A Systematic Literature Review of the Belt and Road Initiative in Australia from 2013 to 2020

This paper comprehensively illustrates how the BRI in Australia is reflected in the broad literature. By utilizing systematic literature review, this research divide literature into four groups: 1. The BRI narratives in the Australian media; 2. Economic opportunities and political influence of the BRI for Australia; 3. Australia’s domestic reasons why Australia has refused the BRI; and 4. The growing China threat rhetoric. This paper not only fills in the gap by offering an exhaustive knowledge of the BRI in Australian, but only, to some extent, contributes to the understanding of China in Australia as a big picture.

Keywords: The Belt and Road Initiative, China, Australia, systematic literature review, Sino-Australian relations

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was first proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2013 and has been viewed within and beyond China as one of central diplomatic and economic policies in China. In October 2017, the BRI was incorporated into the Party Constitution of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in the 19th National Congress of the CPC, attaching unparalleled importance to this economic and diplomatic initiative (Xinhua, 2017). This symbolizes that the BRI is not a temporary phenomenon such as “Go Out policy” and “Great Western Development Strategy” that might not be pursued after the retirement of top leaders, but a notion clearly beyond anyone’s presidency.

While many countries have engaged with the BRI on different levels, the response in Australia has ranged from lukewarm acceptance in the initial stages to suspicion and rejection. Recent Sino-Australian relations have been like a roller coaster ride, purportedly diving into the lowest ebb of history. In this context, the Victorian State Government signing two Memoranda of understanding (MoUs) on the BRI in 2018 and 2019 has been widely condemned by the Australian Federal Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, as the Morrison administration claimed that Victoria broke ranks with the Australian federal government, since Australia rejected the BRI in 2017. In 2020, the Australian Parliament passed Australia’s Foreign Relations Bill to strengthen federal authority and foreign policy consistency over state and Territory foreign affairs and the Victorian State Government was forced to withdraw from two MoUs on the BRI in 2021. However, despite the intensive attention to the BRI in Australia, to my knowledge, no study has sought to systematically approach this topic. By employing systematic literature review, this paper fills in the gap to answer one question: how the BRI in Australia is reflected in the broad literature. This
research offers an exhaustive knowledge of the BRI in Australian and it, to some extent, contributes to the understanding of China in Australia as a big picture.

Method: Systematic Literature Review

The goal of this paper is to offer an exhaustive literature review on the BRI in Australia. The main issue of literature review is selection bias, because the authors may potentially include preferred research that aligns with their own views (Nightingale, 2009). To avoid reviewers’ bias and find key high-quality literature, systematic literature reviews are required, which mean “identify all studies relevant to a specific topic or question, evaluate the findings of the relevant studies, and summarize these findings to make the evidence more accessible to researchers” (Lowe, 2009, p. 375).

In the process of systematic literature reviews, meta-analyses are indispensable that delineate “statistical assessment of the data provided from multiple studies or sources that attempt to answer” a specific topic or question (Piper, 2013, p. 2). Furthermore, there are three steps to conduct systematic literature reviews: first, finding research objective; second, outlining the search strategy and inclusion criteria; third, displaying search and retrieval process; fourth, summarizing and including selected literature in the literature review.

Step 1: finding research objective

This step requires to identify “an area that is neither too broad to be useful to practice nor too narrow to produce useful information” (Wood, 2003, p. 3). In this paper, there is no doubt that the research objective is the BRI in Australia, but it does not cover every aspect of the BRI. Essentially, the goal of this research is to explore the general interpretation or reflection of the BRI in Australia rather than focusing on the implication of a certain BRI measure such as electric power investment risk assessment for the BRI in Australia.

Step 2: outlining the search and inclusion strategy

The search and inclusion strategy mainly encompass the usage of databases, selection criteria of search terms and literature. In this paper, the Queensland University of Technology library (QUT) that contains primary English-language academic databases will be applied for searching available peer-reviewed academic journal articles or book chapters. There are two search terms: “Belt and Road Initiative” and “Australia”. Within all the search results, only the general interpretation or reflection of the BRI in Australia will be included.

Step 3: displaying search and retrieval process
Figure 1. Search term “Belt and Road Initiative” and “Australia” in the PRISMA from QUT databases

Search term “Belt and Road Initiative” and “Australia” in the PRISMA

Source: created by the author of this thesis and based on (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2009)
Due to the number of journal articles, it is necessary to develop research reporting guidelines to promote uniformity and display search and retrieval process (Vrabel, 2015). In this research, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) will be employed to encourage “authors to describe steps taken to minimize bias and maximize accuracy in locating and selecting reports for inclusion, abstracting data from reports, and analysing overall intervention effect” (Kearney, 2014, p. 86; Moher et al., 2009), which is shown in Figure 1.

Step 4: summarizing and including selected literature in the literature review

Based on the first three steps, there are four selected journal articles and book chapters. All the literature will be summarized in Table 1, which elucidates authors, published year and abstract of each article. Nevertheless, the number of journal articles is still limited. To further explore this area, Chinese-language database, China National Knowledge Infrastructure and Wanfang database, two of the most prestigious national information publishing and research and institution, are included. By conducting similar four steps, I find six journal articles that align with my research focus, which will be condensed in Table 1 as well.

That said, in comparison with the sparse peer-reviewed academic publications, there are numerous think tank papers and media pieces. Based on their publishers and contents, I incorporate several representative and high-quality publications into this literature review.
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<th>Authors (Year)</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>Laurenceson, J., Bretherton, H., Burke, P. F., &amp; Wei, E. (2019)</td>
<td>Chinese investment in Australian infrastructure assets: accounting for local public preferences</td>
<td>China Economic Journal</td>
<td>Chinese investment in Australian infrastructure assets can bring economic benefits to both countries. However, it can also create domestic political challenges. This is because Australian public support for foreign investment in infrastructure is limited. The Australian public is found to be more concerned by the share of foreign ownership an investment will bring rather than the fact it is from China. Accounting for these preferences, such as through the recruitment of local partner companies, will facilitate Chinese investment in Australian infrastructure, and potentially, greater bilateral engagement on the BRI.</td>
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<td>Wilson, J. (2019)</td>
<td>Diversifying Australia’s Indo-Pacific infrastructure diplomacy</td>
<td>Australian Journal of International Affairs</td>
<td>This article argues that Australia has struggled to articulate a policy on the BRI that balances strategic concerns against economic opportunities, while enthusiastic engagement with the US alternatives risks perceptions of ‘choosing’ sides between the region’s two main powers. Yet the contemporary marketplace for Indo-Pacific infrastructure and connectivity programs is much broader, with programs recently launched by many governments and regional organizations. These present an opportunity for Australia to diversify its infrastructure diplomacy, particularly through engagement with the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, cooperation with Japan and new avenues for commercial diplomacy.</td>
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<td>Akbar, M. (2019)</td>
<td>BRI and its implication on maritime security in Asia pacific: case study on China-Australia trade cooperation</td>
<td>Journal Asia Pacific Studies</td>
<td>There is a trend shifting from Australia-USA cooperation to Australia-China trade cooperation. The evidence is clear enough to argue that the shifting has begun to be maintained and protected by a legal and legitimate agreement. The signing of the MoU between Victoria and China has remarked the whole new beginning of a relationship.</td>
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<td>Chung, M. Mascitelli, B. (2019)</td>
<td>The case of Australian reluctance with the Chinese BRI</td>
<td>Dynamic Perspectives on Globalization and Sustainable Business in Asia</td>
<td>The aim of this chapter is to ascertain and explain why Australia has adopted a cool and almost negative approach towards the BRI. The overwhelming concern on the Australian coolness towards BRI is not upsetting the security balance in Asia and especially with ongoing need and loyalty towards the US involvement in the security arrangements in the region.</td>
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<td>Yang, W., &amp; Wang, W. (2016)</td>
<td>The reports and shaping of China’s BRI in Australian paper</td>
<td>International Communication</td>
<td>This paper argues that the relevant reports about the BRI in Australian media are generally unfavorable with some favorable opinions from Australian business community. Australian media primarily use three reporting frameworks regarding the BRI: Eurasian Centralism, new Colonialism and Orientalism.</td>
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<td>Author(s)</td>
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<td>Wang, X. (2018)</td>
<td>The framework of Australian mainstream paper media on China’s BRI</td>
<td>Media</td>
<td>This paper argues that Australian media’s reports about the BRI are holistically positive with some negative voices from the current cabinet and anonymous sources. Australian media portray the BRI by only using the strategy of resistance and reconciliation.</td>
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<td>Sun, Y., &amp; Jiang, L. (2017)</td>
<td>The Perception of the BRI in Australian mainstream media</td>
<td>Journal of Communication University of China</td>
<td>This paper illustrates the attitudes of Australian political parties, business community, academic towards the BRI. The Liberal-Party-led government is cautious about the BRI, while the Labor Party is more open-minded about the economic cooperation with the BRI. The Australian business community largely supports the BRI. As for views of the Australian academy, there is also a divide among scholars, but they generally recommend keeping an eye on the BRI to wait and see. More importantly, the influence that the US has on the decision-making of Australian politics cannot be underestimated due to its strong military and economic ties with Australia.</td>
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<td>Shen, Y. (2018)</td>
<td>Australian attitudes and reasons for the BRI</td>
<td>Pacific Journal</td>
<td>This paper illustrates the attitudes of Australian political parties, business community, academic towards the BRI. The Liberal-Party-led government is cautious about the BRI, while the Labor Party is more open-minded about the economic cooperation with the BRI. The Australian business community largely supports the BRI. As for views of the Australian academy, there is also a divide among scholars, but they generally recommend keeping an eye on the BRI to wait and see. More importantly, the influence that the US has on the decision-making of Australian politics cannot be underestimated due to its strong military and economic ties with Australia. This paper also argues that in terms of cultural psychology, Australia may feel insecure and worried about the change of its surroundings, which result in the inherent conservatism in Australian foreign policy.</td>
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<td>Pan, R. (2018)</td>
<td>The dissemination of BRI for Australia: problems and countermeasures</td>
<td>International Communication</td>
<td>This paper illustrates the attitudes of Australian political parties, business community, academic towards the BRI. The Liberal-Party-led government is cautious about the BRI, while the Labor Party is more open-minded about the economic cooperation with the BRI. The Australian business community largely supports the BRI. As for views of the Australian academy, there is also a divide among scholars, but they generally recommend keeping an eye on the BRI to wait and see. More importantly, the influence that the US has on the decision-making of Australian politics cannot be underestimated due to its strong military and economic ties with Australia. It also argues that the impression of the BRI principally exists in the elite or engaged class in Australia, and ordinary Australians rarely know the BRI.</td>
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<td>Li, Y., &amp; Wu, M. (2017)</td>
<td>Counter-globalization</td>
<td>Public Diplomacy</td>
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Research results
The BRI narratives in the Australian media

There is no literature in Australia that directly relates to the BRI narratives in Australian media. By contrast, it is worth noticing that there is some Chinese-language literature that explores this question, although their conclusions are contradictory. For example, with regard to the BRI, Wang (2018) recognizes that Australian media’s reports are holistically positive with some negative voices from the current cabinet and anonymous sources, while Yang and Wang (2016) acknowledges that the relevant reports are generally unfavorable with some favorable opinions from Australian business community. It is possible that the contradiction may originate from the different selection of analytical texts and publishing time.

These media narratives are also bonded with reasons why the BRI was not well-received in Australia. Wang (2018) argues that Australian media portray the BRI by only using the strategy of resistance and reconciliation. Resistance means to perceive the foreign affairs according to its own culture and values, while reconciliation refers to the comparison of its own culture with a different one, preserve the part that complies with its own culture and reinterpret the conflicting part (Wang, 2018).

From another perspective, Yang and Wang (2016) argue that Australian media primarily use three reporting frameworks regarding the BRI: Eurasian Centralism, new Colonialism and Orientalism. Eurasian Centralism means that China has been portrayed by Australian media as a country that tries to become the center of Eurasia and restores the lost glory China had in history by the implementation of the BRI (Yang & Wang, 2016). In the future, every road should lead to Beijing rather than Rome (Yang & Wang, 2016). In terms of new Colonialism, China has been depicted by Australian media as an aggressive nation that expands its economic strength by exporting its capital and staff around the world through the BRI (Yang & Wang, 2016). With regard to the Orientalism, it was proposed by Edward Said in his famous book “Orientalism” to critique that the West colonizes the discourse of the East in the name of academics by using the Western power, and here China has been perceived by Australian media as Authoritarian Empire that is abnormal (Yang & Wang, 2016).

Economic opportunities and political influence of the BRI for Australia

The majority of literature focuses on the potential economic opportunities and political influence of the BRI for Australia. Professor James Laurenceson, Acting Director of the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney is a representative expert in this field who has followed this question since 2017 and has viewed the BRI as an opportunity rather than a threat. In terms of economic opportunities, Australian and Chinese experts have reached a consensus that the Australian business community largely
supports the BRI due to the rich profits and broad prospects the BRI may bring (Laurenceson et al., 2017; Pan, 2018; Shen, 2018; Wade, 2018; Wang, 2018; Yang & Wang, 2016). In addition, there are organizations and events such as the Australia-China Belt & Road Initiative (ACBRI) and Australia-China Business Week that are seeking to promote better business and cultural understanding between the two nations regarding the BRI (Australia-China Business Week 2016; Shen, 2018; Wade, 2018).

Regarding Australian politics, the BRI has become a very controversial issue, but there are two consensuses in Australian and Chinese academy. First, the Liberal-Party-led government is cautious about the BRI, while the Labor Party is more open-minded about the economic cooperation with the BRI, although these lines can blur in practice (Laurenceson & Collinson, 2019; Laurenceson et al., 2017; Pan, 2018; Sun & Jiang, 2017; Wade, 2018; Wang, 2018; Yang & Wang, 2016). Second, it cannot be underestimated the influence that the US has on the decision-making of Australian politics due to its strong military and economic ties with Australia (Laurenceson & Collinson, 2019; Laurenceson et al., 2017; Li & Wu, 2017; Shen, 2018; Sun & Jiang, 2017; Wade, 2018).

Furthermore, emanating from Laurenceson and Collinson’s view (2017), there are two debating opponents in Australia divided by the BRI and how Australia should respond: economic commentators versus defense hawks or “security-intelligence-military establishment”, which also reflects in the distinct attitudes of the Australian federal government and state government. The defense hawks accuse the economic commentators of being too naive so that they have not seen the China’s strategic ambition behind the BRI, while the economic commentators criticize the defense hawks that they just apply their emotive rhetoric and they are not interested in hard data and evidence (Laurenceson & Collinson, 2017). Currently, there is no doubt that the views of defense hawks have dominated the federal government regarding its China and the BRI policy (Raby, 2019). The former Prime Minister Paul Keating criticizes the present China policy in Australian central government that “When the security agencies are running foreign policy, the nutters are in charge” (quoted in Bolt, 2019).

However, in the state and territory governments, there is a different perspective. The most notable exception to this is Victoria, which has signed two Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) on the BRI, and the Northern Territory has claimed to welcome the initiative over the past few years (Collinson, 2019). The both states are led by Labor Party and have viewed the BRI as an economic opportunity to local infrastructure, investment and employability, although the content of the two MoUs is vague and practically meaningless (Collinson, 2019; Flitton, 2019). As would have been expected, Victoria received blunt criticisms from Canberra for signing the first MoU in 2018, and despite that criticism, Victoria signed the second MoUs in 2019 (Flitton, 2019).

As for domestic views in the Australian academy, there is also a divide among scholars, but they generally recommend keeping an eye on the BRI to
wait and see. For example, Cai (2017), Manuel (2019), Laurenceson and Collinson (2017) argue that the BRI’s main aim is China’s economic concerns rather than political influence, which is very similar to Chinese scholars’ perspective. By comparison, Wade (2018) argues that China may use the BRI as a strategic program to dominate small countries and form a regional security mechanism.

Australia’s domestic reasons why Australia has refused the BRI

First, there is a common sense in both countries that the refusal of the BRI is the result that the Australian economic interests succumb to Australian security interests. More concretely, Canberra and Washington signed the “Australia, New Zealand and United States Security Treaty” (ANZUS) in 1951, agreeing that “an attack on either country’s armed forces or territory in the Pacific area” means “common danger” for the US and Australia (Frühling, 2018, p. 199). Thus, as the ally of the US, Australia is concerned about the prospective economic and political challenge the BRI brings to the US, the America’s opposition against the BRI (Akbar, 2019; Chung & Mascitelli, 2019; Laurenceson & Collinson, 2019; Laurenceson et al., 2017; Li & Wu, 2017; Shen, 2018; Sun & Jiang, 2017; Wade, 2018). Furthermore, Australia is anxious about China’s behavior in the South China Sea, the possible debt traps that host countries such as Sri Lanka cannot afford the repayment on infrastructure loans and port projects with commercial and military uses (Laurenceson & Collinson, 2019; Laurenceson et al., 2017; Li & Wu, 2017; Shen, 2018; Sun & Jiang, 2017; Wade, 2018).

Second, Australian experts argue that the BRI lacks a clear and practical roadmap, transparency and governance standards for implementation. The Australian government is not clear about its benefits from the BRI, whereas a great many business opportunities have already existed in the pre-existing China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (Herscovitch, 2015; Laurenceson & Collinson, 2019; Laurenceson et al., 2017; Laurenceson & Shi, 2017; Wilson, 2019). This is not a new statement, as it has been mentioned in the BRI narrative in the Chinese media.

Third, Laurenceson, Bretherton, Burke and Wei (2019) argue that the Australian public do not disagree the Chinese investment in the Australian infrastructure, but they concern the share of foreign ownership in the Australian infrastructure and favor Australian corporations to take the majority of the project shares. In contrast, Chinese investors also prefer to obtain the majority control of the infrastructure shares. This dilemma may lead to the refusal of the Australian government to the BRI, because the public opinion decides the election of governing party in a democratic country.

Fourth, Australian policy-makers and experts have only regarded the BRI as an infrastructure-focused program without more understanding of the communications and cultural dimensions of the BRI (Laurenceson & Collinson, 2019). This new view can be summarized:
The extent to which the Australian government is receptive to the BRI largely stems from an appreciation of the infrastructure deficits that plague the region and recognition that the BRI is one potential forum for cooperation between Australia and China to address these deficits (Laurenceson & Collinson, 2019, p. 1).

Pan (2018) illustrates this view from a different angle, namely that the impression of the BRI principally exists in the elite or engaged class in Australia, and ordinary Australians rarely know the BRI. According to my observation in Australia, it is true that only political, economic and academic professionals are familiar with the BRI.

By comparison, Chinese scholars contend disparate rationales of the refusal of Australia with respect to the membership of the BRI from different perspectives. In addition to the aforementioned negative impact of Australian media frames on the BRI, geopolitically, as a Western country, Australia is located in Oceania and far away from the European countries and its primary ally, the US. Thus, in terms of cultural psychology, Australia may feel insecure and worried about the change of its surroundings. All these result in the inherent conservatism in Australian foreign policy (Shen, 2018).

**The growing China threat rhetoric**

There is also a growing literature around the threat of China in Australia, which has extensively spread in this country. Empirically, its negative influence on the BRI in the Australian media is not negligible. Hamilton (2018) boldly titled his book “Silent Invasion” to describe the Chinese influence in Australia regarding Chinese political donation and other Chinese infiltration in Australia. Australian politician Andrew Hastie (2019) argues that the democratic conviction and security of Australia also face an unprecedented threat from China, and compares the Western tolerance of China’s rise with the appeasement of Nazi Germany. The ideas of Hamilton and Hastie have received some criticism. For example, journalist and former Labor Minister Graham Richardson (2018) denounces Hamilton’s work, saying the “Clive Hamilton is treating us as mugs”. Additionally, former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd criticizes Hastie saying

The Liberal party has a very bad history of using core foreign policy questions for domestic political gain or internal party management, and the best way to make a name for yourself within the raging beast of Australian conservatism is to whack the Chinese on the head again every second Thursday. (quoted in Doherty, 2019)

Despite this contention, the Hamilton’s and Hastie viewpoints have been more widely transmitted and have stimulated a very heated discussion in Australian media, which, to some extent, has shaped the negative atmosphere of public opinion of China in the Australia media, with other adverse commentary on China, such as the Hong Kong protests, Sino-American trade
war and so on. Empirically, this negative narrative about China affects the media reports about the China-led BRI.

Conclusion and limitations

By employing systematic literature review, this paper fills in the gap to answer one question: how the BRI in Australia is reflected in the broad literature. There are common senses in the Chinese and Australian literature. Both Chinese and Australian authors realize there exist controversies in the current Liberal-Party-led government, while the Labor party is more open-minded to the BRI. In addition, the influence of the US on Australia’s policymaking is obvious. Also, it is no doubt that the Australian business community supports the BRI. In terms of academia, there also exists an opinion divide and in general, Australian experts recommend that Australia should adopt a relatively cautious attitude towards the BRI.

With regard to the reasons of Australia’s refusal to the BRI, experts of both countries have reached some consensuses in term of the shallow understanding of the BRI in Australia, and Australia’s overwhelming security concern and its alliance with the US. However, Australian scholars also concern China’s behavior in the South China Sea, the possible debt traps from the BRI, the vagueness of the BRI and foreign ownership of Australian infrastructure, whereas Chinese scholars contend that the negative impact of Australian media frames on the BRI, and Australia’s insecurity mentality.

Additionally, it is worth noticing that there are two split views regarding the BRI: one focuses on the economic benefits, while the other concerns security. The two views have been reflected in the distinct attitudes of Australian federal government, state and territory governments. Furthermore, Australian scholars have not paid enough attention to the BRI narrative in the Australian media and have only focused on the benefits and potential influence of the BRI. By comparison, there is some literature covering the BRI narrative in the Australian media in China, although their conclusions are contrary. In addition, it is noteworthy that the overflow of China threat literature and increasingly negative narratives related to Hong Kong protests and other China-related news have influenced the image of the BRI. Conceivably, the influence of China-related discussions has affected the Australian public opinion and the decision-making of the Australian government regarding the BRI. Theoretically, the Australian government, as a democratic country, should be in tune with public opinion.

The selection of research materials can be representative, but it is by no means comprehensive. Because of the numerous amounts of the BRI-related literature, it is not able to cover all the BRI-related output. This research exclusively concentrates on academic journal articles and book chapters in addition to several representative media articles and think tank papers. Future studies can build upon this work by incorporating more BRI-related works in media and think tank sphere. Also, this paper does not encompass literature in
relation to the cancellation of the BRI deals in Victoria in 2021. This is because no academic papers or book chapters have been published about this topic, and this paper mainly focuses on the Belt and Road Initiative in Australia from 2013 to 2020. Future studies can rely on this work by including the cancellation of the BRI deals in Victoria.

References


traliachinarelations.org/content/decision-time-australias-engagement-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative