

Framing The Belt and Road Initiative in Australian Newspaper Journalism from 2013 to 2020: From Lukewarm Acceptance to Outright Hostility

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ABSTRACT: The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a central policy of the Chinese government. This paper analyses the evolution of BRI narratives from 2013 to 2020 in Australian newspaper journalism. In the field of media and communications, there has been a lack of analysis regarding the BRI narratives in Australia. By employing frame analysis, this paper fills in the gap to record the evolution of the BRI narratives in Australian journalism. This paper selects six representative journalists' works from four Australian mainstream newspapers: The Sydney Morning Herald (SMH), The Age, The Australian and The Australian Financial Review (AFR). It shows how the BRI has been gradually politicized and the BRI narratives in Australian journalism shifted in tone from mostly positive to highly critical. More concretely, this paper elucidates that from 2013 to 2020, the BRI has been gradually related to allying with like-minded countries to stand up against China, human rights violations of the Chinese government in Xinjiang and Tibet, Australia's sovereignty, Australia's global order choice between China-led authoritarianism and liberal democracy, and the debt trap strategy.

Keywords: The Belt and Road Initiative; Australian Journalism; Frame Analysis; China; Sino-Australian Relations

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was first proposed by the Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 and has been viewed within and beyond China as one of the central diplomatic and economic policies in China (Jiang, 2021a). 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. As Geoff Raby (2020), one of Australia's recent ambassadors to China, notes recent Sino-Australian relations have been like a roller coaster ride, purportedly diving into the lowest ebb of history. The Victorian state government's signing of two Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) on the BRI in 2018 and 2019 was widely condemned by the Australian federal government under the leadership of Prime Minister Scott Morrison. The Morrison administration claimed that Victoria broke ranks with the Australian federal government, since Australia had

rejected the BRI in 2017. In 2020, the Australian parliament passed Australia's Foreign Relations Bill to strengthen the federal authority and foreign policy consistency over state and territory foreign affairs and the Victorian state government was forced to withdraw from two MoUs in 2021.

Currently, many scholars argue that voices around the threat of China in Australia have been growing (Brophy, 2021; Evans, 2020; Hu, 2020; Jiang, 2019; Laurenceson, 2019; Sun, 2021). According to the Lowy Institute poll in 2019, Australians' trust in China to 'act responsibly' has dropped to 32%, a 20-point decline from 2018. (Lowy Institute, 2019). In 2020, trust in China has deteriorated to 23%, the lowest point in the Poll's history (Lowy Institute, 2020). As Brophy (2021) argues, "the disparate issues surrounding China were now to be welded into a single, all-encompassing narrative of its hostile intentions towards Australia,

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which would eventually cast a shadow over almost all spheres of contact with China” (p. 5).

Prior to the collapse of the BRI deal with Victoria in 2021, a great deal of discussion about the BRI had ensued in the Australian newspapers. Jiang (2021b) analyses 408 BRI-centric articles in Australian mainstream media from 2013 to 2020 by using Leximancer and NVivo analysis, and argues the BRI narratives are a crucial component of how China is represented in the Australian mainstream media. More crucially, Jiang (2021b) argues that the BRI media narratives shifted in tone from mostly positive to highly critical.

However, in the field of media and communications, there has been a lack of in-depth analysis regarding the BRI narratives in Australia. This paper selects six representative journalists’ works and asks the following research questions:

RQ1: How did Australian newspaper journalism frame the BRI from 2013 to 2020?

RQ2: How did the tone of the BRI articles change from 2013 to 2020?

By employing frame analysis, this paper fills in the gap to record the evolution of the BRI narratives in Australian newspaper journalism. **Literature Review**

Literature Review

The BRI in Australia

As mentioned before, there has been a lack of analysis regarding the BRI media narratives in Australia. Other than the trend, the aforementioned Jiang’s findings (2021b) are too general and lack in-depth contributions. By contrast, there is some Chinese-language literature that explores this question, although their conclusions are contradictory. Wang (2018) recognizes that Australian media’s reports of the BRI were holistically positive with some negative voices, while Yang and Wang (2016) consider that the BRI reports in Australian media were generally unfavorable with some favorable opinions. Possibly, the contradiction may originate from the different selection of analytical texts and publishing time. Also, these reports were published before the wave of anti-China sentiment broke out in 2018 with the publication of Clive Hamilton’s “Silent Invasion” (2018).

By comparison, most of the literature published in Australia has focused either on the potential economic

opportunities or political implications of the BRI for Australia. In terms of economic opportunities, Australian and Chinese experts have reached a widespread agreement that the Australian business community largely supports the BRI, due to the economic benefits the BRI may bring (Laurenceson et al., 2017; Pan, 2018; Shen, 2018; Wade, 2018; Wang, 2018; Yang & Wang, 2016). In the Australian political debates, the BRI has become a very controversial issue, but Australian and Chinese academics generally agree on two views. First, when the BRI was initiated in 2013, the Liberal-Party-led government was cautious, while the Labor Party was more open-minded about the potential economic cooperation, although these lines can blur in practice (Laurenceson & Collinson, 2019; Laurenceson et al., 2017; Pan, 2018; Sun & Jiang, 2017; Wade, 2018; Wang, 2018; Yang & Wang, 2016). In the past, if this was to be a credible statement, all parties, however, are now cautious (Brophy, 2021). Second, many scholars have argued that the influence that the US has on the decision-making of Australian politics plays an important role due to its strong military and economic ties with Australia (Laurenceson & Collinson, 2019; Laurenceson et al., 2017; Li & Wu, 2017; Shen, 2018; Sun & Jiang, 2017; Wade, 2018; Xing & Liu, 2017).

Furthermore, there are three main domestic reasons why the Australian federal government has refused to commit Australia to be a member of the BRI. First, the Australian economic interests defer to security interests. Laurenceson and Collinson (2017) argue that their opponents and proponents in Australia are divided by how Australia should respond to the BRI: economic commentators versus defense hawks, which also reflects in the distinct attitudes of the Australian federal government and state government, as mentioned in the introduction. The defense hawks accuse the economic commentators of being too naive in that they have not seen China’s strategic ambitions behind the BRI, while the economic commentators criticize the defense hawks for their emotive rhetoric and their failure to consider the evidence (Laurenceson & Collinson, 2017; Wade, 2018). Currently, the views of defense hawks have dominated the federal government regarding its China and the BRI policy (Raby, 2019).

Second, the Australian federal government is anxious about China’s growing influence in the Pacific countries; for instance, the BRI might influence competition with Australia’s “Australian Infrastructure Financing Facility” in terms of infrastructure building (Golley & Laurenceson, 2019). Another issue of concern is the potential debt traps impacting host countries such as Sri Lanka, notably their capacity to afford the repayment on infrastructure loans

(Laurenceson & Collinson, 2019; Laurenceson et al., 2017; Li & Wu, 2017; Shen, 2018; Sun & Jiang, 2017; Wade, 2018; Xing & Liu, 2017). Third, the BRI lacks a clear and practical roadmap, transparency and governance standards for implementation. The Australian government is not clear about its benefits from the BRI, whereas a great many business opportunities have already benefited from the pre-existing China-Australia Free Trade Agreement (Herscovitch, 2015; Laurenceson & Collinson, 2019; Laurenceson et al., 2017; Laurenceson & Shi, 2017; Wilson, 2019).

The Australian media coverage of China

The Australian media’s historical view of China “as a Communist, authoritarian regime has persisted” (Sun, 2015, p. 130). China, an authoritarian state with a single ruling party, has historically been portrayed as ‘Red Menace’, also the ‘Red Scare’, which describes the increasing authoritarian threat of communism (Regin, 2004). Currently, although China’s economic growth has benefited the Australian economy, and while China has been Australia’s largest trade partner since 2017, Yang and Wang (2016) argue the Chinese government is portrayed by Australian media as an authoritarian empire that is fundamentally abnormal. The problem is seen as a kind of stereotyping. Bruce Dover, former Chief Executive of Australian Broadcasting Corporation TV’s Australia Network, argues that “the Australian media stereotypes and simplifies reports on China” (Quoted in Li, 2012, p. 271). Sun (2015) further argues “the dominant perspective of reporting China” is more or less still “its lack of transparency, credibility, and freedom of speech and expression” and sometimes danger of personal security (p. 130). In terms of the Covid-19 pandemic, Sun (2021) argues that in Australia’s trustworthy news sites, China’s pandemic measures have largely been portrayed in political and ideological terms, rather than as a public health issue. This bias in the Australian media reporting of China has exacerbated so-called what Sun calls “adversarial journalism” (Sun, 2021). Sun (2021) argues that this type of journalism refers to “a kind of reporting that takes as given that China is a hostile nation, and that this perception legitimizes ways of reporting on China that are adversarial in a pre-determined way” (p. 25).

Despite China not being blameless in the arena of Sino-Australian tensions, China has become a target for conservative pundits in Australia. Clive Hamilton (2018) boldly titled his 2018 book “Silent Invasion”, to describe the Chinese influence in Australia, including Chinese political donations and other infiltration in the Australian political arena. The Australian Strategic

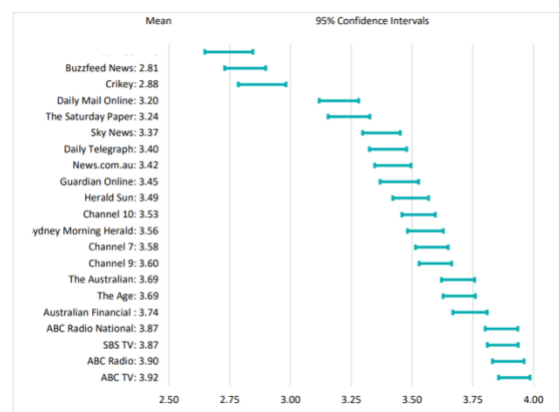
Policy Institute (ASPI) is a think tank that has actively pursued anti-China rhetoric (Cunliffe, 2021). Liberal politicians such as Malcolm Turnbull (quoted in Knaus & Phillips, 2017), Peter Dutton (quoted in Greenbank, 2019), and Andrew Hastie (2019) all have made high profile criticisms of China’s influence in Australia. In contrast, Labor politician Penny Wong (2020), the aforementioned Geoff Raby (Quoted in Tan, 2020), former Labor leader and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (quoted in Doherty, 2019) argued that Australia’s China policy is weaponized to attack political opponents for domestic electoral purposes. These narratives “manifest in a multitude of political, social, and cultural issues” that have “grown to dominate the Australian news media’s coverage of China”, in which the BRI is a part of these big pictures (Sun, 2021, p. 27).

Method

Selection of Material

This research selected four newspapers: The Sydney Morning Herald (SMH), The Age, The Australian and The Australian Financial Review (AFR). This choice is made by considering their wide readership and the high level of trust in Australia. Table 1 reveals that the four newspapers rank the first four newspapers regarding their trust level.

Table 1. Trust in Australian news brands



Source: derived from (Flew et al., 2020).

The project used Factiva, a global newspaper database, to track the most prolific journalists within the four newspapers on the BRI, by searching “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”. These cover all descriptions associated with the BRI in English. The period investigated was from 17 September 2013, when President Xi first proposed the BRI, to 31 December 2020, the last day of 2020. I

identified 11 authors with at least 30 articles related to the BRI, as Figure 1 shows.

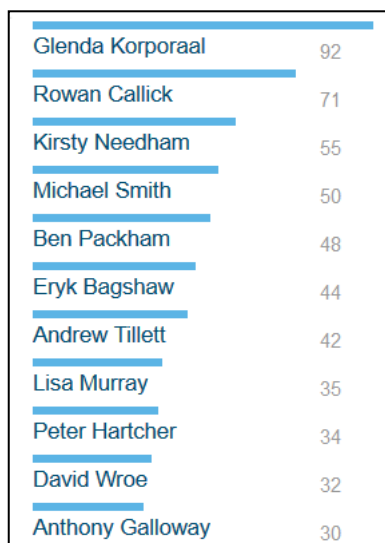


Figure 1 Number of articles per journalist publishing on the BRI between September 2013 and December 2020 across four newspapers (The SMH, The Age, The Australian and The AFR)

To further pinpoint these articles and authors, I selected 11 authors with at least two articles using the BRI as a headline (see Figure 2).



Figure 2 Number of articles per journalist using the BRI as a headline between September 2013 and December 2020 across four newspapers (The SMH, The Age, The Australian, and The AFR)

Drawing upon the above and my own China expertise, I choose the following journalists: Glenda Korporaal, Rowan Callick, Michael Smith, Kirsty Needham, and

Anthony Galloway. This selection of the first five journalists is mainly based on their prolific commentary on the BRI. Additionally, I select Peter Hartcher because of his influence: Hartcher is the political and international editor of the SMH, and a political commentator for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the most trustworthy and comprehensive media in Australia that operates across all platforms: TV, radio and online. He is also a visiting fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy, one of the most prominent think tanks in Australia. He has won Australia's highest journalistic accolade, the Gold Walkley award, and the Citibank and Ashurst awards for business reporting. This paper researches the articles that relate to the BRI. Thus, Korporaal (N=92), Callick (N=71), Smith (N=50), Needham (N=55), Galloway (N=55), and Hartcher (34).

Frame Analysis

While researchers agree that the definition of the frame and its application are not established uniformly, the 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). Although the frame is not uniquely defined, the central and general dimensions "of a frame seem to be the selection, organization, and emphasis of certain aspects of reality, to the exclusion of others" (de Vreese et al., 2001, p. 108).

A review of the previous frame literature has discovered two major forms of media frames: issue-specific media frames and generic media frames. Issue-specific frames are valid only to specific events or topics, whereas generic frames "transcend thematic limitations" and can apply to a broad news topic (de Vreese, 2005, p. 54). This paper adopts a generic approach. Firstly, this approach allows comparisons among frames of topics in different temporal, physical and cultural contexts (de Vreese et al., 2001). The main aim of this chapter is to identify the BRI frames and compare their evolution from 2013 to 2020, which fits in this approach. Secondly, an overabundance of the BRI news has led to the impracticability of an issue-specific approach that focuses on topics in depth or in detail.

For this paper, the frame analysis of Kuypers (2009) and Lambert (2018) is used as a framework. This analysis is divided into several stages, as there has been a lack of established themes or frames on the BRI narratives in Australia. The initial step of the analysis entails preparing individual articles annually using NVivo software to identify significant words, subjects, and references. NVivo is used to manually code the

2020. This trend touches upon at least four key issues: the BRI in Sino-American tensions; the BRI: a vague and evolving initiative or a debt trap strategy; Victoria's BRI deal; and the BRI in Human rights violation in Xinjiang and Tibet. The first two topics cover the entire timeline from 2013 to 2020, whereas the last two appear only after 2017. The next part discusses the general evolution of Australian newspaper journalism towards the BRI at first, followed by more specific discussions about the four aforementioned issues.

Findings and Discussion: From Positive to Critical of the BRI

From 2013 to 2018: The BRI as a Pure Business Opportunity

From 2013 to 2018, the BRI was largely framed as a pure business opportunity. Smith and Korporaal, two business-leaning journalists, have a natural tendency to frame topics in ways that serve the interests of Australian business. They both argued repeatedly that the BRI may bring jobs, trade, and investment to Australia. At times, their articles had an almost regretful tone to describe Australia's initially indifferent, and later rejective, attitudes towards the BRI in order to argue that Australia should join the BRI.

Titled "Left behind on the new Silk Road", Korporaal's article (2014) argued that "Australia has been 'asleep at the wheel' in terms of the implications of" the BRI and "let its focus on the iron ore trade obscure attention to broader changes in China". The key point in this article is that "Australia needs to pay more attention to" the BRI (Korporaal, 2014). Similarly, Smith (2016) wrote that the Australian "market was underestimating the role that Australia could play in China's global infrastructure plan known as" the BRI. By associating with Australia's demand for infrastructure, in an article called "Build it big and prosper", Korporaal (2017a) praised the BRI based on rolling out infrastructure to countries south and west of its borders, creating a "new silk road" into Europe and more active seaborne trade routes. It envisages a network of ports, railway lines, industrial parks and new telecommunications links to Asia and Europe.

Likewise, by quoting then Trade Minister Steve Ciobo, Smith (2018b) believed that the BRI "offers the prospect of further expansion of markets for Australian companies' goods and services, by integrating more countries into the global market economy project". He even went far as to name one of his articles by quoting Fortescue as "Australia must embrace China's Belt and Road project, says Fortescue" (Smith, 2018a).

2019: The BRI as a Contentious Business Opportunity with Solvable Concerns

The subtle transformation of this engagement approach began in 2019 when the BRI became a contentious business opportunity with solvable concerns. Interestingly, even the sentence structure is similar. Starting with some criticism or doubts against the BRI, utterances later focus more on the much bigger, brighter side of the BRI, promoting an engaging approach. For example, Korporaal (2019e) quoted Alistair Nicholas, the then chief executive of China Matters, who contended that "the BRI contained both risks and opportunities for Australia", but that Australia needed "to mitigate the risks and maximize the opportunities". Despite the BRI "being potential debt traps for third world countries", Korporaal (2019e) argued that China has accomplished numerous BRI-related activities and has promised to enhance its "governance and transparency". Also, notwithstanding the accusation of the BRI as "an exercise in Chinese economic colonialism in third world countries", China has invested heavily in BRI projects that may be beneficial to developing nations' trade and economic growth (Korporaal, 2019e).

Drawing on the reality of the BRI and Sino-Australian relations, Korporaal and Smith constructed the BRI in a way that Australia should not be anti-BRI from a business perspective, because of the economic benefits the BRI projects offered (Korporaal, 2019f). Korporaal noted that it is normal that the BRI has suffered "the odd setback and criticism" due to its large scale, complexity, and risk (Korporaal, 2019f). China and the BRI participants have learned these lessons when they implemented the BRI projects (Smith, 2019a).

2020: Allying with Like-minded Countries to Stand up Against the BRI and China

In 2020, Smith's articles published in the AFR that mention the BRI were now focusing on the Sino-Australian political turbulence and Hong Kong protests (Smith, 2020a, 2020b). Likewise, Korporaal produced no articles in support of the BRI in Australia in 2020, instead portraying it as one of China's ambitious policies to boost its trade and diversify its supply chain. (Korporaal, 2020a, 2020b). They might have realized that there was no point to engage the BRI or reflect any benign wills of the Australian business community, as they would not come true during this bilateral political tension and Sino-Australian trade war. It is unclear if there was any editorial direction in this regard. In her last BRI-related article published in The Australian in 2020, Korporaal bluntly condemned the Morrison

administration, seemingly suggesting why she chose not to talk about the BRI engagement.

Australia is developing a McCarthyist attitude towards all things China, with a mixture of legitimate grievances against the increasingly aggressive Xi administration, unnecessary own-goals and clumsy self harm, while our Asian neighbors have played a much more diplomatically sophisticated game (Korporaal, 2020a).

That said, despite the increasingly critical attitudes towards the BRI, the BRI was still a globally conflicted choice during this period in the Australian media. For example, Callick (2018b, 2018c) wrote that Papua New Guinea then Prime Minister Peter O'Neill supported the BRI while the Malaysian then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad warned that the BRI was "a new version of colonialism". In all, more than 150 countries and international organizations have had some involvement in the BRI (China Power Team, 2017). It is normal if some countries such as Australia have chosen not to be part of the BRI, based on their full-sovereignty decision.

However, in 2020, when the voice of engaging the BRI died out in 2020, Australia's BRI choice is not simply saying no, but allying with like-minded democratic nations to stand up against the BRI and China. Named as "New unity against the red bully", one of Hartcher's articles (2020b) indicates clearly how Australia should deal with the BRI and China by allying with European countries. In this article, China is depicted as a "systemic rival" in the EU's official policy to counteract CPC money (Communist Party of China) (Hartcher, 2020b). The EU nations must form new relationships if they are to find any stability in a globe that is "churning, boiling, and storm-tossed" (Hartcher, 2020b). Similarly, Harcher (2020a) hinted that Australia should partner with India to stand up against China in another article. China's growing penetration into the Indian Ocean and its developments on all sides with the BRI have led the Indian government to compete with Beijing in order to safeguard its influence (Hartcher, 2020a). According to Hartcher (2020a), the scenario of India has a similarity with Australia: they both feel endangered by China and are unable to depend on the US.

When positive voices disappeared, media agendas pointed out only one direction to Australian foreign policy, thus shaping the expectation of public opinions and influencing policy agenda in Australia. It was not surprising that Victoria's two MoUs were canceled in 2021.

The BRI in Sino-American Tensions

From 2013 to 2018: The BRI as a Better Policy than Trump's Economic Protectionism

From 2013 to 2018, Australian media professionals realized the intense power competition between its main ally, the US, and dominant trade partner, China, but the media frames are comparatively observant. Callick (2015b) argued

Beijing's goal is widely perceived to be a reduced US presence in Asia, allowing China to become the dominant power in the region. That push is displayed through its suite of New Silk Road initiatives, including a maritime Silk Road in which Mr Xi has offered Australia a big role.

Writing in the SMH, Hartcher (2018a) wrote "as China gains political influence over its neighborhood, it will be able to push back against US dominance and reclaim its own regional strategic space". He (2017a) also contended

Donald Trump has handed China an invitation to become the leader of Asia. Nonetheless, is the mantle of global leadership passing to China? Global leadership, quite suddenly, is up for grabs. China is grasping for the mantle and it is not yet clear that it can win it. Can the US recover it? Or is history leaving Trump's America behind?

Between 2013 and 2018, Australian media frames did not appear to pick a side between China and the US but preferred to stay neutral. Especially, when the Sino-American trade war broke out in 2018, Korporaal (2018a) states Australia's strategic dilemma between its biggest trade partner, China and strongest military ally, the US, and laments that Australia has been "caught in the trade war". However, regarding concrete policies, media frames at the time were more positively inclined with the BRI rather than Trump's new America First policy. Callick (2016a, 2016c) described Trump's foreign policy as a "Fortress USA approach" and as a "clear break from the ascendancy of that internationalist world view" in comparison with the BRI, the icon of Xi Jinping's "China-led form of collaboration" and globalization.

From a business perspective, Korporaal made her points more directly. Trump's foreign policy is "protectionist, possibly isolationist and certainly belligerent", searching for new fighting foes (Korporaal, 2018a). In contrast, China has formally become a supporter of globalization and free trade through the BRI to promote cross-border business (Korporaal, 2018a). Australia's dilemma about its economic connections with China was that Australia would become embroiled in a trade war with a country led by

a protectionist Trump administration (Korporaal, 2017b). The rationale behind these distinct frames is plain: as a trading nation, Australia's economic interests benefit from globalization and suffer from isolationism and protectionism (Adams et al., 2014). Lee and Yang (1995) argue that journalists typically deem the national interests of their own country or media-affiliated country to be one of the main requirements for a news frame. Thus, compared to Trump's approach, media frames leaned more towards the BRI in general.

2019 and 2020: The BRI as an Icon of an Authoritarian Regime and a Shadow of Potential New Cold War

A watershed moment appeared around 2019 and 2020 when power competition and economic policy were aggravated to the confrontation of different social systems and ideologies, and potential change of global order. In *The Australian*, Korporaal (2019a) argued "China's President Xi Jinping has outlined plans to expand his BRI into a broader economic and social cooperation between signatory countries, stepping up the idea of a Beijing-led global order".

Also, in *The Australian*, Callick (2019) furthered more directly that the world is becoming increasingly divided into two kinds of globalization: liberal democratic and authoritarian groups and the BRI has shaped China to be the leader of the latter group. More concretely, Callick (2020) argued

The chances of a reset, or a reboot, are slim before the international scene settles into separate hubs of influence, of tech platforms, of infrastructure, of trade, and of security arrangements — one with its spokes emanating from Washington, and the other with its BRI spokes centered on Beijing.

So, in 2019 and 2020, the BRI was not a better choice in comparison with Trump's protectionist economic policy, but an icon from an authoritarian regime and a shadow of a potential new Cold War. The BRI appeared to form a separate China-centered global order that Australia has not enjoyed because of its democratic values.

The reason is, as Callick (2020) argued, "Beijing appears convinced that weaponizing its economic heft — its most powerful tool to achieve its international aims — should have forced Australia to start to concede ground well before now." In 2020, after the Morrison administration advocated for an independent COVID-19 inquiry without consulting Beijing first, trade actions have been taken by Beijing against a series of Australian goods. As mentioned previously, Lowy Institute (2020) shows trust in China has deteriorated to the lowest

point in the poll's history. Purportedly, this is also related to China's gradually assertive position globally for recent years, the Hong Kong protests of 2019, and the ongoing global COVID-19 pandemic.

Callick (2020) Expounded on China's Ambition, Where China has Become the CPC Here

China's own Communist Party Inc system is creating an entirely new political-economic order; one that is already leaving a deep impression on the global order. China wants to be surrounded by "tribute states" that defer to it as the paramount power and are in return offered its shield of security and economic opportunity. (Callick, 2020)

Thus, the BRI evolution from a better policy than Trump's economic protectionism to an icon of an authoritarian regime and a shadow of potential new Cold War consciously shows that media frames in Australia swung to the ideological side, similar to China's pandemic measures portrayal in Australian media (Sun, 2021).

The BRI: A Vague and Evolving Initiative or a Debt Trap Strategy?

From 2013 to 2019: the BRI as a Vague and Evolving Initiative

Although almost eight years have passed, the lack of clarity around the definition of the BRI has still raised a furor in Australia. Authors like Callick have often implied that the BRI is vague. In 2015, he wrote that the BRI "lacks detail"; in 2016, it is "somewhat mystical" and "incomplete"; in 2018, it is "becoming ubiquitous, even if the concept continues to frustrate", and in 2019, "no clear path has been developed" of how such projects can be branded as the BRI (Callick, 2015a, 2016b, 2016d, 2018d, 2019). This is also the reason why the Australian federal government rejected the BRI initially. Paul Kelly (2017), editor-at-large of *The Australian*, published the first article to indicate this official refusal. The Australian government was not convinced by the deficiency of details in the BRI, as there was little proof that joining the BRI had practical advantages (Kelly, 2017).

By reporting the Beijing-hosted second Belt and Road Forum, Needham (2019b) revealed the evolving feature of the BRI, as the BRI has evolved into being environmental-friendly, transparent and rule-based. Callick and Korporaal stressed this evolution of the BRI.

As it has grown into a global tactic it has lost its original geographic vision of connecting east Asia with Europe,

with even Latin American and Caribbean countries being invited to join and a new “Ice Silk Road” devised to incorporate Russia. (Callick, 2018a)

There has been a lot of criticism about BRI projects It is not a one-way street. The Chinese are listening. (Korporaal, 2019c)

From 2013 to 2020: The BRI as a Debt Trap

By comparison, another contrary, potentially more dominant, frame emerged from 2013 to 2020. This frame argues that the BRI masks well-thought-out, deceptive tricks – for example, the “debt trap” theory – to pursue Beijing’s insidious intentions strategically. Needham (2019a, 2019b), Korporaal (2018b, 2019a, 2019b, 2019d), Callick (2019) and Galloway (2020) have numerously quoted from the Trump administration that the BRI is a debt trap. At times, some journalists alluded more vaguely to some possible debt risks. Korporaal (2018c) argued that the BRI “risks encouraging developing countries to take on too much debt to finance infrastructure projects”. Callick (2018e) argued the BRI may be also a debt trap to China, because the BRI is an “enormous and continuing stimulus program” and its “cost in debt terms remains intensely troubling”.

In contrast, Hartcher (2018a) portrayed the BRI as a debt trap based on the case of Sri Lanka by comparing the BRI to China’s modern Trojan Horse and argued if they cannot make their repayments? When Sri Lanka asked to renegotiate its \$US8 billion debt to China for the Hambantota Port project last year, Beijing converted its debt into ownership equity and a 99-year management lease on the port.

That said, except Beijing’s defense of BRI not being a debt trap in the selected works, only one author clearly opposed the debt trap frame, even though only once. Needham (2019a) quoted from Darren Lim and argued the debt trap diplomacy claim was never credible.....Most of China’s lending had been to countries with poor credit ratings, but once the money is in, much of the leverage shifts to the borrower. Its great weakness is that many of these countries are vulnerable, because they don’t have the political and legal institutions to handle large volumes of debt.

However, from 2019 to 2020, a great number of scholars argue that the criticism against the BRI as debt diplomacy has been greatly exaggerated and asset seizures have rarely occurred globally (Brautigam et al., 2020; Jones & Hameiri, 2020; Rajah et al., 2019; The Rhodium Group, 2019). Jones & Hameiri (2020) argue that

Sri Lanka’s debt trap was thus primarily created as a result of domestic policy decisions and was facilitated by Western lending and monetary policy, and not by the policies of the Chinese government. China’s aid to Sri Lanka involved facilitating investment, not a debt-for-asset swap. (p. 19)

More crucially, all of these scholars are based in Western institutions, including Australian institutions. This shows the BRI in Australian journalism has been politicized.

Victoria’s BRI Deal

As illustrated in the introduction, the Victorian state government’s signing up to two BRI MoUs and the ensuing reactions of the Morrison administration have become one of topics in Australia about Sino-Australian relations.

2018 and 2019: The BRI as an Icon of Victoria Breaking Ranks With the Australian Federal Government

Although the MoUs are not legally binding, and more of a symbol, the controversial essence of the Victoria breaking ranks with the Australian federal government has been mentioned by these selected authors with similar tones, as Victoria is the only state in Australia joining the BRI. For example, Smith (2019b) argued

Victoria broke ranks with the federal government in October and signed a memorandum of understanding with China on the BRI. At the time, Scott Morrison accused Victoria of not being “helpful” through its unilateral participation in the program.

Almost all the selected journalists have been critical of Victoria breaking ranks with the Australian federal government.

2020: The BRI as a Test for Australia’s Sovereign Resolve

The BRI deal in Victoria hit the headlines in 2020 when it became a test for Australia’s sovereign resolve from some authors. Hartcher (2020c) wrote that Australia’s Foreign Relations Bill is aimed squarely at quashing the Victorian government’s deal to join China’s Belt and Road scheme. Morrison and his cabinet have no intention of buckling under Chinese coercion. Neither does Anthony Albanese’s Labor Party. Both sides of Parliament are deeply aware that the CPC is testing Australia’s sovereign resolve.

This media agenda has put the Morrison administration in an extreme position: if Morrison was

not to revoke the deal, he would look incapable of showing Australia's sovereign resolve. This is a fatal issue for top leaders irrespective of democratic or authoritarian countries and may be more deadly in a democracy as democratic leadership is elected directly or indirectly by the public. Thus, to some extent, this media agenda has set a policy agenda for the Australian federal government, which rhetorically leaves no diplomatic leeway to the Morrison administration.

The BRI in Human Rights Violation in Xinjiang and Tibet from 2017 to 2020

The purported human rights abuse of Xinjiang and Tibet minorities, particularly the former, has raised much global furor. Some Western media has condemned the CPC for cultural genocide by imprisoning a million Turkic Uyghur people into reeducation camps, while the Chinese government has repeatedly denied this accusation. However, why is this related to the BRI?

From a Chinese government perspective, the BRI can drive the development of China's frontier regions, thereby resolving issues of regional imbalance and instability (Clarke, 2017). Contradicting this position, Hartcher (2017b, 2018a, 2018b, 2019) conflated Tibetans' loss of their territory and the abuse of Uighurs' human rights with the BRI or infrastructure building. More concretely, by quoting the president of the Tibetan government-in-exile Lobsang Sangay, Hartcher (2018b) wrote

And then there's Beijing's BRI international infrastructure program. "We lost our country because of one road," says Sangay. "First the road came, then the trucks came, then the guns came, then the tanks came. It's the exact blueprint" for domination now on offer to scores of countries under the BRI, he says.

By quoting the leader of the Uighur people's independence movement Rebiya Kadeer, Hartcher (2018a) wrote

The CPC built roads into Xinjiang..... "When the Chinese people first went to Xinjiang, we all thought, what nice people," "They increased and increased and now they are killing us," says Kadeer. The CPC has built a network of re-education camps for the Uighurs. Kadeer calls them concentration camps where people are detained indefinitely..... they are, nonetheless, instructive tales of how Beijing has used infrastructure as the friendly forerunner of political power.

Irrespective of the behaviors of the current Chinese government in Xinjiang and Tibet and the controversial history in Xinjiang and Tibet with the then Chinese

governments, as they have been intensively debatable from the two sides, both autonomous regions are globally recognized to be part of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Thus, the precondition is that at least for now the PRC maintains full sovereignty of Xinjiang and Tibet. Consequently, it is normal to build infrastructure to connect these periphery areas with inland China to develop their economy, send an army to defend the border of the PRC, and solve separatism issues.

Understandably, Hartcher can argue that the treatment the Uyghurs and Tibetans received has been inhumane and can denounce the CPC if solid evidence underpins this claim. However, Hartcher's simple comparison of China's domestic issues with the BRI in some independent foreign countries is unreasonable and lacks the basic respect for China's sovereignty of Xinjiang and Tibet that the Australian government has publicly admitted. This reveals Australian newspapers' stereotypes and oversimplification of China, argued by Dover, (Quoted in Li, 2012, p. 271). Also, this bias confirms Sun's previously mentioned claim of "adversarial journalism" that "takes as given that China is a hostile nation" (Sun, 2021, p. 25).

Conclusion and Limitations

To answer the two research questions, conspicuously, the BRI frames in Australian journalism have been transformed from an opportunity to an issue, shifting in tone from mostly positive to highly critical from 2013 to 2020. In addition, the BRI has been gradually politicized in Australian journalism with the result that it is not just about the BRI but the Chinese government and the CPC. Both findings align with Jiang (2021b). Rather than being an opportunity for Australia, the BRI symbolizes how the PRC is represented in the Australian mainstream media, where the "adversarial journalism" towards the PRC has been rising.

More concretely, the contribution this paper has made is its in-depth analysis that the narrative of the BRI has been used to ally with like-minded countries to stand up against China, human rights violations of the Chinese government in Xinjiang and Tibet, Australia's sovereignty, Australia's global order choice between China-led authoritarianism and liberal democracy, and the debt trap strategy. That said, human rights violations are not proven in the BRI, or as in the case of Xinjiang and Tibet are outside the realm of the BRI; the portrayal of the BRI as a debt trap strategy is not based on hard evidence either. Both portrayals as well as Australia's sovereign resolve and Australia's global order choice have squeezed inadequate diplomatic latitude between China and Australia. This pushed the

BRI narrative and Australia's China question to an extreme so that Australia should decouple the BRI and ally with other like-minded countries to stand up against China, which has happened in 2021. Furthermore, while the COVID-19 pandemic may have not directly impacted the BRI, it is undoubtedly one of the factors that have deteriorated the media atmosphere of the BRI. According to Table 3 and Figure 3, 2020 is mostly a watershed moment, when the BRI became primarily negative.

This research mostly utilized frame analysis that involves methodological boundaries. Even if it was a productive method to identify the BRI frames, frame analysis of content does not demonstrate why the dramatic shift regarding the BRI narratives in Australian newspaper journalism. Also, due to the literature of the general trend of the BRI media narratives (Jiang, 2021b), a certain number of selected articles and authors in Australian mainstream journalism may help seek in-depth findings, but they cannot represent the whole media narrative in Australia regarding the BRI. The focus on individual journalists has probably contributed to making my corpus much smaller than would have been desirable for this analysis. Additionally, the choice of focusing on individual journalists raises doubts about the generalisability of results. Future studies can build upon this work by exploring the 'why' question, and further include more media works in relation to the BRI. Additionally, I recommend the use of interviews to better understand the reporting process of Australian journalists. Such studies would further illuminate the BRI in Australian journalism.

Conflict of Interest Statements and Funding

There are no conflicts of interest to disclose. The author has received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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