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Zhang, D.; Qiu, X.; Edimo, R.M.M.; Rajaoson, J.

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## CHAPTER 10

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**CYBER-NATIONALISM IN CHINA: POPULAR DISCOURSE  
ON CHINA'S BELT ROAD***DECHUN ZHANG<sup>1</sup> AND XIAOJUAN QIU<sup>2</sup>*

## INTRODUCTION

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been the focus of much debate among academia for 8 years since 2013. There are mixed opinions about the BRI for political and economic purposes. Some believe that BRI has a significant impact on geopolitics, such as a shift in Chinese foreign policy towards globalism. Those who support the BRI is the most important economic policy for China in the 21st century and represents at the same time a new idea of globalization, based on cooperation instead of a sharp competition (Chandan & Christiansen, 2019). Arase (2015) suggests that with the help of the BRI, China and some small states involved in its construction will be able to change international rules, international institutions, and international order. China-led BRI is essentially a plan designed to promote a new type of globalization that is distinct in numerous ways from the current dominant world system in terms of its theoretical and practical vision of global economic and political governance (Yilmaz and Li, 2020). With societies worldwide reel from the global shock of the COVID-19

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<sup>1</sup> Dechun Zhang [d.zhang@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:d.zhang@hum.leidenuniv.nl)  
*Leiden University, Netherlands*  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2284-2378>

<sup>2</sup> Xiaojuan Qiu, [qiuxiaojuan@stu.ecnu.edu.cn](mailto:qiuxiaojuan@stu.ecnu.edu.cn)  
*East China Normal University, China*

pandemic, China is reshaping international geopolitics in line with a unique vision of globalization by BRI, a network for infrastructure development and economic cooperation that spans 65 countries to date, promises to usher in a new era of international commerce, cooperation, and prosperity (Li and Lee 2021).

However, there are also more different views towards the BRI. For instance, those scholars who support the motivational locus for the BRI remain entirely focused on domestic economic development and regional stability (Jiang 2020). It is believed that Chinese BRI projects are designed by the Chinese government to express a sense of nationalism (Jiang 2020). After the independence from Japan and the humiliation of western powers, China is demonstrating a strong desire to achieve its national rejuvenation led by CCP. China wants to be seen as a responsible international actor on the world stage, rather than a hegemonic leader because maintaining internal stability remains the first (Yang and Chen, 2020). The BRI itself is a brainchild of Xi closely related with his nationalist idea of Chinese Dream which aims to revive old Chinese glory and pride (Pokharna 2021). On one hand, China's proactive foreign policy has been influenced by the increasing sense of national pride that has accompanied the emergence of China as a global power and the world's second largest economy (Hong 2017). With the global pandemic of COVID-19, all countries in the world are facing challenges to control the pandemic, and China with a small number of cases has made the Chinese more satisfied with the government and prouder of the country's governance capabilities. On the other hand, Chinese President Xi Jinping's vision is to realize the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation before the 100 anniversaries of the Communist Revolution of China in 2049 (Wang 2015). To clarify the concept of Chinese dream, the chairman of Xi Jinping in one of his interviews with the Wall Street Journal in 2015 said that the Chinese dream is

fundamentally about making life better for the Chinese people (The Wall Street Journal 2015). From the willingness of the top leaders, BRI, the Chinese Dream, and the people's happy life are closely linked. BRI is the means to realize the Chinese Dream which aims to enable the Chinese people to live a happy life. Chinese leaders have skilfully linked the country's foreign policy with the popular, invisibly guiding the popular nationalism. Therefore, in other words, from the very beginning, the BRI reflects the purpose of nationalism and is designed for China's own development and people's happiness. The Chinese government's propaganda for the BRI has a major impact on popular nationalism.

The Chinese government is infamous for expressing nationalism to stabilize its control (Zhao 2004). However, increasingly more studies suggest that Chinese popular nationalism is becoming more popular on the internet (Zhang 2020a; Yan and Zheng 2012). Although Chinese popular nationalism is well documented (Fang and Repnikova 2018; Zhang 2020b; Yang and Zheng, 2012), much more case focus on the conflicts with other countries such as the United States and Japan, relatively few studies used the BRI as a case to explore Chinese popular nationalism. The BRI was the Chinese government's promoted project that contained both international and domestic issues which could help us to have a better understanding of Chinese popular nationalism. Hence, this study aims to through online observation to unpack Chinese popular nationalism. Through online observation on Weibo, this study argues that BRI indeed simultaneously mobilized Chinese popular nationalism. This chapter finds that Chinese popular nationalist discourse demonstrates a sense of hostile attitude towards foreign countries, a willingness to deliver the geopolitical win with self-interest, globalism, proudness, and confidence on Chinese BRI projects. Based on existing literature and the author's own

research, the authors suggest BRI triggers a sense of nationalism within the globalist domain.

*Global Background and implementation of the BRI*

From September to October 2013, when Xi Jinping officially visited Kazakhstan and ASEAN, respectively, he announced jointly building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Maritime Silk Road, which were later collectively referred to as the Belt and Road Initiative (Xinhuanet 2018). According to the State of Council of the People's Republic of China (2014), President Xi Jinping pointed out that BRI is to help countries to carry out national and regional transportation, power, communications, and other infrastructure planning, jointly advance preliminary research, which accommodate bilateral and multilateral interests. Although Chinese officials clearly stated that the BRI is not China's geopolitical tool (Chen 2018), BRI having such a broad geographic and economic scope cannot avoid crossing over the mere province of economics, to stray into the domains of geopolitics and geo-economics, providing China with opportunities for economic growth, but also more political and economic leverage both regionally and globally (Cau 2018). India and the United Kingdom worry that China is challenging the existing global order and are trying to establish a new order led by it (Liu 2018). India has tried to convince countries that the BRI is a plan to dominate Asia, warning of what some analysts have called a "String of Pearls" geoeconomic strategy whereby China creates unsustainable debt burdens for its Indian Ocean neighbours to seize control of regional choke points (Andrew & James, 2019). India was the only country in the eight-nation Shanghai Cooperation Organisation which refused to endorse BRI (The Hindu 2018). Overall, it is widely accepted that China designed the B'I to achieve important national economic and geopolitical objectives (Donto 2020).

*Nationalism and Cyber Nationalism in China*

Anderson (2006) defines a nation as an “imagined community”, in which most community members do not know each other, but community members believe they “live the image of communion” (Anderson 2006, p.6). In other words, although community members have differences, they still believe they belong to a community as they share common history, traits, beliefs, and language. Therefore, nationalism could be understood as a sense of belonging to an imagined community (Anderson 2006). In this sense, nationalism is a salient tool for the government to stabilize its rule, China is no exception (Zhao 2004).

The Chinese government is infamous for spreading nationalism to stabilize its control (Schneider 2018; Zheng 1999; Zhao 2004; Jiang 2014; Zhang 2020a). Zhao (2004) suggests that the Chinese government put much effort into expressing patriotic ideology to the public through the education system and media campaigns. For instance, the CCP designed a standardized curriculum to construct a unified, patriotic, Party-loving national culture (Kipnis 2012). Chinese patriotic education, on one hand, highlights the glorious history of China with 5000 years history and used to be the 'leader' of the world in military, economic and technology (Wang 2008); on the other hand, it also highlights the humiliating history of China since 1842 when British troops won the First Opium War (Zhao 2004). The narratives of ‘chosen glory’ and ‘chosen trauma’ which were designed by CCP reshaped the Chinese collective memory and whitewashed modern Chinese history (Friedman 2008). Li (2019) suggests that the state-led education designed by CCP plays a vital role in nationalism which fosters a sense of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, and finally leads to Chinese nationalism roots in its humiliating history (Zhao 2004; Zhang 2020a).

Moreover, Anderson (2006) highlights the role of information technology in nationalism. Chinese media is highly controlled and surveillance by the Chinese government (Li 2019). Furthermore, Zhang (2021) even suggests that the official media are government agencies, so it is not surprising to see Chinese media always alien to the Chinese government's ideology. For instance, Chinese media often highlights the CCP's economic achievements (Seckington 2005). Previous studies already confirm that media use positively connects with nationalism in China (Hyun and al. 2014). With the arrival of the digital age, the news media have adopted digitalization, which has currently failed to transform their official, exclusive, and professional nature. Schneider (2018) in his famous monograph claims that the Chinese government is attempting to put nationalism with its interests in digital media through the interaction between technology and politics. More specifically, the Chinese government cooperates with search engines to offer national biased information (positive to China and sources mostly from China) to spread nationalism (Zhang 2020b; Jiang 2014). Hence, the social media which is designed by CCP in China is ready to follow traditional media logic to facilitate the Chinese government's interests.

Although popular nationalism is undoubtedly influenced by the Chinese government's propaganda about the BRI, it does not mean the Chinese public only passively receives CCP's propaganda. According to Zhang and al. (2018), the nationalism expressed in Weibo is multifaceted and contains both pro-regime and criticism of domestic political conditions. Chinese nationalism expression has been long understood as a top-down or bottom-up structure (Fang and Repnikova, 2018). In other words, Chinese nationalism also shows a grassroots feature. Zhang (2020a) finds that Chinese netizens express their pride in China and call for national unity on Weibo spontaneously. However, increasingly more studies find that Chinese popular

nationalism became increasingly aggressive (Yang and Zheng 2012; Fang and Repnikova 2018; Zhang and al., 2018). Yan and Zheng (2012) find that nationalist expressions from angry Chinese youth (fenqing) are even unsatisfied with the Chinese government's policies. For instance, Weiss (2019) finds that the Chinese nationalist discourse is dissatisfied with the Chinese government's adoption of a pro-West orientation. Hence, online social media offer a fierce battle ground to express their aggressive nationalist sentiment towards the West. Therefore, Gries (2004) suggests that popular nationalism in China is a movement to save collective self-esteem. From this perspective, Zheng (1999) argues that Chinese nationalism is only designed to react to domestic political situations rather than to invade outside of China. He further argues that although Chinese nationalism contains features of antiforeignism, its main purpose is to strengthen CCP's political legitimacy and show the attempt of recognition of Chinese power in the world system rather than to challenge the existing world order (Zheng 1999).

#### *Methodology*

The authors conduct an online observation on popular nationalism discourse on "One Belt One Road" on Weibo since 2020 and especially focus on the case of the Budapest-Belgrade Railway Saga and the CPEC. China's economic and political profile has expanded unusually quickly in the regions of Central, and Eastern Europe and South Asia (Brattberg and Feigenbaum, 2021). The Budapest-Belgrade Railway Saga is the first railway jointly built by China in Europe which is of great significance (China Government Net, 2015). In November 2013, at the Bucharest summit of the 16+1 initiative, China, Hungary, and Serbia spoke of the construction of a high-speed railway that would connect Belgrade to Budapest (Brinză,2020). The route is not only a bridgehead of the belt and the road in Europe, but its destination, the port of Piraeus in Greece, aims to strengthen

Sino-European trade. Moreover, the CPEC is a corridor linking the Gwadar Port with Kashgar in Northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, which highlights infrastructure, energy, and industrial cooperation (Global Times, 2021). Also, CPEC provides access to the Indian Ocean through the Gwadar Port in Pakistan to the western provinces of China and provides access to the Bay of Bengal through the Bangladesh China-India-Myanmar Corridor (Hali and al. 2014). Hence, both are flagship projects of BRI which are of great importance to examine the dynamic contours of popular nationalism from exploring BRI cross-nationally and comparatively.

In addition, there are numerous social media platforms in China, such as Sina Weibo, Tencent Weibo, WeChat, etc. Therefore, it is impossible to include all the social media platforms in China in this research. After much thought, this study regards Sina Weibo as the salient platform to conduct online observation as it is one of the most popular social media platforms where hot social issues are publicly discussed in China. According to Wang (2018), Sina Weibo has approximately 600 million registered users with around 132 million daily active users in 2017. In other words, it could offer systematic data on BRI. Sina Weibo as well known as the Chinese version of Twitter (Ren 2018), while Twitter could provide a range of information (including usernames, text, visual content, followers, number of followers, and hyperlinks). Hence, the authors believe that Weibo could be like Twitter in that it offers a large amount of information. Lastly, Sina Weibo has no boundaries for people to post and engage. Hence, Zhang, Liu, and Wen (2018, p.4) suggested that "Weibo forms a space where diverse ideologies can coexist and compete." During the online observation, the authors focus on the themes of their online nationalist discourse.

*“Greatness” China and “evil” Western*

This study finds that the same pattern that discourse on Chinese BRI is full of nationalism. The study concludes four themes regarding the nationalist discourse on BRI: geopolitical rivalry, self-interest globalism, economic (hard power) pride, and satisfaction with government. The authors will demonstrate the findings and discuss them below. Firstly, the study finds that the popular nationalist discourse on Chinese discourse shows a strong hostile attitude toward foreign countries, such as India and the United States. It also aligns with previous studies that Western countries are the major targets of Chinese nationalism (Zhang and al. 2018). More specially, this study finds that nationalists share an idea that foreign countries show a negative attitude towards the Chinese government, BRI, and Chinese in general. For instance, one popular Weibo post claims that “The U.S and India did it again to prevent the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, they are so afraid of China’s growth”. In other words, the public believes that foreign countries always bully China, and China is always a ‘victim’ in world politics. So, we could argue that Chinese popular nationalism is indeed influenced by CCP-designed media outlets and education materials that are rooted in its “humiliating” history. Hence, it is not surprising that Chinese nationalism discourse is always about the “evil” West. However, it is interesting to see that India as a South-eastern Asian country is also a “Western” country in the public discourse. In other words, there is no clear definition of the ‘Western’ countries in the narrative of the nationalists, if you are opposites to China, then they are the “evil” West. It delivers a political message that “Western” is an abstract term for the Chinese public to imagine a common enemy to call for unity. Overall, the authors argue that Chinese popular nationalism shows binary thinking that any country which is opposite to China marks the ‘evil’ West and vice versa.

Moreover, this study also finds a pattern of self-interest globalism in Chinese nationalism. Self-interest globalism in this chapter refers to “admitting the Western-dominate world orders to call for nationalism to serve its national interests” (Zhang and Gomez, in press). For instance, Chinese nationalism discourse blames the United States for using its hard power to increase its geopolitical power within other ‘small’ countries. However, when it is about China’s China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project, the Chinese netizens celebrate online that will increase its geopolitical power in Pakistan and relevant countries. Moreover, although a previous study highlights the relationship between pro-regime and nationalism (Hyun and al. 2014), Chinese online nationalist discourses contain both pro-regime and negative attitudes on government policies (Zhang and al. 2018). The study finds that some of the netizens are unhappy with China’s China-Pakistan Economic Corridor project designed by CCP, but their unhappiness is in a nationalism way. One popular post noted that “why do we make a deal with Pakistan as a powerless country in the world? It is meaningless for China to become the hegemony in the world to cooperate with such powerless countries. We China must stick together to become the most powerful countries against the West.” Hence, the authors argue that Chinese nationalism, on one hand, admits the uneven development of China; on the other hand, they use this admit expressing their aggressive nationalism.

In addition, Zhang and Bux Jamali (2022) also find geopolitics win also plays a positive relationship with Chinese popular nationalism. The study finds the same pattern that the nationalists celebrate online that BRI offers China a way to deliver a geopolitical win. For instance, Chinese nationalist discourses highlight the role of technology development in China. In the narrative on Budapest-Belgrade Railway Saga, Chinese nationalist discourse celebrates Chinese technology could go outside of China, and European countries now even

need China's technology to develop their train system. Hughes (2006) argues that techno-nationalism offers evidence to prove China's ability to survive in the world. From this perspective, Chinese popular nationalism is a movement to save or maintain face and defend 'ingroup positivity,' or collective self-esteem (Gries, 2004). Although most of the nationalists highlight the geopolitical win of China, their pride much more comes from the comparison of the past – – "Century of Humiliation," that China suffered a series of military confrontations with the West and Japan (Modongal 2016). Their nationalist discourse on geopolitical win reflects China emerging from a "century of humiliation" has already become a significant power in the world that will no longer be subject to the "bullying" of the West. Hence, the authors further argue that Chinese nationalism is a reaction to domestic problems rather than an attempt to invade the outside world. However, it is also interesting to see that geopolitics win in China's nationalist discourse does not only mean hard power but also means being recognized and making friends with other countries. However, the Chinese nationalists demonstrate their willingness to cooperate with the worlds, but world needs to admit the leading role of China. It also reflects that Chinese nationalism demonstrates a sense of self-interest globalism. Moreover, nationalist discourse on global collaboration focuses on "Chinese Confucian Thought of Cooperation and Win-win", so China could be a real leader of the world and make a real friend compared to the United States. Therefore, this study also supports Levenson's (1964) argument that Chinese Culturalism began to transfer to nationalism, or a culture protected by the state (politicization of culture) to seek legitimation in China, while Culturalism, in this case, refers to a genuine belief in cultural superiority, without seeking any legitimacy or defence outside of the culture itself (Duara 1993). Nationalists claim that the BRI project is designed by the Chinese government that aims to make a real friend that benefits

the whole world rather than like the US to exploit the weak countries. Hence, the political ideology behind the BRI reflects the goodness of the Chinese cultural ideology. So, Chinese nationalism also demonstrates a sense of confidence in cultural ideology superiority (Duara 1993).

Lastly, previous studies all confirm that the public's satisfaction with the domestic political situation has a positive relationship with nationalism (Hyun and al. 2014; Zhang 2020a). The case of BRI is no exception. Most of the Chinese nationalist discourse highlight the BRI's projects will benefit the ordinary citizens (Laobaixing, 老百姓). Therefore, the nationalist discourse demonstrates strong support to the BRI projects, and reveals their dedication to the BRI, or even offers reasonable suggestions to the BRI projects. Therefore, the authors argue that the primary purpose of Chinese economic nationalism is not to conquer the outside of China but to satisfy the domestic citizens. However, this sort of nationalism blurs the boundary of the state, government, and political party. The nationalist discourse on BRI usually classifies state, government, and political parties as to the same, while China does have a clear distinction for those three terms. Hence, the authors argue that Chinese popular nationalism seeks a sort of paternalistic government that needs a government to satisfy them. However, if the government was unsatisfied with citizens' needs, their nationalist discourse became angry and well distinguish state, government, and political party. This is the reason why yang and Zheng (2012) find many angry nationalist discourses online. This finding also partially aligns with Kloet, Lin, and Chow's (2020) biopolitical nationalism that if the government took care of citizens during the Covid-19 period, the Chinese do not care how they do and are still proud of living in the most efficient country to control COVID-19 in the world.

## CONCLUSION

This study through observing Weibo discourse to explore the popular nationalism on BRI in China. We found the BRI project has a significant impact on triggering a sense of nationalism. Chinese popular nationalists demonstrate a hostile attitude towards foreign countries and obsess with the international recognition of China when talking the BRI. Hence, Chinese nationalism is rooted in its humiliating history (Zhao 2004) to seek its face or self-esteem in the world (Gries 2005). It is one of the reasons why Chinese popular nationalism demonstrates a sense of self-interest globalism. The nationalists demonstrate a kind of controversial psychology. On one hand, popular nationalists criticize the uneven development of the world order caused by the 'Western' countries. On the other hand, the nationalists use this sort of uneven development of the world order to save its 'face' to express nationalism. However, it is unfair to say popular nationalism is a puppet of state-led nationalism. This study argues that popular nationalism is influenced by the Chinese government's influence but goes beyond state-led nationalism. The Chinese popular nationalists, on one hand, rational analysis of the benefits of the BRI; on the other 'and, some nationalists are angry with some of the BRI projects because they believe that those projects are not beneficial for the development of China. Hence, the Chinese popular nationalism is not a mindless follower, but a 'rational' analysis of the current situation of China. In other words, Chinese popular nationalism changes from time to time-based on different perspectives and events.

Moreover, the study also suggests social media offers nationalists a public sphere to exchange their opinion, and the public engages in communicative action on political discourse online. Hence, the social media is a salient platform to explore public opinions and understanding. Social media has provided

the necessary channels for different interests and opinions to be expressed, heard and counterposed; elements that constitute the very essence of political communication (Papakyriakopoulos and al. 2020). Nationalists took advantage of emerging mass media to disseminate nationalist ideas (Snyder, 2000). The use of social media can influence political views and other ways to engage, such as exposing users to certain views or determining their understanding of current events (Merkley, 2020). With the characteristics of instantaneity, interactivity, openness, and equality, Weibo has become a cornerstone of the public profiles as they use it to transmit their activities and participate in discussions on political issues (Li, 2012). The nationalists participate in the deliberation and administration of political issues in the home and abroad and express their opinion on BRI and its projects and the relations with foreign countries through the tool of Weibo. The public shows the nationalism of China's geopolitical rivalry, self-interest of globalism, proudness, and satisfaction with the government on the discourse of CPEC or the Hungary-Serbia Railway.

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