Assembling China's Belt and Road Initiative: A Post-Structuralist Critique

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Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is predominantly understood as China's global strategy to address its economic problems, pursue its security interests, and seek global hegemony. However, little attention has been paid to underlying assumptions, discursive performances, and constitutive effects that made a global BRI possible. By applying a post-structuralist lens, the thesis explores the genealogy of BRI, setting out to understand the ways in which different factors were framed and constructed so as to constitute a global BRI. After conducting a post-structuralist discourse analysis, the thesis argues that BRI is a socially constructed assemblage of diverse elements developed through a multi-level and non-linear process, rather than a purely rational product resulting from a top-down policymaking process. In other words, by breaking down what the Chinese government has claimed about BRI into its component parts, this thesis has found no inherent essence, being global, open, and cooperative as such, to BRI. Instead, this global BRI was an emergent assemblage, largely constituted through three interconnected stages, and was contingent, subject to the influence of discursive constructions, practices, and material entities such as geography and technology. This assemblage-based post-structuralist analysis contributes significantly to the understanding of the emergence of BRI via the assemblage of a variety of practices, discourses, human agents, and non-human actants. More importantly, it enables the researcher to explore policies like BRI which are both broad and abstract precisely because of the interweaving of domestic and international politics.

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for an award at this, or any other, University. All sources are acknowledged as References.

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) was proposed in a time when the People's Republic of China (hereinafter referred to as the PRC or China) was gradually moving away from a relatively conservative foreign policy of keeping a low profile towards a proactive, and arguably aggressive, strategy of striving for achievement (Cohen, 2015; Johnson, 2016). It is predominantly interpreted as China's international strategy to solve its economic problems and/or expand its geopolitical influence globally through cross-regional cooperation in infrastructure building, trade, finance, culture, and increasingly, health (Huo and Li, 2017). Despite the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, trade along the BRI region continues to grow (EIU, 2021). According to the (pre-Covid-19) estimates of Morgan Stanley (2018), BRI is set to become a one-trillion-USD project by 2027. Therefore, a project of such a scale proposed by a rising great power against its behavioural adjustments and changes makes it critically important to understand what BRI is, how it has come into being, and what its implications are.

Although different theoretical perspectives have been adopted and various conclusions reached regarding the conceptualisation and implications of BRI (Chapter One), the literature shares an assumption that BRI is a rational strategy that was developed from a teleological process (with reference to some purposes, ends, and/or previous practices). This rational and teleological assumption of BRI is, however, at odds with its disjointed political history. First, BRI understood today as one coherent global strategy could not be found in China's official version of BRI's origin. Second, between 2013 and 2015, there were no official policy paper on BRI issued by the Chinese central government, but many disjointed projects were claimed to be BRI projects (Renminwang, 2016). This discrepancy between what happened and what was claimed is largely ignored both the CCP's discourse and the scholarly literature. In short, this thesis is puzzled by the contradiction between the fragmented history of BRI and its linear and progressive development as presented in the CCP's explanation and the scholarly literature.

The thesis sets out, therefore, to understand the *becoming* of BRI framed by Beijing as a global initiative for cooperation, that is, what the conditions of possibility were for the contingency and emergence of a global BRI and the ways in which different elements were framed and constructed so as to constitute a global BRI. It argues that BRI, framed by Beijing as a global initiative for cooperation, was actively made, or assembled, through continuous multi-level and non-linear processes in which various practices, institutions, discourses, and materials came together to form different relations with specific effects. In other words, instead of providing a linear story of the development of BRI as such, the thesis aims to show how BRI was debated, framed, practiced, and eventually came to be a global BRI via the assemblage of a variety of human agents and non-human actants.

This Introduction presents where the idea of this research comes from, what it is about, and what the significance and added value it brings. To do so, this chapter begins with the contextualisation of the research puzzle, situating the thesis in a larger and more complex background. This is followed by the presentation of the research questions and objectives of the thesis. Then, the chapter presents a summary of the theoretical preference, methodological considerations, and the central arguments of this thesis. The final two sections focus on the contributions and the structure of the thesis.

Contextualising BRI: Understanding China's Foreign Policy

In October 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the guiding principle (*zhidao sixiang*) of China's foreign policy – *fenfa youwei* (striving for achievement) when he addressed his most senior staff and called for more active engagement with China's neighbourhood and beyond (Renminwang, 2013a). This new foreign policy principle, *fenfa youwei*, tacitly confirmed an upward trend, since the late 2000s, in China's proactive foreign policy behaviour (Johnston, 2013; Swaine, 2010). Around the same time, a cross-regional project officially named as 'Belt and Road Initiative' was proposed by President Xi, and then, presided over and promoted internationally by China's senior officials (Callahan, 2016a; Johnson, 2016).

Given its centrality at Xi's policy agenda, BRI has been widely discussed and debated, as reviewed in Chapter One, regarding its conceptualisation, rationale, implementation, and implications. However, the period between September 2013 and March 2015 in the political history of BRI has largely stayed under the radar. It has seemingly been erased and assumed away by both the Chinese official narrative and mainstream scholarship. What makes this period worthy of study is that what happened during this period challenges Chinese official discourse on the political history of BRI. Whilst the Chinese government often suggests that BRI is a coherent rational initiative by presenting a linear/teleological evolution of BRI, the political history of BRI suggests the opposite – the process is non-linear and complicated. This contradistinction is also under-examined in scholarly discussions. What happened regarding BRI between September 2013 and March 2015, and, more importantly, what role did it play in constituting BRI framed as a global initiative for cooperation? Simply put, the puzzle underpinning this research is how this contradiction can be explained.

In order to understand what this thesis is about and where its originality lies in, this section first introduces a broader foreign policy context in which this research is situated. This brief review shows three major shifts of China's foreign policy strategies and brings into view the broad-scale environment of striving for achievement that surrounds BRI. Then, this section sets out the puzzle, and finally highlights the limits of the explanation in the current scholarship.

The foreign policy practice of the PRC has been through many shifts since its establishment in 1949. Scholars (Qi Huaigao, 2019; Robinson, 1994; Sun and Wang, 2019; Zhou Yihuang, 1997) often periodise, from various perspectives and at different levels, China's diplomatic history so as to explain and understand its changes, continuation, and by extension, evolution. Sun Lu and Wang Jisi (2019), for instance, periodised China's diplomatic history (1949-2019) into seven periods with seven dominant themes by using a decade as a benchmark. Qi Huaigao (2019) engaged with China's foreign policy practice from the perspective of China's integration into the international society, thus dividing it into four periods. As this section is about contextualising BRI, it focuses on broader themes, or guiding principles (*zhidao sixiang*), that could show the developmental trajectory of China's foreign policy practice. Subsequently, built on the understandings of Li Shenzhi (2009), Su Ge (2017), and Wang Yizhou (2009), this thesis divides China's diplomatic history into three broad periods along three themes: Mao Zedong's supporting and exporting revolutions (1949-1976); Deng Xiaoping's keeping a low profile (1977-2011); Xi Jinping's striving for achievement (2012-).[1]

Until Mao's death in 1976, ideology had dominated China's foreign policy thinking as the Chinese government regarded itself as a vanguard of world's proletarian revolution, supporting revolutions in (and exporting them to) other Third World countries. China's international behaviour and foreign relations were significantly influenced by the communist ideal of internationalism – workers have no country (Li Shenzhi, 2009; Su Ge, 2017; Wang Yizhou, 2009). Prior to the founding of the PRC in 1949, for instance, Mao declared *yibiandao* (Leaning to One Side – reading: standing firmly with the Soviet Union) as one of his three principles to guide China's foreign policymaking (Li Shenzhi, 2009; Huang and Wang, 2016; Sun and Wang, 2019).[2] In 1950, China and the Soviet Union (USSR) signed the *Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance*. From the late 1950s till the end of the 1960s, China had been actively supporting national independence movements and activities against the expansion of imperialism in, or exporting proletarian revolutionaries to Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Cheng Yinghong, 2006; Huang and Wang, 2016).

The significance of communist ideology (internationalism) concerning China's foreign policy is even better reflected through its alienation from the USSR (Sun and Wang, 2019). From the early 1960s, China began its campaign, under the banner of *fandi fanxiu* (anti-imperialism and anti-revisionism), against the USSR (every so often and indirectly), accusing it of engaging in socialist chauvinism and imperialism (Gong, Men, and Sun, 2009; Sun and Wang, 2019). Its ideological zeal reached the peak in late 1960s as

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[1] The years that separate these three periods are only suggestive. The thesis argues that the transition from period A (e.g. Mao's) to period B (e.g. Deng's) always starts before the end of period A and lasts several years into period B.

[2] The other two were *lingqi luzao* (starting anew) and *ba fangzi dasao ganjing yihou zai qingke* (putting the house in order before inviting guests).

'promoting a world revolutionary and striving for a worldwide win for socialism became the basic principle guiding China's diplomatic work' (Huang and Wang, 2016: 109). China's rapprochement and then full diplomatic relationship with the U.S. in the 1970s were partly determined by its opposition against what the Chinese government perceived as the USSR's revisionist approach to communism. Its fever of exporting revolutionaries abated since. But during the Cultural Revolution (1967-1976), almost all of China's foreign missions were shut down and called back, and the normal diplomatic work was halted (Cheng Yinghong, 2006). In short, during this period, ideology played the most important role in shaping China's international behaviour and final decision-making was largely in one man's (Mao) hands (Gong, Men, and Sun, 2009; Sun and Wang, 2019).

After Mao's death and Deng's re-ascendence to become the 'core' of the Chinese leadership of the second generation, the Chinese government abandoned the idea of 'taking class-struggle as the key link' (*yi jieji douzheng weigang*), and began to focus on its national economic development (Shi Yinhong, 2006; Su Ge, 2017; Sun and Wang, 2019; Zhang Qingmin, 2006). After reassessing the global situation, it concluded that another world war was avoidable, and argued that peace and development were the world's two major themes (Zhang Baijia, 2009). Therefore, the Chinese government redefined its core diplomatic goal as 'to create a friendly international environment for China's modernisation programme' (Huang and Wang, 2016: 172). It readjusted its international behaviour by renewing and/or establishing diplomatic relationships with its previous foes such as the USSR, South Korea, and Singapore and actively participating in regional and international organisations (Qi Huaigao, 2019; Wang Yizhou, 2009). As detailed in Chapter Four, one of the key events that defined this period was Deng's proposal of *taoguang yanghui* (keeping a low profile) and *juebu dangtou* (never taking the lead) as the guiding principles of China's foreign policy after the June 4th Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989 and the dissolution of the USSR in 1991.

These principles had been carried forward well into Jiang's and Hu's eras (Sun and Wang, 2019; Zhang Qingmin, 2006). Before the 2008 global financial crisis, China's foreign policy practice had been in general consistent with Deng's doctrine of *taoguang yanghui* that required China to focus on domestic economic development whilst keeping its head down on matters of international affairs. The concept of peaceful rise/development substantiates this point – China tended to keep the utmost low profile. Zheng Bijian (2003), a prominent Chinese scholar from the Central Party School of Chinese Communist Party (CCP), proposed the idea of peaceful rise (*heping jueqi*) in 2003 and defined it as China's commitment to 'securing a peaceful international environment for its own development, and safeguarding and promoting world peace with its own development.' This idea was warmly welcomed by senior Chinese officials. Then-premier Wen Jiabao (2003) declared in his Harvard speech, for instance, that 'China today is a country in reform and opening-up and a rising power dedicated to peace.' However, starting from late 2004, the Chinese government replaced 'peaceful rise'

(*heping jueqi*) with 'peaceful development' (*heping fazhan*) because Beijing believed that the traditional images, such as challenging the existing global order, that are associated with *jueqi* (rise/rising, rising powers) could be negatively projected onto China (Kuang and Chen, 2016).

At the end of the Hu administration (2003-2012), there were debates about the benefits and limitations of Deng's keeping-a-low-profile doctrine guiding China's foreign policy and growing voices that called for new thinking. Meanwhile, China's international behaviour also showed signs of proactiveness and assertiveness. For instance, Mark Lynas (2009) argued that China undermined the 2009 Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change and struck a deal that benefited itself the most. Also, China froze its high-level intergovernmental contacts with Norway, after Beijing's open row with Oslo over the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Chinese political dissent Liu Xiaobo (BBC, 2010a; Watts and Weaver, 2010). Moreover, China speeded up its land reclamation activities in the South China Sea and imposed an Air Defence Identification Zone in the East China Sea (Shambaugh, 2011; Zhang Y.J., 2016a).

In 2012, Xi Jinping took power and vowed to take China into a new stage of development – deepening its reform programme (Men and Tsang, 2016). A year after that, President Xi proposed a new foreign policy principle – *fenfa youwei* (striving for achievement). As fully elaborated in Chapter Six, the principle of *fenfa youwei* means that China will not simply participate in global governance, but more importantly, reshape the international order in its own image and achieve the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. It is against this transition period, during which China became more confident and, arguably, assertive, that BRI emerged. In addition, China continues down the path of becoming a superpower (Brands and Sullivan, 2020; Parton, 2019). Therefore, it is critical to explore BRI, Xi's signature project, so as not only to explain what BRI is and what its implications are, but also to understand China's foreign policymaking in an era of striving for achievement, what China wants and, by extension, what China claims to be.

The Chinese official account of the historical development of BRI always starts with two speeches President Xi made in Kazakhstan and Indonesia respectively in 2013, which are presented as the official origin of BRI (BRI Office, 2017, 2019a; NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015). In Xi's (2017c) words, '[i]n the autumn of 2013, respectively in Kazakhstan and Indonesia, I proposed the building of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which I call the Belt and Road Initiative.' Then, the official account usually omits all other details[3] before March 2015 and only praises the 2015 publication of *Vision and Actions*, China's first written policy paper on BRI, which, according to BRI Office (2017: 6), 'proposes the top-level design and sets out a grand blueprint for building the Belt and Road.' The rest of the official account is all about BRI

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[3] Sometimes, there are a few honourable mentions which are usually associated with Xi's promotion of BRI at high-level domestic conferences and his meetings with foreign leaders.

practices after March 2015 with the dominant theme of BRI as 'a Chinese proposal whose aim is to promote peaceful cooperation and common development around the world' (BRI Office, 2017: 4). These Chinese narratives have painted a positive picture of a top-down design and linear development of BRI in ways that glossed over its jumbled history. However, what is puzzling is that BRI, presented as *one coherent initiative*, did not exist in the so-called 'origin' of BRI (Chapter Five).

In addition, no written policy papers on BRI from the Chinese central government had been issued to explain what BRI was and how it would be implemented, not until March 2015 when *Vision and Actions* was published. However, many of the so-called BRI achievements before 2015 were previous disjointed projects that were *ex post facto* embedded within the official BRI narrative (Renminwang, 2016). And Chinese official narratives and the scholarly literature have thus far overlooked this. Put simply, there is a neglect of complexity in the discourses of the Chinese government concerning the development of BRI, particularly the period between September 2013 and March 2015.

This empirical puzzle remains unexplained as the current scholarship that focuses on the strategic rationale behind BRI often regards BRI as a policy outcome and builds its analysis from there. In other words, the scholarship has assumed a teleological development of BRI. Thus, like the official narratives, it has largely undervalued the period between September 2013 and March 2015, thus overlooking the complicated (multi-level) emergence and development of BRI. This period is important and needs to be understood, as demonstrated fully in Chapter Five, because the development of BRI was not linear or coherent, which is the opposite of what the scholarship as well as the Chinese official narratives have implied. How can this contradiction be accounted for? How did BRI develop in these years? What does an engagement with these years tell us about BRI?

To sum up, both the Chinese narrative and the scholarly literature dominated by strategic thinking seem to have made assumptions about what BRI is *a priori* and its development process: i.e. BRI 'is' China's global strategy, coherent and top-down, with a purpose of economic expansion and strategic influence, and the 'process' has been obvious, teleological, and rational because of its (assumed) rational economic and strategic aims. Hence, this research is motivated by the lack of a critical investigation into the conflicting narratives on BRI's origin of and its conditions of possibility, encompassing agents, structures, procedures, and tactics, that have enabled and legitimised Beijing's construction of BRI as a global initiative for cooperation.

What, Why, or How-Possible Questions

As established above, the historical development of BRI is at odds with the presumed linearity in both the official narrative and the scholarly literature. Therefore, this thesis aims to investigate the emergence of BRI by analysing it as an 'assemblage'. In other

words, the thesis examines the 'becoming' of BRI, rather than the 'being' of BRI. To do so, the thesis asks a how-possible question as it assumes the contingency of the subject of inquiry and explores the conditions of possibility that enable the emergence of the subject. Put formally, the overarching research question to be addressed in this thesis is: *How did BRI become a global initiative for cooperation and come to be deemed legitimate and natural?* In other words, what were the conditions of possibility for BRI, framed by the CCP as global, open and cooperative, and how was it made possible? This section first introduces the definition of what-, why-, and how-possible questions, and then focuses on the justification for a how-possible question for this thesis.

There are three types of questions that the students of international relations ask the most. They are what-, why- and how(-possible) questions. The employment of different types of questions is not only out of personal preference, but also based on the types of inquiry scholars make and their implied theoretical commitments. What-questions are raised to comprehend the subject of inquiry, be it a policy, a phenomenon, or an event, – what it is and what it involves, and occasionally, to '*unravel the puzzles associated with not readily apparent cause-and-effect relationships*' (Spray and Roselle, 2012: 8, emphasis in original). A what-question-based analysis is, therefore, useful for the narration of the subject in question. However, the analysis also inclines to assume a simple and linear causal relationship (Dunn, 2008) and easily ends up with a simple description of, rather than a critical engagement with, the subject of inquiry. Put simply, to use a what-question as the main research question is less valuable for academic inquiries seeking to explain and understand those policies, phenomena, and events.

The second type is the why-question which investigates the reasons with which the subject of inquiry takes place. Why-questions in International Relations (IR) explore '*why particular decisions resulting in specific courses of action were made*' (Doty, 1993: 298, emphasis in original). Depending on its theoretical preferences, a why-question-based analysis in IR probes structural constraints, inter-state power balancing, bureaucratic contestation, or individual leadership (Doty, 1993). Put differently, regarding foreign policy, why-questions enquire into the causal relationship between independent variable X, or a group of variables X_1, X_2 and X_n (such as structure and agent), and dependent variable Y (such as state behaviour), that is, when X, or X_1, X_2 and X_n, happen(s), Y is bound to occur but *with a certain amount of probability*. Through this logic, a why-question-based analysis goes further than a what-question-based analysis to explore the underlying causal determinants of the subject of inquiry.

The third type is how-possible questions which problematise the subject of inquiry by asking in what way it is made possible, or how it gains meaning. These questions examine the ways in which the subject of inquiry is (re)produced and associated with various social constructs that 'constitut[e] particular interpretive dispositions which create certain possibilities and preclude others' (Doty, 1993: 298). In other words, how-possible questions are concerned with explaining and understanding the becoming, *not being*, of the subject of inquiry, that is, how it gains meaning, gets established, and

becomes dominant. Regarding foreign policy, how-possible questions presuppose contingency and investigate the subject's possibility conditions, be they material, ideational, discursive, or visual, which produce the focus of inquiry.

Regarding the inquiry of this thesis, why-questions are not suitable as they tend to assume a narrow conception of causality (positivist and linear) in social scientific explanation. In other words, rather than problematise certain factors or conditions, such as a particular subjectivity and the intersubjective understandings among agents that make possible the subject of inquiry, why-questions presume their pre-existence (Cross, 1991; Doty, 1993; Dunn, 2008). Moreover, a why-question-based analysis presupposes a problem-solving process that emphasises causality, fixes the explanandum (or takes it as a constant) and links that with presupposed independent variables.

In this case, the question 'Why BRI?' follows the same path that this thesis criticises as it presupposes the being of BRI *a priori*. It is not helpful with regard to the puzzle and the main task – how BRI evolved into, or came to be constructed as, what it is now. In other words, before the question of 'Why BRI?' is addressed, we need to ask how it was even possible that something *like* BRI could be conceived and enacted in the first place: upon what conditions (of possibility) and by what processes did something like BRI become *meaningful*? This requires investigating what is being *socially constructed* that linear, causal why-questions premised on natural science methodology often take as given.

On the other hand, given its assumption of a contingent nature of foreign policy behaviour, a how-possible question requires greater effort to research elements that 'enable social actors to act, to frame policy as they do, and to wield the capabilities they do' (Doty, 1993: 299). Put differently, rather than looking at the reasons why particular policies as opposed to others are favoured and chosen, this kind of analysis pays more attention to the ways in which certain policies are endorsed and naturalised while alternative policy options are rendered unacceptable, illegitimate and jettisoned.

Given that the thesis is sceptical of linear accounts of China's BRI and criticises the lack of critical engagement with the underlying assumptions and discursive performances that constructed and sustained BRI as one coherent initiative for international cooperation, it argues that a how-possible question is most suitable. With the question of '*how did BRI, framed by the CCP as global, open, and cooperative, become possible*', this thesis sets out to understand and demonstrate the emergent process and contingent nature of a global BRI. To be specific, the thesis aims to identify the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a global BRI, reconstruct the process through which it came to be legitimised, naturalised, and made hegemonic – the only legitimate and dominant conceptualisation, and describe the interactive mechanism of different elements and their effects that produced a global BRI.

A Genealogy of a Global BRI

The thesis investigates the conditions of possibility, be they material, discursive, human, or nonhuman, for the emergence of BRI and the ways in which the framing of BRI as global, open, and cooperative has become *the truth*, one understood as hegemonic and natural in the Chinese context. Whilst exploring a historical and 'situated' becoming of BRI, the research does not assume what it is *a priori* because any hegemonic framing is emergent and contingent upon complex and multi-level interactions, such as homogenising, cancelling, and reinforcing, of various elements. In order to do this, the thesis reconceptualises foreign policy as an assemblage and investigates the truth-production process with reference to the post-structuralist conceptualisations of power and identity. In other words, the thesis adopts the concept of assemblage, broadly situated in post-structuralism, as a means to understand not only the contingency of a global BRI but also a particularity (that is, a 'global BRI') reified as truth.

  According to Deleuze and Guattari (1987) and Deleuze and Parnet (1977), assemblage is a multiplicity that consists of heterogeneous elements, is temporally and spatially situated, and has no essence. As discussed in Chapter Two, assemblage is characterised by heterogeneity, multiplicity, and non-essentialism. Due to these features, foreign policy as assemblage is a valid and useful concept for engaging with how-possible questions. This section first highlights two reasons for an assemblage-based post-structuralist approach to the analysis of foreign policy, and then explains its methodology.

  First, conceptualising foreign policy as an assemblage allows this research to broaden its range of subjects of inquiry for analysis so as to identify various elements as the conditions of possibility and understand their interactions in the emergence of a global BRI. These elements include discourses, ideas, albeit not being directly observable or measurable explicitly, and, perhaps more importantly, materials that are traditionally excluded from a traditional post-structural approach to policy analysis. Put differently, the forces of non-humans are credited regarding policymaking.

  Second, as a multiplicity with no essence, assemblage relates to the notion of contingency and implies that any elements of the assemblage could be detached (and re-attached) to form a new one. A policy assemblage is, in other words, determined by the relations of exteriority and its formation is a process of (de)territorialisation in which different elements are 'select[ed], organise[d], [and] stratif[ied]' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 406). From this perspective, the making of a policy assemblage is a complex emergent process, and its meaning is contingent and must not be presumed *a priori*. Thus, assemblage thinking requires the researcher to focus on the power relations (not simply who has the power) and the effects of power that are embedded in the (de-)territorialising processes of an assemblage.

Overall, an assemblage-based post-structuralist analysis concentrates on the assembling process of a policy, or the process of territorialisation and de-territorialisation (Chapter Two), and enquires into the context of policy-as-assemblage, the elements in it, and the power relations that manifest through the process. In this case, assemblage thinking prepares the researcher to be alert to the existence and performativity of different and competing elements that enabled BRI. It draws attention to subjugated knowledges or agents as well as promoted ones, and helps to reconstruct the (de-)territorialisation process that leads to a specific constellation, through which the narrative of BRI, a global initiative for cooperation, became *the* truth.

Truth always matters! Particularly when half-truth and untruth, thanks to telecommunications technologies, spread quicker in the matter of seconds (such as via Twitter) and reach to an audience wider than they had ever before (Crilley, 2018; Keane, 2018), truth becomes 'more important now than ever.'[4] So does investigating truth claims as 'the truth is hard to know, … [and] hard to find.'[5] In the thesis, as detailed in Chapter Two, truth is defined in accordance with a post-structuralist tradition as a regime of truth. A post-structural definition of truth does not deny the existence of truth; nor does it claim that anything goes. Instead, it makes us to think what make the subject of inquiry true. It questions the making of the truth, sounds alarm of the so-called objective truth, and tries to understand the power relations behind the 'objective' façade of the truth. By doing so, we understand truth (truth claims) better and prepare to break the yoke of claims that pass as *the* truth.

With these in mind, the thesis turns to genealogy as its methodology. A genealogy of something is not tracing something back to a so-called origin, or identifying the moment of its birth (Smith, 1995). Instead, it is a process of revealing alternative narratives, practices, and any other elements so as to understand the multicausal emergence of something (Foucault, 1980a). In addition, the notion of contingency, rather than the idea of linear causality, is endorsed by a genealogical study, which is compatible with the how-possible research question.

This involves a three-step procedure in which two main methods are adopted (Chapter Three). The first step is identifying the major problematisations that concern BRI, or simply, the so-called problems BRI is designed to solve, and tracing back their evolution. By doing so, the thesis not only shows the contingency and socially constructed nature of these problematisations but also presents the broader context of BRI. The second step is about the identification of assumptions and presumptions that underlie these identified problem representations. In this step, the thesis also establishes the conditions that are conducive to their formulation and general acceptance. The third step is identifying contending discourses, namely, the silenced, the unproblematised, and the

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[4] This is from an advertisement co-created by The New York Times and Droga5 in 2017 (https://droga5.com/work/new-york-times/).

[5] Ibid.

possible alternative(s) by asking how they have evolved over time and how they interact with one another. In both the second and third steps, the thesis also seeks to identify the various means, strategies, and mechanisms through which power is exercised, that is, to underline and make some discourses hegemonic whilst excluding alternatives.

To follow the post-structuralist perspective, discourse is conceptualised as structure and practices. As structure, discourse is a social and cultural apparatus to be employed for the construction of meanings; as practices, discourse enables/disables, and legitimises/delegitimises certain behaviours and social conditions with a purpose of maintaining, reinforcing, or even transforming a *status quo* (Laffey and Weldes, 2004; Price, 1995). The thesis uses multiple data sources. The majority of the data has been collected from documents pertaining to BRI and general Chinese foreign policy, such as government policy papers, public documents, speeches, press conference transcripts, newspaper articles, and editorials from state media. In addition, 18 interviews have been conducted, largely with Chinese scholars, journalists, and policymakers. The key method for analysing BRI is discourse analysis.

Arguments of the Thesis

The central argument of the thesis is about the contingent, non-linear emergence of BRI rooted in a specific set of problematisations that can be best understood through the concept of assemblage. The thesis argues, therefore, that a global BRI was a socially constructed assemblage of diverse elements developed through a non-linear process, rather than a purely rational product resulting from unidirectional top-down policymaking. In other words, the emergence of a global BRI was not a big bang moment, but a messy, uneven, and contested process.

Subject to this core argument, the thesis makes several sub-arguments. The first is that BRI framed by Beijing as a global initiative for cooperation was not 'obvious' but rather 'emergent' and 'contingent.' It demonstrates and argues that the so-called global nature of BRI was contingent upon a particular assemblage of discourses, materials, and institutions. In other words, the thesis disputes the idea that BRI is an inherently (coherent) grand strategy for international cooperation as claimed by the CCP or for regional security and global hegemony as speculated in the scholarship. This idea of a neat and well-directed policymaking process in China is built upon a traditional definition of policy as an outcome of a deliberative process and the assumption of the practice of top-down governance in China's one-party system.

Second, the thesis argues that a global BRI has emerged through three stages that can be traced from two regional assemblages, to an ordered form, and to a global one. Specifically, prior to BRI, China's unbalanced economic structure and its passive national identity became foreign policy concerns and were framed by Beijing as major

problems that required immediate actions. Starting from late 2013, the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road were proposed separately and gradually evolved into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a cross-regional project. Experiencing a messy initial stage in which competing visions and incoherent practices were prevalent, two separate regional policies were homogenised and became one cross-regional initiative through a series of homogenising moves such as discursive reconceptualisation and institutional design. At this stage, power was manifested through BRI-related discourses and the ability of the Chinese government to organise BRI-related institutions and practices. Since 2015, the two-dimensional cross-regional BRI has begun to emerge as a global project via the assemblage of systematic discourses, practices, institutions, and materials.

Third, the thesis argues that the politics of BRI have not been sufficiently studied and that studying the politics of BRI requires us to adopt a post-structuralist approach and understand it as an assemblage based on a multiplicity of actants, discourses, and practices. Therefore, BRI is better understood as a policy assemblage that came to be as the result of the interactions among the Chinese governments at all levels, financial institutions, other states and non-state actors, problematisations, national identity conception, specific projects and documents, high-speed rail technologies, and geographical features. Put differently, the emergence of BRI is permeated with different forms of power.

Overall, the thesis argues that BRI framed as a global initiative for cooperation was not simply China's rational top-down response to a set of 'problems' that concern the economy, identity, and/or geopolitics. Instead, this global BRI was an *emergent* assemblage, largely constituted through three interconnected stages, and it was *contingent*, subject to the influence of discursive constructions, practices, and non-human actants such as geography and technology.

Originality and Contributions

This genealogical investigation of the emergence of a global BRI assemblage is not about establishing a true history of BRI by propagating Beijing's narratives and/or revealing the behind-the-scenes stories. Nor is it about invalidating the analyses based on strategic rational thinking. Rather, it is about questioning the naturalisation of Beijing's narrative and exploring the conditions (material, discursive, and ideational etc.) and their effects that render Beijing's narrative hegemonic. In short, an assemblage-based post-structuralism focuses on the ways in which a particularity becomes a universal truth. In the process of investigating the contingency and emergence of a global BRI, the thesis made three specific contributions regarding the BRI under review, the study of Chinese foreign policy, and a post-structural approach to foreign policy in general.

First, instead of a strategic thinking approach which dominates BRI literature with a focus on its rationale (why did the Chinese government propose BRI? See Chapter One), the thesis adopted an assemblage-based post-structuralist approach to investigate the ways in which the framing of BRI as a global initiative for cooperation was made hegemonic and natural. By doing so, it contributed to more nuanced and comprehensive understandings of a global BRI by identifying various elements, often ignored in the strategic analysis of BRI, and their constitutive effects on its formulation. For instance, China's national identity conception (a responsible great power) lent itself to BRI, rendering the global, open, and cooperative BRI intelligible, whilst being reproduced by BRI-related practices. At the same time, China's infrastructure technologies also played a critical role in constituting a global BRI by giving it a 'body', in other words, materialising the global nature.

Through the genealogical investigation of BRI, the thesis conducted systemic research on the so-called 'problems' that BRI was designed to solve. Instead of viewing them as objective entities and causes as what the strategic approach did (Chapter One), the assemblage thinking regarded these 'problems' as social constructs or problem representation. Thus, it demonstrated that the ways in which certain economic and identity phenomena were framed as, or *made into*, foreign policy problems that needed to be addressed and that these problem representations constituted policies. Meanwhile, the thesis uncovered the evidence, such as the lack of specialised departments in charge, and different names for BRI, from official documents and the speeches made by senior Chinese officials that showed the contingent nature of a global BRI. It also pieced together an undervalued and 'messy' period (September 2013 – March 2015) in BRI's history which was characterised by competing visions, incoherent practices, and limited achievements. But more importantly, different from the existing bureaucratic perspective that only described the messiness and uncovered some behind-the-scenes stories, the thesis accounted for the significance of that messy period in constituting the emergence of a global BRI. It argues that this 'messy' period was necessary, a part of an ordering process of the territorialisation of a global BRI, and that the state of messiness left room to the Chinese central government to bring coherence to the policy.

Overall, with assemblage thinking, the thesis provided a novel and dynamic perspective to explain and understand what BRI is and how it came to be a global, open, and cooperative initiative. From this perspective, BRI was less of a traditional policy, (ir)rational, calculative, and stable. Instead, it was more like an assemblage, contingent, fluid, and continuous. This current form of a global assemblage emerged, through three different periods of (de-)territorialisations, as a response to China's identity and economic issues and was subjected to the influence of both human agents and non-human actants.

Second, the thesis is among the first attempts to utilise the concept of assemblage situated in a post-structural tradition to explain and understand (any aspects of) Chinese foreign policy. The research moved beyond the dominant analytical frameworks of

neorealism and neoliberalism, within which China's rise, its international behaviour and policy are explained merely as the results of senior Chinese officials' rational calculations, which is understandable given China's opaque political system, in relations to its material power and the international anarchical system (Mearsheimer, 2001), international society (Buzan, 2010), and liberal order (Ikenberry, 2008). It also broke away from traditional strategic thinking of foreign policy that centres around largely the Chinese state (its political and bureaucratic systems, procedures, and agents) and credits the state with a determinant role.

By drawing upon the post-structuralist notions of productive power, identity, and assemblage, the thesis incorporated non-human elements such as 'everyday' technologies and environment into the study of China's foreign policy and demonstrated their significant and growing role in constituting China's policymaking. These non-human elements such as high technologies will feature even more in China's policymaking as indicated by its *Made in China 2025* policy that seeks to make China a global dominant in advanced manufacturing, and its China Dream of a national rejuvenation by 2049. Thus, assuming that China's growth will not be derailed before 2049, when it comes to China's foreign policy, attention should be paid not solely to China's top-level governmental activities, but also to other types of activities with the consideration of other elements. Also, this present research added a detailed case study (BRI) to a small but growing cohort of post-structuralist work on Chinese politics. For instance, a post-structural lens has been applied to the nationalist texts (Hughes, 2007) and the concept of China Threat (Song Weiqing, 2015), whilst assemblage theory has been employed to examine China's environmental management (Webber and Han, 2017).

Third, theoretically speaking, the research further advanced the application of policy assemblage (or assemblage thinking) in the broader post-structuralist IR literature by applying assemblage thinking combined with genealogy-as-methodology in a Chinese context. It has succeeded in broadening the theoretical contours of IR approach to foreign policy to seriously consider the power of materials and the blurring boundaries between national and foreign policies of great powers. There are clear links between the contribution of this thesis and a growing post-structuralist IR literature that has sought to understand foreign policymaking via the concept of assemblage (Acuto and Curtis, 2014a, 2014b; Dittmer, 2014, 2017).

Compared with other post-structuralist IR literature, this assemblage-based analysis brought back the role of materials, thus balancing against the dominant view that a post-structuralist analysis is purely about language, discourse at most. Traditional post-structuralist approach does privilege the significance of discourse and, as Feely (2020: 176) argues, 'downplay the importance of materiality and embodied experience', although it does not completely disregard materials. Therefore, including them in policy analysis is a practical turn that 'directs our attention away from theoretical abstractions

and ideal types, … towards more materialist, relational, and bottom-up orientations that seek to understand the tangible shift of policies' (Salvage, 2018: 310).'

Meanwhile, an assemblage-based post-structuralist approach also provided a more comprehensive and dynamic perspective to explore the emergence of foreign policy and understand its contingency. Traditional post-structuralist IR literature tends to concentrate on the co-constitutive relations between one particular factor and states' foreign policy. This is evident in the works of David Campbell (1992) and Natalie Bormann (2008) on identity as performance or Lene Hansen (2006) on discourse as practices. This assemblage-based analysis not only foregrounded the critical role of individual factors, such as identity, in constituting foreign policy, but also emphasised the dynamic interactions between different elements that affect foreign policymaking. In other words, instead of starting foreign policy analysis with a predetermined assumption of what foreign policy is, assemblage-based research problematises the policy, and explores the ways in which that policy is 'made' or assembled to be what it is understood dominantly. In short, it concentrates on the conditions of possibility that constitute the policy of inquiry, and the interactive and ongoing process in which various elements, both material and non-material, woven in the network of power relations enable that policy.

Furthermore, with the notion of anti-essentialism, an assemblage-based post-structuralist approach is more equipped to allow the research to transcend the traditional binary – domestic vs. international – that could have otherwise artificially constrained the objects of inquiry and the ways in which the analysis of a great power's foreign policy has been conducted. In other words, assemblage thinking enables the researcher to explore policies like BRI that are broad and abstract precisely because of the interweaving of the domestic and the international.

Chapter Outline

The chapters that follow present an assemblage-based post-structuralist analysis of the emergence of a global BRI. Chapter One makes a case for a new approach to understand BRI. To do so, the first task is to consider how BRI has been discussed and debated. According to the Chinese government, BRI framed as a public good is a global initiative for cooperation in policy, infrastructure, trade, finance, culture, and industry. The scholarly literature, however, challenges the China's official narrative and focuses on the strategic thinking behind BRI, revealing its highly political nature. The analyses can largely be categorised into three strands. The first strand from the perspective of political economy lays bare China's economic calculation and regards BRI as its strategy for economic restructuring. The second and third strands, built on defensive and offensive realists' world view, often criticise Beijing's framing and reveals its implicit geopolitical

assessments and hegemonic ambitions. In these strands, BRI was conceptualised as a defensive geopolitical strategy to increase China's security or an offensive grand strategy to seek global hegemony. To present a comprehensive picture of BRI debates, the chapter also reviews the main difficulties and risks that confront BRI and demonstrates in three ways that BRI is not exceptional but bears the resemblance to China's previous policies and narratives.

The second task of Chapter One is to assess the arguments of these strands of literature. The thesis argues that the current literature is insufficient in explaining the emergence of BRI because the literature relies on the notion of inevitability and the problem-solving logic. BRI was conceptualised as a natural and rational development in Chinese foreign policy. Consequently, the underlying conditions that have made a global BRI possible in the first place were overlooked. Therefore, a new approach is needed to explore these conditions and explain by what process a global BRI emerged.

Following the literature review on the study of BRI, Chapter Two engages with the theoretical underpinnings for those strategic thinking-based explanations and justifies the thesis' post-structuralist approach to BRI. Theorising foreign policy from a post-structuralist perspective, the chapter starts with a brief account of the metatheoretical debate between positivism and post-positivism in IR. It then moves to the detailed and critical engagement with different IR approaches to foreign policy and ends with a discussion of the politics of truth.

In the first section, the chapter focuses on the historical development and key principles of positivism and post-positivism. It argues that post-positivism opens space both for investigating the same issue(s) from a different perspective and for exploring new phenomena because it advocates a pluralist ontology and an anti-foundationalist epistemology.

In the second section, the chapter discusses middle-range theories on foreign policy with a special focus on neorealism, neoliberalism, conventional constructivism, and post-structuralism. These theories investigate foreign policy as the problem of power, that of identity, and that of knowledge. Chapter Two argues that following a post-structuralist tradition, foreign policy was re-conceptualised as an assemblage, as its flat ontology that includes non-human elements and anti-foundationalist epistemology that rejects essentialism is conducive to exploring the conditions of possibility, emergence, and contingency that are closely related to policy, in this case, BRI.

To further justify its theoretical choice, the final section of this chapter turns to the politics of truth. It first focuses on the Chinese state: how is truth defined, what is the connection between truth and ideology, and in what ways truth matters. Then, it discusses Foucauldian definition of truth. The section argues that truth is not a simple cognitive matter for an authoritarian state like China, but a political one closely related to governance and power. Therefore, Foucauldian definition of regimes of truth is appropriate.

Chapter Three follows the theoretical debate and provides a rationale for the methodological preference (genealogy) of the thesis and the key methods (discourse analysis, and interviews) identified to collect and analyse data about what makes a global BRI necessary, plausible, and possible for the Chinese government in the context of its foreign policy transition. This chapter argues that genealogy is the most suitable methodology to operationalise post-structuralist research as it denies a linear and teleological process embedded in a positivist approach and allows for contingency and anti-essentialism. Then, this chapter presents a three-step research procedure that concentrates on problematisation. While illustrating the definition of these concepts, the chapter also reviews data sources, coding methods and refined codes.

The final three chapters concentrate on the (de-)territorialising process of a global BRI assemblage based on the thesis' primary research. Together, they elaborate the elements, or the conditions of possibility, that enabled the emergence of the global BRI assemblage. More importantly, they demonstrate the contingent nature of BRI and the ways in which a global BRI came to be. In short, these three empirical chapters flow from emerging problematisations (prior to BRI), to an ordered BRI assemblage with dual dimensions, and more recently to a global assemblage. Through this presentation, the central argument is made that BRI, framed by Beijing as a global initiative for cooperation is not natural. Rather, it is a techno-political work that is made possible by the continuing interactive process of human and non-human, material and non-material elements. In short, they demonstrate that the emergence of BRI was not a big bang moment, but a process that was uneven, messy, and intensely contested.

Chapter Four focuses on the stage prior to the formal introduction of BRI. The objects of study are '*expressions* of a particular historically situated spatial and political imaginary' (Bonditti et al., 2015: 160, emphasis in original). Even though BRI as a policy did not exist before 2013, (many of) its component parts started to emerge. This chapter focuses on events, subjects, objects, and discourses which are in the form of problematisation and came before BRI. It not only contextualises BRI, but more importantly, argues that these different components, be they political, social, historical, or conceptual, were the conditions of possibility that precipitated and set original rules and boundaries for conceiving BRI. Specifically, the thesis argues that a concatenation of actors, discourse, practices, and events made China's uneven economic structure and traditional passivity into *problems* that were meaningful and intelligible, such that they were acutely felt by the Chinese leadership and must be addressed. Put differently, this chapter shows that before 2013 there was not yet a BRI. Nonetheless, the ideational and material conditions, upon which it eventually came to rely and through which it was made possible, were already visible.

Chapter Five continues the assembling journey between late 2013 when two separate Silk Road projects were formally introduced and March 2015 when the first official BRI policy paper was published. The chapter explores how various elements were assembled during that period, out of which BRI came to be. The chapter contends that through

discursive constructions, institutional design, and political categorisation, BRI emerged gradually out of *two* separate regional initiatives and became *one regional* initiative with dual purposes: serving China's own national core interests and integrating the Eurasian region. Therefore, the thesis demonstrates that BRI framed as a global initiative for cooperation is an ongoing political work, and that the transformation of BRI from two separate and incoherent regional projects to one ordered and coherent initiative entailed the interaction (e.g. reinforcement and counterbalance) of multiple actants and was permeated by power.

Chapter Six examines the globalisation of BRI and its conditions of possibility in terms of the evolution of the BRI assemblage from a national/regional one to a global one. This chapter is divided into two sections which focus on the role of discourses and materials in constituting a global BRI respectively. It argues that the discursive elements such as the negative narratives, national identity conception, and foreign policy constructed the meaning of global, open and cooperative. More importantly, this global nature was not abstract and invisible, but material and visible enabled by China's infrastructure technologies and geographical features. In short, it demonstrates that after 2015 BRI gradually shed off its domestic dimension and largely focused on its international aspect. This was achieved mainly by the discursive system, shifts in problematisations, the redefined concept of responsibility, all BRI-related practices and projects, and not least geography and technology.

The concluding chapter of the thesis has three tasks. The first is to summarise the thesis' key findings pertaining to the emergence of a global BRI by outlining the key conclusions of each chapter. The second is to reflect on the benefits and limitations of applying post-structuralism, the concept of assemblage in particular, in the analysis of foreign policy in the Chinese context. The last task is to propose future research avenues which emerge from this thesis.

Chapter 1 Revisiting the Belt and Road Initiative

Since it was first proposed officially, BRI has been discussed and debated, both internally and externally, among scholars and officials. Some of these arguments must be sketched out before the thesis introduces its post-structuralist theoretical framework and analysis. The purposes of this chapter are to discuss the existing knowledge regarding BRI, to examine the extent to which the literature problematises BRI, and to make a case for a new approach to investigate the conditions of possibility that have enabled the construction of BRI as a cooperative strategy with a global reach, or simply, the *becoming* of a global BRI.

An overarching theme emerging out of the existing BRI literature is that BRI is a rational strategy, an inevitable one given China's previous economic practices, to solve a series of economic and/or geopolitical 'problems' confronting China. These presumed problems include China's excess industrial capacity, a widening economic gap within China, its national security, and its global influence. This focus tends to translate into a set of questions along the following lines: Why did China put forward BRI? What are the implications of BRI? Why has BRI been prioritised over alternative policies? However, the answers to these questions, as shown in the rest of the chapter, do not completely explain the ways in which a global BRI has emerged, become a common sense, and been regarded as natural, because these why- or what-questions include *a priori* assumptions about what BRI is.

This chapter argues that despite the diverse and important contributions to the understanding of BRI, the conventional strategic thinking embedded in the literature still falls short of appreciating the *emerging process* of BRI and, by extension, the *contingency* associated with its meaning of being global, cooperative, and open. The literature has not interrogated the underlying assumptions, discursive performance, and the effects/power of non-human factors that have *made* a global BRI. In other words, the ways in which a global BRI came into being have not been sufficiently explored. Without doing so, the understanding of and, by extension, the responses to BRI can only be narrow, limited to strategic rational thinking.

To present the argument, this chapter starts with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) discourse on BRI in terms of how Beijing has conceptualised it. The second section critically engages with the existing debates on BRI, highlighting its contested nature with reference to China's economic concerns, security challenges, and hegemonic advances. It also reviews the continuity pertaining to BRI in a broader context of Chinese domestic and foreign policies. The final section identifies two major issues that restrain the existing literature to explore the contingency and emergence of a global BRI.

1.1 The CCP's Conceptualisation of BRI

As this chapter critically engages with the existing literature on BRI and, more importantly, the whole thesis investigates the emergent process of BRI, it starts with the Chinese official answer to the question of 'what is BRI?'. It focuses on the CCP discourse on BRI and highlights some practices that have been constructed and claimed to be successful under BRI. According to the Chinese government, as President Xi's signature foreign-policy venture, BRI is a two-part global initiative for cooperation, open to all states, in policy, infrastructure, trade, finance, culture, and industry with a higher purpose of building a global community of shared future (BRI Office, 2017, 2019a; NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015).

  First, BRI is framed as a two-part cooperation initiative. According to the Chinese government, BRI is composed of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road proposed by President Xi in his 2013 overseas visits (BRI Office, 2017, 2019a; NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015). In the *Vision and Actions*, the first policy paper on BRI, Beijing identified five areas of cooperation for both domestic and international actors: policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, trade, finance, and people-to-people contacts (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015). In 2019, 'industrial cooperation' (BRI Office, 2019a: 30) was officially listed as the 6th area of cooperation under the BRI framework. That said, the core contents of BRI are the regional integration in infrastructure and economic development. In Xi's (2017b) own words, the goals were 'to promote infrastructure development and greater connectivity, synergise the development policies and strategies of individual countries, deepen practical cooperation, [and] encourage coordinated and interconnected development.'

  This cooperative aspect of BRI has also been articulated through the guiding principle of 'mutual consultation, joint construction and shared benefits' (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015: 4). Additionally, the Chinese government argued that BRI 'is in line with the purposes and principles of the UN Charter. It upholds the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence: mutual respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual nonaggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence' (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015: 4). In other words, the cooperative feature of BRI is discursively incorporated into and generated by the ways in which BRI is, or should be, implemented.

  Second, BRI is framed as a global and open initiative. Started as two separate (sub-)regional initiatives, which is largely ignored in official Chinese narratives, BRI had remained, as of early 2015, to be a cross-regional dualistic project that focused on both domestic and regional issues (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015). As Beijing argued, the introduction of BRI was due to China's needs to 'further expand and deepen its opening-up' as well as 'strengthen its mutually beneficial cooperation with countries in Asia, Europe and Africa and the rest of the word' (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015: 4). To

emphasise, the construction of BRI's global nature in 2015 was not explicit because the initiative aimed more at 'the countries along the Belt and Road', 'instil[ling] vigour and vitality into the ancient Silk Road, [and] connect[ing] Asian, European, and African countries more closely' (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015: 4).

After that, in 2017, BRI was framed specifically as 'a Chinese proposal whose aim is to promote peaceful cooperation and common development around the world' (BRI Office, 2017: 4). At a press conference in March 2017, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (2017a) proclaimed that BRI 'not only belongs to China, … [but] also belongs to the world. The benefit of the initiative will be shared by the whole world.' In 2019, based on Chinese official discourses, BRI had already turned itself 'from a Chinese proposal to a global consensus' that led to 'peace, prosperity, opening up, green development, innovation, connected civilisations, and clean government' (BRI Office, 2019a: 33, 49).

Third, BRI is framed as a global public good. This new aspect of BRI started around 2017 when Foreign Minister Wang (2017a) declared that BRI became 'the most popular international public product.' In a 2019 policy paper, *The Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Contributions and Prospects*, BRI was unambiguously constructed by Beijing as 'a global public product' that was 'non-competitive and nonexclusive' and aimed to build 'a global community of shared future' (BRI Office, 2019a: 3, 33, 44). Beijing claimed that BRI is a great contribution to 'the reform of the current global governance system and to economic globalisation' (BRI Office, 2019a: 33).

Since its introduction, BRI has been deliberated by the Chinese government in such high-level conferences as its National People's Congress and Central Economic Work Conference. It established a specialised working group for BRI called the Leading Small Group for BRI to guide and monitor its implementation (BRI Office, n.d.). In addition, the Chinese government founded the Silk Road Fund in 2014 and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015 to financially support BRI, and urged other institutions such as the Shanghai-based New Development Bank established in 2014 to fund BRI as well (Cohen, 2015; Tian, 2015, 2016). Moreover, BRI was written into the Constitution of Chinese Communist Party (CCP, 2017), gaining constitutional protection.

According to the Chinese government, BRI has made huge progress over the years, becoming 'the best international cooperation forum' (Wang Yi, 2017a). Between 2013 and 2018, Chinese companies, both private and state-owned, had invested over USD 90 billion with an annual increase of 5.2% in BRI countries [6] (Wang and Yu, 2019). Meanwhile, Beijing claimed that it had secured '283 [BRI] projects' (Xinhua, 2019b) between the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in May 2017 and the second in April 2019. According to the Ministry of Commerce of the PRC (2021), as of January 2021, 'the Chinese government has signed 205 BRI cooperation documents

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[6] China has never given a list for its reference of 'the countries along the Belt and Road' (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015: 4), and now the list is only getting longer as Beijing argues that BRI is open to all countries.

with 140 countries and 31 international organisations.'[7] Thus, Beijing proclaims that BRI has gone beyond Asia and Europe and reached Africa, Latin America, South Pacific, et cetera (BRI Office, 2019a).

  Overall, from the perspective of the CCP, BRI is 'the project of the century' (Xi, 2017c). Framed by the Chinese government as a positive and constructive initiative, *not* a strategy, for cooperation with a global reach, it is to create a win-win situation for all participants in six policy areas. Any alternative discourses, perceived by Beijing as misconstrued, negative, and wrong, are totally rejected (Chapter Six).

1.2 BRI: Debates and Issues

Such a grand proposal from an emerging great power to strengthen, at least for Beijing, international cooperation, has undoubtedly attracted many interests, speculations, and debates among academics (Aoyama, 2016; Benabdallah, 2019; Callahan, 2016a; Clarke, 2016a; Dodwell, 2015; Fallon, 2015; Johnson, 2016; Kennedy and Parker, 2015; Ljungwall and Bohman, 2017a; Summers, 2016; Wang Yong, 2016; Zhou and Esteban, 2018). Dominated by strategic thinking and focusing on the question of 'why China proposed BRI', these debates go beyond the aforementioned CCP's narratives and critically examine China's other motivations or long-term goals, often unspoken but deducible (from relevant issues and theories). This section reviews this traditional strategic thinking of BRI. At the broadest level, the rationale behind BRI is related to China's economic concerns, security challenges, and hegemonic ambitions. That being so, BRI is often conceptualised as China's latest attempt, or an inevitable rational strategy built on its previous experience, to solve its own 'problems'. The first three subsections elaborate three strands – an economic strategy, a defensive geopolitical strategy, and an offensive grand strategy. The fourth one focuses on the risks and difficulties that were confronted by BRI. The final subsection turns to the issue of continuity (inevitability) that situates BRI in a broader context regarding China's politics.

1.2.1 BRI as an Economic Strategy

BRI is designed to gain economic benefits. This argument is consistent with the perspective of (international) political economy. Thus, BRI is regarded as China's

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[7] This number (140) is given by the Chinese government. But it is debatable as, according to Nedopil (2021), seven of these 140 countries 'have not published a confirmation of signing a full MoU or even denied it.' These seven countries are: Austria, Benin, Comoros, Congo D.R., Dominica, Niger, and Russian Federation (Nedopil, 2021).

economic strategy to deal with some of its domestic challenges, issues, or 'problems', particularly pertaining to its economic development. Here, problems, as the thesis argues in Chapters Three and Four, refer to a set of economic issues that are problematised, or simply, framed as problems, to which BRI serves as a transnational economic solution. They include China's excess capacity (Cheng, 2016; Johnson, 2016; Nordin and Weissmann, 2018; Pu, 2016; Yu Hong, 2017; Wang Yong, 2016), the transformation of its investment-driven growth model (Kennedy and Parker, 2015; Kratz, 2015a; Huang Yiping, 2016; Wuttke, 2017), a slower economic growth (Nordin and Weissmann, 2018; Zhao Minghao, 2015; Zhou and Esteban, 2018), the potential debt crisis of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Johnson, 2016), and uneven regional development within China (Johnson, 2016; Kennedy and Parker, 2015; Pu, 2016; Yu Hong, 2017; Summers, 2016).

Firstly, BRI could expand China's overseas markets to release the mounting pressures from its excess industrial capacity that is perceived as economically unsustainable (Cheng, 2016; Johnson, 2016; Pu, 2016; Yu Hong, 2017; Wang Yong, 2016) and is hampering China's wider strategy to restructure its economy (Cai, 2014). The issue of overcapacity troubled China periodically, as shown in Chapter Four. It has been compounded by the slowing down of China's economy that has, since the 2008 financial crisis, suffered inadequate domestic demands, flaccid overseas consumption, and the re-emergence of trade protectionism in some developed markets (Cheng, 2016; Zhou and Esteban, 2018). In 2013, for instance, the utilisation rates of cement, coal, iron, and steel, according to a senior Chinese official, fell between 70% and 75% which were lower than a healthy rate that ought to be between 80% and 85% (Zhou and Wan, 2013). Built on David Harvey's (2001) spatial fix argument that depicts a spatial dynamics of capitalist accumulation, Hung (2008: 152) suggests that the way out of it, or at least alleviate its impact, is to 'open up and integrate new territories into the world market and … export surplus capital to these territories, where rate of profit is usually higher than the system-wide average.' Therefore, BRI is 'a state-led spatial fix' (Summers, 2016: 1637) to facilitate capital, technology and information flows in the form of infrastructure-based networks connecting urban nodes (Nordin and Weissmann, 2018).[8]

In the same vein, BRI is pointed out as a strategy to ease the debt burden of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and boost their performance by creating a bigger market, thus indirectly preventing banks from being troubled with otherwise enormous non-performing loans (Johnson, 2016; Yu Jie, 2018). SOEs have been playing an important role in China's economy from engaging in the post-war reconstruction (Fan et al., 2012) to being a tool to regulate the market (Ye et al., 2019). After several rounds of reform

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[8] Urban node means, according to regulation 1315/2013 of the EU, article 3 (p), 'an urban area where the transport infrastructure of the trans-European transport network, such as ports including passenger terminals, airports, railway stations, logistic platforms and freight terminals located in and around an urban area, is connected with other parts of that infrastructure and with the infrastructure for regional and local traffic' (L 348/7).

since 1978, retreating from most industries, they still maintained a dominant presence in seven industries or areas that are critical, defined by the Chinese government, to its national security and economic development (Ren and Liu, 2006; Yuan and Shao, 2010). Now, SOEs have been called to develop their ability to compete with foreign multinational companies in the global market (Hu Angang, 2012). In this case, SOEs were the leading forces of championing President Xi's signature project (Wang Lin, 2015; Zhen Xinwei, 2019). In other words, BRI is regarded as a litmus test, or 'a semi-controlled laboratory,' (Johnson, 2016: V) which could assess whether large Chinese SOEs could meet their leadership's call to transform themselves into internationally competitive global champions (Kliman and Grace, 2018). According to the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council, as of October 2018, China's Central Enterprises (*yangqi*)[9] were involved in 3116 projects, and the number of projects they participated in and the total contract value accounted for almost 50% and over 70% respectively among the BRI projects under construction and in the pipeline (Zhen Xinwei, 2019). From this perspective, BRI is, therefore, proposed to ease the pain brought by this economic slowdown, possibly to prevent an over-accumulation crisis, and to help China transform its investment-driven growth model so as so sustain its long-term economic prosperity (Kennedy and Parker, 2015; Kratz, 2015a; Huang Yiping, 2016; Pu, 2016; Wang Yong, 2016; Wuttke, 2017; Swaine, 2015).

Secondly, BRI represents China's latest effort in rebalancing its domestic development. It is expected, if successfully implemented, to bridge the widening wealth gap between China's prosperous coastal area and its chronically underperforming western region (Du and Ma, 2015; Johnson, 2016; Kennedy and Parker, 2015; Pu, 2016; Sheng and Li, 2016; Yu Hong, 2017), and to move towards a more open economy (Kratz, 2015a). This means that China will go beyond its original 1978 Open-Door policy that mainly encourages the operation of foreign investments and technologies in China, but to help other countries open their economies to China (Kratz, 2015a; Xue Li, 2017). Despite China's Great Western Development Strategy (*xibu dakaifa*, GWDS), a national strategy proposed in 2000 to promote economic development in its western region and reduce its regional development gap, China's western region is still plagued by its substandard infrastructure and inadequate investment (Du and Ma, 2015; He, 2019; Zhou and Esteban, 2018). '[A] threat to political stability', according to Zhou and Esteban's (2018: 490) assessment, could arise from a growing gap between China's eastern and western regions. As Yu Hong (2017) estimates, inland western provinces such as Xinjiang and Yunnan can benefit economically from having access to better-integrated transport networks, port facilities, and open markets in neighbouring countries enabled by BRI.

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9 China's Central Enterprise (*yangqi)* is one category under State-Owned Enterprises. There are only 126 Central Enterprises, among which 97 are under the management of the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council. The name of these companies is listed on the Commission's website (http://www.sasac.gov.cn/n4422011/n14158800/n14158998/c14159097/content.html).

To summarise, this political-economic perspective frames BRI as a strategy to solve China's domestic problems that largely concern its excess industrial capacity and uneven regional economic development. Compared with China's previous national economic projects, however, BRI stands out because of its incorporation of conventional Chinese diplomatic articulations, shown in the CCP discourse in section 1.1, such as sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-intervention, into contemporary economic speeches that call for compliance with international laws and norms and adherence to the paramount role of the market (Kennedy and Parker, 2015). Given that, BRI has also been conceptualised from a realist perspective with reference to security and hegemonic competition.

1.2.2 BRI as a Defensive Geopolitical Strategy

BRI is designed to increase China's security gains. This security perspective is broadly a defensive realist understanding of BRI in the context of national security maximisation and balance of power (Fravel, 2010; Montgomery, 2014; Schweller, 1994). From this perspective, BRI is still about China's material interest rooted in security concerns. Accordingly, it is interpreted as a strategy to deal with China's security 'problems' as a rising great power by sending out the signal of peaceful rising, disrupting other countries' strategies perceived to contain China and/or hedge against its growing power (Wang Yong, 2016), and increasing its geo-economic resilience (Ljungwall and Bohman, 2017; Song, 2019). In other words, BRI is understood as China's geopolitical strategy to increase its power and influence whilst framing its rise and empowerment in particular (positive) ways through geostrategic practices and discourses.

To begin with, BRI is described as 'a scheme of offensive for defensive' (Wang Yong, 2016: 456) which derives from a security dilemma facing all emerging powers. China as a rising great power proclaims that it needs a peaceful international environment for its own development and is committed to a peaceful rise, while pre-empting status-quo great powers' attempts to prevent, or withhold, its rise (Wang Jisi, 2011a, 2011b; Zheng Bijian, 2005). From the defensive realist perspective, the proposal of BRI is a balancing move. Here balancing includes both internal balancing and external counterbalancing. The former refers to China's effort to improve its own economic power through BRI, whilst the latter refers to China's endeavour to deter a balancing alliance forming in East Asia and Southeast Asia.

At a regional level, BRI serves as a vehicle to push forward China's periphery diplomacy – using economic and financial incentives to (re)build its image of peaceful rising and elicit more positive and cooperative efforts from neighbouring states (Kennedy and Parker, 2015; Rolland, 2015). China's relations with some of its neighbours since the late 2000s have deteriorated, which is manifested by, *inter alia*, its increasing rows with neighbouring states regarding the territorial disputes in the East and South

China Seas (Aoyama, 2016; Summers, 2016; Wang Yong, 2016). A project with potential economic returns like BRI could arguably ameliorate China's conflictual relationships with its neighbours and facilitate closer cooperation among them (Kennedy and Parker, 2015; Lavi, He and Eran, 2015; Song, 2019), whilst facilitating China's rise (Du and Ma, 2015). In short, BRI can be understood in this scholarship as China's strategy that is indicative of a goodwill to its neighbours and other extra-regional powers, and to a certain degree, to build its own balancing bloc through regional economic incentives.

At the same time, BRI indicates 'a quiet pivot towards the developing world' (Zhao Minghao, 2015: 11) so as to counterbalance the influence of and/or damages caused by other great powers in the region, and to deter balancing forces on the horizon in East Asia and Southeast Asia, or in Zhou and Esteban's (2018: 493) words, 'the formation of any-China coalition and "anyone but China" club.' More specifically, BRI is interpreted as China's balancing strategy in response to growing complexity in the region marked by the U.S.'s Pivot to Asia under Barack Obama (Clarke, 2015; Du and Ma, 2015; Li and Li, 2015; Overholt, 2015; Pu, 2016; Song, 2019; Wang Yong, 2016), Japan's accelerated steps towards military normalisation under Shinzo Abe, and India's 'Act East' policy under Narendra Modi (Aoyama, 2016; Swaine, 2015; Zhou and Esteban, 2018). This speaks to the core realist proposition: major powers balance and counterbalance against one another.

Second, the security gains from BRI could be understood from the perspective of internal balancing, that is, to improve China's geo-economic resilience defined by Ljungwall and Bohman (2017a: 27) as a state's ability 'to inhibit, withstand and recover from economic isolation [such as naval blockades and economic sanctions] through a combination of economic and political factors.' China's rapid rise in power engenders, to some degree, a sense of insecurity and vulnerability in itself, due in part to its ever-increasing dependency on imported natural resources, mostly secured via maritime transport, to power its economy (Wang Yong, 2016). For instance, as of 2017, approximately 80% of China's oil imports had gone through the Strait of Malacca (Kliman and Grace, 2018), and by 2030, 75% of China's petroleum consumption will need to be imported if no measures are taken to reduce its current rate of consumption (Zhao Minghao, 2015). The economic vulnerability as a consequence of substantial reliance on energy imports means that the Chinese economy cannot afford a sudden and sustained interruption in energy supply (Dannreuther, 2011; Lee, 2012).

A well-developed transport network, one of six priorities identified in BRI, could, according to the views that see BRI from the standpoint of its purported economic benefits (He, 2019; Ljungwall and Bohman, 2017a; Rolland, 2015), accelerate flows of trade, investment, and knowledge, and bring China's periphery further into its orbit. Moreover, China's vulnerability to external shocks can be ameliorated by an increase of renminbi-denominated transactions in international trade and the growing economic dependence of the Belt states on China (Ljungwall and Bohman, 2017a). If BRI is brought to fruition, in other words, China not only diversifies its energy sources, but also

becomes less reliant on sea lines of communication (SLOCs) that are dominated by the U.S., the Strait of Malacca in particular, for trade and energy transport (Downs, 2015; Hallgren and Ghiasy, 2017; He, 2019; Kennedy and Parker, 2015; Len, 2015; Rolland, 2015; Swaine, 2015). '[T]he BRI seems to,' Ljungwall and Bohman (2017a: 26-27, emphasis added) summarise it well, 'be selectively and gradually *decoupling* China from dependence on the West and maritime trade while constructing a more industrially self-sufficient Eurasia and building alternative land-based trade routes across the continent.'

1.2.3 BRI as an Offensive Grand Strategy

BRI is designed to fulfil China's regional or even global hegemonic ambition, that is, to become a hegemon, a peer competitor of the U.S. in Eurasia, and to shape the international order based on its own interests, norms, and values. Similar to the security perspective that casts BRI as China's defensive strategy – mainly about ensuring its own security of energy and trade routes, this perspective is also largely situated in the IR literature on China's rise in an anarchical international system. Different from that defensive view, this perspective considers the offensive or revisionist intentions of BRI in the context of the offensive realist scholarship on power maximisation and hegemony seeking (Layne, 1993; Mearsheimer, 2001, 2010; Roy, 1994; Schweller and Pu, 2011).

First, BRI is 'a geopolitical and diplomatic offensive' (Godement, 2015a: 2), through which China seeks greater regional integration in trade, finance, and transport so as to facilitate its regional ambition, or simply, to seek regional hegemony (Aoyama, 2016; Benabdallah, 2019; Johnson, 2016; Zhou and Esteban, 2018). A moderate version proclaims that the object of BRI is not to replace the U.S. but to cultivate 'a more multipolar order' (Leverett and Wu, 2017: 112). Bhattacharya (2016: 310) has taken this argument further and contended that BRI is 'formulated to reclaim its [China's] geopolitical dominance in Asia.' Just as the Cold War strategy of the U.S. has yielded strong and prosperous allies in Western Europe and East Asia, so BRI is believed to assist China in creating cross-continental networks in which China and other (regional) powers are bound together (Overholt, 2015). As Fallon (2015: 140) argues, BRI is China's regional ambition to compete with the U.S. and 'rewrit[e] the current geopolitical landscape' via exporting its economic and political influence.

Second, BRI is China's strategy to seek global hegemony and create a China-centred order by exporting its own values, ideas, and norms and reshaping the global system to reflect its preferences, interests and status (Benabdallah, 2019; Li and Li, 2015; Zhou and Esteban, 2018). China is discontented with protracted reforms in major international financial institutions (IFIs), and its status in and privileges provided by the existing U.S./West-dominated economic order, feeling undervalued and under-represented (Huang Yiping, 2016). Former U.S. President Barack Obama (2015) once claimed that 'we cannot let countries like China write the rules of the global economy.' Given that, China's

long-term goals are to strengthen the narrative that 'China is moving to the centre of global economic activity, strength, and influence' (Johnson, 2016: v) and to 'entrench Sino-centric patterns of trade, investment, and infrastructure' (Kennedy and Parker, 2015: 3) by establishing new norms and institutions, deepening regional economic and financial integration, enhancing cross-border trade flows and moving up along the global supply chain (Zenn, 2015). As Callahan (2016a: 226) argues, BRI 'is to re-constitute the regional order – and eventually global order – with new governance ideas, norms, and rules.'

   Accordingly, BRI is China's 'global strategy' (Aoyama, 2016: 19), or 'well thought-out grand strategy' (Bhattacharya, 2016: 310), to compete with the U.S. globally by becoming 'a normative power' (Zhou and Esteban, 2018: 488). Not only BRI is about physical and 'hard' objects such as power grids, railways, and trade, but also it concerns the spread of such 'soft' elements as China's values, ideas, and expertise through cultural and people-to-people exchanges (Benabdallah, 2019). By doing so, China could establish new norms and institutions, deepen regional economic and financial integration, enhance cross-border trade flows and move up along the global value chain (Zenn, 2015). More importantly, China not simply engages with the existing international order (and norms) but also seeks to change the parts that it is not satisfied with through disseminating its own (alternative) norms via cultural exchanges (Benabdallah, 2019). In other words, China's BRI effort is built on the cost of the U.S. normative authority and legitimacy (Zhou and Esteban, 2018).

1.2.4 Risks and Difficulties Confronting BRI

Despite different explanations of the rationale behind BRI, the perspectives of political economy, defensive realism, and offensive realism all focused on the conceptualisation of BRI, aiming to define what BRI is and determine what China wants from it. These realist analyses, as demonstrated above, often challenged the political economic perspective sanctioned by Beijing, and could be seen as one form of criticisms levelled against BRI.

   This subsection turns to the empirical aspect, namely, the practicality of BRI. This empirical perspective assesses, mostly based on quantitative methods, the achievements and impacts of BRI on such issues as trade, energy, and China's soft power (Chen and Yang, 2015; Du and Zhang, 2018; Herrero and Xu, 2017; Voon and Xu, 2019; World Bank, 2019; Zhai, 2018). It also discusses potential challenges and difficulties facing BRI, such as a complicated political situation in Central Asia and Western Asia, the overstretch of China's own capabilities and resources, China's existing disputes with other countries, and China's domestic institutional fragmentation (Cohen, 2015; Dodwell, 2015; Godement, 2015a; Johnson, 2016; Jones and Zeng, 2019; Kennedy and Parker, 2015; Kratz,

2015a; Pantucci and Chen, 2015; SCMP, 2015; Wang Yong, 2016; Yu Jie, 2018; Zhou and Esteban, 2018).

The discussion on the difficulties and risks that confront BRI is closely related to the conceptual debate on what BRI is, and often directly challenges the official narratives and design of the Chinese government. It also demonstrates how politically contested BRI is and, by extension, intrigues academics to further inquire into the emergence of a global BRI. All these practical challenges and difficulties are seen by this thesis as another form of criticism. After all, under China's one-party authoritarian system, dissents, or public criticisms, are rare (Manuel, 2019). Only through discussing potential risks can criticisms against BRI be presentable to the Chinese officials. Therefore, this subsection highlights two main risks that may have and/or will complicate the implementation process of BRI.

The first major risk for BRI relates to its potential geopolitical implications. Put differently, China's geopolitical ambition comes with geopolitical risks. Regions along the Belt and the Road are culturally diverse, politically unstable and economically uneven (Codement, 2015a; Cohen, 2015; Huang Yiping, 2016; Pu Xiaoyu, 2016). Particularly in Central Asia, nationalism, national identity, and by extension, inter-ethnic issues are on the rise (Zenn, 2015). Mishandling regional issues could deal a blowback to China, damaging its image (Kennedy and Parker, 2015) and further impeding its efforts of promoting BRI in the region. This is also compounded by China's inexperience in managing a project of such scale (larger than the Marshall Plan) (Johnson, 2016), its lack of a strong team of Central Asia specialists (Yu Jie, 2018), its complicated historical encounters with local states, and different religions (Wang Yong, 2016). To be specific, China's existing territorial disputes (particularly the Kashmir region with India), internal challenges (such as 'three evil forces'[10] (Pantucci, and Chen, 2015), ecological and environmental concerns (Fallon, 2015; Johnson, 2016), and its current human rights violations in Xinjiang) could derail this whole plan. However, BRI seems not to address security concerns in the region (Wang Xiaoquan, 2017).

In addition, well-intentioned or not, BRI could stimulate regional power competition, which could, in turn, jeopardises its further execution, especially in East Asia and Central Asia where traditional regional powers would question China's intentions, and would not relinquish their influence lightly (Dodwell, 2015; Fallon, 2015; Johnson, 2016; Kennedy and Parker, 2015; Pantucci and Chen, 2015; Pu Xiaoyu, 2016). Prior to China's BRI, there were several competing visions, with varying degrees of success, of reviving the heartland of the Eurasian continent. The U.S. introduced, for instance, the vision of a New Silk Road in 2011, 'an international web and network of economic and transit connections' (Clinton, 2011) linking Central Asia, South Asia, and Western Asia. Also, aiming to build a cross-regional transport passage, Russia signed an agreement with

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[10] *Sangu shili* (three evil forces) is defined as terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism in the *Shanghai Convention on Fighting Against Terrorism, Separatism, and Extremism* signed by China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in 2001.

India and Iran in 2002 to build a North-South Transport Corridor which is now developed into a multi-mode Eurasian transport project involving 14 Asian and European states (Hasan, 2021). Therefore, BRI needs a plan to deal with major regional powers (Chu, 2015).

The second major risk is closely related to BRI itself as Johnson (2016: 21) argues that BRI is 'too hasty, too broad, too ambitious, and without sufficient preparations for unexpected contingencies,' running the risk of being an unfulfilled promise and leading to huge financial losses. This is first reflected through the lack of a specialised department, as demonstrated in Chapter Five, to chair the whole policy/strategy (Manuel, 1997). Meanwhile, just like slogan-type projects, there are simply too many objectives, especially at its initial stage (Johnson, 2016; Zeng, 2020). Wang Jisi (2016) warns, for instance, that the scale of BRI reaching to North Africa and South America is far too ambitious and could overstretch the Chinese government. Chu Yin (2015) also called to have a level-headed discussion on BRI, rather than simply hyping it up.

In the similar vein, the real issue is the economic efficiency of BRI, rather than its economic relevance (Kratz, 2015a). Put simply, BRI deals must make sense financially (Global Times, 2016) and avoid the mistakes that Japan made regarding its overseas investments (Huang, 2015b). Investments in the Central Asia are going to take decades to reap any returns (Dodwell, 2015) due to its complex and uncertain political economic environment (Godement, 2015a; Wang Yong, 2016). The possible piling-up of debt due to BRI projects (Kratz, 2015a), if not managed well, may aggravate China's domestic industrial situation that infrastructure-related sectors highlighted in BRI are leading loss-makers (Godement, 2015a), which is exactly what Beijing wants to address. It could end up, therefore, 'as little more than a serious of expensive boondoggles' (Kennedy and Parker, 2015: 5) or a blind investment (Codement, 2015a). Huang Yiping (2015b, 2016: 321) even warns that without a proper management, BRI might turn into 'an international version of its [China's] early "Go West" policy, under which lots of infrastructure projects were built in the country's Western region without meaningful financial returns.'

1.2.5 BRI as Policy Continuity

From the conceptual and empirical perspectives, the first four subsections revealed the novelty of BRI: a *new* strategy under a *new* administration with such *new* features as a global public good (framed by the Chinese government) (Song Guoyou, 2015). The thesis does not, however, imply that BRI is exceptional, either in a Chinese or an international context. Instead, it argues that BRI, embedded in a broader context of Chinese politics, bears some resemblance to many of China's domestic projects/policies of the past. This subsection turns to the issue of continuity concerning BRI, further shedding light on the current debate on it. This subsection concentrates BRI's connections with China's past

strategies, the fragmented nature of BRI as with many other Chinese policies, and its embeddedness in the same and lasting grand narrative of China's rejuvenation.

First, BRI is not an exceptional project, attributed to President Xi only, as Du and Ma (2015) and Xu and Wang (2016) proclaimed, a product of Xi's strategic vision. Rather, BRI is, particularly from the perspective of political economy, an extension of China's *Going Global* strategy[11], a culmination of its economic (or infrastructure) diplomacy of decades (Huang Yiping, 2015a; Ferchen, 2016). To be specific, whether it is to export excess production or to rebalance the economy, BRI is regarded as China's international economic strategy that is built on its previous initiatives for economic development and cross-regional cooperation (Aoyama, 2016; He Baogang, 2019; Johnson, 2016; Parepa, 2020; Summers, 2016; Zhang Yunling, 2015; Zhao Minghao, 2015). In short, parts of BRI can be easily identified in China's previous economic activities and experience.

At the regional level, China has accumulated decades of experience in investing overseas, as it begun to pursue an active bilateral and multilateral engagement with foreign states and international organisations, since the late 1990s, regarding both security and economic cooperation (Ferchen, 2016; Huang Yiping, 2015a). In 2000, for instance, China established a consultation mechanism, called Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC), with African states, through which senior officials from both sides discuss and exchange views on the issues concerning both China and African states (Parepa, 2020). In 2012, the Chinese government also initiated a formal high-level dialogue (16+1) to promote its business and investment relations with 16 Central and Eastern European states[12] (Parepa, 2020). At the national level, the Chinese government initiated a GWDS in 1999, and then in 2010, upgraded it to GWDS 2.0 with a greater emphasis on its own outbound investment (Brown, 2017; Summers, 2016). Specifically, this GWDS 2.0 is designed to open Western China to its west (*xiangxi kaifang*), such as Central Asia, rather than just being a bridgehead (*qiaotoubao*) attracting inbound investment (Summers, 2016; Zhao Minghao, 2015).

Second, the actual roll-out of BRI also reflects the feature of and, by extension, continuity with China's policy practices of other periods of reform. The feature refers to a complex and often-fragmented China's policymaking process (Su, 2012a; Zheng

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[11] The Going-Global (zou chuqu) strategy is part of the twin strategies of Bringing-In (*yin jinlai*) and Going-Global (*zou chuqu*) which were put forward in late 1980s and were essential for China's open-door policy. The 'Bringing-In' strategy aims to bring in advanced technologies and foreign capital to assist China's economic development, while the 'Going-Global' strategy encourages all capable Chinese companies to expand their overseas market and invest more internationally.

[12] As Greece joined the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries in 2019, the 16+1 mechanism was renamed as 17+1. But in March 2021, Lithuania left the 17+1 mechanism (Lau, 2021). Therefore, there are only 16 European participating countries. They are: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

Yongnian, 2006). Regarding a national policy, the central government first articulates certain ideas or visions. These ideas are usually very broad, conceptualised as slogan-type discourses, so as to leave enough room for different interpretations and create space for the competition as well as interaction among various actors (Zhou Li'an, 2008). Then, gradually and tentatively, within those broad ideas, details are added, based on both central and local contributions (possibly via local pilot programmes). Afterwards, action plans are made, rolled out in targeted localities, and promoted nationwide (with changes if necessary) (Brown, 2017; 2018a). Deng's well-known phrase summarises it well – *mozhe shitou guohe* (crossing the river by feeling the stones).

Here briefly, as will be demonstrated fully in Chapters Four, Five, and Six, BRI started with two separate regional initiatives whose relationship was not elaborated by President Xi Jinping in his original two speeches (Xi, 2013a, 2013b). Then in the following year and half, the Chinese central government issued no formal policy papers or guidelines on BRI, but tacitly allowed the circulation of different and competing interpretations of BRI by different actors at all levels. Only by March 2015 did it put forward the first policy paper – *Vision and Actions* – to lay out its design, still very broad, for BRI.

This practice is well understood and often performed by Chinese leaders and can be observed in other national policies. The Post-Mao rural reform, for instance, had no master plans in the initial steps (Teiwes and Sun, 2016). Instead, its final form of de-collectivisation (a household responsibility system) was attributed to a series of local experimentation, intra-local contestation, and the central government's tacit allowance for certain deviation at the local level (Teiwes and Sun, 2016). In other words, like many other policies, BRI results from a complex process where there was interplay between different actors and forces, whilst eventually taking a definite form in the centrally supported and ordained narratives from the government.[13]

This aspect of Chinese policymaking has been studied in terms of decentralisation and fragmentation. After decades of China's Open-Door policy with an emphasis on economic reform, phenomena such as interdepartmental rivalries, Party-Government competition, and central-local conflicts became more apparent. Thus, the Chinese state became 'riddled with competing state agencies, problems of cross-department coordination, and mismatch between central and local policies' (Su, 2012a: 504). Put differently, China's one-party political system does not necessarily imply that it is a monolithic state solely with the philosophy and practice of top-down governance (Jones and Zeng, 2019; Yu Jie, 2018; Su, 2012a). On the contrary, as shown in Chapter Five, policymaking in China is less of a chain of command but more of a coalition or consensus building process resulting from multi-party and multi-front negotiations, and political mobilisation as the Chinese government has been promoting decentralisation for

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[13] I thank my examiners for pointing this out to me.

decades and China is more fragmented in terms of policymaking than it is assumed (He, 2019; Jones and Zeng, 2019; Zheng Yongnian, 2006).

Decentralisation refers to the delegation of authority in terms of resource control, policymaking and implementation from a central level to a local level and/or from state to society (Hameiri and Jones, 2016; Su, 2012a; Jones, 2019; Jones and Zeng, 2019). This phenomenon is conceptualised by Zheng Yongnian (2006: 107) as a '*de facto* federalism.' Given the Chinese one-party political system, decentralisation remains much more about central-local relations than state-society relations (Zheng Yongnian, 2006).

The corollary of decentralisation is that local governments gain more power or autonomy in terms of making independent decisions in certain policy areas and interpreting and executing 'national' policies based on local circumstances and interests (Zheng Yongnian, 2006). Thus, it has generated multi-level and multi-party bargaining and negotiation for policymaking and, sometimes, different implementation plans (He Baogang, 2019; Jones and Zeng, 2019). For instance, provincial governors could manage their own external economic relations and engage in external economic activities, which sometimes creates issues and problems for China's central foreign policy (Jones and Zeng, 2019). In other words, national policymaking is not simply a unidirectional top-down process. Instead, it is a two-way process in which local actors also exert their influence on policymaking (Zheng Yongnian, 2006).

Being constitutive of the phenomenon of decentralisation, fragmentation first means that a wider range of actors is involved in policymaking with some actors empowered whilst others are disempowered. Regarding foreign policymaking, not only traditional official actors such as governmental departments and institutions, but also non-traditional ones such as businesses and citizen intellectuals, all attempt to influence policymaking to suit their own interest (Callahan, 2013; de Graaff, 2020; Huo and Parmar, 2020; Yu Jie, 2018). These non-traditional actors include but are not limited to the following: large state-owned, private, and, to a lesser degree, foreign enterprises, transnational and national networks in knowledge and business (Cabestan, 2009; Jakobson and Knox, 2010; Jakobson and Manuel, 2016).

Moreover, fragmentation implies struggles for power and resources, thus sometimes leading to contradictory guidance and practices, as decision-making is relegated to multiple agencies at the same level (He Baogang, 2019; Jones and Zeng, 2019; Pieke, 2013). In other words, responsibilities for some issues are shared among different departments which compete as well as cooperate with one another for greater influence (Pieke, 2013). This is also, to a certain degree, inflamed by globalisation as China increasingly integrates itself into the international society through socialisation (Su Xiaobo, 2012a) and more domestic actors tend to obtain an international role (Jones and Zeng, 2019). In terms of foreign policy at the central level, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) is joined and, sometimes, bypassed by other actors such as the Ministry of Defence, the People's Liberation Army, and the CCP's International Department (Jones and Zeng, 2019; Pieke, 2013). In other words, nowadays, with lesser authority, the MOFA is only

one of many actors (Zhang Qingmin, 2016). For instance, regarding maritime affairs, 22 different agencies have some jurisdiction over it or some aspects of it, 'with inter-agency rivalry directly generating clashes with neighbouring countries' (Jones and Zeng, 2019: 1416). In short, decentralisation leads to fractured authority regarding foreign policymaking (Jakobson and Manuel, 2016), and China is more fragmented and decentralised than it is often assumed (Jones and Zeng, 2019; Yu Jie, 2018).

Third, BRI's continuity is observable via its embeddedness into a long-lasting grand narrative – taking China back to its rightful place in history, modernised, powerful, and respected – which has been dictating the major decisions made by the Chinese leadership since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. According to Brown (2018a, 2018b), this grand narrative is closely related to China's historical encounter, usually violent and humiliating, with foreign states since the late 19th century and appeared before the establishment of the CCP. Despite the existence of different renditions, the essence of this narrative remains unchanged, that is, the restoration of China's national greatness. Furthermore, this grand narrative is powerful, generating a common language and a consensus between the Chinese leadership and the public that hold China together (Brown, 2018a). It is the foundation, upon which China's major policies are built and to which Chinese leaders are of service (Brown, 2018a).

To sum up, the existing literature on 'why BRI', predominantly featuring a strategic rational thinking, has three strands. The first strand frames BRI as an economic strategy, serving mainly as a spatial fix to tackle the issue of excess capacity and rebalance the uneven development within China. The second strand regards BRI as a defensive geopolitical strategy to increase its own security through seeking closer cooperation with its neighbours and improving its own geo-economic resilience. The third strand conceptualises BRI as an offensive grand strategy to seek hegemonic leadership and a Sino-centric world order. Meanwhile, the literature also analysed the potential challenges and risks generated by BRI with a focus on its geopolitical risks. The final subsection investigated the ways in which BRI is closely connected with China's previous strategies, its traditional practices of politics, and the long-lasting grand narrative of China's national rejuvenation.

1.3 Problem of Strategic Thinking of BRI

The strategic thinking of BRI has helped us to appreciate the domestic and international challenges China was and is facing, a shifting global distribution of power, and a growing geopolitical competition. However, these analyses are still insufficient to answer the research question concerning the emergence of a global BRI. Simply, the puzzle – how a global BRI came into being – remains. Therefore, this final section of this chapter concentrates on the problem concerning the strategic thinking of BRI and aims

at laying grounds for a new approach to investigate BRI. It argues that the existing scholarship on BRI falls short of exploring the underlying assumptions, discursive performances and effects, and the interactions of various elements that create certain conditions, and at the same time, exclude others, for the contingency and emergence of a global BRI. There are two issues contributing to its problem.

First, the issue of contingency associated with a global BRI is often under-examined. Rather, as demonstrated above, the existing literature often implies that a series of economic phenomena or geopolitical issues, framed as 'problems', unfolded in ways that *inevitably* led to the solution – BRI. This is largely consistent with the issue of continuity (Section 1.2.5) that BRI 'represent[s] the culmination of … debates or processes that have been unfolding within China for much of the last two to three decades' (Johnson, 2016: 3). He Baogang (2019) argues, for instance, that BRI is to replace China's previous domestic strategies such as Great Western Development Strategy to regenerate the development of China's western region. And Rumi Aoyama (2016: 6-7, emphasis added) takes this perspective to the foreign policy level and argues that BRI is 'simply *a new name* for the consolidation of efforts that China had already been making in its relations with Asia, Europe, the Arab World, and Pacific Islands.'

However, as elaborated in Chapter Five, there was no BRI in President Xi Jinping's 2013 overseas speeches, but it was these speeches that the Chinese government claimed to be the official origin of BRI (Xi, 2013a, 2013b). Instead, when the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) were proposed, they were two separate regional strategies which had the possibility to be developed into different strategies and the relationship between the two strategies was not defined (Xi, 2013a, 2013b) which challenge the idea of the origin of BRI as a coherent grand narrative. In addition, there already existed other regional strategies proposed by China such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor which were later integrated into BRI. These details concerning the emerging process of BRI were often left out in the official narratives and ignored in the current debate. More importantly, disregarding this messy period, or simply an omission of it, in the literature distorts the analysis of what BRI is and how it comes to be.

There is indeed some literature on BRI (He Baogang, 2019; Jones and Zeng, 2019; Yu Jie, 2018), as demonstrated above, dealing with this period by focusing on China's domestic politics. It breaks the myth of the omnipotent power of the Chinese state and explains, to a certain degree, the initial 'messy' stage of BRI when there were no unified understandings and practices regarding BRI and actors of different types joined in with their own interests. However, the domestic-politics-focused BRI literature remains insufficient as it has not fully linked the dynamic formulation process that involves both human and non-human elements with the meaning of BRI framed as global, open, and cooperative. Put simply, what is the role of this period in constituting a global BRI? In other words, although the politics of decentralisation and fragmentation explains what

may have caused this 'messy' and incoherent period, the literature does not explain how it relates to the construction of BRI as a global, open, and cooperative initiative. Moreover, the perspective of China's domestic politics may have renounced a top-down approach to BRI, but it has certainly retained the idea of a rational and teleological process of the formulation of BRI. Simply, in the domestic-politics-focused literature, BRI is still assumed to be *inevitable* (for China's own problems).

The second issue concerns the conceptualisation of problem that underpins the aforementioned strategic thinking of BRI. In the existing literature, as detailed in Chapter Two, problems are 'out there' waiting to be found and distinct from solutions as BRI is often conceptualised as China's solution to a set of problems. Meanwhile, it implies a rigid hierarchical dichotomy in which solutions (positive) are always superior to problems (negative), and a simple causal relationship between them. This lies in its foundationalist epistemology, as shown in Chapter Two, that problems could be objectively identified, described, and assessed, and then they are the foundations upon which solutions are built. In short, this strategic approach to BRI presupposes problem(s) and insists that policies serve as solutions to the problem(s) out there.

Just like such concepts as 'interest' and 'threat', however, 'problem' is an intersubjective concept that is socially constructed and discursively represented. Problems are not natural or obvious, and should not be assumed as objects 'out there' to be discovered and dealt with. No issues, events, and phenomena are intrinsically more or less problematic than others. In other words, there are not objective problems but rather issues, events, and phenomena that are problematised, or framed as problems. To paraphrase Bormann's (2008: 80) idea of threat, problems are *made* intelligible 'through an act of interpretation within a particular, known context.' Furthermore, the dichotomous view of problem/solution falls short of reflecting issues framed as 'solutions', and their constitutive relationship with those framed as 'problems', that is, the framing of solutions exists in relation to the framing of problems (and vice versa). In other words, solutions are nothing but constructed; solutions are part of problems and reproduce them.

In the case of BRI, the existing scholarship fails to question the status of these so-called economic and/or geopolitical problems and investigate the process in which issues, events, and phenomena, among all others, become problems that are meaningful and legitimate so as to demand BRI as a solution.[14] Moreover, it regards BRI as the solution that is derived and completely separated from these presumed problems. From a geopolitical perspective, for instance, China has geopolitical problems such as national

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[14] In the existing literature, some scholars such as Huang Yiping (2016), Johnson (2016), Kennedy and Parker (2015), Pu Xiaoyu (2016), and Yu Hong (2017) have indeed traced back these so-called economic and/or geopolitical problems prior to BRI. However, they never questioned why these issues, events, and phenomena are problems in the first place and still regarded them as objective problems. Put differently, what they have done is the process tracing of objects *as* problems, not a process of objects *becoming*, or being framed as, problems.

security concerns and the emerging balance of power in the Asia-Pacific. Therefore, BRI is China's policy solution to these problems (Aoyama, 2016; Benabdallah, 2019; Callahan, 2016; Clarke, 2016; Ljungwall and Bohman, 2017a; Wang Yong, 2016; Zhou and Esteban, 2018).

The same goes for the literature from the perspective of political economic. That is, such economic problems as excess industrial capacity and unbalanced economic development have generated BRI as the solution (Cheng, 2016; Johnson, 2016; NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015; Nordin and Weissmann, 2018; Pu, 2016; Yu Hong, 2017; Wang Yong, 2016). However, the phenomenon of industrial over-accumulation had, for instance, been an issue for years and became more acute after the 2008 financial crisis (Hung, 2008). Instead, in 2008, Beijing chose to stimulate the market through a nationwide investment package of RMB 4 trillion. So why only in 2013 did this phenomenon become *the* problem that needed to be solved?[15] The thesis understands that the issue of quantity vs. quality of economic growth long existed, as shown in Chapter Four, permeating into the discourse of harmonious society and scientific development in the Hu era. Also, how about other issues to which BRI has been framed as a response, such as China's weak geo-economic resilience and the global balance of power? Moreover, BRI could be a 'problem' in the form of a solution that contributes to and sustains the framing of the problems, or those so-called 'problems', which it is supposed to solve. For instance, as detailed in Chapter Four, China's preferential economic policies which aimed to capitalise on the advantages of individual regions ended up contributing to the issue of a growing unbalanced regional development. Simply, why BRI (among all other policy options)?

Therefore, without problematising these particular phenomena framed as 'problems' that BRI is supposed to solve and reflecting the co-constitutive relationship between BRI and those 'problems', the analyses of BRI could only be very limited in terms of their scope as the parameters, regarding what to study and how, have already been fixed in a strategic thinking approach. In other words, without acknowledging the constructed nature of problems and solutions and their co-constitutive relationship, the analysis would not study certain elements and their relations, thus failing to explain and understand the emergence and contingency of a global BRI. This is because the framings of problems (with their underlying assumptions) have legitimised and included as well as delegitimised and excluded certain elements for analysis. Overall, relating back to the research question raised in the Introduction, the strategic thinking of BRI still largely asks why-questions – why did Beijing propose such a grand project that involves risks – rather than how-possible questions. Therefore, a new critical approach is needed to focus on how a global BRI has come to be.

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1.4 Conclusion

The main purpose of this chapter is to make a case for a new approach to explain and understand BRI. To do so, it focused on two issues: what has been debated about BRI, and what their limitations are. Divided into three sections, the chapter began with the CCP's conceptualisation of BRI and found out that the Chinese government had framed BRI as an open initiative for global cooperation in six areas, and a public good provided by China to the world.

In the second section, the chapter critically engaged with the scholarly literature on BRI regarding how it explains and understands the driving forces behind BRI. It argued that most of the literature had brought to surface the highly political nature of BRI, going beyond Beijing's official line that exclusively emphasises, often in a positive fashion, its economic nature. Accordingly, three strands of arguments dominated in the literature. First, BRI is China's economic strategy to deal with such economic issues as industrial over-accumulation and a widening gap between China's western and eastern regions. Second, BRI is China's defensive geopolitical strategy to ease its own security concerns by engaging balance-of-power politics internally as well as externally. Third, BRI is China's offensive grand strategy to challenge the U.S. hegemony in Central Asia and the world at large by spreading its own norms and values. To present a comprehensive debate on BRI, the last two subsections turned to its empirical aspect with a special focus on the risks and challenges that confront BRI and reviewed three aspects through which BRI relates to policies, practices, and narratives of the past.

Nonetheless, these explanations cannot fully answer the research question of the thesis as they did not interrogate the ways in which a global BRI emerged. Put differently, the strategic thinking of BRI did not explore the conditions, be they underlying assumptions, discursive performance, and ideational and material effects, which made a global BRI possible. The chapter found that two issues caused this problem. The first is the literature, even the ones that discussed the incoherent and fragmented practices concerning BRI, assumed what BRI is *a priori*, thus implying the notion of inevitability that the emergence of BRI is inevitable. Second, these explanations ignore the constructed nature of the 'problems' that BRI is supposed to solve.

In short, the chapter argued that BRI had been widely debated, but within a set of parameters (teleological and strategic thinking, and the logic of problem-solving) that limited the understanding of BRI. Therefore, it is not simply these 'analyses', but the theoretical models of world politics and state behaviour that inform them, especially the realist worldview, that (arguably) dictate what counts as 'problems' and types of 'solutions.' This is a theoretical issue that the proceeding chapter will explore.

Chapter 2 Foreign Policy as an Assemblage

As demonstrated in Chapter One, the existing conceptualisation of BRI as China's strategy, largely built on its previous practices, to solve China's internal and external problems under-examined the 'broken' political history of BRI and is insufficient to explain and understand such a dynamic socio-political phenomenon as BRI. Behind this dominant strategic understanding of BRI is a broader conceptual idea of foreign policy that is traditionally defined as a human-centred product of material and rational calculations with a set of goals (Zakaria, 2009). This chapter critically engages with this strategic thinking of foreign policy by probing its theoretical underpinnings and discussing its limitations, and more importantly, argues for a new conceptualisation of foreign policy.

The purposes of this chapter are to explain and justify the necessity and significance of a post-structuralist perspective taken by the thesis and to present an assemblage-based post-structuralist framework for the analysis of foreign policy with reference to the concepts of assemblage, power, and identity. In other words, this chapter aims to explain why post-structuralism should be brought in to complement [16] rationalist and constructivist understandings of foreign policy, and what analytical added value it provides.

This chapter argues that foreign policy should be re-conceptualised as an assemblage that is a temporally- and spatially-situated multiplicity comprising various elements and that an assemblage-based post-structuralist approach is the most suitable approach to understand the contingency and emergence of foreign policy without *a priori* assumptions about what it means. The reasons are as follows. First, largely situated in a post-structuralist tradition that is suspicious of metanarratives, usually teleological and progressive processes, assemblage thinking embraces the idea of multiplicity and anti-essentialism and, by extension, the contingent and emergent nature of foreign policy. Second, assemblage thinking also follows the post-structural conceptualisation of power as being relational, productive, and disciplinary which is valuable in terms of exploring the conditions and ways in which possibilities are generated for the emergence of foreign policy assemblage. Third, going beyond post-structuralists' heavy reliance on discourses, it embraces a full range of actants, non-human ones in particular, and argues for their critical role in rendering a policy intelligible.

This chapter has three sections. The first section is about the metatheoretical debate in IR, serving as a background in which middle-range IR theories are embedded. The main

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[16] Positivist and post-positivist theories are committed to a different, even incompatible, ontology and epistemology, as presented in the following parts. Incompatible as they are from a philosophical perspective, these theories, the thesis argues, still explore different aspects of an issue/event by asking different questions and providing answers. This is what the thesis means when it says 'complement'.

reason is that ontology and epistemology, the focuses of metatheory, underpin all middle-range IR theories and determine what should be studied and in what way. The second section concentrates on the theorisation of foreign policy at the middle-range level. This section is further divided into three subsections. The first subsection concentrates on positivist theories with specific reference to neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, and conventional constructivism. It elaborates their conceptualisations of identity and power, and how they explain and understand state policy. The second subsection focuses on the problem of knowledge with reference to the post-structuralist views on identity and power. The final subsection concentrates on the re-conceptualisation of foreign policy as an assemblage. The third section turns to the politics of truth and presents the post-structural conceptualisation of truth to justify the assemblage approach to foreign policy analysis.

2.1 A Metatheoretical Debate in IR

Explaining and justifying the post-structuralist approach that underpins the thesis requires engagement with the metatheoretical debate in IR that largely focuses on ontological and epistemological issues. The reasons are as follows. First, no work, theoretical or empirical, is free of metatheoretical assumptions. The philosophical considerations behind the metatheoretical debate are the foundation of all IR theories as the understandings of ontology (the nature of *being*: what makes up the world) and epistemology (the nature of *knowledge*: how we produce knowledge concerning the world) determine what should be studied, why, and in what way (Reus-Smit, 2013; Wendt, 1998). In the matter of analysing state behaviour, the association of a theory with the explanatory role of material factors, or ideational factors, or both is derived from its ontological and epistemological positions (Hansen, 1997, 2006).

Moreover, relating to their role as the disciplinary foundation, these philosophical underpinnings, specifically epistemology, serve as the criteria for assessing the knowledge claims made by IR theories, and therefore the validity of knowledge produced by them (Reus-Smit, 2013; Smith, 1996). The validity of arguments of one IR school could meet considerable resistance, if not a categorical rejection, from another IR school with a different epistemological position. For instance, Keohane (1988: 379, 393), a well-known neoliberal institutionalist, criticised critical approaches, or in his words, 'a "reflective" approach', for lacking 'testable theories.'

Through engaging with the metatheoretical debate in IR (Lapid, 1989), this chapter provides the intellectual context for the thesis' post-structuralist approach and lays the groundwork for the re-conceptualisation of foreign policy in order to understand BRI in ways that go beyond mainstream accounts outlined in the previous chapter. This chapter finds out that post-positivism breaks with positivist commitments to follow in the

footsteps of natural sciences, that is, to become scientific, to be objective, and to discover laws. Instead, post-positivism seeks ontological diversity, advocates anti-foundationalism, and opposes metanarratives. Therefore, the chapter argues that post-positivism opens up thinking space for not only the ways in which the world can be observed but also the opportunity to explore different (other) worlds, otherwise ignored and suppressed, because of its non-conformity to positivists' scientific dream of aligning with natural sciences (George, 1989; Smith, 1996).

To present this argument, this section examines and compares the principles of positivism and post-positivism. It starts with the historical trajectory of positivism in IR and its key principles. This is followed by an analysis of the emergence of post-positivism and its principles.

2.1.1 Positivism in IR

Positivism has dominated sciences as part of the 18th-century Enlightenment project to understand humans and study the modern world in a 'scientific' way (George, 1989; Smith 1996). Its significance lies not in its methodological contribution but in its epistemological position that determines the ways in which valid knowledge is produced (Smith, 1996). This subsection begins with presenting a historical development of positivism so as to lay a foundation for the subsequent comparison with post-positivism in IR (subsection 2.1.2), and the illustration of the differences between rationalist and constructivist theories within the positivist tradition (subsection 2.2.1), and the deficiency of their explanatory frameworks (subsection 2.2.1). Then the section elaborates the principles of positivism in IR.

2.1.1.1 The Development of Positivism in IR

According to Steve Smith (1996), there are three variants of positivism connected by their foundationalist epistemology in the history of social sciences. The earliest version is method-based positivism, also known as naturalism, developed by Auguste Comte (Smith, 1996; Zammito, 2004). Progressing from theology and metaphysics, it aims to reveal laws and regularities that govern observable phenomena by applying the methods of natural sciences (Crotty, 1998; Hollis and Smith, 1990; Smith, 1996; Zammito, 2004). As Kurki (2006: 194) observes, 'most social scientists are still adamant that only careful observation of regularities (even if of "localised" regularities) can give us an adequate understanding of human action and society.'

The second one is logical positivism, emerging from the Vienna Circle, which recognises *only* the observable and contends that true knowledge *solely* comes from observations and experience (Crotty, 1998; Smith, 1996; Zammito, 2004). From this

perspective, knowledge must be in principle verified or falsified by experience. Things that transcend experience, such as theology, ethics, and aesthetics, are cognitively meaningless as they are 'merely expressions of preferences or feelings and emotions, but they are not knowledge' (Smith, 1996: 14). Simply, experience is the arbiter of the true form of knowledge.

The most relevant and influential to IR is the third variant. It promotes a deductive logic and insists that scientific knowledge only derives from either empirical verification/falsification or analytical deduction (Smith, 1996). It explores causality among the observed and maintains that neutral observation can be achieved because of the existence of a clear separation between the observer/researcher and the observed/researched (Smith, 1996).

When it applies to IR, positivism has been treated in three different ways – as an epistemology, as a method, and as behaviouralism (Smith, 1996). When positivism is treated as an epistemology, it is essentially seen as the same as empiricism, declaring that knowledge about the world can only be generated through experience; when viewed as a method, it refers to a set of rules and procedures dictating actual research practices, generally associated with natural sciences; when equated with behaviouralism, positivism retreats into a quantitative-centred research strategy, dismissing the unquantifiable such as human perceptions and motivations (Smith, 1996).

Among these three usages, positivism-as-epistemology has dominated IR studies due to the conflation of positivism and empiricism (Smith, 1996). These usages overlap in many enquiries, but must be distinguished from each other. The conflation of the two may risk imposing the narrowly defined ontological claims of empiricism upon positivism (Smith, 1996). For instance, empiricism argues that statements are meaningful only on condition that they are confirmed by direct observation (Nicholson, 1996). However, moving further than empiricism that only approves of the function of observation and sensory experience in validating knowledge (truth by correspondence), positivism in IR contends that both the validation and the falsification of knowledge can be done through a direct sensory experience or 'logical deduction from those which are so confirmed' (Nicholson, 1996: 133).

2.1.1.2 The Principles of Positivism in IR

Firstly, it is a scholarly conviction among positivists that IR can be as 'scientific' as the natural sciences on the condition that the former is patterned upon the latter (Jackson and Sørensen, 2013; Neufeld, 1995). Being scientific means to utilise verifiable methods borrowed from natural sciences to increase the 'sophistication, precision, parsimony, and predictive and explanatory power' (Jackson and Sørensen, 2013: 233) of social sciences on a cumulative basis. It means that the task of social sciences is to 'report on a world that is external to our theories … and thereby explain the social world in much

the same way as a natural scientist might explain the physical world' (Smith, 1997: 167). This principle is ingrained in a belief that no fundamental differences between natural and social sciences exist, or at least, their differences could be bridged by the same scientific methods (Neufeld, 1995; Nicholson, 1996; Smith, 1996). Simply put, positivism believes in the unity of sciences and embraces 'a naturalistic monism' (Ruggie, 1998: 859).

  Secondly, positivists insist on the principle of objectivity, declaring that there exists a world 'out there' which can be observed and described objectively, and that these observations and descriptions can be vindicated and invalidated by testing whether or not they correspond to facts (Campbell, 2013; Neufeld, 1995; Nicholson, 1996; Smith, 1996). This principle has three interrelated assumptions. First, discourse that is used to describe the world 'out there' is neutral, objective, and without any presuppositions, and its veracity lies in the external world (Ashley, 1984). Second, there is a distinction between facts (what it is) and norms (what it ought to be), with the former being neutral (Smith, 1997). Otherwise, truth by correspondence to an empirically and objectively observable social world would never happen. The third assumption is foundationalism, an epistemological view of knowledge production. A foundationalist position echoes the claim of a world 'out there' by IR positivists. It is a claim, quite opposite to anti-foundationalism presented in the following subsection, of the existence of an Archimedean point outside of the social world upon which objective observation, description, and judgments can be made, or in Smith's (1997: 167) words, 'all truth claims … can be judged true or false.' This Archimedean point, or simply a foundation, could be experience, reason, or a combination of both (Blackburn, 2005).

  Third, building on the unity of science and the principle of objectivity, positivists are convinced of 'the existence of regularities' (Smith, 1996: 16; 1997) in the social world. That is to say, IR theorists are obliged to discover laws and regularities governing international relations. These laws are built upon and evaluated by reason, multiple observation, experience, and subject to falsification (Morgenthau, c1997; Nicholson, 1996) and could be employed to predict the future (Ashley, 1984; Gaddis, 1992/93). Morgenthau (c1997: 18, 25) rails against, for instance, the failure of early IR studies to 'detect and understand the forces which determine political relations among nations' and insists that IR should aim to 'divorce knowledge from action and … pursue knowledge for its own sake.' This principle also licenses both deductive and inductive methods (Smith, 1996) and allows, to some extent, the unobservable in research (Nicholson, 1996).

  To sum up, positivism in IR has three principles: to become scientific, to be objective, and to discover (universal) laws. These principles have kindled a strong tendency in IR to be closer to the discipline of economics (Waltz, c1979) regarding subjects of inquiry (ontological homogeneity), perspectives from which the world is observed (epistemological similarity), and methods with which research is conducted (methodological resemblance). Consequently, IR positivists insist on the possibility and

validity of a parsimonious truth and the objective observation and description of the social world.

2.1.2 Post-positivism in IR

Post-positivism is an umbrella term and represents 'a loosely framed and evolving set of attitudes toward theory and practice' (George, 1989: 270). What unites these miscellaneous approaches together is their dissatisfaction with and challenges to the philosophical foundations of established positivist traditions. Simply, as the critique of positivism, post-positivists endorse 'the disappearance of the *grounds* of knowledge' (Brown, 1994: 215, emphasis in original). This subsection addresses two main issues. The first issue concerns the emergence of post-positivism which could be of help in understanding the diversity and complexity of post-positivist approaches. The second issue is about the principles of post-positivism.

2.1.2.1 The Emergence of Post-positivism in IR

Out of many and complex reasons for the development of post-positivism, there are two worth noting. The first reason largely relates to the new developments of social sciences that challenge the underlying philosophical assumptions of orthodox approaches and cause a 'crisis' of modernity (Brown, 1994; Der Derian, 1988; George, 1989). These developments are often associated with three intellectual lineages: critical theory that emphasises emancipation and resistance to domination by Frankfurt School scholars, the postmodern tradition that questions all grand and totalising metanarrative by Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida, and the linguistic turn in philosophy by Wittgenstein (Ashley, 1984; Balzacq and Baele, 2014; George, 1989).

Upholding the banner of anti-Renaissance and anti-Enlightenment, these developments speak 'the language of exile' (Ashley and Walker, 1990a: 259) and question 'the intellectual imperialism of the modern, post-Cartesian "scientific" approach to knowledge and society' (George, 1989: 270). For instance, they insistently make inquiries into its foundational unities such as sovereign states, and dichotomies such as self/other, domestic/international, inside/outside and culture/material, which are embedded in positivist theories (Ashley and Walker, 1990a; Der Derian, 1988; George, 1989; George and Campbell, 1990). In short, these new developments represent a thorough reappraisal of traditional positivist benchmarks for our understanding of contemporary world politics, jettison metanarratives, and cast doubt upon the ways in which modern narratives are given in theoretical traditions (George, 1989).

The second reason is closely linked with the end of the Cold War and the prevalence of globalisation. Traditional positivist IR approaches, especially neorealism, were

challenged by the Cold War ending: a rising scepticism of their explanatory power regarding the unexpected and relatively peaceful ending and associated issues, and a growing discontent with their hegemonic 'gatekeeper' status in the discipline (Monteiro and Ruby, 2009; Smith, 1997; Sørensen, 1998). Moreover, with ongoing globalisation, significant changes in the international agenda are taking place. Globalisation, broadly defined, has blurred the physical and temporal boundaries of sites where modern global life is occurring, and accentuated the role of such factors as non-state actors, social forces, materials, non-human, and cross-border transactions (Ashley and Walker, 1990a; Smith, 1997; Sørensen, 1998). In this 'new' world, '[o]bjective reality is displaced by textuality, modes of production are supplanted by modes of information,' Der Derian (1988: 189) argues, '[and] representation gives way to simulation.' In other words, the fixation of time and space becomes more difficult. As Ashley and Walker (1990a: 261) put it, 'a homogeneous territory in which categories are fixed, values are stable, and common-sense meanings are sure' is highly unlikely if not impossible. Put simply, this is a complex world.

2.1.2.2 The Principles of Post-positivism in IR

To challenge positivism, post-positivism positions itself differently in three aspects. First, different from positivism, post-positivism pursues an ontological diversity with an emphasis on a discursive ontology, and a critical methodological pluralism (Biersteker, 1989; Lapid, 1989). Post-positivism persistently enquires into underlying premises and assumptions, purposefully problematising taken-for-granted concepts and casting doubt upon traditional ways with which we observe and know the world (George, 1989; Lapid, 1989). Its goal is to critically understand world politics in which such issues as the political, power/knowledge nexus, emancipation, and gender loom large (Jackson and Sørensen, 2013). By critical, it means to unmask power, free the oppressive, challenge the dominant and empower the marginalised (Biersteker, 1989; Lapid, 1989).

  Second, post-positivism brings to the fore anti-foundationalist epistemology (George, 1989; Hansen, 2006). Post-positivist anti-foundationalist argument explicitly negates the foundationalist claims of positivism, such as a complete and clear separation of subjects and objects, or the researcher and the researched (Brown, 1994; George, 1989; Lapid, 1989). Put differently, positivism argues for an objective observation of the world *out there*, but post-positivism regards itself as part and parcel of the world *in the making* (Sørensen, 1998). More importantly, it criticises positivists' effort to search for a foundation, or a neutral ground, upon which objective and (usually) universal laws, regularities, generalisations, and truths are produced and against which they are validated or falsified (Brown, 1994; George, 1989; Lapid, 1989). Anti-foundationalists insist that subjects and objects are not freestanding in this socially constructed world (Jackson and Sørensen, 2013).

Third, following the logic of anti-foundationalism, post-positivists are also sceptical about metanarratives which refer to overarching or master stories such as modernism and development (Sørensen, 1998). While metanarratives, similar to universal laws and regularities sought by positivists, is built on the foundationalist idea that all truth claims can be validated and falsified by being set against neutral grounds, post-positivism thinks not because there are no objective grounds of knowledge. Given that, post-positivism is severely critical of universal truth claims and objectivity embedded in positivism. It resists the concept of knowing in the modern sense which is defined as 'to "know" is to construct a coherent representation that excludes contesting interpretations and controls meaning from the standpoint of a sovereign subject whose word is the origin of truth beyond doubt' (Ashley and Walker, 1990a: 261). Rather, post-positivism advocates 'theory *as* practice' (George, 1994: 2, emphasis in original), the inseparability between theorists and the world they study. Therefore, post-positivism opposes metanarratives but prefers localised narratives.

To sum up, this part has concentrated on two issues – the intellectual history of positivism and post-positivism, and their core principles. Positivism has dominated the IR discipline. It argues that the study of international relations can and should be modelled on natural sciences as the world 'out there' can be objectively described and universal laws can be identified with reference to facts and verified methods. On the contrary, post-positivism in IR advances ontological pluralism and anti-foundationalist epistemology. Therefore, it not only rejects the belief of the unity of sciences embedded in positivism, but also opens more means to explain and understand this complex world. This comparison between positivism and post-positivism provides a context for a better understanding of differences between IR theories and, by extension, the choice of an assemblage-based post-structuralist approach to foreign policy. The next section will focus on these middle-range theories under positivism and post-positivism.

2.2 Theorising Foreign Policy

Foreign policy is usually framed within the discourse of national interest, because 'interest' mobilises the support for and legitimises a particular policy by appealing to the public that actions to be taken can preserve, if not always extend, their national interest (Hansen, 2006; Weldes, 1996, 1999). As Morgenthau (c1997: 5) and his fellow realists argue, national interest is 'the main signpost' that guides the international behaviour of states in international politics. It provides a lens for policymakers to perceive the world, understand their goals (Weldes, 1996, 1999), and act accordingly. 'The internal language of decision is', Hollis and Smith (1990: 166) argue, 'the language of national interest.' Given that, the concept of interest is an important vantage point from which foreign policy is explained and/or understood.

Then the following questions are whose interests, what interests, for what purposes, and what defines them. The answers to these questions constitute the core of this section. Positivist theories are diverse regarding what defines national interest, either (pre-)determined or constructed by structure, power, and/or ideas, due to their different conceptualisations of what makes up the world. But they stand together in terms of how valid knowledge is produced, that is, a foundationalist epistemology. In this case, foreign policy is an outcome, resulting from the calculation of national interest, and both exist in a causal relationship. On the other hand, post-positivist theories question the national interest itself and argue for a co-constitutive relationship between foreign policy and interest.

This chapter investigates neorealism, neoliberal institutionalism, conventional constructivism, and post-structuralism. Its ultimate goal is to justify an assemblage-based post-structuralist approach to foreign policy with reference to power and identity. Why are these four theories chosen in this order? As already argued in the previous section, metatheoretical considerations are the root causes of the differences among IR theories. Therefore, these four theories together demonstrate the gradual expansion of IR study in terms of the subject of inquiry (ontology) and the ways in which valid knowledge is produced (epistemology). They illustrate, in other words, the evolution of positivist and post-positivist approaches in IR. The other reason is that neorealism and, to a lesser degree, neoliberalism are theoretical thinking behind the strategic thinking of BRI as demonstrated in Chapter One.

To do so, this section starts with a rationalist approach which includes neorealism and neoliberalism. This rationalist approach focuses on the concept of power, largely defined in material terms, but downplays, if not completely ignores, the role of identity in foreign policymaking. Meanwhile, it regards interest as a fixed exogenous given and tends to have ahistorical views. This is followed by a constructivist approach which focuses on the social construction of identity and argues for a constitutive relationship between identity and foreign policy. But the problem is its foundationalist epistemology which still emphasises a causal relationship over a constitutive relationship, and holds the concept of corporate identity. The final subsection focuses on the problem of knowledge. It argues that the assemblage-based post-structuralism is the most suitable approach to investigate the emergence and contingency of foreign policy as it advocates for the disappearance of a foundation and focuses on the possibility conditions, both human and non-human, with reference to productive power.

2.2.1 The Problem of Power

In this thesis, neorealism and neoliberal institutionalism are categorised as a rationalist approach due to their acceptance of rationality (Keohane, 1988). Rationality denotes behaviour that is appropriate to specified goals in a given milieu and can be assessed

objectively (Allison, 1971; Keohane, 1988; Simon, 1985). Both theories also recognise the ordering principle of anarchy, states as primary unitary actors, and the significance of power understood broadly in material and coercive forms (Keohane, 1984, 1988; Wæver, 1996). In addition, both are committed to a narrowly materialist ontology and a foundationalist epistemology, even though their specific arguments are distinct, thus aiming at explaining state behaviour as scientifically as possible (Keohane, 1988; Wæver, 1996). These philosophical underpinnings determine their conceptualisations of power, identity (or lack thereof), and interest, and their relationships.

First, as a key element in the rationalist approach, power is largely defined in material terms. It mainly derives from an anarchical international structure where the absence of a Leviathan leaves self-help the most tempting and 'rational' option (Rose, 1998; Waltz, c1979). Given the permanent and unchanging state of anarchy and a dominant logic of self-help, the surest way of ensuring their own survival is to increase their own power. Power is, therefore, naturally circumscribed to 'the distribution of [material] capacities' (Waltz, c1979: 192), economic and military in particular. Gilpin (1981: 13) argues straightforwardly that power 'refers simply to the military, economic, and technological capabilities of states.'

Power is habitually associated with realism. However, it is a mistake to regard power as an exclusive province of realism because the rationalist approach also includes neoliberalism. Neoliberal institutionalists take the material-based conceptualisation of power further by adding an institutional dimension (Barnett and Duvall, 2005). Power from this perspective works through mutually or universally accepted rules and procedures to 'guide, steer, and constrain' (Barnett and Duvell, 2005: 51) others' actions and/or nonactions. Given that the power mechanism typically rests on rules, norms, practices, and procedures, institutional power is less tangible and concrete than compulsory power (Barnett and Duvell, 2005). In short, power is understood in largely material and compulsory terms, with additional engagement with institutional power in neoliberalism.

Following the materialist logic, the second feature of power from a rationalist perspective is 'power over' (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 41). It is generally conceptualised, from a rationalist perspective, 'in terms of capabilities that are said to be distributed, possessed, and potentially used *among* states-as-actors' (Ashley, 1984: 244, emphasis in original). Power is, in other words, states' ability to employ material or institutional resources to compel others to do what they otherwise would not (Barnett and Duvall, 2005; Bălan, 2010; Manokha, 2011). These material or institutional capabilities 'are said to exist independent of the actors' knowing or will' (Ashley, 1984: 244) and represent a property of, '[a] possession, … [or] something owned by' (Bălan, 2010: 2) an agent or a structure (Manokha, 2011). Furthermore, power most often carries negative connotations, being conceptualised as 'observable repression, coercion or negation' (Manokha, 2011: 68). Overall, the rationalist conceptualisation of power, power as a possession defined in material terms, is a reductionist view (Manokha, 2011) and is

consistent with the positivist tradition that is embedded in a rationalist approach (Buzan, 1996).

Second, the role of identity is traditionally reduced to a minimum in a rationalist analysis of state policy. It is understandable that identity is the least important factor in most rationalist theories, particularly neorealism and neoliberalism, given their materialist ontology that concentrates on observable and measurable objects. Another reason for the minimal role of identity is that states are alike in their function and their internal properties such as political culture and system do not matter. Neorealists argue that states as unitary units are not functionally different, have the same goal (to survive) and act in the same way (to balance or to dominate) (Waltz, c1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). A billiard-ball metaphor is often drawn on by realists who argue that states are like billiard balls that constantly run into one another on a pool table (Hobson, 2000; Mearsheimer, 2001). Though neoliberal institutionalists find the pool-table part anachronistic and liken the system to networks or 'cobwebs' (Little, 1996: 67) which are increasingly populated by non-state actors and dominated by a complex array of issues (Buzan, 1996; Little, 1996), they still uphold the billiard-ball part as they insist that states are functionally undifferentiated.

In addition, states are also conceptualised as rational utility-maximisers with fixed and given interests. This particular conceptualisation is owing to anthropomorphism, the central feature of a rationalist approach. In *Theory of International Politics*, for instance, borrowing from microeconomic theories, Waltz (c1979) analogises states, anarchic structures, and power to firms, markets, and utility respectively. Neoliberals implicitly agree on this analogy as they almost fully accept the neorealist assumption of a rational actor model. Therefore, states in rationalists' world are simplified and modelled on homo economicus being stripped of everything but rationality and power and with a desire to maximise utility. Simply, states are 'centrally coordinated, purposive individuals' (Allison, 1971: 3) with fixed interests.

Accordingly, for rationalist theories, this anarchical international system has determined *a priori* the fundamental state interest – to survive in this self-help system – that is fixed and exogenously given. Put differently, interest from a rationalist perspective is persistent and predetermined. Thus, states' international behaviour and, by extension, their foreign policy options are similar and determined by the system-wide distribution of material capabilities only. Foreign policy, from this perspective, is nothing more than a rational calculation of costs and benefits with the sole purpose of survival.

2.2.2 Limitations of Rationalist Theories

There are three main problems pertaining to the rationalist theories of foreign policy. First, they have a materialist ontology that places emphasis on the observable and

measurable factors such as economy and military. Second, they regard national interest as a fixed and exogenously given. Third, their analysis tends to be ahistorical. This is why those rationalist theories conceptualise foreign policy as a final product, but not a process, and their analyses of foreign policy behaviour tend to focus on causality and problem-solving.

The first problem pertains to their narrow materialist ontology. In rationalist theories, neorealism and neoliberalism in particular, states are the most important, if not the sole, actors, together with the rising status of international institutions under the neoliberal institutionalist framework (Blyth, 2003; Milner, 1998). Naturally, such ideational factors as identity, political system, and ideology are largely undervalued by the rationalist approach. Moreover, this materialist ontology is related to ontological individualism, that is, world politics is eventually nothing more than complexes of individual states (conceptualised as rational unitary actors) and their interactions (Wendt, 1987, 1992). Thus, this narrow ontological commitment generates a restricted perception and understanding of states' foreign policy that is no more than a human calculation.

There are a few attempts to add more analytical sophistication within the rationalist approach. For instance, there have been constant efforts in bringing in domestic actors such as bureaucracies and interest groups because domestic politics is the medium for the effect of institutions on states (Garrett, 1998; Martin and Simmons, 1998; Milner, 1998). One of the most widely credited attempts is Goldstein and Keohane's (1993) proposal of a rationalist analytical framework on the role of ideas. They argue that three types of beliefs affect foreign policy through three causal pathways – road maps, focal points, and institutionalism (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993). However, like identity discussed in the previous subsection, other ideational factors such as norms, perceptions, and culture, are still underestimated in the rationalist approach and treated as derivative of the anarchical and/or institutional structure and subjected to the distribution of capabilities (Katzenstein, 1996b). These ideational factors operate with no independent explanatory power and are 'ultimately parasitic on a material base' (Checkel, 1998: 329).

The second problem concerns the rationalist assumption of interest that is fixed, homogeneous, and exogenously given. Rationalist theories often make a sweeping generalisation that states have the same set of interests and preferences (Milner, 1998). They put little thought into the specifics of national interests and preferences, and brush aside their nature being a social construct because states are conceptualised as like-units (Checkel, 1998). Put differently, the construction of national interests does not follow seamlessly or unproblematically from international structures and material power.

In addition, rationalists' concept of fixed interests leaves rationalists little analytical space for explaining and understanding political changes.[17] These fixed preferences and/or interests implied in neorealism and neoliberalism are responsible for the under-

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[17] Keohane (1988: 388) believes that 'rationalistic theory can help us understand the direction of change in world politics, if not always its precise extent or the form that it takes.'

study, if not a total ignorance, of an interactive process and potential changes involved in that process (Blyth, 2003). The lack of a dynamic view on identities and preferences also prevents neoliberals from taking into account the constitutive relationship between structures (such as normative, cultural structures) and agents (such as identities), namely, how social interaction among states is shaped by and, in turn, shapes the structure (Ba and Hoffmann, 2003). In short, the rationalist approach only treats the issue of war and peace among states as a single act resulting from the homogeneous interest of national survival that is derived from the anarchical pressure, profit calculations, and the estimation of the distribution of capabilities (Allison, 1971) rather than an on-going process where states interact with and adapt to their counterparts and structures of different types.

Furthermore, this supposition of fixed interests partly results in an ahistorical and non-normative analysis of foreign policy. The role of time is ignored (Gaddis, 1992/93). As a synchronic analysis (Shih, 2005), a rationalist analysis tends to set up fixed scenarios for state behaviour, brackets off historical contexts, and denies '*history as process*' and 'the historical significance of *practice*' (Ashley, 1984: 258, emphasis in original), which corresponds to its positivist foundational epistemology – seeking a scientific way to do research. Society would not, however, exist and history would 'be reduced to a perpetual recurrence of sameness, conflict and balancing' (Katzenstein, 1996b: 23) if states made decisions purely on pre-set standard scenarios. Instead, history is *a process of change* that leaves an imprint on state identity, and states should and have made decisions 'on the basis of probabilities' (Wendt, 1992: 404), deriving from who they are, what they do, and what contexts are.

In summary, rationalist theories have restrictive, ahistorical and non-normative views on world politics and find it hard to explain changes and processes in international politics, as they are committed to a materialist ontology and a foundationalist epistemology, aiming at solving why-questions. Dominated by rationalism and materialism, rationalist theories of foreign policy only treat ideational factors as auxiliaries, and foreign policy is simply a product of a series of problem-solving assessment and cost-benefits calculations for a set of fixed interests. Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner (1988: 646) summarise the logic of rationalist theories well, arguing 'if you have a puzzle, formulate it as a problem for rational actors with unproblematically specified interests, competing in a situation characterised by scarce resources.'

2.2.3 The Problem of Identity

Following rationalist theories, this chapter moves to the third positivist theory – conventional constructivism and investigates how it conceptualises the roles of power and identity in relation to foreign policy. As it is committed to a social ontology,

conventional constructivism argues that identity plays a significant role in shaping foreign policy through the construction of national interests and the logic of appropriateness.

Since Wendt's (1987) critical engagement with the structure-agent problematique, constructivism has gradually become prominent in IR. It addresses issues for which rationalist theories have yet to provide compelling answers (Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner, 1998; Wendt, 1987). As it continues borrowing from critical social theories, constructivism has also witnessed the development of different strands within (Hopf, 1998). This subsection only focuses on conventional constructivism, not critical constructivism, because the former advocates a social ontology and a foundationalist epistemology whilst the latter adopts the position of minimal foundationalism (Hopf, 1998). Put differently, although conventional constructivists challenge rationalists regarding their ontological understanding by committing to a social ontology and a social construction of the world, they still agree with rationalists on their foundationalist epistemology.

First, the concept of power is re-conceptualised by conventional constructivism and its social aspect is augmented. Similar to the conceptualisation of power in rationalist theories, power is still about power over, a property possessed by actors. But different from their definition, power in conventional constructivism is at least as much about ideational factors as it is about material elements (Katzenstein, 1996b). Meanwhile, the meaning of the material power remains to be socially constructed. For instance, for U.S. national security, the UK's nuclear weapons are understood as much less belligerent than the ones possessed by North Korea. In other words, the role of power in relation to foreign policy is manifested through nonmaterial factors like norms, identities, and culture as well as material ones like military and economy (Katzenstein, 1996b).

Second, in constructivism identity is re-conceptualised as an inter-subjective social construct and foregrounded in the analysis of foreign policy. From the perspective of conventional constructivism, identity is defined as an endogenous social construct rather than an exogenous given (Katzenstein, 1996b; Wendt, 1992). Identity formation undergoes a continuous political process of defining and redefining through self-other, or ego-alter, exchanges within specific historical and social contexts (Hopf, 1998; Katzenstein, 1996b; Wendt, 1992). In other words, the identity of a state is always produced in relation to that of the Other (Wendt, 1992). Here, the Other can be either other states or a distinct historical Self; meanwhile, the Other can be either negative (such as dangerous, opposing, and inferior) or positive (such as appealing and superior) (Hagström and Gustafsson, 2015; Hopf, 2002). And the Self includes me and I: 'me' is the part of subjectivity which is determined in relation to the Other, and 'I' is the part of subjectivity which is defined by pre-interaction features – material substrate and a desire to survive (Wendt, 1992).

Considering the prominence of the social dimension of power and identity, conventional constructivism conceives of two ways in which identity, power, and

foreign policy are connected. The first way is via the social construction of national interest. As Wendt (1992: 398) argues, 'identities are the basis of interest.' From the perspective of conventional constructivism, national interest is a social and inter-subjective construct produced by a process of interaction among states, rather than being a pre-existing entity to be discovered (Katzenstein, 1996b; Weldes, 1999; Wendt, 1992). It is 'created as a meaningful object, out of shared meanings through which the world, particularly the international system and the place of the state in it, is understood' (Weldes, 1999: 4). It is strongly influenced by changes in beliefs and identities of states as either top-down or bottom-up designs (Koslowski and Kratochwil, 1994; Wendt, 1999). As Mark Blyth (2003: 699) argues, 'interests develop from states' identities, with materialism playing second fiddle to meaning.' Simply put, interest is socially constructed rather than being determined *a priori*, and its contents are, to a large degree, decided by identity.

What is more, the power of identity in relation to foreign policy is also reflected through the logic of appropriateness. According to March and Olsen (2011: 478), '[a]ctors seek to fulfil the obligations encapsulated in a role, an identity, a membership in a political community or group, and the ethos, practices, and expectations of its institutions.' Therefore, states often align their foreign policies with their national identity conception rather than only considering the maximisation of their own material interests and the minimisation of costs to them (the logic of consequences) (Flockhart, 2012). In other words, situated in a system, or a society, of states and institutions, states act according to what they see as appropriate for their distinct identity that represents 'varying national ideologies of collective distinctiveness' (Katzenstein, 1996b: 6), and in a specific situation.

2.2.4 Limitations of a Constructivist Approach

Despite providing a corrective to the rationalist conceptualisations of power, identity, and interest in relation to foreign policy, conventional constructivism is still insufficient in terms of understanding the dynamic emergent process and, by extension, contingency of foreign policy. This thesis argues that the foundationalist epistemology of conventional constructivism is the very source of its problematic understanding of foreign policy. Therefore, a new theoretical perspective is needed to understand not only the constitutive role of non-traditional factors but more importantly, the ways in which foreign policy emerges through interactions of different elements.

Conventional constructivism remains to be committed to a foundationalist epistemology (Wendt, 1999). That is, constructivism explores ideational elements such as identity, norms, and culture, but still stays close with the principle of truth by correspondence, theory-testing methods, and the commitment to grafting scientific research methods in sciences to social sciences. Constructivists' foundationalist

standpoint is criticised by Hansen (2006: 4) as 'an epistemological rapprochement to rationalism' and demonstrates the hegemonic status of positivism in IR as Keohane (1988) famously criticised reflectivism for its failures to generalise its findings, execute a concrete research agenda, and understand the significance of causal hypotheses. However, the foundationalist epistemology has caused a few problems for conventional constructivism.

First, constructivists' epistemological commitment to foundationalism undermines their argument of a co-constitutive relationship between agents and structures because foundationalism argues for a complete separation of agents and structures. In other words, a causal, not constitutive, relationship between the two is emphasised in many constructivists' works, thus presenting either a structured-centred analysis or an agent-centred one (Checkel, 1998; Smith, 2000). For instance, when exploring the role of norms and identity in national security, Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein (1996: 66, emphasis in original) argued that they focused on 'how *structures* of constructed meaning, embodied in norms or identities, affect what states do.' Martha Finnemore (1996) did the same by solely concentrating on the ways in which international normative structures shape state interests and behaviour, but not the other way around.

The foundationalist epistemology embedded in conventional constructivism proclaims that truth claims could be (in-)validated by measuring them against the foundation, be it knowledge or experience, 'out there', thus implying foreign policy and its causes such as identity and power are separate entities. They are mostly in a causal relationship in which interests shaped by identity and power are usually causes and foreign policy is the result. Therefore, conventional constructivists such as Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), Hopf (1998), Katzenstein (1996a) and Wendt (1999) argue that ideational factors are the causes, whilst state behaviour and policies are results or effects. But causes and effects are never easily distinguished and separated (Zehfuss, 2003).

This problematic distinction between cause and effect can be understood from a problem/solution dichotomy. With respect to this point, Robert Cox (1981: 128) argues that the rationalist approach is a problem-solving approach which 'takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for action.' Instead of calling the existing order into question, it proceeds from that order and, consequently, limits its analyses within the order and, in an intended or unintended manner, sustains it (Cox, 1981). Cox's criticism against the rationalist approach regarding problem-solving is also relevant to a conventional constructivist framework since its conceptualisation of the social construction of the world, for instance, is more of giving meanings to the world 'out there'. Therefore, a constructivist analysis aims to, in essence, solve (a set of) problems by relying on ideational factors such as norms, culture, and identity, rather than material factors. In other words, all positivist theories, whether by analysing power politics, by bringing domestic bureaucracy back in or by resorting to belief systems, only tend to answer why-questions and leave how-possible-questions unaddressed (Doty,

1993). In this case, a constructivist approach still takes policy for granted and does not question where it is from and how it comes about or materialise.

Moreover, the constructivist conceptualisations of identity and its relations to foreign policies are problematic because identity is still assumed, to a certain degree, *a priori*. In other words, it is paradoxical that, whilst criticising rationalists for conceptualising identity, shown in the previous subsection, as exogenously given, conventional constructivists still take it for granted. They are silent about the process of identity construction. They tend to focus on the relationship between identity (fixed) and policy, but ignore the formulation of identity itself. In other words, identity becomes fixed/fixated. For instance, whilst acknowledging the social construction of identity, Wendt (1999) recognises and accepts the existence of pre-socialised or corporate identity. From the perspective of foundational epistemology, this corporate identity is the foundation of other identities. However, where does the corporate identity come from? What are the sources of these identities?

Overall, like rationalist theories, conventional constructivism is concerned about its foundationalist epistemology. In the case of foreign policy, positivist theories base their conceptualisation of foreign policy on the idea that foreign policy behaviour is determined by external forces. To be precise, positivist theories conceptualise foreign policy as a product of a teleological and linear process (to serve national interest) in which material, institutional, or ideational factors, depending on specific strands, take the centre stage. Accordingly, problem(s), be it power or identity, as the cause(s) and foreign policy as the effect are separate and distinct. Due to this particular dichotomous view of foreign policy and interest, positivist theories are less critical as they maintain and reproduce the status quo (Cox, 1981) and insufficient in addressing the question of probability and contingency that are always associated with mainstream theoretical analyses (Doty, 1993).

2.2.5 The Problem of Knowledge

As discussed in the first section, in the late 1980s, the voices of dissent, largely categorised as post-positivism, began to proliferate in IR literature in the late 1980s. There was a Critical Theory movement which criticises the current oppressive form of reason, liberates modern peoples from 'an understanding of their history, culture, and political power … appropriated by a dominant mode of knowledge (scientific rationality)' (George and Campbell, 1990: 278) and advances emancipation rather than power and order in the conduct of international affairs (Booth, 1991). There was a battle with masculine discourses, cultures and societies, aspiring to empower women and exploring gendered international politics (Cohn, 1987; Enloe, 2014). In addition, there was also a rising voice of radical interpretivism that faulted orthodox IR approaches on

their foundationalist perspective and their disciplinary hegemony (George and Campbell, 1990).

As shown in Section 2.1.2 on post-positivism, these unconventional voices, however, share commonalities in their critical analyses. First, voicing discontent with positivist IR theories for their predominant, but rather inadequate, understandings of the world and acquirement of knowledge, they dismiss positivists' foundationalist claim – an external and objective actuality, or an Archimedean point, against which knowledge claims can be validated (George and Campbell, 1990). Second, they make a discursive turn by highlighting the subjectivity of political science and the discursive representation of reality, and emphasise the conditions of possibility (George and Campbell, 1990).

This section concentrates on a post-structuralist approach to foreign policy. It begins with the presentation of key propositions of post-structuralism with a focus on the ways in which it challenges the monopoly of positivist theories in the study of international politics. Then, the section elaborates post-structuralists' conceptualisations of power and identity. Finally, it fleshes out the concept of foreign policy as an assemblage characterised by multiplicity, heterogeneity, and anti-essentialism. Overall, the section argues that the assemblage-based post-structuralist approach is the most suitable approach to explore the how-possible question raised in the thesis that emphasises contingency, reflexivity, and possibility conditions for the emergence of the subject of interest.

2.2.5.1 The Basics of Post-structuralism

Other than Foucault, Deleuze, and DeLanda from philosophy and social science, this thesis draws its understanding of post-structuralism from Carol Bacchi (1999, 2009), Natalie Bormann (2008), David Campbell (1992), and Lene Hansen (2006), because their works are applied studies of post-structuralism in (foreign) policy analysis. These works have asked how-possible questions in IR and applied many post-structuralist concepts such as genealogy, identity, power, and assemblage in relation to state behaviour, all of which are critical to this thesis. This subsection presents four key arguments that allow post-structuralism to be the most appropriate approach to explore how-possible questions. These arguments centre around the discursive ontology and anti-foundationalist epistemology.

First, sharing with other post-positivist theories, post-structuralism challenges the metatheoretical underpinnings, the epistemology in particular, of positivist theories. It criticises positivists' 'scientific' dream of teaming up with natural sciences in epistemology and even methodology, and rejects their claims to objectivism (Hansen, 1997). Its attitude toward their ontological commitments is complicated. Whilst categorically rejecting rationalists' materialist ontology, post-structuralism accepts, in principle, constructivists' social ontology with a further push to incorporate discourse

in a broader sense (Jackson and Sørensen, 2013). Thus, embracing an anti-foundational epistemology and espousing a discursive ontology, post-structuralism in IR proclaims that discourse is political and constitutes *the* world it is meant to make sense of and, by extension, it refutes the universal knowledge (Campbell, 2013).

 Second, post-structuralism criticises positivist IR theories for their 'analytical closure and reductionism' (George and Campbell, 1990: 282), historical obliviousness and uncritical conformity. Positivists' analytical closure is reflected upon the study of both International Relations and international relations. Since WWII, Anglo-American academics have tacitly agreed that there is 'only one form of knowledge (scientific rationalism), one methodology (deductivist empiricism), and one research orientation (problem-solving)' (George and Campbell, 1990: 282). This tacit agreement causes R. B. J. Walker's (1988) grave concerns with the monopoly of traditional approaches on the construction of *the* world and their negligence of many *other* worlds. The world that neorealist and neoliberal IR theories have described and conventional constructivism has seen as constructed needs to be exposed and criticised because the state-centric logic of the former precludes a variety of analytical dimensions such as gender, identity, and discourse, and the positivist perspective of the latter abandons a historically sensitive analysis (Hansen, 1997; Jackson and Sørensen, 2013). The world that positivist IR theories claim to explain and understand is not, according to post-structuralism, *the* world as it is but *a* world they (re)construct, and their claims and assumptions are 'theoretical and political demarcations of what constitutes reality and knowledge' (Hansen, 1997: 372).

 Third, discourse is of utmost importance for a post-structuralist analysis. Discourse plays a critical role, though it is not only in the form of language. In other words, discourse is not reducible to linguistic entities such as language, signs, or signifiers; rather, it also includes social practices, technological objects, and bodily procedures (Bonditti, et al., 2015). Discourse from a post-structuralist perspective stops being a mere means of communication, reflecting, and describing a world; instead, it gives meaning to a world and is constitutive of the social construction of that world (George and Campbell, 1990). In light of this constitutive role, discourse serves as an instrument of power that includes and privileges certain understandings of the world whilst excluding and marginalising others (George and Campbell, 1990). By doing so, discourse as *practices* rather than as signs or symbols 'systematically forms social subjects and the objects of which they speak' (George and Campbell, 1990: 285). As George and Campbell (1990: 285, emphasis in original) point out, '[discourse] is as much *the object of analysis* as the tool for analysis.' In short, discourse gives lives, that is, produces subjects.

 Fourth, closely related to its emphasis on discourse, post-structuralism facilitates the understanding of the contingency of and the conditions of possibility for the subject of inquiry. Post-structuralism posits that no social realities exist out of the discursive context and the representation(s) of the subject of inquiry shall be foregrounded (Dunn, 2008). Representation explores how that subject of inquiry has been represented

temporally and spatially (Dunn, 2008). 'Discursively produce[d], circulate[d] and consume[d]' (Dunn, 2008: 79), representations are historically and contextually contingent and provide regimes of truth instead of universal causal explanations. Put simply, discursive representations specify 'the bandwidth of possible outcomes' (Neumann, 2008: 62) rather than determine the outcome. Moreover, representations are not objective but bear political implications. They create the conditions of possibility that allow/include certain actions and, at the same time, forbid/exclude others. For post-structuralism, certain meanings and identities are widely accepted as unproblematic, not because of any inherent truths in them, but because of the ways in which they are represented (Dunn, 2008). In Dunn's (2008: 80) words, discursive representations are the sources that 'enable actors to "know" the object and to act upon what they "know".' It is worthwhile, therefore, to enquire how certain representations become dominant and accepted (Dunn, 2008).

2.2.5.2 Identity, Productive Power, and Foreign Policy

To further elaborate post-structuralism in IR and its difference from positivist theories, this subsection turns to the concepts of identity and power, already discussed above from the positivist perspective, and explores the ways in which they are conceptualised in relation to foreign policy.

From a post-structuralist perspective, identity is not simply a factor, as understood by liberal institutionalists (Goldstein and Keohane, 1993) and conventional constructivists (Katzenstein, 1996a, 1996b), which is distinctly separated from and influences state behaviour. It does not have a linear, causal relationship with foreign policy (Hansen, 2006). Instead, identity is part and parcel of a practice, a representational process that is imbued with 'tactics and strategies' (Shapiro, 1988: 93) of power and constitutes states and their behaviour. It is conceptualised as an endogenous discursive representation that is always ongoing, social, and political, rather than an exogenous, unitary given. In short, identity is discursive, social, relational, and political (Hansen, 2006).

These different, but interconnected, aspects of identity could be understood with reference to the concept of self-other dynamic. Like conventional constructivists' idea discussed in the previous section, the self-other dynamic from the post-structuralist perspective remains the fundamental mechanism of identity formation because the Self is always produced in relation to 'something it is not' (Hansen, 2006: 6). But unlike conventional constructivism, which focuses on the impact of an identity, already determined, with reference to causality (Wendt, 1998), post-structuralism emphasises co-constitution and embeds the self-other interaction into the analysis of foreign policy.

The self-other dynamic is enabled through discursive constructions and representations (Hansen, 2006). Meanwhile, the production of the Self is, in Campbell's (1992: 105) words, 'secured by the effective and continual ideological demarcation of

those who are "false" to the defining ideals.' In other words, the Self is produced and reproduced through constantly differentiating itself from, contrasting, comparing and/or building itself together with the representation of the other. Simply, identity is not a 'private' (Williams and Neumann, 2000: 363) representation, but discursive and relational.

Moreover, the self-other dynamic requires a continuous process of linking (with the other) and differentiating (from the other) (Hansen, 2006). In this ongoing process, a privileged sign and a devalued sign are juxtaposed, and the self is always linked to the privileged one, whilst the other is largely associated with the devalued one (Ashley and Walker, 1990a; Hagström and Gustafsson, 2015). In addition, this constant linking and differentiating also means that some discourses are included and promoted while others are simultaneously excluded and silenced (Hansen, 2006). Thus, identity is social and political.

Furthermore, this continuous self-other interaction through linking and differentiating implies 'the possibility for destabilisation' (Hansen, 2006: 18), which means the existing chain can be broken, reorganised and relinked to other signs. Therefore, no essence shall be attributed to agents, which is different from the constructivist idea of corporate identity that refers to 'the intrinsic, self-organising qualities that constitute actor individuality' (Wendt, 1994: 385). Instead, identity is 'an *effect* to be explained, not assumed' (Devetak, 2005: 166, emphasis in original). Simply, identity has no essence.

Given this conceptualisation of identity, post-structuralism argues that (the representations of) identity and foreign policy form a co-constitutive relationship in which the former serves as a condition of possibility for the latter, and the latter produces and reproduces the former (Hansen, 2006). First, identity affects foreign policy behaviours through its discursive/productive power, that is, to produce a particular type of 'subject' that constitutes the state in particular ways. In other words, these discursive representations have the power to set boundaries for an imagined Self, constraining what can be thought and done (Herman, 1996). In terms of foreign policy, the state identity based on these discursive representations frame possibilities, set rules, and create meanings for policy options within which some are deliberated and accepted as legitimate while others are blocked as illegitimate. In short, foreign policy is made possible and meaningful by state identity.

Second, their co-constitutive relationship is reflected in the production of identity through foreign policy. As argued earlier, the identity formation characterised by the self-other dynamic is a continuous and political process in which the Self is defined and redefined against the Other within specific historical and social contexts (Hansen, 2006). It never stops and is in a constant process of construction, maintenance, and transformation (Ashley and Walker, 1990; Williams and Neumann, 2000). This on-going process implies that identity needs to be substantiated through actual practices, or continually reproduced over time through discourses and actions (Williams and Neumann, 2000).

As demonstrated above, the post-structuralist conceptualisation of identity and its relations with foreign policy are closely associated with the other concept, power. The rest of this subsection elaborates on the post-structuralist conceptualisation of power and explores how post-structuralists understand the role of power in the analysis of foreign policy. Post-structuralism rejects the very idea of hidden truth suppressed by power and dismisses attempts to secure emancipation and empowerment through unmasking power, reducing oppression, and freeing ideological assumptions (George and Campbell, 1990). Instead, it concentrates on the way that power is utilised, in other words, the specific conditions of possibility created by power, but 'looks for no distinction between truth and power, for it expects none' (George and Campbell, 1990: 281). Given that, power from a post-structuralist perspective is *productive, relational,* and *everywhere.*

First, power is productive of practices and subjects. In this regard, power enables, legitimises, and generates practices that are in compliance with 'the dominant standard of normality or acceptability' (Manokha, 2011: 68), thus eventually (re-)producing different types of subjects (Bălan, 2010; Rouse, 2005). Put differently, a post-structuralist conception of power rids of the habitual connotation of a sole negative and suppressive nature of power that relates solely to coercion and destruction (Bălan, 2010; Rouse, 2005). It '*mediate[s]* the dominant view of what constitutes normality or deviance' (Manokha, 2011: 68, emphasis in original), and it promotes, facilitates, generates as well as supresses, restrains, and silences. As Foucault's (1977a: 194) argues, '[w]e must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it "excludes", it "represses", it "censors", it "abstracts", it "masks", it "conceals". In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth".' In short, power is no longer 'power over' but 'power to' (Barnett and Duvall, 2005: 44).

Second, a post-structuralist view of power is no longer a reductionist one that regards power as a property possessed or a capacity exercised by agents/states (Bălan, 2010; Manokha, 2011; Rouse, 2005). Foucault (1978: 94) insists that 'power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away.' Power in this sense constitutes social processes and is subjected to the practices of actors rather than a quality of actors *per se* (Barnett and Duvell, 2005). It is not limited or confined to the production of effects, an attribute of actor; rather it is as well about social relations, a process that highlights and manifests power mechanisms between or among agents (Bălan, 2010). 'This means that power may be exercised not only over others but also over oneself, a situation in which the subject transforms themselves into an object of power and adopts forms of behaviour that are expected by the prevailing discourse and truth configurations' (Manokha, 2011: 68). In short, power is relational.

Third, 'power is everywhere … because it comes from everywhere' (Foucault, 1978: 93). As Jennifer Gore (1995: 182) argues, '… no site was free of power relations and no site "escaped" the use of techniques of power.' Power is diffused in society and concerned with systems of signification and meaning (Barnett and Duvell, 2005: 55). By the same

logic, Foucault's idea of power challenges the traditional conception of knowledge as a neutral instrument through which the world is explained and understood, or in Rouse's (2005: 99) words, 'more thoroughly knowable or known.' Put differently, knowledge is power. According to Dunn (2008: 80, emphasis in original), '[p]ower is the *practice* of knowledge as a socially constructed system, within which various actors articulate and circulate their representations of "truth".' No knowledge and, by extension, truths in the form of so-called objective and neutral knowledge, are 'outside of networks of power relations' (Rouse, 2005: 102, emphasis in original).

To sum up, even though post-structuralism does not provide substantive hypotheses on state behaviour such as the realist concept of balance of power/threat (Walt, 1985; Waltz, c1979) as many positivist theories do, post-structuralism remains the most appropriate approach to engage with the puzzle and questions raised by the thesis.

First, post-structuralism inherits the critical ethos of post-positivism by embracing a discursive ontology and, most importantly, anti-foundationalist epistemology. Its critical spirit allows it to broaden the base of the subjects of inquiry, searching for the 'left-behind', the marginalised, and the excluded, eventually for a more complete explanation and/or understanding of this complex world.

Second, largely due to its anti-foundationalist epistemology, post-structuralism stops chasing the 'scientific' way provided by positivists to explain and understand the world 'out there'. Instead, it turns to a more reflective way to understand the world where post-structuralism itself is embedded and constituted. It foregrounds the dynamic process and the ways in which the world is socially and discursively represented. In other words, the critical ethos of post-structuralism requires a reflective approach to the subject of inquiry, simply, to de-familiarise the familiar by exploring the power relations embedded in it.

Third, the concept of power is the utmost critical concept to analyse foreign policy. Power is productive, relational, and everywhere. It is an anchor concept upon which other elements such as identity and discourse all rely. Meanwhile, from a post-structuralist perspective, foreign policy is a dynamic process rather than a mere product. This aspect of post-structuralism also speaks back to the how-possible question raised by the thesis that is, in essence, a question of power as it explores the way in which power works to constitute particular possibility conditions, be they conceptual framework, mode of thinking or subjectivity, that render the subject of inquiry possible.

2.2.5.3 Policy Assemblage

As shown above, the post-structuralist conceptualisations of identity as a becoming and power being productive turn analysts' eyes to a dynamic process of foreign policy practices and their constitutive roles in it. But the question remains – what is foreign

policy? This subsection turns to the definition of foreign policy in this thesis and provides a conceptual framework to analyse it.

Traditionally, foreign policy is conceptualised as a '*set of goals, directives or intentions*, formulated by *persons* in official or authoritative positions, *directed at* some actor or condition in the environment beyond the sovereign nation state, for the *purpose* of affecting the target in the manner desired by the policy-makers' (Cohen and Harris, 1975: 3831, emphasis added; quoted from Gustavsson, 1999: 75). However, this traditional theorisation of foreign policy and, by extension, foreign policy analysis, are problematic from a post-structuralist perspective and insufficient in carrying out this research that is based on a how-possible question.

First, as a set of intentions to affect the behaviour of other states, foreign policy from this perspective is regarded as a result, a finished product, from a rationalist process. Thus, policy analysis often focuses on the rationality of human and human-like actors (politicians and bureaucracies), or in other words, argues that policymaking is largely an anthropocentric activity (human participants). Even with constructivist's social ontology, the analysis of foreign policy based on this traditional definition is not critical enough as it would be reduced to a human rational choice. But the world is cohabited by humans and non-humans and effected by both and their interactions. Second, another approach to foreign policy analysis gives prominence to policy practices or process, and acknowledges the 'complexity, ambiguity, and contradictions' (Ureta, 2014: 304) associated with policymaking. This process-oriented perspective still, however, underestimates the issue of contingency that often accompanies policymaking, falls back to the logic of teleology and concludes that even complex processes 'are *best* understood through intelligent disaggregation into their components parts. These parts should then be apprehended – and any problematic aspects of them resolved instrumentally – in piecemeal fashion' (Dryzek, 1994: 6, emphasis in original). Third, the linear logic of problem-solving implied in this traditional definition connotes that there is a distinct separation between foreign policy and what it is designed to serve or affect (or what problems it aims to solve). As demonstrated in the discussion of positivist and post-positivist theories, is foreign policy completely separated from the issue(s) or problem(s) it is designed to tackle? Or is it part of a process that (re-)generates the same issue(s) and problem(s)?

To deal with these issues, the thesis keeps a distance from the positivist conceptualisation of policy, an end product of a rational and teleological process. Instead, it follows a post-structuralist perspective and defines foreign policy as an assemblage. As Ureta (2015: 11) argues, '[foreign] policies as always existing in the form of assemblages.' The notion of assemblage has been applied widely in studying contemporary issues, events, phenomena, and policies in various ways. A few examples bring home the diversity of assemblage literature. For instance, Pauline McGuirk (2011) employs 'assemblage' to investigate a particular conjuncture through which climate change is problematised in Australia; Christian Bueger (2018) uses it to enquire into the

international efforts to fight against piracy off the coast of Somalia; and Christopher Bear (2017) tries to reconceptualise the Blue Economy by assembling blue economic practices and policies. Many other issues that are interrogated from the perspective of assemblage thinking are: Buruli ulcer treatment in Ghana (Hausermann, 2015), forest management (Li T. M., 2007), global assemblages (Ong and Collier, 2005), human security (Voelkner, 2011), and IR assemblages (Acuto and Curtis, 2014a, 2014b).

The rudiments of the concept of assemblage are the same – the processes of putting together diverse elements – and are always credited to Deleuze and Guattari (1987), despite the various ways in which it is applied, either as a conceptual idea or as a new research technique. Thus, assemblage, according to Deleuze and Parnet (1977: 69), 'is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them ... Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a "sympathy". It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind.'

From this perspective, foreign policy is an on-going assembling practice that includes and simultaneously excludes various elements. In other words, foreign policy as assemblage is a complex human and non-human, material and ideational system 'made up of multi-faceted interactions between component parts, which interact to produce broader traits or characteristics that are of relevance to thinking about contemporary social problems' (Savage, 2018: 309). The rest of this subsection concentrates on the conceptual commitments and characteristics of assemblage and how these attributes – multiplicity, heterogeneity, and anti-essentialism – contribute to the study of foreign policy.

Multiplicity

An assemblage is, first, a multiplicity. It is neither a unity, nor a part, nor a whole, nor a totality (Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; Bueger, 2014; Nail, 2017). To understand the notion of multiplicity, we need to know what unity means first. A unity is 'an organic whole' (Nail, 2017: 22) defined by the intrinsic relations that put all parts together as a whole. Originating in an organismic metaphor in which a society is compared to a human body (DeLanda, 2006), a parallel has been drawn between a unity and a live body, and between its parts and its organs (Nail, 2017). Bodily organs with their individual function work together for the harmony of the body. In unity, the relations between parts and wholes are determined *a priori*, meaning '[t]he unity of an organic whole is given in advance of the emergence of the parts and subordinates the parts to an organising principle or spirit' (Nail, 2017: 23). The differences existing among these components are, according to Anderson and McFarlane (2011: 125), 'subsumed into a higher unity.' Just as an organ without a body dies, a part separated from a whole ceases to be what it is, because '*relations of interiority … [that are] … logically necessary …* make the whole what

it is' (DeLanda, 2006: 9; 11, emphasis in original), meaning, the very relations of a part with other parts constitute what it is. As Nail (2017: 23) argues, 'unities do not allow for the possible emancipation of recombination of their parts without destroying themselves in the process.'

In contrast to unity, assemblage as a multiplicity is composed of parts 'which are self-subsistent and articulated by *relations of exteriority*, so that a part may be detached and made a component of another assemblage' (DeLanda, 2006: 18, emphasis added). The relations of these elements could be 'only *contingently obligatory*' (DeLanda, 2006: 11, emphasis in original). Put differently, these relations are neither predetermined nor unvarying. More specifically, the elements comprising an assemblage could be 'added, subtracted, and recombined with one another *ad infinitum* without ever creating or destroying an organic unity' (Nail, 2017: 23). As Deleuze and Guattari (1994: 23) claim, an assemblage resembles 'a dry-stone wall', not a jigsaw puzzle, 'and everything holds together only along a diverging line.'

The fact that the elements of one assemblage can be detached and inserted into another suggests that assemblages are constructs generated by complex processes, to use DeLanda's (2016) language, a series of '(de)territorialising/(de)coding'. Territorialisation refers to the processes of homogenisation, increasing internal homogeneity or coherence to be specific, in which components stabilise the formation, in other words, the solidity of the form of an assemblage, thus 'strengthening and sharpening spatial and non-spatial boundaries' (Bueger, 2014: 64). Meanwhile, deterritorialisation indicates the opposite in which components destabilise, even transform, that particular formation, thus 'either destabilis[ing] spatial boundaries or increas[ing] internal heterogeneity' (DeLanda 2006: 13). The processes of territorialisation and deterritorialisation can co-function within an assemblage (DeLanda, 2006), and they characterise the formation of assemblages. Legg (2011: 129) puts it well that assemblages 'lead to order, striation, re-territorialisation, long-term effects and scaling as much as dis-order, smoothing, de-territorialisation, short-term effects and de-scaling.' In other words, this perspective examines not only emerging ordering, but also its 'decay and erosion' (Bueger, 2018: 615). Given that, the notion of assemblage is particularly suited to capture both continuity and change in foreign policymaking.

Heterogeneity

Secondly, assemblages consist of heterogeneous items that, in theory, can be anything – humans, animals, things, nature, technologies, culture, discourses, institutions, etc. (Bennett, 2005; Bueger, 2014) – or in Foucault's (1980: 194) words, 'the said as much as the unsaid.' An assembled world is, precisely, populated with human, non-human, material and ideational entities. Assemblage thinking, however, goes beyond just acknowledging the existence of non-human entities; it empowers them as well. On this account, the notion of assemblage diverges from the conventional theorisation of agency

that underrates the ontological diversity of *actants* by accrediting agency mainly to human subjects with rationality and intentions. As Bennett (2005: 455, emphasis in original) observes aptly, it seems that only social activities of *humans* register with social scientists, and '[t]he agency it [social science] examines, describes, or explains is normally confined to that exercised by *humans*, exercised directly in the case of individuals and indirectly in the case of collective practices, institutions, or rituals.' In short, non-human entities assume an independent agency.

As DeLanda (2006: 28, emphasis in original) notes, 'unlike taxonomic essentialism in which genus, species and individual are separate ontological categories, the ontology of assemblages is flat since it contains nothing but differently scaled *individual singularities* (or *haecceities*).' A flat ontology means that the ontological status of these human and non-human entities is non-hierarchical. Simply, assemblage thinking recognises the complexity of the world and associated cultural and social phenomena (Prince, 2010; Venn, 2006) and endows non-human elements with agency.

In the light of the broadened ontological remit under the assemblage thinking, foreign policy analysts shall give more attention to 'the more-than-rational, and indeed the more-than-human, nature of foreign policy' (Dittmer, 2017: 3). Foreign policy is not just about individual personality (statespersons), bureaucratic infighting (political systems and institutional interests), and/or invisible but present international pressures (an anarchical structure), but also highly concerns the mundane life of the public and the non-human elements like nature and technology. The worldly activities of sayings and doings, for instance, in foreign policy analysis are worth attention because 'realities are enacted, relations are built and ordering takes place' (Bueger, 2014: 65) by these mundane pursuits. In practice, assemblage thinking helps 'disassemble bordered thinking' (Legg, 2011: 128) by broadening the scope of data collection and requiring researchers to, at least try to, be unbiased to non-humans in data analysis, and be mindful of the vitality of non-human entities.

Anti-essentialism

Following the heterogeneous nature of assemblage, assemblage thinking rejects the existence of essentialism, because an assemblage has no essence, or in Nail's (2017: 24) words, 'eternally necessary defining features.' According to DeLanda (2006), essentialism is the main weapon of social scientists to fight against realism. The essence of a thing is the intrinsic and mind-independent nature or a group of enduring properties of something that determines what that thing is. As Nail (2017: 23) notes, 'what it is about a thing that makes it what it is such that it is not something else, which endures despite all its unessential aspects.' Accordingly, an essentialist approach is a three-step analysis: it begins with a presupposition of finished products, then identifies enduring features that characterise those products, and finally posits them as an essence – eternal, essential, and defining (DeLanda, 2006; Nail, 2017).

The essentialist thinking is not, however, unproblematic due to its association with reification. It tends to adopt concepts in an unreflective fashion and provide an analysis that reifies them when they are temporally and spatially situated. Quite the contrary, assemblage thinking rejects taking these concepts for granted; instead, it questions the conditions for the emergence of these concepts and related evolutionary processes and seeks to understand how they become accepted as a natural category of thought, that is, how certain ideas and notions become common sense. Assemblage thinking de-emphasises, therefore, the analytical significance of such reified broad categories as state, bureaucracy, and capitalism. State should, for instance, be conceptualised as an entity that is 'made up of prosaic practices of differently situated individuals' rather than a unified one that 'decides, rules, and treats' (Hausermann, 2015: 2208). It argues that these categories are so 'blunt' (Acuto and Curtis, 2014b: 7) that analyses built on them often neglect concrete historical and complex processes and other factors.

Following the same logic, assemblage thinking rejects the idea of 'one coherent whole' (Bueger, 2014: 61), in other words, singular universalist understandings of reality. From this perspective, the analysis of state behaviour and foreign policy should divorce itself from an automatic assumption of the existence of a single overarching logic, such as the logics of consequence and appropriateness, which is often employed in the analysis of state policy (Bueger, 2014). By shedding off these singular overarching logics, policy analysis truly embraces contingency, discontinuity, and abnormality.

Furthermore, in contrast to essentialist approaches that presume what people observe is their *final* configuration and then make universal claims of what that is, assemblage thinking argues that the configuration of things, events, and concepts in question is nothing but contingent since they are embedded in a network of social, historical, and on-going processes (Nail, 2017). Here, the term 'historical' refers to 'cosmological and evolutionary history in addition to human history' (DeLanda, 2006: 28). This anti-essentialist attitude of contingency inheres within the constructivist nature of an assemblage, its formation resulting from territorialisation can always be destabilised through deterritorialisation and re-territorialisation.

Assemblage Thinking and Foreign Policy Assemblage

After elaborating three key features of assemblage, the thesis turns to its contributions to foreign policy analysis. It argues that an assemblage-based conceptualisation is helpful in three ways. First, regarding the contingent emergence of an assemblage, assemblage thinking resists the idea (or the trend) of technicalising policymaking which regards policymaking as a technical issue, mechanic, lifeless, and knowable from data sets (Winder and Le Heron, 2017). Instead, it re-characterises policymaking as a complex emergent and unshackles policy analysis from the tyranny of traditional approaches focusing on simplified, linear, fixed or 'scientifically' pre-established processes because assemblage thought brings to the front the 'true' processes of policymaking replete with

competition, rivalry, vitality, complexity, and contingency. From this perspective, assemblage thinking indicates that the meaning of foreign policy is contingent and must not be presumed *a priori*, thus helping to explain how policies transfer and mutate (Savage and Lewis, 2018). As Ureta (2015: 12) argues, '[s]eeing policies as assemblages implies treating them not as solid or stable entities but as temporary concatenations of heterogeneous entities, always on the verge of becoming something completely different.'

Second, the assemblage approach brings attention to the agency of things (materials and non-human beings) regarding policymaking by steering away from the traditional anthropocentric view of policymaking, that is, human beings are the most significant forces and agency is the property of human beings only. The fact that assemblage is a completely heterogeneous composite suggests ontological openness – a flat ontology – all objects equally exist (Foucault, 1980). This ontological diversity allows the researcher to break the confinement of the official discourses on BRI and to assemble BRI by enquiring into other elements (alternative discourses, ideas, materials, and practices) that are crucial, albeit not being observable or measurable explicitly. Thus, assemblage thinking could further enrich a traditional post-structural analysis of foreign policy by re-introducing the importance of materiality and its constitutive role in policy formulation without rejecting the significance of discourse, a core element in post-structuralism.

In the same vein, foreign policy becomes '*alive*', not simply technical or specialised, situated in and shaped by the world marked by 'complex human and non-human systems' (Savage, 2018: 309). It is no longer exclusively in the hands of the political establishment, a monopoly game played by political elites, and out of touch with the general public. Rather, foreign policy becomes 'everyday' policy, permeating through our daily lives, new inventions, and physical environment. By doing so, policy analysis turns to 'more materialist, relational, and bottom-up orientations' (Savage, 2018: 310) that seek forces. This 'force' is wide-ranging, encompassing 'the meanings individuals make about policy, the networks through which policy influence flows, the technical processes through which policies are put together, plus many other policy aspects' (Savage, 2018: 310).

Third, from the perspective of assemblage, foreign policy analysis is not simply about understanding who has the power for what purposes, but how the power dynamics (e.g. the interactions of different actants) in the continuous assembling process shaped the meaning and content of policies. Power relations, not simply power as a property, are emphasised in the assemblage approach to foreign policy. Assembling is more than merely enumerating and displaying heterogeneous components and entities. It is about the *becoming*, rather than being, of a foreign policy, and bringing into view the processes of the (de)territorialisation – 'select[ing], organis[ing], [and] stratif[ying]' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 406) – how these actants come together, competing with and adapting to one another, being made to cohere, and forming an assemblage (Bear, 2017; Bueger,

2018). In other words, assemblage thinking is to investigate and demonstrate how a particular foreign policy assemblage consisting of miscellaneous parts is formed, maintained, and/or reconfigured (via the processes of (de-)territorialisation).

To sum up, the concept of assemblage emphasises multiplicity, contingency, heterogeneity, and anti-essentialism. As Venn (2006: 107, emphasis added) summarises, assemblages give prominence to '*adaptivity* rather than fixity or essence, the *formal properties* of the system rather than the specific instance or individuation, the *spatio-temporal dimension* rather than quantities, *co-articulation and compossibility* rather than linear and discrete determination, *multilinear time* and the *temporality of processes*.' The concept of assemblage is employed in this thesis to open more avenues for foreign policy analysis – to understand policies 'along the dimensions of the temporal, the material, the relational and the perceptual' (Marcus and Saka, 2006: 103). Assemblage thinking could, in other words, map out all (if possible) relevant but diverse elements that constitute the policymaking process, at the same time, implicitly reveal the relations that exist among these elements. It aims to denaturalise policymaking and highlight its contingency and hybridity, and the constant processes of (dis)association it requires. Assemblage thinking can as well avoid favouritism, a mistake traditional scholarships of foreign policy analysis often make, by refusing to privilege *a priori* structures, systems, or agents (Prince, 2010). Put simply, assemblage thinking in this thesis is 'a mode of response' (McFarlane and Anderson, 2011: 162), in the sense of critique and orientation, to the traditional thoughts of the formulation process of foreign policy.

2.3 China and the Politics of Truth

As presented in Introduction, the thesis investigates how China's framing of BRI as a global initiative for cooperation became naturalised, in other words, *the truth* in the Chinese context. And today's world is so inundated with untruths, half-truths, 'alternative facts', and truths that we are warned of the emergence of a 'post-truth' era (Chen Haifeng, 2017; Keane, 2017; 2018; Ruan and Du, 2017; Xia Ying, 2017). Meanwhile, the research situates itself within a broad post-structural tradition that emphasises the process of becoming (anti-essentialism) and the idea of contingency that associates with policymaking. Therefore, the final section of this chapter focuses on the politics of truth – how truth is understood in this thesis – so as to justify the theoretical perspective of the thesis and avoid any misunderstandings of its position on truth.

The thesis focuses on two questions: How does the Chinese state understand 'truth'? How is truth defined in this thesis? It makes two arguments here. First, officially, the Chinese state adopts a Marxist conceptualisation of truth and defines it as human beings' accurate reflections of an objective world and relevant laws (Binns, 1973; Xiao Zhongzhou, 1991). Like ideology, truth remains critical not because of the propositions

included in the truth *per se*, but due to its pragmatic, or instrumental, function for governance. Thus, it is important to understand the ways in which truth is constructed and utilised by the Chinese state. Second, given the importance of the utility of truth, truth is defined in this thesis as an 'ensemble of rules' (Foucault, 1984c: 74), against which the true is distinguished from the false, rather than an objective and hidden entity 'out there' to be discovered. Consequently, for this thesis, truth is not a simple cognitive matter, but a political one closely related to power.

The understandings and, by extension, attitudes, of the Chinese state towards truth are closely related to its communist ideology. China's official ideology – Marxism-Leninism (and its Sinicized variant, socialism with Chinese characteristics) – has remained unchanged since the establishment of the PRC in 1949. In the preface of the Constitution of the PRC (CGP, 2018, emphasis added), it reads: '[u]nder the leadership of the CCP and the guidance of Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, Deng Xiaoping Theory, the important thought of Three Represents, the Scientific Outlook on Development, and Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics in a New Era, the Chinese people of all nationalities will continue to adhere to the people's democratic dictatorship and the *socialist* road, … steadily improve *socialist* institutions, develop the *socialist* market economy, develop *socialist* democracy, [and] improve the *socialist* rule of law, … to build China into a great modern *socialist* country.' The Constitution (CGP, 2018, emphasis added) continues, '[t]he *socialist* system is the basic system of the PRC. The leadership of the CCP is the defining feature of *socialism* with Chinese characteristics.'

Moreover, the ideological campaign has gained momentum since Xi took power in 2012 (compared with that in post-Mao period). On many occasions, the current Chinese leadership under President Xi remarked on Marxism, declaring that 'in the history of thoughts, no thought schools have ever reached the level of Marxism regarding scientificity, truth, impact, and dissemination; nor have they had an impact on the world as huge as Marxism' (Xi, 2018a) and that 'Marxism is the foundation of the establishment of the CCP and the PRC' (Xi, 2021). Meanwhile, the endorsement of Marxism and its Sinicized theories are further facilitated by calls to increase the teaching and study of these Marxist theories in schools, universities, and even private enterprises, according to the General Office of the CCP Central Committee and the State Council (2019).

Meanwhile, compared with Western philosophy, the concept of truth is less discussed and debated among ancient Chinese philosophers (Hansen, 1985; Zhou Jianzhang, 2021). Chad Hansen (1985: 492) argued that 'Chinese philosophy has no concept of truth' as ancient Chinese philosophers were 'typically men of practical action, government functionaries,' and tended to abstain from 'abstract impractical theorising.'[18] Therefore, the thesis argues that the Chinese state's definition of truth is influenced more by Marxist's (or historical materialists') conceptualisation, that is, truth is objective and not subject to human wills, desires, or passions (Hu Fuming, 1993). The sole criterion of

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[18] A different view was presented in the work of Ni Peimin (2019) and Xu Shumin (2017).

testing truth is practice, and seeking truth from facts (*qiushi*) is immortal (Hu Fuming, 1993).

However, that to what degree the Chinese leadership representing the Chinese state actually believes in them is very difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint because its political system remains opaque and access to internal documents is limited. This issue is compounded by China's capitalist economic practices and the knowledge that publicly available documents are often sanitised, often devoid of controversial or provocative language (Davies, 2001). Thus, words there can be deceiving and should not be taken for granted. Moreover, what the Chinese state really believes is less relevant to the how-possible question raised in the thesis; nor does the thesis make any normative claims about what the Chinese state believes. Given that, a different perspective is required to critically engage with the concept of truth in the Chinese context.

Following Brown (2018a) and Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova's (2018) suggestions, the thesis argues that more effort should be made to explore and understand how truth claims made by the Chinese state come into being and how they are deployed for the governance of the CCP, rather than the veracity of those truth claims. Consequently, truth (about something) functions, like the grand narrative of national rejuvenation detailed in Chapter One, as a consensus and/or a common language – to govern a complex and potentially fragmented state (Brown, 2018a; Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2018).

For Chinese leaders, particularly since Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up policy, truth itself (e.g., the basic tenets) has not been a main concern; rather, the critical issue lies in its pragmatic aspect, that is, the ways in which truth can be utilised (as a common language, a consensus, or an instrument) for national unity and governance (Brown, 2018a; Brown and Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2018). Perry Link (2013) also expresses a similar idea, arguing that Chinese leaders regard truth (about something) as a political device. The use of truth in the Chinese context, Brown (2018a: 45) argues, is tantamount to 'a religious practice, a belief system that spoke to people's emotional and rational side and supplied a framework for change, engagement and action.' Put simply, truth for Chinese leaders is political, and about unity (of the state) and organisation (of the society).

As truth for Chinese leaders is less of an abstract philosophical notion limited to scholarly debates but more of a practical matter for governance, it is pertinent to employ a post-structuralist approach, which is highly critical of universal truths, to define truth. According to Foucault, truth is 'a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution and circulation of statements' (Foucault, 1977c: 14), and is 'linked by a circular relation to systems of power which produce it and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which redirect it' (Foucault, 1977c: 14). From this Foucauldian tradition, truth is better understood as a regime of truth.

Foucault's conceptualisation of truth has following features. First, Foucault rejects the argument that 'all truth claims (i.e. about some feature of the world) can be judged true or false' (Smith, 1997: 167). The notion of truth by correspondence – that the truth of

something can be verified or falsified only by whether it corresponds to facts or external experience – is dismissed because there are no neutral grounds to do that in Foucault's anti-foundationalist position (Ashley, 1984; Sørensen, 1998). Instead, in Foucauldian terms, truth exists only within specific discourses and temporal and spatial conditions (Smith, 1997; Sørensen, 1998). Truth claims are not something that objectively describe and reflect 'the world "as it is" but … a set of theoretical and political demarcations of what constitutes reality and knowledge' (Hansen, 1997: 372). These discourses and conditions are all regimes of truth (Foucault, 1977c).

  Second, given that truth is embedded in and resulted from these regimes, '… truth isn't outside power, or deprived of power' (Foucault, 1977c: 13). From Foucault's perspective, truth is closely related to power (Chapter Two), or the knowledge/power nexus; every society has its own regime of truth, determining what is true or false. Truth is not an eternal and unvaried thing, but in constant (re-)production through power. Therefore, to challenge truth (claims) is not to seek some 'absolute truth' but 'of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time' (Foucault, 1977c: 14).

  Caveats are in order. Foucauldian conceptualisation of truth does not deny the possibility of truth or aim to blur the boundary between truth and falsehood altogether. Nor does it imply any commitments to the philosophy of relativism or nihilism (simply, anything goes). As Foucault (1984b: 343) argues, '[m]y point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do.' On the contrary, truth defined as a regime of truth only reinforces post-structuralists' dedication to constantly seek truths and hold them accountable by problematising truth claims, challenging their underlying assumptions, and investigating the procedures by which what is true (and false) has been established. And all these make it imperative to pursue the ways in which truth comes into being.

2.4 Conclusion

After questioning the existing empirical analyses of BRI (Chapter One), this chapter questioned the theoretical models of world politics and state behaviour that inform these analyses, especially their positivist view. It has one central task, that is, to justify an assemblage-based post-structuralist approach to analyse foreign policy. To do so, the chapter has focused on three major issues: the metatheoretical debate in IR, the theorisation of foreign policy behaviour (middle-range theories), and the politics of truth. The first issue raises fundamental questions pertaining to the theories of foreign policy, that is, their ontological and epistemological commitments. These philosophical underpinning are critical as they determine the legitimate objects of inquiry and the

legitimate ways of observation. The thesis argues that the ontological pluralism and anti-foundationalist epistemology embedded in post-positivism has introduced diverse themes and approaches to explain and understand this complex world.

The second issue deals with different IR theorisations of foreign policy. This section has started with positivist theories with reference to neorealism, neoliberalism, and conventional constructivism. It has demonstrated that no matter which theory is used, positivist theories conceptualise foreign policy as a product of a teleological and linear process (to serve national interest) in which material, institutional, or ideational factors, depending on metatheoretical commitments, take the centre stage. It has argued that its dichotomous view of policy/interest and solution/problem is insufficient to address the issue of contingency that is associated with foreign policy.

The chapter has then explored a post-structuralist approach of foreign policy. It has argued that due to its anti-foundationalist epistemology, post-structuralism is very critical of the take-for-granted assumptions and very reflective (understood as reflectivity) of its role in shaping the world. It has argued that despite lacking substantive or normative arguments on foreign policy, the critical ethos of post-structuralism foregrounds the contingent nature of foreign policy. In other words, its emphasis on contingency, thus the conditions of possibility, makes it the most suitable theory to investigate foreign policy. Given that, foreign policy is conceptualised in this thesis as an assemblage. By doing so, the thesis can focus on the emergent and contingent nature of foreign policy because policy assemblage is a multiplicity that comprises different elements and has no essence.

The final issue concentrated on the politics of truth with the purposes of justifying the theoretical choice and dispelling the common misunderstanding of post-structuralism argues that anything goes. The final section argues that truth matters and that in an authoritarian state, the more important and urgent matter is how truths are utilised for governance. Therefore, post-structuralists' conceptualisation of regimes of truth is more appropriate to explore the making of truths. As this chapter sets out the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for BRI. This next chapter is going to investigate the methodology issue and specific methods for data collection and analysis.

Chapter 3 Genealogy as a Methodology

To understand the dynamic emergence of a global BRI, it is not enough to simply ask what and why questions, as most existing literature did (Chapter One and Introduction), which largely provide a rationalist and teleological explanation. Rather, we need to ask a how-possible question as this type of question acknowledges the contingency of a global BRI and concentrates on the conditions and, by extension, process through which BRI framed as a global and cooperative initiative is naturalised (see Introduction). To do so, the thesis had adopted a post-structural approach to analyse the emergence of BRI with reference to assemblage and productive power (Chapter Two). Now the question is: how can the thesis empirically demonstrate the emergence and contingency of foreign policy assemblage, in this case, the assembling process of a global BRI? This question relates to the issue of methodology as without it, there would be 'no transformation of theory into analysis' (Hansen, 2006: 2).[19]

Methodology is defined as a normative theory of methods, explicating how research should be conducted based on the ontological and epistemological commitments of the research (Herrera and Braumoelle, 2004; Vucetic, 2011). Its conceptualisation is different from method which is defined as a discrete technique for collecting and analysing data (Herrera and Braumoelle, 2004; Vucetic, 2011). In other words, the same method can be used in different methodological settings. Moreover, methodology helps the researcher to think about the relations between ontology and epistemology in practical terms (Ackerly, Stern, and True, 2006b). The effect of methodology is the operationalisation of metatheoretical commitments that address the research objectives – what data to collect, where and whom to collect it from, and how to collect and analyse it (Ackerly, Stern, and True, 2006b).

The aim of this chapter is to provide a rationale for the methodological preference (genealogy) and key methods (discourse analysis and interviews) identified in the thesis in understanding the conditions of possibility and by what process a global BRI emerged and became meaningful and intelligible. It argues that genealogy refutes linear causality and argues for the concept of contingency which reflect the discursive ontology and anti-foundationalist epistemology of post-structuralism that the thesis has adopted.

The chapter starts with a post-structuralist perspective on genealogy as methodology, elaborating on its definition and its relevance to post-structuralism, assemblage, and research methods. The second section explains the key concept of problematisation that

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[19] Conventionally, post-structuralism is rarely associated with methodological debates as traditionally methodology is associated solely with positivism. But the thesis agrees with Hansen (2006), Laffey and Weldes (2004) and Milliken (1999) that reflections on methodology show the rigor of research rather than entail the fetish for 'science.'

stems from genealogy, a three-step research strategy, and primary research techniques employed in the thesis. The last section introduces data sources.

3.1 Foucault and Genealogy

This section concentrates on two issues – the conceptualisation of genealogy and its primary contributions to the thesis. Foucauldian genealogy foregrounds a re-conceptualisation of the prevailing order, problematising and historicising what is accepted and taken for granted and, by extension, what is suppressed and forgotten (Kearins and Hooper, 2002). The thesis argues that genealogy is the most suitable methodology to operationalise post-structuralists' commitments to critique, in other words, to de-familiarise the familiar, because it refutes linear causality that is rooted in positivist IR theories and it insists the concept of contingency and, by extension, anti-essentialism. Put simply, genealogy helps to identify the regime(s) that has made BRI framed as a global initiative *the* truth. To present the argument, this section begins with the notion of genealogy as methodology, and then turns to its association with aforementioned post-structuralism and foreign policy as assemblage, and subsequent methods.

Nietzsche (1997: 120, emphasis in original) introduced genealogy as a prescription for the '*malady of history*' afflicting conventional approaches to history. The malady refers to the scientific quest of these conventional approaches (Chapter Two) that have modelled themselves on natural sciences, and claimed that they could, and should, establish objective representations of the past by being neutral and observing from a distance. Nietzsche (1997) refutes this scientific pursuit by arguing that history is imposed with certain perspectives, and that it serves purposes, be they cultural or political, rather than a simple past record. Chasing the scientific dream could only serve to legitimise and naturalise 'the values and presumptions of the present', and delegitimise and denaturalise 'the potential for criticism, creativity and change' (Bonditti, et al., 2015: 162).

Following Nietzsche's (1997: 103) concept of genealogy, a historical-philosophical account of 'knowledge … turn[ing] its sting against itself', Foucault (1980: 83) defines it as 'a painstaking rediscovery of struggles together with the rude memory of their conflicts.' Foucauldian genealogy does not look for the origin[20] or the simplistic, linear and teleological explanations of an object, an event or a practice of inquiry (Smith, 1995). Instead, it investigates the whole process of its formulation, with a special emphasis on the establishment of 'a historical knowledge of struggles' through '[t]he union of erudite knowledge and local memories' (Foucault, 1980: 83).

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[20] Here origin is understood as the ultimate truth or the root, which Foucault rejects. 'The purpose of history guided by genealogy is', Foucault (1977a: 162) argues, 'not to discover the roots of our identity but to commit itself to its dissipation.'

The rest of this section presents two closely related features that make genealogy the most suitable methodology. First, genealogy discounts the positivist claim that a linear, and usually forward, connection (causal patterns) can be determined between past and present, and possibly, deployed later for prediction as genealogical investigation into these struggles destabilises 'the causality assumed in a universal conception of time' (Bonditti, et al., 2015: 163). In short, genealogy denies a teleological and linear history, that is, 'the story of how historical events eventually lead into the present' (Manokha, 2011: 72). Its purpose is to denaturalise taken-for-granted assumptions and unearth subjugated knowledges by revealing covert and contingent power relations that make those assumptions necessary, plausible, and possible in the first place (Bonditti, et al., 2015). Put differently, what genealogy seeks to provide is a non-linear (or interpretive understanding) of the present (Price, 1995), rather than a linear progression, or in Gutting's (2005: 46) words '[the] grand teleological narratives', of an object, an event or a practice of inquiry.

Second, genealogy's allowance for contingency and anti-essentialism is of great service to the how-possible question concerning the emergence of an assemblage because it 'starts from the present and asks *how what we 'know' now has become the understanding of history* [unproblematically], and what has been excluded or marginalised by current representations' (Hansen, 2012: 105, emphasis added). Again, this speaks back to Foucault's regimes of truth – that truth was produced and reproduced in a spatial and temporal context. Genealogists' commitment to the contingent nature of the present means that genealogy 'recognise[s] the events of history, its jolts, its surprises, its unsteady victories and unpalatable defeats – the basis of all beginnings, atavisms, and heredities' (Foucault, 1984: 80) and opposes 'biological necessity, rational design, teleology, liberal progress narratives and similar *schemas* once present in the putative traditional history' (Vucetic, 2011: 1302, emphasis in original). History is not a history of facts, but a history of interpretations and problematisations (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982).

Given that, genealogy is appropriate for this case since the thesis subscribes to a discursive ontology (a meaningful world is known and understood through discourses), an anti-foundationalist epistemology (a self-reflective approach), and a commitment to de-familiarise the familiar, rediscover knowledge-power struggles, and foreground the notion of contingency. Meanwhile, a genealogical study of BRI is needed because there existed the 'messy' political history of BRI and the problematic linear and rationalist conceptualisations of BRI as shown in the Introduction and Chapter One respectively.

With genealogy, therefore, the thesis challenges the so-called 'problems', be they economic or geopolitical (Chapter One), that are embedded in both official narratives and the existing rationalist academic analyses. Thus, it does not treat BRI simply as a policy solution to *those economic and geo-political problem(s)*, but as a policy assemblage with no *a priori* assumptions that are (re-)produced in and contribute to the historical struggles over truth, knowledge, and power about BRI and China's national identity.

Furthermore, this genealogical investigation interrogates/denaturalises the accepted, or naturalised, economic (and geostrategic) narratives about a global BRI and demonstrates its emergence and contingency (set out below) by bringing to light the possibility conditions including assumptions, practices, and strategies that made the global BRI assemblage possible and the ways in which they interacted with one another so as to promote some conditions whilst suppressing others. Put differently, it operationalises the idea of a regime of truth.

To be specific, instead of simply exploring how BRI was created chronologically, even with reference to identity, the thesis examines how a global BRI was a product of history and politics, and how China's predominant narratives about a global and inclusive BRI were '*expressions* of a particular historically situated spatial and political imaginary' (Bonditti, et al., 2015: 160, emphasis in original), and not simply a solution to the unevenly economic development between within China and/or its weak geo-economic resilience. The aim is, simply put, to desist from assuming that we know what BRI is.

3.2 Foucauldian Problematisation and Primary Methods

Genealogy is always the genealogy of *something*; and the term 'something' could refer to a concept (Foucault, 1977a; Fraser and Gordon, 1994), an identity (Jackson, 2006), a phenomenon (Mitchell, 1992), or a policy (Price, 1995), all of which become so embedded in society that people consider them to be true and/or self-evident. To put into practice the genealogy of something, put differently, to enquire into the historical and structural basis of a particular object, the thesis has borrowed heavily from Bacchi's (1999, 2009) 'what's the problem represented to be' (WPR) approach. The WPR approach to policy analysis abandons the conventional perception of policy as a solution to fixed, identifiable, and exogenous problems; rather, it regards policy as part of the problem creation (Bacchi, 1999, 2009). It 'question[s] how "problems" are thought about rather than simply accepting the shape they are given' (Bacchi, 2009: 46).

Other than that, this thesis has also benefited from other scholarship, such as Keeley's (1990) Foucauldian analysis of international regimes, Price's (1995) genealogical approach to chemical weapons, and Jackson's (2006) Foucauldian reading of the invention of the West and its relations with the Marshall Plan and NATO. Therefore, the thesis focuses on the concept of problematisation and explores assumptions, strategies, and actors (understood as possibility conditions) that have given BRI the meaning of being global and cooperative, in other words, enabled the emergence of a global BRI.

The rest of this section is going to first elaborate on the notion of problematisation, the key to understanding the genealogical approach, and then present more specific undertakings, the actual methods employed, and their justifications when applying genealogy to BRI. A caveat is in order: the use of methods introduced under each step is

not limited to that particular step; rather, it is, and should be, used in other steps when appropriate.

3.2.1 Problematisation

According to Foucault (1988: 257), problematisation is 'the totality of discursive or non-discursive practices that introduces something into the play of true and false and constitutes it as an object for thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.).' Problematisation thus could be understood in two ways. First, it serves as the method of critical analysis (Bacchi, 2012a, 2012b; Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016) to demystify, denaturalise, or disrupt taken-for-granted truths and beliefs. As Foucault (1977b: 186) puts it succinctly, problematisation means 'thinking problematically'. Second, it could be understood as 'a historical process of producing objects for thought' (Bacchi, 2012a: 1). As Foucault (1997: 118, emphasis added) argues, 'it [problematisation] *develops the conditions* in which possible responses can be given; it *defines the elements* that will constitute what the different solutions attempt to respond to.' In this sense, problematisation is more about establishing and/or interpreting conditions of possibility that *constitute* and produce certain objects for thought and practice than simply looking for independent objects. This definition indicates that problematisation does not imply any object existing *a priori*; nor does it indicate the creation of one that does not exist (Foucault, 1988).

Building on Foucault's original conceptualisation of problematisation and the latest development and application of this concept in policy analysis, the thesis concentrates on the second reading of the concept, that is, problematisation as a practice that produces certain types of problems. Following this thinking, analysts can now examine how and why certain phenomena, events, and processes become particular objects for thought – problems that 'at specific times and under particular circumstances … are questioned, analysed, classified, and regulated' (Deacon, 2000: 127). From this perspective, problem is better conceptualised as problem representation.

Enquiring into problematisation aims not to find 'real' problems and 'right' solutions, nor to expose the manipulative framing of policymakers (Bacchi, 2012b; Payne, 2014). Instead, it interrogates how the representations of the object of inquiry occur and what effects they have by examining taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs, and logics (Bacchi, 2012b; Goodwin, 2012; Payne, 2014). To explore problematising processes is to investigate the ways in which a phenomenon becomes a *problem* or *is understood as* a particular type of problem, thus revealing underlying assumptions, alternative-hence-silenced understandings and discourse, power struggles, and effects that associate with these processes (Payne, 2014). In other words, it is about the political work done through the practice(s) of 'problematisation'.

Moreover, problematisation is closely associated with policy assemblage as '[p]olicy cannot get to work without first problematising its territory' (Osborne, 1997: 174). Problematisation as detailed above produces objects and the ways of thinking about them (Ureta, 2015). In the case of foreign policymaking, it makes certain phenomena, behaviour, and objects *the problem* that constitutes policy assemblage. After the successful problematisation of something as a problem, a new configuration of a policy assemblage emerges.

3.2.2 A Three-step Procedure for Problem Representations

First, the thesis examines China's discourses on BRI to uncover the different ways in which issues and phenomena have been problematised leading to BRI framed as the solution. This is built on the premise that proposed solutions contain how a particular issue or phenomenon is framed and what is regarded and framed as the 'problem' (Bacchi, 2012b). Due to post-structuralists' discursive ontology, the thesis primarily focuses on the discourse that covers not only official CCP discourse but also broader discourse in scholarship and policy commentary literature. It examines what has been proposed in BRI as a solution or a change, and works backwards to reconstruct the problem(s) with reference to other discourses (Bacchi, 2009; Bonditti, et al., 2015). Hence, the thesis has pinpointed the problem(s) represented in the BRI discourse, such as a market problem, an economic structure problem, an international cooperation problem, and an identity problem.

To achieve this, this research first consults archives, namely, identifying key raw materials and data sources for analysis, which, in this case, consists of the documents produced by the Chinese government, media (newspapers and documentaries), policy papers/reports produced by Chinese academics, ministry think tanks and recently-established BRI research centres. The details about archives such as types, purposes, and reasons why they are chosen are discussed in the final section. To determine problem representation(s), this research asks: How many circulating discourses around BRI are there? What are they? What are their relations with one another or among them? These discourses are then coded under three initial headings: topic, solution and goal. The topic includes four categories of economy, geopolitics, culture, and others (the discourse not fitting the first three). All identified solutions and goals are coded according to the topical categories. Problem representations could be distilled from the archive in the form of 'topic + solution/goal + problem'.

The goal of this first step is not to exhaust all but to isolate the dominant discourses circulating around BRI, because along with these discourses, narratives, imageries created by them and events impacting the development of BRI as a practice could be identified. To paraphrase what Bacchi (2009) says, how BRI is contemplated could be revealed by what is/are proposed as policy solutions. It seeks, simply put, to identify a

set of problematisations, or problem representations, to which a global BRI has emerged as a solution. As elaborated in Chapters Four, Five, and Six, the two major problematisations concerning BRI are unbalanced economic structure and passive national identity.

Second, the thesis determines assumptions or presuppositions that underlie the identified problem representation(s) and then establishes the conditions that are conducive to its/their formulation and general acceptance (Bacchi, 2009). These assumptions refer to background knowledge that is taken-for-granted, including epistemological and ontological assumptions, and they lead to the discovery of 'conceptual logics' (Bacchi, 2009: 5), that is, meanings, which are indispensable for a particular problem representation to be consistent and intelligible. To be clear, these assumptions (or beliefs or biases) investigated by the thesis do not come from policymakers but are implied within problem representations, as this research is about how it is possible for something to happen, not why it happens (Bacchi, 2009; Doty, 1993).

To carry out this step (and the next), this research turns to discourse analysis. Due to the post-structuralist position taken by this thesis, discourse[21] has been defined, in accordance with Laffey and Weldes's (2004: 28) proposition, as 'structure and practices.' As structure, discourse is a social and cultural apparatus to be employed for the construction of meanings; as practices, discourse enables/disables, rewards/punishes, and legitimises/delegitimises certain behaviours and social conditions with a purpose of maintaining, reinforcing, or even transforming a *status quo* (Laffey and Weldes, 2004; Price, 1995). From this perspective, discourse takes on both linguistic (e.g. language, signs) and non-linguistic forms (e.g. visuals). By doing so, it does not simply reflect realities 'out there', but more importantly, becomes constitutive of realities and truths (Herrera and Braumoelle, 2004). To understand discourse is, in other words, to set aside the impartiality of the discursive arrangement[22], and to recognise and acknowledge the power relations underpinning it, and the contingency, or in Herrera and Braumoelle's (2004: 16) words 'situatedness', of the meaning (Crawford, 2004).

Defined as structure and practices, discourse from a post-structuralist perspective is closely related to power conceptualised as a productive force. As detailed in Chapter Two, in contrast to the compulsory power (such as military) exercised by states, the structural power imposed by an international system, and the institutional power exerted through institutions (Barnett and Duvall, 2005), discursive/productive power performs via organising knowledge, time (e.g. timetables that regulate your daily work/study), space (e.g. the way in which prisons, schools, or hospitals are built), and

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[21] The definition of discourse is debatable, and this issue has been addressed well and is beyond the remit of this research. For example, Crawford (2004: 22) argues that discourse is 'the content and construction of meaning and the organisation of knowledge in a particular realm.' Commonly understood as language, discourse could refer to 'extended samples of spoken dialogue' (Fairclough, 1992: 3, quoted in Laffey and Weldes, 2004: 28).

[22] For instance, it could refer to grammars and metaphors for texts, or structures for visuals.

everyday activities (Foucault, 1977a). Power is no longer confined to material capabilities or defined in negative terms; rather it becomes productive – power to produce. Given these, a genealogical investigation tends to concentrate on the ways with which power is exercised and sustained 'through disciplinary discourse … routines … individualisation, exclusion, and ultimately through normalisation' (Kearins and Hooper, 2002: 736) and the effects of power. As Price (1995: 87) observes, discursive power constructs categories, or 'conceptual possibilities', that determine what can and cannot be intelligibly thought, comprehended, and said about the world. In other words, through the exercise of power, discourse conditions what counts as knowledge and determines the intelligibility of the knowledge, its authority and acceptance as (regimes of) truth within a given historical milieu (Bonditti, et al., 2015).

After the review of the conceptualisation of a post-structural discourse, the thesis turns to the actual analytical strategies and procedures employed to investigate discourse. This thesis borrows from the articulation-interpellation approach (Laffey and Weldes, 2004; Weldes, 1996, 1999) and, to a lesser degree, Hansen's (2006) intertextual models (linking and differentiating). Articulation refers to, according to Weldes (1996: 284), the process through which meaning is created out of 'extant cultural raw materials or linguistic resources' and then temporarily fixed by establishing contingent connections between meanings and institutions/social relations. The goal of articulation is to present and circulate terms with fixed meanings that are used to describe and understand objects, events and/or social relations in the world (Weldes, 1996). These terms are the representations of the world that are socially constructed, historically contingent, and contextually specific (Weldes, 1996). Interpellation is defined as a dual process by which 'identities or subject-positions are created and concrete individuals are "hailed" into or interpellated by them' (Weldes, 1996: 287; Laffey and Weldes, 2004). The goal of interpellation is that actors are discursively coerced into taking on those identities (Laffey and Weldes, 2004).

With this in mind, the thesis looks at the specific framings of problematisations and asks: what are deep-seated cultures, binaries and/or key concepts? What has been assumed and taken-for-granted? Who is involved? What responses have been advocated? What resources or tactics such as material, ideational, or intellectual have been drawn upon?' What identities, if there are any, are involved, and how are they represented as individual entities and in relations with others? What non-human actants shape assumptions and presuppositions of problem representations? (Bacchi, 2009; Bonditti et al., 2015). For instance, the thesis has found out that several predicates such as 'open' and 'cooperative' and some nouns like 'public goods' and 'initiative' were most often associated with BRI. Meanwhile, the senior Chinese officials, the president and the foreign minister in particular, constantly linked BRI with its national identity conception by framing BRI as 'a public good' provided by China, 'a responsible great power' but belonging to the world. At the same time, they differentiated BRI from America's Marshall Plan by asserting the latter was the product of the Cold War.

In short, post-structural discourse analysis calls attention to the power/knowledge nexus by asking what possibility conditions are needed for a particular discursive production to come to fruition and become *the truth*. It not only examines but also challenges the naturalisation of certain discourse(s), thus distinguishing itself from other approaches to discourses, such as the study of norms in IR, which evaluate the influence of discourses as collective and unproblematic understandings on state behaviour (Hopf, 2004; Laffey and Weldes, 2004; Milliken, 1999).

Third, the thesis seeks to identify contending discourses, namely, the silenced, the unproblematised, and the possible alternative(s) by asking how they have evolved over time, how they interact with one another (Bacchi, 2009; Price, 1995), and the most importantly, what role they play in the formulation and development of a policy, and in what ways? In both the second and the third steps, the thesis also seeks to identify the various means, strategies, and mechanisms through which power is exercised – that is, to underline and make some discourses hegemonic whilst excluding alternatives.

So far, the thesis mainly investigates texts – government reports, policy papers, editorials, and public addresses – which are mostly available either online or in traditional archives. These public records could, however, be sanitised, or made acceptable, by government officials, 'weeders' in Phillip Davies' words (2001: 74), and this sanitation is likely substantial and widespread in China[23] since it is an authoritarian one-party state that has a tight control over publications. This may leave readers nothing but all government-endorsed explanations. Meanwhile, as a result of sanitation, public records are procedure-centred or formality-centred, leaving out the contestation among decision-making bodies and full of 'self-justificatory elements' (Davies, 2001: 74). Consequently, other than identifying important but missed documents, interviewing could (in)validate the data collected from official documents as a good way of triangulation (Mikecz, 2012; Tansey, 2007), and interview transcripts can constitute part of discourses to compensate for a lack of and/or limited access to documentary evidence (Davies, 2001; Tansey, 2007).

The focus of this research – BRI as Xi's signature project (Johnson, 2016) – determines elites to be the target group of interviews. Notwithstanding different categories[24] of elite (Harvey, 2011), the term 'elite' in this research embraces Lancaster's (2017: 93) conceptualisation, being defined as 'individuals or groups who ostensibly have closer proximity to power or particular professional expertise.' Elites are differentiated from non-elites, in other words, not by their official titles, status and seniority but by their ability to wield power and influence through 'social networks, social capital and

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[23] This issue of data accessibility has been flagged up early in this research and addressed in the section of data sources. It is fair to say, at this stage, that accessing outcome-documents, such as policy statements, public addresses and white papers, is not as difficult as deciphering and interpreting these documents full of, sometimes with only, official party lines.

[24] Building on his own reading of Zuckerman, MaDowell and Parry, Harvey (2011) has identified three categories – ultra elites, professional elites and hybrid elites.

strategic position within social structures' (Harvey, 2011: 433). Thus, elites in this study include, ideally, senior policymakers who have been involved in various stages of the formulation of BRI and academics who specialise in China's foreign policy and the BRI initiative.

Interviews were approximately one hour either via Skype or in person. A one-hour interview is long enough for the researcher to get a sufficient amount of information, but short enough that interviewees and/or their proxies may find it harder to reject the researcher's request (Lancaster, 2017). Although gaining access to elites is challenging as positions occupied by these individuals can engender barriers preventing them from researchers' scrutiny, there are some ways to access them, such as public forums including large conferences and small-group workshops, and specialised networks (Lancaster, 2017; Mikecz, 2012). Another strategy to gain access to elites is snowball sampling, simply known as recommendation (Davies, 2001; Lancaster, 2017; Tansey, 2007). The idea of snowball sampling is to access interviewees' social networks through their recommendation and identify other critical stakeholders in BRI who may be ignored at the beginning (Davies, 2001; Lancaster, 2017; Tansey, 2007).

Doing interviews is not to document an official account of events but to examine the factors such as political values, tropes, motives, and ideals which inform interviewees of their interpretation of and responses to the 'problems' and assumptions identified through the first two steps (Mikecz, 2012). This kind of information is either off the record or simply hard, if not impossible, to obtain, if ever recorded (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002; Richards, 1996). In this case, the interviews for this research aimed mainly at eliciting participants' thinking of their interpretations of BRI, reasons behind it, President Xi's political vision, China's national identities, and the invocation of such ancient Chinese concepts as Silk Road. The information solicited from interviews could assist in mapping out the possibility conditions for the emergence of a global BRI.

After the approval of the ELMPS ethics committee of the University of York in January 2018, sixteen face-to-face interviews and two telephone interviews were conducted in China between June 2018 and August 2018 through the researcher's personal connections and conference participation in China. But snowball sampling for this research in China was very difficult and not very successful. Among all interviews, two interviews were allowed to be recorded (transcribed and approved by interviewees) and notes were taken for all interviews. Fifteen interviewees were scholars from Beijing and Shanghai, and the others were a journalist from *People's Forum*, and two government officials (one from the State Council, and one from the Shanghai government).[25] The length of interviews varied from 15 minutes (with the official from the State Council) to more than one hour (with the journalist), but most interviews lasted 45 minutes. A few

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[25] I understand that the number of interviewees is relatively small, and among them, most were academics. This was an issue and I reflected it in the conclusion. That said, these interviews at least confirmed and, by extension, sustained and strengthened Beijing's narratives or framing. In conclusion, the issue was reflected upon, and a solution was proposed.

more informal conversations were conducted on the sidelines of conferences and workshops in Beijing.

Nonetheless, the researcher is mindful of a few pitfalls of interviewing. First, certain interviewees, especially governmental officials, are more bound (than others) to organisational rules and regulations, and may only be willing to communicate along official lines (Lancaster, 2017). Mikecz (2012: 484) makes a fair point that 'it is not uncommon to hear the "public relations" version of events' rather than individual opinions from elites because many of them have training in how to deal with the media and represent their organisations. They might, in other words, practice political correctness and self-censorship, or in McDowell's (1998: 2137) words, '[be] on their guard', out of the fear of getting into trouble. This is certainly the case in China. The researcher, therefore, not only interviewed officials who are still working in relevant government departments, but also identified and reached out to those who have previous experiences in policymaking of various stages and other non-officials (Lancaster, 2017). Meanwhile, participants were advised to read through their transcript before actual coding and data analysis for the purposes of correcting errors, providing clarifications and amending their transcripts (Lancaster, 2017; Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011; Wiles et al., 2006). By doing so, interviewees could be more confident to share their individual opinions, which could provide more background and insights for this research, even though they may not be quoted in the thesis. These interviewees do not allow quoting.

Secondly, as mentioned above, due to their closeness to power, elites in governments are used to being in charge, being asked for their opinions, and taking responsibilities for themselves and others (Lancaster, 2007). They are, therefore, likely to be articulate and knowledgeable, and to challenge the researcher's views, especially when these views are opposite to official narratives, to demonstrate their relative power and knowledge[26] (Lancaster, 2017; McDowell, 1998; Mikecz, 2012). This also applies to academics. Their familiarity with foreign policy research is, on the one hand, of assistance in recommending potential interviewees and suggesting other important literature (Lancaster, 2017). On the other hand, it could be counterproductive especially when academics make assumptions, without a full engagement, about my research (Lancaster, 2017). They could, for instance, brush off questions the researcher poses, start to talk about what they think is of particular interest or relevance to the research, and even, up to a point, suggest theoretical frameworks for data interpretation (Lancaster, 2017). In this case, they did brush off many questions raised to them. When this occurs the researcher allows, to a certain degree, the deviation of interviewees, and then brings

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[26] The dynamics between the interviewee (elites) and interviewer can be fluid and context dependent. The author's supervisors are well known in the academic community, so all the interviewees are more cautious of giving the interview since they know that their answers are to be scrutinized by professionals and want to appear knowledgeable (Lancaster, 2017).

them back by reintroducing talking points from the semi-structured interview schedule (Lancaster, 2017).

Thirdly, misrepresentation, rhetorical inflation and deflation, for example, can all happen during the interview process (Tansey, 2007). Interviewees have incentives to claim unaccredited success and distance themselves from failures, no matter how small they are, while interviewers might purposefully or not guide interviewees to say things they want to hear (Tansey, 2007). Considering that, triangulation through other sources is necessary to consolidate the evidence collected from interviewees (Davies, 2001; Lilleker, 2003, and Tansey, 2007).

This thesis adopts semi-structured interviews that give the interviewer abilities to maintain the whole interview on track while allowing certain flexibility (Beamer, 2002). Questions are mixed in the interview with both general and specific questions. Most questions will be open-ended because they offer interviewees an opportunity to fully elaborate their thoughts and engage in wide-ranging discussions, meanwhile allowing the interviewer to probe their responses (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002; Beamer, 2002; Davies, 2001). Interviewees are, for instance, asked to talk about their perceptions of China's national identity and explain their choice of certain descriptors for that identity or those identities. A few strictly-worded closed-ended questions will be posed for straightforward answers (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002; Davies, 2001). Before formal interviews, the researcher ran a few pilot interviews among academics with the purpose of evaluating its feasibility, the political sensitivity of selected topics, the effectiveness of interview questions, and the availability of primary data sources (Beamer, 2002).

Overall, conducting elite interviews allowed, to a small degree, the researcher to triangulate the data collected from official texts by gaining access to first-hand testimonies which might (or not) be different from official accounts. But more importantly, it allowed the researcher to gain more insights of the employment of power and power/knowledge nexus in discourses as most interviewees for the thesis most often repeated and emphasised the government lines.

3.3 Data Sources

To prepare interviews and fully carry out discourse analysis, this research has identified several data sources that are briefly touched upon previously. The data source is critical for high quality research and analysis. Unverified sources can misguide the research and jeopardise its validity. Meanwhile, China has a 'closed' political culture that prefers opacity and secretiveness. Therefore, the researcher is mindful, whilst doing the research, for the scope, the accessibility, the alternative resources, and the verifiability of sources. This section is going to elaborate on the types of data sources (government documents, media, academic papers/reports) and the justifications for them.

First, this research draws on the Chinese documentary record on BRI and BRI-related issues. It includes government policy statements, keynote speeches delivered by members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo, the transcripts of press conferences held by Chinese president, premier and ministers, government reports, and, where possible, interviews with policymakers. Other than the Politburo, the researcher has identified three government departments and one small leading group[27] for policy statements: National Reform and Development Commission (NDRC) (*guojia fagaiwei*), Ministry of Commerce (MOC) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), and the Leading Small Group for the Belt and Road Initiative (*yidaiyilu jianshe gongzuo lingdao xiaozu*). Closer attention will be paid to their departmental/office reports on BRI, domestic economic development and foreign affairs. These three departments have been chosen, based on the 2015 official BRI report, with aims to see how they understand and interpret the policies and instructions from the Central Government and to identify their difference (implied interests and competition). Most of their statements are accessible from their official website.

Transcripts of press briefings and conferences held by the central government and different government departments and keynote speeches delivered by members of the Standing Committee of the Politburo and ministers are available on the websites of MOFA and the State Council Information Office (SCIO). The topics of these speeches are beyond foreign policy and BRI, and the researcher aims to have an in-depth idea about the elites' perception on Chinese national identity, ancient Chinese ideas and other cultural factors. Moreover, these speeches are of particular importance because they often shed light on principles and rationales for new policies (Cao Qing, 2007), as evident in two speeches introducing BRI to the world. In all, this research has identified 236 speeches between 2009 and 2018 that concern BRI and Chinese foreign policy and 25 transcripts of China's premier's press conference from 2003 to 2018 and China's foreign minister's press conference from 2010 to 2018.

Different government reports are available online. For instance, one page on the MOC website (http://fec.mofcom.gov.cn/article/fwydyl/) is dedicated to China's trade and investment relationships with BRI countries. China's plans for reform and development for different regions are available on the NDRC website. Apart from these websites, National Data operated by National Bureau of Statistics of China can help the researcher to access and understand data in different fields (energy, finance, trade and industry) – to reconstruct the economic discourse if necessary. *Report on the Work of the Government* have been given a special attention. This annual central government work report is comprehensive and authoritative (Wang H, 2003), covering the most important aspects of the Chinese society, but the focus is mainly on BRI, foreign policy, national economy and security. Some other government reports can also be accessed through local archives

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[27] Leading Small Group is a coordinating body, either Party- or government-affiliated that is established to address important policy areas. The details on Leading Small Group are presented in Chapter Five.

in Beijing, such as the Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China (the MOFA Archive, *zhongguo waijiaobu danganguang*). Chinese nationals are free to use and cite all published data. Accordingly, this research has identified all government work reports from 2003 (the beginning of Hu-Wen administration) to 2018 and four other meeting minutes from the group study of the CCP central committee.

It is difficult, however, to obtain decision-making process documents, especially those most recent ones, which in most cases are still classified or just not available to the public (such as internal newsletters - *neican*). To compensate for these, other than the abovementioned doing interviews, the researcher, while trying to secure access to those documents, turned to the media. This is the second major primary data source for this research, a very interesting category, and potentially very useful in locating competing, or even contrasting, narratives. Media in China is mostly state-controlled. According to Cao Qing (2007), the media system is, however, in fact a two-tier system with a propaganda-focused Party press at the top and a market-oriented press at the bottom. Another reason for referring to the media is that it is extremely unlikely for any politicians, even those in authoritarian states, to successfully legitimise a foreign policy under a full ignorance of the representations found in the media that have wider access to the public (Hansen, 2006).

The Party press is active in championing the government's policies by printing out full speeches and policy papers, carrying editorials calling for popular support, reporting academic views and restricting opponents' voices (Cao Qing, 2007). In most cases, therefore, publications from the Party press are endorsed by the government, either openly or tacitly. These articles and videos could shed light on the government's attitude towards certain issues, and can also keep the researcher up to date on BRI and foreign policy. The research has, therefore, consulted 48 pieces in total from *People's Daily*, the mouthpiece of the CCP, Xinhua News Agency, People.cn website, CPC news website, and *Global Times*, a Party tabloid focusing on international issues to see how they interpret central government documents. The researcher compares them with the central government documents (the outcome documents) to see whether there are any contradictions or differences. The market-oriented media, on the other hand, either ignores international affairs or adopts a realistic perspective to report these affairs with a more of commercial and tabloid style (Cao Qing, 2007). Meanwhile, some media can run independent (relatively speaking) reporting and social media such as *Weibo* (Chinese version of Twitter) is more difficult to control, all of which gives this thesis more channels through which different viewpoints can be discovered.

Thirdly, given the opaque nature of the Chinese party-state system, semi-transparent foreign policymaking processes, and the close ties between top Chinese research institutes and the government, it is necessary to evaluate academic discourses produced by Chinese academics and ministry-affiliated think tank researchers (Laura Barber, LSE PhD thesis, June 2014). As Hansen (2006) argues, foreign policymakers do reference academic analysis to support their discourse. Analysing academic discourse helps the

researcher to better perceive current BRI and foreign policy debates, from which the government may draw its ideas, and evolving positions on foreign affairs. These institutes include, but are not limited to, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the China Institutes for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), the China Foundation for International and Strategic Studies (CFISS), and Chongyang Institute of Financial Studies (RDCY).

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to provide a justification of genealogy as methodology and two primary methods of discourse analysis and interview selected by the researcher to carry out the research of what made a global BRI necessary, plausible, and possible for the Chinese government, and in what ways. It argues that the chosen methodology and methods are appropriate for this research because they correspond with the post-positivist epistemology and social ontology embedded in the theoretical considerations of this research, and the concepts of the history of the present, problematisation, discourse, and power are useful the unpacking the conditions of possibility of BRI. To make the argument, the chapter has started with Foucauldian genealogy, focusing on the contingency of the present, and how it is useful for this research. The second section has presented the three-step research plan – identifying problem representations; exploring underlying assumptions; seeking contending or alternative discourses, and at the same time determining strategies through which certain problematisations became dominant. Detailed reasons for the selected methods and the ways they are used in the actual research are also presented in this section. The last section supplements the validity of methods by describing the data source.

 Drawing upon the theoretical framework (Chapter Two) and the methodological considerations, the remainder of this thesis is going to explore the assembling process of a global BRI, what conditions of possibility were for the emergence of a global BRI and in what way.

Chapter 4 Assembling BRI: The Politics of Problematisation

From this chapter on, the theoretical and methodological frameworks (Chapters Two and Three) are going to be applied to understand the complexity and contestations intrinsic to the (de-)territorialising process of BRI as an assemblage in which the construction of being global, open and cooperative was normalised and naturalised. To question the particular framing of BRI, or in post-structuralist words, the regime of truth about BRI, the following three empirical chapters analyse BRI as an assemblage in different periods. Chapter Four concentrates on the emerging assemblage concerning BRI prior to September 2013. Chapter Five investigates the (de-)territorialising process of an 'ordered' trans-Eurasian BRI between September 2013 and March 2015. Chapter Six looks into the period between April 2015 and May 2017 when BRI was becoming a global assemblage.

These three assembling periods are marked by three critical events. The first event took place in Autumn 2013 when Xi introduced two (sub-)regional projects, Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR), which were, according to Beijing, the official origins of BRI. The second event happened in March 2015 that witnessed the release of *Vision and Actions*, Beijing's first written official document explaining its design pertaining to BRI. The third one occurred in May 2017 when Xi (2017b) announced that BRI was 'a platform of open and inclusive cooperation and a public good' at the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, 'the largest and highest-level multilateral diplomatic function hosted by the PRC since its establishment' (Yang J., 2017). The speeches and documents produced in these three events are great anchors to enquire into assemblage practices concerning BRI due to the political authority of President Xi. In assemblage terms, they were not only key components constituting BRI assemblages but also key moments of (de-)territorialisation of locking down from a position of ultimate authority (and therefore authorising) what BRI 'is'.

As a whole, these three chapters demonstrate the ways in which different elements, material and non-material, human and non-human, came together, interacted with one another, and formed a global BRI assemblage through discourses, practices, networks, and effects. They together substantiate the central argument of this thesis that is about the contingent, non-linear emergence of a global BRI which is rooted in a specific constellation of various elements that can be best understood through the concept of assemblage. In other words, the thesis argues that a global BRI is *not* obvious or natural; instead, it is an ongoing process of becoming in which both human and non-human elements act upon one another to form a specific constellation that leads to the emergence of a global BRI. From this perspective, a global BRI came into being from an

emerging prototype prior to 2013, to an ordered form between 2013 and 2015, and to a global assemblage from 2015 onwards. The non-linear and multilevel assembling process of a global BRI refutes not only the argument that BRI is a product of linear and rational deliberation at the policy level but also the argument that BRI is an obvious response to economic and/or geopolitical imperatives at the structural level. The non-linearity is reflected in the multiple roots and narratives that contribute to the (de-)territorialising process of a global BRI.

As discussed in Chapter Two, an assemblage-based post-structuralist analysis allows for a broad range of actors, non-material and non-human agents included, which is deemed to be critical in the policy assembling process. Assemblage analysis goes beyond, however, simply making an inventory of what are included in and excluded from an assemblage. It is also about studying the difficult political work expended in bringing an assemblage together and forging the connections of different elements, and in doing so rendering particular forms of knowledge as authoritative. In other words, assemblage analysis is about revealing the dynamic and multilevel processes of different elements interacting with and acting upon one another and, by extension, power dynamics, which result in the ascendance and/or descendance of a particular assemblage (emergence, consolidation, transformation, and dissolution).

So, what are specific elements that constitute BRI assemblages? Apart from standard elements, commonly the material, this research also brings light to the elements that are allegedly marginal, unimportant, and neglectable. These elements are more difficult to directly observe and empirically measure but are indispensable for the emergence of a BRI assemblage. They are neither add-ons that are epiphenomenal nor vehicles that are simply instrumental; rather, they are independent agents with agential capabilities that constitute BRI. All these elements and their interactions are discussed in Chapters Four, Five, and Six. These elements are not exhaustive or natural. They are analytical categories developed through this research to explain and understand BRI as a global assemblage.

Moreover, a chronological presentation of the assembling process of BRI does not indicate a linear emergence and development of a global BRI which is the opposite of what this assemblage analysis is arguing – a non-linear assembling process. Chronology understood by the thesis solely denotes time, referring to 'the arrangement of events and dates in the order of their occurrence' (Stevenson, 2010), whilst linearity implies a teleological and progressive process. Hence, whilst the BRI assembling process is presented in a chronological way, the thesis still points to complexity, nuances and contingency and avoids simplistic, linear and teleological explanations.

This chapter focuses on the politics of problematisation, as policymaking begins with framing issues as problems of which policies are constitutive, or in Osborne's (1997: 174) words, 'problematising its territory.' It contextualises BRI in relation to broader shifts in China prior to BRI, be they economic, political, social or historical. More importantly, problematisations are critical elements that constitute an assemblage. Thus, by tracing

back two core elements of the BRI assemblage – economic problematisation and national identity problematisation, this chapter refutes the essentialist understanding of BRI as a *natural* solution to economic problems and demonstrates that these economic and identity problems are social and historical constructs, through which BRI was made possible.

This chapter argues that prior to BRI, China's unbalanced economic structure and passive national identity had been evolving, became its own foreign policy concerns, and eventually framed by Beijing as China's major problems, of which BRI was constitutive. From a post-structuralist perspective, these problematisations were possibility conditions, *not* causes, which constituted BRI by setting original rules and boundaries for conceiving and practicing BRI. Moreover, the chapter also argues that these so-called 'problems' in Beijing's discourses, such as China's unbalanced economic structure and passive international behaviour, were all *made*, or constructed, to be what they were. These phenomena and behaviour became problems because they were intersubjectively conceived as problems by the CCP leadership such that the problem became a social fact. In other words, a concatenation of actors, discourse, practices, and events made these phenomena and behaviour into *problems* that were meaningful and intelligible, such that they were acutely felt by the Chinese leadership and must be addressed.

To make these arguments, this chapter starts with the discussion of the problematisation of China's economic structure, that is, its uneven regional development and excess industrial capacity. The second section focuses on the second principal problematisation of China's national identity. Implicit as it is, China's national identity problem had been framed in terms of China being a passive international player and was constructed through the debates of its foreign policy strategy, China Dream, and national identity conception (international role).

4.1 The Problem Representation of China's Economic Structure

During President Hu's first nine years in office from 2003 to 2012, Beijing's central task was to 'maintain steady yet rapid economic development' (*jingji pingwen jiaokuai fazhan*) by 'strengthening and improving macro-economic regulations' and 'expanding its domestic consumption' (GWR, 2004-2012). In 2013, however, the final *Government Work Report* (GWR) of the Hu administration altered its previous discourse on China's economic tasks and proclaimed that Beijing's foremost economic priority was to 'speed up the transformation of its economic models and promote a sustained and healthy development.' There is more to this than meets the eye.

As argued in Chapter Three, a proposed solution or goal implies what is regarded and framed as a problem (Bacchi, 1999, 2009, 2012b). Therefore, Beijing's central economic

tasks implied its framing of economic problems. According to the *Government Work Report* (2004-2012), prior to 2013, Beijing framed insufficient macro-economic regulations and weak domestic consumption as its economic problems. Since 2013, Beijing has begun to frame the uneven development between its prosperous coastal areas and its less-developed inland, and industrial overcapacity as its economic problems (GWR, 2013). In other words, before 2013, China's economic problem was conceptualised largely as a growth problem, one concerning the speed of economic growth, or simply, GDP, whilst after 2013, its economic problem was framed as a systemic problem that concerned China's economic structure and the quality of its economic development.

This discursive shift in Beijing's narratives from focusing on economic growth rate (quantity) to economic structure (quality) is critical for the analysis of Beijing's economic policy as the shift suggests that Beijing's conceptualisation of its own economic development changed fundamentally, and with that, the perceptions of its own economic problems and relevant policies. Within such a discursive turn, Beijing argued that compared with economic growth, economic structure was more crucial to the health of China's economy. It is through the construction of a systemic problem pertaining to economic imbalance and excess capacity that BRI as a response emerged, at least as stated by Beijing (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015).

From a post-structuralist perspective, this particular framing of China's principal economic 'problem' was an important discursive condition, upon which later BRI was built (Chapters Five and Six). Simply, it *constituted* BRI in terms of its policy contents and meanings. The following two subsections unpack the problematisation of China's economic performance with reference to these two economic phenomena for the purpose of exploring the constitutive relationship between this '*made-to-be*' problem and BRI.

4.1.1 Problematising Economic Imbalance

The discourse of domestic economic imbalance has always been part and parcel of Beijing's narratives on its economic development. But to problematise China's economy centring around economic imbalance, in other words, to transform the phenomenon of economic imbalance into one of two foremost critical economic problems that demand immediate action is more than a language game. It is a 'play of true and false' (Foucault, 1988: 257) that entails, among other things, power relations, agents, discourse, practices, and their effects. In this case, during the 'play', the rules for the debate of China's economic development have been set, in which discourses, such as regional economic imbalance and growing wealth gaps, were highlighted, whilst other alternative framings, such as weak domestic consumption, suppressed. Hence, it is necessary to investigate the process in which the problematisation of economic imbalance became dominant.

When the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, the phenomenon of economic imbalance which referred to the different levels of economic development in China's regions already existed. According to the research conducted by Wang and Hu (1999), in 1949, China's coastal region constituted 77.6% of China's total industrial production, whilst its western region made up 8% of the total and the rest of China, 14.4%. By 1952, the state of regional economic imbalance persisted with the provinces and municipalities in China's east coast accounting for 72% and 69% of fixed assets and the gross value of industrial output respectively (Démurger et al., 2002). These figures indicating regional imbalance become more striking when we consider that China's coastal areas only account for about 14% of its territory. Therefore, in the 1st *Five-Year Plan* (1953-57), Beijing tried to re-allocate its state resources to boost the development of its western region by distributing 56% of its total state investment to interior provinces, and this figure kept going higher, on paper at least, registering at 59% and 71% in the 2nd and 3rd *Five-Year Plans* respectively (Démurger et al., 2002).

However, it is insufficient to argue that China's regional economic imbalance at that time was a major problematisation with the sole evidence of such redistributive policies as the re-allocation of state resources. The first reason is that the preference for resource diversion to China's western region in the 1960s was also largely driven by national defence concerns about possible attacks from the U.S. and its allies (Bao et al., 2002; Fan, 1995; Wang and Hu, 1999; Yang Dali, 1990). More importantly, during this period, Beijing proclaimed unambiguously that 'socialist industrialisation is [was] the central task of our country [China] at this transitioning period, and the central part of it is [was] to prioritise heavy industry. … The development of the secondary industry is [was] the key of the 1st *Five-Year Plan*' (Li Fuchun, 1955). In other words, Beijing's primary problematisation was the absence of a strong secondary industry, and the phenomenon of economic imbalance might have raised a few concerns, but was not framed as *a major problem* that required full resources and attention.

What is more, all the effort of resource redistribution was severely disrupted by a sequence of domestic economic and political movements such as the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) between the late 1950s and the early 1970s. The final official version of the 2nd *Five-Year Plan* was, for example, never released (CCP News Portal, n.d.). The 3rd *Five-Year Plan* was supposed to be implemented between 1963 and 1967, but it was postponed to 1966 because Mao proposed a transition period between 1963 and 1965 to get China's economy back to its pre-1961 level[28] (CCP News Portal, n.d.; Wang Ruize, 2014). But the 1966 Cultural Revolution broke out and disrupted the 3rd *Five-Year Plan* (CCP News Portal, n.d.). These examples demonstrate that economic imbalance was not a core concern for Beijing.

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[28] The Great Leap Forward (1958-1961), the Great Famine (1958-1962) and other economic and political movements have cost China's economy dearly that has experienced three consecutive years of negative growth (-0.6% in 1960, -27.3% in 1961, and -5.6% in 1962) (Wang Ruize, 2014)

By the late 1970s, however, China's economic policies had not notably improved its economy. China's share of world economy increased, for instance, merely 0.6% in 30 years, from 4.6% in 1950 to 5.2% in 1980 (Li Yang, 2012), and its GDP *per capita* rose by about 3% annually between 1952 and 1978 (Zhu Xiaodong, 2012). From 1978 onwards, Beijing reversed its previous effort in rebalancing regional development and put forward a new regional development strategy, part of China's Open-Door policy, which benefited its eastern coastal region the most. For example, during the 6th *Five-Year Plan (1981-1985)* period, the investment in China's coastal region accounted for 47.7% of the national total, whilst its western region made up 17.2% only (Ren, 2005). The proportion of China's East continued to grow, reaching to the record high of 54.2% in the 8th *Five-Year Plan (1991-1995)* period when the investment in China's West was further reduced to 14.7% (Ren, 2005).

This post-Mao strategy of favouring China's East contradicted the strategy in Maoist China that strived for an egalitarian society through economic rebalancing. As Dali Yang (1990) argued, Beijing in the post-Mao era pursued a strategy that emphasised uneven regional growth and its measures contributed to, as discussed later, the phenomenon of the development gap between China's West and East. But the contradiction is not unfathomable given the principal economic problem in the post-Mao era was framed as lacking economic efficiency and ignoring regional comparative advantages (Fan, 1995; Yang Dali, 1990). This particular problematisation of economic inefficiency dictated that China must have prioritised efficiency over equality, thus capitalising on the easy access to the sea and good industrial infrastructure of its eastern coast. Favouring the coastal region continued, despite the growing regional economic disparity in the early 1990s (Wang and Fan, 2004; Wang and Hu, 1999). In other words, till the mid-1990s, China's major concern about its economy was its inefficiency, and the solution was to utilise the comparative advantages of each region with heavy emphasis on the eastern coast.

Without doubt, there were opposing voices against Deng's uneven development strategy and, by extension, there existed conflicting problematisations and narratives in place that were silenced. The dominant opposing narratives focused specifically on the low economic efficiency and inferior technological sophistication of western China (Yang Dali, 1990). They argued that western China would be firmly entrenched in an underdeveloped condition, if the uneven development strategy was not reversed, which would eventually jeopardise the economic prosperity of China's coastal region (Yang Dali, 1990; Wei, 1999). Put differently, these narratives framed the economic underperformance of western China, *not* the whole of China, as the major problem.

These dissident voices were, however, marginalised by such narratives as the importance of regional division of labour which were boosted by the political will to achieve economic efficiency over economic equality in the wake of the Cultural Revolution (Fan, 1995). Moreover, they were also delegitimised by then-dominant neoclassical economic theories such as growth-pole theory and inverted-U theory which argued that widening regional disparity was inevitable and would become less acute at

the later stage of development as a result of economic diffusion (Wang and Hu, 1999; Wei, 1999). Based on these economic theories, Beijing proposed *tidu lilun*[29] ('ladder-step' theory). According to the 'ladder-step' theory, every region in China represented one rung on a ladder with the highest rung being given priority (Fan, 1995; Wang and Hu, 1999; Yang Dali, 1990). Thus, Beijing claimed that the coastal region as the highest rung could become an engine of growth due to its better industrial infrastructure and access to the sea and, in time, it would facilitate the development of western China (Fan, 1995; Wang and Hu, 1999; Yang Dali, 1990).

Another opposing problematisation is concerned with socialist ideology. Troubled by the turbulent situation of the Soviet Block as detailed in the following subsection, some senior Party conservatives began to voice their opposition to Deng's Open-Door policy (economic issues) and asserted that Anti-Peaceful Evolution (politics) must be restored as its most important task (Ma Licheng, 2010; Wu Songying, 2018). Between 1990 and early 1992, for instance, many Chinese media, *People's Daily* in particular, published a series of articles criticising China's economic reforms and calling to re-introduce class struggle and firmly oppose capitalism and peaceful revolution (Ma Licheng, 2010; Wu Songying, 2018).

Worrying about the possible derailment of China's development, Deng and his allies made several attempts, such as Deng having private conversations with some senior leaders and his allies publishing a series of op-eds on a liberal newspaper *Jiefang Ribao* (Liberation Daily), to thwart the agenda of their opponents (Ma Licheng, 2010; Rui and Ma, 2018; Wu Songying, 2018). The most successful attempt was Deng's clandestine[30] Southern China tour in 1992 when he made several speeches, emphasising the importance of upholding China's Open-Door policy, including preferential policies to coastal regions (Ma Licheng, 2010; Wu Songying, 2018). After that, the opposition died down and the central government re-oriented its effort towards China's economic development with a focus on growth.

All these political struggles within the Party, the successful continuation of Deng's Open-Door policy, and the emphasis of regional division of labour via 'ladder-step' theory suggest that the phenomenon of regional imbalance remained as a secondary matter that was subjected to the mainstream framing of China's economic problem as a growth problem. Put differently, China still framed its slow growth and economic inefficiency as the core problem.

Afterwards, the Chinese economy began to grow significantly with some phenomena becoming more striking. With the benefit of hindsight, one phenomenon was a widening growth gap within China. Put differently, the material effect of the problem

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[29] It is better known as trickle-down theory in the West (Aghion and Bolton, 1997).

[30] Deng's trip in 1992 was clandestine because the news of his trip was kept to a minimum number of people on the pretext of having a break with family members in warmer cities and he only brought his family, one secretary, and a few security guards on this trip.

representation of lacking economic efficiency and neglecting regional comparative advantages was the exacerbation of regional disparity. Minxin Pei (2006: 39) called this growing regional disparity the emergence of 'two Chinas.' Whilst one China, mainly the coastal East, enjoyed economic prosperity and was well connected to global markets, the other China was economically deprived and lacked access to overseas markets (Pei, 2006). This phenomenon was partially exhibited by income distribution in China – the widening income inequality between people in coastal cities and those in inland cities (Ianchovichina and Martin, 2004; Pei, 2006). According to Démurger et al. (2002), the inter-provincial income gap between western and eastern China grew larger in the early 1990s.

That being said, warned by the State Planning Commission that a widening regional imbalance, if left unattended, would threaten China's social stability and national unity (Wang and Hu, 1999), Beijing gradually stepped up its investment in the western region from the mid-1990s. In other words, the regional imbalance from the 1990s started to be framed as a political problem as well as an economic problem. For instance, in its 9th *Five-Year Plan* (1996-2000), Beijing proclaimed that 'policies that help to address the growing regional gap should be carried out.' Then in 1999, Beijing proposed the Great Western Development Strategy (*xibu dakaifa*, GWDS) with an intention to 'improve the economic and social development and the defence capability of the western region' (Qin Xin, 2010). One of the key parts of GWDS was to improve infrastructure in the western region (*Tenth Five-Year Plan*, 2001; Wu Yuqing, 2009). However, GWDS has made limited progress regarding addressing regional imbalance. The regional gap remained, and the western region continued to underperform in most economic indicators (Grewal and Ahmed, 2011). By 2014, fifteen years after GWDS, the GDP of the western region still only accounted for barely a fifth of the national total (Ruan, 2014). The Hu administration took more measures to deal with the issue of economic disparity. Besides continuing with GWDS, Beijing also introduced two more regional development projects – Northeast Area Revitalisation Plan (*zhenxin dongbei laogongye jidi*) in 2003 and the Rise of Central China Plan (*zhongbu jueqi*) in 2004. These regional schemes discussed some aspects of the regional development as problematic, and together they were indicators of Beijing's growing concerns with a widening regional economic gap.

Beijing's practices regarding the phenomenon of economic imbalance in the early 2000s demonstrated the power, or discursive effects (Bacchi, 2009; Goodwin, 2012), of problematisation which is reflected through what could be thought, said, and done about China's economy. In this case, Hu largely kept his predecessors' framing of China's principal economic problem which was about the size of China's economy and the speed of its development. This particular framing warranted Beijing's most important economic task of 'maintain[ing] steady yet rapid economic development' (GWR, 2004-2012). Therefore, other framings such as regional economic imbalance were side-lined by and subsumed within the principal problematisation of China's overall economic growth and relegated to a secondary position. Even for those regional

programmes mentioned above, they largely focused more on the growth of individual regions (how less developed regions catch up), but less on the inter-regional coordination.

However, in the late 2000s, China's economy was facing huge downward pressures. According to Zhang Xiaoqiang (2009), then-Deputy Director of China's National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), domestic issues such as lacking domestic assumption and growing regional disparity became more acute given a deteriorating international market after the 2008 global financial crisis (GFC) and the demand for more reforms for China's economic structure ascended and became prominent. The reform mainly referred to the transformation of China's economic growth from being solely export-driven to being driven by consumption, investment, and export. Thus, Beijing gradually prioritised the task of transforming economic structure, which was evident in the occasional references in China's GWR from 2008 to 2012, and eventually moved it to the top of its economic agenda in 2013 (GWR, 2008-2013). For instance, Beijing officially framed the phenomenon of unbalanced, uncoordinated, and unsustainable development as a problem in its 2011 GWR. Then in 2013, Beijing named it the biggest problem in the 2013 GWR by declaring that '… we [China] still face many difficulties and problems in our economic and social development. In particular: [sic] unbalanced, uncoordinated and unsustainable development remains a prominent problem.' During that time,

This was a clear evidence of China's effort to problematise its economic imbalance that concerns the economic structure and make it as the core problematisation. It showed the phenomenon of economic imbalance became urgent and requires Beijing's action because in the Chinese political context, the word 'problem' is rarely used unless the issue is really serious. More importantly, the problematisation indicated that the issue was elevated to the political arena where unusual measures could be justified. This transition of China's core problematisation from its economic growth to its economic structure was also evident in its *Five-Year Plan*s. In the 12th *Five-Year Plan* (2011-2015), China proposed to 'focus on the unbalanced, uncoordinated and unsustainable problems concerning its economic and societal development by accelerating the transformation of its economic development model, reforms, and innovation.'

In summary, the phenomenon of economic imbalance (or the different levels of development in China's regions) has been prevalent since the establishment of the PRC. The eradication of the imbalance was one of Beijing's key tasks with the purpose of building an egalitarian society. In the late 1970s, however, Beijing shelved the issue, reversed its own policies, and advocated a new regional development policy that pursued uneven development with growth as the determining factor. With growing concerns about regional economic disparity, Beijing was pressured to re-visit the issue of economic imbalance and started to introduce different regional programmes from the late 1990s. That said, China's economy was dominated by Beijing's preoccupation with its GDP growth. In other words, for China, its main economic problem lay with its

economic growth that was hampered by its insufficient macro-economic regulations and weak domestic consumption (GWR, 2004-2012). It was only in the late 2000s that Beijing began to change its perception of its economy and, in 2013, officially redefined and framed its central economic problem as one that was structural in nature and concerned economic imbalance rather than simply growth. To be specific, the structural problem relating to the imbalanced sectoral share within the Chinese economy is manifested through the regional uneven development. At this stage, the problematisation of unbalanced development was strictly limited to China's domestic context.

4.1.2 Problematising Industrial Overcapacity

Following the first aspect of Beijing's principal problematisation regarding its economic structure – the unbalanced regional economic development, this subsection turns to the second aspect, that is, excess industrial production. As then-director of the NDRC, Zhang Ping (2013, quoted in Zhou and Wan, 2013) argued, 'to solve the problem of overproduction is the key task in restructuring China's economy and transforming the development models in the foreseeable future. … One of the ways is to encourage Chinese companies to invest overseas, shifting their industrial capacity overseas.' Considering Zhang's status as a top commissar overseeing China's development and reform, his thinking of China's economy was indicative of Beijing's framing of its own economic problem and future policy directions.

To frame the phenomenon of industrial overcapacity as a *problem* and to *re-introduce* the solution of transferring capacity overseas were significant moves. The problematisation of industrial overcapacity transformed an economic phenomenon restricted to a few industries into a political and technical problem at the national level, highly sensitive and with potential international implications, which required Beijing's immediate attention and forceful intervention. In other words, around 2013, the phenomenon of excess industrial capacity was taken seriously, becoming not just a *domestic* economic problem but also a *foreign* policy concern. The international dimension of this problematisation became even more prominent after 2013, as will be discussed in Chapter Five.

Prominent and urgent as it may seem, the problematisation of industrial overcapacity was contingent and, to use Bacchi and Goodwin's (2016: 17) words, 'made to be' as it was. In other words, it was a political move as the existence of the phenomenon of industrial overcapacity does not automatically translate itself into a problem, or a particular type of problem. Several industrial overcapacity crises have occurred in China (Cao Jianhai, 2015; Hu and Zhuang, 2015; Ji Zhihong, 2015; Lu Baifu, 2013), but they were downplayed by Beijing and went largely unnoticed abroad in the 1990s. For instance, before 2006, the issue of industrial overcapacity was barely mentioned in GWRs or by any senior Chinese officials. Beijing's silence on the issue testifies to the argument that

the discourse on industrial overcapacity *as a problem* had yet to emerge. Put differently, Beijing was yet to frame its main economic problem based on industrial overcapacity, or even to acknowledge that it was a problem at all. One reason is that this issue was believed to be dealt with before it became a full-blown problem. At that time, the central government intervened through administrative policies, such as encouraging mergers and acquisitions among companies and closing outdated factories (Lu Baifu, 2013), and external markets 'act[ing] like a "safety valve" on a pressure cooker' (Wuttke, 2017: 64) consumed the extra production.

In the 2006 GWR, the Hu administration framed industrial overcapacity as a problem that 'has become more serious', and proposed 'to shut down the enterprises that deplete resources and pollute the environment … as well as outdated plants.' This is the first publicly available evidence showing Beijing's explicit problematising move of industrial overcapacity. The following years, sustained effort was called for to deal with it, but the word 'problem' was completely dropped in Beijing's definition of industrial overcapacity as Beijing argued that the situation of industrial overcapacity was under control, with investment declining and many outdated plants in coal and aluminium being shut down (GWR, 2007-2010). Beijing's softened discourse revealed an effort to downplay the seriousness of industrial overcapacity, redefining it as a secondary economic issue, and indicated that at that time this issue had yet to be fully problematised as a political move. This was also reflected in Beijing's proposed solutions which insisted on 'regulat[ing] certain industries with industrial overcapacity … through a combination of economic, legal, and necessary administrative tools with a sufficient consideration of the role of market' (GWR, 2006). Beijing's action should not be too surprising and was congruent with its preoccupation with economic growth and its central problematisation of China's economic inefficiency reflected by insufficient macro-economic regulations and weak domestic consumption.

The phenomenon of industrial overcapacity became more serious and started to attract the world's attention following the 2008 GFC when global demands for industrial products plummeted and Beijing struggled to implement such industrial reforms as restructuring or shutting down outdated and loss-making plants particularly at the GDP-obsessed local level (He Yafei, 2014; Stanway, 2015, 2016; Wuttke, 2017). Nonetheless, the issue of industrial overcapacity was still not the centrepiece of Beijing's framing of its economic problem as Beijing's primary task between 2008 and 2012 was to achieve relatively rapid economic growth (*jingji pingwen jiaokuai fazhan*) through expanding its domestic consumption[31] (GWR, 2008-2012). This means that Beijing still framed its primary economic problem as a growth problem.

As shown above, problematisation defines the range of possible solutions. For the phenomenon of industrial overcapacity, therefore, Beijing kept the same attitude, the same framing, and similar policies between 2007 and 2012 (except 2010). The key motif

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[31] The top priority in 2011 was to strengthen price controls (GWR, 2011).

shared by all Beijing's solutions to excess capacity was *to control industrial overcapacity nationwide*, that is, to deal with it by limiting industrial production within China. Put simply, prior to 2013, the solution was the nationwide control of, rather than transformation of, those industries with excess capacity. The specific techniques included, but were not limited to, controlling the building of new plants, restructuring or shutting down outdated and loss-making plants, and encouraging mergers and acquisitions among those enterprises (GWR, 2006). Among them, curbing the loans to outdated and loss-making industries was the major tool emphasised in all GWRs between 2007 and 2012. Contrary to the intent of those policies aiming to ease the pressure of industrial overcapacity, under its own domestic stimulus package China's production continued to expand with an average annual increase of 18.8% from 2009 to 2014 in the fixed asset investment of the manufacturing industry (Wuttke, 2017).

Similar to 2006, there was a brief period in 2010 when an alternative framing of excess production as a 'contradiction' (*maodun*) (GWR, 2010) became visible only to be silenced, which demonstrated the political struggles in the problematising process. The word 'contradiction' (*maodun*) was not a novelty because it has the meaning of problem. The use of *maodun* showed that there was an attempt to re-problematise the phenomenon of industrial overcapacity. This was also accompanied by a different solution, that is, to 'speed up the implementation of "Going Global" strategy to encourage industries that match the needs of the international market to *transfer their industrial capacity overseas* in an orderly manner' (GWR, 2010, emphasis added). However, neither this particular framing nor the new solution re-appeared in the 2011 and 2012 GWRs which actually went back to the original framing that only acknowledged the existence of the phenomenon with no such descriptors as 'problem' or 'contradiction' and emphasised the tools of 'controlling'.

All these actions of excluding these novel discourses have demonstrated that the problematising process of industrial overcapacity was not a straightforward linear development, but more complicated. It involved successes (being problematised) and setbacks (being de-problematised) and oscillated between these two. In this case, between 2006 and 2012, industrial overcapacity was explicitly problematised twice with the second time demanding new policies; between those two explicit problematisations, the phenomenon was de-problematised as, at best, a serious issue that can be dealt with by following traditional approaches emphasising internal control.

In 2013 GWR, the phenomenon of industrial overcapacity was officially described as a major problem (again) as Beijing framed 'a growing conflict between downward pressure on economic growth and excess production capacity' as the second most important economic problem, second only to 'unbalanced, uncoordinated and unsustainable development' (GWR, 2013). Zhang Ping, a senior Chinese official, associated overproduction with China's traditional manufacturing industries such as iron, steel, cement, and coal by arguing that their production utilisation rates fell to between 70% and 75% which were lower than the reasonable and healthy rate that ought

to be between 80% and 85% (Zhou and Wan, 2013). He further argued that the excess industrial capacity could, if not properly addressed, set off a perilous chain reaction, such as wasting both labour and natural resources, causing the loss of profits, engendering destructive competition, and harming its effort to transform China's development models and economic structure (Zhou and Wan, 2013; Stanway, 2015).

This problematisation was reinforced in a document entitled *Guiding Opinions of the State Council on Resolving the Contradictions of Serious Overcapacity* issued in October 2013. In that document, Beijing argued that overcapacity was 'widespread in traditional manufacturing, particularly iron and steel' and framed it as 'the root of many economy-related contradictions and problems' (State Council, 2013), such as the waste of resources, a steep drop in profits, stagnant wage growth, and worsening regional inequalities in China (He Yafei, 2014; State Council, 2013; Wuttke, 2017). Furthermore, Beijing proposed to 'expand both the domestic and international markets so as to digest its own excess capacity' (State Council, 2013).

The problematisation of industrial overcapacity revealed that power in various forms permeated the whole problematising process. First, the political power of states. The phenomenon of industrial overcapacity existed, but to frame, and later sustain, it as a problem was a political move demanding an agent with power and authority. The political power of the Chinese state granted authority and legitimacy to a particular framing and transformed it into the hegemonic discourse that should not be challenged. Without it, industrial overcapacity would otherwise remain to be a phenomenon, or a minor issue, demanding no immediate action, as it was in the periods of 1992-2002 and 2008-2009, even though the overall capacity utilisation rate for manufacturing during those two periods (69.6% and 75.8% respectively) was worse than that (80%) between the first quarter of 2013 and the first quarter of 2014 (Hu and Zhuang, 2015). Second, the productive power of discourse. Problematisation moved a technical industrial issue into the political arena where unusual measures could be justified. This was manifested through the policies that followed or were 'dictated' by the problematisation of excess production because solutions only make sense in relation to the specific framings of excess production. For instance, when the phenomenon of excess production was framed only as a *concern* subjected to the principal problematisation of economic inefficiency, the major policy was to control it nationwide (GWR, 2007-2012). When it was framed as a primary problem that affects the transformation of China's development model and, by extension, the structure of China's economy, the major solution was to export it overseas.

To sum up, the phenomena of regional uneven development and industrial overcapacity were framed in various ways as 'problems', i.e. problematised, over a period of time, and then not as 'problems', i.e. de-problematised, over other periods. They only began to be framed as the most prominent problems in the early 2010s. In other words, around 2013, Beijing's framing of its overarching economic situation shifted from a growth problem that involved insufficient macro-economic regulations to a

structure problem that was concerned with the quality of its economic development and manifested through regional uneven development and industrial overcapacity. So far, this chapter has demonstrated that problematising these economic phenomena was not *natural,* and that we can trace a process by which they become both *prominent* and *urgent* in ways that suggest the politics of the process (i.e. problematisation) is important. Simply, they had been elevated above other phenomena, such as slower economic growth, China has been confronting since 2008, through a series of (re)framings and practices facilitated by state power.

4.2 The Problem Representation of China's National Identity

As this chapter focuses on the core conditions prior to BRI, this section turns to the second critical discursive condition in the form of a problematisation, that is, national identity, through which a BRI assemblage emerged and gained meaning. Meanwhile, the issue of identity is also closely related to China's primary economic problematisation, since Bacchi (2012b: 22) has observed aptly that 'the way in which "problems" are constituted elicit particular forms of subjectivity, influencing how we see ourselves and others.' In short, China's national identity conception is a key constitutive part of BRI and that is why it needs to be understood.

 Following the post-structuralist conceptualisation of identity, the thesis does not attempt to identify some hidden and fixed essence that reveals what China is. Instead, it aims to explore how China comes to understand itself as what it is now, in Devetak's (2005: 166) words, 'to determine the forces that give shape to' its current self-identity conception. National identity in this thesis is conceptualised as the collective identity of the state held by ruling elites. Thus, this section probes the Chinese elite discourse on its national identity conception that is the most authoritative in presenting how political elites see China and how they understand other states' conceptions of China. The following three subsections show, therefore, the problematising process of China's national identity conception centred on a framing of traditional passivity that has permeated the debates of its foreign policy strategy, its national rejuvenation, and its international role.

4.2.1 Still Keeping a Low Profile?

As presented in the Introduction Chapter, China's national identity conception is closely associated with its foreign policy as evidenced by BRI, Xi's signature foreign policy framed by Beijing as the public good provided by China as a responsible great power. Moreover, BRI was proposed when China's foreign policy behaviour was transitioning

from being passive and responsive to being active and assertive. Therefore, to understand China's foreign policy strategy is conducive to understanding BRI as well as its national identity conception.

Whilst the West was debating the ascendance of China's 'new' assertive behaviour on the world stage in the late 2000s (Johnston, 2013; Swaine, 2010), the Chinese government was assessing its dominant foreign policy strategy of keeping a low profile (*taoguang yanghui*) and, arguably, beginning to edge away from it and head in a more proactive direction. This subsection intends to tease out the core concern of China's national identity conception fully embedded in the foreign policy debate by providing background tracing of Deng's *taoguang yanghui* strategy. It argues that China's foreign policy transition constitutes a national identity construction of what China is with regard to international politics, rather than a mere passive response to a changing international environment and/or China's international repositioning built on its newly-gained material power. Put simply, the transition is about the political elite's redefinition of China's international role.

The end of the 1980s ushered in a new world, a world that witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union, a looming unipolarity, and the spreading of Western liberal democracy, or simply in Fukuyama's (1989: 3) words, 'the end of history.' Whilst China was called out by some Third World countries to take the lead in a united front against Western hegemony, it was economically sanctioned by Western countries after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre (Chen and Wang, 2011; Men Honghua, 2016; Wang Jisi, 2011b). This unfavourable external environment aggravated China's domestic circumstances that were plagued by severe domestic inflation and economic stagnation, leading the rise of the voices opposing its Open-Door policy and demanding the reorientation of its policy towards anti-peaceful evolution (*fan heping yanbian*)[32] (Men Honghua, 2016; Wang Jisi, 2011b).

Against this unfriendly international environment which compounded an unfavourable domestic situation in 1989, Deng Xiaoping (emphasis added) argued: 'my views about the international situation can be summed up in *three* sentences. First, we should *observe the situation coolly*. Second, we should *hold our ground*. Third, we should *act calmly*. Don't be impatient; it is no good to be impatient. We should be calm, calm and again calm, and quietly immerse ourselves in practical work *to accomplish something – something for China*.' What Deng said was later summarised as *lengjing guancha, wenzhu zhenjiao, chenzhuo yingfu* (observing calmly, securing China's position, coping with international affairs with confidence) to mend the rift between China and Western countries and to prevent a likely derailment of domestic economic reforms. This was the original version of the '*taoguang yanghui*' doctrine that guided China's international

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[32] Even today, Chinese elites still warn the public of the alleged attempts, primarily of the U.S., to transform the Chinese socialist system through peaceful means, such as ideological infiltration. This is called Peaceful Evolution theory, a dominant theory circulating among Chinese elites in understanding the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

behaviour unequivocally until the late 2000s when debates about its usefulness started to emerge (Chen and Wang, 2011; Yan Xuetong, 2014).

Since its first appearance, the keeping-a-low-profile doctrine has not remained unchanged. It has been elaborated by three generations of the Chinese leadership with the inclusion and exclusion of different elements. In 1998, building on Deng's proposal, then-President Jiang officially added *yousuo zuowei* (getting some things done or doing some things), but deleted the original term '*wenzhu zhenjiao*' (securing China's position) from Deng's 12-character foreign policy principle (Chen and Wang, 2011). Later, terms of *jüebu dangtou* (never taking the lead) and *taoguang yanhui* were officially added, turning Deng's 12-character principle into a 24-character[33] doctrine (Chen and Wang, 2011).

It is important to understand the evolution of the keeping-a-low-profile doctrine revealed the contingent and constructed nature of this doctrine and reflected China's regular revisiting of its own international role. More importantly, this evolution shedded light on the later development of the new foreign policy doctrine (striving for achievement) that played a critical role in the assembling process of a global BRI. This subsection presents two points to highlight the contingency and complexity regarding this doctrine, the power embedded in the process, and its relationships with China's identity.

First, there were significant silences on the element of 'accomplish[ing] something – something for China' (Deng Xiaoping, 1989) which was part of Deng's original idea. The first silence is the exclusion of this element from the original iteration of the keeping-a-low-profile doctrine. The original framing, as discussed earlier, concentrated on the necessity for China to respond passively to a changing world, but went silent on the possibility of China's active engagement with the world to accomplish something. On December 24th 1990, Deng reiterated that 'we cannot simply do nothing in international affairs; we have to make our contribution (*yousuo zuowei*). In what respect? I think we should help promote the establishment of a new international political and economic order.' But Deng's re-emphasis on 'accomplishing something' did not make much difference. The meaning of this element was side-lined in the form of under-representation, even though the element of *yousuo zuowei* (accomplish something or get some things done) was officially added to the doctrine in 1998.

Second, the element of keeping-a-low-profile was highlighted in the doctrine, and the rest elements were marginalised and of little consequence. The term, keeping-a-low-profile, did not appear in Deng's 1989 original proposal, and was not officially incorporated in the doctrine until 1998. It first appeared in 1992 when Deng (1992, quoted in Chen and Wang, 2011: 197; Men Honghua, 2016) addressed China's *domestic* problems, proclaiming that '[w]e will only become a big political power if we keep a low

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[33] There is another version, a 28-character principle, with the addition of *shanyu shouzhuo* (being adept at protecting one's weakness) (Chen and Wang, 2011).

profile (*taoguang yanghui*) and work hard for some years; and we will then have more weight in international affairs.' However, the meaning of this doctrine centred around the element of keeping-a-low-profile, one out of six elements in the doctrine. This element outweighed all other elements and became the source of the interpretations, and later the debate, of this doctrine and the benchmark of China's international behaviour. In fact, the doctrine is famously known as '*taoguang yanghui*' (keeping-a-low-profile) that is the symbol and essence of the doctrine. In other words, the centrality of the element of keeping-a-low-profile is conditional on the marginalisation of other elements in the doctrine.

So, what does keeping-a-low-profile actually mean? The dominant interpretation is that China must concentrate on its own domestic issues rather than getting too much involved into world affairs. When it was proposed as mentioned earlier, Beijing mainly targeted its domestic problems. As Deng argued, China was still an economically weak state and should lay low and concentrate on its domestic affairs, economic development in particular (Chen and Wang, 2011; Men Honghua, 2016). After being included in China's foreign policy strategy, it was interpreted as a code of belief that China should only engage with world affairs in a limited way. Qian Qichen, then-Foreign Minister in the Jiang administration, argued, for instance, that to practice *taoguang yanghui*, 'China must keep its head down, must not hold the banner of any ideologies nor take the lead in world affairs; … instead, China must make solid and steady progress in its economic development rather than wasting time' (Quoted in Wang Jisi, 2011b: 6). Meanwhile, Beijing forcefully denied the Western interpretation of keeping-a-low-profile as China's conspiracy theory that China was biding its time and would strike back at the West and demand more privileges when it became powerful (Heydarian, 2014). In short, the *taoguang yanghui* doctrine meant that China should lie low in world affairs and concentrate on domestic issues.

The ascendency of the element '*taoguang yanghui*' in China's foreign policy doctrine went beyond a language game that was prone to changes at the whim of top Chinese leaders. Rather, it was a reflection of Beijing's perceptions of the international structure and its material power, and constitutive of its national identity due to the consistency of the discourse over time. This doctrine also refers back to China's principal problematisation of its economic inefficiency as discussed in the previous section. In the 1980s and the 1990s, China was a fast-growing socialist economy, growing in size but weak in its actual power and influence. The dissolution of the Soviet Union was interpreted by Beijing as the result of peaceful evolution of the West (Garver, 1993; Meisels, 2012). Compounded by the emergence of the U.S. unipolarity, Beijing felt the urgency to defend its own national security, its survival to be precise (Kristof, 1991; Meisels, 2012). Thus, the Chinese leadership felt the need to act accordingly, that is, concentrating on its domestic affairs, particularly development (keeping its head down), rather than being heavily entangled in world affairs (Kristof, 1991; Meisels, 2012).

At the same time, discourse shapes possibilities for action, that is, policymakers are constrained by their own narratives. In this case, Beijing's international behaviour must be congruent with the keeping-a-low-profile doctrine. China's foreign policies under the influence of this doctrine tended to be more reactive or responsive rather than proactive (Johnson, 2016). To be specific, keeping-a-low-profile pushed China to prioritise its internal development and modernisation in its diplomatic work and emphasised, at a later stage, multilateral diplomacy and strategic partnerships with other major powers (Cao Qing, 2007; Johnson, 2016). As Peter Ferdinand (2016: 941) notes, China's diplomacy under this doctrine was 'extremely risk-averse and largely preoccupied with maintaining domestic economic growth.' During Hu's presidency, China largely resisted the calls from the U.S. and its Western allies to step up its international commitments, as explained in the following subsection, despite its more active (but still selective) engagement in world affairs (Ferdinand, 2016). Moreover, this keeping-a-low-profile strategy successfully created a stable and favourable international environment for China's domestic development (Yan Xuetong, 2014; Zhao Xiaocun, 2006), which is evidenced by China's rapid economic growth from the 1980s to the 2000s and its current economic status as the world's second largest economy. These discursive effects (what is appropriate for China to do) and empirical/lived effects (what China's international behaviour has achieved) shored up its meek international image and strengthened the centrality of keeping-a-low-profile.

The *taoguang yanghui* doctrine did not meet many, at least forceful, challengers between the 1990s and the early 2000s; but the situation started to change in the late 2000s with more voices calling for second thoughts about the doctrine (Yan Xuetong, 2014). For defenders of *taoguang yanghui*, despite its economic success, China still faced daunting domestic challenges such as energy security, environment degradation, and the Taiwan issue (Zhao Xiaocun, 2006; Ma Licheng, 2013). A peaceful and stable external environment was still needed for China's rise in all areas, but the international environment had become more complicated. The pressures from other status-quo countries, the U.S. and Japan in particular, had been mounting (Zhao Xiaocun, 2006; Ma Licheng, 2013; Wang Jisi, 2011b); non-traditional security threats were on the rise (Wang Jisi, 2011b); even other rising powers such as India and Vietnam were getting closer to the U.S. rather than China (Wang Jisi, 2011b). Given these developments, China should, whilst upholding the *taoguang yanghui* strategy, accomplish some things (*yousuo zuowei*) *within* that strategy (Wang Yusheng, 2004; Wang Jisi, 2011b). This 'doing-some-things' element is actually part of Deng's 24-character doctrine.

For opponents, the keeping-a-low-profile doctrine should be phased out since Beijing had been emphasising its role as a constructive and responsible great power. Wang Yizhou (2008) went further and argued that it had been in fact abandoned piecemeal based on China's recent international practices such as Beijing's latest proposals of the New Security Concept and Peaceful Rise. And its achievement was problematic pertaining to China's foreign relations with other countries (Yan Xuetong, 2014). To

continue *taoguang yanghui* was, some scholar argued, to practise an ostrich policy and seek a moment's peace which ignored the elephant in the room, namely, that China had risen to the great-power status and America continued seeking to maintain its hegemony by containing a rising China (Zhao Xiaocun, 2006; Wang Yusheng, 2004). In fact, the Chinese leadership had been advised to 'give up the illusion of U.S. partnership and face squarely the profound and inevitable strategic competition' (Yuan Peng, 2010, quoted in Economist, 2010: 4). Furthermore, China's political and strategic interests were expanding with its economic interests, which demanded China to be proactive, rather than responsive, regarding international affairs, and to get some things done rather than staying under the radar (Zhao Xiaocun, 2006). After the GFC, there was a tacit understanding among Chinese elites that the West might need China more than it needed the West (Economist, 2010: 3).

   This debate was won, at least temporarily, by the proponents of keeping-a-low-profile when then-State Councillor Dai Bingguo, the highest Chinese diplomat in the Hu administration, weighed in. He (Dai Bingguo, 2010) defended China's commitment to the path of peaceful development and interpreted *taoguang yanghui* as 'keep[ing] modest and prudent, not serv[ing] as others' leader or a standard bearer and not seek[ing] expansion or hegemony … [and being] consistent with the idea of the path of peaceful development.' Put simply, *taoguang yanghui* required China to concentrate on its domestic affairs and never take the lead in world affairs whilst being cautious about the political agenda of the West. Despite all the differences between these two camps, the underlying assumption of this foreign policy debate was the problematic nature of China's identity as a low-profile participant in the international system that only passively responded to external changes. The debate reflected Beijing's growing concern about its international role – in what capacity should China act on the international stage – in the context of its increasing economic and military power. Put differently, the issue that underlay China's debate of its foreign policy direction was framed as a problem of traditional passivity on the world stage, that is, China with ever-growing material power was under-represented in the world.

4.2.2 Dreaming about the Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation

This subsection turns its focus to the second element, the concept of China Dream, which constitutes China's identity concern. It argues that the problematisation of China's traditional passivity also draws on the discourse of national rejuvenation which is the core idea of the China Dream, thus constructing the identity problem around China's desire for and, by extension, lack of due international status and respects.

   The discourse on the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is deeply intertwined with Chinese history and could be traced back to the late 19th century when Qing Dynasty, China's last dynasty, struggled to survive (Hu, 2011). Similar narratives and slogans can

be found in previous government reports and the speeches made by senior Chinese leaders. Nevertheless, the thesis concentrates on the discourses after China's Open-Door policy as they are more relevant to the current period and more evident in demonstrating the evolution of their meanings. These discourses expand constantly, from a narrowly defined domestic implication of unifying the country at the very beginning, to the main reference of adhering to socialism and the CCP's rule in the 2000s, and to the current broader view pertaining to China's international status.

During Jiang's presidential terms (1993-2003), the narrative of national rejuvenation was mostly tied with the Taiwan issue, as then-President Jiang Zemin (1995) claimed that a full unification (referring to taking Taiwan back to the mainland China) could help revitalise (*zhenxing*[34]) the Chinese nation. This particular discourse was put forward against the rise of Taiwan's independence activities, separatist attempts from Beijing's perspective. For instance, Taiwan initiated a campaign to bid for a UN seat in 1992, proposed the concept of 'one country, two political entities' (*yige guojia, liangge zhengzhi shiti*) and called for state-to-state negotiations in 1994 (CGP, 2006). Given the deterioration of China-Taiwan relations in the following years, particularly the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis (Ross, 2000), the Jiang administration worked hard at the core idea of China's full unification. In his 2000 New Year speech, for example, Jiang argued that the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation was also about building a modern, prosperous, democratic, and civilised socialist state. Later in his 2001 speech commemorating the 80th anniversary of the CCP, Jiang associated socialism with Chinese characteristics led by the CCP with the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The discourse of national rejuvenation was framed in the Jiang administration around China's domestic politics, and this particular framing was consolidated by the return of Hong Kong in 1997 and Macao in 1999 and a continuing programme to 'Sinicise' Tibet.

After Hu came to power in 2003, the narratives and definitions regarding the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation of his administration were consistent with his predecessors'. Hu's administration mainly concerned the subjects of defending the Chinese state and socialism and demanding absolute loyalty and support to the CCP's rule (Hu J., 2011). In addition, Hu began to move beyond domestic politics in terms of interpreting national rejuvenation and linked, albeit occasionally, the cause of rejuvenation with the necessity of a peaceful international environment (Hu J., 2011). Nevertheless, the relative lack of full discussion of the international implications of national rejuvenation suggests that the rejuvenation discourse before Xi was mostly about China, about what China should do within.

In Xi's presidency, the discourse of national rejuvenation was further incorporated into an all-encompassing concept of China Dream which was defined by Xi (quoted in Xinhua, 2012a) as 'the realisation of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.' Xi's

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[34] In the official English translation, revitalisation and rejuvenation are used interchangeably for *zhenxing* (not *fuxing* in the current discourse).

China Dream retained the domestic aspect of the 'national rejuvenation' discourse. That is, the Chinese path (*zhongguo daolu*), namely socialism with Chinese characteristics, is, as Xi (2013d) proclaimed, *the only way* that leads to the realisation of the China Dream. Meanwhile, Xi began to allude to the international implications of China's national rejuvenation. For instance, when speaking of the relationships between the China Dream and the world in a press release, Xi (2013e) stated that '[w]hen realised, the Chinese dream will bring peace and opportunities to the world, not turbulence or threat.' The concept of the China Dream is of significance in two aspects.

First, the national rejuvenation framed as the China Dream was explicitly tied up with China's future economic performance as it was about 'economic prosperity' (Xi, 2013e). According to Xi (2013e), China has set two centenary goals: by 2021 when the CCP marks its first centenary, China will achieve a moderately prosperous society in all aspects, 'doubl[ing] the 2010 GDP and per capita income of both urban and rural residents' (Xinhua, 2012a); and by 2049 when the PRC celebrates its first centenary, China will become 'a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, and harmonious' (Xinhua, 2012a). This was a move to operationalise an elite discourse of rejuvenation around which debates on national identity were circulating. More importantly, it connected back to China's problematisations on its economic structure. Failing to deliver these goals, in other words, failing to improve China's economic performance, means a possible derailment of the cause of national rejuvenation. In short, the link between China's economic development and China Dream has turned a general and abstract issue regarding national rejuvenation into a concrete and technical problem built on economic data that must be addressed properly.

Second, the significance of Xi's rendition of national rejuvenation as China Dream lay in its connection with China's international status, thus implicitly reflecting China's concerns about its international role. As Xi (2012b, emphasis added) proclaims, by the time China Dream is realised, 'China's economic power, comprehensive national power, international status, and influence will improve significantly; … *the Chinese nation will stand, among the world of nations, proudly with open arms*.' The reference to China's desire of and, by extension, lack of due international status was strongly implied in the occasion when China Dream was proposed. It was proposed by Xi when he visited an exhibition, entitled *The Road of Rejuvenation*, which showed the Chinese people's long march since 1840 towards the national rejuvenation (Xinhua, 2012a). Put differently, similar to the debate about China's foreign policy strategy, China problematised its lesser international status and influence, and its national rejuvenation was about how China should present and position itself on the international stage. The rhetoric of revival suggests that what China aimed for was the reclamation of the rightful place it used to have in the world, in Economy's words (2017: 142), to 'right the scales of history.'

4.2.3 Becoming a Responsible Great Power

So far, the chapter has argued that China's traditional passivity at the international stage has been problematised via the domestic debates of its foreign policy strategy and China Dream, which all pointed to China's national identity conception. This subsection concentrates on the ongoing construction of China's national identity – *fuezeren daguuo* (a responsible great power) – by linking with and differentiating from the Other. This subsection argues that during the process of identity construction, China's traditional passivity with reference to international responsibility was problematised. In other words, the problem representation of China's identity drew on the conceptualisation of 'responsibility', framing the identity problem as one concerning its passive and lesser international role. Together, foreign policy debate, China Dream, and national identity have demonstrated that China's national identity has gradually become its own foreign policy concern that needs to be addressed.

In the 18th National CCP Congress in 2012 that marked the power transition from Hu to Xi, President Hu (2012a) proclaimed that 'China [would] … play its due role of *a responsible major country* [*fuzeren daguo*].' That was the first time that China was framed publicly by Beijing as *fuzeren daguo*. This term has two embedded sub-concepts: *fuzenren* (being responsible) and *daguo* (a great power). These two sub-concepts have been employed separately by previous administrations, but their meanings have varied. These meanings show that China's state identity conceptions are social construct and have been evolving and adjusting.

First, the usage of *daguo* (a big/major/great power) to describe China has been kept as a tradition among the Chinese leadership, even when it was economically weak. But its definition, or what constitutes a *daguo*, is contested and used differently at different administrations. This indicates that the Chinese government has been changing and readjusting its self-perception in relation to its historical Self and international Other. For instance, when Mao (1938) called China (Republic of China) '*daguo*', he mainly implied that China was a big country due to its vast territory, abundant natural resources, its large population, and its large army. However, being big does not necessarily mean being powerful or influential.

During Jiang's presidency (1993-2003), *daguo* had been used more to describe China and, more importantly, its meaning had begun to be largely defined by China's perceived international influence and privileges rather than simply being big in terms of its size. *Daguo* (a great power) was not simply qualified by a large territory and population. Instead, it was qualified by its greater influence on global affairs and a bigger presence on the world stage. The change pertaining to the meaning of *daguo* could be clearly perceived through both China's discourses and practices to differentiate itself from its historical Self (a closed and weak Maoist China largely isolated from the international society) and link with other contemporary great powers (open and powerful Western countries fully integrated into the international society).

After almost two decades of its reform and opening-up policy, China gradually rid of its previous discourse of being a victim of Western invasion in its perceived 'century of national humiliation', and opt for discourses on more commitments to international institutions and the global community (Breslin, 2009; Johnston, 2007; Kim, 2003; Shambaugh, 2004/05). In other words, China purposefully distinguished itself from a Maoist China that was poor, closed, and revolutionary and started to act like a confident major power that faced no imminent external dangers (mainly foreign interventions) or internal implosion, and had resources to control and even shape its environment (Breslin, 2009; Shambaugh, 2004/05). For instance, its establishment of a full diplomatic relationship with South Korea in 1992 underscored the weakening of ideology in China's post-Cold War foreign policymaking (Kim, 2003). About the same time, the Chinese government speeded up its negotiation with its counterpart in Russia on territorial disputes and signed a series of border agreements between 1991 and 2008, eventually putting an end to their border disputes (Maxwell, 2007; Tagirova, 2017; Xinhua, 2005, 2008). Moreover, the Chinese government seldom failed to cite its refusal to devalue its currency during the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis and its $4 billion pledge to help countries hit by that crisis as an example of its responsible international behaviour (Kim, 2003).

The other way to reproduce China's identity as a major country with international influence was through linking with the Other (other great powers). For instance, Jiang argued that China needed to work with other major powers with great influence and had a responsibility to safeguard world peace and stability (Jiang Zemin, 1997). Moreover, Chinese leaders also referred to China as one of several major powers on the international stage, as Jiang did during his meeting with the U.S. President Clinton in 2000 (MOFA, 2000).

This particular definition of *daguo* was only strengthened during Hu's presidency (2003-2013) with a clear inclination toward defining it as being powerful, being in the top tier of states wielding great influence in a certain area (e.g. an economic great power) and/or most areas (a great power in a general sense). One clear evidence of this was China's public announcement of its national interest, or in its own phrase, '*hexin liyi*' (core interests). *Hexin liyi* was not simply an erratic political slogan; instead, it meant 'critical issues on which there is very little room, if any, for negotiation' (Wong, 2015: A10).

Through such practices as re-establishing its diplomatic relations with other states and explicitly drawing a line on certain issues, China's identity as a great power defined by its international influence became sedimented and reproduced in the Chinese state and was made manifest in its later practices and discourses. In other words, China's identity problem was steadily framed as a foreign policy problem with reference to its international status.

Second, the idea of *fuzeren* (being responsible) began to gain momentum and be associated with China in the Hu administration. In the early 2000s, there was a wide-

ranging discussion of China's power and responsibility among scholars against the backdrop of growing concerns that China posed a significant threat to the West (Kim, 2003; Zhang and Austin, 2001). But the first well-known association of the term '*fuzeren*' with China appeared in the address of Robert Zoellick, then-Deputy U.S. Secretary of State, before the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations in 2005. He urged China to 'become a *responsible stakeholder*' that 'not only adjusts to the international rules, … but also joins us [the U.S.] and others to address the challenges,' and 'to sustain the international system.' (Zoellick, 2005: 7, 13, emphasis in original). Put differently, from Washington's perspective, China should step up to the leadership role, given its growing economic weight in the world, and join the West to manage and maintain the system. The implied meaning is that China should start bearing more costs for the greater good.

Indeed, the Chinese leadership accepted, or linked itself with, the idea of China as a responsible country. At the same time, it rejected Zoellick's definition of responsibility that solely focused on China's international obligations. Instead, the Chinese government defined 'responsibility' with reference to its own internal economic, political and societal issues. All the responsibilities were not objective but constructed in the course of (re)producing dominant identity conceptions. Beijing situated the definition within the boundary of the traditional Chinese foreign policy discourse. For instance, being responsible was also about protecting its sovereignty and security (Yang Jiechi, 2012b) and committing itself to a path of peaceful development (Li Keqiang, 2010; Wen, 2005).

Furthermore, China linked its own societal stability and sustained economic growth with its place in and responsibility towards the international society. It constantly reminded the world that being responsible also meant to take good care of its domestic affairs. After the 2008 GFC, and against the rising trend of anti-globalisation, for instance, Wen (2008) rebuffed the idea that China should take on more obligations by claiming that keeping China's own financial and capital markets stable and continuing growing its economy steadily was China's biggest contribution to the world, which was an extension of the *taoguang yanghui* doctrine. Xi (2012a), then-Vice President, summarised it well that 'the most important way to be responsible to the world is to manage its own affairs well.' This clearly corresponded to China's keeping-a-low-profile doctrine emphasising domestic economic development.

Given that, the term 'a responsible power' remained open-ended before Xi took power as the Chinese president. It was open-ended because adjectives (e.g. 'developing') were often added to such key terms as power and country, to modify them, usually circumscribing their meanings (Zeng and Breslin, 2016). On different occasions, Beijing used, for instance, 'a responsible *great* power' (Hu, 2012a; Wen, 2012; Yang Jiechi, 2012b), 'a responsible *major developing* state' (Ma, 2012; Xi, 2009), 'a responsible country' (Yang, 2010), and 'a participant, a maintainer, and a supporter of the international system' (Wen, 2006; Xi, 2012a; Yang Jiechi, 2012a). Put simply, the existence of the variants of 'a responsible power' suggests that there were multiple competing discourses on China's

national identity and that Beijing's acquiescence to the identity of 'a responsible great power' demonstrated that it has already begun to construct its national identity with reference to a changing international context.

Meanwhile, China's identity of a responsible power was built on its implicit differentiation from what were perceived as too many international responsibilities, such as sustaining the international system that could over-stretch China (Wen, 2008). The differentiating move could be also understood as suppressing alternative discourses, often seen by Beijing as negative and dangerous. Some scholars claim that Zoellick's idea of responsibility is 'an arrogant, thin-veiled attempt to … strengthen the United States' own hegemonic grip on the global power by offering Beijing a secondary, subordinate role in a U.S.-led great power consortium' (Baum, 2005: 19) and/or to prevent China's rise with unnecessary burdens (Larson, 2015). In other words, this joining-the-management-team argument advanced by Zoellick belittled, for those who accede to an essentially nationalist position, China as a runner doing the U.S.'s bidding.

China's differentiating move was, for instance, apparent in China's reaction to the concept of G2, functioning as a 'caucus' that is 'kept informal and … unremarked on' (Bergsten, 2009: 169) and where the U.S. and China can discuss global economic issues and problems. The idea of G2 endowed China with a great power status, 'a true partner in managing global economic affairs' (Bergsten, 2008: 68), which it had been always pursuing. As Bergsten (2008: 64) argues, '[o]nly such a "G2" approach will do justice, and be seen to do justice, to China's new role as a global economic superpower and hence as a legitimate architect and steward of the international economic order.' China felt flattered at the beginning, but soon treated it with suspicion, and then publicly opposed the idea (Zeng and Breslin, 2016). As Wen Jiaobao said in the press conference of a China-EU summit in Prague in 2009, '[s]ome say that world affairs will be managed solely by China and the US. I think that view is baseless and wrong' (quoted in Cong, 2009).

Over the years prior to Xi, China's national identity had been evolving. It started from piecemeal changes regarding the meaning of *daguo* (a big/major/great power) which was defined as a powerful state with a large international influence. In the early 2000s, it embraced the idea of a responsible stakeholder, but was suspicious of responsibility defined in an international context. Then by the end of the Hu administration, Beijing formally articulated the concept of *fuzeren daguo* (a responsible great power). This evolving process is very telling in terms of the problematisation of China's national identity.

First, to all appearances, before Xi's presidency, national identity was a major foreign policy concern for China as it had been conflicted about its international role as a responsible great power (*fuzeren daguo*). But China was particularly cautious about the definition of 'responsibility'. As demonstrated above, China defined it as being responsible to both its own citizens and the international community. China took on its due international responsibilities and attended to the interests of other countries, as Hu (2012a) declared that 'China will continue to keep in mind … the common interests of

the people of all countries, get more actively involved in international affairs … and work jointly with other countries to meet global challenges.'

Second, China problematised its traditional passive role on the international stage and framed gradually its national identity along the line of a responsible great power. This identity problematisation was not only shared by the debates of the keeping-a-low-profile doctrine and the national rejuvenation, but also connected to the problematisation of China's economic structure. In this context, China's traditional passivity was defined as China's under-representation on the world stage and inadequate action in addressing its domestic problems. In other words, China was a lesser international player because China could have contributed more to the debate of global issues and done a better job in pursuing a balanced Chinese economy. As Xi (2012a) argued, 'the most important way to be responsible to the world is to manage its own affairs well.'

Meanwhile, the evolution of China's identity conception is indicative of the contingent nature of the meaning of *fuzeren daguo*. The dominant self-perception during the Hu administration had resulted from a series of interactions between Beijing (Self) and, mainly, the West (Other) and the process of inclusion and exclusion. To be specific, Beijing incorporated the concept of 'international influence' into the meaning of *daguo* alongside its thriving economy and closer integration into the West-dominated international society; it accepted, but severely limited, the international aspect of responsibility in the construction of a responsible great power. More importantly, the politics of identity continues to be a central object of thought in the Chinese leadership and influence the Chinese leaders' perception on both internal and external issues.

Third, the problematisation of passivity embedded in the conceptualisation of China Dream and the debate of the keeping-a-low-profile strategy culminated in China's national identity conception. As argued in Chapter Two, from the post-structuralist perspective, identity is performative and constitutes state behaviour. In this case, China's national identity conception of a responsible great power produced a particular subject-position, a country that was capable of and committed to delivering on what it saw as its responsibilities. The articulation of this identity has already set the boundaries for China in terms of what she could do. Put simply, 'a great responsible power' has prescribed China's behaviour that must be in line with its definition of responsibility. Moreover, as identity is ongoing, it needs specific behaviour to substantiate it, to reproduce identity(ies). In that sense BRI-as-assemblage was productive of this iteration of 'China' insofar as it produced and reproduced this core 'great responsible power' identity.

4.3 Conclusion

Since policymaking begins with problematising acts that frame issues into problems or produce policy concerns, this chapter has concentrated on the politics of problematisation regarding BRI. It starts with the problematisation of China's economic structure with reference to economic imbalance and excess capacity. Economic imbalance caught Beijing's attention when the PRC was established, but soon this issue was shelved among a series of economic and political movements. The existence of the phenomenon was even justified at the early stage of China's Open-Door policy. Similarly, industrial overcapacity was problematised twice and then de-problematised. Both phenomena began to be taken seriously since the late 2000s and officially framed as serious problems in 2013. The second section turned to the problematisation of China's traditional positivity which permeates its foreign policy debate, China Dream, and national identity conception. The presentation of the contested problematising process of China's economic and identity concerns demonstrated the discursive construction and, more importantly, contingent nature of China's economic and identity problems and, by extension, BRI as a solution.

This chapter argued that prior to the emergence of BRI, the phenomena concerning China's economic structure and national identity gradually became its own *foreign policy concerns* and were framed as problems through a concatenation of actors, discourse, practices, and events. It also argued that these so-called problems were not simply backgrounds or variables that were separated from BRI. They were part of BRI and constituted BRI by giving meanings to its emergence and continued to shape the boundary of BRI assemblage by interacting with other elements. Put differently, this chapter shows that before 2013, the ideas and material conditions in the form of problematisations, upon which BRI eventually came to rely and through which it was made possible, were already visible. Without critically engaging with these problem representations, any analyses of BRI are limited, and fail to understand how a global BRI has come to be.

In the next chapter, the thesis turns to explore the second assembling period between October 2013 and March 2015. Specifically, it investigates the ways in which an ordered two-dimensional BRI emerged out of two separate (sub-)regional initiatives, that is, the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.

Chapter 5 Assembling BRI: Towards an Ordered Two-Dimensional Initiative (2013-2015)

As argued in Chapter Three, problematisation is key to the formation of policy assemblage. It acts not only as the first step of starting an assembling process, but also as a critical element that binds other elements together. Other elements directly speak to or challenge problematisations, or they interact with one another via problematisations since the latter 'develops the conditions in which possible responses can be given' and 'defines the elements that will constitute what the different solutions attempt to respond to' (Foucault,1997: 118). Problematisations, that is, things framed as problems, are ongoing processes that condition the interactions of different actants.

With this chapter, the focus of the thesis moves to BRI assemblages since late 2013 and explores to what degree and in what way the principal problematisations of China's economic structure and national identity priori to BRI were woven into the BRI assemblages. The chapter aims to show by what processes in which heterogeneous elements worked together to deliver an ordered assemblage with two dimensions.

In Beijing's official narrative concerning BRI's origin in late 2013, there was no BRI, but Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR). In this period, SREB and MSR were separate (sub-)regional initiatives that involved different types of actors and activities at different levels. As their enactment went on, however, BRI gradually came to be through the interactions of different discourses, events, and practices which included issuing the standard discourses on BRI, establishing new institutions, coordinating with the strategies of other countries, and regulating the involvement of local entities. Simply, this chapter presents the disparate elements and their interactions and effects constituted BRI through the exercise of power (understood as productive and disciplinary).

Hence, this chapter argues that the BRI presented in the 2015 *Vision and Actions* as a two-dimensional initiative of economic cooperation developed from two loosely coupled (sub-)regional initiatives of SREB and MSR. From an assemblage perspective, the territory of the 2015 BRI assemblage (what elements were included, and by extension, excluded) and its identity (an ordered two-dimensional initiative) emerged out of two different assemblages (SREB and MSR), resulting from a series of (de-)territorialising moves enabled by power in the forms of discursive construction, institutional design, and political categorisation.

To make this argument, this chapter is divided into two sections. It begins with the disorderly BRI assemblage by turning to multiple agents (agents as different levels), different names for and, by extension, different conceptualisations of BRI, all sorts of activities in the name of BRI, and sporadic BRI projects. At this stage, what can be found from BRI practices was not consensus, order, well-articulated implementations; rather it

was 'chaos', disorganised implementation, and controversies. The second section deals with the ways in which those two disorderly SREB and MSR evolved and were made to be one 'ordered' BRI.

Caveats are in order. First, an 'ordered' assemblage here does not mean that this is the ultimate form of the BRI assemblage. The word 'ordered' employed here is to describe the character of the 2015 BRI assemblage that was more coherent and had clearer boundaries than previous emerging assemblages concerning SREB and MSR that were less consistent and definite. Second, even though the two periods covered in this chapter and the next respectively are presented separately, the thesis recognises that some events, phenomena, and their effects from the first period extend into the second. In other words, although this chapter has presented the fragmented state of different assemblages and their ordered form separately, the thesis does not subscribe to the view that these two are completely separate processes. They were intertwined.

5.1 Amorphous Assemblages

By investigating actors, events, discourses, and activities immediately after Xi's two famous speeches, this chapter argues that Beijing's articulation of a cohesive BRI initiative between 2013 and 2015 masked what was a fragmented and amorphous policy initiative. Its lack of a definite form, in other words, a clear definition of BRI, is evidenced by contradictions within the origin of BRI, various actors at all levels, no single centralised commanding authority, limited achievement, and multiple names (or conceptualisations). This contrasts with Beijing's linear, progressive, and teleological narrative of the origin and development of BRI, that is, BRI as a coherent strategy comprising SREB and MSR took off smoothly. From an assemblage perspective, therefore, this 'messy' stage evidences contingency, multi-causality, multiple discourses, contestations and problematisations that concern a global BRI assemblage.

This section begins with the contestations within Beijing's linear explanation of BRI's origin. Then, it explores the achievements concerning BRI and its multiple names. It concludes that BRI assemblage possesses no particular or essential kind or character, and that the truth about BRI, a global BRI, is 'made' to be.

5.1.1 Contradictions in the Official Origin of BRI

As shown in Chapter One, the CCP narrative regarded Xi's two speeches that introduced the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) respectively as the beginning of BRI. So does much scholarly literature, particularly that in Chinese, in which hardly any alternative narratives about the origin of BRI can be

found (Chapter One). Their accounts of the origin are, however, always simple and perfunctory. Other than claiming BRI began with SREB and MSR, these accounts have provided few details about the contents of and the relations between SREB and MSR, as if both were organically interconnected. As *Vision and Actions* (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015: 4, emphasis added) summarises, '[w]hen Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Central Asia and Southeast Asia in September and October of 2013, he raised the *initiative* of jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21ˢᵗ-Century Maritime Silk Road.' In short, for Beijing, BRI existed as one initiative with two components in 2013.

This section interrogates this particular narrative of BRI's origin and raises important but often ignored details, directly derived from those two speeches, to demonstrate that BRI was not the original proposal and that SREB and MSR were *separate*, to a certain degree, incoherent *(sub-)regional* projects without detailed contents. In other words, by revealing some contradictions in the CCP's linear and teleological explanation of BRI's origin, this section demonstrates that there were possibilities of alternative development for SREB and MSR and that BRI as one coherent initiative was a political construct built on not least the marginalisation of the initial thoughts of SREB and MSR.

First, SREB and MSR aimed at different (sub-)regions and their geographical areas were smaller than those presented in *Vision and Actions* in 2015 (which included Africa), let alone the latest version of BRI articulated in 2017 (which included Latin America). The geographical area of SREB broadly referred to Eurasia, as Xi (2013a) suggested that Central Asian countries and China should take an innovative approach '[t]o forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand development space in the Eurasian region.' But he (Xi, 2013a) at that time only explicitly mentioned three subregions, that is, East Asia, West Asia, and South Asia, when speaking of building a regional transport network. In other words, SREB was designed as a regional strategy largely targeting Asian countries. Moreover, the geographical area of MSR was even smaller, only covering China and Southeast Asia as it was subjected to a bigger project aiming at binding China and ASEAN countries together (Xi, 2013b). However, Xi did not address the relationship between these two in his speeches. Therefore, Beijing's linear explanation of the BRI's origin is questionable and their connections can only be speculated and 'added' afterwards. In short, it is a retrospective construction of a whole.

Second, SREB was proposed as an independent project, separated and distinct from MSR, with five key areas of cooperation, covering policy, road connectivity, trade, monetary circulation, and people-to-people exchanges (Xi, 2013a). But there were no specific areas of cooperation identified in MSR, only trade facilitation and infrastructure linkage being strongly indicated under the name of 'develop[ing] maritime partnership' (Xi, 2013b). Moreover, no funding agencies were determined for SREB (Xi, 2013a) whilst MSR was supposed to be funded by China-ASEAN Maritime Cooperation Fund established in 2011 (Xi, 2013b).

Third, and more importantly, MSR was just one component of Xi's broader vision of 'build[ing] a more closely-knit China-ASEAN community of common destiny (*zhongguo-dongmeng mingyun gongtongti*) so as to bring more benefits to both China and ASEAN and to the people in the region' (Xi, 2013b). Beijing's vision for a China-ASEAN shared future also included different projects to increase mutual trust in political and strategic issues, to strengthen security cooperation, and to promote cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts (Xi, 2013b). In other words, MSR with a focus on trade and infrastructure development originally ran parallel to other China-ASEAN programmes such as China-ASEAN Defence Ministers' Informal Meeting (established in 2009) and China-ASEAN Year of Cultural Exchanges held in 2014 (Xi, 2013b). This is, however, different from its later practice that treated MSR as an independent project parallel to SREB and its later description as part of BRI which has incorporated the aspect of cultural and people-to-people communication.

To summarise, at the outset, SREB and MSR were two separate (sub-)regional projects. The former as an independent project idea targeted a deeper Asian integration (Southeast Asia was excluded) through trade, transport, and people exchanges, whilst the latter was situated within a broader regional programme exclusively targeting ASEAN countries. However, other than broadly describing the goals of SREB and MSR, Xi did not provide any other details concerning those two projects such as cooperation mechanisms, specific participants, capital involved, and their relations with each other. No policy papers on SREB and MSR had been issued before the *Vision and Actions* in May 2015.

The lack of content details and a dedicated governmental agency implies that SREB and MSR when proposed were not as well-organised or fully developed as they are often assumed. In other words, there were no standardised practices regarding, for example, what counted as SREB and MSR projects, and how they should be carried out. This corresponds to the actual practices of SREB and MSR, as elaborated below, which were sporadic and involved multiple agents acting upon their own will. From an assemblage perspective, a variety of elements regarding BRI was yet to be held together. To emphasise, evidence shows that there was no BRI at this point, but two distinct assemblages concerning SREB and MSR respectively that had different elements and identities.

5.1.2 Fragmented Implementation and Limited Achievements

Right after the announcement of SREB and MSR, both central and local governments as well as non-state actors across the spectrum started to engage in a variety of activities concerning SREB and MSR. These activities were diverse. At the state level, activities focused on strategic planning within China, and policy coordination with other countries. At the local level, activities tended to be more pragmatic. The understandings

of SREB and BRI and the ways of enacting them at the local level were more diversified than, and sometimes contradictory to, those at the central level.

There is a literature on BRI and China's economic statecraft that discusses this fragmented and decentralised nature of activities, as discussed in Chapter One (He, 2019; Jones and Zeng, 2019; Yu Jie, 2018). It has identified and, to a certain degree, explained this fragmented or messy character of the two projects. However, it never explained how that fragmentation constituted SREB, MSR, and later BRI. Put differently, an assemblage analysis not just identifies these inconsistencies and controversies but also explores how they relate to the subsequent truths about BRI.

First, at the central level, both SREB and MSR were approved at the third plenary session of the 18th Central Committee of the CCP in November 2013 to be part of Beijing's overall effort to deepen its domestic economic reforms and boost its Open-Door policy (Zhu, 2017). As *The Decision of the CCCPC on Some Major Issues Concerning Comprehensively Deepening the Reform and Opening-up* (CCCPC, 2013, emphasis added) declared, 'we [the Chinese government] will … work hard to build a Silk Road Economic Belt and a Maritime Silk Road, so as to form *a new pattern of all-round opening*.' The following month, Xi called for strategic planning for SREB and MSR to promote the infrastructural links within the Eurasian region at the annual Central Economic Work Conference, a conference on economic affairs at the highest level held by the Central Committee of the CCP and the State Council (Tian, 2015). Xi's effort was echoed by Premier Li who in the *2014 Government Work Report* (GWR) proclaimed that SREB and MSR must be promoted *alongside* other key regional projects such as the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and that China must speed up its cooperation with neighbouring countries in infrastructure linkage in terms of both specific projects and policies.

However, these central-level domestic conferences do not conceal the fact that there was no specialised government agency designated to manage day-to-day affairs related to SREB and MSR because those conferences are only annual events for senior leaders to discuss general issues. The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) was taking the lead in preparing a few SREB and MSR workshops, supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). But there is no evidence showing that they were the leading agencies for Xi's two regional projects. There is no publicly available data that could help to pinpoint the exact date of the establishment of a specialised BRI agency. But that particular governmental agency, the Leading Small Group (*lingdao xiaozu*, LSG) for BRI, convened its first meeting in February 2015, as explained in the following subsection (BRI Office, n.d.). It is reasonable to presume, therefore, that prior to that date, there had been no specialised agency to manage SREB and MSR.

The central-level domestic promotion of SREB and MSR testified to the changing of SREB and MSR assemblage in three ways. To start with, MSR was elevated to be an *independent* regional project equivalent to SREB, and both were included as national strategies for domestic development. In other words, SREB and MSR, proposed as

regional projects, began to be connected under the name of national development strategies. Moreover, by early 2014, SREB, MSR, CPEC, and BCIM were still individual projects, or in assemblage terms, separate regional assemblages before they were all integrated into one BRI assemblage. Lastly, a specialised central government agency was not a component of SREB and MSR assemblages. (what is the point?)

Second, at the local level, governments began vying for a seat at the table. However, those seemingly organised and coherent central-level practices, as shown above, have not been passed down to the local level. Instead, local activities in terms of their understandings and ways of enacting SREB and MSR could only be characterised as incoherent, disorganised, and even contradictory. This is partly because the only documents on SREB and MSR at that time were Xi's two speeches, but even they had no details. Without detailed guidance, participants had plenty of room to manoeuvre and to interpret these two projects based on their local needs. To some degree, their interpretations transformed these regional projects (serving more than China) into domestic projects. To actively promote or aggrandise senior leaders' pet projects, in this case SREB and MSR, is a common practice among provincial or municipal party leaders and the surest way for them to curry favour from their bosses and prepare for their own future career advancement (He, 2019). At the same time, doing so allowed those party bosses to access newly available central funds to pursue their own local projects or relaunch their previous dying/dead ones under the name of SREB and MSR. As shown below, SREB and MSR were overused by local governments and some domestic projects (repackaged from on-going or previous failed ones) were called off by Beijing (Interview 02, 2018).

For example, Zhengzhou, a city in Central China, established a SREB working group named *Leading Small Group on Gaining Access to the National Strategy of New Silk Road Economic Belt*, aiming to turn itself into a logistics hub and a trading centre in the Belt region by utilising SREB (Liu Yong, 2014; Wang and Zhong, 2014). In this case, Zhengzhou focused more on trade. Moreover, the full name of that working group also demonstrates the vagueness of SREB because the words 'strategy' and 'new' were not part of the central government's original discourse and later were specifically required by Beijing to be removed from all formal narratives. Trying to catch Beijing's attention, another inland city, Xi'an, began to promote itself as an indispensable part of SREB not only within China but also overseas. Three weeks after Xi's proposal of SREB in 2013, Xi'an together with other 12 cities from six countries[35] issued *Xi'an Declaration on Jointly Building SREB* with the goal of strengthening their cooperation in mostly trade and cultural exchanges (SCIO, 2013; Wang Gang, 2014; Wang and Feng, 2013). Later that year, Xi'an put forward its own implementation plan entitled *Action Plan to Advance the Building of the New Starting Point of SREB* to transform itself into a cosmopolitan city with

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[35] Signatory parties include: seven cities from China, two from Italy, one from Armenia, one from India, one from Portugal, and one from South Korea.

global influences (Liu Yong, 2014; Wang Gang, 2014; Wang and Zhong, 2014). Either the name of the city-level working group or the title of the city-level plan has demonstrated that SREB was an independent cross-regional strategy and that BRI was yet to arrive. Meanwhile, these local activities prioritised their own local interest which was at odds with the intention of two regional projects proposed in 2013, that is, to serve the interest of a transnational region.

If these different interpretations given by local governments could only demonstrate the vagueness of SREB and MSR at their early stage, then domestic competition about the status/position of individual cities and provinces within these two projects is evidence of their indeterminacy and incoherence. For instance, a few local governments soon proclaimed to be the 'core areas' of SREB and MSR, calling for the strategic repositioning of their provinces. The Party Secretary of Xinjiang, a northwest region bordering Central Asia, declared that Xinjiang must strive to be the core area in SREB, to be specific, the hub for transport, business and trade, finance, culture, and technology (China Daily, 2014).

The most compelling example of how indeterminant SREB and MSR were at this stage is the debate about which city is the start of either land-based or maritime Silk Roads. Several local governments from coastal to inland cities began their campaigns to name themselves the start of either Silk Road (Liu Yong, 2014; Wang, Xu, and Li, 2015). For instance, other than Xi'an and Luoyang which had long been rivals for the start of ancient land-based Silk Road, and now SREB, there were three more contenders: Zhengzhou, Lianyungang, and Chongqing (Liu Yong, 2014). Zhengzhou, the provincial capital of Henan Province, should be named as the starting point of SREB, as argued by the Party Secretary of Henan Province, because of its strategic location in Central China connecting China's East and West (Liu Yong, 2014). Lianyungang government made a similar argument and aimed to become the Eastern bridgehead of SREB, on the basis of its advantages as a port city (Liu Yong, 2014). Chongqing made its most ambitious move by tabling a proposal, during two sessions (*lianghui*)[36] in March 2014, to designate Chongqing as the starting point of SREB so as to tap its potential in contributing to both SREB and Yangtze River Economic Belt (Liu Yong, 2014; Wang and Zhong, 2014). The vague, indeterminate, and incoherent nature of SREB and MSR implies that rather than being a fixed, centralised, top-down grand design, what SREB and MSR were (and by implication what BRI was to become) was open, contingent and contested.

To make the situation more complicated, non-governmental actors joined as well. As far as this thesis can determine, the first public activity concerning SREB was a cultural programme launched in Beijing in October 2013 entitled '*Retracing the Silk Road*' and sponsored by the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (Ma Haiyan, 2013). Another example is the establishment of University Alliance of the

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[36] China's 'two sessions' refer to its largest annual political event, the annual meetings of the national legislature (National People's Congress) and the top political advisory body (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference).

Silk Road (UASR), a non-governmental and non-profit organisation to promote international cooperation in higher education.

All these, either the episodes of domestic rivalry or the ostensibly enthusiastic responses from non-governmental actors, are evidence of the contested nature of SREB and MSR. Put simply, it seemed that in this period everyone and everything could be part of them one way or another. That said, these activities must not be presumed unproblematically as the natural results of SREB and MSR. As shown below, some of SREB and MSR projects were repackaged projects. Meanwhile, these activities also are the first actors that have shaped both the contents and meaning of SREB and MSR. In other words, from the perspective of assemblage, the process of territorialisation (and homogenisation) of SREB and MSR seemed to be unfolding. These effects are reflected by the BRI assemblages that have emerged later.

Third, at the state level, Beijing's advocacy of SREB and MSR also crossed its national borders, which was consistent with its original design, that is, cross-regional projects. China's overseas achievement came a bit later than its domestic one and its first breakthrough was made in Russia. Both sides agreed in February 2014 to coordinate specific projects in SREB and MSR with Moscow's Euro-Asia Railways (Tian, 2015). The first physical project was the China-Kazakhstan logistics terminal (Xinhua, 2014e). This was designed under the SREB framework to distribute goods from Central Asian countries to the rest of the world and went into operation in a Chinese port of Lianyungang in May 2014 (Xinhua, 2014e). In the Middle East, Xi expressed China's willingness to deepen cooperation with Arab states in oil and gas, infrastructure, trade and investment, nuclear power, aerospace and satellites, and new energy in June 2014 (Tian, 2016). Then, China made some progress in Southeast Asia where Thailand approved a draft MOU between Thailand and China on railway cooperation in December 2014 (Wang Xiaofeng, 2014). As discussed earlier, SREB and MSR practices at the state-level were largely confined to strategic planning either at China's central level or between China and its neighbouring states. At that time, SREB and MSR were often discussed separately.

All these practices, central or local, domestic or regional, show that SREB and MSR started with limited achievement (in the sense of real projects on the ground) in Asia, which was accompanied by occasional debates on SREB and MSR at domestic top-level meetings, despite Beijing's self-praise for its orderly implementation and great success. In fact, Beijing had to reframe some previous projects as SREB and/or MSR projects, making them sound like a coherent and well-developed strategy. For instance, originally, promoted alongside with SREB and MSR (GWR, 2014), the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor were later reframed as two of six economic corridors under the name of BRI (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015).

A page on the Renminwang site (people.cn)[37], a website affiliated to the CCP's news outlet *People's Daily*, can illustrate this point as well. The page has listed the BRI projects between 2013 and 2016. But a closer scrutiny of some early projects listed there indicates otherwise. These so-called BRI projects could clearly be dated prior to SREB and MSR, and there was no trace of BRI in those news coverages at that time. It has listed, for instance, China's delivery of a remote sensing satellite system to Venezuela as a BRI project. But according to a news report, it happened on 4th September 2013, a few days earlier than SREB (7th September 2013) (Wu Zhihua, 2013). Another example is China-Myanmar Gas Pipeline that started in 2010 and was completed in June 2013 (Renminwang, 2013b), but it is still listed as a BRI project. Put differently, BRI-related activities at this early stage were sporadic and unsystematic both inside and outside China.

In short, the BRI assemblage in the form of SREB and MSR was amorphous, in other words, yet to materialise, where different actors such as local governments, companies, and, to a lesser degree, foreign states acted based on their understandings and needs. These actors were forces that shaped what would become BRI. All these activities have demonstrated that the assemblage was still indeterminate, so was the truth about it.

5.1.3 Many Names, Many Conceptualisations

The third major evidence that demonstrates the amorphous character of SREB and MSR and, by extension, the contingent nature of a global BRI is the indeterminate relations between SREB, MSR and BRI, and the existence of different versions of their names. The questions in 2013 and 2014 were: was BRI simply an umbrella term to address two separate projects (SREB and MSR), or was it one coherent project composing those two? How should BRI be addressed and conceptualised? Was it a strategy, an initiative, or something else? This subsection argues that the existence of multiple names for these grand projects correlated with the fluidity of their meaning and conceptualisations, and the amorphous character of the assemblages that constituted them.

As mentioned earlier, SREB and MSR were proposed separately, and no evidence in Xi's original speeches indicated that they were two parts of one initiative (project, programme or strategy). According to official public records, the first time that SREB and MSR were mentioned together as '*yidai yilu*' (literal translation: One Belt, One Road; the Belt and the Road) was when Foreign Minister Wang Yi (2013c) called for greater effort to bring out initial achievements for these *two* projects to further boost China's economic diplomacy. But the word '*changyi*' (initiative) was still missing from Wang's reference. Based on the context of that speech, it is fair to conclude that the phrase '*yidai*

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[37] http://world.people.com.cn/GB/8212/191616/409002/index.html

yilu' was used largely for a rhetorical purpose – to be less of a mouthful (but still awkward in English), and that SREB and MSR were still perceived as separate projects.

Until the second half of 2014, SREB and MSR were most often spoken of as two separate projects, and sometimes only one of them was referred to. In his address to the College of Europe in 2014, for instance, Xi (2014f) called for the inclusion of SREB, *not MSR*, into the framework of China-Europe Cooperation. Considering Xi's message could be interpreted as evidence for SREB as one part of BRI, the thesis has identified additional evidence that demonstrates unequivocally that SREB and MSR were treated as separate projects by senior Chinese officials. Put differently, at the beginning, BRI was not *one* coherent project as it has subsequently been framed. For example, at the 2014 Boao Forum for Asia, Yang Jiechi (2014a, emphasis added), then State Councillor in charge of foreign affairs, unambiguously stated that '[t]he *two initiatives* … known for short as the Belt and the Road, were put forth by President Xi Jinping ... [and] [t]he Belt and Road *initiatives* … fully reflect the commitment to mutual trust and mutual benefit.' Another piece of compelling evidence comes from the very person who has proposed BRI. When addressing the Indian Council of World Affairs in September 2014, Xi (2014e, emphasis added) argued that *'[t]he "Belt" and "Road" initiatives* … are precisely aimed at strengthening connectivity among countries along the routes of the traditional land and maritime Silk Roads.' In short, all these examples have demonstrated that BRI framed and understood today as a single entity did not exist as such, and SREB and MSR were two separate (maybe connected) initiatives.

This indeterminate situation extended into the rendition of the name of SREB, MSR, and BRI. How should they be addressed? Other than '*changyi*' (initiative), other designations such as '*zhanlue*' (strategy), '*dazhanlue*' (grand strategy), '*jihua*' (plan), and '*zhengce*' (policy) were employed to refer to SREB and MSR. For instance, BRI was explicitly addressed as one of three national strategies in the 2014 Central Economic Work Conference (Xinhua, 2014b).[38] These different designations were most often seen among local-level governments, and the word 'strategy' was often seen in academic journals. The name of SREB, MSR, and BRI is far beyond a rhetorical question. How they should be addressed, as demonstrated in the following section, implicated a strong political message and implied China's conceptualisation of them. Thus, the existence of multiple names was indicative that Beijing was not clear about their position among all its policies and strategies. Simply, multiple names showed the messy and, possibly, conflicting conceptualisations of these initiatives, or projects or strategies.

Overall, this section has demonstrated that contrary to China's official portrayal of a linear development of BRI between 2013 and 2015, BRI was yet to emerge. Instead, it was a messy and complex development with a lot of confusion and jostling around SREB and MSR. These two separate regional projects were interpreted by different actors in different ways, and achievements associated with both were very limited. Different

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[38] The other two are Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei Coordinated Development Plan and Yangtze River Economic Belt.

names and, by extension, conceptualisations were given to them. Put differently, the sheer dimension and, sometimes, highly abstract character of SREB and MSR invited different interpretations and appropriations by different actors. In the end, what counted as SREB and MSR projects was 'a subjective and ultimately political question' (Nordin and Weissmann, 2018: 241).

5.2 BRI Assemblage on the Horizon: Reconceptualising, Organising and Categorising

This section continues the investigation of the assembling process of BRI between 2013 and 2015 and turns to the emergence of an ordered BRI. It argues that an ordered two-dimensional Eurasian initiative for cooperation emerged out of SREB and MSR through a series of such ordering or homogenising moves as reconceptualisation, institutional design, and political categorisation.

In the thesis, ordering/homogenising is conceptualised as a process in which similar meanings are given to different objects, events or phenomena so as to be rendered intelligible and coherent. In this case, ordering refers to the process in which the BRI assemblage took a particular formation and its power was reflected through not just purposeful activities but also their unintended effects. Meanwhile, it does not mean that the assembling process was solely a top-down process in which the Chinese government imposed its thinking of BRI upon local actors. On the contrary, the ordering process included a bottom-up procedure in which local actors influenced the meaning and, by extension, boundary of BRI through their own interpretations and practices.

As demonstrated in the previous section, SREB and MSR assemblages included the central and local Chinese governments, non-state actors, actors from other states, limited SREB- and MSR-related practices and projects, and multiple discourses of names and conceptualisations. All these elements are credited in the assembling process (Chapter Four). But at this stage, the Chinese central government played the most critical role and started to intervene and cohere different elements such as discourses, state actors and institutions after months of staying 'inactive'. The role of the Chinese central government was reflected through different strategies that included discursive reconceptualisation, institutional design, and political categorisation.

5.2.1 Reconceptualising SREB and MSR Through Discourse

The first principal instrument to order SREB and MSR assemblages is through re-conceptualisation. Here Beijing relied on diverse discourses that concerned what these

two projects should be called, the narration of the Silk Road, and the problematisations of its economic structure and national identity. In other words, BRI emerged out of SREB and MSR through the articulation, assemblage and recombination of different ideas about the name, the concept of Silk Road, and its underlying problem representations.

5.2.1.1 One Initiative with Two Components

As argued in the previous section, the indeterminacy of SREB and MSR assemblages at the beginning was partially manifested through the ambiguous relationships between and among SREB, MSR, and BRI, and the various titles such as strategy, project, and policy that had been employed to describe them. Being aware of this messy situation, particularly sensitive to a growing phenomenon of naming SREB and MSR as strategies (Interview 02, 2018), Beijing began to intervene through discursive construction. It tried to shape the amorphous state of SREB and MSR and bring some sense of order into them by labelling them as a single *changyi* (initiative). In other words, a BRI assemblage began to emerge, or was made possible, through a combination of discursive reframing and reworking centred on SREB and MSR that legitimised certain discourses whilst delegitimising others.

First, the central government started to use *changyi* (initiative) when referring to SREB and MSR, and later BRI whilst refraining itself from other words such as *zhanlue* (strategy). The first official record appeared in Yang Jiechi's 2014a (emphasis added) speech where he referred to SREB and MSR as '*two initiatives.*' And in September 2014, Xi (2014e, emphasis added) referred to his own proposal as 'the "Belt" and "Road" *initiatives.*' The deliberate employment of the word *changyi* (initiative) had a powerful impact in ordering/homogenising SREB and MSR.

The immediate effect is that other Chinese officials followed suit by keeping their discourse concerning SREB and MSR in line with Beijing's, and before long, they only employed *changyi* to describe these two projects. This was the end, at least at the Chinese government level, of the phenomenon of multiple descriptors for these projects. At the same time, to ensure the Party line was observed, Beijing censored all domestic academic papers (Interview 03, 2018) and placed mandatory approval procedures for international academic activities (He, 2019). The 'consensus' could create an image of a unified Chinese front, in other words, political stability, in support of SREB and MSR (He, 2019). This created a sense of orderliness in terms of the typology of SREB and MSR among all practitioners.

The other effect is closely related to the meanings of *changyi* (initiative) and *zhanlue* (strategy). Initiative in Chinese is composed of two characters: *chang* (to propose, to lead, or to initiate) and *yi* (to discuss). Together, *changyi* as a verb means to initiate a new proposal and as a noun it means the first open and grand proposal for a common cause (Yang, 2019; You, Fan, and Li, 2019). As *changyi* is a grand proposal, it does not have to

entail specific contents that policies (*zhengce*) generally demand, thus allowing relevant parties of that *changyi* to discuss its specific contents. In short, *changyi* implies neutrality, openness, and a sense of vagueness. On the other hand, the word *zhanlue* (strategy) in Chinese is commonly employed in military, and increasingly business, contexts where one party tries to outmanoeuvre other parties (Yang, 2019; You, Fan, and Li, 2019). *Zhanlue* indicates the competitive nature of the activity it describes and implies that the owner of that *zhanlue* has a specific target. Therefore, from Beijing's perspective, the word 'initiative' possesses no negative connotations, mainly geopolitical implications, that are often associated with the word 'strategy' (He, 2019).

Thus, this effect referred to the meaning of SREB and MSR endowed by the word *changyi*, which is more relevant to Beijing's central truth claim about BRI, a global initiative of cooperation. From an assemblage perspective, whilst the discourse of *zhanlue* was excluded from SREB and MSR assemblages, the discourse of *changyi* was included, constituting them by setting rules for conceptualising and interpreting SREB and MSR. These rules centred around a particular subject – SREB and MSR are open proposals – that was produced by *changyi* as *changyi* indicates openness. Any debates, discussions, and projects about SREB, MSR, and later BRI could only take place within those rules because any practices and discourses outside of these rules were deemed as illegitimate and must be suppressed and excluded. This process of legitimating/delegitimating was the exercise of power via discourse in the assembling process.

Second, by late 2014, Beijing began to purposefully address SREB and MSR as one initiative. In November 2014, the Belt and Road *Initiative* (*yidai yilu changyi*), singular not plural, appeared for the first time, when Xi (2014b, emphasis added) addressed the Dialogue on Strengthening Connectivity Partnership, stating that '[t]he "Belt and Road" *initiative* and the connectivity endeavour are compatible and mutually reinforcing.' One initiative, *not two*, was clearly asserted. This was a clear departure from the previous discourse on SREB and MSR that they were two separate initiatives.

Meanwhile, Beijing never publicly acknowledged the contestation in the official narrative of BRI's origin, that is, BRI's ambiguous relations with SREB and MSR, and pretended that the issue had never existed by simply brushing off the details of Xi's original proposal (as discussed in the previous section) and plainly using BRI in its later documents. This pretence was Beijing's strategy to reconstruct and reinforce its own narrative that BRI composed of SREB and MSR had always been an original design. In fact, Beijing's pretence contributed to the succeeding hegemonic status of that misleading narrative, as shown in Chapter One that many scholarly works have accepted this particular narrative of BRI's origin.

Tying SREB and MSR together as *yidai yilu* (the Belt and Road) was largely consistent with Chinese political convention. In Chinese politics, once a new policy is put forward, subordinates often introduce catchy phrases by choosing a few Chinese characters out of that policy to facilitate their superiors' understanding of what might be a

comprehensive and complex policy, and also to assist propaganda.[39] But this practice of coining memorable slogans could introduce a new perspective and possibly changes to (aspects of) that policy. In this case, framing SREB and MSR as *yidai yilu* (the Belt and Road, BRI) and repeatedly employing it in government documents and high-level speeches went beyond a rhetorical purpose of easy pronunciation. The recurrent articulation of *yidai yilu* coordinated and integrated those two initiatives into one, in other words, reconceptualised SREB and MSR as two components of BRI. Given that, this was a crucial discursive and political move that enabled the emergence (production, in terms of productive power) of a *singular* BRI.

In 2015, this move was substantiated officially in *Vision and Actions*, the first written policy paper that merged SREB and MSR together as one initiative called the Belt and Road Initiative (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015). In September 2015, NDRC together with other ministries issued a regulation on the English translation of *yidai yilu changyi*. First, *yidai yilu* should be translated as the Belt and Road, or B&R, and *yidai yilu changyi* can be translated as the Belt and Road *Initiative* or the land and maritime Silk Road *Initiative* (BRI Office, n.d.). The version 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) was allowed for a while but was later dropped. Second, *changyi* can only be translated as initiative, a single not plural word; no other English words such as strategy, project, programme, and agenda should be used for *changyi* (BRI Office, n.d.).

Another element that was involved in reconceptualising SREB and MSR as one initiative is the concept of Silk Road as it is literally part of their names. Instead of focusing on the differences between the land-based Silk Road and the maritime one, Beijing emphasised the commonalities between them, that is, 'the valuable inspiration … drawn from the ancient Silk Road' (Xi, 2013a). This inspiration was described by Xi (2013a) as follows: 'on the basis of solidarity, mutual trust, equality, inclusiveness, mutual learning and win-win cooperation, countries of different races, beliefs and cultural backgrounds are fully capable of sharing peace and development.' Beijing often used 'Silk Road' as a trope to advocate cooperation among states in terms of SREB and MSR. For instance, State Councillor Yang Jiechi (2014a) called the ancient land-based Silk Road, 'a flag of unity and cooperation among Asian countries.'

The so-called Silk Road inspiration had been brewing among Chinese officials and scholars and was later conceptualised as *silu jingshen* (Silk Road Spirit, SRS). For instance, in his press conference, Wang Yi (2014a) argued that '[a]t the core of the Silk Road spirit [*sichou zhilu de jingshen*] is peace, friendship, openness and inclusiveness, which have become the common assets of human civilisation.' The first time that SRS as a concept appeared was in Xi's address to the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in 2014. In his speech, however, Xi (2014d) did not explicitly define SRS; instead, he went to great lengths to explain what SRS required states to do – to promote mutual learning among civilisations, to respect the individual choice of development models, to pursue win-win

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[39] This point benefits from a conversation with a Chinese official from the Ministry of Public Security in 2019.

cooperation, and to champion peace through dialogues. SRS was later formally defined as '[the ethos of] peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit' (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015: 4).

This reveals the discursive construction of SRS object and subject assuming SREB, MSR, and China were its embodiment. It blurred the boundaries of SREB and MSR and created the idea that both initiatives were in essence the same – an open and cooperation-based initiative that aimed to bring peace and prosperity to the region. In other words, the homogenisation of SREB and MSR assemblages through the Silk Road Spirit contributed to the emergence of a BRI assemblage. Meanwhile, the discursive construction of SRS also suggested a problematisation: this 'spirit' was lacking in China's regional relationships and BRI was the solution. This is closely related to the problematisation of China's traditional passivity.

5.2.1.2 One Initiative with Two Dimensions

Other than framing SREB and MSR as one initiative, Beijing also re-emphasised that the nature of these two projects was about the Eurasian region as well as China. On this front, Beijing relied on the second aspect of the concept of Silk Road, that is, Beijing's narratives of the history of ancient Silk Roads. In Beijing's narratives, the role of China was minimised whilst the collective identity of Asia was magnified in building the ancient Silk Roads. What matters was Asia as a whole, of which China was only one member. For instance, in an interview, Xi (2013c) noted that peoples from China and Uzbekistan *together* had built the well-known land-based silk road, and nowadays it would be their *shared* responsibility to rebuild it. More emphasis was also given to the shared ownership of the ancient Silk Roads over the issue of who started them. As Foreign Minister Wang (2014a) argued, ancient Silk Roads 'belong to the world.'

Beijing's narratives gave relevant participants a reference for their SREB and MSR interpretations and hence practices. In post-structural terms, the discursive representation of these old silk routes disciplined potential participants by laying out the rules for imagining and interpreting SREB and MSR: they were about not only China but also the Eurasian region. Meanwhile, these narratives gave other potential participants some space or leeway for attaching their own interpretations because they were usually vague. This was an additional legitimising move by Beijing in the framing of MSR/SREB/BRI in relation to the SRS, another discursive plank in the BRI assemblage that invites other states (and their actors) to come together as part of the BRI assemblage.

The second tool that Beijing employed to reconceptualise SREB and MSR assemblages is problematisation. As argued in Chapter Four, prior to SREB and MSR, two economic phenomena of uneven development and excess productivity had been framed by Beijing as China's major economic problems, thus setting the stage for SREB and MSR. But with the Xi administration taking shape, the problem representations of China's economic

structure experienced new developments. Simply, from Beijing's perspective, the significance of these two 'problems' extended beyond China's border. It was these new developments and their connections with other problematisations, plus Beijing's practices (discussed in the following subsection), which provided SREB and MSR with a new meaning (a Eurasian initiative for domestic and regional cooperation), thus influencing activities concerning these two projects and, by extension, constituting their assemblages.

The first development is China reframed its excess industrial capacity as not simply a domestic problem but also a regional (beyond China) problem. This was evident in China's extra attention to a possible regional solution. This is confirmed by Chen Bin from NDRC who participated in the formulation of the *Guiding Opinions of the State Council on Resolving the Contradictions of Serious Overcapacity* (State Council, 2013). Chen acknowledged that the measures introduced by previous governments failed to address the deteriorating 'problem' of excess capacity by controlling and limiting the construction of new plants (Jiang Guocheng, 2013). In the Xi administration, according to Chen, Beijing turned to the market for a long-term solution to the problem (Jiang Guocheng, 2013).

Since 2013, Beijing has suggested, more precisely re-proposed, to export its excess production to new overseas markets, as discussed in Chapter Four. From then on, this proposal was publicly endorsed and connected gradually to SREB and MSR by senior Chinese officials on many occasions. For instance, He Yafei (2014), then-Vice Minister of the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council, argued that a renewed effort in the 'Going Global' strategy for Chinese enterprises, a much-preferred language by Beijing, would help solve the 'problem'. Huang Libin (2015, quoted in Stanway, 2015), an official from the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, also contended in a briefing that 'the only route' to ease the 'problem' of industrial overcapacity was to 'speed up going overseas for high-grade production capacity.'

Furthermore, Huang framed the great need for, or in other words, lacking industrial production in the countries along the Belt and Road regions as a problem and argued that the export of excess capacity was a win-win situation (Stanway, 2015). On that, Beijing further strengthened its problematisation of the lack of industrial production in the Eurasian region by consistently highlighting a 2013 report produced by Asian Development Bank which argued that a shortfall or deficit in 'infrastructure', a US$8 trillion infrastructure gap (2012-2020), should (normatively) be filled in order to realise development (ADB, 2017).

With the enactment of those two initiatives, the discourse of exporting overcapacity was abandoned. Instead, the discourse of international cooperation on industrial production was introduced and promoted in government reports. This indicated that Beijing framed its economic problem as lacking sufficient cooperation on industrial production, implying a shift in the discursive problematisation. This is confirmed in an interview with a journalist from *Renminwang*. He said that narratives centring on

'cooperation of industrial production' were encouraged whilst all narratives associated with overproduction, such as 'easing the pressure of China's industrial accumulation' and 'ridding of China's overcapacity', were discouraged and staged out after Xi took power (Interview 02, 2018). This rhetorical rephrasing aimed at not only softening Beijing's image of forcing its own projects onto others, but also engendering a positive perception of SREB and MSR as cooperative mechanisms. As above, this was a discursive legitimising move that constructed subject and objects in specific ways through SREB/MSR/BRI.

Overall, all these discourses not only removed the confusions over SREB and MSR but also suppressed alternative framings of SREB and MSR whilst legitimising Beijing's particular framing. They narrowed down the debate about SREB and MSR and cast constraints on different interpretations or opposing voices. From a post-structuralist perspective, the narratives about *changyi*, Silk Road, and economic problematisation disciplined all practices that were related to these two projects, producing a particular BRI object. That is, BRI comprising SREB and MSR emerged as an open and inclusive initiative which served the whole Eurasian region.

5.2.2 Organising SREB and MSR Through Institutional Design

Institutional design represents strong evidence of the role of the Chinese central government in shaping, or organising, SREB and MSR assemblages. It took place at both domestic and international levels. There are two types of institutions for the task of 'organising': policymaking agency and funding agency. The former sets goals and basic rules for SREB and MSR projects, utilises different resources to support some and suppress others, and supervises their implementation. The latter executes them, 'guides' future practices by using their funded projects to visually demonstrate what SREB and MSR (later BRI) projects should look like. Here 'organise/organising' is defined in a Foucauldian way. By that, the thesis means that through institutional monitoring based on political procedures, norms, protocols and recource allocation, practices concerning SREB and MSE were disciplined and those two assemblages were shaped with the purpose of producing a particular subject – BRI as one coherent initiative for cooperation.

Beijing created two financial institutions to facilitate SREB and MSR projects. The first one is a multilateral financial institution, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). It is arguably the most compelling example of Beijing's international effort in terms of institutional design. Even though the AIIB is now often regarded as an intrinsic part of BRI (Zhao Minghao, 2015), the original design of the AIIB was not about BRI. Xi proposed to establish the AIIB in his meeting with President Susilo of Indonesia in 2013 to facilitate regional infrastructure connectivity and economic integration, and to promote sustained and stable economic growth of Asia by working with existing multilateral development banks both inside and outside the region (Du and Liu, 2013).

The next day, when addressing the Indonesian parliament, he (Xi, 2013b) announced the plan, but did not explicitly connect the AIIB with MSR, let alone with BRI (that was yet to emerge). This is confirmed by President Jin Liqun of the AIIB (quoted from Glenn, 2017) who said that '[w]e [the AIIB] operate by our standards, by our governance. The Belt and Road [initiative] is a marvellous program ... but we have our standards.' Indeed, the AIIB can be, and has been utilised to facilitate the implementation of BRI mainly through financing infrastructure-related projects in Asia and beyond either on its own or in partnership with other international financial institutions (IFIs), as Laurel Ostfield (quoted from Shepard, 2017a), the head of communications for the AIIB, explained that 'we are not connected to One Belt, One Road. [But] obviously, we will be playing a part in it.'

The second funding agency, the Silk Road Fund (SRF), was specifically established to serve BRI only and wholly sponsored by Beijing. The SRF is, with China's initial contribution of US$ 40 billion, 'designed to provide investment and financing support for countries along the "Belt and Road" [regions] to carry out infrastructure, resources, industrial cooperation, financial cooperation and other projects related to connectivity' (Xi, 2014b).[40] Meanwhile, it is worth noting that when Xi proposed the idea of the SRF, it was also the time when he employed the term '*yidai yilu*' (the Belt and Road) for the first time. This suggests that Beijing had already contemplated the idea of merging SREB and MSR together and that the establishment of the SRF was to provide an institutional presence to BRI. At this stage, however, the disciplinary role of these two funding agencies was relatively limited, given their formal operations did not start until late 2014 (the AIIB began operations in January 2016 and the SRF began in November 2014).

A stronger influence on SREB and MSR at this stage was exerted by Beijing's policymaking organisation. Compared with the international front of institutional building, its domestic front was more complicated and structured, involving several institutions. Other than the SRF, Beijing also established a policymaking organisation at the domestic level, that is, the Leading Small Group on Advancing the Construction of the Belt and Road (*yidaiyilu lingdao xiaozu,* BRI LSG for short). Based in the State Council, it was established to guide, monitor, and promote BRI (BRI Office, n.d.). The first BRI LSG was headed by Zhang Gaoli who sat in the Standing Committee of the CCP Politburo (PBSC), China's highest-ruling council, and served concurrently as China's first vice premier. Under the BRI LSG, there was a permanent office called the Office of the Leading Small Group for BRI (BRI Office for short). It was based in the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) and set up to carry out the daily work of the BRI LSG that convened every six months (BRI Office, n.d.).

The establishment of the BRI LSG and BRI Office was a sign of the great importance that Beijing attached to SREB and MSR, and demonstrated the central government's

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[40] In 2017, Xi (2017c) announced an additional RMB 100 billion (US$ 148 billion as of 2019) to be injected into the Silk Road Fund.

seriousness to organise these two projects. At the same time, their composition, namely who sat in and what departments were represented by the BRI LSG and office, embodied the intricate interests of and competition among different bureaucratic departments reflected in the making of BRI. From an assemblage perspective, the BRI LSG was also a smaller assemblage within a bigger assemblage in which different components such as departments, political procedures, and officials came together to form this working group. Their effects on SREB and MSR assemblages were delivered through the BRI LSG.

First, a specialised Leading Small Group (*lingdao xiaozu*, LSG) was set up to steer and monitor BRI. Originally, LSGs are *ad hoc* working groups to deal with a few broad issues such as economics, finance, and foreign policy (Miller, 2008, 2014; He, 2019). They are 'informal, [and] off-the-books' (Miller, 2008; 2014: 1), which means that public information and research about them are limited. Meanwhile, LSGs meet to discuss, but mainly hear, reports only a few times every year, and rely on their general office for daily routines because they have no dedicated office space, no formal operating rules, and no dedicated budget (Miller, 2014). Zhang Fu (2015) argues that LSGs at the central level serve as a bridge connecting the highest Chinese leadership with major governmental agencies which collect information and carry out policies. They are an intermediary between decision-making and policy implementation. In other words, the role of LSGs could help to translate the broad idea(s) of the ruling party into actual policies (Zhang Fu, 2015).

After years of LSGs practices, there are some changes concerning LSGs. First, although LSGs are still established on an *ad hoc* basis and disbanded after the mission, some of them are kept *de facto* permanently and become more formal (Zhang Fu, 2015). Second, LSGs are established to deal with more specific issues such as the World Trade Organisation and 2022 Winter Olympics, and in 2017, there were 83 LSGs (Johnson, Kennedy, and Qiu, 2017).[41] Third, LSGs have been strengthened and become more involved in the policy process over the years, particularly under Xi's supervision (Johnson, Kennedy, and Qiu, 2017). Since its establishment, for instance, the LSG on Comprehensively Deepening Reform chaired by Xi met regularly, once per month, much more than regular LSGs (Johnson, Kennedy, and Qiu, 2017).

In short, LSGs are regularly and widely practised in the Chinese political system to monitor and coordinate the implementation of policies concerning almost all areas and, to a certain degree, make policy decisions (Johnson, Kennedy, and Qiu, 2017; Miller, 2008, 2014; Zhang Fu, 2015). Among the nuanced differences among all LSGs at the highest level of Chinese politics, the most important difference is that those based in the CCP Politburo, often called Central Leading Small Group (CLSG, Party-based LSGs)[42], are

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[41] LSGs in Johnson, Kennedy, and Qiu's 2007 research include other groups with similar functions, such as coordinating small groups (*xietiao xiaozu*), coordinating working groups, (*xietiao gongzuozu*), and commissions (*weiyuanhui*).

[42] All Central Leading Small Groups were renamed as Central Commissions after 2018 (CCCPC, 2018).

more authoritative than those based in the State Council (government-based LSGs). There are three types of LSGs: permanent, term-oriented, and task-oriented; their ranking in the government mainly depends on the political standing of their heads (and members) (Miller, 2008, 2014). Structurally, LSGs are composed of a presiding leader, the group's general office, and designated department(s) (*qiantou bumen*), and their proceedings are dominated by the head (plus members) and the general office (Miller, 2014). Their ranking in the government mainly depends on the political standing of their heads (Miller, 2008, 2014).

Accordingly, the BRI LSG led by a PBSC member was near the top in the Chinese political system and categorised as a term-oriented one. Although the BRI LSG was an *ad hoc* working group that convened only twice a year, its influence on BRI was significant. First, it has shown the importance of BRI by establishing a specific task force led by a senior Chinese official to monitor its implementation. When Zhang chaired the BRI LSG, the resources of all departments, commissions, and bureaus under his supervision could be, in theory, utilised for BRI purposes as he saw fit.[43] At the same time, the departmental interests of those agencies were in a better position to be promoted and advocated, because they all reported directly to Zhang. Simply, those departments could have their requests and concerns heard first. Through this way can they affect BRI based on their own interests. Second, the fact that the BRI LSG was based in the State Council strongly indicated that BRI was an economic-centred project because government-based LSGs usually deal with economic issues (Johnson, Kennedy, and Qiu, 2017).

Last but not least, the official establishment of the BRI LSG corresponded to Beijing's discursive discipline on SREB and MSR because by then Beijing had already frequently employed the term '*yidai yilu*' (the Belt and Road) and officially confirmed that they belonged to one coherent initiative. It also addressed the previous situation in which no dedicated central government agency was in charge of these two projects, or in He Baogang's (2019: 185) words, the problem of 'the lack of an effective leadership structure.' In other words, the BRI LSG became the BRI network builder that had access to different resources and agencies. More tangible influence on BRI was exerted by the BRI Office.

As stated earlier, the routine job of LSGs is left to their general office, in this case, the BRI Office. This office was based in NDRC, the most important governmental department in macroeconomic management that studies, designs, and formulates

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[43] Besides being in charge of the daily routines of the State Council, Zhang Gaoli monitored the following ministries, commissions, and bureaus – National Development and Reform Committee, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Land and Resources (now as Ministry of Natural Resources), Ministry of Environmental Protection (now as Ministry of Ecology and Environment), Ministry of Housing and Urban-Rural Development, State Administration of Taxation, National Bureau of Statistics, Development Research Centre of the State Council, National Energy Administration, Three Gorges Project Construction Committee of the State Council, and South-to-North Water Diversion Project Commission of the State Council (Zhao Kejin, 2016). He was partly involved in the work of the General Office of the State Council, and the National Audit Office as well (Zhao Kejin, 2016).

policies for economic and social development as well as being in charge of China's economic reform (Yu Jie, 2018). The establishment of a NDRC-based office should not be too surprising as Zhang was the direct supervisor to NDRC. But its establishment implicitly showed an inter-departmental power struggle because among 10 departments supervised by Zhang, NDRC was the one that housed the BRI Office. The domestic power wrestling was more evident if perceived from the organisation of the BRI Office. The BRI Office was led by He Lifeng, Director of NDRC, with three deputies: Ji Zhe, Deputy Director of NDRC; Qian Keming, Vice Minister of Commerce; Zhang Jun, Assistant to Minister of Foreign Affairs (BRI Office, n.d.). Instead of coming from the departments supervised by Zhang, two deputies came from different ministries, namely, Ministry of Commerce (MOC) and Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA). Similar to where the BRI Office was based, the composition of its key members reflected departmental competition across a broader spectrum of Chinese domestic politics. After all, it matters who sits on the table because their interests can first and foremost be considered and discussed. This composition corresponded to the endorsers of the first BRI written policy paper issued later. The sequence of their names has also shown that NDRC weighed more in decision-making and its interests have more chances to be reflected and served.

The inter-governmental competition was typical 'amid the crowded and hierarchical Chinese bureaucracy' (He, 2019: 191), but the process and result of that competition affected the composition of the BRI assemblage, and thus its meaning. The make-up of the BRI LSG and that of the BRI Office are good examples. Among all deputies of the BRI LSG, the first deputy was Wang Huning who was also in charge of China's domestic reform project, whilst Yang Jiechi who was in charge of foreign affairs only ranked the last. Even more tellingly, in the BRI Office, the last deputy Zang Jun was only an assistant to Minister of Foreign Affairs, one level below other deputies. This particular make-up of the management team further strengthened the connections between SREB and MSR on the one hand, and Beijing's official problematisations of its economic structure, on the other, reflected through uneven development and excess industrial capacity (Chapter Four). In other words, these economic problematisations were stronger components of SREB and MSR, affecting the meaning of SREB, MSR, and later BRI towards an economic plan.

More importantly, the make-up of the BRI Office has ordered BRI by setting rules for BRI practices. In other words, the interests of the actors comprising the office are reflected in the design of BRI (the governance structure, and its practices). The NDRC-centred BRI management team ensured that the development of BRI was clearly aligned with the needs and priorities of China's economic reform, and was not simply meant to coordinate and make full use of international and domestic resources. This was all reflected in the description of BRI in the first official document which defined BRI as part of China's new-round of opening-up and addressing the growing economic gap within China as well as regional development problems. At the same time, the presence of MOFA and MOC, despite their supporting role, demonstrated that Beijing considered

the possible regional and international implications of BRI activities. In other words, the involvement of MOFA and MOC gave BRI activities a regional dimension – they were not just about China but also the region.

To sum up, the institutional design at both internal and external levels gave the Chinese central government levers to regulate previous practices concerning SREB and MSR and mould future practices as part of BRI (rather than SREB and MSR) through government regulations and, to a lesser extent, pilot projects conducted by the SRF and other State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). From the assemblage perspective, institutional design functioned as one element of the assemblage to help cohere other elements (represented by various interpretations and practices) and form a particular BRI assemblage. In the ordering/organising processes, power was not solely possessed and wielded by the central government; rather, it is dynamic and relational. Power relations were manifested through the interactive processes, the (de-)territorialisation of SREB and MSR, in which SREB and MSR practices are disciplined and regulated, and at the same time, these practices in return shape the behaviour of central government in terms of its vision for BRI and its design of the BRI LSG.

5.2.3 Building the BRI Assemblage Through Political Categorisation

In March 2015, three Chinese ministries, NDRC, MOFA, and MOC issued the very first policy paper on BRI, *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road*, which was endorsed by the State Council. In this document, Beijing elaborated its thinking on BRI – principles, key areas of cooperation, cooperative mechanism, and its planning for local regions. In other words, the central government explicitly tried to determine what BRI was by defining the nature of BRI and setting boundaries for what should and should not be included in BRI and in what way. The release of *Vision and Actions* represented a significant act from the central government in the ordering process because after months of staying less active in shaping SREB, MSR, and BRI, the central government officially intervened and attempted to rein in all these disparate actors and activities and bring some order/coherence to these disorganised assemblages through documentation.

One of the major functions of this document, which helped to shape the BRI assemblage, is political categorisation. This is first reflected through the central government's regulation on the previous responses at the local level to SREB and MSR. The central government outlined its expectations for local governments, namely, what their role(s) would be in BRI (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015). Different goals were assigned to chosen provinces and cities. For instance, to the north, Xinjiang was named as 'a core area on the Silk Road Economic Belt' (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015: 4); to the east, Fujian was entitled as 'a core area of the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road' (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015: 4); and to the west, Yunnan was designated as 'a pivot of

China's Opening-up to South and Southeast Asia' (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015: 4). This contrasted the central government's earlier approach of staying away from issuing directives to local governments.

However, the thesis does not suggest that Beijing's political categorisation was simply a top-down approach imposed forcefully from the central government and accepted totally and passively by local governments. Similar to the institutional design presented in the previous subsection, it is tempting to assume that China's political directives are simply designed at the central level and then imposed upon the local level, and that the central government is powerful whilst local governments are passive implementers. Put differently, these ordering processes are unidirectional, from the top to the bottom. This assumption is understandable, since China is an authoritarian one-party state, but only partially right. As shown in the previous subsection, local authorities do often skew policy interpretation to their own favour, and even sometimes ignore the central directives. Dominant as the role of the central government has been, the political categorisation, the method it employed to organise BRI, was, to a certain degree, two-way in that local governments could and did express their ideas and provide their advice about what and how to do BRI. For instance, before the establishment of the BRI LSG, NDRC and MOFA co-convened a workshop on SREB and MSR to convey the central messages of the central government and solicit advice from local governments (Liu Yong, 2014; CGP, 2013). In this case, Beijing's final list of BRI participants and their designated roles reflected not just the power jostle among local governments and but also their positive contributions to BRI and their power over the central government.

In *Vision and Actions*, for instance, Beijing identified 18 provinces (autonomous regions and municipalities included) to be part of BRI, among which six were in the Northwest, three in the Northeast, four in the Southwest, and five on the East coast (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015). But Jiangsu Province was not on the list. That was very surprising to many because the Jiangsu government had always been part of the preparatory work of BRI. For instance, Jiangsu was invited to the only workshop on SREB and MSR co-convened by NDRC and MOFA in December 2013 to solicit advice from local governments (CGP, 2013). Moreover, only three months before the issue of *Vision and Actions*, Xi stated that Jiangsu should actively participate in BRI due to its strategic location at the convergence of SREB and MSR (Jiangsu Party Committee, 2019). Then a few days later, Jiangsu government approved the *Advices on More Quality Overseas Investment by Utilising BRI* (Jiangsu Government, 2014). However, in the end, Jiangsu did not make it into the final list. Another example is Xinjiang. Xinjiang's role outlined by Beijing was exactly what it had been arguing for from the beginning, a core area of SREB. That said, all provincial-level governments, including those not identified in the document, put forward their plans to fit their development strategies to BRI, and their plans were all in line with the central guideline.

The most important political categorisation is the classification of previous international practices (such as institutional building, the MOU signing with other states,

and projects executed in the field) as international cooperation, and their clustering into five areas: policy coordination, infrastructure, trade, finance, and culture and people-to-people exchanges (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015). These five categories were derived from and merged together via those areas of cooperation in SREB and MSR, showing the emergence of BRI. Meanwhile, the framing of international cooperation further strengthened China's problematisation of unbalanced economic structure and excess production, reinforcing the idea of cooperation and the meaning of cross-regional cooperation associated with the BRI assemblage. More importantly, these five categories, broad as they were, still set rules for actual practices concerning BRI. Activities that fall into these areas were homogenised, becoming part of the BRI assemblage, whilst others that did not were detached and separated from it. In short, these processes reinforced the territory of the BRI assemblage. This rest of this subsection briefly introduces these categories and discuss the role of the *Vision and Actions* in shaping the BRI assemblage.

First, infrastructure included Beijing's domestic and international transport infrastructure construction, energy infrastructure projects, and the construction of cross-border communications networks (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015). The infrastructure linking was envisaged as 'all-dimensional, multi-tiered, and composite connectivity networks' (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015: 4) that spread across and connect Asia, Europe, Africa, and their adjacent seas. The eastern route (the Chinese section) of Russia-China gas pipeline, 'one of the underpinning projects of China's Belt and Road Initiative' (CNPC, 2015: 36) started, for instance, in June 2015. One of the flagship BRI projects was the China Railway Express (CR Express), a service project that allowed block trains to run between Chinese, European, and other BRI cities (NDRC, 2015). But the CR Express began with Chongqing-Xinjiang-Europe railway service in 2008 (Hillman, 2018).

Second, policy coordination which is part of the original SREB. As 'an important guarantee' (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015: 4) for the implementation of BRI, the policy coordination mainly referred to the coordination of macro policies and economic development strategies of different countries. This aspect did not really take off until the first official agreement signed between China and Russia in March 2015 when both sides reached a consensus on the integration of Beijing's SREB, *not BRI*, with Moscow's Eurasian Economic Union, a vision of a trade, investment, and infrastructure network across Eurasia (Tian, 2016). That meant both sides tried to make their own regional cooperative mechanisms more compatible.

As for the cooperation in trade, finance, culture and people-to-people exchanges, and other areas, the descriptions of these areas were quite generic, or yet to be fully developed, or both. The international cooperation concerning investment focused on investment and trade facilitation, the removal of investment and trade barriers, and the opening of free trade areas within the region (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015). It also called for the expansion of trading areas, the optimisation of the trade structure, and the improvement of trade balance (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015). Moreover, the cooperation in finance largely focused on financial integration that included cross-

border system building, the opening and development of Asian bond markets, institutional building, foreign currency exchange mechanisms, and financial regulation (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015). The cooperation regarding culture and people-to-people exchanges covered a wide range of areas, such as academia, culture, media, youth, tourism, art and humanities, science and technology, political parties, and NGOs (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015).

Overall, from the perspective of assemblage, *Vision and Actions* was, to borrow from Mellaard and van Meijl (2017: 345), 'both a product of an assemblage and a generator of new policy assemblage.' The formulation of this document symbolised an ordered BRI, *neither SREB nor MSR*, assemblage on the horizon resulting from a series of processes in which agents and practices were 'disciplined', in other words, either transformed, homogenised and incorporated into BRI or undermined and excluded from BRI. This document was an effort to organise BRI, to territorialise BRI in an assemblage language, by attempting to bring together previously diverse actors, discourses, practices, and institutions into a new national/regional policy assemblage.

At the same time, *Vision and Actions* aimed at bringing coherence to BRI by assembling different elements such as actors, practices, ideologies, and discourses, setting rules of BRI practices and dictating the territory of the evolving BRI assemblage. The release of *Vision and Actions* (the willingness of local governments to let the central government set the roles for them) should be situated in relation to other elements composing a larger assemblage. It was not a simple top-down imposition. Put simply, this policy paper as a result of an assembling process of political, institutional, and discursive practices was introduced as a road map to guide future practices and discourses pertaining to the BRI assemblage. This is a clear example to show that assemblage is an ongoing process, and one assemblage is within a larger assemblage.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter investigated the assembling processes of BRI between 2013 and 2015, starting from the initiation of SREB and MSR and ending with the first BRI official policy paper. It paid particular attention to the ordering or homogenising part in terms of where the BRI assemblage began to take shape as an economic initiative with two dimensions. Employing assemblage thinking, this chapter identified different elements comprising the SREB, MSR, and BRI assemblages, investigated how these elements interacted with one another, and explored how their interactions affected the identity of, or gave meanings to those assemblages.

Hence, this chapter argued that a BRI assemblage gradually emerged out of incoherent and all-inclusive assemblages concerning SREB and MSR, and evolved into an ordered, and largely regional, assemblage through a series of political, institutional, and

discursive practices. The truth about BRI as an economic initiative with five priorities understood in 2015 was not natural, but constructed.

The whole assembling process between 2013 and 2015 has been divided into two stages. In the first stage (roughly between 2013 and the first half of 2014), SREB and MSR assemblages had been incoherent and characterised by multiple actors, no central authority, and limited successes. One of the most important findings of this chapter is that there was no BRI to begin with. SREB and MSR, *not BRI*, were the original proposals and they were separate (sub-)regional projects without a clear-cut connection. Gradually, with their enactment, different elements from SREB and MSR assemblages began to cohere and emerge as the BRI assemblage presented in *Vision and Actions* in 2015 through Beijing's reconceptualisation of SREB and MSR, its institutional design at both international and domestic levels and political categorisations. All these institutional and discursive practices reflected the power of the central government at this stage. Therefore, the second important finding of this chapter is the emergence of a BRI assemblage was not 'even' regarding power relations between different components.

These findings validate the continued efforts of this thesis to question the truth about a global BRI and investigate the 'regimes', or conditions, which have enabled that particular truth. They have demonstrated how different elements have been assembled to forge BRI as a particular regime of truth. In other words, this chapter concludes that BRI was a contested concept, so was the truth about BRI. In this sense, BRI was not a univocal strategy but a point of reference, an empty signifier, to which actors can give different meanings commensurate with their worldviews and agendas. Therefore, this particular truth, BRI as a global initiative for cooperation, was not obvious or natural, but was enabled and sustained by different conditions which included actors, discourses, and institutions. Those conditions generated and maintained that particular truth while excluding and suppressing alternative ones, and they need to be explored.

The timeline of the chapter stopped approximately at the time when *Vision and Actions* was released. From the perspective of assemblage, this document represented a great anchor to enquire into the (de)-territorialisation of BRI assemblages, namely, the ordering processes of disparate elements constituting BRI through homogenisation, inclusion, and exclusion. More importantly, it was an assemblage upon which a future assemblage, the global BRI assemblage, was built. And that will be the focus of the final empirical chapter.

Chapter 6 Assembling BRI: Towards a Global Initiative for Cooperation (2015-2017)

Understood as an assemblage of discourses, practices, and materiality generated by specific problematisations and incorporating pre-existing assemblages like SREB and MSR, BRI has evolved from a national/regional to a global enterprise. Therefore, the task of this chapter is to tell that story of its globalisation and its conditions of possibility in terms of the evolution or transformation of the BRI assemblage from its first iteration set out in the previous chapter to its current (2017) iteration. In other words, after investigating the problematisations of China's economic structure and national identity prior to BRI (Chapter Four) and the (de-)territorialisation of an ordered two-dimensional trans-Eurasian BRI (Chapter Five), this thesis turns to the third stage of the assembling process of BRI, and explores the ways in which a global, open, and cooperative BRI assemblage emerged and become naturalised. To do so, it investigates the interactions of human and non-human elements and their effects that were constitutive of the global BRI assemblage between 2015 and 2017.

This chapter argues that the construction of BRI as global, open, and cooperative reflected and was conditional upon a particular constellation of different components. A global BRI was constructed through China's discursive system of narratives and identity representations; it was made through practices/projects which gave it a physical form – a visual representation of being global, open, and cooperative; it was also enabled by geography and technology. Put differently, BRI as a global initiative was not simply a policy outcome of the interactions of such humans as officials and professionals, but also enacted by non-human elements such as railways, pipes, discourses, and landscapes, and the interactions between human and non-human elements. In short, instead of being essential to BRI, this global nature was emergent and contingent, resulting from the interactions of those components and being subjected to future changes.

To explore the evolution from a trans-Eurasian assemblage into a global one, this chapter is divided into two sections. It begins with the discursive system comprising linguistic construction, identity representation, what BRI is and is not, in relation to China's identity conception. Then it moves to the material elements which constituted as well as constrained BRI to be framed as global, open, and cooperative. This section pays particular attention to the role of China's geography and technology in constituting a global BRI, assuming that things are not passive background but rather possess an active form of power.

6.1 Constituting the Global Through the Discursive

Discourse is part and parcel of a broader assembling process of BRI as it not only generates subjects through the discursive construction of problems but also brings together diverse elements and simultaneously excludes the others. Specifically, discourse played a critical part in problematising China's economic structure and national identity conception (Chapter Four) and contributed to the ordering process by reconceptualising BRI through narratives concerning name standardisation and the political categorisation of the areas of cooperation (Chapter Five). The discourse on BRI evolved and became gradually more systematic in terms of narrative construction and identity representation. This section continues to explore the discursive (re-)production of BRI as an open initiative for global cooperation in its second iteration from 2015-17. The chapter argues that the boundary of the global BRI assemblage – what can or cannot be included into BRI – was partially constituted by this discursive system. More importantly, by delegitimising and eliminating alternative narratives, and approving and including those of political neutrality, this discursive system exercised power over the conceptualisation of BRI, (re-)producing the subject of BRI and gave it the meaning of being global, open, and cooperative.

6.1.1 Power, Negative Construction, and the Global Nature

The narrative system that constituted BRI comprises negative and positive constructions. The former refers to a series of narratives in the form of what BRI is not. These narratives are constructed to counter alternative narratives which are deemed by China as negative, dangerous, and undesirable. On the contrary, the latter describes the narratives of the self (what BRI is), which are, for China, positive and desirable. Like other discursive factors, such as economic and identity problematisations and the reconceptualisation of BRI (Chapters Four and Five), this narrative system was not simply a linguistic instrument separated from and developed outside of BRI. Instead, it was an indispensable component that constituted a *global* BRI assemblage, in other words, gave BRI the meaning of being global, through the process of inclusion/homogenising and exclusion/elimination. More specifically, the construction of *what BRI is not* delimited the remit of BRI by delegitimising, suppressing, and excluding alternative constructions of BRI. Meanwhile, these positive narratives of what BRI is framed a deeply political initiative (Chapter Four) as *apolitical* – a denial of the politics of BRI by framing it as a purely technocratic vision. In short, the narrative system was political and produced a BRI subject and a broader Chinese national subject – a global, inclusive, and cooperative initiative provided by a responsible China with a global influence – through both what BRI is not and what it is.

The first narrative is that BRI is *not* China's 'Marshall Plan'. This narrative emerged to counter the analogy between BRI and the 1948 U.S. Marshall Plan, which provided aid to Western Europe after World War II, circulating outside China (Chen Dingding, 2014; FT, 2015; Penna, 2014; Tiezzi, 2014). For instance, BRI was described by some as 'China's Marshall Plan' (Curran, 2016) and 'a Marshall Plan without a war' (Tinker, 2017, quoted in Sabine, 2017). The *Financial Times* (2015) argued that '[l]ike the Marshall Plan, the new Silk Road initiative looks designed to use economic treats as a way to address other vulnerabilities.' The *Global Times* (2015), the state-owned tabloid, published an editorial to rebuke such an analogy, arguing that 'BRI is completely different from the Marshall Plan.' Its argument was built on the assertion that 'BRI … is a milestone in world economic aid and cooperation … [and] an open platform for all-around cooperation that takes equality and mutual benefits as its first principle' (Global Times, 2015). It continued with the contention that '[t]he Marshall Plan has, [on the contrary], had harsh political strings attached. Whilst excluding all pro-Soviet Union states, it had sets of non-negotiable rules for the U.S.'s allies. Eventually, the Marshall Plan sowed division among European countries' (Global Times, 2015).

The Chinese government officially addressed the BRI-Marshall Plan analogy in a press conference, with then Foreign Minister Wang Yi (2015d) denying the comparison between those two by arguing that '[c]omparing one to the other would be like comparing apples and oranges … because it [BRI] is born in the era of globalisation. It is a product of inclusive cooperation, not a tool of geopolitics, and must not be viewed with the outdated Cold War mentality.' This narrative was emphasised in Xi's meeting with the board of directors of Boao Forum for Asia where he (Xi, 2018, quoted in Hou and Dai, 2018) argued that BRI was 'neither China's conspiracy nor a Chinese version of the Marshall Plan.' Deputy Foreign Minister Le Yucheng (2018, quoted in Anderlini, 2018) in an interview with the *Financial Times* rejected as well the idea of BRI as China's Marshall Plan, arguing that the former was 'an initiative for international economic co-operation and connectivity co-operation' whilst the latter had 'clear geopolitical and ideological objectives.' He continued to argue that there was 'no intention of using the security of BRI to set up overseas military bases' (Le Yucheng, 2018, quoted in Anderlini, 2018) and dismissed any indication that there was a military element to it. In short, China argued that BRI was the opposite of the Marshall Plan and framed it as an initiative open to all states regardless of their political systems, ideologies, and religions.

The second narrative, as Foreign Minister Wang Yi claimed in his 2015 press conference, is that BRI is *not* China's geopolitical instrument to advance its own interest. Li Ziguo, deputy director of the BRI research centre,[44] argued, for instance, that the BRI was not a response to America's Pivot to Asia strategy or to Russia's plan to build a Eurasian Economic Union, an updated version of its Customs Union (Bondaz, 2015). Instead, BRI

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[44] The BRI research centre is a subsidiary of China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) that is affiliated to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

was conceptualised as 'a public good for all countries' (Yang Jiechi, 2015a) in which states participated on an equal footing and through a broad consultation with the goal of promoting societal harmony and economic dynamism across the globe, Asia in particular (Xi, 2014b).[45] BRI was framed as, in other words, a joint undertaking between China and other countries – an open and inclusive platform (open to all, not excluding nor targeting any third party), and an open process without seeking conformity – to coordinate national development programmes and regional cooperative mechanisms (Xi, 2014b, 2016g). Xi (2017c) summarised that '[t]he Belt and Road Initiative is not a tool to advance any geopolitical agenda, but a platform for practical cooperation.'

This variant of the BRI discourse continued to expand its remit as BRI was being implemented. The discursive construction of BRI was based on 'the principle of wide consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits' (Xi, 2015d). Xi (2017f) proclaimed that BRI was a platform of pragmatic cooperation and an initiative for development, and it could assist in realising the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. For China, BRI was built on the existing norms and rules but required participants to 'align their development strategies and form complementarity' (Xi, 2015d) and it aimed 'not to replace existing mechanisms or initiatives for regional cooperation' (Xi, 2015d). Overall, to Beijing, BRI was *not* a geopolitical instrument or China's strategy to challenge the existing international rules, but a new model of win-win cooperation framed more broadly (Xi, 2017c, 2017f).

The third variant concerns the 'China club' narrative. Here, Beijing claimed that BRI was *not* a closed and exclusive China-centred club, and that it was China's proposal, but belonged to the world. With a special focus on Asian states, BRI was framed as an open and inclusive platform that welcomed countries from all regions, at different development stages, and with different cultures (Xi, 2017b). Speaking metaphorically, Xi (2015b) argued that BRI was 'a real chorus comprising all countries … not a solo for China itself' (Xi, 2015b). What China aimed, according to what was affirmed by its leadership, was not to 'form a small group detrimental to stability' or 'to reinvent the wheel', but to 'create a big family of harmonious coexistence' through BRI and 'complement the development strategies of countries involved by leveraging their comparative strengths' (Xi, 2017c).

These negative narratives have delegitimised, suppressed, and excluded alternative ones represented by what BRI is not. Any narratives bearing negative connotations, from China's perspective, such as the motivations of geopolitical expansion or the ambition for dominance, were categorically rejected by the Chinese government as illegitimate and groundless. For instance, the most recent narrative was that 'BRI is not a "debt trap" that some countries may fall into', an official message delivered by Foreign Minister Wang Yi in his 2019 press conference. At the same time, whilst disputing and silencing

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[45] Here, Yang Jiechi (2015a) referred to the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road.

'negative' narratives, China also put forward counter-narratives to frame what BRI is or represents.

More importantly, all these narratives have, from an assemblage perspective, exercised power and drawn the boundaries of a BRI assemblage. These narratives constituted the global, open, and cooperative nature of BRI by promoting BRI practices regarded as positive and correcting, eliminating if necessary, those alternatives that were perceived as negative. The thing is these narratives were not only narrow, but also powerful, being often regarded as official and authoritative. Therefore, it would be not only impossible to imagine BRI in a language that is different from Chinese official lines, but also, in some sense, illegitimate to ask questions regarding BRI's ulterior/other motives. When BRI projects were seen as problematic or began to run counter to the official BRI narratives and feed into the geopolitical discourses, they would be corrected or no longer included as BRI projects. In other words, they were decoded and detached from the BRI assemblage.

In 2018, for instance, Malaysia suspended three BRI projects – two gas pipelines and a rail link – and asked for a re-evaluation, citing the fear that it could be bankrupted by these overpriced Chinese investments (Erickson, 2018; Palma, 2018). China yielded and agreed in 2019 that the cost for the East Coast Rail Line, one of the three suspended projects, would be slashed by 30% (Perlez, 2019; Stevenson, 2019). The other example is Budhi Gandaki hydropower project in Nepal. Listed as a BRI project, it was cancelled by Nepal in late 2017 but restored in 2018 (Subedi and Ghimire, 2017; Sharma, 2018). This research was unable to get more data on cancelled BRI projects from the Chinese side. Even data from foreign newspapers was not sufficient to know all the reasons for the suspension and cancellation. But these examples of projects from being suspended to being restored have demonstrated the power of these discursive narratives, that is, to keep China's international behaviour in line with its the social construction of what BRI is and the Chinese national identity conception it (re)produces.

Alongside these negative narratives, both passive and responsive, positive narratives have developed and actively constructed BRI, among which the concept of Silk Road was critical in defining its open and cooperative nature. Its first aspect is the Silk Road Spirit (SRS). The definition of SRS of 2015 and onwards remained what it was between 2013 and 2015, that is, the legacy of ancient silk roads (Xi, 2016e, 2017b), representing 'peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit' (Xi, 2017c). But the roles SRS played in constituting BRI in the two periods were different. In contrast with its role in homogenising two initiatives (SREB and MSR) into one (BRI), from 2015 and onwards, SRS has provided BRI with the meanings of openness and cooperation. For instance, purposefully and repeatedly, the Chinese government has connected BRI with the concept of SRS by arguing that BRI '[was] guided by' (Xi, 2017b), 'embodied' (Wang Yi, 2015d), or 'inherited and carried forward' the Silk Road Spirit (Xi, 2016e). This was apparent when it was combined with the second aspect of the concept of Silk Road, the historical narrative.

The historical narrative became more specific with the emphasis moving towards the role of silk routes in cultural exchanges and historical changes. This historical narrative was recast in the particular way in which the role of ancient Silk Roads in the booming cultural exchanges and people contacts was underlined, while the aspect of trade and business was side-lined, and that of military was completely silenced. As Xi (2017b, 2017c) declared, the ancient silk routes not only increased inter-state trade, but more importantly, boosted the flow of knowledge, a great contribution to the progress in human civilisation, by catalysing cultural exchanges and mutual learning. For instance, whilst shipping to the West its finest products and technologies such as silk, porcelain, and 'four great inventions' (papermaking, printing, gunpowder and compass), China acquired new sciences such as astronomy and medicine, and religion like Buddhism through ancient silk routes (Xi, 2017c).

At the same time, China evoked the memory of the proudest eras in the Chinese history. The Silk Road narrative often referred to Han (202 BCE-220 CE) and Tang (618-907 CE) dynasties when people, capital, goods, resources, and technology flowed freely in and out of China and Chang'an, then-capital, grew into one of the world's largest cosmopolitan cities where Chinese and non-Chinese worked and lived in harmony (Xi, 2017c). Furthermore, images and stories of the splendour and advancement of different civilisations, hard-working Asian people, the peace and prosperity brought by these silk routes were often spoken of in the Silk Road narratives (Xi, 2017d; Yang, J., 2015a).

All these historical narratives and the concepts of Silk Road Spirit and Silk Road went beyond harking back to 'the golden age' as Xi (2017c) described. As illustrated in Chapter Four, discursive constructions were not simply political instruments utilised to make BRI more acceptable to both domestic and international audiences. More importantly, they were constitutive parts of the BRI assemblage that reconceptualised it as a global BRI characterised by cooperativeness and inclusiveness. These positive narratives, combined with the negative ones as discussed at the beginning of this section, created images that were characterised by openness and cooperativeness – possibility conditions that generated a global BRI.

Since 2015, these narratives have constituted the nature of the BRI assemblage in two ways, though they did not explicitly dictate what BRI was or denied any alternative conceptualisations of BRI. First, they reinforced the political categorisation of BRI set in 2015, particularly the international cooperation in culture and people exchanges, and generated actual (new) BRI practices. From the perspective of assemblage, these narratives territorialised the BRI assemblage by homogenising practices. For instance, in 2016, the Ministry of Culture issued *'BRI' Action Plan for Cultural Development (2016-2020)* to improve the cooperative mechanisms with regards to cultural programmes, build its own brand, and promote the cultural industry under the BRI framework. Moreover, new BRI practices emerged, such as those concerning city development. The Chinese government has planned to develop 19 city clusters that are linked by 'two-horizontal and three-vertical corridors' across China, among which two are linked to BRI (Preen,

2018). The Yangtze River Corridor is linked to the Belt, whilst the Coastal Corridor is linked to the Road (Preen, 2018). Second, they softened the materialist aspect, i.e. economic interests, of BRI by contending that peace and cultural prosperity were also intended results of BRI, thus contributing to the open nature of BRI, being open not just in terms of actors but also in terms of new ideas of cooperation.

Overall, these narratives, both positive and negative, were crucial to the discursive construction of a global BRI. Through repeated references in official talks, speeches, and documents, these narratives created a specific BRI, or in a post-structuralist language, produced a BRI subject that was global in scale and characterised by openness and cooperation. Any other narratives and, by extension, practices that were not considered to be open and inclusive were excluded. Consequently, the character of BRI, being global, open, and cooperative, should not be assumed *a priori*. Instead, BRI was made to be global partly through these constitutive narratives. To emphasise, the open and inclusive nature of BRI was constructed by Beijing precisely in response to concerns that it was not open and inclusive. In this sense, this framing of BRI was a reaction to existing criticisms used in an *ad hoc* manner to defend BRI.

6.1.2 Responsibility, Public Good, and the Open Nature

The second main element of the BRI discursive system is ideology, understood as a broad and cohesive set of ideas and ideals held by a social group or individual. Ideology included China's national identity conception, its foreign policy strategy, and its world vision. Similar to narratives, ideology was not new to the BRI assemblage as it has been discussed in terms of problematisation in Chapter Four. But it has been evolving as it interacted with other elements and played a larger role since 2015 in constituting the global, open, and cooperative nature of BRI, making it what it was understood in 2017. Ideology has rendered BRI as an open initiative for global cooperation intelligible, whilst a global BRI has (re-)produced this particular ideology held by the Chinese leadership. In other words, they were part of the same process and were co-constitutive, i.e. that BRI as a global endeavour and a Chinese elite conception of its national identity and world vision emerged concurrently with both reinforcing each other.

First, the thesis argues that China's conception of its national identity as a responsible great power (*fuezeren daguo*) constituted the normalisation of BRI by giving meanings to BRI as an open initiative for global cooperation. At the same time, a global BRI reinforced China's identity as a responsible great power. As argued in Chapter Two, identity from a post-structuralist perspective is political, productive, and normative. National identity produces a particular 'subject', through which state behaviour is disciplined due to the logic of appropriateness. Meanwhile, as identity formulation is also a continuous process, identity needs to be substantiated, in other words, reproduced by actual behaviour. In this case, *fuzeren daguo* (a responsible great power) generated a subject – a responsible

China that is willing to and capable of bettering the world – which not only sought to provide its own version of reality, but also prescribed what an appropriate behaviour for a responsible great power should be. Concurrently, China's 'responsible' behaviour reinforced its identity as a responsible great power.

As argued in Chapter Four, at the end of the Hu administration, China framed the issue of its traditional passivity regarding world affairs as an identity problem and oriented its national identity discourse towards greatness and responsibility. During Xi's presidency, the idea of a responsible great power became a dominant national discourse among Chinese elites. More importantly, its definition of responsibility was framed in line with what counts as international responsibilities and obligations, which was similar to Zoellick's (2005) proposal of being a responsible stakeholder. According to the Chinese government, its international responsibilities were defined as follows: to speak for developing countries, advance and protect their legitimate rights and interests (Wang Yi, 2014a); to put forward more Chinese proposals to address all kinds of regional and global challenges (Wang Yi, 2014a; Yang Jiechi, 2013b); to reform and improve the international governance regime, or in Yang Jiechi's (2013b) words, 'to build a more equitable and balanced global partnership for development'; and to provide more public goods (Wang Yi, 2013a; Xi, 2016c).

From this perspective, therefore, a global BRI was legitimised and normalised by China's own national identity conception as a responsible great power. The features of a great responsible power were most discernible in the characterisation of BRI as a global public good, at least from China's perspective, and its role in disciplining China to act responsibly. As such, the global, open, and cooperative nature of BRI was produced and reproduced by that particular identity conception. For instance, BRI was explicitly framed as a public good provided by China (GWR, 2014; Li Ze, 2015; Xi, 2017b), even claimed to be 'the largest' (Jia Xiudong, 2019) or in Foreign Minister Wang Yi's (2017a) words, 'the most popular international public good.' Put simply, BRI was conceptualised as a project of the world and for the world. As public goods are about non-rivalry and non-excludability (Kaul, Grunberg and Stern, 1999; Leverett and Leverett, 2012), BRI must be, as argued strongly by the Chinese government, inclusive and not in competition with other regional regimes, and it targeted no third parties nor involved any political constraints (Global Times, 2015; NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015). This construction of BRI as a public good by a responsible China has given BRI the meaning of being open and global.

At the same time, China's national identity as a responsible great power was reproduced in the process of implementing BRI. More specifically, a responsible great power was implicated in BRI practices that distinguished its more proactive and responsible behaviours such as more overseas investment from its previous ones that were framed as traditional passivity. This is evident in Beijing's explicit connections between BRI and the framing of a responsible great power. For instance, BRI could make economic globalisation more inclusive and equitable by addressing its negative

implications (Wang Yi, 2017a). BRI is, according to the BRI Office (2017), part of the Chinese solution, originating from its sense of international responsibility, to global issues of peace and development. By doing so, China honours its commitment of 'shouldering more responsibilities and obligations within its capabilities and making greater contributions to the peace and development of mankind' (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015: 4). Put differently, BRI is 'the clearest manifestation to date of China's attempts to present itself as a major global actor' (Nordin and Weissman, 2018: 244) by not shirking from its due responsibilities, such as 'in promoting international economic governance towards a fair, just and rational system' (BRI Office, 2017).

The second ideological representation related to China's foreign policy strategy of striving for achievement. As argued in Chapter Four, the issue of identity was woven through China's foreign policy strategy, both setting the stage for the emergence of BRI. Put differently, a global BRI emerged as a political policy to manage China's identity and foreign policy issues. Therefore, similar to the national identity of a great responsible power, China's foreign policy strategy also constituted the global and open nature of BRI.

As argued in Chapter Four, China's foreign policy strategy was hotly debated in the late 2000s with the *taoguang yanghui* (keeping a low profile) strategy holding an upper hand. However, the direction of the debate began to change after Xi came to power. In October 2013, Xi formally put forward the idea of *fenfa youwei* (striving for achievement) in his address to the first-ever CCP Central Work Conference (CWC) on the Neighbourhood Diplomacy[46], where he called for more actions to be taken in dealing with neighbouring states for a more productive and mutually beneficial relationship between China and its neighbours (Renminwang, 2013a). Like *taoguang yanghui* (Chapter Four), the doctrine of *fenfa youwei* has not been systematically explained by Xi. Building on the use of the term in different speeches made by Xi and his cohort, the thesis suggests the following meanings and connotations.

This doctrine first indicates that more effort will be directed to shape the reorientation of the international system (Foot, 2014; Sørensen, 2015), with the aim of making it more equitable and just. This is not a new message in China's foreign policy discourse, but it has its new developments. According to Xi, an equitable and just system means that international financial institutions need reforms to increase the representation of emerging markets and developing countries, and that global governance should reflect the interests of most countries (CCP Member Portal, 2015a). On the international front, China is more confident and active in multilateral diplomacy and international institutional building (Zhang Y.J., 2016a). China has been energetically endorsing the United Nations through the reinforcement of the authority of the UN Security Council,

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[46] The conference itself is of great significance, because it is by far the highest-level conference on foreign policy, which is attended by all members of the standing committee of the Politburo, officials at the provincial level and foreign envoys since the establishment of the PRC (Renminwang, 2013; Yan Xuetong, 2014).

and its full support for the UN peacekeeping operations and General Assembly (Foot, 2014). There emerges, according to Wang Yong (2016), a new style of foreign policy practice which calls for embracing China's new role as a global leader, proactively shaping the international environment replete with uncertainties.

On the domestic front, China has reshaped its foreign policy apparatus and attached greater importance to foreign affairs. China has streamlined its foreign policy-making procedures with a centralised top-level decision-making body and an enhanced coordination mechanism (Yang Jiechi, 2013d; Zhang, Y.J., 2016a) and established a National Security Commission (Reuters, 2014). This shows the overlap between the ideational and institutional dimensions. In addition, the Chinese government, during the CCP's central work conferences on its neighbourhood diplomacy and foreign affairs, articulated its proactive foreign policy strategy with a goal of shaping the international environment by capitalising on its newly-gained power and prestige (Renminwang, 2013a; Xinhua, 2014a; Zhang Y.J., 2016a). The 2014 CWC on Foreign Affairs also redefined the concept of *zhanlüe jiyuqi* (period of strategic opportunity), which means China should adopt a more forward-leaning approach to shape the environment rather than its prior attitude of accepting and capitalising on it (Johnson, 2016).

Moreover, *fenfa youwei* is politically oriented with an ultimate goal of achieving China's national rejuvenation, or as Xi's China Dream (Yan Xuetong, 2014). Meanwhile, China asks for due respect from and equal footing with other great powers (Sørensen, 2015). The *fenfa youwei* strategy was announced when China was already an economic power and an emerging military power. It indicates that China's participation will no longer be confined to trade and economic cooperation, but will extend over security and politics (Sørensen, 2015; Yan Xuetong, 2014). This is different from the *taoguang yanghui* strategy that was introduced when China's Open-Door policy was under way, which espoused a foreign policy was mainly to serve China's domestic development by creating and maintaining a stable and friendly international environment (Yan Xuetong, 2014).

This second aspect is also closely related to China's national identity conception of being a responsible great power in terms of China's understanding of international responsibilities. By keeping a low profile, China undertook no leadership, passively responded to changes from the external environment and underlined its relations with major powers, the U.S. in particular (Yan Xuetong, 2014). Yet, aiming at striving for achievement, China is more proactive and taking the initiative to shape the international system in its favour (Yan Xuetong, 2014). The deeper China is engaging with the system, the more responsibilities China is going to take.

Last but not least, China might relinquish, if necessary, its commitment to nonalignment in order to secure its core interests (*hexin liyi*) (Foot, 2014; Sørensen, 2015; Yan Xuetong, 2014). As Xi (2013, quoted in CCP Member Portal, 2013) proclaimed not long after he took power, '[n]o foreign country should ever expect us [Chinese] bargain over our core national interests, and nor should they expect us to swallow the bitter fruits of harm to our sovereignty, security and development interests.' Xi (2013, quoted

in CCP Member Portal, 2013) further argued that 'China is committed to peaceful development, so must other countries.' Xi's message has been repeated and touted by other senior Chinese officials. For instance, Yang Jiechi (2013d) argued that '… we [Chinese] definitely must not forsake our legitimate interests or compromise our core national interests.' Meanwhile, the concepts of 'peaceful development' and 'harmonious world', promoted by Hu, Xi's predecessor, have been shelved and replaced by those of 'China dream', 'two centenary goals' and 'community of a shared future'.

  China's more proactive and less responsive stance is reflected not only in its rhetoric as shown above but also in recent controversial activities in the East and South China Seas. In other words, it influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others. China imposed, for instance, an Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea and continued its land reclamation activities in the South China Sea (Zhang Y.J., 2016a). This contentious aspect could be interpreted as a harbinger of 'China's peaceful rise 2.0' (Zhang Jian, 2015: 7) which is characterised by defending purposefully and even assertively its core national interests whilst maintaining a peaceful international setting. Put differently, it heralds a new approach towards the region and the world at large, forcing the West to re-evaluate its China policies. A bolder claim could be made that this contentiousness portends China's pursuit of a regional hegemony by making the most of the existing system without breaking it (Zhang Y.J., 2016a).

  In short, although China's dominant identity conception and foreign policy strategy did not directly construct a global BRI, these ideological elements, like other discursive elements such as narratives, are the lens through which BRI has been understood. In the language of assemblage, its broad discursive shift towards becoming a responsible great power and being proactive/assertive regarding international affairs constitute the BRI assemblage by influencing how BRI is put into practice and regulating BRI practices.

6.2 Constituting the Global Through the Material

As argued in Chapter Two, an assemblage is a completely heterogeneous composite. Thus, it suggests ontological openness. Assembling a thing, an event, an object, a place, or even a concept is to 'make more visible' (Winder and Le Heron, 2017: 4) the diverse forms of components, *actants* [47] in Latour's words, which *constitute* that specific assemblage, or formation, and the distinct relations imposed externally. Different actants possess different resources and capacities to act (Briassoulis, 2017), and their

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[47] *Actant* is coined by Latour to denote both human and non-human elements with agential capacity, removing the difference between these two in terms of their possibility for agency (Frowd, 2014; Voelkner, 2011).

interrelation could give rise to new, potentially unintended and undesirable effects (Voelkner, 2011). Moreover, the world is inhabited by non-human living entities, and material non-living things as well as human beings. The first two share power with the last; they are all 'coeval, co-present and co-constitutive of the worlds which we inhabit' (Nyers, 2012: 3). Put differently, the world is productive of human-non-human, material-non-material, and living-non-living alliances. Therefore, this section concentrates on the role of materials in constituting a global BRI assemblage.

Materials have social, economic and political effects, but how those effects are understood varies by different theorisations of the world. Risking generalising the literature and losing its nuanced arguments within, the thesis argues that the traditional literature on the politics of materials tends to concentrate on a causal relationship between materials such as nature and technology and state behaviour with an emphasis on the power exerted by the former over the latter. For instance, Weiss (2005: 299) argued that innovation in science and technology affected all aspects of the international system that included 'its operational processes, its substance, its architecture, and the information, ideas and perceptions on which it is based.' Diamond (1997) argued that the temperate-tropical divide with regard to economic performance was largely because the diffusion of technology is much slower crossing different ecological zones than that within one zone. Put simply, the traditional literature embraces material determinism and argues that geography and technology enable as well as constrain state behaviour.

To steer clear of the material determinism, the thesis analyses the role of materials in constituting a global BRI with reference to the post-structuralist conceptualisation of power that comes from everywhere and is productive. From this perspective, materials not only have instrumental values that rely on human agency, but also have independent power, a force of their own. In other words, materials have a 'force' beyond being merely human instruments, or in vital materialists' language, thing-power (Bennett, 2004, 2005, 2010; Coole, 2013): the capacity 'to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle' (Bennett, 2010: 6). Accordingly, if materials were completely removed from policymaking, any policies that we have today could have been profoundly changed.

This section argues that the so-called nature of BRI – being global, open, and cooperative – was not simply discursive, rhetorical, and abstract, as articulated by the Chinese government, but also concrete and material. Put simply, material elements such as projects, geography, and technology were the materiality of BRI's global nature. Infrastructure projects as the basis for communications and logistics also reinforced the discursive construction of BRI by producing a form of subjectivity – China as a responsible great power. Moreover, these materials conditioned as well as enabled the characteristics of BRI. Specifically, the global nature was conditional on these elements and their interactions – they block, impede, constrain, and suppress; at the same time, they promote, facilitate, transform – thus, the current form was enabled by them.

6.2.1 The Materiality of a Global BRI

China's infrastructure capability constitutes BRI by reconfiguring China's geography empirically and conceptually. Empirically, it has transformed China's topological landscape – breaking down the natural barriers posed by its landscape features – so as to make all parts of China more interconnected, and to a certain degree, the world connected through a material network of rails, ports, roads, and pipelines. In other words, through this material network, these BRI infrastructure projects rendered the global nature of BRI visible, giving a body to BRI.

Meanwhile, infrastructure capability interacted with other ideational elements of the BRI assemblage by (re-)producing 'a mode of visibility, gaze, or way of seeing' (Lundborg and Vaughan-Williams, 2015: 20). In this case, infrastructure capability has brought about possibilities for larger and cross-regional projects that further integrate China into the Eurasian region and the world at large, thus reinforcing China's national identity as a responsible great power and its perception of the world as a network of nodes connected through infrastructure and telecommunication (Interview 03, 2018). Put simply, it is within the networks of ports, railways, and pipelines, a global BRI and, by extension, China's national identity of a great power, are to be found.

Among all the success that China has achieved since its Open-Door policy, China's advances in infrastructure development, high-speed rail (HSR) technology and network in particular, have been the most prominent in recent years. These new technologies have transformed China's landscape massively, rendering China more interconnected. Due to its high altitude and fragile environment, Tibet had no railways until 2006 when China opened its first Qinghai-Tibet rail. Even though there are only two operating railways connecting Tibet and its bordering provinces till today, China is home to the second largest rail network in the world, according to China's National Bureau of Statistics (2019), reaching 139,800 kilometres and connecting all major Chinese cities.

HSR has been named as one of China's 'four new inventions' (Global Times, 2017; Jakhar, 2018; Xu G., 2017).[48] China's massive rail network, particularly HSR, is built on its increasing infrastructure capability. Although the first HSR service only opened in 2008 between Beijing and Tianjin (Xinhua, 2018b), as of 2019, China was also home to the world's largest HSR network, climbing to 25,000 kilometres, which was more than the rest of the world combined (Lawrence, Bullock, and Liu, 2019).

At the beginning of the development of China's HSR network, China relied heavily on foreign technologies and expertise such as key components of cars, control networks, and traction converters (Zoellner and Ferriss, 2014). The first series of bullet trains titled '*hexie*' (harmony) relied on French, German, and Japanese technologies (Huang Jingjing,

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[48] The other three inventions, according to the Chinese media, are mobile payment, e-commerce, and bike-sharing. But this is fact-checked by BBC (Jakhar, 2018): 'China did not invent any of these technologies, - but it has led the way in their widescale implementation.'

2017). In July 2017, China launched a new series of bullet trains titled '*fuxing*' (rejuvenation) to serve the Beijing-Shanghai line. This new series is, as reported (Huang Jingjing, 2017), entirely designed and manufactured in China.

The current presence of China's HSR technology in the international stage has a strong political backing from top Chinese leaders (Kratz and Pavlićević, 2016). Wen Jiabao, former premier (2003-2013), is the first senior Chinese leader to promote China's HSR technology overseas and followed by current senior leaders (Kratz and Pavlićević, 2016). These leaders take every opportunity to promote HSR in their overseas state or working visits (e.g. Xi's visits to the UK and Iran in 2015, and Li's 2015 visit to Malaysia), and international and regional conferences that Beijing prefer such as 16+1 Summit (Kratz and Pavlićević, 2016: 2). Li's effort has even won him a new title, among the media, the salesman of China's HSR.

Under the name of BRI, China has succeeded in exporting its infrastructure technologies to other countries. For instance, Addis Ababa–Djibouti Railway, completed by two Chinese companies (BBC, 2016) was praised by Tan Jian (quoted in Xinhua, 2018d), then-Chinese Ambassador to Ethiopia as '[an] earlier harvest project of the Belt and Road initiative.'[49] Other cross-regional transport projects such as Moscow-Kazan high-speed railway (Farchy et al., 2016), Jakarta-Bandung high-speed railway (NDRC, 2017a), and Budapest-Belgrade railway (Vasovic, 2017) were either completed, near completion, or upgraded under BRI by the time of writing.

Other than the physical linkages in the region, China has also been coordinating with other countries to harmonise relevant infrastructure policies, such as 'their infrastructure construction plans and technical standard systems' (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015: 4). In other words, the connectivity is not merely about building roads, erecting bridges, or digging tunnels; it is also about 'software connectivity, involving telecommunications, customs and quarantine inspection' (Xi, 2017c). The flagship BRI project is, according to the Chinese government (SCIO, 2016), China-Europe railway service titled *CHINA RAILWAY Express* (CR Express).

Politically, China has been using the announcement of new rail routes between China and Europe as evidence that BRI is succeeding. China-Europe railway services have been growing, since the very first trial in 2008, in terms of cargo volume and type as well as the frequency, origins, and destinations (Hillman, 2018; NDRC, 2015). The very first tester train in the trial period was sent by Foxconn, a Taiwanese electronics manufacturer, from Shenzhen to Europe via Mongolia in 2008 (Hillman, 2018; Shepard, 2016). Pilot trains continued until Mongolia more than doubled their transport rates when technologies and standards all came together (Shepard, 2016). In 2009, DB Schenker, a

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[49] The construction of this railway started in 2011 and finished in October 2016 (Railway Technology, n.d.). *Zaoqi shouhuo* (early harvest scheme or, sometimes, earlier harvest) refers to an initial and partial agreement before a free trade agreement (FTA) is eventually reached between two trading partners. Sometimes, Chinese officials also use *zaoqi shouhuo* to refer to a project or a set of projects at the early stage that can demonstrate the success of a policy.

German logistics company, started a weekly service between Shanghai and Duisburg (Hillman, 2018). The same year, HP, a U.S. information technology company, began to mull over the possibility of a route from Chongqing, a south-western metropolis, to Europe via Central Asia and Russia. With the support of the government of different cities, this route worked out (Hillman, 2018; Shepard, 2016). On 19 March 2011, an outbound block train was dispatched from Chongqing (China) to Duisburg (Germany), which was called Chongqing-Xinjiang-Europe Railway at that time, but later rebranded as CR Express (BRI Office, 2018).

The first biggest breakthrough came in 2011 with the customs union signed by Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus allowing cargo trains to go non-stop from China to Europe (Hillman, 2018; Shepard, 2016). A regular weekly service began in 2012 (Hillman, 2018). In April 2017, for instance, railway authorities from seven countries (Belarus, China, Germany, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Poland, and Russia) signed an agreement to strengthen their partnership in China-Europe Freight rail services (Song Lifang, 2017). As of October 2018, regular cross-regional direct freight services reached 11,000, carrying nearly 920,000 TEUs[50], and connecting 52 Chinese cities with 44 cities in Europe and dozens of cities in the Middle East through 65 (sub-)routes (BRI Office, 2018a; Hillman, 2018; Shepard, 2016; Xiong Li, 2018).

In short, originally, this project started with a single route, mostly known as Chongqing-Xinjiang-Europe, in 2011 (prior to BRI) and was later developed into a railway network connecting China and Europe via Central Asia (BRI Office, 2018a; Hillman, 2018; Shepard, 2016; Xiong Li, 2018). Based on Hillman's (2018) research, China-Europe railway services are done through three primary corridors. The northern corridor has three starting points in China, all of which merger with the Trans-Siberian railway (Hillman, 2018). Similar to the northern one, the middle corridor has also multiple sub-lines in China, but all run through Kazakhstan (Hillman, 2018). The nascent southern corridor is connecting China with Europe via Central Asia, Iran, Georgia, and Turkey (Hillman, 2018).

Moreover, Beijing has framed its vision of infrastructure connectivity as 'a multi-dimensional infrastructure network' (Xi, 2017b, 2017c) that mainly comprised cross-regional land-sea-air transport infrastructures, oil and gas pipelines, and electricity transmission and telecommunication networks. Given that, other than railway construction, China has other infrastructure projects overseas. Chinese state-owned enterprises such as COSCO China and China Merchant Port have been accessing foreign ports through purchasing equities and/or leasing. For instance, China held a 99-year lease on Hambantota Port from the Sri Lanka government through a debt-for-equity swap (CMPort, 2017; Kliman and Grace, 218; Kynge et al., 2017). In Africa, it has access to Djibouti and built its first overseas logics base there with the goal of assisting Chinese

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[50] TEU refers to Twenty-Foot Equivalent Unit, a measurement used to describe the capacity of container ships and terminals.

navy in escorting ships, conducting humanitarian relief operations and peacekeeping, and performing other international obligations in the Gulf of Aden and the waters off the Somali coasts (MOFA, 2017). Less-known ports and terminals that China has access to are Seychelles in Africa, and Antwerp, Zeebrugge, and Rotterdam in Europe (Braden, 2017; Kynge et al., 2017). In addition, China has many gas pipelines across the Eurasia such as China-Russia crude oil and gas pipelines, China-Myanmar crude oil pipeline, and China-Mongolia transmission grid (CNPC, 2015; Jing Shuiyu, 2017; Kodaka and Nitta, 2017; State Grid, 2017).

Overall, China's infrastructure capabilities and its expanding networks of infrastructures both within and without have facilitated the development of BRI across the world. They served as the conditions of possibility that enabled BRI to go global. All these infrastructure projects together on the ground, such as ports, railways, and industrial parks, connected different cities and states and formed a network of infrastructures spreading across the world. They have given 'body' to a global BRI, or a material form to the nature of BRI. Whilst making the governance of regional economy possible via delivering BRI projects, China's infrastructure capabilities also ensure a materialisation of China's national identity whereby China as a great power is by proxy ever-present in its growing world network of infrastructures. Therefore, the global, open, and cooperative nature of BRI was not simply theoretical, discursively constructed and represented by Beijing's narratives and ideologies. It was also visible and concrete, manifested through materials such as physical projects, geography, and technology. Put simply, the global nature of BRI was seen, felt and materialised through the network of infrastructure projects.

6.2.2 Materials, Resistance, and the Global BRI

As demonstrated above, regarding policy, materials are no longer passive or inert entities – tools – which are used to simply either facilitate or impede policymaking; they are vibrant matters that 'always carry a degree of agency in themselves, the capacity to alter the current state of affairs in one way or anther' (Ureta, 2015: 7). Whilst giving a body to the global BRI through a network of infrastructures, materials also conditioned the global nature of BRI and defined what forms BRI's global nature could take. As argued in Chapter Two, assemblage is a multiplicity in which elements could be detached and reattached and it is in a continuous process of being made and remade. Continuous interactions among different elements sustain the current assemblage (territorialisation) and are likely to transform and form a new assemblage (deterritorialisation). In this case, this global BRI was contingent and unstable.

The thesis argues that geography was a critical material element in assembling a global BRI in two aspects. First, China's geographical locations and topological features contributed to the development of BRI by framing, legitimising, and shaping the

knowledge of China's economic and identity issue. Geography constituted the global BRI first through influencing the framing of problematisations, particularly the one related to regional differences.

Second, the thesis argues that geographical locations and topological features constantly constrained, even compromised, the global nature of BRI. They conditioned the design of BRI in terms of the directions of different routes. For instance, the land-based Silk Road always starts from central China and passes through Xinjiang (northwest), not Tibet (southwest), before it reaches Kazakhstan. Furthermore, together with the global network of infrastructures, geographical locations threaten the global nature of BRI by generating/strengthening the resistance of other states.

First, geography conditions economic development and contributes to the framing of uneven economic development. Topological features, natural endowment, and geographical locations either endow states with or deprive them of certain conditions that are conducive to economic growth. In other words, geography produces certain types of economic models and, to a certain degree, influences policies. It influences the possibility and operability of BRI-related discourses, thus constituting the BRI assemblage. In the case of China, the topological features of China's different regions and their geographical location have exerted great influence on economic development and, by extension, contributed to its domestic east-west divide (the coast vs. the inland) (Gallup, Sachs, and Mellinger, 1999). As explained in Chapter Four, by 2014, the GDP of the western region making up 70% of mainland China still only accounted for barely 20% of the national total (Ruan, 2014).

China's landscape, known as 'a three-step staircase' (CGP, 2005a; Jen, 1964), varies significantly, descending from its west to east. The first stair is the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau with an average altitude of 4,000 metres, standing imposingly in China's southwest. This area is known for its delicate ecology and majestic mountains (CGP, 2005a; Jen, 1964).

Image 6.1 China's Physiography

Source: https:///www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/cia-maps-publications/map-downloads/china_physiography.jpg/image.jpg

The first stair then proceeds to the second one that covers a vast territory from China's northwest and (part of) southwest to its central region (CGP, 2005a; Démurger et al., 2002; Jen, 1964). The second stair, about 1,000 to 2,000 metres above the sea level, comprises mostly highlands, deserts, and basins (CGP, 2005a). The southwest part of this second stair has a rugged surface punctuated with numerous mountains and rivers (Démurger et al., 2002). With an average elevation of 1,428 metres and an average slope of 5.2 degrees, this region is endowed with only 10% arable land (Démurger et al., 2002).

The northwest part of the second stair is covered by a variety of landscapes such as the Mongolian Prairie, the Gobi Desert, and the Loess Plateau. Provinces and autonomous regions in China's northwest are truly isolated and landlocked. Meanwhile, only 8% of the land in China's northwest is arable, which, plus low annual precipitation, makes this area the least habitable in China (Démurger et al., 2002).

The third stair is China's east. Home to hills and plains that are less than 500-metres high, this area is mostly flat and spotted with many river deltas (CGP, 2005a). Traditionally, the whole area is widely known as China's granary due to the combination of higher precipitation and fertile soil. Its southern part, in particular, is endowed with a warmer climate and abundant water resources, earning itself the title 'Land of Fish and Rice'. Furthermore, China's east also borders the Pacific. The seas along China's east coast from north to south are as follows: the Bohai Sea (or the Po Sea), the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea. The easy access to navigable rivers and the sea in particular have granted China's east coast a great advantage in developing international trade by significantly reducing transport costs (Bao et al., 2002; Démurger et al., 2002; Wang and Hu, 1999). Thus, this region is also the most prosperous part of China.

The topographic features of China's first two stairs, home to China's western region, being mountainous and hilly imply unfavourable natural conditions for communication and economic development (Bao et al., 2002). More and better physical infrastructure is needed for the connection between the region and its outside, and within itself for a better economic development (Démurger, 2001; Démurger et al., 2002). However, compared with China's east, the rugged surface, fragile ecological environment, and extreme weather of its western region demand not just better technologies but also high costs for infrastructure building (Démurger et al., 2002; Tan et al., 2008).

These difficulties of building infrastructures in these regions both technologically and financially could be understood easily through the density of railway networks, particular high-speed railways in China. By 2014, in terms of the railway network density calculated with reference to the length of railway lines and the size of territories, the top three are all coastal municipalities – Tianjin topped the table, followed by Beijing and Shanghai (Guanchazhe, 2018). Among top 10 provinces and municipalities, only two are from Central China, and the rest are all from China's east coast (Guanchazhe, 2018). In contrast, the bottom three, Xinjiang, Qinghai, and Tibet, are all from western China (Guanchazhe, 2018). In short, China's mountainous inland regions are less developed due to the technological difficulties and high costs for communication.

Image 6.2 China Railway Map 2019

Moreover, the much easier access to the sea of the coastal regions relative to hinterlands implies a reduced transport cost which gives these coastal countries an edge in economic and trade development. For instance, China's east coast due to low costs of transport is well known for its manufacturing industry and international trade. Even for those inland countries, such as Cambodia, which are not far away from the sea, at least no farther than the interior parts of some coastal countries, lacking access to the sea still proves to be a hurdle to their economic development because the cross-border transport of goods and cross-border human migration are more problematic and complex than internal (within a state) transport and migration (Gallup, Sachs, and Mellinger, 1999). Modern technologies and investments in physical infrastructure can and have reduced the lower-transport-cost and closer-to-market advantage of coastlines relative to hinterlands (Démurger et al., 2002), but according to Gallup, Sachs, and Mellinger (1999: 186), maritime transport (through containers ships) still dominates.

In short, this thesis argues that the phenomenon of the uneven domestic economic development, an economically advanced east coast co-existing with less developed central and western regions, is partially attributed to China's topological features (three-

staircase landscape), natural endowment, geographical locations and (the lack of) technology. As Chapters Four and Five have argued, this phenomenon was problematised by Beijing and framed as an urgent economic problem, to which SREB, MSR, and later BRI emerged as responses. In other words, geography constitutes the BRI assemblage by helping to shape the economic problematisation.

The second way that geography constitutes BRI is to constrain the design of BRI routes. It can be understood from the geographical coverage [51] of BRI – in terms of the geographic areas the initiative covers. BRI has been expanding in terms of both official discourse and actual activities and open to all participants according to Beijing. However, the expansion of the geographical coverage of BRI has largely corresponded to China's three-tier landscape and geographical location.

First, the development of BRI started with China's Asian neighbours, then the Eurasian continent, North Africa, and then crossed the Pacific reaching to the shore of South American countries. Asia remains at the centre of BRI as the Chinese government traces its origin to Asia (Xi, 2014b), which is discernible in the inauguration places of SREB and MSR, Kazakhstan and Indonesia respectively. According to Xi (2014b, 2015a), China's neighbouring states are the principal participants of BRI, and at the same time, BRI is inviting for its neighbours because they are BRI's major beneficiaries. This aspect is well evidenced by most early BRI projects that, as discussed in Chapter Five, are located within Asia. As Xi (2014b, emphasis added) summarises, 'we [China] should strive to realise *Asia's connectivity first* by making *Asian countries* our *priority*.'

Slowly but steadily, China has been expanding the geographical coverage of BRI, as it has consistently claimed that the sources of BRI participants should not be limited to countries along the ancient silk routes. 'It is open to all countries,' declares the *Vision and Actions* (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015: 4). In the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, Xi (2017c) proclaimed explicitly that 'the Americas' were potential partners for BRI. Later, Xi claimed that Latin America was the 'natural extension' of MSR during his meeting with President Macri of Argentina (quoted in Wang Huihui, 2017). In December 2017, Panama become the first Latin American country to sign a memorandum of understanding on cooperation under the framework of BRI, which was followed by Antigua and Barbuda, Trinidad and Tobago, and Bolivia (Barrios, 2018). Now, top Chinese diplomats like Wang Yi (2018a) consistently refer to the LAC (Latin America and the Caribbean) 'as a natural extension of the ancient maritime Silk Road, … [and] is indispensable to' BRI's construction.

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[51] 'Geographical coverage describes the locations or the geographic area which is related to the measured economic phenomenon, or the area that is covered by a survey, etc.' (Eurostat, n.d.).

The Belt and Road Initiative: Six Economic Corridors Spanning Asia, Europe and Africa
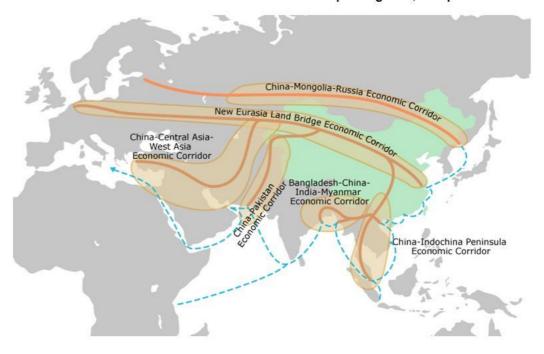

Image 6.3 The Belt and Road Initiative: Six Corridors

Source: china-trade-research.hktdc.com/business-news/article/The-Belt-and-Road- Initiative/The-Belt-and-Road-Initiative/obor/en/1/1X000000/1X0A36B7.htm

Overall, the design of the 'belts' and 'road' in BRI, namely, which regions should be included and in what way, is impacted significantly by China's geographical elements. For instance, five routes are confirmed in the *Vision and Actions*, though a single official map of BRI has never been published. Despite the differences in these specific routes, all Belts (land-based routes) start from central and western China, enter into Central Asia (mostly Kazakhstan) through Xinjiang, and split into several across West Asia, and finally into Africa and Europe (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015). To emphasise, the land-based routes begin in China always go through Xinjiang, not Tibet, as the average altitude of Tibet is over 4000 metres and Xinjiang is lower and borders Central Asia. The Roads (sea-based routes) are the same. They start with Quanzhou located in China's southeast coast, down south along China's coastline and then split into two, one leading to Africa and Southern Europe via the Indian Ocean, and the other leading to the South Pacific (NDRC, MOFA, and MOC, 2015).

Furthermore, the power of China's geography is its geopolitical effects, the resistance to policymaking and implementation, which is displayed through lesser-than-expected effects of policy, underperformance, and policy revision. This is closely related to China's geographical location.

Located at the east end of the Eurasia continent, China as the third[52] largest country covers a massive land territory of 9.6 million square kilometres. Its east coast meets the Pacific, and its west is landlocked without any access to open seas (Démurger et al., 2002). Furthermore, China has 14 border-sharing neighbours (CGP, 2005c). China has a mixed group of neighbours with different economic and military capabilities. Some of them, such as Japan, Russia, and India, are its (rising) peer competitors with their own ambitions to claim their (self-perceived) entitlement in the region and adequate abilities either in economy or in military. Moreover, most of China's neighbouring countries do not share similar political systems with it, some having allied with the U.S., and some having had territorial disputes with China over either land or sea.

In this case, this geographical element could hinder the global nature of BRI by accelerating the geopolitical competition and suspicions. This is also why scholars like Wang Jisi who called to scale down the BRI investment. One of the biggest overseas resistances to BRI is from India. India has, for instance, simply refused to participate in BRI from the very beginning and still does. When asked that if India had changed its longstanding position of opposing BRI, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar (quoted in the Economic Times, 2019), External Affairs Minister of India, responded by saying 'BRI rethink, the answer is no.' India has also vocally argued against the development of CPEC which runs through the disputed area of Kashmir.

6.3 Conclusion

To proceed with the journey of the (re)production of the truth about, or the nature of, BRI as a global initiative for cooperation, this final chapter has turned to the 2015-2017 period when the 'ordered' BRI assemblage gradually became a global assemblage characterised by openness and cooperation. With the help of the post-structuralist conceptualisation of power, it has investigated upon what conditions and in what ways that particular nature of BRI – being global, open, and cooperative, is acquired, sustained, and reproduced. In other words, this chapter has explored the role played by narratives, ideologies, geography, and infrastructure capability in the constitution and interaction of a global BRI.

Contrary to what China has claimed that BRI is always an open platform for closer international cooperation that pursues a more interconnected, fairer, and more just world economy, this chapter has found out, via assembling BRI, that there was no such inherent meaning in it, and that BRI's global, open and cooperative nature was contingent and emergent. It has argued that this particular meaning was produced by

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[52] The figure is debatable. Depending on different measurements, the U.S. is also often regarded as the world's third largest country.

the interactions among different components. More specifically, this global nature was constructed through a series of negative and positive narratives and ideologies. It was made intelligible, understood as it was, by the practices and projects beyond Asia, China's geographical location, topological features, high-speed rail, and national identity. Overall, this global BRI assemblage was composed of Chinese officials, foreign and domestic private enterprises, governments and institutions, BRI policy papers, journal articles, news, speeches, China's national identity conception, foreign policy strategy, its geographical features, and infrastructure capability and projects like ports, railways, and pipelines.

Conclusion

In 2017, President Xi (2017b) proclaimed that BRI was 'a platform of open and inclusive cooperation and a public good … [that] is open to all like-minded friends …[and] does not exclude or target any party.' In the same year, the BRI Office (2017) argued in a policy paper that BRI was 'a Chinese proposal whose aim is to promote peaceful cooperation and common development around the world.' In short, BRI has been framed by Beijing as a global initiative for cooperation that is inclusive (open to all), brings material benefits to all participants, and contributes to the cause of world peace and development.

Many scholarly debates have been generated by this 'project of the century' as what President Xi (2017c) once proclaimed. With the why-BRI question at the core, they presented us China's geopolitical and geo-economic concerns and the global power shifting in the Asia-Pacific region (See Chapter One). Whilst challenging the CCP's benign framing of BRI as a global initiative for cooperation, they have rarely challenged or questioned its linear narrative of BRI's development. In other words, they did not question the contingency issue associated with a global BRI; nor did they investigate the underlying assumptions and discursive performance that make its emergence possible.

This thesis is concerned with this particular narrative – BRI as a global initiative for cooperation – and explores the ways in which it became hegemonic. To do so, among all types of research questions, this thesis has chosen a how-possible question to investigate BRI: how did BRI, framed by the CCP as global, open, and cooperative, become possible? The most important reason is that the analysis based on how-possible questions does not presume that the subject of inquiry, in this case, BRI exists *a priori*. Instead, it regards BRI as being emergent and contingent and investigates the *becoming*, not *being*, of BRI. Therefore, this thesis asks: how did BRI become a global initiative for cooperation *and* come to be framed and accepted as legitimate and natural? What were the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a global BRI? In what ways did these elements interact with one another so as to make the global BRI possible?

Given that, this thesis is not about establishing *a* or *the* history of BRI, or determining the ultimate truth about BRI (in other words, what BRI is or is not). Nor it aims at replacing the analyses based on strategic thinking. Rather, the thesis is about positing an alternative interpretation of BRI by engaging in a genealogical exploration of and historical reflection on the emerging process of a global BRI, and investigating the prevailing 'regime of truth' from the CCP that BRI is a global initiative for cooperation.

In doing so, the thesis has demonstrated that BRI is not a realist grand strategy to increase its global influence nor an economic grand strategy to solve its own problems, resulting from a teleological and linear process of cost-benefit calculation. Instead, BRI can be understood as something much messier, multicausal, and contingent, even as the CCP has attempted to fix its meaning in discourses and practices. The messiness,

multicausality and contingency were analysed using the analytical tool of the assemblage and wider theoretical framing of post-structuralism.

The thesis argued that BRI framed by Beijing as a global initiative for cooperation was contingent and emergent, and that BRI-as-assemblage emerged from the interactions of both human and non-human elements. In other words, BRI was *made* to be global, open, and cooperative. More specifically, prior to BRI, the ideas and phenomena concerning China's economic performance and national identity became prominent and were framed as problems, or foreign policy concerns, that needed to be addressed. They gave rise to the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road. BRI then emerged out of these two separate regional initiatives as a two-dimensional assemblage that focused on China and the Eurasian region, and grew gradually into a global BRI characterised by cooperativeness and inclusiveness. This global BRI assemblage included state actors such as government agencies, institutions and policymakers, ideational factors such as national identity conception, discourses such as the problematisations of China's economic structure and international passivity, and material entities such as geography and technology.

The purposes of this conclusion are to summarise the thesis' key findings pertaining to the emergence of a global BRI, to reflect on the benefits and limitations of applying post-structuralism, the concept of assemblage in particular, in the analysis of foreign policy in the Chinese context, and to highlight the broader empirical and theoretical contribution and future research avenues which emerge from this thesis. This chapter begins, therefore, by outlining the key conclusions of each chapter and that of the thesis as a whole. It is followed by reflections on conducting post-structuralist research in and about an authoritarian state, and what methods could be used to mitigate the difficulties. The last section reflects upon future research pathways opened by this thesis.

A Global BRI Assemblage and Beyond

To investigate the ways in which a global BRI assemblage emerged, the thesis began by reviewing the existing BRI literature with a particular focus on the rationale behind BRI, then moved into the theoretical and methodological considerations that highlighted post-structuralism, policy assemblage, and genealogy. The last part of the thesis concentrated on the three stages of assembling BRI from two emerging assemblages, to one ordered or homogenised form of BRI, and to a global BRI assemblage. This section highlights the conclusions of each and every chapter, whilst underscoring the contributions brought by the assemblage approach to foreign policy.

In Chapter One, the thesis reviewed what had been discussed and debated about BRI, and assessed to what degree the discussion had helped us understand its emergence. Apart from finding out the CCP's conceptualisation of BRI as a two-part initiative for

global cooperation and a global public good, this chapter brought to light the general theme of scholarly literature on BRI – a strategic thinking perspective – which often challenge China's official narratives. BRI was understood, therefore, as China's economic strategy to transfer its excess industrial capacity and rebalance its domestic economic growth, or a balancing strategy for security, or an ambition to expand its sphere of influence and compete for regional and/or global hegemony. From this perspective, BRI was also interpreted as policy continuity which was closely related to China's economic diplomacy of last few decades, China's traditional policy practice and state transformation (bureaucratic fragmentation), and its enduring grand narrative of returning to its rightful place.

  This strategic thinking perspective cannot, however, explain the contingency and emergence of a global BRI: what makes BRI what it is now, and how? As shown in Chapter One, the first reason for their failure is that their analyses, based on the logic of problem-solving, tended to assume the making of BRI was teleological, and rational. This directly contradicts the messy and incoherent political history of BRI, in other words, the non-linear, multi-level and multicausal development of BRI. The second reason is that they ignored the constructed nature of the 'problems' that BRI was supposed to solve and assumed *a priori* what BRI was without enquiring into the conditions of possibility upon which a global BRI relied. In short, BRI has been widely debated, but within a set of parameters (teleological and strategic thinking, and the logic of problem-solving) that limited the understandings of BRI.

  In Chapter Two, built on assemblage thinking and the post-structuralist conceptualisations of power and identity, the thesis developed a post-structural theoretical framework of foreign policy analysis. It took three steps in all. The first step demonstrated the diversity and critical ethos of post-positivism that opened up thinking space within IR as ontology and epistemology determine what counts as legitimate subjects of inquiry in IR and how knowledge is produced. The second step continued theorising foreign policy with the focus on the problem of power, identity, and knowledge. The whole discussion centred around positivist theories (neorealism, neoliberalism, and conventional constructivism) and post-positivist theories (post-structuralism). It concluded that an anti-foundationalist epistemology make post-structuralism the most suitable approach to investigate the how-possible question at the heart of the thesis. And from that perspective, foreign policy shall be reconceptualised as an assemblage, as assemblage thinking not only incorporates post-structuralist concepts of productive power and identity as practice, but also gives credit to the role of non-traditional actors, materials in particular, in foreign policymaking. In this case, the thesis employed the concept of policy assemblage with the aid of Foucauldian understanding of power to explore the (de-)territorialisation of the global BRI assemblage, in which heterogeneous elements interact with, reinforce, and in some cases, cancel one another.

The third task of the chapter visited the issue of truth in the Chinese context and its conceptualisation in the thesis, which is critical to further legitimise an assemblage approach to policy analysis. The thesis found out that although truth for the Chinese state is defined in accordance with its Marxist ideology, that is, accurate reflections of an objective world and relevant laws, it is more of an issue of governance, rather than an theoretical issue, providing 'a framework for change, engagement and action' (Brown, 2018: 45). Put differently, the actual contents of truth claims are subjected to their functional utility. Thus, Foucault's regime of truth is all the more relevant.

Following the theoretical framework, in Chapter Three, the thesis explained its methodological preferences and specific methods employed to conduct the research. The first part of the chapter focused on the conceptualisation of genealogy as methodology. It argued that genealogy is 'a painstaking rediscovery of struggles' (Foucault, 1980: 83), rather than an exploration looking for origins. Consequently, genealogy emphasises the contingency of the present and rejects linear, progressive, and teleological narratives of the subject of inquiry. This means that genealogical research is useful to investigate the emergence of a global BRI. The second part presented a three-step process of collecting and analysing data. The research design centred around the concept of 'problematisation', where the subject of inquiry was framed as a problem. The thesis first identified problematisations. Then, it determined the assumptions or presuppositions that underlie the identified problematisation(s). This was followed by the third step, that is, to identify contending discourses, namely, the silenced, the unproblematised, and the possible alternative(s). In both the second and third steps, various means, strategies, and mechanisms were identified because through them power was exercised to make some discourses hegemonic while others suppressed.

The second part of the thesis focused on the empirical discussion of the emergence of a global BRI assemblage. As the thesis has periodised the assembling process with three critical events, this empirical part was divided into three chapters, each of which concentrated on one period of the development of BRI.

In Chapter Four, the thesis focused on the politics of problematisation prior to BRI. The first finding was the contingent and constructed nature of the so-called problems to which BRI was argued to solve. The Chinese government claimed that BRI was an initiative designed to tackle some domestic economic problems and cross-regional economic concerns. But 'problems' were, however, not natural; instead, they were constructed and made 'natural' through constant (re-)framing and practices. The other important finding from Chapter Four was that China's national identity became a policy concern and framed as a problem that needed to be addressed. These two major problematisations not simply set the stage for the emergence of BRI (setting parameters for and giving meanings to it). More importantly, they were deeply woven into the BRI assemblage and continuously shaped its content, practice, and meaning with their own evolving framings.

In Chapter Five, the thesis turned to the ordering, or homogenising, period between late 2013 and early 2015 in which a BRI assemblage began to take shape. The period was marked by the proposals of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road (MSR) in 2013 and the publication of the first BRI policy paper in early 2015. The most important finding from this chapter was that BRI did not exist in Beijing's official version of BRI's origin. Rather, there were only two distinct (sub-)regional projects, which acknowledged the contingency of BRI. Moreover, when SREB and MSR were proposed, both were left undefined and no policy documents were available to explain what SREB and MSR were and how they would be implemented. Thus, they were amorphous assemblages in which almost every actor could join them and everything seemed to be part of them. Gradually, with a series of political moves in the form of institutional design, discursive re-conceptualisation, and political categorisation, SREB and MSR gained a more 'ordered' form, a process of (de-)territorialisation with clearer boundaries, generating BRI. At this stage, the role, or more precisely, power of Chinese government was very apparent, not only in the disciplining of actual practices, but also in producing subjects and objects of BRI. In short, this chapter focused on the relations between SREB, MSR, and BRI, and argued that BRI has, facilitated largely by state power, gradually grew out of amorphous SREB and MSR assemblages and came to be an/one ordered two-dimensional assemblage

Chapter Six focused on the global, open, and cooperative framing of BRI by the CCP, and explored how different elements, non-human as well as human, exercised power to produce a particular set of meanings. The first section of the chapter concentrated on the evolution of discursive elements and their role in giving BRI the meaning of being global, open, and cooperative, whilst the second part focused on the constitutive role of materials. This final chapter argued that since the first BRI policy paper, BRI has evolved from a regional initiative focusing on both domestic and regional needs into a global initiative for cooperation. This transformation is not simply a social and discursive construction through Beijing's narrative system centring on 'what BRI is not' and its national identity conception as a responsible great power, but also enabled and, at the same time, conditioned by such materials as China's high-speed rail and geographical features. Put simply, the chapter argued that BRI was not born with the global, open, and cooperative nature; a global BRI was made possible by the assemblage of human and non-human elements.

Overall, this assemblage-based post-structural analysis has generated a few key insights concerning BRI and foreign policy. First, from the perspective of assemblage, the thesis demonstrated that the global, open, and cooperative nature of BRI claimed by the CCP was *contingent* and *contested*. It was made evident and naturalised as an essence by the interactions of heterogeneous elements, which functioned as the conditions of possibility, be they physical, historical, social, or conceptual. In other words, by breaking down what the Chinese government has claimed about BRI into its component parts, the thesis has found no such inherent meaning existing in the policy beyond official written

documents themselves. Via presenting the process of forming a global BRI assemblage, this thesis has argued that BRI was assembled, or simply *made*, to be global, open, and cooperative through the interactions of human and non-human elements. Therefore, BRI included, but not limited to, the following elements: traditional actors such as the Chinese central government, local governments, non-government agencies, private companies, and their foreign counterparts; traditional policy elements such as administrative measures; practices such as the cooperative projects in infrastructure, policy, finance, culture, and people-to-people exchange; materials such as geography, technology, official documents, policy papers, and speeches, press conferences and interviews by senior Chinese leaders; discourses such as scientific statements, problematisations of China's economic structure and national identity, the concept of Silk Road, the specific names for SREB, MSR, and BRI, etc.

Meanwhile, from this perspective, China's dominant interpretation of BRI as a global initiative for cooperation is hardly *the* truth, but *a regime of truth*. This particular truth was embedded in China's continuous effort to strive for achievement and its growing sense of becoming a responsible great power according to the prevailing understandings of what that meant; and it was also produced by various techniques such as institutional design, discursive construction, and technological export. In short, it is a concatenation of miscellaneous elements (rules, actions, discourses, practices, institutions, identities, ideas, materials, et cetera) that has made China's interpretation '*true*'. Here, 'true' is understood in the sense of being legitimate and hegemonic, rather than in a right/wrong or true/false dichotomy. Also, this truth is part of the global BRI assemblage rather than separated from it.

Reflections on Assemblage and Post-structuralism

This thesis aims at not only joining in the debate on BRI, but also, in a broader sense, contributing to a post-structural approach to foreign policy analysis. Based on the experience of the researcher and the case of China, this section presents three reflections – what assemblage thinking brings to the study of foreign policy and what issues need to be addressed – which can be useful for future post-structuralist research. The first reflection is that assemblage permits a new way of conceptualising BRI. The second reflection is that assemblage thinking and post-structuralism can and should be applied more widely to carry out foreign policy analysis. And the third reflection is that conducting post-structuralist research in and about China, and broadly, a non-Western, non-liberal setting, requires more personal networking and more effort to triangulate data collected for research.

First, assemblage thinking allows us to reimagine BRI and, by extension, possible responses to it. The thesis acknowledges that the assemblage-based post-structuralist

approach has not directly provided any practical solutions, or in other words, policy recommendations, to all issues/problems identified in the analysis or given any predictions about the future development of BRI. It would have contradicted the idea of post-structuralism as a non-prescriptive approach if it did. However, by highlighting the role of national identity, including such elements as high-speed rail technologies and geographical features, and analysing their interactions in producing (any aspects of) the meaning of BRI, assemblage thinking has provided a deeper understanding of BRI regarding its contents, purposes, motivations, and emergent process. Instead of presupposing the being of BRI (what it is) as the strategic rational approach did (Chapter One), it focuses on its becoming, considers the effects of both human and non-human factors, and captures the extensive, multi-layered, and multi-sited dynamics of the (de-)territorialisation of a global BRI. Thus, BRI is not simply a policy solution to a series of economic and geopolitical problems that was made through a linear deliberative process. Rather, it is an assemblage that is contingent, conditional upon the specific human-non-human alliances, and 'always in the process of (un-)becoming, absorbing, discarding, and transforming disparate human and non-human elements' (Voelkner, 2013: 204). For practitioners, engaging with BRI from this perspective can go beyond the Chinese state, and look for local partners.

The second reflection is that on a broader policy level, the combination of assemblage thinking and post-structuralism could further push us to reconceptualise foreign policy and provide a more comprehensive, reflective, and critical analysis, compared with mainstream IR theories. When defined as an assemblage, policy is no longer simply a product of a teleological process, 'in which rule [e.g. rationality, problem-solving etc.] extends itself unproblematically across a territory' (Rose, 1999: 51). Instead, policy assemblage is a process, a state, a becoming of 'fragile relays, contested locales and fissiparous affiliations' (Rose, 1999: 51), demanding hard work to 'draw heterogeneous elements together, forge connections between them and sustain these connections in the face of tension' (Li, 2007: 264).

Meanwhile, the thesis shows how assemblage thinking, if applied in foreign policy analysis, could not only undermine the traditional centrality of human and bureaucracies (represented by human) in a strategic approach to policy, but also underscore the role of non-human elements, their interactions with human, effects on foreign policy, rendering it intelligible and meaningful and giving it concrete form. In other words, assemblage thinking compliments traditional post-structuralist analysis by recognising the significance of materials, not simply discourses, in redefining our thinking of contemporary issues and policies at large. Perhaps more importantly, it emphasises the intricate interactions *among* all elements and their constitutive effects on foreign policy rather than a single important factor of discourse. For instance, traditional post-structuralist analysis most often concentrates on the co-constitutive relationship between one single factor, such as identity, and foreign policy (Campbell, 1992; Hansen, 2006) and is accused of being purely discursive.

Moreover, an assemblage-based post-structuralist approach helps to examine the policy critically and, possibly, reconceptualise it as a component part of a broader/bigger problem because post-structuralism is suspicious of the conventional problem/solution dichotomy. Post-structuralism is particularly reflective and conscious of different forms of power that permeate through the process of policymaking and make the policy possible. Therefore, it first questions the problems that the policy is claimed to solve, that is, the political process in which a phenomenon or an event is framed as a problem. Then, it explores how and to what degree the proposed policy contributes to the framing of the problem. In other words, in a post-structuralist analysis, problem and policy (solution) are no longer distinctly separated from each other, and policy could be one of the constitutive parts of the problem. In doing so, the assemblage-based post-structuralist approach provides a critical and reflective perspective not only to understand but also to assess the proposed policy, thus providing opportunities for further improvement.

Furthermore, following the same logic, assemblage thinking enables the researcher to explore policies like BRI that are fluid in nature and flexible in implementation precisely because it subscribes to the idea of anti-essentialism which challenges the boundaries we draw between domestic and international politics (Salvage, 2018). It also opens a new range of sources to see how a national policy is shaped, and how it only makes sense when seen in its relations with the outside world. In short, an assemblage-based post-structural approach transcends the traditional binary of national and foreign policy that could have otherwise artificially constrained the objects of inquiry and the ways in which the analysis of foreign policy is conducted.

The third reflection is the necessity of a more robust networking and triangulation. As discussed in previous chapters, a genealogical research of *anything* (objects, subjects, events, phenomena, and concepts) requires researchers to de-familiarise the familiar, problematise the taken-for-granted, and investigate the power relations embedded in that particular thing. It explores the conditions of possibility and their interactions for research objects and unearths, in the process, what is suppressed, silenced, or subjugated. Such a research asks: what are the silenced alternatives to the current dominant paradigm? Therefore, genealogical research requires full access to archives of all sorts, such as paper-based policy papers, proceedings, parliamentary testimonies, images, video recordings etc., and access to those whose voices have not been heard and who are prepared to speak to collect data. However, in an authoritarian state with a one-party system, like China, there is very limited access, compared to a more open state, to policy documents and potential interviewees, particular those with different views from the party line.

Having access to policy documents in China is complicated as different types of documents vary in accessibility. First, nowadays in China, researchers have access to the outcome documents for major decisions and policies. The outcome document includes, but is not limited to, the following: the policy contents, purposes, decision-making

rationale, and implementation procedures, and expected outcome. The outcome document is usually published on the websites of the Chinese central government and the biggest state-owned media such as Xinhua News Agency, China Daily, and Chinese Communist Party Portal. In local archives where more official documents are available, with the permission of local authorities, researchers can also read documents, take notes, and, sometimes, photocopy them for the purpose of study.

That said, it is very difficult to identify what alternative narratives and arguments are, let alone to analyse the ways in which they are homogenised and incorporated into, or totally excluded from, mainstream narratives. One reason is that outcome documents are usually 'sanitised' to show 'one voice' of, or the consensus reached among, the Chinese leadership. In other words, the outcome documents in the Chinese context do not provide alternative thoughts or their relevant evidence. The other reason is that there is little access to documents regarding the decision-making process, such as expert evidence and internal minutes, where alternative narratives are debated and discussed as part of the policy-making process. This is also what the researcher has experienced during the process of researching for this thesis.

To make up for it, researchers can conduct interviews with, ideally, senior policymakers, scholars and journalists to get more behind-the-scene stories about policymaking process, debates, and alternative (and suppressed) thoughts, ideas, and narratives. Personal networking (*guanxi*) is critical in the Chinese society and is built on interest and, to a certain degree, trust. Without the networking, there could be two issues with regard to conducting interviews in China. First, interviews with Chinese policymakers, compared with their western counterparts, are more difficult to secure in China. Chinese officials and scholars are less willing to be interviewed, even off the record, by a research student, particularly one with no established networking or sponsorship in China. Second, there is a lack of willingness from interviewees, even on condition of anonymity and off the record, to engage with alternative narratives and arguments to the party line. This issue is expected (Chapter Three) but could be worse for a research student.

For this thesis, for instance, the researcher stayed in Beijing and Shanghai for three months in total and managed to interview 18 people, among whom 15 are Chinese scholars and all of whom were recommended by the researcher's sponsor and friends. These interviewees rejected the interviewer's request to provide names of other possible interviewees. What makes the interview more difficult, and to a certain degree, the interview data less useful in terms of identifying alternative explanations, is that most interviewees strictly stuck to the party line.[53] In this case, they were only willing to discuss BRI from the economic perspective, denied the political calculations of BRI, its geopolitical implications in particular, and barely engaged with any other perspectives.

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[53] Ironically, their strict adherence to the party line indicated that there was an effort of suppressing alternative interpretations.

For instance, only two scholars in the interview recognised the geopolitical implications of BRI but insisted that those implications were never the reasons for proposing BRI but merely inevitable side effects. And the researcher was told directly by interviewees, more than once, to go back and read the government documents. One of the most important reasons for this less ideal interview experience was the lack of personal connections and, by extension, personal trust between the researcher and interviewees.

Therefore, in terms of methods in future post-structuralist research in a less liberal state, researchers could first build a professional network in the researched country and fully use their personal network to reach out to more officials and scholars. Building robust networks entails not only meeting more people but also, perhaps more importantly, getting to know more senior professionals and build trust with them. The seniority and trust of someone in your network helps to identify more potential interviewees and to remove some obstacles, such as identifying host institutes more easily and cutting down some administrative red tape, for the fieldwork. Second, interviews can be conducted in a less formal manner, so that interviewees may be more at ease to talk. In less liberal countries, if time allows, researchers should follow up with them for more 'chats.' Once the sense of trust is established, interviewees may be more open and direct in terms of providing information and answering questions. Last but not least, for alternative narratives and stories, researchers need to read and collect data from foreign media and adopt a more rigorous triangulation process. For instance, researchers could collect data from some overseas Chinese news media and verify those data through other mainstream western media. If the data collected from those overseas Chinese media cannot be verified by at least two mainstream media, then these data must not be employed for analysis.

Future Research Agendas

Several avenues for future research are opened. First, regarding foreign policy behaviour and international relations, future research could continue developing and extending the assemblage-based post-structuralist framework. To recall from Chapter Two, this theoretical framework has drawn heavily from the insights of Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Carol Bacchi. The post-structuralist analysis has shown the potential of understanding the complex and dynamic process of foreign policy and demonstrated that foreign policy is not necessarily solely subjected to elites, centralised at the state level, but more distributed, though unevenly, among various actors and across different levels.

The future assemblage research could further develop the role of non-human elements, such as materials, in constituting foreign policy behaviour by combining post-structuralist conceptualisation of power and the latest development in technology such

as artificial intelligence. Meanwhile, more research could explore further and establish a more rigorous mechanism to map out the interactions between human and non-human elements in policymaking.

The second principal focus for future research stemming from the thesis is the need to concentrate on, understand more about, or even theorise the role of local governments, particularly those cities and provinces with a strong economy, in China's foreign economic policymaking. As shown in Chapter Five, local governments compete intensely with one another to influence the national policymaking and to secure more access to and resources from the central government. Whilst actively promoting national policies, they often attempt to incorporate their local interests into their interpretations and, by extension, implementation of those policies. Therefore, future research could identify the commonalities of cities that influence foreign economic policy, establish the criteria for the degree of influence of cities on foreign economic policymaking, and theorise the ways in which cities shape the making of foreign economic policy. Furthermore, comparative studies could be conducted between the cities from countries with different political systems and/or at different development stages. By doing so, the study of city diplomacy could be enriched (Acuto, Morissette, and Tsouros, 2017; Acuto et al., 2018; Chan, 2016; van der Pluijm, 2007).

Finally, further research could continue paying close attention to the evolution of BRI and China's foreign policy strategy in this post-Covid world. The thesis has argued that China's national identity conception (a responsible great power) has played a critical role in defining the meaning of BRI and constituting China's strategy of striving for achievement. Since the Covid-19 outbreak, China has intensified its discourse on responsibility in its foreign 'aid,' and called for 'build[ing] a Silk Road of Health' (Crawford, et al., 2020; Huo and Li, 2017). Beijing argued that it behaved responsibly regarding its fight against the pandemic and that it acted as a responsible great power to help other countries. But at the same time, China is accused by the EU of launching a ferocious disinformation campaign on the coronavirus (He, 2020), and its most recent international behaviour has been dubbed as 'wolf warrior' diplomacy (Hille, 2020; Zhu Zhiqun, 2020). Therefore, it will be interesting to observe how these new elements like wolf-warrior diplomacy and the Silk Road of Health and their interactions with other existing elements like China's national identity affect the BRI assemblage and, by extension, the meaning of BRI in a post-Covid world.

Appendix: List of Interviews

Interview number	Description of Interview	Place	Date
01	Official, State Council	Beijing, China	June 2018
02	Senior Journalist Reporter (Politics), *Renmingwang*	Beijing, China	June 2018
03	Scholar, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences	Beijing, China	June 2018
04	Scholar, University of International Business and Economics (UIBE)	Beijing, China	June 2018
05	Scholar, UIBE	Beijing, China	June 2018
06	Scholar, UIBE	Beijing, China	July 2018
07	Scholar, Chinese Central Party School	Beijing, China	July 2018
08	Scholar, UIBE	Beijing, China	July 2018
09	Retired official, Shanghai Government	Shanghai, China	July 2018
10	Scholar, East China Normal University	Shanghai, China	July 2018
11	Scholar, Shanghai University of International Business and Economics (SUIBE)	Shanghai, China	July 2018
12	Scholar, SUIBE	Shanghai, China	July 2018
13	Scholar, SUIBE	Shanghai, China	July 2018
14	Scholar, SUIBE	Shanghai, China	July 2018
15	Scholar, Tsinghua University	Beijing, China	July 2018
16	Scholar, UIBE	Beijing, China	August 2018
17	Scholar, UIBE	Beijing, China	August 2018
18	Scholar, UIBE	Beijing, China	August 2018

Abbreviations

Acronym	Name (English)
ADIZ	Air Defence Identification Zone
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
BCIM	Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor
BRI/OBOR	Belt and Road Initiative
	One Belt, One Road
	One Belt: Silk Road Economic Belt
	One Road: 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road
BRI LSG	Leading Small Group on Advancing the Construction of the Belt and Road
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
ECS	The East China Sea
GFC	Global Financial Crisis
GWDC	Great Western Development Campaign
IFI	International Financial Institution
IR	International Relations
LSG	Leading Small Group
MOC	Ministry of Commerce
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MSR	21st-Century Maritime Silk Road
NDRC	National Development and Reform Commission
PBSC	The Standing Committee of the CCP Politburo
PRC	People's Republic of China
SCS	The South China Sea
SLOC	Sea Line of Communication
SOE	State-Owned Enterprise
SREB	Silk Road Economic Belt
SRF	Silk Road Fund
SRS	Silk Road Spirit
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership

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