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**Strategic Narratives, Visuality and Infrastructure in the Digital Age:
The Case of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative**

Abstract: Visual communication is at the heart of international relations in the digital age. Using a range of media tools, political elites communicate so-called 'strategic narratives' to persuade and influence the behaviour of target audiences. The existing body of research on 'strategic narratives' examines both spoken and written messages. While an academic focus on visual texts is emerging, limited attention has been given to the visualization of peaceful topics such as infrastructure projects. This paper examines the ontological and methodological foundations of 'strategic narratives', 'visuality', and 'infrastructure', to ascertain what *seeing strategic narratives on infrastructure* means in the study of global politics. The theoretical claims are demonstrated using the case study of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative. Herein, it is shown how China communicates strategic narratives on infrastructure to persuade target audiences of its foreign policy priorities, and to secure its self-concept. This communication process is supported by images in the digital sphere.

Keywords: China, Digital Age, Infrastructure, Maritime Silk Road Initiative, Strategic Narratives, Visuality

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Strategic Narratives, Visuality and Infrastructure in the Digital Age: The Case of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative

Introduction

The goal of this article is to examine the ontological and methodological foundations of 'strategic narratives', 'visuality' and 'infrastructure', and to ascertain what *seeing strategic narratives on infrastructure* means in the study of visual global politics (Bleiker et al 2018; Crilley 2015).

Strategic narrative research examines the communication processes by which political elites try to influence domestic and foreign audiences (Miskimmon et al 2013; 2017). Strategic narratives are 'a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors' (Miskimmon et al 2013, 2). Most studies in this area analyse the verbal or written communication of strategic narratives, including national newspapers (Dimitriu and de Graaf 2016, 3) interviews and speeches (Roselle 2017). Moreover, research on the power of images in news coverage is gaining momentum in International Relations studies (Crilley 2015; O'Loughlin 2011; Hansen 2011; Moeller 1999; Swimelar 2018). Examples used to explain the significance of visuality include the 'photographs of torture and prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib' (Miskimmon et al 2013, 49), as well as media coverage of '9/11; the invasion of Iraq; jihadist videos; successive waves of violence in Gaza; the Arab Spring; the war in Syria; and most recently the crisis in Ukraine' (Kirkpatrick 2015, 200).

Although an analytical perspective of visuality and strategic narrative is suitable for the study of war, radicalization and civic conflict, it also provides the tools to study more 'peaceful' topics (Möller and Shim 2019) such as infrastructure. For instance, visuality plays an important role in China's communication to construct a shared meaning of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). For this purpose, China is actively engaged in visual communication through its international broadcasting operations, media collaborations and traditional and online news presence, among other media efforts (for example, the Belt and Road Portal, CCTV News, CGTN, China Daily, China Radio International). The conceptualization of visuality and infrastructure is, therefore, an original and important contribution to the strategic narrative literature.

The BRI is a strategic infrastructure and economic collaboration. The Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) is part of the BRI – introduced in 2013 by China’s leader Xi Jinping as the ‘Project of the Century’ (State Information Center 2015). The MSRI is a direct extension of the ‘China Dream’, which has been the dominant theme of the administration of Xi Jinping (Ferdinand 2016). According to the ‘Vision for Maritime Cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative’, China is actively involved in the development of soft infrastructure (technology-sharing and people-to-people interactions) and hard infrastructure (ports, terminals, port cities, airports, bridges) to achieve ‘ocean cooperation’ amongst the countries along the ‘China-Indian Ocean-Africa-Mediterranean Sea Blue Economic Passage’ (State Information Center 2017, 3). The persuasiveness of China’s communication on maritime infrastructure projects and its own identity amongst countries along the Maritime Silk Road is critical for the success of the MSRI. Consequently, studying how China deploys images to supports its strategic narratives on infrastructure and what the significance of this imagery is in the overall scheme of persuasion, is of high importance.

Using China’s MSRI communications on infrastructure as a case study, this paper presents a set of arguments for the study of peaceful visual strategies by conceptualizing how images are tied to strategic narratives on infrastructure. *Seeing strategic narratives on infrastructure* can be described as the process in which political actors utilize visual communication to enhance the appeal of their infrastructure vision and action plans and their identity among international audiences. Political actors seek to discipline the practice of *seeing* to improve the discursive framework of foreign relations. While visual communications can be used to depict infrastructure projects as abstract objects, they are also often used to associate infrastructure with norms, values and character qualities of the political actor. The promise and delivery of infrastructure is fundamental for achieving domestic and international influence and advancing preferred order narratives. The importance of infrastructure in state-building and international relations is exemplified by projects including President Trump’s border wall, the Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa and the State Program of Infrastructure Development ‘Nurly Zhol’ in Kazakhstan. China’s pursuit of the MSRI, the subject of this case study, also follows this practice.

Concisely, political actors use infrastructure to advance their interests because infrastructure is the backbone of a society; it effects all citizens, and it requires governments to

reach deep into their pockets. Thus, political actors deploy strategic narratives to construct a shared meaning of infrastructure vision and action plans, often using images to support such efforts.

This paper explains that images are utilized in the communication of strategic narratives because of their ability to alter the scope, provide additional layers, and offer alternative forms of presenting information (Höllerer et al 2018). Additionally, images embody one or more narrative functions, which contribute to meaning production regarding infrastructure projects. Lastly, visual language is important in international communication because of the memories it can evoke, and the case study will illustrate this. China's promotion of the BRI builds on the communication of a *new* Silk Road, thus evoking a memory of the ancient Silk Road.

Building upon literature of the aesthetic turn and the narrative turn (Bleiker 2001; Roberts 2006), this study engages with the communication stages of strategic narratives: formation, projection and reception (Miskimmon et al 2013). The paper reviews the literature on the relationship between infrastructure, visibility and strategic narratives. It explores who creates and communicates these images, where these images are disseminated, why political actors engage in this practice, and how meaning is produced through images. Second, the article builds upon O'Loughlin, Miskimmon and Roselle's advice to 'think about how to assemble *methods* into a coherent *methodology*' (2017, 24; italics in the original). This then considers how we can, in a meaningful way, study the visual communication of strategic narratives on infrastructure. This approach is exemplified using the case study of China's MSRI. It examines a set of online images presented on the official Belt and Road Portal. The case study demonstrates how China's infrastructure vision and action plans are visualized, and how the country seeks to associate infrastructure communication with narratives about the 'Self'.

The article outlines 1) what visibility means in the communication of strategic narratives – specifically with regards to the issue of infrastructure, 2) it explores and explains how this can be studied, and 3) it provides a case study of China's visual strategic communication of the MSRI to demonstrate the theoretical claims given.

The ontology of strategic narratives, visibility and infrastructure

In the digital age it is imperative that we understand and analyse the intersection of strategic narratives and visual media. The extension of strategic narrative studies into the visual domain is required due to the omnipresence of images in the communication of political goals and the news

coverage of foreign affairs in the digital age (Bleiker 2018). Moreover, the intersection of strategic narratives and visual media is of particular interest in the study of infrastructure. This is because visuality is an important communication tool for political actors to give meaning to infrastructure, and to achieve public approval among target audiences. This section will explain what images that support strategic narratives on infrastructure look like, who communicates these images, where these images are disseminated, why political actors engage in this practice, and what we can learn from the use of images in a strategic narrative study.

What do images that support strategic narratives on infrastructure look like?

Political actors attempt to visualize their infrastructure vision and action plans to elicit public support. This type of imagery does not only depict infrastructure itself; images often associate infrastructure with the norms, values, and character qualities of the political actor. For instance, images tied to strategic narratives on infrastructure may point out desirable standards, suggest sustainable practices, or convey a self-conceptualisation of the political actor as benevolent and legitimate.

In the context of strategic narratives, images can be considered as separate *things* that are being tied to verbal communications. The meaning of visuality is always delivered through ‘mixed media’. As Campbell puts it, ‘all media are mixed and the meaning of the image is gravely affected by the text (the article, headlines, caption, other stories and advertisements) that surround its presentation to the public’ (2007, 372; Mitchell 2005; for an example, see Galai 2017). Images are communicated in the form of photographs, geographical maps, public relations material, posters and exhibition materials. They are also communicated on traditional newsprint, through social media as well as popular culture – including television, film and comics (Hansen 2017).

Therefore, visuality comes in many forms and shapes. Some of these images are ‘iconic, symbolic, and influential’ (Swimelar 2018, 180), while others can be plain and unassuming, as in the case of infrastructure projects (for example, industrial areas, cranes, ports, and handshakes). Despite the plain and unassuming nature of the aforementioned infrastructure images, audience engagement with and response to strategic narratives on infrastructure can be studied and understood from a visual lens.

Who is communicating these images to support strategic narratives on infrastructure?

Both state and non-state actors can disseminate images to support the communication of strategic narratives on infrastructure (Miskimmon et al 2013; Barthwal-Datta 2015). As a result of ‘technological capacity, institutional capacity, and organizational capacity,’ the politics of infrastructure is simultaneously played out in the visual domain by a multitude of actors (Castells 2008, 81). Countries such as China and the United States utilize communication to give meaning to infrastructure projects. Other non-state actors, such as multinational corporations operating in civil engineering and transnational networks concerned with the socio-economic and environmental impact of infrastructure, also disseminate strategic narratives on infrastructure.

An analysis of images and strategic narratives should always consider who the actor is and assess whether they are visually fluent. Indeed, political actors have agency to select and assemble images into a strategic narrative, and their success depends on their visual literacy skills (Bleiker 2018). This engagement with visuals is a necessary response to the immediacy of images (for example, the livestreaming of public speeches, the launch of infrastructure projects, news about local conflicts arising from infrastructure projects). It urges political actors to ‘manage and respond to this visual aspect of international relations’ and to ‘fit visuals of ongoing events into long-term strategic narratives’ (Miskimmon et al 2013, 22). Ideally, this visual construction then reflects the interests, ideas, and objectives of the political actor (for example the government, political party, non-governmental organisation).

Where are images that support strategic narratives on infrastructure communicated?

The physical presence of infrastructure (hard power) is complemented with appealing images tied to strategic narratives on infrastructure that are mostly disseminated in digital media. The *seeing* of infrastructure is therefore, for the most part, a digital practice.

To understand how images constitute meaning there needs to be an understanding of the multimedia environment in which the images are projected. Media censorship and regulation as well as media control (that is public or private ownership) affect the formation and dissemination of images. The digital age is changing the playing field, and as Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle emphasize, ‘traditionally powerful actors still exert control, but the increase in the number of actors and the contingency of control give the processes through which the meaning of events is created a different quality’ (2013, 22). Thus, political elites have broadened their communication

practices, for instance in the area of digital diplomacy and international broadcasting (Bjola and Holmes 2015; Thussu 2018).

The complexity of the media environment of the 21st century presents both opportunities and challenges for political elites to communicate narratives about infrastructure. Bleiker emphasizes that ‘images are now produced and circulated in ever faster and more complex ways and in the context of a rapidly changing global media economy’ (2015, 873). Not only do media companies have access to instantaneous messaging, but political actors also have access to digital media technology as a means to spread their political ideas. The case study below will present a clear example of how a state can pursue its political goals by means of images.

Complete political control of the meaning of the message and the flow of images is an illusion due to visual intertextuality. Stuart Hall explains intertextuality as the ‘accumulation of meanings across different texts, where one image refers to another, or has its meaning altered by being ‘read’ in the context of other images’ (2001, 328). The production of meaning and the legitimacy of the images depends, among other aspects, on the recognisability of the communication (Roselle 2006). States cannot control this communication process due to different interpretations held among various audiences (Steele 2018). Indeed, the digital age has opened up a complex new media ecology that political actors have to navigate in order to achieve positive public opinion (Miskimmon et al 2013). This process is difficult to control, and as such, ‘images in their relationship to strategic narratives are not stable’ (Swimelar 2018, 180). Thus, despite considerable efforts, political actors cannot completely discipline the meaning of infrastructure vision and action plans.

Why are images that support strategic narratives on infrastructure communicated?

In general, political actors communicate strategic narratives for the purpose of ‘[a]genda setting, legitimization, diverting attention, securing acquiescence, enhancing popularity, and mobilization’ (Miskimmon et al 2013, 8). Images, then, are communicated to reinforce these goals. As an example, political actors seek to create a positive perception of military recruitment through the use of attractive images (Rech 2014). The same communication process applies for other policies, including those involving infrastructure plans such as China’s BRI.

In addition, images are communicated to secure consistent notions of the ‘Self’. The term ‘ontological security’ refers to the narration of actions aiming to secure and ‘maintain consistent

self-concepts' (Steele 2008, 3). Political actors communicate images for aesthetic power purposes (Steele 2010) to control their self-concept and to ensure order and continuity. Thus, images are used to control the meaning of infrastructure vision and action plans, and to secure the actor's sense of 'Self'.

These types of images are sometimes modified to mediate an uninterrupted narrative of success. This is the case when contentious infrastructure plans are presented as desirable to local publics, and images are devoid of socio-economic and environmental concerns/effects. Moreover, political actors now increasingly use visual images in disinformation campaigns. In such cases, images are not necessarily communicated to tell the truth. This then confirms the observation that images can be doctored to convey a different message (Höllerer et al 2018). Research on images in a strategic narrative study should highlight how political actors modify images to pursue political objectives and identify how this behaviour is contested by publics (Khaldarova and Pantti 2016).

How do images give meaning to strategic narratives on infrastructure?

There are multiple functions that images can take in relation to written or spoken words. Höllerer, Jancsary, and Grafström observe three types of interactions in their research about the relationship of visual and verbal/written elements: 'First, the visual *alters the scope* of information. Second, the visual *adds additional layers* of information. Third, and finally, the visual *offers alternative forms* of presenting information' (2018, 627; italics in the original). The third interaction emphasizes sensibility over thought (Bleiker 2001). Thus, the relationship between the visual, the written and the spoken influences the meaning construction, production and performance of strategic narratives on infrastructure. For instance, images can *alter the scope* of information by associating infrastructure plans with either positive or negative externalities (Fourie 2006). In terms of *adding layers* of information, images about infrastructure vision and action plans can signal additional meanings as regards to identity and system narratives. Lastly, images may *offer an alternative form* of presenting information using emotion.

In addition, images can embody one or more narrative functions (informed by the work of Barthes 1966; Bruner 1991; Burke 1962; Fisher 1987; White 1980). According to the framework of Dramatism (Burke 1962; cited in Miskimmon et al 2017, 7), there are five essential components in a narrative: character or actors (agent), setting/environment/space (scene), conflict or action

(act), tools/behaviour (agency) and resolution or suggested resolution/goal (purpose). These narrative functions give meaning to infrastructure projects and to the identities of political actors because ‘narratives help to construct personal and social identity, provide sense and order to experience, and frame and structure action’ (Roberts 2006, 710). In terms of narrative functions, images can depict who is involved in the infrastructure plans, where the infrastructure developments are taking place, and with what purpose. By adopting sensemaking and sense-giving perspectives, researchers can illuminate how images, which convey narrative functions, bring order in the complex flow of information (Höllerer et al 2018; Awan 2007).

This paper also draws attention to the use of visual language as a form of visuality. Visual language can evoke responses due to the verbal communication of place-images, because they respond to audiences’ visual registries (see also Weber 2008). Place-images can have a specific or a generic form. Specific place-images are ‘a result of direct experiences such as tourist visits as well as from mediated experiences like television programs, magazines, newspapers, and movies,’ while generic place-images are ‘internalized’, with the example of the mountain, the city, and the beach (Adams 2009, 139). Visual language is relevant for a strategic narrative study on infrastructure because images of places are not always explicitly communicated to the public; instead, images of places are often incited. Examples of specific place-images of infrastructure projects include China’s Great Wall, the International Space Station, the Panama Canal and the Three Gorges Dam. Visual language of these place-images evokes public responses by relating infrastructure to, for example, security, international cooperation, science and innovation.

Visual language is sometimes supported by images – but this is not always the case. Place-images can already incite a memory, and more importantly, a public response. This is illustrated in the example of the war on terror, in which Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle observed that ‘many news stories that generated great public debate or even outrage did not include a photographic or other visual representation of the controversial phenomenon in question’ (2013, 125). Therefore, a place-image can be incited using visual language (verbal text) or images, or a combination of both.

Other ways of explaining what images *do* are advanced in Swimelar’s work. She describes four reasons why images can tell strategic narratives effectively: 1) ‘images can visually tell a story, or part of a story, through communicating the causes or effects of a particular action;’ 2) ‘images can make important claims about power;’ 3) ‘they can also provide evidence for claims

and actions that are crucial for an actor in telling a story and in trying to convince an audience;’ and 4) they can achieve an ‘emotional resonance for an audience’ (2018, 182). Noticeably, Swimelar’s work overlaps with the aforementioned explanations. Images that embody the narrative function of ‘actor’ are associated with claims about power, and images ‘providing an alternative form of information’ relate to the idea of ‘emotional resonance’.

Notwithstanding the different explanations of how images can give meaning to strategic narratives on infrastructure, the visual communication process is not always successful. This is because images can ‘support, complicate, and/or undermine particular strategic narratives’ (Swimelar 2018, 180). Tensions and contradictions may arise within the singular image as well in a selection of images if the narrative fails to achieve ‘verisimilitude’ to multiple audiences (Bruner 1991). In other words, images tied to strategic narratives should convey ‘a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by convention and “narrative necessity”’ (Bruner 1991, 4). Images should convey sufficient ambiguity to carry meaning for multiple audiences, but this is a fine balance, because too much ambiguity will undermine the communication process (Swimelar 2018; Miskimmon et al 2013).

What can be deduced from the use of images in a strategic narrative study?

To explain and understand what images *do*, scholars have theorized about the causal relations between images and international politics, and scholars committed to the poststructural/post-positivist approach have argued that constitutive explanations are more meaningful. Kirkpatrick explains how the ‘bedrock of the positivist wing of IR is a belief in the capacity for scholars to use factual evidence – gained via empirical observation – in order to arbitrate between rival truth claims’ (2015, 201). A notable body of research in this field concerns itself with the CNN effect (Gilboa 2005). A study of strategic narratives, visuality and infrastructure is then subject to the belief that the consequences of images and strategic narratives on infrastructure on the external world can be objectively observed and analysed.

However, I agree with Bleiker that in ‘most instances the power of images is far more difficult to identify through causal mechanisms’ (2015, 884; see also O’Loughlin et al 2017, 25) because of the ‘gap that inevitably opens up between a form of representation and the object it seeks to represent’ (Bleiker 2001, 512). By situating my research in the post-positivist tradition, I focus ‘not on the causes of events in international politics, but rather on constitutive questions of

meaning construction, production and performance’ (Kirkpatrick 2015, 205). Thus, the causal mechanism linking infrastructure images and international politics is difficult to verify. Instead, using a post-positivist perspective, research on images tied to strategic narratives on infrastructure addresses questions pertaining to their meaning construction, production and performance.

Moreover, images that support strategic narratives on infrastructure are subject to narrative contestation (Wiener 2014; Oppermann and Spencer 2016). An analysis of strategic narrative success (or failure) needs to consider several variables, including image selection (why is this particular image depicting or representing an infrastructure project and not another), juxtaposition (choosing one image or a selection of carefully framed images), and the medium (from traditional to digital platforms). These types of questions address meaning construction, production and performance.

So far, this paper has focused on the ontology of strategic narratives, visibility, and infrastructure. Let us now turn to the issue of methodology.

How to study strategic narratives, visibility and infrastructure?

This section explores and explains how strategic narratives, visibility and infrastructure can be studied. The interpretation of images presents methodological challenges, because the process has ‘as much to do with the values of the interpreter’ as with ‘the content of the image itself’ (Bleiker 2015, 875). This then raises the need for researchers to be explicit in addressing their methodological framework. This section will draw attention to different modalities in visual methodology and the various methods suitable for the analysis of images in a strategic narrative study about infrastructure.

Modalities to understand production, image and audiences

Gillian Rose introduces three types of modalities suitable for the study of visual texts: social, compositional and technological (2001). ‘Social modality’ refers to the ‘range of economic social and political relations, institutions and practices that surround an image and through which it is seen and used’ (Rose 2001, 17). Rose then explains ‘technological modality’ as a ‘visual technology’ that looks at how the image is made, and ‘compositional modality’ as the ‘specific material qualities of an image or visual image’ including ‘content, colour and spatial organisation’ (Rose 2001, 17). The three modalities matter in the area of the ‘site(s) of the production of an

image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences' (Rose 2001, 16). Researchers can structure their analysis using one or more modalities to study how meaning is constituted in the production of the image, the image itself, and through its interpretation by various audiences. A visual methodology is best approached from a multimodal perspective. Following the view that visibility is communicated through mixed media, it is important to analyse the relations of the 'verbal text with photographs, images, drawings and/or graphs' (Höllerer et al 2018, 624).

The visual methodology is suitable for a study of images that support strategic narratives on infrastructure. The social modality draws attention to the kind of geopolitical institutions and economic practices that surround the infrastructure projects. Technological modality can be fitting, for example, when a low-angle camera shot contributes to the imagination of political strength, while a high camera angle suggests a negative power relation between those in control of the infrastructure and the public subjected to the material construction. Compositional modality provides a closer look at the image itself. This can be used to study how content and composition give meaning to infrastructure projects.

Methods

In terms of analysing strategic narratives on infrastructure, this paper agrees with Bleiker's argument that the 'politics of images is far too complex to be assessed through a single method' (2015, 873). In his work Bleiker refers to, among other things, audience interviews and observations (audience research), semiotics, discourse analysis, and content analysis (projection of image) (2015, 878-879). Another method which is considered suitable for studying strategic narratives on infrastructure is visual elicitation, which 'involves using photographs, drawings, or diagrams in a research interview to stimulate a response' (Prosser 2013, 187). The method of visual elicitation can explore how target audiences view and engage with the visibility of large-scale infrastructure projects (Van Auken et al 2010). This paper then agrees with Bleiker's pluralistic approach to methods, arguing against the fear of relativism (2015, 885).

Furthermore, the methods choice used for an analysis of images in a strategic narrative study has both performative and political implications. Accordingly, '[u]nderstood as devices, methods are seen to enact social and political worlds. Understood as acts, methods can become disruptive of social and political worlds' (Aradau and Huysmans 2015, 598). Methods enact social

and political worlds – they create snapshots of a continuously changing political environment. Understanding how this disruptive act impacts the research results is necessary. Methods choices influence how strategic narratives on infrastructure are *seen* – in isolation or in relation to social and cultural contexts, at a specific point of time. Taking into consideration the extensive time and resources involved in planning and implementing large-scale infrastructure projects, these *snapshots* conceal the changeability of social reality.

Having discussed the methodology and methods suitable for a study on strategic narratives, visuality, and infrastructure, the next section demonstrates these theoretical claims with a case study.

Case Study

To further enhance the understanding of images tied to strategic narratives on infrastructure, the following case study is presented. The communications of China’s Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI) were chosen based on current relevance to international relations, as well as a broad usage of objects, media and audiences. Although not all-encompassing, this case study provides insights into the challenges and opportunities of visual communication about infrastructure projects.

China communicates strategic narratives on infrastructure to elicit support for the MSRI, combining spoken, written, and visual texts. In addition, China alludes to the historical period of the Silk Road to explain this foreign policy priority. China’s international communication efforts are used to achieve buy-in from countries along the MSRI, including small island states in the Indian Ocean. These islands share an interest in trade and security issues, and, due to their small size, can greatly benefit from new investments in maritime infrastructure. These countries are actively negotiating and shifting alliances between the newcomer China and the existing naval powers of India and the United States (Brewster 2017). Noteworthy are the Chinese investments in ports and transport infrastructure in the Indian Ocean, including the Port City Colombo, Port Colombo and Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka, and the Ihavandhippolhu Integrated Development Project in the Maldives (Singh 2015).

Due to the critical function of infrastructure in shaping geopolitics (van der Putten 2016), China’s investments in infrastructure globally are followed closely. There are significant investment funds available in the Silk Road Fund and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank to support multiple maritime plans. Taking into consideration that China’s infrastructure investments

are already contested in some parts of the world (Keuleers 2015), and diverging geopolitical perspectives on the MSRI are emerging from the European Union, India and the United States (for example, see Department of Defense United States 2018), it is critical to understand the communications that underpin China's strategic narratives about the MSRI. This case study of the MSRI explores how China communicates images to support its strategic narratives on infrastructure, and about itself as a state.

Research framework of case study

China's visual communication of the MSRI on an online state portal is studied by means of a content analysis (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz 2017; agreeing with the proposed methods in Bleiker 2015). Digital images from the dedicated Belt and Road Portal (B&R Portal) hosted by the Chinese government were selected on 11 April, 2019 (State Information Center no date) and include a sample of nineteen still images (screen shots depicting a coherent visual message).

The study particularly focuses on the content disseminated under the tab 'About Belt and Road Initiative'. The B&R Portal promotes both the MSRI and the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). There is a lack of visual differentiation between the Belt and the Road initiatives on the B&R Portal. This then influenced the analytical depth of the MSRI, with a broader focus on the BRI. The scope of this research is limited to one digital platform at one particular point in time – hence the enactment of the methods choice and the disruptive act of this snapshot (following the methods section).

The selected images were analysed using a multimodal approach – which addressed the relationship between the visual texts and the verbal cues. The compositional modality was used to study 'the site of the image itself' (Rose 2001, 16). The images were examined for their embodiment of narrative functions, differentiating between character or actors (agent), setting/environment/space (scene), conflict or action (act), tools/behaviour (agency) and resolution or suggested resolution/goal (purpose) (Miskimmon et al 2017). Using the proposed systematic process, the case study identified how these images on the B&R Portal produce meaning about maritime infrastructure projects and about China's identity.

Results

The results are listed according to the five narrative functions that images supporting strategic narratives on infrastructure can embody: agent, scene, act, agency, and purpose.

The principle actor (agent) in one of the sample images is China's President Xi Jinping. Instead of depicting infrastructure projects, this image on the B&R Portal exemplifies the communication practice of associating infrastructure with character qualities of the political actor. The image depicts Xi Jinping in a talking capacity – making an open gesture with his hand and facing directly to the camera. By associating infrastructure vision and action plans with the authority and suggested friendliness of the political actor, the image provides an additional layer of meaning.

Next to this image is an embedded video of CCTV, the Chinese television broadcaster, which reports on Xi Jinping's speech at the Indonesian Parliament in which he introduced the MSRI to the world for the first time. The embedding of international broadcasting in the government website is an example of optimization of visual intertextuality. China seeks to control the meaning of BRI by accumulating different texts together.

Another image in the data sample communicates, in small letters, that the State Information Center is hosting the B&R Portal. This section is supported by two symbols: the national emblem of the People's Republic of China, and the emblem of the State Information Center. These symbols grant political authority to the images and legitimize the B&R Portal. This then shows that images tied to the issue of infrastructure do not necessarily depict infrastructure; instead, they accentuate the *who* over the *what*.

In terms of the setting/environment/space (scene), the land and sea dimension of the BRI are visually and verbally categorized. This then reiterates the usefulness of a multimodal approach to study visual communication in the digital sphere. One of the sections on the B&R Portal explains the sea dimension as follows: 'the initiative will focus on jointly building smooth, secure and efficient transport routes connecting major sea ports along the Belt and Road [...]' (State Information Center no date). This text is supported by the depiction of arrows on a geographical map; the arrows represent the land (arrow in beige colour) and the sea (arrow in blue colour) dimensions. The verbal communication of the transport routes and sea ports conceal the contentiousness of these infrastructure projects. The visual arrows present an alternative form of expressing the connectivity rhetoric.

Moreover, visual language can be used to associate infrastructure projects with a selective use of history. The mentioning of the Silk Road in the projects' names incite a memory of the ancient Silk Road. These verbal messages are supported by an image of the land-based Silk Road, comprising a caravan of people on camels crossing a desert, alluding to connectivity in past times. Nevertheless, there are no images that explicitly refer to the historical Maritime Silk Road on the B&R Portal. This is not surprising since inciting memories is sufficient to generate an impact on the audience.

With regards to the visual communication of actions (act), the data sample presents an illustrative image of six major achievements by China. These achievements verbally mention international support, international agreements, international cooperation, economic and trade cooperation zones, international recognition, and Chinese financial mechanisms. These verbal texts are visually organized in separate boxes, using a colourful background, and positioned together as building blocks. Importantly, the visual composition alters the scope from infrastructure to international cooperation and offers an alternative form of presenting the achievements of China's BRI. In terms of the latter, this approach is also replicated in an arrow-shaped image that quantifies achievements within China and beyond, at the level of provinces, municipalities and cities. Taking into consideration these visual compositions, strategic narratives on infrastructure are visualized in the form of process and progress.

In terms of tools/behaviour (agency), there are several images on the B&R Portal that embody this narrative function. First, the B&R Portal communicates a banner with three images and supporting texts that set out desirable cooperation mechanisms. Infrastructure cooperation is imagined through bilateral relations, multilateral cooperation, and international forums and exhibitions. The image that supports the issue of bilateral relations depicts men and women with different ethnicities dressed up in business suits. This image claims meaning about inclusive participation and equality. In that sense, the image offers an alternative form of presenting information. The other two images display institutional logos and promotional materials of forums and exhibitions. Again, these images present an alternative form of presenting information, as regards to China's promotion of friendly and inclusive dialogue.

In addition to infrastructure cooperation mechanisms, the B&R Portal communicates five cooperation priorities: policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonding. Using a SmartArt design, the verbal captions are

connected by lines, suggesting the co-dependency of these priorities, thus providing an alternative form of presenting information. Each caption is connected to a specific image. For example, financial integration is depicted by the onsite promotion of the Asian Infrastructure Bank (AIIB) and people-to-people bonding is visualized in an image of a (presumably) Chinese lady teaching a (presumably) westerner individual about Chinese culture. The relationship between verbal and visual communication produces a benevolent and cooperative image of China. It is noticeable that only one image explicitly refers to maritime infrastructure. This image is connected to the caption about unimpeded trade and depicts a maritime terminal in a non-descript port. Against a blue sky, this infrastructure looks uncontested.

In support of the narrative function for narrating and visualizing tools/behaviour (agency), the B&R Portal communicates the principles of the BRI. This image accentuates the norms, values and principles underpinning China's vision and action plans on infrastructure. The image is presented on a colourful background and it is interactive (when you click on the caption more text becomes available). This image adds another layer to the verbal communication. Together, these visuals provide less attention to who is behind the initiative.

The resolution or suggested resolution/goal (purpose) is depicted in an interactive image that has the verbal captions: Green Silk Road, Healthy Silk Road, Intelligent Silk Road and Peaceful Silk Road. On the background of these verbal texts are photographs of a windmill in a grassland, a doctor and a nurse in conversation, students celebrating their academic achievements by throwing their caps in the air, and an image of doves and green leaves. This is an example of visual language, because the captions incite memories of generic place-images, allowing for multiple audiences to associate with the suggested goals underpinning the BRI.

The results of this study on China's strategic narratives of the MSRI are summarized as follows. First, there are few images about actual infrastructure projects; instead, the communications use images with an implicit connection to infrastructure. Following the argument of this paper, China uses the B&R Portal to communicate about desirable behaviour of state actors (itself as well as other states) and infrastructure cooperation mechanisms in foreign relations. This is exemplified by the numerous images that embody the narrative function of tools/behaviour (agency). Second, China seeks to secure and maintain its self-concept as a benevolent and a cooperative player on multiple levels, including the provincial, municipal, state, and the

multilateral. Continuity is promised through an image of President Xi Jinping, who embodies the vision of the BRI.

Taken together, these results suggest the instrumental value of images to give meaning to strategic narratives on infrastructure and to China's self-concept. What follows is a discussion of the results in relation to the theoretical claims made in this paper.

Discussion

The present study was designed to investigate the relationship between strategic narratives, visuality, and infrastructure, and the case study was used to demonstrate the theoretical claims presented. The case study demonstrated practices of *seeing strategic narratives on infrastructure*. China utilizes visual communication to make its infrastructure plans and its own identity more attractive, by associating infrastructure with desirable norms and values in foreign relations (inclusive participation, multilateral cooperation) and by suggesting that China is cooperative and benevolent. In light of mixed understandings of China's infrastructure and economic collaboration, the images on the B&R Portal seek to clarify the meaning of the initiative to international audiences.

The results section indicated how images alter the scope, provide an additional layer, and offer an alternative form of presenting information. The analysis also showed how images embody narrative functions, which then structure the meaning of the infrastructure projects. Furthermore, the study revealed how visual language is strategically used to incite memories of specific place-images (for example, the ancient Silk Road), and generic place-images (for example, the Healthy Silk Road and Intelligent Silk Road). Lastly, the case study demonstrated how a multimodal approach can be deployed – using a compositional modality to study the site of the image itself.

Noticeably, the images support as well as complicate and undermine China's strategic narratives on infrastructure. While China's infrastructure plans are presented as uncontested thanks to the interactive and colourful display, this narrative is complicated and potentially undermined by the one-way approach to communication. The disciplining of the public imagination around these infrastructure plans and China's identity does not correspond to the interactive media behaviours of publics in the digital age.

These images are problematic in association with other visual media in the digital sphere. While the visual and verbal content on the B&R portal communicate a commitment to inclusive

participation and a self-concept of China as cooperative and benevolent, these narratives are complicated due to visual intertextuality in the digital sphere (images of protests against Chinese infrastructure projects, see for example, Shihar 2017). Indeed, the existence of visual counter narratives complicate and undermine China's communication goals.

The results are in line with recent studies that indicate that visibility matters in global politics (Bleiker 2018). The digital age compels actors to engage in visual politics to tell strategic narratives of the 'Self' and about their infrastructure plans. That this practice is complex and susceptible to failure is inevitable.

Conclusion

The main objective of this article was to explain what we can know about the relation between strategic narratives, visibility and infrastructure, and how this relationship can be studied. The case study of China's visual communication of the MSRI illustrates how images are utilized politically and give form to strategic narratives on infrastructure. China's visual communication on the B&R Portal is carefully framed to elicit support for their infrastructure vision and action plan. Specifically, China associates infrastructure projects with desirable behaviour in the state's foreign relations. The visual communication is also used to secure China's identity as a benevolent and cooperative actor. Nevertheless, the use of images can become problematic when the communication is too static and controlled, and when visual counter narratives in the digital sphere undermine their message.

The findings might be of interest to scholars working in the field of International Relations and in the area of Global Political Communication in particular. A natural progression of this research is to develop the case study, and to conduct audience research among publics in the Indian Ocean Region to examine how China's strategic narratives on infrastructure and visual communication of the MSRI are perceived, co-opted and contested by different political actors. The method of visual elicitation described in the article would be suitable for such an endeavour.

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