 “Vision and Actions” document. Here, the development of people-to-people bonds was identified as one

of the main cooperation priorities¹¹ for the BRI (NDRC, 2015). This whole segment of the document, which will be analysed further below, provides a list of types of public and cultural diplomacy activities to implement, representing core elements of a soft power strategy.

It is, therefore, evident that the BRI's soft power represents "a gateway for China with the capability to influence" (Sterling, 2018, p. 104). First of all, the fact that China is the wealthiest country participating in the BRI is considered a possible source of soft power in itself, because economic primacy tends to be linked with "culture dominance" (Sparks, 2018, p. 93). Moreover, China's potential influence went hand in hand with the growing number of territories that got involved in the initiative (Naseem and Javaid, 2019). In this context, the BRI employs cultural diplomacy to internationalise Chinese culture, not only relying on economic cooperation but also on people-to-people relations (Sterling, 2018).

At this point, it is possible to observe that the BRI and Chinese soft power are connected on two different levels: on the one hand, the projects under the BRI – especially the ones regarding people-to-people diplomacy – can be considered tools aimed at enhancing China's soft power; on the other hand, however, Beijing needs to employ its soft power, through public diplomacy, to create a positive and non-threatening image of the initiative. Consequently, China is implementing a "charm offensive" towards target states to promote the establishment of the BRI (Yu, 2017, p. 353). Especially after 2018, Xi Jinping emphasised the necessity to ensure the support of foreign publics, prioritising the 'people-to-people' aspect of the initiative exemplified in projects focusing on culture, education, science, and tourism (Rolland, 2019).

Public and cultural diplomacy initiatives within the BRI

Considering the public and cultural diplomacy strategies implemented by Beijing on the ground, since 2013 the BRI has involved investments in the area of cultural and international cooperation, in projects regarding art, cinematography, museums, cultural heritage, tourism, etc. (Winter, 2020). Therefore, it is evident that China has ambitious objectives with regards to the soft power generated by the BRI, trying to become "a leader of cultural diplomacy" (Dobra-Manco, 2014, p. 42). This approach allows Beijing to form a positive perception of China in foreign public opinions, and this aspect is particularly crucial in the democratic countries involved in the BRI, where the views of the civil society are relevant in shaping the decision-making process. Thus, starting from the abovementioned "Vision and Actions" document, it is useful to offer an outline¹² of the various typologies of public diplomacy projects delineated in the 'people-to-people bond' section to grasp the scope of China's soft power efforts within the BRI.

In the area of education, the pre-existent project of the Confucius Institutes was enhanced within the BRI (Chunwei, 2019). Furthermore, the University Alliance of the Silk Road was established in 2015 (Sharma, 2015), while Chinese universities and educational programmes were founded abroad (Liu and Sukumaran, 2017). Even more importantly, the 2016 'Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative', issued by the Chinese Ministry of

¹¹ These are policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade and financial integration, and people-to-people bonds (NDRC, 2015). Interestingly, the section devoted to people-to-people diplomacy takes up much more space than the others.

¹² For a more complete list, see Appendix 1.

Education, indicated the promotion of “closer people-to-people ties” as one of its main goals (Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2016, n.d.).

Another example of cultural diplomacy connected to the BRI is the organisation of festivals and cultural events. In fact, Chinese cultural products – from art to classical music, from movies and literature to sports and martial arts – are increasingly gaining popularity through exhibitions and manifestations, while Beijing is also hosting international conferences, as in the case of the Boao Forum for Asia (Shambaugh, 2015).

Other Chinese soft power efforts concern the media since Beijing is employing its broadcasting apparatus to enhance its influence abroad. Not only Chinese traditional media outlets have recently reached global relevance (Shambaugh, 2015), but new media have also been employed in this sense. For instance, the traditional Chinese strategy of the “Panda Diplomacy”, which dates back to Mao Zedong (Rawnsley, 2008, p. 285), has been revitalised through what is defined as “digital panda diplomacy”. China’s state-owned media use tweets about pandas to “promote [...], implicitly, China’s policies”, including the BRI (Huang and Wang, 2020, pp. 132–136). Furthermore, within the BRI, the Digital Silk Road was established in 2017 (Winter, 2020) to improve “digital connectivity” around the world and enhance the Chinese global leadership in the realm of technology (Cheney, 2020, n.d.).

An additional priority of people-to-people diplomacy efforts is international cooperation in the promotion of cultural heritage. As anticipated, China often refers to its history to strengthen the narrative around the BRI. In particular, the cultural heritage connected to the ancient Silk Road became an instrument for the Chinese narrative connected to the BRI (Sterling, 2018). In this sense, the main example is the inscription of the item ‘Silk Roads: the Routes Network of Chang’an-Tianshan Corridor’ in the World Heritage List in 2014 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2014; Winter, 2020)¹³. As a consequence, other countries seemed interested in the heritage of the Silk Road and in joining other inscriptions of this kind (Winter, 2016b).

The valorisation of the Silk Road heritage is also connected with the growth of touristic opportunities in the region (Winter, 2016a). In fact, the BRI was accompanied by many projects focusing on tourism. For example, a “super-ministry” of Culture and Tourism was established in 2018 (Jaivin, 2019, p. 240). Furthermore, since 2014, the PRC negotiated visa accords with states involved in the BRI and created bodies – such as the Silk Road Tourism Promotion Union, the Maritime Silk Road Tourism Promotion Alliance, and the Tea Road International Tourism Alliance – aimed at supporting the cooperation in this area (Li *et al.*, 2020). The PRC also collaborated with European¹⁴ and global¹⁵ actors to enhance Silk Road related tourism. All these efforts seem to be successful since researchers found that the BRI has contributed in a significant way to tourism in the countries along the Silk Road (*ibid.*).

Finally, the abovementioned “Vision and Actions” document states that it is important to “strengthen cooperation with neighbouring countries on epidemic information sharing, [...]

¹³ The idea of valorising the heritage connected to the Silk Road predates the BRI, with the 1988-1997 World Decade for Cultural Development (Dobra-Manco, 2014).

¹⁴ In March 2016, the China National Tourism Administration in Budapest (Hungary) was inaugurated with the branding campaign “Beautiful China, Silk Road”, while the Europe China One Belt One Road Culture & Tourism Development Committee was created in Brussels in 2016 (Richet, Ruet and Wang, 2017, p. 110).

¹⁵ The World Tourism Organization developed a strategy aimed at enhancing the Maritime Silk Road tourism in 2019 (Winter, 2020).

and improve our capability to jointly address public health emergencies” (NDRC, 2015, n.d.). These objectives were initially pursued in different ways. The first step was the publication of the “Three-year plan for Belt and Road health cooperation (2015-2017)” by the Chinese health authorities in 2015 (National Health and Family Planning Commission, 2015). China also worked to finance medical research, promote traditional Chinese medicine and improve cooperation with international health institutions (Rolland, 2020). However, the current pandemic has dramatically modified how the world perceives health issues, especially in relation to China.

Chinese soft power and the COVID-19 pandemic

Beyond the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic had relevant economic consequences on the BRI (Zou, 2020), it is interesting to assess how, within the discursive strategy described above, China managed to contain the image damage caused by the Chinese origin of the virus¹⁶. In practice, China continued its efforts to enhance its soft power through the promotion of concepts such as the community of common destiny or the Silk Road with the purpose of creating a narrative aimed at fostering three main images of China: a “selfless hero”, a provider of help to a needing world, and a “guiding light” for others (Rolland, 2020, pp. 27–30). This is evident in the rhetoric used in the 2020 white paper regarding the fight against the virus, in which Beijing presented itself as a reliable actor who “fought shoulder to shoulder with the rest of the world”, acting promptly and helping others (SCIO, 2020, p. 4). Coherently, Beijing and Chinese businesses launched the so-called mask diplomacy to improve their reputation during the crisis of image caused by the COVID-19 (Wolf, 2020). In concrete terms, the PRC sent medical equipment and personnel to European and Asian states to present China as a “leader and benefactor in public health” in contrast to the criticisms caused by the virus outbreak (Kuo, 2020, n.d.). At the same time, the creation of a Health Silk Road (HSR) was proposed by Xi Jinping¹⁷ (Brînză, 2020; Kuo, 2020) to dispatch medical support to countries involved in the BRI (Zou, 2020).

In this context, China portrayed the BRI as a tool to overcome the economic issues caused by COVID-19, while the HSR has been connected with the image of the Silk Road as a “cargo lifeline and a bond of solidarity”, which allowed China to provide help to countries affected by the virus, fostering the idea that the PRC was supporting the abovementioned “community with a shared future for mankind” (Xinhua, 2020, n.d.). Therefore, the HSR became a crucial public diplomacy tool developed by Beijing in the framework of the BRI. Similar to the latter initiative, the HSR uses the metaphor of the Silk Road as a rhetorical basis; moreover, while the BRI has the general goal of enhancing China’s soft power, the HSR was created to solve the specific crisis of reputation arose with the pandemic.

The HSR has been described as “China’s blueprint for a new form of global health governance with Chinese characteristics” (Rolland, 2019, p. 33). This goal can also be detected in Xi Jinping’s speeches on this topic. On May 18, 2020, for instance, the president

¹⁶ Such a connection was drawn by then-President of the United States Donald Trump (The White House, 2020) and soon influenced the perception of the BRI. For instance, on January 24, 2020, an article defined the coronavirus as “the Belt and Road Pandemic” (Garret, 2020, n.d.).

¹⁷ The idea of an HSR dates back to 2016 (Ji, 2020) with mainly cultural cooperation goals (Brînză, 2020).

addressed the World Health Assembly underlining China's commitment to the fight against the virus at the global level and – in contrast to the United States – in coordination with international organizations with the main aim of working for the world's "shared future" (Niquet, 2020, n.d.). It is, thus, clear that the concept of the community of common destiny, presented as one of the drivers behind Beijing's search for soft power, became a valuable tool employed in the complicated circumstances caused by COVID-19. It not only reinforced China's narrative of being selflessly devoted to helping other states in need, but it provided a rhetorical basis to Beijing's attempt to gain a central role in shaping how the world responds to a health crisis.

However, the presentation of a positive image of China was also accompanied by "a more offensive (in both senses of the word) turn" aimed at deflecting critiques from abroad through the use of very aggressive methods, which involved the employment of fake news, personal attacks, racism, etc. (Rolland, 2020, p. 31). This assertive approach was denominated wolf-warrior diplomacy, in reference to a patriotic Chinese movie where the hero triumphs over foreign private armies (Ma, 2020). This strategy was first initiated at the end of 2019 when many embassies and diplomatic officials first joined Twitter (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2020). Then, in the context of the pandemic, the name wolf-warrior diplomacy was employed to describe how the PRC strongly opposed any criticism from abroad in spreading its narrative of the crisis¹⁸ (Ma, 2020).

To sum up, it can be claimed that the HSR and the wolf-warrior diplomacy were two faces of the same coin. On one side, the Chinese official narrative emphasised the help sent abroad and the consequent gratitude of foreign publics; on the other, it aggressively opposed anyone who criticised China with regard to the pandemic. As a consequence of this twofold behaviour, European actors¹⁹ soon became increasingly aware of the "Chinese information operations" (Small, 2020, p. 8) and the pre-existing tensions between China and the United States worsened (Zheng, 2020). Yet, this aggressive conduct is not in complete contradiction with China's effort to be perceived positively abroad, as its goal is probably to earn esteem through a tough attitude, especially in the eyes of countries dissatisfied with Western powers (Rolland, 2020). Therefore, the question around the long-term impact of the double-edged sword of China's behaviour – which combines the cooperative narrative of the Silk Road and the assertive one of the wolf-warrior diplomacy – remains open for future debate.

The bottleneck of Xinjiang

Another critical issue connected to Beijing's soft power efforts is the case of Xinjiang. This region is considered "a core area on the Silk Road Economic Belt" (NDRC, 2015, n.d.), but it also represents a source of liability for China, especially because it is home to the Uyghurs²⁰ (Pantucci and Lain, 2016b). A brief focus on this situation is very useful since it allows us to

¹⁸ Various authors provide a more precise analysis of the wolf-warrior diplomacy (Ma, 2020; Rolland, 2020; Zheng, 2020).

¹⁹ The main example in this sense came from the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, who issued a statement identifying the "global battle of narratives" surrounding the COVID-19 on March 24, 2020 (Borrell, 2020, n.d.).

²⁰ This Turkic ethnic group mainly practices the Muslim religion and speaks a language similar to Uzbek (Pantucci and Lain, 2016b).

show how China uses the soft power generated by the BRI to avoid international criticism around the very controversial policies it carries out in Xinjiang.

Even though the tension between the Uyghur ethnicity and Beijing has a long and complex history (especially after 9/11, with the association between Uyghur separatism and terrorism²¹), nowadays Uyghurs are repressed by Beijing for their distinct identity and the fact that they inhabit Xinjiang, which is rich in natural resources and a crucial junction of the BRI (Torrey, 2017). Moreover, the situation is complicated by the fact that while Xinjiang's stabilisation is vital for the success of the BRI, the project is also aimed at ensuring Beijing's control over the region. In fact, China implements a twofold strategy to secure the area: on the one hand, the PRC is developing initiatives to bring economic development to the region; on the other hand, it simultaneously implements control strategies targeting any identity element characterising the Uyghurs from Han people (Tiezzi, 2014; Shan, 2019). In practice, since 2014 (in parallel with the development of the BRI), and more vehemently after 2017, the crackdown on Uyghurs became particularly harsh²².

This strategy of strict control of Uyghurs could cause a "global controversy" in the eyes of the rest of the world (Fernando, 2019, n.d.) since Chinese actions have been considered infringements of human rights²³. In this context, despite Beijing's prioritisation of the elimination of the Uyghur's threat over its international reputation (Clarke, 2019b), China deployed its tools of soft power to justify the repression of Uyghurs to outside publics. For instance, in a public diplomacy effort, the SCIO published various white papers in parallel with the establishment of progressively more restrictive measures after the implementation of the BRI and the 2017 crackdown²⁴. In its official discourse, Beijing uses a rhetoric based on the metaphor of detention camps as educational facilities (Raza, 2019; Kirby, 2020), portraying the Uyghurs as victims of the pathology of extremism and separatism (Zenz, 2018), while always presenting the operations in Xinjiang as part of the global fight against terrorism.

The reaction of the international community to this situation has been mixed. While most Western nations condemned the Uyghurs' repression, many countries, and particularly the ones involved in the BRI and counting on China's economic support, aligned with Beijing's official positions²⁵. This shows how the BRI is used as a "financial lever to ensure support for China's anti-rights agenda" (Richardson, 2020, n.d.).

²¹ Many academics focused on how China progressively depicted violence in Xinjiang as terrorism (Castets, 2003; Kanat, 2016), using a narrative that allowed Beijing to align its repression of Uyghurs to the global fight against terrorism (Cunningham, 2012).

²² For a more complete list of repressive measures adopted in Xinjiang, see Appendix 2.

²³ The Uyghurs were sent to camps for re-education within what has been defined as "large-scale extra-judicial detention system" (Zenz, 2018, p. 2). There is also evidence of forced labour (Xu *et al.*, 2020) and of "mass sterilization" (Zenz, 2020, p. 18).

²⁴ From 2017 to 2020 six white papers concerning Xinjiang and the Uyghurs were published; the same number of documents on these topics were issued in the 1996-2016 period. For a more complete list of public diplomacy initiatives related to Xinjiang, see Appendix 3.

²⁵ The main example of this alignment dates back to July 2019 when twenty-two (Western) states sent a letter to the UN condemning the situation in Xinjiang, soon followed by thirty-seven countries praising the counterterrorism efforts perpetrated by Beijing in the region (Sciorati, 2019). This alignment to China is also evident in the case of countries with strong ties with Uyghurs, such as Muslim states (Hayes, 2020), like Central Asian states (Sciorati, 2019) and Turkey (Erdemir and Kowalski, 2020). Moreover, even European states involved in the BRI, like Greece and Hungary, obstructed the statements denouncing Beijing's violations of human rights proposed by the European Union (Liu, 2020).

Conversely, the BRI itself could become a tool for states to “apply diplomatic pressure” over China to address its treatment of Uyghurs (Hayes, 2019, n.d.). Only the future will tell us if states involved in the BRI will be able to use their leverage to deter the PRC from repressing the Uyghurs, or if the economic relevance of the PRC will make them value profits over upholding human rights. In this sense, foreign publics play a relevant role. If Beijing’s soft power fails to convince foreign audiences of the advantages of the BRI, the reasonability of Uyghurs’ treatment and China’s actions in general, a vocal public opposition may push democratic countries – where the orientation of the civil society plays a relevant role in influencing governments – to distance themselves from Beijing.

Conclusion

This paper showed that, beyond the economic and geopolitical implications of the project, the BRI also implies a crucial soft power element. In particular, while the BRI constitutes a suitable framework where public diplomacy programmes can be implemented, the initiative itself relies on the ability of China to build a positive reputation among external publics to be successful. Hence, it is evident that the BRI and Chinese soft power are co-dependent. For this reason, Beijing is particularly interested in shaping the narrative around the BRI to achieve its soft power ambitions. First, the PRC is intentionally presenting the Silk Road emphasising both the historical relevance of China and its ability to create peaceful economic linkages, especially through the use of the metaphor of the ‘Silk Road Spirit’. Second, in the context of the pandemic, China is depicting itself as a leader for the global fight against the Corona virus, underlining the cooperation of the HSR and silencing any external criticism with the wolf-warrior diplomacy. Third, Beijing portrays the Uyghurs as terrorists to justify the harsh repression implemented in Xinjiang, exploiting the economic linkages created through the BRI to avoid international disapproval.

More in general, these key outputs underline the importance of soft power in the contemporary world for a major global player like China. On the one hand, it is evident that Beijing put much effort in shaping the narrative of the Silk Road and including public and cultural diplomacy projects within the BRI, i.e., one of its main foreign policies. On the other hand, we provided evidence of how the country has been using the BRI initiative as a valid instrument to exert influence abroad, employing the Silk Road narrative and the people-to-people connections to boost its overall soft power.

This tactic faces relevant obstacles, opening the question of the effectiveness of the BRI as a soft power strategy. In general, it is very difficult to assess the results of this initiative in terms of soft power, since the impact of this kind of strategies is complicated to measure²⁶ (Shambaugh, 2015; Albert, 2018; Yağci, 2018). Nevertheless, this paper underlined some specific problems in Beijing’s behaviour, starting with its attempt to present China favourably in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic or the treatment of the Uyghurs. The PRC tried to clean its image around these issues, for example through the publication of *ad hoc* white papers. However, “China’s soft power campaign is limited by the dissonance between the image that China aspires to project and the country’s actions” (Albert, 2018, n.d.). This creates a lack of

²⁶ Garcia-Herrero and Xu (2019) and Voon and Xu (2020) provide studies on the BRI’s soft power results.

credibility because this incoherence makes the publics abroad perceive the state as undeserving of trust. Therefore, the BRI's soft power success is tied to China's ability to align its narrative with its actions. The celebrated 'Silk Road Spirit' of "peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit" (NDRC, 2015, n.d.) should also be applied in those situations – such as the opposition to any criticism around the management of the pandemic and the human rights violations in Xinjiang – for which China is condemned abroad.

Finally, this paper suggests that it would be relevant for future research to examine further the deep interconnection between the BRI and China's public diplomacy strategy. Beyond the economic and geopolitical components usually studied in academic research, more attention should be given to the soft power connotation of the initiative. Moreover, after eight years from its establishment, it would be interesting to measure the impact of the BRI on the general perception of China in foreign publics, especially in Western democracies where the civil society can influence governmental decisions. Last but not least, it would be crucial to evaluate the long-term effects of the discrepancies between narratives and behaviours, with the consequent lack of credibility highlighted in the previous sections.

Supplementary material: The supplementary material for this paper can be found at: https://osf.io/ahj2y/?view_only=9242df34d1314a70b5246de69983b9e5

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