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## **Public diplomacy and the reemergence of China**

A case study of how China's Belt & Road public diplomacy reflects its soft power ambitions

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# Abstract

The reemergence of China as a global Great Power raises multiple questions regarding how China will exert its influence on the international arena. Arguably the most important feature of China's current foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can be considered a manifestation of China's contemporary ascendancy. The establishment of the BRI hinges on an extensive diplomatic effort by China, of which public diplomacy is a central component. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how China's soft power goals and soft power ambitions are reflected in Chinese public diplomacy relating to the BRI. The political theories of realism and constructivism are used in conjunction with previous research to operationalize China's soft power goals and strategies into distinct frames. This paper then conducts an in-depth descriptive case study using qualitative content analysis, outlining explicit and implicit reflections of these frames in the primary material. The study concludes that China's soft power goals and soft power strategies feature extensively in the primary material.

*Keywords:* Soft power, public diplomacy, China, foreign policy, realism, constructivism, Belt and Road Initiative

*Word count:* 9910

# Table of contents

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	4
1.1 Research question & purpose.....	5
1.2 Background.....	6
1.3 Relevance & limitations.....	6
<b>2. Theory &amp; previous research</b> .....	7
2.1 Soft Power & China’s international attractiveness deficit.....	7
2.1.1 Soft Power.....	7
2.1.2 China’s international attractiveness deficit.....	9
2.2 Realism & soft power goals.....	9
2.2.1 Realism.....	9
2.2.2 Soft power goals.....	9
2.3 Constructivism, public diplomacy & soft power strategy.....	12
2.3.1 Constructivism & public diplomacy.....	12
2.3.2 Soft power strategy.....	13
<b>3. Method</b> .....	16
3.1 Qualitative content analysis.....	16
3.2. Material.....	20
3.3 Methodological reflections.....	20
<b>4. Analysis</b> .....	20
4.1 Analysis of the primary material.....	21
4.2 Results.....	26
<b>5. Conclusions &amp; reflections</b> .....	28
<b>6. References</b> .....	30
6.1 Primary material.....	32

## 1. Introduction

Throughout history, many great empires and civilizations have fallen to the tides of time, conflict, or decay, with a few notable exceptions. Among the continuous civilizations of the world China is one of the oldest, if not the oldest (Leandro, 2018, p.49). Historically a great global power, China only quite recently began fully recovering from what they refer to as the “the century of callous humiliations” (Leandro, 2018, p.49-50). China’s ‘economic miracle’ began in the 1990’s, and after three decades of rapid economic growth China has attained political influence and military power that is unprecedented in its modern history (ibid.).

In 2010 China became the second largest economy in the world (Lee, 2016, p.102). China has given reassurances that its global rise would happen peacefully and that China does not seek hegemony, but both Western powers and China’s neighbors are concerned that China is seeking to alter existing power relations and pursue imperialist policies (Lee, 2016, p.102-103).

There are multiple ways to consider China’s rise and its foreign policy objectives. Agnew divides them into two general categories: “just another in a long succession of Great Powers rising (...) or a completely new phenomenon because of its singular history” (Agnew, 2010, p.570).

The interest of this paper is to advance the understanding of China’s rise, as well as which theory of international relations holds the most explanatory strength in describing it. Taking an analytical approach more in line with the first category presented by Agnew, this paper takes the form of a descriptive case study, using a combination of realist theory of international relations, constructivist methodology and framing analysis to conduct this research. The methodology of the paper will be outlined further in section 3.1.

The object of analysis in this paper is a public diplomacy document relating to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a global infrastructure project unilaterally proposed by China. Specifically, this paper is concerned with the social construction of the project, and how China advances its soft power goals and strategies related to the BRI in its public diplomacy. A synthesis of realism, constructivism and relevant previous research will be used to outline the relevant soft power goals and strategies that will be looked for in the primary material. This paper will limit its scope to one single document in terms of primary material in order to allow for a holistic and in-depth analysis that aims to cover all the identified goals and

strategies. The presentation of the theories used in this paper can be found in sections 2.1-2.3.2, as well as the descriptions of the relevant soft power goals and strategies.

The following section will clarify the chosen research question and outline the purpose of asking it. In section 1.2 some relevant background regarding the BRI will be presented, and section 1.3 will outline the relevance and limitations of the study.

### **1.1 Research question & purpose**

The research question this paper seeks to answer is the following:

*How, and to what extent, are China's soft power strategies and soft power goals reflected in its BRI public diplomacy?*

The purpose of the study is essentially twofold. The first aim is primarily a descriptive one - to investigate how China seeks to frame itself and its role in the BRI using public diplomacy, and how this reflects China's soft power ambitions. This purpose is mirrored in the research question. The paper is thus a descriptive case study, emphasizing *how* China's soft power goals and strategies are reflected. It is a case study in the sense that it investigates a specific case of a great power rising, in this case China (Esaiasson, 2019, p.38). Furthermore, it is a case of a great power rising as understood in the theoretical framework of realism.

This leads into the secondary purpose of this study, to test the explanatory strength of realism in this particular case. The motivation for this is connected to Agnew's statement regarding the divergent opinion on how the rise of China should be understood. The existence of such a debate should warrant further research. In order to fulfill the broader scientific purpose of a descriptive case study, this paper aims to draw conclusions regarding China's rise as a global great power beyond what is readily visible in the primary material (Esaiasson, 2019, p.37). This will be done by using a clear and transparent set of operationalizations for the soft power goals and strategies and constructing these operationalizations in line with the theoretical material (ibid).

Before discussing the relevance and limitations of this study, some background regarding the BRI is presented in the following section.

## **1.2 Background**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as the One Belt One Road Initiative (OBOR), was initially presented by China's president Xi Jinping in 2013 during visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia (Gao, 2018, p.321). The project can be considered as one of massive economic, cultural and geopolitical significance. May Hongmei Gao writes that President Xi considers the purpose of the BRI as a project to revive the Ancient Silk Road, to share the Chinese Dream, and to replicate Chinese economic development in the rest of the world (Gao, 2018, p.321). Gao further argues that president Xi has made the BRI the most important feature of China's foreign policy (Gao, 2018, p.328).

This statement does not seem far-fetched when considering the scope of the project. China has said that it will invest US\$4 trillion in BRI-participant countries (Gao, 2018, p.328). This amount greatly exceeds that of the Marshall Plan, which, adjusted for inflation, amounts to roughly US\$130 billion (ibid). A project of this magnitude arguably merits extensive research.

The next section will delve into further detail regarding the relevance and limitations of this study.

## **1.3 Relevance & limitations**

Utilizing a theoretical framework that is commonly accepted, in this case realist theory of international relations, gives the research a certain accessibility. The operationalizations constructed with the help of the theoretical material allow for reproducibility, and the conclusions regarding China's soft power foreign policy are applicable beyond this study. The use of realism is arguably also relevant because China is perceived as a threat by many western and neighboring countries. As will be seen in section 2.2.1, realism is well suited for analyzing security-related concepts and power balancing.

Limiting the scope to one source has clear drawbacks, and limits the generalizability of the findings, which hampers one of the primary objectives of any research paper (Esaiasson, 2019, p.28). A comparative case study on expressions of soft power could also aid in judging whether China should be considered a typical great power or a unique phenomenon, as using multiple units of analysis allows for more precise conclusions and generalizations (Esaiasson, 2019, p.91-92).

Another general limitation of this paper is the occasional difficulty in distinguishing between hard- and soft power. This limitation will be minimized by not deviating far from the secondary material and

connecting the strategies and goals to relevant soft power resources.

While this paper takes a realist view of the Chinese state, it should be of relevance for anyone attempting to understand China's rise as a global power. Although this paper lacks the scope to delve into Chinese particularity, anyone attempting to do so could benefit from the conclusions and descriptions made in this paper. Some more general points regarding soft power, realism, constructivism, and public diplomacy could also be extracted from this paper for further research.

The following sections outline the relevant theoretical material and previous research, starting with the concept of soft power.

## **2. Theory & previous research**

This section will outline the relevant theoretical material and construct the soft power goals and strategies for the analysis. The aim is to construct frames of China's soft power goals and strategies that closely align with the previous research, and thereby maintaining scientific validity, or in other words analyzing that which is intended (Esaiasson, 2019, p.93). Therefore, the theory and the previous research are presented in conjunction.

### **2.1 Soft power & China's international attractiveness deficit**

#### **2.1.1 Soft power**

The concept of soft power was introduced by Joseph Nye in the book *Bound to Lead* in 1990, later defining it as follows: "soft power- getting others to want the outcomes that you want, coopts people rather than coerces them (...) [it] rests on the ability to shape the preferences of others" (Nye, 2005, p.5). Conversely, hard power refers to more coercive forms of power, such as military force or economic sanctions (ibid). There are three resources that a state can utilize to generate soft power: "its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)" (Nye, 2011, p.57).

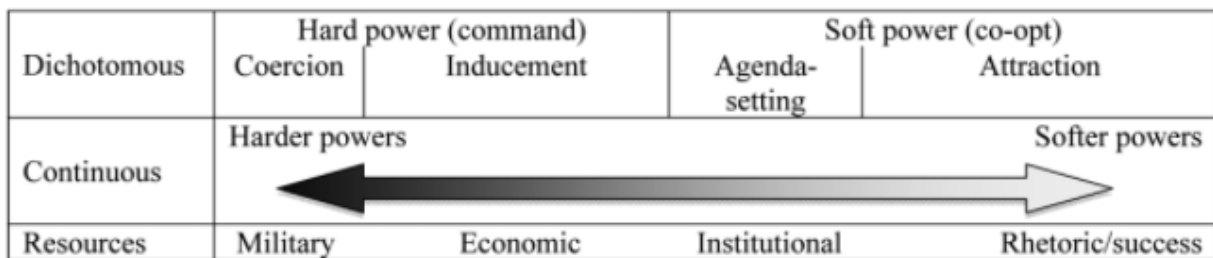
Nye later added economic capabilities as a component of a state's attractiveness, writing that "economic resources can produce soft power behavior as well as hard" (Nye, 2011, p.52). Distinguishing between the

hard- and soft aspects of an economic relationship can be somewhat arbitrary, but Nye writes as an example that the desire of countries to join the European Union can be seen as a sign of Europe's economic soft power (Nye, 2011, p.58). Based on that, a similar assertion could be made regarding the willingness of countries to participate in BRI projects as an example of an economic soft power resource. Increasing China's economic attractiveness can therefore be understood as a soft power goal, and any attempts to gain such economic soft power through public diplomacy can therefore broadly be seen as an economic soft power strategy.

These four soft power resources will act as the basis-point from which this paper will operationalize Chinese soft power goals and strategies into concrete themes and frames. Generally speaking, any public diplomacy goal or strategy that can be connected to the gain of any of these four resources can broadly be referred to as a soft power goal or strategy.

The figure below was made by Steven B. Rothman (Rothman, 2011, p.51), and is based on an earlier diagram made by Nye (Nye, 2005, p.8). This spectrum is helpful when interpreting the secondary material and attempting to identify BRI soft power goals and strategies. The focus of this paper will primarily be on attempting to operationalize and investigate the Chinese soft power goals and strategies that fall on the 'softer' side of the spectrum of power: agenda-setting and attraction, and to a lesser extent economic inducement.

Figure 1:



Jan P. Voon & Xinpeng Xu make the assertion that increasing soft power is analogous with increasing international image (Voon & Xu, 2020, p.120). The assertion that increasing soft power is analogous with improving one's international image also resonates with Nye's description of the four resources of soft power outlined earlier, measuring the effectiveness of the resources based on how they are perceived by other states.



### **2.1.2 China's international attractiveness deficit**

It is generally accepted among Chinese scholars and politicians that one of China's greatest strategic threats is its current international image (Voon & Xu, 2020, p.120). The conception (in the west and other places) that China as an economic power will challenge the global role of the US and the liberal world order generally has given rise to the "China threat theory" (CTT) (Nymalm, 2020, p.12). China's ascendancy is sometimes depicted even more severely by western media and politicians, framing it as a "threat (...) to the future of the 'free world'" (Nymalm, 2020, p.17). This can be seen in the reporting on the BRI that happens in the west, urging caution in the face of expanding Chinese influence, and often criticizing the BRI as a form of neo-colonialism (Gao, 2018, p.328-329).

## **2.2 Realism & soft power goals**

The following section intends to provide the reasons for choosing a realist theoretical framework in outlining China's soft power goals, highlighting some of the theoretical assumptions within realism and how a realist theoretical framework can be used when creating analytical frames.

### **2.2.1 Realism**

Political realism, also referred to as 'Power politics' or 'realpolitik', is the oldest and most frequently adopted theory of international relations (Donnelly, 2013, p.32). The name of the theory is rooted in the claim by its followers that they describe the world "as it is, not as it ought to be" (Joobani, 2013, p.18). Rationality and state-centrism are considered central premises of realist theory, and at the core of realist theory lies the conjunction of a world operating within a system of egoism and anarchy, and the resulting imperative of power politics (Donnelly, 2013, p.33).

Realists are skeptical towards the power of norms and institutions, largely seen as "reducible to the material interests of the powerful" (Donnelly, 2013, p.48). The international system is rather one of self-reliance, and states are concerned with their own security (Joobani, 2013, p.18). This does not mean that the realist account of state motives is necessarily narrow and centered on the domination of the 'other', as realist theory allows the inclusion of "wealth, advantage and flourishing (...) peaceful coexistence (...) [and] prosperity" in state motivations (Donnelly, 2013, p.43).

Realists are concerned with the systematic balancing of power between actors in the international system,

and therefore also with alliance formation among states (Donnelly, 2013, p.44-46). Alliance formation can roughly be based on how states relate to each other in terms of amity or enmity, if there are competing or common interests between them, and if cooperation is conducive to balancing against a common enemy (Donnelly, 2013, p.47). One important point to make is that institutions and norms are not completely disregarded in realist theory, as Donnelly writes that the “actual impact of international norms and institutions is empirical (...) at the global level, norms and institutions can have considerable influence” (Donnelly, 2013, p.48).

Within a realist framework soft power can not only be understood, but goals related to soft power can be outlined using the analytic toolkit realism affords. Nye affirms that realism is compatible with the soft power concept, writing that a “commonsense realist takes into account the full spectrum of power resources, including ideas, persuasion, and attraction” (Nye, 2011, p.13-14). Wilson also draws a connection between Nye’s claim and classical realist thinker Hans Morgenthau’s statement that “all foreign policy, then, is a struggle for the minds of men” (Wilson, 2013, p.12). Soft power resources are immaterial and hold their power through the perception of others, as shown in section 2.1.1. A realist state’s approach to soft power would therefore be concerned with altering how the intended audience perceives it, in a way that increases its soft power.

### **2.2.2 Soft power goals**

The goal of public diplomacy is to improve a nation's international image, and improving a nation’s international image is essentially synonymous with gaining soft power. Using a synthesis of previous research and realist theory, four Chinese BRI soft power goals will be presented as separate frames in the following section:

#### *Goal 1 - Facilitating China’s rise as a great power*

There exists a prevalent perception that China can use BRI projects to gain geopolitical influence and become the center of a new form of globalization (Gao, 2018, p.328). Combined with the realist assertion that “a lust for power is a defining characteristic of states”, China can be said to be working towards the establishment of a global institution in the form of the BRI, where China occupies the central position (Wilson, 2013, p.3). China still has a military deficit compared to the U.S. and India, and therefore favors securing influence through economic investments and different modes of diplomacy (Winter, 2019, p.21). This supports the assertion that in its realist calculus, China prefers using public diplomacy to facilitate its

rise as a great power. Regarding China's goal of being at the center of the BRI, Chang writes that China's soft power ambitions can be reflected in its BRI rhetoric, and that China aims to regain its international status and high esteem through the BRI (Chang, 2019, p.26).

#### *Goal 2 - Combating the CTT*

The political leadership of China considers the U.S. goal of expanding its global dominance as a manifest global and cultural struggle, an assertion that is in line with realism and the concept of balancing power (Wilson, 2013, p.19). Relatedly, Wilson argues that China's motivation to adopt a soft power strategy has its roots in "a realist appreciation of the importance of exerting influence in the international system" (Wilson, 2013, p.26). An expectation based on the theory would then be that China seeks to attain greater amity with countries that are potential allies, and thus balance U.S. global influence.

According to Jian, counteracting the CTT is the primary motivation for China's emphasis on the importance of public diplomacy (Jian, 2011, p.73). Regarding the issue of China's negative international perception, Wilson writes that "China's employment of a soft power strategy is designed to provide supplemental evidence of its benign intentions, demonstrating to a global audience that it provides no threat either to individual states or the operation of the international system" (Wilson, 2013, p.12).

#### *Goal 3 - Increasing economic attraction*

Another issue for China that is of great domestic importance is China's continued economic growth. It is generally agreed that China aims to maintain long-term growth through international trade and capital investments (Winter, 2019, p.11). The BRI provides China with a vehicle for accelerating and sustaining this process (Gao, 2018, p.332). It is therefore imperative for China to increase their economic soft power, and to ensure high economic attraction.

#### *Goal 4 - Creating understanding for China*

Ingrid d'Hooghe argues that China has four main public diplomacy goals (d'Hooghe, 2011, p.24). The first goal is creating understanding for China's political system and policies (d'Hooghe, 2011, p.24). China wants to illustrate itself as seeking sustainable and balanced economic growth, without taking radical steps in political and economic reform (ibid.). Terms used in this context are primarily "harmonious society", and to a lesser extent "scientific development" (ibid.). The second goal is being

seen as a “stable, reliable, and responsible economic partner (...) that the international community does not have to fear” (ibid.). The third goal is being seen as a trustworthy and responsible member of the international community, and as a country willing to actively contribute to world peace (ibid.). The fourth goal mentioned by d’Hooghe is being “acknowledged and respected as an ancient, but vibrant, culture” (ibid.).

Having outlined the soft power goals that will be looked for in the material, the next section deals with the constructivist analytical framework and Chinese soft power strategies.

## **2.3 Constructivism, public diplomacy and soft power strategy**

Wilson argues that constructivists, like classical realists, are concerned with the distribution of power, but the main difference is the weight placed on the transmission of ideas (Wilson, 2013, p.14). A constructivist analysis is relevant in the context of the importance of ideas and values in the modern era, extending realist theorist Morgenthau’s acknowledgment of the “struggle for the minds of men” as a central component of international power struggle (Wilson, 2013, p.2-3).

### **2.3.1 Constructivism & public diplomacy**

Constructivist theorist Alexander Wendt writes that “the distribution of power in international politics is constituted in important part by the distribution of interests, and that the content of interests are in turn constituted in important part by ideas” (Wendt, 2003, p.135). Reus-Smit writes that “constructivists have (...) three core ontological propositions about human life” (Reus-Smit, 2013, p.224). First, normative or ideational structures are as important as material structures (ibid.). Reus-Smit cites Alexander Wendt: “Material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded” (ibid.). Second, it is important to understand how non-material structures condition actor’s identities, as identities inform interests and actions (ibid.). To explain interest formation, constructivists focus on the social identities of individuals or states (Reus-Smit, 2013, p.225). Third, agents and structures are mutually constituted (ibid.). Institutionalized norms and ideas define the meaning and identity of the individual actor and the patterns of appropriate economic, political, and cultural activity engaged in by those individuals (ibid.). All three of these propositions can be connected to the concept of soft power, defined as the ability to shape the preferences of others.

Most constructivists would argue that constructivism should not be considered a theory, but rather as an analytical framework (Reus-Smit, 2013, p.230). Therefore, there is no contradiction in taking a realist approach to understanding Chinese soft power goals, while using a constructivist framework to analyze the ways in which these goals express themselves in Chinese soft power strategies (Wilson, 2013, p.1).

Public diplomacy is defined as “a government’s process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation’s ideas and ideals, its institution and cultures, as well as its national goals and current policies” (Tuch, 1990, p.3). Public diplomacy also generally has the two goals of creating support for foreign policies and to generate better cultural understanding (Dutta-Bergman, 2006, p.104).

### **2.3.2 Soft power strategy**

Combining a constructivist framework with the previous research, the following section aims to articulate and operationalize Chinese soft power strategies in public diplomacy as five distinct frames. This is done by asking how China is attempting to use its BRI public diplomacy to create soft power.

#### *Strategy one - The harmonious world narrative*

In its rhetoric, China has criticized aspects of the international order as a self-appointed “internal critic” (Hongying, 2011, p.41). Some of these criticisms are the dominance of power politics, North-South economic disparity, intolerance of value systems, tendency towards violence and neglect of the environment (ibid.). In connection to these criticisms, China is offering its own global vision for a “harmonious world” (ibid.). The marketing of this vision can be considered a soft power strategy, as it aims to improve the perception of China’s political values and foreign policy. The vision has four main principles (Hongying, 2011, p.42):

The first is the democratization of international relations, referring to equitable participation of countries in international affairs, and broad consultation when dealing with international problems. The second is justice and common prosperity. Growing inequality is unjust and undermines peace and stability. The third is diversity and tolerance. Countries have different histories, cultures and economic situations. The fourth is peaceful resolution of international conflicts (Hongying, 2011, p.42).

### *Strategy two - The Chinese Dream narrative*

One concept that relates to both Chinese soft power goals and soft power strategies is the ‘Chinese Dream’ (Chang, 2019, p.7-8). The Chinese Dream is meant to convey President Xi’s vision for China (Chang, 2019, p.11). Chang argues that there is no firm definition of what constitutes the Chinese Dream, but that it has some implications which are helpful for understanding BRI marketing (Chang, 2019, p.12). It involves ‘the Chinese spirit’, which emphasizes harmonious order, Chinese culture and the Chinese experience of the economic miracle (ibid.). The projection of the Chinese Dream is meant to enable China to increase its influence and consolidate its position in the world by encouraging other actors to identify with Chinese civilization, and provide an alternative road and concept for constructing world order (ibid.). In this strategy, all four soft power resources can be reflected. China seeks to make its culture and political values appear attractive, its foreign policy legitimate and having moral authority and framing economic cooperation with them as desirable.

### *Strategy three - The development narrative*

China frames many countries as underdeveloped and having been left behind by previous globalization waves (Gao, 2018, p.329). In combination with that frame, China presents itself as economically successful, and able to lift these countries out of poverty through development and BRI infrastructure (ibid.). Gao argues that China uses large-scale infrastructure projects to appeal to countries wanting higher development, and thus increasing its attractiveness (ibid.). This strategy aims to increase China’s economic and foreign policy soft power resources, appearing as economically attractive and moral in its foreign policy.

### *Strategy four - Narrative of the Ancient Silk Road (ASR)*

The Chinese government and media frame the BRI as a revitalization of the ASR that connected China with Central Asia, Europe and Africa (Gao, 2018, p.327). They frame the BRI in this way by making nostalgic connections to the ASR, framing the BRI as a vehicle to replicate the Chinese economic miracle by building infrastructure for third world countries and beyond (ibid.).

Tim Winter further discusses China’s evocation of ASR history and imagery for political and diplomatic means in his book “*Geocultural Power - China’s Quest to Revive the Silk Roads for the Twenty-First Century*” (Winter, 2019). Winter argues that China is using the history and heritage of the ASR for

political ends (Winter, 2019, p.5). China has created a normative form of history related to the BRI, using the ASR as a metaphor for trade, exchange and connectivity (Winter, 2019, p.85). The vision of China's use of ASR symbolism is to create an image of a "rising Asia" in which China is the center, and thus constructing the idea of a shared cultural identity with other BRI states (Winter, 2019, p.166).

Furthermore, Jian argues that development of cultural soft power is the centerpiece of China's soft power strategy, and that the primary narrative used is the glory and continuity of its culture and civilization (Jian, 2011, p.12). The Chinese leadership considers culture as their most important source of soft power, but they limit themselves to the use of ancient culture as a soft power resource (d'Hooghe, 2011, p.25). Ancient culture is considered apolitical, and therefore harmless, while much of more contemporary culture is considered as subversive by the Chinese leadership (ibid.). This strategy mainly relates to culture as a soft power resource but can also be connected with the foreign policy soft power resource, as China is framing the two as intertwined.

#### *Strategy five - The "win-win" and "mutual respect" narratives*

Gao argues that the "win-win" narrative is the most important frame used by the Chinese government to promote the BRI (Gao, 2018, p.332). The frame contains the assertion that China is a partner not a colonist, that China is not involved in playing a zero-sum game, and that the ultimate purpose of the BRI is mutual benefit. This frame relates to the strategy of invoking the 'Chinese dream' in China's public diplomacy (ibid.). Winter argues that China attempts to convey the narrative of the 'Chinese dream' by asserting that its economic rise can be shared with other BRI member states through "win-win" cooperation (Winter, 2019, p.15). Schortgen argues that China's economic charm offensive is largely intended to present the BRI as a promising and credible alternative to Western initiatives in the quest for global economic influence and power (Schortgen, 2018, p.22).

China is aiming to increase cultural and political ties with BRI countries through economic exchange and is framing the BRI as a project based on mutual respect and mutual trust in order to make countries accept those closer ties. This frame also includes negating "power domination", and can thus be connected to the soft power goal of combating the CTT (Gao, 2018, p.329). Most of the discussions in Chinese media on the topic of public diplomacy deals with the need to offset the CTT (Wang, 2008, p.258).

This paper utilizes a constructivist methodology and ontology as it views the usage of language and the social construction of realities as interconnected (Bergström & Boréus, 2013, p.28). Constructivism

places emphasis on empirical analysis in the study of world politics, and its practitioners often employ discursive and interpretive modes of analysis (Reus-Smit, 2013, p.222-223). A constructivist approach is therefore useful when conducting a qualitative content analysis. The next section will further outline the methodological considerations of the paper and its research design.

### **3. Method**

This section outlines the paper's research design and the methodological approach used to answer the research questions. This paper takes the form of a descriptive case study, investigating one specific public diplomacy document. The chosen method of this paper is qualitative content analysis, aiming to identify expressions of soft power goals and strategies in the chosen primary material through the use of constructed frames.

#### **3.1 Qualitative content analysis**

A qualitative content analysis is useful for discovering implicit meaning within a text, as well as making analytical reflections regarding the material beyond the sum-of-the-parts approach of a quantitative content analysis (Esaiasson, 2017, p.211). For the purpose of quantifying the extent to which the various goals and strategies are present, a quantitative content analysis would have been useful. However, this paper aims to construct a more holistic picture of soft power in China's public diplomacy by analyzing selected quotes, and thus sacrifices quantitative width for qualitative depth. This narrow selection of content analyzed therefore means that there is an inability to fully convey to what extent a certain expression is present in the material.

A systematic analytical approach will be used, aiming to uncover meaning by using a thematic approach (Esaiasson, 2017, p.213). By operationalizing the goals and strategies discussed into distinct categories with clear sub-themes and related frames, the complex concept of China's soft power ambitions are thereby turned into manageable and transparent units of analysis. Framing analysis can be utilized to uncover strategic and conscious efforts to describe reality or concepts in particular ways (Esaiasson, 2017, p.218). The method is therefore relevant, as this paper ascribes a realist motivation to the Chinese state and looks for strategic uses of rhetoric to advance China's foreign policy objectives.

Formalizing complex ideational structures into simplified concepts that allow for replication is a common methodological approach when conducting a qualitative content analysis (Esaiasson, 2017, p.218). Using



a combination of previous research, inductive reflection and expectations based on the theories used, figures 2 and 3 were constructed for the purpose of enabling a systematic analytical approach. The soft power goals and strategies in these figures are compiled as distinct frames and are meant to reflect the relevant material regarding China's soft power goals and strategies outlined in sections 2.1-2.3. The objective was to deviate as little as practically possible from the previous research in the construction of the figures. Any other scientific study using a similar body of previous research should therefore be able to reproduce this study and come to similar conclusions, meaning that this paper fulfills the criteria of intersubjectivity (Bergström & Boréus, 2018, p.31-32).

By constructing the frames in figures 2 and 3 the identified goals and strategies are operationalized, and the analysis section will use these frames as its basis. This paper aims to achieve a high degree of scientific validity by operationalizing the concepts in a transparent and logical manner and thus make a more tangible contribution to the field of research (Esaïsson, 2019, p.57).

Figure 2:

<b>Soft power goals</b>	
<b>1: Facilitating China's rise as a great power</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Becoming the center of a new form of globalization through the BRI</li> <li>● Countering the influence of other great powers</li> <li>● Regaining high international status and esteem for China from the global community</li> </ul>
<b>2: Combating the CTT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Convincing the world that China has benign intentions, is contributing to world peace and is a trustworthy and reliable member of the international community</li> <li>● Demonstrating that China is not a threat to any individual state or to the established international system</li> <li>● Building amity and common interests with potential allies</li> </ul>
<b>3: Increasing economic attraction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Establishing China as the economic center of the BRI</li> <li>● Being seen as a reliable and responsible economic partner</li> <li>● Convincing BRI states of the benefits of having China as an economic partner</li> </ul>
<b>4: Creating understanding for China</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Showing that China is seeking sustainable and balanced economic growth</li> <li>● Convincing the world that China does not seek radical political or economic reform, neither in China or abroad</li> <li>● Acknowledged and respected as an ancient but vibrant culture</li> </ul>

Figure 3:

<b>Soft power strategies</b>	
<b>1: Harmonious world vision narrative</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Criticizing aspects of the current world order, specifically the dominance of power politics, North-South economic disparity, intolerance of value systems, tendency towards violence and neglect of the environment</li> <li>● Advocating for the four principles of China’s harmonious world vision: Democratization of international relations, justice and common prosperity, diversity and tolerance, and peaceful resolution of international conflicts</li> <li>● Claiming that the BRI is conducive for attaining a harmonious world</li> </ul>
<b>2: The Chinese Dream narrative</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Emphasizing harmonious order, Chinese culture and the Chinese economic miracle</li> <li>● Encouraging other nations to identify with Chinese civilization, providing an alternative road and concept for constructing world order</li> <li>● Framing the BRI as a concretization of the Chinese Dream, and as an opportunity to share China’s economic rise through win-win cooperation</li> <li>● Framing the BRI as a process of rejuvenation and revival</li> </ul>
<b>3: Development narrative</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Describing other countries as underdeveloped and left behind by globalization</li> <li>● Presenting China as able to lift countries out of poverty through development and BRI infrastructure projects</li> </ul>
<b>4: Ancient Silk Road (ASR) narrative</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Framing the BRI as a revitalization of the ASR, making nostalgic connections to a shared silk road history</li> <li>● Using the ASR as a metaphor for trade, exchange and connectivity</li> <li>● Creating an image of a rising Asia in which China is the center</li> <li>● Highlighting the continuity of China’s culture and civilization</li> </ul>
<b>5: The “win-win” and “mutual respect” narratives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Framing the BRI as a project based on mutual respect and mutual trust</li> <li>● Negating power domination</li> <li>● Claiming China does not pursue zero-sum political games</li> <li>● Portraying China as a partner, not a colonist</li> <li>● Asserting that the ultimate purpose of the BRI is mutual benefit</li> </ul>

### 3.2 Material

The aim was to identify a BRI public diplomacy document extensive enough that it could reflect most or all of the identified soft power goals and strategies, in other words a *typical* material for the chosen category (Esaïsson, 2017, p.226). The document chosen was “*The Belt and Road Initiative. Progress, Contributions and Prospects*”, by the Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, a Chinese governmental organization (OLGPBRI, 2019). In understanding China’s social construction of foreign policy through public diplomacy, a document written by a governmental organization that is meant primarily for foreign audiences seems appropriate. A study on U.S. public diplomacy confirms that documents labeled as reports are viable in the study of public diplomacy (Dutta-Bergman, 2006, p.105).

The main purpose of the secondary material was to contextualize Chinese BRI public diplomacy, make it interpretable through the chosen theoretical frameworks, and create figures 2 and 3 in order to analyze the primary material. After conducting a literature review, the secondary material that was deemed the most relevant was chosen. The majority of the secondary material used was written at western institutions, although certain secondary sources are from Chinese institutions. No purposeful distinction was made between the two in the selection of the material. There exists an extensive and broad literature on the BRI and Chinese soft power, much of which is not reflected in this paper

### 3.3 Methodological reflections

Any qualitative text analysis is limited by the preconceptions the author has before being confronted with the chosen material (Bergström & Boréus, 2013, p.31). An attempt is made to maintain some distance between the author and the observed text in the primary material, mainly through creating operationalizations based on previous research and within the framework of established theoretical traditions.

There are still limitations to this measure, and the bias of the author cannot be fully eliminated. One such bias is the author's academic background in exclusively western academic institutions, which might result in a lack of preliminary understanding of Chinese foreign policy thinking. Being aware of this and the fact the topic discussed in this paper is incredibly complex, this study attempts to maintain transparency in the formulation of analytical concepts and conclusions.

This leads the paper into the analysis section.

## 4. Analysis

Having presented the Chinese soft power goals and strategies identified in the previous research, this paper now turns to the primary material. Before delving into the primary material, a repetition of the research question:

*How, and to what extent, are China's soft power goals and soft power strategies reflected in its BRI public diplomacy?*

The following section will be dedicated to answering the research question by attempting to identify reflections of all the goals and strategies outlined in figures 2 and 3 and assessing how and to what extent they are present in the primary material.

#### **4.1. Analysis of the primary material**

Based on the discussion in section 2.2, the goal of facilitating China's rise is conceptualized in this paper as efforts towards a world system in which China occupies the central position, and where China is a global great power. There is no explicit mention of China's rise in the primary material, or any clear description of the BRI or China that transparently reflects such an ambition. From both a realist and constructivist perspective, the absence of such a depiction is expected. A goal based on realist perceptions of international relations and ambitions toward great power status where China has greater geopolitical influence does not pair well with China's soft power strategies. The way the primary material portrays China contradicts the goal of being the center of the BRI system:

*“The Belt and Road is an initiative for peaceful development and economic cooperation, rather than a geopolitical or military alliance; it is a process of open, inclusive and common development, rather than an exclusionary bloc or a “China club”” (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.55).*

A realist understanding of China is in line with the CTT, as it rejects the altruism of the Chinese state, and considers its goal to be attaining greater geopolitical and economic power. Wanting to limit the geopolitical influence of competing great powers, the BRI is to some extent exclusionary, which contradicts the former quote. The exclusion of other great powers is partially present. The U.S. is not mentioned in the document. India and Russia are only mentioned as participants of various BRI projects. China consistently frames itself as the primary actor in the BRI system:

*“In the B&R framework, all participating countries and international organizations, based on the principle of seeking common ground while reserving differences, have exchanged views on economic development plans and policies and discussed and agreed economic cooperation plans and measures. By the end of March 2019, the Chinese government had signed 173 cooperation agreements with 125 countries and 29 international organizations” (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.6).*

This quote frames China as the central actor in the BRI system, describing China's signing of agreements with other nations as the BRI making advancements. This quote also highlights China's need to utilize its soft power strategies whenever it portrays itself as the central actor in the BRI system. The “win-win” and “mutual respect” narratives are featured here, framing the BRI system as based on seeking common ground. This relates to the overarching goal of combating the CTT.

It can be seen that China's public diplomacy rhetoric positions itself as the primary actor in the BRI system, and in that way the center of the BRI globalization project. This leads to the third aspect of the ‘China rising’ goal as operationalized in this paper: China regaining its high international status and esteem from the global community. One quote in the material reflects this goal in quite an apparent way:

*“Offering a Chinese approach to reforming the current global governance system [title of the section]. Our world today faces challenges such as an insufficient drive for growth, an outdated governance structure, and imbalanced development. (...) It [the BRI] propels the interaction between global governance, security, and development – an attempt to provide an alternative solution to these issues as they have not been addressed effectively in isolation over long periods of time” (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.46-p.47).*

Highlighting issues in the current international system, China offers the BRI as an alternative global institution. By explicitly stating that the BRI represents a Chinese approach to global governance, the goal of regaining high international status and esteem is reflected. Thus, China’s soft power goal of facilitating China’s rise as a great power is implicitly reflected through all three frames.

One quote of significance in this context is the following:

*“The Belt and Road Initiative aims to build a new model of international relations featuring mutual respect, fairness, justice and win-win cooperation” (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.50).*

Here the BRI is described as a new model of international relations. Combining this statement with how China frames itself as the primary actor in the BRI system, the ‘China rising’ goal is clearly reflected.

The goal of increasing economic attraction is connected to the ‘China rising’ goal, as it aims to establish China as the economic center of the BRI. Describing the funding of the various BRI projects, reference is made almost exclusively to China, for example:

*“From 2013 to 2018 China’s direct investment in B&R countries surpassed US\$90 billion, realizing a turnover of US\$400 billion in foreign contracted projects in these countries” (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.31).*

In terms of the major infrastructure projects being described, they too center around China:

*“The six major corridors for international economic cooperation – the New Eurasian Land Bridge, and the China-Mongolia-Russia, China-Central Asia-West Asia, China-Indochina Peninsula, China-Pakistan, and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar economic corridors –connect the Asian economic circle with the European economic circle” (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.9).*

The goal of establishing China as the economic center of the BRI also requires China being seen as a stable and reliable economic partner, as well as convincing other states of the benefits of an economic partnership with China:

*“As faster growth in B&R countries has generated huge market demands on international industrial cooperation, China has taken active measures to boost market-oriented industrial cooperation with relevant countries in all areas, so as to upgrade the industrial structure and raise the level of industries in these countries” (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.32).*

Here China argues that member states have received economic benefits because of their participation in the BRI, as well China being responsible for elevating the industrial standard of these countries. The

economic attraction goal can therefore be said to be fully reflected.

While situating itself as the central actor, economic pillar and standard setter of the BRI, China is also acutely aware of the CTT and how the advancement of the goals that places it at the center of the BRI can worsen the prospects for the latter goal. Combating the perception of China as a threat is arguably China's primary public diplomacy objective. Some quotes directly reflect this goal:

*“China is a staunch force in safeguarding regional and world peace and promoting common development. China is committed to peaceful development and an independent foreign policy of peace. We respect the development paths and domestic and foreign policies pursued independently by the people of every country. China will never interfere in the internal affairs of any country, never impose its own will on any country, and never place its own interests above the interests of any country”* (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.51).

China is attempting to convince other nations of its benign intentions and claiming that China is not looking to interfere in the internal affairs of others. In this sense China is attempting to gain soft power by making its policies and foreign policy appear moral and legitimate, connecting the strategy back to the concepts of soft power resources. The “win-win” and “mutual respect” narratives are also clearly present, as the quote highlights common development and respecting the domestic and foreign policies of other states.

Most of the soft power strategies presented can be connected to the goal of countering the CTT. The following section reflects multiple of the identified soft power strategies:

*“To meet the various challenges faced by humanity and work for a bright future in which the whole world enjoys peace, prosperity and development, countries across the globe should share the rough times and the smooth and build an open, inclusive, clean, and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, common security, and shared prosperity. The concept of a global community of shared future involves combining interests, seeking common feelings, values, and responsibilities, and sharing the benefits of development. The Belt and Road Initiative calls for mutual support and assistance and is informed by equality, cultural affinity, and empathy. It upholds the principles of seeking common ground while reserving differences, inclusiveness, mutual understanding, communication and dialogue, and interactions on an equal footing. We should regard the development of other countries as our own opportunity and promote the convergence of China's development opportunities with those of its B&R partners and other countries in the wider world, so as to ensure that our development benefits both sides of cooperation and all relevant parties. During its four decades of reform and opening up, China has accumulated a wealth of experience that can be used by other countries.”* (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.47-48).

All four principles of the harmonious world vision narrative are present, either implicitly or explicitly. The principle of democratizing international relations is present, endorsing interactions on equal footing and seeking common ground. The principle of justice and common prosperity is present, describing peace as attainable through shared prosperity. The principle of diversity and tolerance is reflected in the seeking of common feelings and values, and the emphasis on inclusivity. The principle of peaceful resolution of conflicts is not directly present but features implicitly in the statement that by sharing “rough times” lasting peace and common security can be achieved. The principle is however clearly reflected at another point: “All countries should settle disputes through dialogue” (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.51).

The previous section connects to the harmonious world strategy by reflecting these principles and stating that they can be attained through the BRI. The “win-win” and “mutual respect” narratives are also present. The quote frames the BRI as having mutual benefit as its ultimate goal, and the emphasis on combining interests and seeking common feelings can be connected to the mutual respect narrative.

This section can also be connected to the Chinese Dream strategy. It is not explicitly mentioned at any point in the primary material but features implicitly through the outlined frames. The previous quote reflects the Chinese Dream strategy by emphasizing harmonious order, providing an alternative road for constructing world order and by presenting the BRI as an opportunity to share China’s economic miracle through win-win cooperation. It also implicitly describes China as contributing to world peace via the BRI, and depicts China as a reliable member of the international community through the “win-win” and “mutual respect” narratives.

Reflecting multiple soft power strategies, the section can be seen as a clear reflection of the goal of combating the CTT and building amity with potential allies.

No quotes have been identified in the primary material that either glorify or directly reference Chinese culture, except referencing the establishment of Chinese culture centers in BRI countries (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.27). This seems somewhat counterintuitive, as the previous research has indicated that China considers its culture as its most crucial soft power resource (Jian, 2011, p.12). The use of culture as a soft power resource is however not absent, as the material makes multiple references to the cultural heritage of the ASR:

*“The ancient Silk Road facilitated interactions between countries and between ethnic groups as well as advances in human civilization. The Belt and Road Initiative is rooted in profound civilizations and inclusive cultures. It provides a platform for participating countries to approach each other and enhance mutual learning. It enables deeper exchanges between peoples from different countries, cultures and historical backgrounds. It allows peoples, regardless of their ethnicities, cultures, social systems and religions, to communicate, blend and connect with each other from a new height, in joint efforts to build a global community of shared future”* (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.61).

The ASR narrative is clearly reflected in this quote. By drawing a parallel between the ASR and the BRI a nostalgic connection is made between the two, framing the BRI as rooted in the ASR. The ASR is also explicitly used as a metaphor for connectivity and exchange. This quote is a quite clear example of China using the ASR narrative to shape the interests of other states by invoking the image of a shared cultural trajectory, and explicitly using the frame of rejuvenation. To some extent China is asserting itself as an ancient and profound civilization, although it does not apply that description only towards itself. It encourages other states to identify with China culturally within the historical framework of the ASR, thus gaining cultural soft power. Instead of highlighting the continuity of China’s culture and civilization, China’s BRI public diplomacy highlights the continuity of the shared Silk Road culture and civilization. In this way, the cultural aspect of the Chinese Dream strategy can be identified.

Multiple frames have not been mentioned yet, but some of them are reflected in the document. The document does not explicitly describe other countries as underdeveloped, but it is implied in the following quote:



*“Development holds the master key to solving all problems. In pursuing the Belt and Road Initiative, we should focus on the fundamental issue of development, release the growth potential of participating countries, and achieve economic integration and coordinated development to the benefit of all participants”* (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.52).

Describing the growth potential of participating countries as unreleased can be understood implicitly as referring to them as underdeveloped. China is clearly depicted as being able to elevate these countries economically through the BRI. The development narrative is therefore mostly reflected.

At one point China directly claims that the purpose of the BRI is to build a harmonious world:

*“To ensure the smooth implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, China will work together with all other countries involved to establish a dispute settlement mechanism (...) Such dialogue will foster a positive development environment for Belt and Road cooperation, and help all participating countries to build a harmonious world”* (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.51-52).

This is a direct reflection of one of the frames used to promote the harmonious world vision narrative.

As outlined previously, the “win-win” and “mutual respect” narratives feature prominently. The related frame of negating zero-sum games also features explicitly:

*“The Belt and Road Initiative is not a zero-sum game which results in the win of one party and the loss of the other. Rather, it is meant for mutual benefits and win-win and all-win outcomes”* (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.41).

The frame of seeking sustainable economic growth is present, both in the financial and environmental sense:

*“China will establish a stable and sustainable financial service system that keeps risks under control, and create new models of investment and financing”* (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.54).

And:

*“The Belt and Road Initiative pursues the vision of green development and a way of life and work that is green, low-carbon, circular and sustainable”* (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.56).

In presenting this frame, the document also frames China as the center of the proposed new financial system, reflecting both the ‘China rising’ and economic attraction goals.

Some other frames were not reflected in the material. While the Chinese Dream was reflected extensively implicitly, no direct mention of it was found in the material, and therefore no direct depiction of the BRI as a concretization of the Chinese Dream.

The harmonious world narrative was mostly reflected, but not in the sense that the document explicitly featured the criticisms of the current world order mentioned in figure 3. Criticism of power politics is indirectly present in the form of a negation: “All countries should resolutely reject (...) power politics” (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.50).

## 4.2 Results

In this section the results from section 4.1 are presented in a format that reflects figures 2 and 3:

Figure 4:

<b>Results - Soft power goals</b>	
<b>1: Facilitating China's rise as a great power</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All three frames are present to varying degrees. The BRI is depicted as a new form of globalization, implicitly centered around China. The exclusion of other great powers can partially be seen. The goal of attaining high international status and esteem through the BRI is present.</li></ul>
<b>2: Combating the CTT</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Never explicitly mentioned but features extensively implicitly. Multiple strategies and quotes aim to convince the reader of China's benign intentions, world peace ambitions, and that China is a reliable member of the international community. While denying seeking allies via the BRI system, hints of this can be observed in the rhetoric.</li></ul>
<b>3: Increasing economic attraction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All three frames are clearly present.</li></ul>
<b>4: Creating understanding for China</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The document clearly reflects China's claim to be seeking sustainable and balanced economic growth. China's aversion to radical political and economic reform is partially reflected. China's goal to be respected as an ancient and vibrant culture is partially reflected through the ASR narrative.</li></ul>

Figure 5:

<b>Results - Soft power strategies</b>	
<b>1: Harmonious world vision narrative</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• While not directly criticizing the current world order, the narrative is partially present through presenting potential improvements to the international system. All four principles of China’s harmonious world vision are present. The document directly claims that the BRI is conducive for achieving a harmonious world.</li> </ul>
<b>2: The Chinese Dream narrative</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Never explicitly mentioned, but it's operationalizations were partially reflected. The document emphasizes harmonious order directly and the Chinese economic miracle indirectly. The BRI is presented as an opportunity to share China’s economic rise through win-win cooperation. The document frames the BRI as a process of rejuvenation and revival and encourages other nations to identify with Chinese culture via the ASR narrative.</li> </ul>
<b>3: Development narrative</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some countries are implicitly described as underdeveloped. The BRI is presented as able to lift developing countries out of poverty.</li> </ul>
<b>4: Ancient Silk Road (ASR) narrative</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partially reflected. The BRI is clearly framed as a revitalization of the ASR, and nostalgic connections are made to a shared silk road history. The ASR is used as a metaphor for trade, exchange and connectivity. Highlighting the continuity of China’s culture and civilization is partially present via the depiction of the ASR.</li> </ul>
<b>5: The “win-win” and “mutual respect” narratives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mostly reflected. The BRI is framed as a project based on mutual respect and mutual trust. Power domination is explicitly condemned, and it is explicitly claimed China does not pursue zero-sum political games. It is asserted that the ultimate purpose of the BRI is mutual benefit.</li> </ul>

## 5. Conclusions & reflections

Referring back to the research question - *How, and to what extent, are China's soft power goals and soft power strategies reflected in its BRI public diplomacy* - the analysis found that most of the soft power goals and strategies identified are quite extensively reflected, as shown in section 4. 2. This affirms the view that the Chinese state is aware of its need to attain greater soft power resources and to improve its international image through public diplomacy. In support of this claim, it can be observed that the document represents an attempt to utilize all four resources for gaining soft power.

There is a clear attempt at generating cultural soft power through the strategies outlined. While a glorification of specifically Chinese culture is not present, the use of the ASR symbolism and connecting it to the BRI is used to strengthen the cultural attractiveness of the BRI, and by extension China. Connecting back to constructivism, the BRI can be considered an attempt at creating a non-material structure of shared identity, and thereby altering the interests of current and potential BRI member states. The rhetoric in the document goes far beyond depicting the BRI as an international infrastructure project, attempting to embed what might be considered “BRI norms” and a shared ASR cultural identity into the economic, political and cultural activities of the involved BRI states. This supports the claim that China is seeking great power via diplomatic means, accumulating cultural soft power via the BRI.

The document utilizes political values as a soft power resource differently than expected. Little is reflected regarding how China lives up to its political values abroad, as can be seen in the incomplete reflections of the Chinese Dream narrative strategy, as well as the goal of creating understanding for China’s political system, policies and culture. There is no mention of specifically Chinese political values. One explanation for this can be hinted at in the goal of combating the CTT - China does not want to rhetorically equate itself with the BRI or give the impression that it is gaining geopolitical influence through the BRI. Therefore, the political values represented in BRI public diplomacy are not framed as Chinese values, but specifically BRI values. This can for example be observed in the strong reflection of both the harmonious world narrative and the “win-win” narrative. When espousing the four principles of the harmonious world, the document frames these principles as offered by the BRI as a shared initiative (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.47-48). When discussing “win-win” cooperation, this too is presented as a feature of the BRI (OLGPBRI, 2019, p.50).

Referring back to the secondary purpose of this study, it can be argued that realism as a theory of international relations provides substantial explanatory utility when investigating soft power expressions in China’s public diplomacy. It can be used to uncover implicit intentions in public diplomacy goals, one specific example being how the document frames China as the political and economic center of the BRI. A realist understanding of China’s foreign policy intentions would also merit observing Chinese public diplomacy and its extensive focus on not appearing guided by realist principle with some skepticism, which gives this study some practical relevance.

While China’s soft power public diplomacy can be understood using a realist theoretical framework, the way China pursues its soft power strategy clearly has some uniquely Chinese characteristics. For one, using the BRI as a vehicle for achieving global influence counteracts the CTT by not having to frame BRI expansion as synonymous with China gaining power, but rather just as the establishment of an

international system of equal peers. The fact that the document features hardly any direct criticism of the current world order can be considered a reflection of the goal to counter the CTT, as China seeks to portray itself as not threatening the established international system. The fact that certain frames were missing in the primary material could be an indication that realism, even when complemented with a constructivist methodology, is insufficient for giving a full account of China's foreign policy ambitions and soft power diplomacy.

This could however be a flaw of specifically this research paper, and not indicative of an inability of realism to account for China's rise as a global power, or of how China expresses its soft power ambitions. As mentioned earlier, using only one document as primary material makes this study insufficient for drawing general conclusions regarding China's public diplomacy. For example, based on the previous research, it is likely that the concept of the Chinese Dream features explicitly in other forms of Chinese public diplomacy, such as speeches or newspaper articles.

The findings of this paper offer partial support for a realist understanding of soft power elements in China's BRI public diplomacy. The analysis however implies a degree of Chinese particularity in China's great power ambitions, which could not be properly explored in this paper. Due to the limited scope of the paper, the findings are not sufficient to draw general conclusions regarding China's soft power ambitions or the explanatory merit of realism when analyzing China's great power ambitions. To develop and test the findings of this paper, further research would be beneficial.

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## **6.1 Primary material**

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