

# **A Mass Mediated Interpretation of The Chinese “Belt & Road Initiative” As Strategic Intelligence Perspective**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper contrasts the current Chinese “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) against the opening of the U.S. west in the 19<sup>th</sup> century using principles of western rhetoric as basis for interpretation. Most specifically, Kenneth Burke’s Dramatistic Pentad is used for initial clarification along with explanation of how further understanding can be realized via Fantasy Theme Analysis to better appreciate the expression of rhetorical vision. Recognition of how BRI can be understood differently, depending on the cultural context, is stressed as a strategic intelligence perspective. This is couched in the contextual framing of mass media influences as explained by Marshall McLuhan.

The Chinese “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI) is a huge sweeping endeavor that will take years to conceptualize and fully implement. It envisions connecting many countries across multiple continents. It has parallels with how the U.S. opened lands that were west of Chicago in the 1800s, lands that extended to the Pacific Ocean. This paper contrasts the present-day Chinese “Belt and Road Initiative” against the opening of the U.S. west in the 19<sup>th</sup> century using principles of western rhetoric as basis for interpretation.

In doing so, the reader will recognize how such phenomena can be understood in varied ways depending on the cultural frame of reference. Hence, I seek to clarify what these events are and, more importantly, what these events represent. It is with the latter that I find considerable room for understanding and misunderstanding to occur. There are relevant facts to be recognized but, equally important, there are significant variables that are merely open to interpretation. Cultural perspectives are key with these interpretations as are the mass media channels that impact our understanding of such variables.

The role of mass media channels, in framing our understanding of the world around us, is gaining emphasis with the continued evolution of the information age and commensurate new communication technologies. We are finding that such new communication technological innovations not only enhance conveyance of meaning but that they impact our understanding of the phenomena being communicated about. That is, the new communication technologies impact the speed and format with which we receive information and they impact what is being reported on as result of that immediacy and format.

With the world becoming more interconnected we find ourselves encountering a phenomenon that has been historically less common but is becoming more common with increasing frequency. Most notably, that peoples who have rarely been in contact with each other in the past are now dealing

with each other on a frequent basis via business, travel, education and popular culture venues. What goes on in one culture, indeed, has impact on other cultures. Such evolutions have great potential for not only opening doors to new understanding but for also have potential for creating misunderstanding. Mass media channels are part of such processes.

Fundamental in such processes is that we tend to interpret developments in other cultures via the mindset of our own culture. Such an approach can offer a perspective for understanding but it may not equate with how the culture being interpreted, in fact, interprets itself. This is the case with the “Belt and Road Initiative” that is underway in China.

China’s president Xi Jinping announced creation of the BRI in 2013. It is intended to reorient relations among China and other countries in the Eurasian community. There are two aspects of BRI: an overland “belt” connecting China with Central Asia, Russia, South Asia, and Europe and a maritime “road” linking Chinese ports with those in Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. It is intended to project an extensive network “of railways, highways, ports, pipelines, and communication infrastructure spanning the Eurasian continent and facilitating trade, investment, and people-to-people exchange. In 2015, Beijing announced a plan to develop six economic corridors to advance this initiative. China’s leadership has rallied behind BRI, pledging substantial investment, creating new financial institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Silk Road Fund, and making diplomatic commitments to countries along the proposed routes” (Clarke et al, 2017, p. 66).

Announcement of BRI has stimulated considerable interest in the global community. A driving aspect of such inquiry grows from the question of what BRI means for each nation directly in the BRI path and the rest of the world order on other continents. As such, U.S. constituencies have been quick to interpret BRI in relation to phenomena familiar to the U.S. national mindset, which grows out of the western rhetorical tradition. Most notably the Marshall Plan that was stressed by the U.S. after World War II when the U.S. helped to rebuild war torn Europe. It helped to rebuild Europe and extend U.S. influence in the region. Such a context can be used to view how “China’s Belt and Road Initiative is one example of an effort to accumulate influence far from Chinese territory. Supporters of the initiative explain that ‘the New Silk Road can be understood as a type of Marshall Plan with Chinese characteristics; it reassures the Middle Country’s neighbors, contributes to their growth and places them in a system designed by Beijing’” (Cooper & Shearer, 2017, p. 309).

BRI will require considerable resources from the Chinese government—resources that could be used with other needs within China. This situation is mildly exacerbated by the reality that it is something of a gamble that may not fully benefit Chinese people in intended ways. Hence, there may be pockets of people within the Chinese order who are lacking enthusiasm for BRI. Overall though, the Chinese people have embraced this extensive undertaking that has the potential to reshape the global economy. “As the Chinese writer Lu Xun once said, Chinese people opt for moderate reform in the face of revolutionary change. If you want to open a window against the darkness, you are likely to be rejected, but if you say you want to remove the rooftop for light, you will get the window opened” (Li, 2017, p. 73).

China’s advance with BRI somewhat replicates past moves by Great Britain and the United States. The expansion of the British empire in the 1800’s was perpetuated, in part, by the desire to create outlets for the British goods and capital that could not be utilized in the British domestic economy. The United States, in a similar manner, engaged in commensurate empire building via the same view that America’s continuing economic growth required profitable export of American capital and

goods. China is confronted with a paralleled challenge of insufficient demand for its products and problems linked to minimal potential for domestic investment. As a result, using the British and U.S. as guide, China is pursuing to promote new markets beyond their borders. Extension of such new markets typically involves extension of geopolitical reach in that the new lines of global extension require protection. One can expect such context may serve as rationale for the projection of Chinese military capabilities (Layne, 2017, p.29).

Cultural imperialism often goes hand in hand with economic and militaristic imperialism. BRI will connect 68 countries from Southeast Asia to Europe and Africa. This has the potential to perpetuate a form of global culture that gives first billing to Chinese cultural components. The Chinese film industry will be one of the key cultural components. "We do not see Belt and Road's impact on culture and entertainment yet as communication with these countries has only just begun. But once the hardware is ready, the cultural impact will follow," says Professor Anthony Fung, co-director of the Hong Kong Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (Chow, 2017, p. 16).

Enthusiasm for exporting Chinese culture into foreign markets has not always been met with enthusiasm for importing it. For example, there has been criticism that the Confucius Institute serves little more than Chinese propaganda functions under the auspices of promoting awareness of Chinese culture around the world. The film industry has the potential to enjoy better success. However, even with significant growth of the Chinese film sector, minimal success has been realized at the box office. Zhang Yimou's elaborate "The Great Wall" offers illustration, regarding Chinese films, in that it received minimal fanfare in relation to the extensive resources that were expended in production of it (Chow, 2017, p. 18).

The role of vision with BRI will be key. That is, BRI is an abstract construct that will involve many constituencies interpreting BRI in relation to what BRI means for them. At the same time, it will be important to concurrently have a fundamental foundation from which all parties recognize relevant variables. Historical context will be part of that foundation.

"On November 15, 2012, the day he became general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping stood onstage at the Great Hall of the People, in Beijing, to reflect back on his country's 5,000 years of history. After citing China's 'indelible contribution' to world civilization, Xi called for 'the great revival of the Chinese nation'" (Economy, 2017,

p. 141). This glorified past is drenched with images from periods when China led the world with advanced thought, power and resolve. Previous leaders—including Mao Tse Tung, Hu Jintao, Jiang Zemin and Deng Xiaoping—also reminded Chinese citizenry and the world of China's esteemed place in world history. In building upon this honored past Xi "has put in motion a massive infrastructure plan, the Belt and Road Initiative, which is designed to revive the ancient Silk Road and the maritime spice routes that flourished as early as the Han dynasty, thus reinforcing the claim of Chinese centrality. He has also articulated the idea of a 'new type of great power relations,' whereby China would enjoy the status of a global power on par with the United States" (Economy, 2017, p. 141).

One can infer parallels between U.S. President Donald Trump's call to "Make America Great Again" and China's harkening to a glorified past—hence "Make China Great Again." As observed in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, such proclamations to "Make America Great Again" can have far reaching effects. Trump won the U.S. presidency via that rallying call to the American electorate.

In such cases one can see large scale examples where entire segments of the U.S. population voted for leadership that would undercut their own individual economic well-being in favor of the perpetuation of national pride. Such nationalistic messages can inspire the public to move in unpredictable directions within a short amount of time.

The larger context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election offers more intrigue in that the same electorate that had elected Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012, in turn, elected Donald Trump. Obama is considered to be to the far left of American politics and Trump is considered to be at the far right of American politics. This evidences the degree of vacillation that can exist in U.S. politics and underscores some of the attributes of such a multi-cultural society with so many political interests to consider.

The election of Trump was practically unparalleled in modern U.S. political history. Virtually no well-established American polling organizations foresaw a Trump victory. He seemed to tap feelings of frustration and desire among the American populace in a manner that paved the way for him to personify America's greatness. In similar ways, President Xi can be recognized as the embodiment of China's path to, or reclaiming of, greatness.

The rhetoric put forth by Xi implies that BRI is merely a manifestation of China living out past themes in contemporary global relations. "This story has gone largely unchallenged. Yet two fascinating new books—Howard French's Everything Under the Heavens and John Pomfret's The Beautiful Country and the Middle Kingdom—suggest that there is much more to the story. French's book raises important questions about the accuracy of the rejuvenation narrative" (Economy, 2017, p. 142). Such challenges from historians will be part of the process of establishing historical legitimacy as BRI moves forward from idea to implementation.

Other types of challenges will be part of the BRI evolution. Many of these will grow out of the mere interpretation of what BRI is and what it means for the constituent. As noted earlier, U.S. entities have been quick to interpret BRI in relation to phenomena familiar to the U.S. national mindset, which grows out of the western rhetorical tradition. Kenneth Burke, the most prominent western rhetorician of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, offers a theory of Dramatistic Rhetoric that can be used as framework for interpreting BRI that exemplifies how the U.S. might come to understand BRI. Such an understanding could be foundation for U.S. thinking and subsequent actions.

A fundamental premise of Burke's rhetorical perspective stresses a "new rhetoric." New Rhetoric emphasizes "identification" between sender and receiver rather than "persuasion" done by the sender to the receiver. That is, the sender should seek to identify his/her needs with those of the audience. Burke builds upon this by describing dramatism--which is the study of human relations and motives using clusters and terms (elements) along with their functions. He clarifies his perspective, in a more detailed manner, by stressing use of a Dramatistic Pentad to interpret events.

The Dramatistic Pentad is composed of five elements: act, agent(s), scene, agency and purpose. The "act" is the conceptual center that other elements revolve around. The "agent(s)" are the individual(s) involved in the act. The "scene" is the situation. The "agency" is the means to the end. The "purpose" is the objective. Ultimately, an ACT takes place only when there is an AGENT who operates in a SCENE or situation, and employs an AGENCY or means to accomplish a PURPOSE (Golden et al, 2011, chapter 13).

The following describes how an American view of BRI can be deduced using the Dramatistic Pentad to frame BRI.

1. ACT - The Chinese government is promoting the Belt & Road Initiative to connect 68 countries from Southeast Asia to Europe and Africa to enhance economic, cultural and political development.
2. AGENTS - Include the Chinese government leadership, leaders of the other 67 countries in Southeast Asia, Europe and Africa located in the path of the proposed Belt & Road, the people of China and leaders of other major world powers.
3. SCENE - The situation involves Chinese advancement of BRI and reaction to BRI by the other 67 countries directly impacted by BRI and other major world powers.
4. AGENCY - The means stresses two aspects of BRI: an overland "belt" connecting China with Central Asia, Russia, South Asia, and Europe and a maritime "road" linking Chinese ports with those in Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. It is intended to project an extensive network "of railways, highways, ports, pipelines, and communication infrastructure spanning the Eurasian continent and facilitating trade, investment, and people-to-people exchange. In 2015, Beijing announced a plan to develop six economic corridors to advance this initiative. China's leadership has rallied behind BRI, pledging substantial investment, creating new financial institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Silk Road Fund, and making diplomatic commitments to countries along the proposed routes" (Clarke et al, 2017, p. 66).
5. PURPOSE - To return China to its historic role as a global leader and reaffirm the place of Chinese culture as an advanced civilization on the world stage.

Using the Dramatistic Pentad interpretation of BRI as foundation, the western perspective can be elaborated on through analysis of rhetorical vision via Fantasy Theme Analysis, as clarified by Lu Xing (2008, pp. 112-113). Rhetorical vision involves a compilation of desired themes that unfold into an imagined form of reality in the minds of participants. Participants will function together, and individually, in accord with their shared understanding of this imagined form of reality. A convergence occurs through a shared view of goals, objectives, function and future. This analysis acknowledges consistencies of behavior and highlights how these consistencies lead to a constructed form of reality for participants as manifested in shared desires, intentions and meanings. Ultimately, this socially constructed form of reality provides direction for the perceptions of participants. Three themes can be delineated within this process. They focus on characters, actions and settings. A detailed understanding of the rhetorical vision can be realized by coding the characters, actions & settings and then constructing the rhetorical vision from these themes. Hence, the rhetorical vision maintained by each BRI constituent can be understood using this analytical process.

This application provides understanding of an American view of the Chinese BRI using principles of western rhetoric to frame BRI in a detailed manner. Such a view reflects the western rhetorical tradition and, as such, does not offer global understanding of BRI. BRI is a multicultural phenomenon due to the many cultures impacted by BRI and, as such, the understanding of BRI will be a multicultural event.

The Chinese BRI has many parallels to the opening of the west that went on in the U.S. during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was often referred to as "manifest destiny." Like China, prior to the opening of the west, much of the U.S. population lived in the eastern part of the country. The movement west was as a movement toward the new and somewhat unknown. All kinds of potentials but all kinds of risks, as well.

The American west, in the 1800's, represented the future. Hence, the phrase "Go west, young man" was echoed many times in that it encouraged youth to look toward a new and exciting future involving such things as the California gold rush, the creation & settling of the western states, land claims and considerable development. One can see similar parallels with the opportunities and challenges associated with the opening of the Chinese western provinces.

Such development is romanticized in the history of 19<sup>th</sup> century America. It was a time of excitement, potential and vision. However, lesser considerations are given to those who lost during the process of adventure and settlement—or should I say resettlement. Most notable, in this regard, are the Native Americans who were forcibly removed from the lands that were being "opened" via white settlement. The history of my own ancestors illustrates how this occurred in that time frame.

My family background is a mix of German, Polish and Native American. My father's last name is Schnell. My father's side of the family are from an Amish-Mennonite farming community in northeastern Ohio (Berlin, Ohio). As is custom I carry the last name Schnell, from my father, but I grew up among my mother's people closer to central Ohio (Gahanna, Ohio).

My mother's side of the family carry the last name Sandusky. The Sandusky family lineage is part of the Sandusky Indian heritage that was linked to the Wyandotte Indians who were, in turn, a sub-unit of the Huron Indians. These Indians inhabited what become known as the Ohio River Valley.

For the most part, my Native American ancestors that survived that period (some had been killed outright) were forcibly removed from central Ohio to Indian reservations in Oklahoma. Some, most directly linked to my lineage, were kept in Ohio under the auspices of a form of involuntary servitude. That is, to provide cheap labor that was essential for developing the area for white settlement. Over the years, primarily through inter-marriage with the occupying white population, the Sandusky Indians managed to assimilate into the white society and minimize the stigma associated with our Native American roots.

I share this illustration to exemplify how the story of the "opening" of the American west can be romanticized as some type of glorious event but it is a blood-stained chapter in American history. The romanticized nature of this occurrence illustrates how strong the power of vision can be in the public mind. It can almost seem as if God, or some divine entity, sanctioned the opening of the American west whereas it really was a murderous bloodbath that unleashed painful horrors on those who were in the path of economic development. It is a common story that is retold throughout the history of expanding civilizations.

Interpretation of westward expansion via the "manifest destiny" vision in the U.S. can be easily achieved using the Dramatistic Pentad just as has been done to interpret the Chinese BRI.

The following describes use of the Dramatistic Pentad to frame westward expansion in the U.S.

1. ACT – The U.S. was a relatively young country just beginning to realize future potentials and the means for moving toward achievement of those potentials. Much of this young country was settled along the eastern border—in areas where those coming from Europe had arrived into this new land. Westward expansion was the logical expression of the U.S. destiny.

2. AGENTS – Included white settlers, U.S. government representatives and businessmen. Native Americans had something of a muted role to play in this drama in that they represented the past rather than the future.

3. SCENE – This unfolding drama fit well with the American family framework. Young, restless, adventuresome, strong and capable. The young country was full of aspiring people who heeded the call to continually move west from the eastern population centers. As areas were settled, these new settlements were used as launching pads for further movement westward. The Lewis & Clark expedition westward captured the imagination of those back east. Eventually this movement westward landed on the west coast of (what is now) California, Oregon and Washington. At that point, the long reach westward then began to focus attention on domesticating the land that had been claimed. Such domestication involved the establishment of railroads, telegraph lines, small towns became cities and the land was tamed.

4. AGENCY - The means, that was outlined within the scene, took on fuller expression via more thorough development. The American cowboy era exemplified the rugged individualism that manifested the “wild west.” Over time, the means for progress was recognized via a more domesticated form of individualism that stressed planned growth and future oriented thinking centered on building civilized population centers. This was concurrently addressed with an eye toward preserving the natural beauty inherent in, what became, the western states. This process has not yet been completed. The modern centers of life in the U.S. are very much found on the east and west coasts of the country and then between the east coast and Chicago. Otherwise, much of the lands between Appalachia to Montana are still in the process of being developed on par with the more well-established population centers of the east and west coasts.

The state of Texas best illustrates a land in transition along these lines. Dallas, San Antonio and Houston have developed into large urban population centers while the rest of the state is moving toward such modernization. The role of the rugged individualist spirit is still embraced in this transition via the rich embodiment of the Texas cowboy. One will even notice cowboy hats fashionably worn by wealthy businessmen in Dallas, Houston and San Antonio. Image can be larger than life.

5. PURPOSE – To establish the U.S. as “land of the free and home of the brave.” That is, the rhetorical vision that is promoted seeks to exemplify how the American spirit (free enterprise, innovation and hard work) can be a force of nature in the development of largely unsettled lands. It is meant to be a beacon for the rest of the world that has been associated with religious forces of divine intervention. That the U.S. was, and has continued to be, a land of immigrants is part of this rhetorical vision. One will clearly observe, throughout the history of the U.S, that there are far (far) more people seeking to immigrate into the U.S. than to immigrate away from it.

A factor in this, that is minimally acknowledged, is the role of religion. Is only vaguely alluded to from the U.S. perspective and it is entirely absent from the Chinese perspective, as earlier depicted in the Dramatistic Pentad interpretations. However, it is worth engaging in closer scrutiny to find elements that suggest consideration for divine intervention.

The role of a Christian God is indirectly asserted throughout the opening of the west in the U.S. “In God We Trust” can be found on U.S. currency, churches were a staple (along with saloons) in towns across the plains, babies were typically baptized at birth and ministers solemnized weddings. That the light of God shone brightly over the lives of westward settlers was clearly implied.

The role of religion with the Chinese is practically absent, especially in modern day China, in relation to the governmental discouragement of religion. Chinese leader Mao Tse Tung referred to religion as

the “opium of the masses.” However, a view of Mao as a supernatural being can be recognized within Chinese culture.

In 1995 I was on a visit to Beijing, China and turned off the bedroom light one night as I prepared to lay down to sleep. I laid in bed, about to doze off to sleep, and noticed a glowing in the dark at the foot end of my bed. It came from the floor. I could not see what was creating the glow, rather, I could only see the glow. I curiously crawled to the edge of my bed and could see the source of the glow was a bust of Mao Tse Tung.

I was creating a collection of Mao memorabilia at that time, especially busts of Mao. I soon learned that a few of the Mao busts I had collected glowed in the dark, as did some of the plastic Mao badges. I had never seen such a thing until I remembered back to my childhood when I had a couple plastic figurines of Jesus that glowed in the dark. The idea of a glowing entity seemed to imply some sort of supernatural being.

It then occurred to me that Mao was something of a political/nationalistic/spiritual icon. He was something akin to a supernatural god. I’ve talked to Chinese friends who have described how they were surprised when Mao died in 1976 because it was assumed he would live many years beyond the standard old age and that finding he was a mere mortal opened their eyes to the truth about his mortality. I believe that degrees of, what Americans view as, spirituality can be recognized in Chinese nationalism. Love of country in China is something akin to a spiritual love. This can be closely aligned with the notion of patriotism. However, patriotism and spirituality can be observed separately in the U.S.

The process of understanding phenomena presented in this report has become more complicated in relation to the new communication technologies associated with continually evolving information age mass media forms. Marshall McLuhan, the most prominent mass media theorist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, explained this with his dictum “the medium is the message.” That is, the technology that conveys information also, within itself, conveys meaning (Golden, 2011, chapter 20).

Inherent in his perspective is that our understanding of the world is altered by the media that are in effect at any given time. The media that surround us, that we use, convey meaning in—and of—themselves. This can be recognized via the different media that have existed throughout history.

McLuhan stresses this through consideration of four periods of media: tribal society, manuscript society, Gutenberg society and electric society. Tribal society stressed face to face communication. Manuscript society (0-1400 AD) occurred when ideas could be recorded in written form using words. Gutenberg society came into being with development of the printing press whereby ideas could be written, mass produced and distributed on a mass level (1500-1900 AD). Electric society (1900-present) exists with the use of electric circuitry (telegraph, telephone, TV, radio, computer etc.) in ways that resonate with the belief that such electric circuitry is an extension of the central nervous system.

Many of the meanings that evolve from this nexus of interpretation, cross-cultural framing and mass media interplay place us at a transformational point in history. Our understanding of the past, present and future are impacted as the notion of memory and context is altered. The future that we anticipate will not always be what we thought it to be. Hence the present will impact our understanding of the past and the present will impact our understanding of the future. The future will impact our understanding of all three: past, present and future.

We live in a time where there is a possibility for everything but little certainty of anything. The role of vision will help chart the future courses to be taken, understand present circumstances we find ourselves in and interpret from whence we came. As such, the learned person will do well to keep a pulse on the significance of cultural contexts and the evolving technologies that impact such cultural contexts.

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