Unpacking the Trend of the Belt and Road Initiative Narratives in Australian Media from 2013 to 2020

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a central policy of the Chinese government. This paper analyses the trend and evolution of the BRI narratives from 2013 to 2020 in Australian printing media. By using Leximancer and NVivo Analysis, and frame analysis, this paper selects works from five Australian mainstream printing media: The Sydney Morning Herald (The SMH), The Age, The Australian, The Australian Financial Review (The AFR) and Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). It identifies that the BRI has been gradually politicised and ideologized in Australian print media and these narratives shifted in tone from mostly positive to highly critical of any involvement by Australia. Also, the BRI media narratives have been not about the BRI, but the Chinese government as a whole.

Keywords: The Belt and Road Initiative, Australian media, Leximancer, NVivo, China, 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 the party-state’s central diplomatic and economic policies. The Belt refers to a land-based Silk Road Economic Belt “from China to Central Asia to Russia and Europe”, while the Road describes a sea-based Maritime Silk Road including Southeast Asian countries and spreading through the Indian Ocean to South Asian countries, then by the Suez Canal to the Mediterranean (Sun, 2019, p. 535). 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 to varying degrees of anti-CPC rhetoric. According to Raby (2020), 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’s signing of two Memoranda of understanding (MoUs) on the BRI in 2018 and 2019 was challenged by the Australian federal government. Prime Minister Scott Morrison claimed that Victoria broke ranks with the Australian federal government, since Australia had rejected any formal association with the BRI in 2017. In 2020, the Australian Parliament passed Australia’s Foreign Relations Bill to strengthen federal authority and foreign policy consistency in relation to state and territory foreign affairs. The Victorian state government was forced to withdraw from its two BRI MoUs with China in 2021. Adding to the anti-China rhetoric in the media was a global pandemic. The worldwide COVID-19 outbreak, which first appeared in China, has complicated China’s global image (Sun, 2021). The Australian federal government’s decision to press for an independent international COVID-19 inquiry without first
consulting Chinese authorities antagonized the Chinese government, precipitating a Sino-Australian trade war, further damaging bilateral relations. Prior to the collapse of the BRI deal with Victoria in 2021, a great deal of discussion had ensued in the Australian media about the opportunities of the BRI for Australia. Drawing on empirical experience, this study hypothesizes that from 2013 to 2020, the BRI narratives in Australian journalism shifted in tone from mostly positive to highly critical of any involvement by Australia. By using Leximancer and NVivo analysis and frame analysis, this paper will test this assumption and identify the evolution of the BRI narratives in Australian journalism. Due to the fact that there is no empirical research of media representations of the BRI in Australia this paper fills in the gap to record the evolution of the BRI narratives in Australian journalism. It also helps to understand the BRI in Australia, as it has been a heated topic for years. Finally, it contributes to a better understanding of China in Australia on the whole.

Method

Selection of Material

This paper selects The Sydney Morning Herald (SMH), The Age, The Australian, The Australian Financial Review (AFR) and Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) as media representatives to analyze BRI-related news. In order to find out the accurate BRI outlets in Factiva, a global news and search engine, after rounds of experiments, I use “Belt and Road Initiative” or “One Belt One road” or “belt and road” or “Silk Road Economic Belt” or “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” or “Maritime Silk Road” or “belt road” as search terms, because these cover all names associated with the BRI in English. Also, time span is from 17 September 2013, when President Xi first proposed the BRI, to 31 December 2020, the last day of 2020. The number of news items mentioning the BRI is shown in the following graph, 2004 articles in total.
However, some of 2004 media reports do not concentrate on the BRI. By employing Factiva, the research found 408 articles that focused on the BRI through adjusting the aforementioned search terms according to headline and lead paragraph.
Last, these articles are double-checked for anomaly-detection and data-cleaning to delete inappropriate information and formats such as biographies of authors.

To observe the evolution of the BRI narratives in the Australian media, it is necessary to find the watershed of the BRI in Australia. In fact, the turning point of the BRI in Australia appeared in March 2017, when Canberra refused to officially endorse the BRI by signing a MoU. In my search of all the 408 samples, I concluded that the article “Cabinet saw no gain in Xi ‘project of the century’” written by Paul Kelly and published by The Australian on 29 May 2017, was the first one to indicate the official rejection of the Australian Federal Government. Before this, there were 59 articles published over more than 4 years; after that, there were 349 articles over the next three and a half years.

**Leximancer and NVivo Analysis**

The crucial step of this study is exploratory by identifying main frames in the Australian media discourse. Due to numerous media texts regarding the BRI in Australia, the usage of computer-aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) is required in order to enhance efficiency and visualize data, which offer greater insights into the “patterns of relevance” of the data (Anderson, 2012; Angus et al., 2013). NVivo and Leximancer are renowned choices for such identification and are selected for aforementioned purpose in this research (Wilk et al., 2019). In terms of media text analysis, both programs can be used to find out the themes, concepts under each theme and the relationships among these concepts and themes (Adu, 2019; Smith & Humphreys, 2006). The process of working with texts in NVivo and Leximancer constitutes grouping all the data in a certain way so that main themes and their related concepts can be identified (Adu, 2019; Smith & Humphreys, 2006).

The reason why the two programs will be employed concurrently is that even with similar roles of conceptual analysis and relational analysis, both have different algorithms and functions. In brief, “NVivo analysis is researcher-driven and is, therefore, influenced by and to some degree, limited by researchers’ analytical decisions and epistemological positions. Leximancer analysis is more automated and relies on the researchers assigning meaning, interpreting and working with the results” (Wilk et al., 2019, p. 110). More importantly, utilizing two to identify frames of identical data will avoid potential program bias and increase research credibility.

In Leximancer, the Concept Map I mainly apply is heat-mapped to demonstrate significance of themes and their affiliated concepts (Leximancer., 2018). From the hottest to the coolest; colors in order are red, orange, green, blue and purple, in which the importance and relevance of themes decline gradually (Leximancer., 2018). By adjusting the configuration of “theme size”, the number of themes changes, and, in this research, theme size is arranged from 35 % to 60 % to show from 6 to 11 themes. By modifying the
configuration of “visible concepts”, the intensity of concepts under each theme is altered to show different percentages of concepts. In this research, “visible concepts” are set as 100 % to illustrate all the themes and concepts. Based on concept maps, two figures can be drawn as “frequency of several most frequent themes” and “detailed concepts that are affiliated with several most frequent themes” to enrich the understanding of Concept Maps.

In NVivo, I primarily employ the first 11 highest occurring words. In order to deepen the understanding of any single word and its connected contexts, Word Trees are used to display as a tree, with branches that reflect the contexts where the word appears (Woolf, 2017). These words in the branches transpiring near the searched word or with a larger size are ones more frequently appearing (Woolf, 2017). To precisely locate the searched word and its related concepts, the configuration of Word Trees is tailored to find the exact match of the searched word and the branch order around the searched word is customized to number of matches. The context (words) is modified into either maximum 5 or 10, depending if the pertinent context can be explained clearly. On account of lengthy Word Trees, screenshots are made to cover words surrounding searched word.

Word Tree in NVivo Analysis can help further understand concepts, but in practice, not every concept will be analysed by word tree in NVivo or concept map in Leximancer, as some concepts have obvious meaning and directions. That said, software is not omnipotent and cannot replace human analysis (Angus et al., 2013). Themes and concepts do not usually equal to frames that researchers pursue, because analytical ability of the programs is limited, and this analytical process will be conducted by researchers (Adu, 2019; Smith & Humphreys, 2006). For example, “belt” and “road” is the name word of the BRI, but the BRI cannot be simply framed as “belt” or “road”. As Crofts and Bisman (2010) argue, “the application of CAQDAS should not operate as a substitute for the researcher’s immersion in, or interpretation of the data but rather as a means for enriching the research process” (p. 197). In addition, the essence of the BRI is a policy, as this research has constantly elucidated. Also, “policy” has an impartial connotation. However, if there is another word such as “plan”, “project”, “conspiracy” or “strategy” in Leximancer and NVivo Analysis with more stressed position, the more dominant word will be employed to replace “policy”.

Frame Analysis

This study employs a qualitative frame analysis to investigate the trend of the BRI narratives in the Australian media. While researchers agree that the definition of frame and its application are not established uniformly, frame provides a powerful tool for researching the role of news media as the mediator of real-world events and public interpretation (Borah, 2011; Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 1999; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). As a social constructionist, Goffman (1974) argued that the frame is an interpretative scheme that constructs reality and facilitates people’s ability to perceive, label and
understand the constructed information. Furthermore, Entman (1993, p. 52) notes that the function of the frame is “to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text”.

According to (de Vreese et al., 2001), from a media studies perspective, “the central dimensions of a frame seem to be the selection, organization, and emphasis of certain aspects of reality, to the exclusion of others” (p. 108). The key words here are “selection”, “organization”, “emphasis” and “exclusion”; they reveal that a frame is not a holistic and objective description of a subject, but an incomplete and subjective interpretation of the social reality. A generic approach is chosen to examine these BRI frames in the Australian media. According to de Vreese et al (2001), generic frames permit comparisons in different temporal, physical and cultural contexts. This generic modality is well suited to the usage of Leximancer and NVivo Analysis which is often discursively broad and adaptive.

Framing the BRI in the Australian Media from 2013 to 2020

Figure 3. Concept map of 408 BRI-centred news in Leximancer

Note: Configuration of the map in Leximancer: theme size – 60%, visible concepts – 100%.
Figure 4. Frequency of the six most frequent themes of 408 BRI-centered news in Leximancer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Hits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>4720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>government</td>
<td>2895</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China’s</td>
<td>2403</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>power</td>
<td>1148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>billion</td>
<td>1018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>company</td>
<td>385</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Configuration of the analyst synopsis in Leximancer, high detail level.

Table 1. Detailed concepts that are affiliated with the six most frequent themes in Leximancer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>China, Road, Belt, Chinese, infrastructure, BRI, Australia, countries, Beijing, Road Initiative, trade, projects, Australian, investment, initiative, economic, global, China’s, year, including, companies, project, business, program, political, co-operation, opportunities, work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>government, foreign, deal, signed, federal, agreement, policy, Victoria, security, national, sign, week, governments, Victorian, relationship, Andrews, Labor, former, states, minister, party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China’s</td>
<td>China’s, region, world, development, Asia, strategic, influence, debt, nations, plan, Europe, leaders, international, Pacific, country, economy, growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>power</td>
<td>power, time, local, role, key, need, public, during</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>billion</td>
<td>billion, road, people, port, One Road, capital, past, million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>company</td>
<td>company, director,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. The first 11 highest occurring word of 408 BRI-centred news in NVivo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Weighted Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>china</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4098</td>
<td>2.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chinese</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1784</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>australia</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1634</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>road</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1578</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>government</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1476</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>belt</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1345</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bri</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1053</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>infrastructure</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>907</td>
<td>0.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>australian</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>862</td>
<td>0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>initiative</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>840</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>823</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contradictions

The first frame to appear is about conflicts. In Australia media, this frame portrays the BRI as an abundant economic opportunity; however, it also depicts the BRI with security and strategic concerns. In terms of economic opportunity, the key words are “infrastructure”, “trade”, “economic”, “company”, “project”, “business”, “co-operation”, “opportunities”, “growth”, “investment”, “development”, “port” and “capital”. Among them, “company” are a theme in Leximancer Analysis; “infrastructure” is the eighth frequent words in NVivo Analysis. Both suggests the importance of the BRI as an economic opportunity. More concretely, words “trade”, “development” and “growth” explicitly refer to the BRI as an economic opportunity. The BRI, as an economic opportunity, can be elaborated into several facets. “Company”, “project”, “business” and “co-operation” signify that the BRI brings business prospect to corporations. “Infrastructure” and “port” illustrate business opportunities focus on infrastructure field.

Regarding the negative side, key words “security”, “strategic”, “influence”, “debt”, and “power” shows various intertwined concerns about the BRI. Among them, “power” is a theme in Leximancer Analysis. The logic behind these words is interconnected. Due to the well-admittedly rise of China’s “power”, its “strategic influence” has been growing and the BRI can be viewed as a part of China’s “power”. The Australian media discourse is concerned and unsettled about the possible “strategic influence” or “power” the BRI may bring, as the Australian media use words “expand”, “economic supremacy”, “saddle poor countries”, “predatory economic behavior” and “failing into Chinese hands” to depict the BRI, shown by the following Figure 5.

**Figure 5.** Word trees of “power”, “influence” and “strategic” in the 408 BRI-centered news
This concern in Australian media discourse can be specified as “security”
and “debt”. “Security” refers to military unease and fear of losing stability.
“Debt” reflects economic anxiety with “trap” in its word tree, alluding a threat
to national “sovereignty”, as Figure 6 illustrates. Therefore, the BRI can be
regarded as contradictions in the Australian media discourse.

Figure 6. Word trees of “security” and “debt” in the 408 BRI-centered news
Intragovernmental frictions

The BRI primarily deals with relationships among governments. “Government” is the second most important theme in Leximancer Analysis, and fifth most frequently appearing word in NVivo Analysis. In addition, there are numerous government-related concepts and key words in Leximancer and NVivo Analysis such as “political”, “federal”, “Victoria”, “national”, “governments” “Victorian”, “Andrews” (Daniel Andrews, Premier of Victoria), “Labor” (Australian Labor Party), “states”, “minister”, “party”, “leaders”, “president”, “premier”, “Xi Jinping” (President of China), “communist” (Chinese Communist Party) and “Morrison” (Scott Morrison, Prime Minister of Australia).

In summary, this frame implies the BRI mainly incorporates the interplay of the Xi Jinping-led Chinese Central Government, the Daniel Andrews-led Victorian State Government and the Scott Morrison-led Australian Federal Government. Behind these governments, there are respective Chinese Communist Party, Australian Labor Party and Liberal–National Coalition. The background has been mentioned before. The BRI was issued by the Chinese Central Government. The Victorian State Government signed the BRI MoU, while the Australian Federal Government refused to be part of the BRI.

Chinese-government-centered infrastructure policy

Undoubtedly, China-related words such as “China”, “China’s” and “Chinese” are the dominant themes in Leximancer Analysis and most frequently occurring words in NVivo Analysis, according to Figure 3 and Table 2. The issue is that China/Chinese is a massive concept and what the specific meaning behind China is unclear. It is not difficult to observe that China in Australian media denotes the Chinese Central Government, namely, Beijing, where the Central Government is located. Also, “government” is the second most important theme in Leximancer Analysis, and fifth most frequently appearing word in NVivo Analysis, which underpins the aforementioned observation.

Furthermore, the BRI is an infrastructure policy. Even though word “infrastructure” only ranks 8th most frequently appearing word in NVivo Analysis, “road”, the name word of the BRI, literally meaning a type of infrastructure, places 4th most repeatedly occurring word. More crucially, the following Figure 7 pinpoints the importance of “infrastructure” in Leximancer Analysis. “Infrastructure”, as a concept, centers in the most critical theme “China” in red, and its branches are almost connected to every important concept in hot-colored themes. From the hottest to the coolest, colors in order are red, orange, green, blue and purple, in which the importance and relevance of themes decline gradually (Leximancer., 2018). Therefore, one of the BRI frames in Australian media can be concluded as “China-government-centered infrastructure policy”.

11
Figure 7. Concept map and relational analysis of “infrastructure” in the 408 BRI-centred news in Leximancer

Note: Configuration of the map in Leximancer: theme size – 60%, visible concepts – 100%
Framing the BRI in the Australian Media from 2013 to 2017

Figure 8. Concept map of BRI-centred news in Leximancer from 2013 to 2017

Note: Configuration of the map in Leximancer: theme size – 50%, visible concepts – 100%
Figure 9. Frequency of the eight most frequent themes of BRI-centred news from 2013 to 2017 in Leximancer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Hits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>projects</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silk Road</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>billion</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>growth</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>million</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROAD</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Configuration of the analyst synopsis in Leximancer, high detail level.

Table 3. Detailed concepts that are affiliated with the eight most frequent themes news from 2013 to 2017 in Leximancer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>China, trade, countries, Australia, road, business, economic, maritime,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>China’s, One Road, silk, Beijing, BELT, global, strategy, people,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Chinese, infrastructure, Australian, government, Asia, investment,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>year, ports, Europe, port, links, build, China’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>projects</td>
<td>projects, OBOR, companies, rail, initiative, construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silk Road</td>
<td>Silk Road, world, Tang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>billion</td>
<td>billion, group, deal, state-owned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>growth</td>
<td>growth, time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>million</td>
<td>million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>road</td>
<td>road</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. The first 11 highest occurring word of BRI-centered news from 2013 to 2017 in NVivo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Weighted Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>china</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>2.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chinese</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>road</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>1.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>infrastructure</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>australia</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>belt</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>projects</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>government</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>0.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>new</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>0.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The resurrection of historical Silk Road

The resurrection of historical Silk Road is the first frame from 2013 to 2017. According to Figure 9, “Silk Road” ranks 4th of all the themes in Leximancer. As a notion, Silk Road, literally takes its name from the profitable trade in silk that rose in the Han dynasty in China (Winter, 2019). It gradually developed into a network of trade routes, connecting and Southeast Asia and East Asia with the Arabian Peninsula, South Asia, Persia, Southern Europe and East Africa (Winter, 2019).

To further understand historical ties of Silk Road, “Tang”, one of concepts in the theme “Silk Road” is worth noting. As illustrated by the following Figure 10, “Tang” refers to Tang Dynasty and is also intertwined with other words with historical connotations such as “dynasties: Zhou, Qin”, “Han”(the Han dynasty), “Golden age”, “Du Fu” (a poet in the Tang dynasty), “Fang Gan” (a poet in the Tang dynasty), “AD 618-907” (duration of the Tang dynasty) and “Emperor Li” (the family name of emperors in the Tang dynasty). Well-admittedly, the Tang dynasty is one of the most glorious and prosperous periods in Chinese history, when the Silk Road reached its golden age (Liu, 2019).

To deepen the understanding of the word “silk”, word tree of “silk” is employed and shown by Figure 10. Clearly, “road” is as same as the size of “silk”, indicating the indivisibility of the two words. More importantly, the word “new” is a stressed one that occurs around the “silk” word tree. These leads to a notion “New Silk Road” that has been constantly used as a substitute of the BRI by Xi Jinping’s speeches and Beijing’s official documents. Thus, the resurrection of historical Silk Road is one frame of the BRI in the Australian media.

Figure 10. Word trees of “Silk” and “Tang” of BRI-centered news from 2013 to 2017
An infrastructure-focused economic opportunity

The second frame appearing is infrastructure-focused economic opportunity. "Trade", "business", "economic", "investment", "companies", "projects" and "capital" either show in red/orange-coloured Figure 8 Leximancer map or frequently appear in Figure 11 NVivo map. More crucially, "growth", and "project" are two of eight themes in total in Figure 9 Leximancer map, indicating the significance of the BRI’s economic side. In general, these words mean that the BRI brings investment and businesses to companies.

As for shaping the BRI to revolve around infrastructure, Table 3 and 4 illustrate that "port", "links", "rail", "construction", and "ports" regularly appears in Leximancer map or NVivo map, belonging to a broader notion, namely, infrastructure. More significantly, not only do they occur in Leximancer map, but "infrastructure" also rank 5th most frequent appearing words in NVivo map, as demonstrated by Table 4. Thus, one of frames of the BRI-centered news in the Australian media is an infrastructure-focused economic opportunity.

A China-centred project

Another frame is a China-centred project. Evidently, China-related words such as "China", "China’s" and "Chinese" are the principal themes in Leximancer Analysis and most frequently occurring words in NVivo Analysis, according to Figure 8 and Table 4. The question is that China/Chinese is a massive concept and what the specific meaning behind China is unclear. It is not difficult to observe that China in Australian media denotes the Chinese
Central Government, namely, Beijing, where the Central Government is located.

However, compared to the status of “government” in Australian media from 2013 to 2020, when “government” is the second most important theme in Leximancer Analysis, and fifth most frequently appearing word in NVivo Analysis, this time “government”, as a notion, has been strongly weakened. “Government” and “Beijing” only appear in Table 3 Leximancer map as a concept rather than a theme, and just rank 9th and 24th in Table 4 NVivo map. Thus, government is not a main frame here. Also, there is not any other concept to extend the meaning of “China”, so this only utilizes “China”.

Furthermore, “project” is the third theme in Figure 3 Leximancer map and eighth most regularly occurring word in Table 4 NVivo map. The essence of the BRI is a policy, as this research has constantly elucidated. Also, “policy” has an impartial connotation. However, if there is another word such as “plan”, “project”, “conspiracy” or “strategy” in Leximancer and NVivo Analysis with more stressed position, the more dominant word will be employed to replace “policy”. For this part, “project” as a word can be utilized to define the BRI, as it frequently appears both in Leximancer and NVivo Analysis. Moreover, the usage of “project” rather than “policy” implies that Australian media view the BRI more as a concrete business opportunity, stressing again its economic side.

**Framing the BRI in the Australian Media from 2017 to 2020**

**Figure 11. Concept map of BRI-centered news in Leximancer from 2017 to 2020**

Note: Configuration of the map in Leximancer: theme size – 35%, visible concepts – 100%.
Figure 12. Frequency of the eleven most frequent themes of 408 BRI-centered news from 2017 to 2020 in Leximancer

Note: Configuration of the analyst synopsis in Leximancer, high detail level.

Table 5. Detailed concepts that are affiliated with the eleven most frequent themes from 2017 to 2020 in Leximancer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>China, Belt, Road, BRI, Road Initiative, Beijing, trade, signed, global, sign, program, work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Chinese, infrastructure, countries, projects, investment, initiative, China’s, including, companies, business, nations, co-operation, plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>government</td>
<td>government, Australian, deal, foreign, federal, agreement, Victoria, policy, week, Victorian, Andrews, Mr Andrews, Labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>economic</td>
<td>economic, region, China’s, project, world, strategic, Pacific, international, leaders, country, port</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>Australia, year, influence, political, told, deals, key</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>security</td>
<td>security, national, governments, relationship, states, former, local, minister, public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>debt</td>
<td>debt, development, Asia, Europe, billion, economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>power</td>
<td>power, time, role, company, director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>need</td>
<td>need, during, down, past, million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people</td>
<td>people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>party</td>
<td>party</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6. The first 11 highest occurring word of BRI-centered news from 2017 to 2020 in NVivo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Weighted Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>china</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3414</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>chinese</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1301</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>australia</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1350</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>government</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1138</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>road</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1242</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>belt</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1106</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>bRI</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>942</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>australian</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>738</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>initiative</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>706</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>infrastructure</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>701</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>beijing</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>690</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Division is the first occurring frame. Undeniably, the BRI has an economic side, as “trade”, “infrastructure”, “projects”, “investment”, “companies”, “business”, “economic”, “development”, “economy”, frequently appears in Leximancer map Figure 12 and NVivo map Table 6. Additionally, “economic” is the fourth of eleven themes in total in Leximancer map Figure 12. All of this indicates that the BRI brings investment and economic opportunities to companies.

However, this cannot overlook or cover the contentious nature of the BRI in Australian media that constitutes one of the main frames here. “China”, the most dominant theme in Leximancer map Figure 12 and most regularly occurring word in NVivo map Table 6, is closely surrounded by “anti” and “pro” in the word tree of “China”, as illustrated by the following Figure 13. This has never happened in the word tree of “China” from 2013 to 2020 or from 2013 to 2017. Also, as the sixth most frequently transpiring word in NVivo map Table 6, “Belt”, also the name word of the BRI, is tightly bordered by “controversial” in its word tree following Figure 13.
Figure 13. Word trees of the “China” and “belt” in the BRI-centered news from 2017 to 2020

Note: Configuration of six-word trees in NVivo: find exact matches; branch order – number of matches; context (words): maximum 5.
With regards to the aforementioned Leximancer map theme “economic”, its NVivo word tree Figure 14 not only demonstrates economic “prosperity”, but also more closely adjoins economic “dependency”, reflecting concerns in Australian media. There are other terms in a negative tone such as “warning”, “dependency for its political advantage”, “benefit for signing up, but a lot of negative strategic”, “benefit derived from the agreement could be dwarfed in importance”, “benefit project, it has a lot of political agenda”, “criticism of flares” and “defies rational analysis”, indicating that the BRI in Australian media is divisive.

**Figure 14.** Word trees of “economic “of BRI-centered news from 2017 to 2020

![Word trees of “economic “of BRI-centered news from 2017 to 2020](image)

Note: Configuration of six-word trees in NVivo: find exact matches; branch order – number of matches; context (words): maximum 10.

Furthermore, “security”, “strategic”, “influence”, “debt”, and “power” reveals a variety of intertwined anxieties about the BRI either in Leximancer map Figure 12 or NVivo map Table 6. Among them, “security”, “debt” and “power” are three independent themes in Leximancer map Figure 12. By comparison, same words appear in the Leximancer map Figure 4 from 2013 to 2020, but only “power” creates one theme. These five words or themes are profoundly interconnected. The logic behind them is that with the well-admittedly rise of China, the BRI-represented “power” and “strategic influence” has been growing, leading to worries such as “security” and “debt”. More concretely, as the following Figure 15 indicates, “debt” refers to “too much debt”, “debt trap”, “a political tool which saddles poor countries with too much debt”, “predatory economics”, “leave countries at China’s mercy” and “threaten their sovereignty”.

“Security” is surrounded by “to ensure security” and “ability to protect security”, illustrating the fear of losing stability in Australian media. “Power” is strongly related to “paving the way for China to assume greater power”, “a fairly naked attempt by Beijing to maximize geostrategic power” and “it employs economic power as an expression of strategic power”, signifying the rise of China and transforming its economic power into strategic influence. Furthermore, “influence” suggests “an undue expansion of China’s global
influence”, “China buying global influence”, “corrosion of democracy under China’s global influence”, “China’s initiative as a vision of foreign influence”, “seeking influence” and “influence, saddling poor nations with debt”, implying China’s ambition and strategy. Likewise, “strategic” indicates “a fairly naked attempt by Beijing to maximize geostrategic”, “Beijing directs capital flow to reinforce its strategic” and “as a tool used by Beijing to advance its strategic”. Thus, drawing on the above, one of the BRI frames in Australian media is a divisive policy.

**Figure 15.** Word trees of “security”, “strategic”, “influence”, “debt”, and “power” of BRI-centered news from 2017 to 2020
a reality "under Mr. Trump, with more "soft and hard"
let because it doesn’t meet the market’s need for
but they are still the most expensive form of
market to see as much as "cool" -
and some can also play a role in supporting
At this time, the initiative is about infrastructure development.
the main reason for "soft and hard"
weak or well in the network of
and asked "that there are being an

own deals will be examined first and foremost with
socially are paying the way for China to assume
the significantly larger partner, will be able to meet a
fairly naked attempt by Beijing to maximise prof

"it employs economic power as an expression of

could be better... It also makes some strategic sense
in the Indo-Pacific, Mr.桂小平 stressed suggestions that
his government at the time, that Indonesia
was only part - social, political strength brought down after 20 years,
to be recognised. Indeed while President Xi
sets his Paris conference apart, making a potential shift

lesson from the pandemic - taping resort to
Professor Iken said the issue was whether
will be scrapped by the government

question whether the MoU was constitutional. It
an initiative designed to boost China’s strategy -
technopolitical and
restating... "he said, "It’s China wants to use...

分歧 within the EU is already very wide and
Western diplomat based in Brussels also warned against overreacting

Belgium One food initiative at Australia expressed concern about
University of Canberra and the author of "ollipop literature"
memorandum of understanding with China, with plans to break
extending five years. "We see it as no democracy in
I’m really quite happy about it. It’s not signifying changes because we are westernising our
sentiments to many people, much such as Malaysia and Indonesia.
action to track China’s strategy of infrastructure building and
strategically linked with our allies in the region, member
manipulated by the British media..."
would use their position

"You can imagine - Australia are collaborate week "..."we have studied the soft capability
not mean China Ministry of Commerce would also
in the region..." China is in a position today
And China’s new president has profoundly changed Beijing’s attempts world...

not still determined components of strategy and..." is making
and undermine the unity of the European Union.

in some quarters of an unusual equation of China’s
Washington is convinced that China is trying to gain
need context and deep analysis..." he said. China buying
and other infrastructure in Indonesia. The new court in
Canberra replaced "the current government is not China’s

it has set an "advanced" - inspired strenuous
availability for China to exploit its region is

is playing neutral China’s capital and industrial capacity to
another layer to Australian government efforts to limit unilateral
oppose themselves with national security acts to better leverage

Seems well - documented history of ties to Chinese for
Australian organizations like this to be on

he labelled China’s initiative as an

Initiation is a clear expression of

power

influence

global

foreign

station

Chinese

the Chinese Communist Party

China's most powerful

the communist party's

the government now has

the Australian government does not

in Australia. The Chinese government has been keen to

selecting powerful nations without..." We have threshold
permanent economic presence in the Indo-Pacific, Mr. Turnbull

involvement in the debate, it is an overtly stated..." These reports,

economic supremacy in the Indo-Pacific... Mr. Grugeon dismissed
the country needed to "with others"... it maintains its

as we have a relationship with..."

in terms of BRI's chair and

Monash and the Australian Prime Minister have exchanged strong
An Australian domestic political issue

The second frame is about Australian domestic political issues. Conspicuously, the BRI is a Chinese Central Government-initiated policy, as the whole research illustrates. However, the BRI has evolved into a domestic political issue in Australian media. “Government”, the third most crucial theme in Leximancer map Figure 12, contains the following concepts: “government”, “Australian”, “deal” (the BRI deal between China and Victoria), “foreign”, “federal” (Australian Federal Government), “agreement”, “Victoria” (one State in Australia), “policy”, “week”, “Victorian”, “Andrews” (Daniel Andrews, Premier of Victoria), “Mr Andrews” (Daniel Andrews, Premier of Victoria) and “Labor” (Australian Labor Party). None of them directly points out China. Also, “government” is the fourth most frequently occurring word in NVivo map Table 6 and its word tree in the following Figure 16 does not explicitly illustrate the involvement of China. More significantly, its word tree clearly indicates that it is an issue among “Morrison”, Prime Minister of Australia, and “Andrews”, Premier of Victoria.
Figure 16. Word tree of “government” in the BRI-centered news from 2017 to 2020

Note: Configuration of six-word trees in NVivo: find exact matches; branch order–number of matches; context (words): maximum 5.

By further exploring the word trees of “Victoria”, “Andrews” and “Morrison” in the following Figure 17, the political division regarding the BRI between the Australian Federal Government and the Victorian State Government becomes much clearer. For instance, “had received a letter setting out Mr Morrison’s concern with Victoria”, “Victoria signed up to the controversial infrastructure scheme”, “Victoria become the only government in Australia to formally commit to”, “Andrews broke ranks with the federal government”, “Andrews was warned by the Prime Minister”, “Andrews was wrong in principle to back the BRI”, “Andrews was criticized for his government’s agreement with the Asian superpower”, “Andrews pressured to dump the deal”, and “Morrison will legislate to tear up Victoria’s multimillion dollar bill”.

In summary, not only do they reflect the divisive essence of the BRI as the previous frame, but all the aforementioned examples also illuminate that the BRI is an Australian domestic political issue in Australian media. Thus, one of the BRI frames in Australian media is an Australian domestic political issue.
Figure 17. Word trees of “Victoria”, “Andrews” and “Morrison” of BRI-centered news from 2017 to 2020.
Note: Configuration of six-word trees in NVivo: find exact matches; branch order – number of matches; context (words): maximum 10.

A Chinese-communist-party-centered policy

The last frame is a Chinese-communist-party-centered policy. Unmistakably, the most vital themes in Leximancer Analysis and the most common terms in NVivo Analysis are China-related words such as “China”, “Chinese” and “China’s”. The problem is that China/Chinese is a huge notion and what the real meaning behind China is. It is easy to assume that China denotes the Chinese Central Government in Australian media, namely Beijing, where the Central Government is based.

However, “government” as a concept does not appear in the first two most important themes “China” and “Chinese” in Leximancer map Figure 12. As mentioned in the last frame, “government”, the third most crucial theme in the same Figure, contains the numerous concepts in relation to Australia, but none of them directly points out China. Also, “government” is the fourth most frequently occurring word in NVivo map Table 6 and its word tree in Figure 16 does not explicitly illustrate the involvement of China. Admittedly, China means the Chinese Central Government here, but defining it as a frame is inappropriate.

By searching the word tree of “party” in Figure 18, a theme in Leximancer map, “party” mainly means the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Here the meaning of China is beyond the Chinese government and reaches to the ruling party in China. This can be employed to explain the inference of China. Noticeably, in addition to routinely mentioning BRI issued by the CCP such as “the BRI, which was included in the party constitution”, the Australian media outlets discuss more about Chinese political system, Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 and its following Massacre and Uighurs. For example, “Mao Zedong, the great dictator of the People’s Republic”, “freedom that drove the Tiananmen demonstrators”, “intensified by Hu’s death in April. The massacre
set” (Hu Yaobang, former General Secretary of the CCP, his death indirectly triggered the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989), “detention of Uighurs” “leader in nationally televised meeting May 19 Zhao Ziyang” (on 19 May 1989, Zhao, former Premier, appeared in Tiananmen Square and delivered a speech to protesters, which is the last time of his public appearance) “control history is one of the party”, “lack electoral legitimacy”, and “how brutal the CCP”. All of above are irrelevant with the BRI and intended to condemn the CCP regarding its authoritarian political system and violation of human rights. In summary, the BRI has been arguably politicised to an ideological level, stressing the party rather the government. Thus, one of the BRI frames in Australian media is a Chinese-communist-party-centered policy.

**Figure 18. Word trees of “party” of BRI-centered news from 2017 to 2020**

Note: Configuration of six-word trees in NVivo: find exact matches; branch order– number of matches; context (words): maximum 10.
Discussion: Understanding the BRI Frames in Australian media

Table 7. The BRI frames in the Australian media from 2013 to 2020, from 2013 to 2017 and from 2017-2020

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>The BRI-focused news number:</th>
<th>The BRI-related news number:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013-2020</td>
<td>408</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contradictions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intragovernmental frictions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Chinese-government-centered infrastructure policy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2017</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>An infrastructure-focused economic opportunity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A China-centred project</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The resurrection of historical Silk Road</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2020</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>1744</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>An Australian domestic political issue</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Chinese-communist-party-centered policy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Division</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: created by the author of this paper.

The trend of the BRI news in Australia and the influence of the Covid-19

Drawing on the above, the amount of BRI news rose since 2016, when Sino-Australian relations started to deteriorate. By comparison, from 2013 to 2015, when bilateral relations were ‘normal’, the number of BRI outlets has not frequently appeared in the five media. The general trend of the BRI-focused articles is almost identical to the number of news stories in the five media that mentions the BRI. The Australian media did not draw much attention to the BRI before 29 May 2017, when the official rejection of the BRI happened, and BRI-focused news only make up 17%. However, after that, the BRI became a news topic in Australian media, accounting for 83% of the the BRI-focused news. Similarly, the BRI-related outlets constitute 13% before 29 May 2017, whereas they comprise 87% after that date. This confirms that the Australian federal government’s refusal to commit was possibly a decisive factor in the media coverage.

More interestingly, the once-a-century Covid-19 pandemic has not decreased the media attention in Australia towards the BRI but has possibly deteriorated the media atmosphere of the BRI. In 2020, the BRI-focused news culminated, and the BRI-related news reaches its second highest. This, on the contrary, signifies increasing media attention to the BRI as an individual case in 2020. Arguably, the reason behind this phenomenon is that the BRI has gradually evolved into an Australian domestic political issue, a point I will return later.
From economic opportunities to divisions: Australian distorted mentality

In general, the BRI was framed as contradictions during the 7 years with the coexistence of the positive and negative sides that respectively refer to economic benefits, and strategic and security concerns. This reflects the two debating opponents in Australia divided by the BRI and how Australia should response: economic commentators versus defense hawks or "security-intelligence-military establishment" (Laurenceson & Collinson, 2017). The defense hawks accuse the economic commentators of being too naive because 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).

Conspicuously, the BRI was much more positive before 2017 in Australian media and mainly means economic benefits such as investment and infrastructure projects, taking up 17% of the BRI-focused news. This view is primarily held by Australian business community, which is a well-admitted common consensus in Australia (Laurenceson et al., 2017; Pan, 2018; Shen, 2018; Wade, 2018; Wang, 2018; Yang & Wang, 2016). By comparison, the BRI became a contentious topic with concerns of security, debt, economic dependency and strategic influence after 2017, accounting for 83% of the BRI-focused news. “China”, the most dominant theme and most regularly occurring word during all the three periods, is placed after prefix “anti” and “pro” from 2017 to 2020. This has never happened from 2013 to 2020 or from 2013 to 2017. In summary, the BRI media reports are generally unfavorable with some favorable opinions, which is consistent with views of Yang and Wei Wang (2016).

To further understand the current controversy of the BRI, it is worth noting that Australia has a pluralistic media system which is conflicted by Australia’s economic reliance on China. That said, freedom of speech encourages people to express differing views of the BRI, some leading to Australia’s concerns about the BRI. Some of them are reasonable. Being economically too dependent on China is not healthy and not secure for the Australian economy, facilitating recent diversification strategy of the Morrison administration.

Furthermore, every rising power tries to expand its influence and fill in power vacuums, and facing increasing power imbalance in Asia Pacific, Australia is justified to be concerned about the strategic influence of the BRI and take actions correspondingly. “The Liberal-Coalition government has increased spending on foreign aid for the first time since the Coalition came to power in 2013”, which is mainly because China’s BRI investment throughout the Pacific (Galloway, 2021).

However, military concern seems irrelevant to the BRI, as it is a Chinese economic and diplomatic proposal. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QSD) appeared frequently in relation to the BRI frames in the Australian media, although the QSD is an informal strategic forum with the emphasis of military cooperation that has been extensively perceived as a response to China’s rise.
(Sarkar, 2020). Geoff Raby (2019), former ambassador to China, reveals that
the views of defense hawks have dominated the federal government regarding
its BRI policy. All of these signifies that the BRI in Australian media has been
beyond the BRI itself and politicized, a point I will stress later.

**The growingly ideological lens towards the BRI**

“China/Chinese” is undoubtedly the central frame of the BRI in Australian
media. Overall, “China/Chinese” refers to the Chinese government from 2013
to 2020 in Australian media, and this reflects the fact that the BRI is initiated
by the Chinese government. However, the remarkable component is that before
2017, the BRI frame directs to “China/Chinese”, an open-ended concept,
without pointing out much about governmental agencies but more about
business organizations. In contrast, after 2017, “China/Chinese” in the BRI
frame evolved into Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which involves criticism
against Chinese authoritarian political system and violation of human rights.
Evidently, this denunciation should have not linked with the BRI, an economic
and diplomatic proposal, but the Chinese government as a whole. Also, by
using “CCP”, the single ruling party in the Chinese government, the discussion
about the BRI in the Australian media was colored with communism, an
ideology that the West, including Australia, has opposed for decades.

To deepen the understanding of this trend, the background of China’s
image in Australia is key. There is a growing literature around the threat of
China in Australia and their negative influence on the BRI in the Australian
media is not negligible. Hamilton (2018) boldly titled his book “Silent Invasion”
to describe the CCP’s 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 the CCP, and compares the
Western tolerance of China’s rise with the appeasement of Nazi Germany.

Officially, the Minister for Home Affairs Peter Dutton, one of most senior
officers in the Liberal-Coalition-led Morrison administration, condemned
China’s interference and cyber hacks in Australia and claimed that the policies
of the CCP are incompatible with Australian values (Greenbank, 2019).

Despite some disagreements, their ideology-driven viewpoints have been
more widely transmitted and have stimulated a heated discussion in the
Australian media, which, to some extent, has shaped the negative atmosphere
of the China-initiated BRI in the Australia media, with other adverse
commentary on China, such as the Hong Kong protests, Sino-American trade
war and so on. To this extent, the BRI in Australian media has been
ideologized and beyond the BRI itself since 2017.

*From intragovernmental frictions to an Australian domestic political issue*

For more than 7 years, the Chinese government, Australian Federal
Government and Victorian State Government were involved in the BRI in
Australian media without a clear judgement. However, after 2017, the BRI turned into an Australian domestic political issue between the Australian Federal Government and Victorian State Government in Australian media. The Chinese government, the initiator of the BRI, should have been the leading actor, but in fact, has become less important.

This reflects the reality. The Victorian state government has signed up to two BRI MoUs to pursue its local economic prosperity and employment improvement regardless of this federal perspective, which leads to fierce criticism in Canberra (Jiang, 2019, 2020a). In 2020, the Australian Parliament passed Australia’s Foreign Relations (State and Territory Arrangements) Bill to strengthen federal authority and foreign policy consistency over state and Territory foreign affairs (Jiang, 2020b). Even though Canberra has not admitted officially that one of bill intentions is to cancel Victoria’s BRI MoUs, it seems a consensus in Australian politics and some politicians such as Liberal Senator James Patterson has already stated so (Speers, 2020).

Currently, the discussion about the BRI in Australia is not about the BRI itself, but a test for federal authority and national foreign policy consistency in Australia, more accurately, a constitutional issue. Until the end of 2020, Victoria’s BRI deals has remained intact, but their future is likely gloomy.

The gradually disappearing frames

The resurrection of the historical Silk Road frame only appeared from 2013 to 2017 in the Australian media and relevant notions did not emerge as a primary frame either from 2013 to 2020 or from 2017 to 2020. To define the ancient Silk Road, it began when trader and explorers found their passage from China to Europe and the Middle East in the second century BCE, mostly as a trade based on silk and silk products but also including precious stones and jewelry (Peters, 2019, p. 1).

However, the contemporary notion of ancient Silk Road is a recent phenomenon forming in the mid-19th century (Mishra, 2020). Peters (2019) argues the ancient Silk Road is more than an historical relic that serves as a modern metaphor….. It is a living reality that attests to the very early beginnings of capitalism as a form of merchant capitalism or mercantilism that predated the development of capitalism in Europe and therefore, of course, the industrial capitalism that grew up with the so-called “Industrial Revolution” (Peters, 2019, p. 2).

Thus, the Silk Road has arguably had a positive image in the West, in which industrial capitalism/revolution originated. As a Western democracy, Australia has benefited from global trade, leading to encouraging view of Silk Road in Australia (Adams et al., 2014).
Meanwhile, the emphasis on infrastructure has changed. Overall and before 2017, the BRI has been described as an infrastructure project, especially before 2017. However, infrastructure as a frame has gradually evaporated after 2017. In fact,

By 2034, Australia’s population is projected to grow by 23.7% to reach 31.4 million, adding to infrastructure demand, while existing infrastructure struggles under maintenance backlogs and the condition of many assets is unknown (Infrastructure Australia, 2019).

Especially, in 2020, infrastructure building is one of tenable solutions to recover the Covid-wreaked economy and the Australian federal and state governments have done so to stimulate economy (Infrastructure Australia, 2020). The BRI with infrastructure as one of crucial components exactly fits in Australian demand, which supposes to have a positive image in Australia. That said, the disappearing process implies that positive factors of the BRI have been gradually receding. Being infrastructure-related or resurrection of historical Silk Road is not of great interest to the Australian media, even though these are still key concepts of the BRI in China. Understandably, Australia is not the part of the BRI and thus, the Australian media cares more what the BRI means to Australia rather that what the BRI is.

**Conclusion**

From 2013 to 2020, the BRI in the Australian media has experienced drastic transformations from an economic opportunity to twisted concerns, and from less media attention to increasingly more. Due to the enormous disparity of the BRI news before and after 2017, we can conclude that the BRI media reports are generally unfavorable with some favorable opinions.

After 2017, the BRI has been gradually politicized beyond the BRI itself in Australian media. It has become a domestic political issue, a test for federal authority and national foreign policy consistency in Australia, more briefly, a constitutional issue. It is more about the CCP, an ideological and substantial threat to Australia, rather than the BRI itself. That said, to some extent, the BRI has become a Rorschach blot.

Everywhere, inside and outside China, interest groups have gazed upon it and seen different things. What they see often reveals more about themselves than anything else. Naturally, most interpret the BRI to suit their own interests (Hillman, 2020, p. 204).

To Australia, what the Australian media reveal is more about Australia rather than the BRI. Its democratic values, liberal media system, economic insecurity and corresponding overaction, local and federal political conformity are all the pictures the BRI mirror reflects.
Limitations and future research

This research mostly utilized Leximancer and NVivo Analysis, and frame analysis that involves methodological boundaries. Even if these were productive methods to identify the BRI frames, these methods do not actually demonstrate how these frames are produced from these journalists, what consequences certain frames may have, and why the dramatic shift regarding the BRI narratives in Australian media appeared. Also, a certain number of selected articles and authors in Australian mainstream printing journalism may be representative, but they cannot represent the whole media narrative in Australia regarding the BRI.

Future studies can build upon this work by exploring these ‘how, what and why’ questions, and also television programs in relation to the BRI. Additionally, I recommend the use of interviews to better understand their reporting process of Australian journalists. Such studies would better illuminate the BRI in Australian media.

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