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CLARIFYING THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF EMPIRE: IS CHINA'S BELT
AND ROAD INITIATIVE AN ATTEMPT AT EMPIRE?

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A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
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Abstract

Is 21st century China¹ building an empire through the Belt and Road Initiative? Where do modern imperialist trends fit into the post-colonial world? This study explores different conceptualizations of empire used in previous academic studies and explores how the Belt and Road Initiative fits in this narrative of empire. Clarifying the discourse surrounding modern expansionist and imperialist behavior is a necessary first step in comparing phenomena that occur in very different historical periods. For example, when comparing former imperial dynasties of China to modern Chinese expansionist behavior, over 500 years of development divide these two historical periods. Newer terms such as “soft power” or subcategories of imperialism have been developed to define more specific components of this behavior. However, this divergence in terminology oftentimes leads to academic studies speaking on the same topic in different terms due to baseline similarities and seemingly insignificant differences. One of the key focuses of this study is clarifying the terminology that is applicable (under what circumstances by whom) in this instance of Chinese modern empire; an important component in clarifying concepts and terms assigned to China’s behavior is understanding the language used to describe expansive or imperialistic behavior exhibited by the BRI is the rhetorical analysis of an academic summary of the initiative as presented in mainland China’s universities. Using a two-part qualitative research method of theory-based pattern matching (by viewing the BRI and classic cases of ancient empire such as the Roman empire, British empire, and ancient Chinese empire through Weyland’s classification framework) and rhetorical analysis, this study develops a multi-dimensional framework to determine whether or not 21st century China’s expansionist behavior through the Belt and Road Initiative can be classified as imperialistic.

¹ All references to “China” in this study refer to the People’s Republic of China (P.R.C.) and is not reflective of the behavior of Hong Kong, Taiwan (R.O.C.), or other special administrative regions.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The sense of national pride and patriotism in both China and the United States can be observed in daily interactions, media, and almost all outlets of expression. In my experience interacting with many Chinese people, and even fellow Americans abroad, a sense of national pride has guided many conversations or at least served as a looming theme that is not explicitly stated. With this in mind, a commonly observed method of demonstrating Chinese pride is discussion of Chinese history, a series of accomplishments spanning over thousands of years. Throughout the course of these conversations, transition into the present usually carries an overhang of dynastic and imperial pride.

On several occasions, people have referenced the similarities between the veneration of ancient Chinese emperors and more modern figures such as Mao Zedong and Xi Jinping. The Mao Zedong comparison does not surprise me due to the amount of academic research produced on his status as an “updated emperor” (Andrew and Rapp 2000) (Wills 1994). This title seems a bit peculiar because of China’s largely closed, domestic focus during the Mao era, suggesting that this title as any sort of “emperor” is more of a reference to domestic power consolidation and status than a reflection of outward-focused imperialistic influence. However, Xi Jinping’s concentrated power and domestic propagation of Xi Jinping thought, an economic model of production/development associated with his leadership, is reminiscent of and could be said to go a step further than Mao’s “imperial” role (Tsang, Xing, Hettlingen, and Roberts 2019). Xi Jinping serves as the chairman of an open, outward-looking China that

is much stronger and more developed than the Mao era in regard to economic growth, international influence, etc.



***(Image 1.1) retrieved from BBC News: China anniversary: Beijing celebrations mark 70 years of Communist rule**

October 1, 2019 marked the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. This celebration was marked by an enormous People's Liberation Army military demonstration; the entire five-hour procession can be streamed on YouTube thanks to China's Global Television Network (CGTN 2019). Images such as the one in Image 1.1 above demonstrate the importance of Xi Jinping leadership in this celebration of military skill-level and showcase of arms power. The image is striking in resemblance to the revered Mao portraits (Image 1.2) that can be found everywhere from Tiananmen Square to local households in China.



***(Image 1.2) retrieved from Tiananmen Square Wikipedia Page**

This likening of Xi Jinping to former chairman, Mao Zedong, previously assigned with similar power to that of an emperor, initiated this study's exploration into a modern application of "imperialism." Secondly, the military capabilities demonstrated by China in the 21st century has increased annually. This demonstration of military capability, combined with the consolidated power of Xi Jinping under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and expansionist economic initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), created the basis of this study's overarching research question.

Is 21st century China building an empire? If China's expansion is "imperialist," how might present-day Chinese empire differ from ancient/traditional cases of empire? How does one define or practically measure the existence of an empire when its conceptualization is so highly contested? China is a prime example of a rapidly rising global power. Following China's opening up and reform period in the late 1970s onward, Chinese globalization and expanding influence has only hastened. In order to understand where China fits into the narrative of empire building, it is important to understand how "empire" is conceptualized by historians, political scientists and theorists, academics that argue "empire" is relative to other disciplines, people historically considered to be imperialists themselves, and the general public. The practices associated with empires, as

well as the fundamental components exhibited by examples of classic empires throughout history, also serve as useful reference points in conceptualizing modern empire. These fundamental components and dimensions can then be applied to modern Chinese expansionist initiatives to determine whether China fits into these conceptual definitions or not.

“Imperialist” tendencies associated with China in the 21st century (especially China’s presence in Africa and Southeast Asia) have served as a focal point in Western media to draw attention to China’s expansionist behavior exhibited by the Belt and Road Initiative. China’s relationship with Africa has been a point of contention even before the Belt and Road Initiative was announced in 2013(Boone and Doshi 2009).“Empire” is a term that is often used in more informal contexts than that of academic research, such as news articles or videos. Media-related normative conceptualizations of empire may or may not be used strategically to trigger an emotional response in viewers given the mix of emotions that has become associated with the term over time; this use of normative conceptualization is present in the portrayal of 21st century China as an empire in U.S. media (Ferguson 2008). From the collection in the *Financial Times* dedicated to “Xi Jinping and his Empire” (Financial Times 2017) to the *NYT* Opinion article on “Chinese Empire Reborn” (New York Times 2018), the term “empire” is associated with the Belt and Road Initiative and Xi Jinping leadership. The range of media outlets that use this language demonstrates the expansive basis on which the label is assigned: economic, political, cultural, and militaristic. This range is eerily reminiscent of characteristics of classic empire; thus, the term is applied and association is made. The case of 21st century Chinese imperialism is not an anomaly; similar accusations have been made regarding the

United States as well. Both of these cases are very interesting, given these countries' history with colonialism and imperialism as both the aggressor and the victim prior to the 21st century. This study explores the conceptualization of "empire" and the concept's application in a modern setting, specifically in the case of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Background Information

It is important to have an initial basic understanding of what the Belt and Road Initiative is, who it affects, and why it matters. The Belt and Road Initiative is a Chinese-funded collection of large-scale cooperative projects along land-based and maritime routes throughout Eurasia and spanning as far as Africa and Latin America. Map 1 below depicts the land-based and maritime cooperative trade routes that are established by projects and agreements under the Belt and Road Initiative. The Belt and Road Initiative affects 61% of the world's population, totaling over 4.6 billion people residing in countries that have signed onto the initiative (CSIS 2019). Between 2014 and 2017, \$6 trillion in trade flowed between China and Belt and Road countries (CSIS 2019). Funding pledged by the Chinese government for infrastructural plans along the Belt and Road Initiative is approximately \$25 trillion short of what is needed (CSIS 2019). According to the National Bureau of Asian Research, funding for the development projects is provided by Chinese policy banks such as Bank of China and the China Development Bank (Rolland 2019). One of the observable short-term results of China's Belt and Road Initiative is discrepancy between pledged funding and available funds; insufficient funds have given rise to concern of strategic debt-trapping as a form of modern imperialism

under the Belt and Road Initiative. This unequal balance in economic stability creates a relationship that seems to fall under Plano and Olton’s “superior-inferior” conceptualization of imperialistic behavior (1988). This unequal relationship lays the basis for this study’s research question, delving into the nature of China’s Belt and Road Initiative.



*(Map 1) retrieved from the Council on Foreign Relations

Theoretical Framework

“Empire” is our key term here. For the purpose of this study “imperialism” and the concept of “empire” are considered to have the same meaning. Furthermore, these

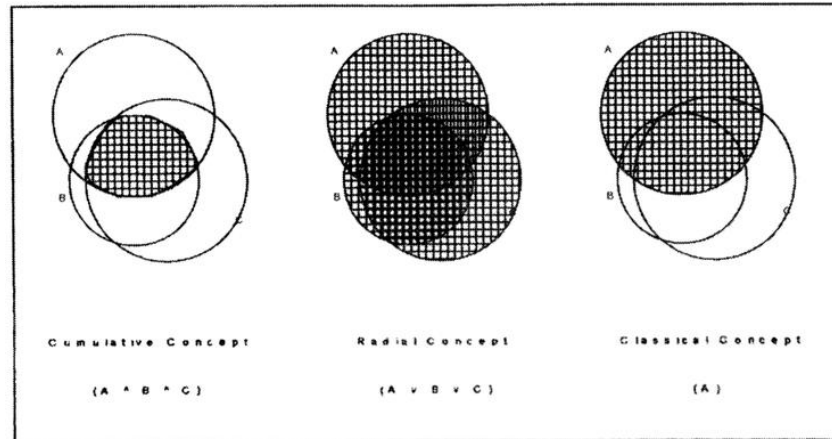
two terms represent a conceptualized form of the same idea that “colonialism” applies in practice. For this reason, literature on imperialism and the idea of empire are focused on more directly than that of colonialism. Definitions of empire and imperialism are both highly debated and not always used synonymously. In its most minimalistic, procedural form, imperialism is defined as “a superior-inferior relationship in which an area and its people have been subordinated to the will of a foreign state” (Plano and Olton, 1988)². A Marxist-Leninist approach would argue that imperialism is rooted in economic gain and monopolizing (Marx, 1881). Imperialism is also referenced as one of the main guiding foreign policy options, juxtaposed with “status quo” and “prestige” (Morgenthau 1978). The conceptual boundary between imperialism and many of similar concepts such as “colonialism”, “informal” and other types of imperialism, and “soft power” is often fuzzy. For the purpose of this study, “imperialism” and “colonialism” are considered to be synonymous, the former representing theoretical application and the latter practical application. Both of these terms can similarly be broken down into sub-concepts political, economic, militaristic, and cultural imperialism/colonialism.

The conceptualizations of “empire” and “imperialism” are so commonly debated that further efforts have been made to identify the specifics of conceptual variation (Doyle 1986). This highly contested conceptualization of the terms “imperialism” and “empire” is not an uncommon phenomenon; furthermore, discrepancies in the research and application of these and other terms can allow for confusion and misuse.

Discontinuity and missing connections (correlation, causality, etc.) between “islands of findings” (Vasquez 2012) under certain concepts can be largely attributed to authors

² I acknowledge that citations of direct quotes require page numbers, but this source was a library book that I had checked out and no longer have access to under current COVID-19 circumstances.

“talking past each other” (Weyland 2001). In order to compensate for this lack of consensus, academics have made strides in dealing with this lack of clarification by highlighting these discrepancies. Kurt Weyland’s *Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics* (2001), breaks a widely used concept (“populism”) down into three subsequent types of concepts that are used within academia: cumulative concepts, radial concepts, and classical concepts. These types of concepts are further analyzed and applied to ancient cases of empire in the literature review. (Figure 1.1) is a visual used by Weyland to show the difference in these three forms of conceptualization based on Giovanni Sartori’s work on concept mis-formation (1970). Weyland’s piece also uses a similar framework to other term-specific conceptualization clarification studies such as that of Collier and Levitsky’s *Democracy with Adjectives* (1997). I believe that this paradigm-based variation in conceptual classification accounts for much of the debate surrounding the nature of the Belt and Road Initiative and modern Chinese expansionist behavior overall. Furthermore, the application of this classification system to the identifiable components of the Belt and Road Initiative provides clarity on where modern expansionist initiatives such as this one fit into the overall narrative of empire; the final chapter of this study addresses which of these conceptualizations of empire China’s BRI best fits into, if any.



(Figure 1.1) Kurt Weyland's Extension of Cumulative, Radial, and Classical Concepts

Research Design and Methodology

This study exhibits a two-part research design, first focusing on the larger theoretical concept of “empire” and later moving more specifically into an analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative under the lens of imperialism. While this study is ultimately focused on assessing where the Belt and Road Initiative fits into the historical narrative of imperialism and present expression of empire, this case study is focused on clarifying the conceptualization of empire as a whole. Debates over the use of the term empire across disciplinary lines is addressed, and a dimensional approach to measuring empire is adopted to assess where the Belt and Road Initiative fits into the spectrum of cumulative, radial, and classical conceptualizations of “empire.”

This case study involves pattern matching between theoretical/conceptual patterns and observed/operational modern phenomena, exploring both the evolution of a classic conceptualization of “empire” and the potential implications of the modern initiative (the Belt and Road Initiative). Furthermore, this study sets up the means for both small-N and large-N comparative studies involving the Belt and Road Initiative and other initiatives

exhibiting imperialist tendencies by situating these modern phenomena into a more theoretical context. An introduction to the application of Weyland's conceptual classification system on examples of classic empires and a more in-depth application to China's Belt and Road Initiative is provided in the final chapter. This portion of the study addresses the external view of China's Belt and Road Initiative, the observed qualities of empire. However, the Chinese government often refutes imperialistic labels on the basis of there being no language implying such intent in original documentation and planning stages.

To address this label of "empire" from the perspective of both the country exhibiting "imperialist" behavior in addition to the perspective of outside countries observing this behavior, rhetorical analysis of language used in the Belt and Road Initiative is provided as an additional component of this study. The document chosen for rhetorical analysis is an academic summary of the original Belt and Road Initiative documents which breaks down the key points of the initiative and explains in detail why this each component is necessary. The phrases drawn from the document are reflective of key language used in the original documents and the public propagation of the initiative within mainland China. The rhetoric is broken down into economic, political, cultural, and international components and associated language; English translations of the Chinese text and analyses are both subject to the author of this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review & Overview of Empire

“Empire” is an age-old term that remains relevant in the 21st century. The term is still frequently used in the contexts of both formal academia and in more casual settings. The term “empire” is also used to reference moments in history, as well as modern examples of “empire.” “Empire” has been defined throughout history within different contexts, by people of differing disciplines, and in fundamentally different ways. Disagreement about the ability of this concept to evolve as time passes and circumstances change is exemplified by the continued use of age-old terms in addressing more modern case-studies by some academics, and oppositely, the adoption of newer (neo-, post-) conceptualizations and terminology by other academics to discuss similar patterns and phenomena. Some argue that “empire” should still hold the same meaning as definitions and theories coined nearly a century ago, while others completely reject this notion. One thing that all who conceptualize “empire” agree upon is that consensus on the conceptualization and operationalization of this term may never be reached.

The most encompassing definition of empire as found in an International Relations dictionary is “a superior-inferior relationship in which an area and its people have been subordinated to the will of a foreign state” (Plano and Olton, 1988). While this definition suggests that empire is a power dynamic between two states, it does not determine the nature of this relationship as being political, economic, cultural, militaristic, or all of the above. Flexible conceptualizations of “empire” reinforce the use of Weyland’s radial concepts, with a wider range of characteristics that fall under this categorization under an “or” logic (Weyland 2004, 2). Many definitions and

conceptualization of imperialism are vague; thus, a new vocabulary of characteristic-specific types of imperialism and empire have emerged. Table 1.2 outlines some of the names associated with definitions of imperialism and several of the more specific types of imperialism; among those names mentioned are those of theorists, politicians associated with establishing practical definitions, academics who have coined conceptualizations, and imperialists themselves.

Concept	Definition(s)	Key Names Associated
Imperialism	some degree of domination of the "other"; political or economic dominance either formally or informally	Morgenthau, Cohen, Disraeli, Rhodes, Kipling, Hobson, Angell, Lenin, Schumpeter
Economic Imperialism	economic exploitation/domination of a weaker force (often backed by looming military threat)	Koebner
Cultural Imperialism	promoting and imposing culture onto the "other" weaker force	Said, Tomlinson

***(Figure 1.2) Summary of Definitions of Imperialism created by Olivia Melvin**

Disagreement on the conceptualization of a term is common in the social sciences, and many methods of breaking down and understanding a disputed term to further complicate this process. From Giovanni Sartori's (Sartori 1970) classic piece on conceptual misinformation to more modern and concept-specific analyses including Kurt Weyland's categorization of "populism" (Weyland 2001) many studies have been performed specifically to address the validity, adaptation, and application of concepts in academia. In the following chapters, the following theories and conceptualizations of empire will be categorized similarly to Weyland's conceptual classification/clarification system; this framework is ultimately less focused on the correctness of one conceptualization compared to another, but rather focuses more heavily on the aspects acknowledged or ignored by each method of conceptualization.

This process of categorizing arguments surrounding a disputed concept moves the focus from correctness vs. incorrectness to a more comprehensive view of how and why these different conceptualizations exist. Furthermore, these categorizations can then be applied to cases of both ancient/classic and modern “empire” to better understand which theorists agree or disagree with this label and why. Variation in conceptual classification accounts for much of the perceived misuse of terminology and debate surrounding the nature of the Belt and Road Initiative and modern Chinese expansionist behavior overall; therefore, this debate can be easily alleviated or avoided by breaking down these conceptualizations into respective categories and understanding the shortcomings or benefits of using each type of conceptualization.

Empire: Static or Dynamic Concept?

Some of the most well-recognized conceptualizations of empire/imperialism are static, fixed concepts. Lenin (1917) uses a Marxist approach to assess empire as a period of time or phase of societal progression. For Lenin, imperialism is a single, necessary stage exhibited by capitalist societies. Thus, application of Marxist/Leninist political theory of imperialism implies that empire is an “inevitable consequence of historical forces” (Foster 2017).

This view of imperialism as the end goal, or unavoidable final product, of capitalism assumes that imperialism is historically uniform in practice and is identifiable by a common set of features in all cases. This frames imperialism as a historical phase of capitalist development. This is interesting when looking at historical cases of empire; while Roman empire is referenced as being one of the birthplaces of capitalism and

British empire is another cornerstone of capitalism, the same cannot be said of all phases on Chinese empire. If a capitalist economic structure is a compulsory characteristic of “empire,” then certain phases of historical Chinese empire are deemed invalid. While this Marxist/Leninist theory of “empire” mainly focuses on the rise of imperialism and how it came about, it is important to include in this analysis of empire because it also provides thorough description of what empire looks like in practice. However contradictory it may sound to use a theory based in Marxism to analyze potential monopolistic behavior at the hand of a communist regime, the Marxist theorization of empire is one way of viewing a modern manifestation of a historically recognized conceptualization of empire/imperialism.

Marxist/Leninist imperialism can be broken down to its core argument that large amounts of concentrated capital results in the formation of monopolies, and thus imperialism stems from absolute control exercised by these monopolies. The current structure of the Chinese economy as being socialist with Chinese characteristics or “state capitalist” as labeled by the *Washington Post* (2019) further complicates the view of the modern situation by potentially satisfying the criteria of a Marxist/Leninist conceptualization of “empire.” This base line argument of one power exerting absolute influence over another is largely agreed upon by all imperialism theorists. The means by which an imperialist state enforces this control or influence is where theories and conceptualizations diverge.

Other simplistic forms of conceptualizing imperialism and empire include Foster’s taxonomy of empire (2017). In Foster’s analysis of empire, he refutes the notion of labeling empire as a type of state or necessary societal phase (Foster 2017). Many

classification systems of identifying “empire” are based on individual “box checking systems” that list minimum requirements that constitute empire in the eyes of each theorist. Some theories emphasize a baseline requirement of exertion of political authority (Doyle 1986), while others focus explicitly on economic authority with no mention of politics (Kobner 1949). This focus on the necessary components of empire in this “box checking system” style is also a point of contention in deciding what is deemed most and least essential. In grappling with the pre-existing conceptualizations and independent thought, Cohen, a systemic theorist, states that imperialism is “any relationship of effective domination or control, political or economic, direct or indirect, of one nation over another” (Cohen 1973, 280). This less specific taxonomy of empire provides little help in trying to identify components that would indicate imperialistic tendencies. Foster also rejects this “box checking system” in his focus on identifying what empire is not. According to Foster, empire is not “a geopolitical taxonomy defined by a checklist of characteristics. Any such checklist is arbitrary and depends on the whims and agenda of the writer, and inevitably includes societies whose people did not consider their rule ‘empire’” (Foster 2017, 15). While theories focused on economic dominance fit most obviously with the modern example of the Belt and Road Initiative, it is important to remember that the divide between some political and economic components isn’t always very clear and overlap is exhibited in observing and assessing these two means of exerting dominance or authority. Foster, like many other academics looking for answers to the application of “empire” in a contemporary (21st century) setting, looks to former cases of empire such as Roman, Ottoman, Japanese, Incan, and several others.

Most definitions of imperialism are limited to describing what imperialism looked at during the time the concept/theory was coined. This type of conceptualization creates a one-dimensional view that either neglects previous usage, adapts previous definitions to case-specific scenarios, or is simply unable to account for future change. Oppositely, using classic empires as the base of the concept has further complicated this case-specific view of “empire.” Each classic empire is wildly different from the next in many different ways, and the differences strongly outweigh the similarities (Foster 2017). This classic empire reference point is particularly useful in combination with the more specific “box checking system” style conceptualization; combining this textbook-style definition with real life example allows for a more comprehensive view of necessary and unnecessary components of what empire looks like in practice.

More dynamic conceptualizations of empire exhibit a culmination of pre-existing theories and conceptualizations adapted to make sense of the present situation. This dynamic conceptualization is synonymous with Weyland’s classical conceptualization of terms; this process is based on redefinition while still focusing on one domain. Adapting older uses of a concept threatens the uniformity in a term’s use, because the adaptation is not always clearly demarcated by use of the same term. Most commonly we see terms with added prefixes (neo-, post-, proto-) to express an adaptation to better suit a different time period or context.

Concept Clarification

Weyland’s approach at differentiating between contested conceptualizations is dimensional, rather than definition-based. Weyland’s framework was mentioned briefly

in the introduction and then scattered throughout the analyses of cases of historical empire. In this section, an in-depth explanation of this concept-classification framework is developed to discuss what these classifications mean.

The first of Weyland's concept-classification types is cumulative. "Cumulation elaborates definitions that combine the attributes from different domains stressed by various scholars through a logical 'and'" (Weyland 2001, 2). This classification type is characterized by a "box-ticking" system previously discussed and the stipulation that all of the boxes must be ticked for the concept to apply.

Weyland's second concept-classification type is radial. Radial conceptualization entails an "addition that connects the attributes from different domains proposed by various authors with a logical 'or' (V). Any case that displays at least one of the defining characteristics is subsumed under the concept in question. While only cases that share all the attributes from different domains are considered full instances, cases that partake in some of these characteristics are also included in the general category, though as "diminished subtypes" marked by qualifying adjectives" (Weyland 2001, 2). Weyland's incorporation of qualifying adjectives is a reference to *Democracy with Adjectives*, another study that attempts to clarify conceptualization of a specific term, "democracy" (Collier and Levitsky 1997). This conceptualization allows for more flexibility in assigning terms to partial cases, giving rise to the addition of adjectives in addition to the original concept.

The last of Weyland's concept-classification types is classical. Classical conceptualization consists of a refining and redefining process: "Re-definition is based on logical differentiation, the distinction of definitional attributes from logically accidental

(though empirically coincident) characteristics. Redefinition thus yields classical concepts. These "minimal" definitions contain only the attributes from one domain that are necessary and jointly sufficient to identify instances of a concept" (Weyland 2001, 2)

This final type of concept-classification is based on Sartori's concept mis-formation (1970) and Collier and Mahon's "conceptual stretching" process (1993).

Each of these classification types are distinct from one another. The first two, cumulative and radial, focus on multiple domains at the same time; "and" and "or" logics, respectively, are applied across these domains. The third, classical, focuses on a single domain but allows for a more evolutionary process associated with a concept.

Empire: The Interdisciplinary Conversation

Paradigm-related underlying assumptions surrounding the concept of empire differ within and between disciplines. The two disciplines that deal most directly with conceptualizing and theorizing empire are history and political science. The historical approach presents empire as a moment in time, characterized by certain traits. This forms the basis of our understanding of classic cases of empire such as the Roman empire, British empire, Japanese empire, and ancient Chinese³ empire being "imperialistic." These are all moments of empire that are widely accepted throughout historical research on "empire." Historical approaches tend to lean toward cumulative conceptualizations of "empire." The political science approach has resulted in a wide variety of conceptualizations of "empire" ranging from systemic theoretical approaches and

³Defining "ancient Chinese empire" is a bit more complex due to the sheer amount of time encompassed under this period of rule. A more detailed analysis of the phases and historical divide of Chinese empire is outlined later in this section.

structural theoretical approaches to socioeconomic analyses. Likewise, political science seems to have a bit more variety in the type of classification of “empire” (cumulative, radial, classical) that is used in these theoretical approaches.

Historical conceptualizations and adaptations of empire generally focus on previous cases of empire, thus basing the concept on the earliest form of empire as a reference point. This practice suggests specific dimensions of a concept being used as a means of clarifying concepts in a “cumulative” way (Weyland 2001). The Roman, British, and former Chinese empire are three of the most widely-accepted forms of classic empire, and the components which make each of these empires are equally as important. While the Roman and British empire are considered to be continuous cases of empire, there is debate and lack of consensus on how China’s imperial history should be divided. Some historians divide Chinese empire into early and late imperial sections, while others use a more all-encompassing approach of grouping many different imperial dynasties into one imperial era (Rowe 1993) (Ebrey 2014).

The Roman empire, accredited as one of the most powerful and long-lasting empires in history was a political, economic, militaristic, and social empire. The Roman empire, often associated with the origin of “empire” as a whole, suggests a cumulative definition of empire according to Weyland’s classification framework. Centralized political rule, uniform currency and collective economic development, empire-wide military training and maintenance, and expansive cultural influence represent each of the four components of Roman empire (Stollberg-Rilinger and Mintzker 2018) (Hargis, Garnsey, and Saller 2012). Thus, a cumulative conceptualization of “empire” can be applied. Similarly, the British empire was a system of colonies governed by a centralized

government with the intent of economic exploitation and implementation of cultural practices (especially religion) enforced my militaristic rule.

Empire within the Chinese context has historically been a bit more complex, and much of China's dynastic history is considered to be an "imperial era" (Ebrey 2014) or a sequence of subsequent empires (Rowe 1993). Language surrounding Chinese empire has not been as black and white as that of the Roman and British empires in terms of self-identification or assessment by Chinese historians.

"The dynasties associated with these rises to conspicuous and unambiguous pre-eminence are the Qin-Han from 221 BC, Sui-Tang from 581 AD and Ming-Qing from 1368 AD" (Huisken 2010). The age of empire began under China's first dynasty, the Qin. The Qin dynasty is characterized by consolidated power, conquests, the beginning stages of building the Great Wall, and the establishment of a somewhat unified and collective Chinese identity (Li and Chang 1985). China's second dynasty, the Han, is known for formally establishing the Silk Road, maintaining large, efficient armies, encouraging development of infrastructure and tools, and many other attributes. The Silk Road established China as the focal point of an affluent economic empire; this component is particularly important in comparing the ancient Silk Road to the present-day BRI. These two dynasties constitute some of the most successful moments in China's imperial history. Chinese historians such as Rowe would argue that these dynasties, and a few others with notable accomplishments preceding the Ming and Qing dynasties, can be label as cases of early Chinese empire. China was in a much earlier stage of development during these cases of early empire than the late imperial Ming and Qing dynasties. Both the Qin and Han dynasties, as well as the overall image of early Chinese empire represent

cumulative conceptualizations of “empire” by exhibiting the political, economic, cultural, and militaristic components of empire.

High levels of interaction with outside countries and a peaking tributary system with China as the central power characterize the Ming and Qing empires throughout Chinese history (Lee 2017) (Lee 2017). Economic development grew at an exponential rate during the Ming dynasty and paved the way for China’s last dynasty, the Qing. The Qing dynasty was established after overthrowing the former Ming dynasty and maintained by militaristic force (Lee 2017). Perdue cites an outside perspective of a citizen belonging to a tributary state looking at the Qing empire: “he shared his Chinese counterparts’ experience of the vastness of the empire and its great military and cultural power” (Perdue 2015, 213). Culturalism is prominent throughout the course of both early and late Chinese empire. Although culturalism in politics and society has largely been replaced by nationalism, its legacy is still present in contemporary China (Townsend 1992). These four political, economic, cultural, and militaristic elements suggest that late Chinese empire fits into a cumulative classification as well. This is to be expected because of our initial assessment that most historians use a cumulative method of measuring “empire.” The Roman, British, and ancient Chinese empire are historical moments that represent cumulative “empire.”

Normative Conceptualization of Empire

Many words carry emotional connotations that are implied with use. The term “empire” is one that carries a variety of connotations based on the context of its use. In a post-colonial context, “imperialism” and “empire” can carry an extremely negative

connotation due to the ruler/subject relationship that is associated with the initiator and victim of classic examples of empire. The word is often considered to insinuate uneven power balance and exploitation; this term is then used as a flare word in media to trigger an emotional response to the behavior of a state that is being labeled as such an aggressor.

Oppositely, the positive impact of imperial legacy is also still apparent in the present day. Legacies associated with empire, even those that drove some countries away from the imperial/hegemonic structure, are still seen today. Infrastructural development that is oftentimes associated with empire is an overall positive. Other forms of development ranging from political, economic, militaristic, philosophical, and academic strides were all present under the context of imperial societies. “Ironically, it was the European empires that carried the idea of the sovereign territorial state to the rest of the world” (Ferguson 2008, 273). The positive connotation of empire is less often used to trigger an emotional response in media in the present day; however, in cases of ancient empire, pride used to be associated with an empire’s wealth, military strength, etc. Boasting about these attributes was a means of triggering a different sort of (positive) emotional response.

A middle ground between this extremely negative and extremely positive connotation associated with the term “empire” is a neutral view of the term. Although not common, another option would be to view the term as encompassing both the good and the bad and proceeding to use the term to discuss certain behavior without insulting or praising the country exhibiting said “imperialistic” behavior. Foster argues against the ability to use “empire” in a neutral way by saying “Empire is vague, and so long as it is

vague it will not be neutral” (Foster 2017, 15). Each person using or hearing the term has a different emotional relationship to the term based on how their perceived notion of empire has affected their life, normally in a positive or negative way, not both.

In a similar study to this one, Ferguson discusses four ways of defining “empire” in the context of contemporary American behavior, one of those four ways being normative. Ferguson states that the “normative or even pejorative approach engages in purposeful name-calling, labeling a polity as an empire either for the purpose or praise or in order to engender reform/resistance” (Ferguson 2008, 274). Of Ferguson’s four ways of defining modern American empire, ideal type, self-consciously empirical, constructivist, and overtly normative, the author’s personal view is that a normative conceptualization of empire was most prominent at the time the article was produced, and a lack of more recognizable hegemonic behavior suggested that the U.S. may have simply been exercising hard and soft power (Ferguson 2008, 279). Ferguson reiterates Morgenthau’s claim that “the power of a nation depends not only upon the skill of its diplomacy and the strength of its armed forces but also upon the attractiveness for other nations of its political philosophy, political institutions, and political policies” (Morgenthau 1978, 154); thus, normative name-calling simply didn’t tick enough of Ferguson’s boxes to agree with calling American behavior in 2008 “imperialistic.”

The normative component of modern Chinese empire is certainly present in media representation of the BRI by foreign countries. However, this normative conceptualization of empire is not enough on its own to consider the BRI as being overall “imperialistic” in nature, mostly because this conceptualization does not take into account the attitude/platform the Chinese government has taken in assessing its own behavior.

Chapter 3: Rhetorical Analysis and Discussion

The Chinese government actively avoids using explicit rhetoric that could be interpreted as imperialistic. Instead, the government utilizes rhetoric emphasizing global harmony, interconnectedness and integration, and joint prosperity to express the economic goals of the Belt and Road initiative. This type of rhetoric was also used during expansion of the Japanese empire on the basis of creating a “co-prosperity sphere” (Grajdanzev 1943). The language used by the Chinese government in discussing the Belt and Road Initiative is important, as it has been used as a means of refuting imperialist and colonialist accusations made by other states in the international system. As a former victim of imperialism and a reformed empire itself, imperialist and colonialist rhetoric aimed at Chinese initiatives and behavior is no small offense. The Chinese government exercises great caution in discussing anything and everything deemed to be a sensitive economic, political, cultural, or overall societal issue. This cautionary practice creates an avenue for upholding a consistent government-wide and nation-wide consensus on an issue at the base level. When examining the infrastructural details and macro-level goals of the Belt and Road Initiative, it is important to keep in mind that the rhetoric deployed here is quite strategic; as such, equally as much value can be drawn from analyzing what is not explicitly stated in these government documents.

Each of the following phrases drawn from Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s propagation of the Belt and Road Initiative represents the explicit goals of the initiative, including economic, political, and even cultural goals. This selection of quotations and documents are taken from the CET program under Harbin Institute of Technology’s

academic curriculum on expanding public knowledge of the Belt and Road Initiative. The summarized BRI documents from this institute were chosen to be a representative sample of the academic materials on this topics that are distributed throughout mid-tier mainland Chinese education systems; secondly, access to these resources via established relations with professors at the Harbin Institute of Technology played a role in the selection process of materials. The rhetoric selected for analysis is representative of the key elements of the Belt and Road Initiative as expressed in curriculum presented to domestic and international students. The English translations and rhetorical analysis are subject to the author's interpretation. Rhetorical analysis is centered on the language present, as well as analysis of what is not being mentioned.

Foundational Rhetoric

The baseline goal of the Belt and Road Initiative, is stated as:

主动地发展与沿线国家的经济合作伙伴关系

“Active Improvement of Economic Cooperation and Partnership along the Belt and Road” (Anonymous 2019; author's translation)

This theoretical goal of cooperation and partnership encourages ideas of mutual benefit, joint development, and positive collective growth for all participants of the Belt and Road Initiative. Such a positive, collective rhetoric fits with the narrative of Xi Jinping serving as an “uncle figure” (Ma 2017), with China functioning as a family member that would encourage the growth and development of other family members or other states. In this single phrase, China opens its arms to the world for an opportunity of partnership, cooperation, and most importantly, relationship building. The last term (关系 or “guan

xi”) can simply be translated to “relations” or “relationships.” However, “guan xi” is actually a rather complex term in the Chinese language that carries many different cultural connotations. “Guan xi” is “the system of social networks and influential relationships which facilitate business and other dealings” (Oxford University Press 2019). This “relationship” comes with many cultural expectations that are necessary to facilitate effective communication and cooperation. In this light “improvement of economic cooperation and partnership” takes on a much deeper meaning that involves political and cultural components that are not explicitly mentioned.

Political and Cultural Rhetoric

Although the foundation of the Belt and Road Initiative is explicitly economic in its original Chinese documentation, one goal of the initiative directly addresses political relations. Through implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese government hopes to 共同打造政治互信 (“collectively create an atmosphere of political trust,” author’s translation). This establishment of political trust is largely an open-ended hope with no pragmatic facilitating mechanism. This political trust is expected to stem from 经济融合 (“the integration of economic systems”) in an organic way that doesn’t require further politically-focused efforts. The Chinese government employs the term 共同 (“collective”) in almost all components of the initiative, as seen in domestic political and economic agendas. This usage could be a reflection of long-standing communist rhetoric or, more simply, an effort to dissuade potential participants from viewing the BRI as a unilateral growth initiative. This incorporation of explicit political goals is an

important feature in demonstrating that this initiative is not a hegemonic political mission in the eyes of the Chinese government. Chinese government documentation consistently states its core focus on economic cooperation, cooperation that may ultimately result in political and cultural exchange and integration.

Like the ambiguously outlined political goals of the Belt and Road Initiative, cultural goals are incorporated loosely throughout the document. The Chinese government aims to forge a 文化包容的利益共同体 (“structure for collective cultural inclusivity”). The Belt and Road Initiative is the largest economic cooperation initiative in history, encouraging 与世界各国的务实合作 (“pragmatic cooperation with all countries of the world”). Cultural exchange that may have previously been considered to be inconceivable is now very plausible. Acknowledging the global scale of the initiative from the start, the Chinese government decided this blanket statement of “cultural respect” would suffice. Once again, focus is placed on 共同 (“collectivity”). This emphasis on a collective cultural sphere works in tandem with the aforementioned collective political sphere.

The Belt and Road Initiative in the Global Context

Furthering this focus on the collective, the Belt and Road Initiative is described as an avenue for pursuing a 命运共同体 (“structure of collective destiny”). This global collective destiny entails an international call for all states to join the initiative. As such, this type of language straddles the line between globalization and hegemony. The term “destiny” in itself implies that one goal should be pursued by all countries participating in

the Belt and Road Initiative; moreover, China positions itself as the leader/facilitator of such a collective action. Similarly, 中国的宏大经济愿景 (“China’s grand economic vision”) further emphasizes this global destiny and a vision of prosperity with China as its root. This rhetoric frames with Belt and Road Initiative within a global context. Without explicitly placing itself as a unilateral leader, China has taken up a facilitating role pursuing global economic integration.

Changing the Model

The Belt and Road Initiative was implemented following a similar preceding initiative, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)⁴ enacted under the Obama administration. This correlation with the TPP is important to note, as several of the avenues of economic cooperation outlined in the Belt and Road Initiative are in direct response to previous economic initiatives rejected by the Chinese government. The Belt and Road Initiative focuses on 传统区域经济一体化模式的超越于创新 (“transcendence and innovation of traditional regional economic integration models”). Western economic integration models are often organized with Western benefit in mind and not always appealing to China; the Belt and Road Initiative presented an opportunity for China to be at the reigns of global economic initiative that could exponentially increase multilateral growth and development. Acknowledging that this type of initiative is the first of its kind, the Chinese government has embraced the use of terms that indicate overcoming and

⁴ Office of the United States Trade Representative. (October 4, 2015). “Summary of the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement.” <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2015/october/summary-trans-pacific-partnership>.

surpassing pre-existing systems in new and innovative ways. This phrasing utilizes the appeal of modernity in order to emphasize a need for change and further development in the global economic system. In a sense this “new” way of facilitating and organizing economic cooperation is not much different from the TPP, aside from the fact that a new, non-Western leader stands at the forefront of the BRI, China.

Economic Rhetoric

Lastly, it’s important to look at some of the specific economic goals of the Belt and Road Initiative and how they will be achieved in practicality. The Belt and Road Initiative outlines 以重点经济产业园区为合作平台 (“utilizing important industrial zones as a platform for cooperation”) This platform encompasses infrastructural development for the purpose of mutual benefit. However, the document does not specify whether or not these industrial zones are those previously existing or those that will be built up through Belt and Road cooperative loan systems. This platform for cooperation embodies the previously mentioned core focus on economic integration of participating countries and takes one step further to expand upon how this integration will practically play out.

At the heart of any efficient economic integration model stands the goal of 消除投资和贸易壁垒” (“eliminating investment and trade barriers”). This choice of wording could be a direct response to dissatisfaction with previous international and regional economic cooperation initiatives. If the BRI is an economic counter-initiative to previous regional initiatives, it makes sense that the desire to eliminate investment and trade

barriers, along with a desire to reinvent economic integration models largely stem from previous failure of the TPP.

Conclusion

An analysis of rhetoric used by the Chinese government in the Belt and Road Initiative shows that imperialistic language and rhetoric is not explicitly used. Similarities to language used by Japanese empire to call upon a need for “co-prosperity” is present (Grajdanzev 1943). However, the main point to be drawn from the lack of direct claim to “empire” is that China does not identify as such. Lack of explicit use of empire-associated rhetoric is an important claim in China’s rebuttal to accusations that suggest such intentions. Although imperialistic/hegemonic language and intent may not be explicitly present, it is important to perform a close-reading and further analyze the Chinese government’s cautious wording. Without any direct mention of empire, accumulation of power, Sino centrism, etc., China has strategically positioned itself as one of the main facilitators in this global economic integration and movement toward a global destiny.

China has undoubtedly positioned itself in a position of global leadership, whether that be as a hegemon or not. Through efforts to incorporate all countries of the world in this collective endeavor, China embarks on a mission of reinvented economic, political, and cultural integration and cooperation. The rhetoric used by the Chinese government is reflective of this goal while also avoiding language that would explicitly point to hegemonic behavior. The same is true of the status and subsequent rhetoric employed by the United States. There is often a double standard when viewing the rhetoric used by the

country that is not one's own, especially by the media. This has led to normative use of the term "empire" in name-calling and bashing China for rhetoric used in describing the BRI.

Discussion: How Does China View Itself?

The language used in China's Belt and Road Initiative planning stages and initial documentation clearly depicts the foundation of economic empire reminiscent of the ancient Silk Road. After all, the original name of the initiative was the "Silk Road Economic Belt" project (Brugier 2014, 1). Based on Belt and Road documents, the only aspect of imperialism guaranteed as present is the economic factor. China has positioned itself as a facilitating father-figure to lesser developed countries seeking assistance with infrastructural development. This framing suggests that modern China can be viewed an economic empire, rather than political.

China's personal history as victim to Western colonialism has affected the normative use of the term, and for this reason China strategically avoids this term when assessing its role in the global hierarchy. Modern Chinese rhetoric has focused most heavily on promoting harmony on a global scale; this focus on "harmony" is a recognizable characteristic/label present throughout many of the political initiatives that Xi Jinping has undertaken throughout his reign as chairman of the CCP. Pax Americana has also been accredited with using this type of rhetoric and language more closely related to hegemonic behavior (Beidler 2007); this double standard does not go unnoticed.

Voicing an opinion that mimics that of the Chinese government in the *NYT*, China-Africa expert, Deborah Brautigam refuted U.S. Security adviser John Bolton's

claim that “China is making strategic use of debt to hold states in Africa captive to Beijing’s wishes and demands” (Bolton 2019). Debt is indeed, on the rise, and China is now a primary investor in Africa, but Brautigam argues that evidence linking the Chinese government to a strategic debt-trapping plan is scarce (Brautigam 2019). The Chinese government maintains this platform of misunderstood or incorrect terminology being associated with the motives and practice of implementing the BRI by other, particularly in the media. “Empire” is a dirty word, and it is seemingly not one that China wants associated with its contemporary behavior.

Chapter 4: Findings and Application

To summarize the takeaway of this study, the core findings are listed below:

Findings
1. Historical instances of empire, such as the Roman, British, and ancient Chinese empires, are cumulative conceptualizations of “empire.”
2. Political scientists and theorists conceptualize “empire” in cumulative, radial, and classical ways depending on the structure of the study it is used in.
3. Normative conceptualizations of empire are most common, given that this conceptualization is solely based on perception and can be used in more casual settings. Normative use of a term can be categorized as a radial conceptualization.
4. Representatives of many foreign countries and media outlets consider China’s behavior via the Belt and Road Initiative to be a normative form of “empire.”
5. China does not identify with the term “empire,” nor is hegemonic language used in the Belt and Road Initiative documents.
6. The language used in the Belt and Road Initiative has a large focus on “co-prosperity” and “cooperative development” with the core focus being economic growth.

With these findings in mind, the initial research question can now be addressed: Is 21st century China building an empire? Yes, and no. From some perspectives, modern Chinese expansionist initiatives such as the BRI do classify as an expression of empire, at least normatively (Finding 4), suggesting that radial conceptualization is applicable. If

China's expansion is "imperialist," how might present-day Chinese empire differ from ancient/more traditional cases of empires? BRI documents do not suggest a cumulative conceptualization of modern Chinese empire, while historical cases do (Finding 1). How does one define or practically measure the existence of an empire when its conceptualization is so highly contested? Using Weyland's framework to analyze the interdisciplinary debate surrounding "empire" allowed some degree of clarification before attempting to analyze the BRI through this lens.

Language surrounding cooperative economic development is most prominent in the BRI-related documents (Finding 6). This suggests that under a "box-ticking" system of (political, economic, cultural, and militaristic) components of empire, modern Chinese expansionist behavior under the BRI ticks the economics box only, indicating a radial conceptualization with adjectives. Thus, the label of "economic empire" may better suited for describing behavior under the BRI.

Political theorists conceptualize "empire" in a broad variety of ways (Finding 2). Take the Marxist/Leninist conceptualization of "empire" for example and view it through Weyland's framework of conceptual classification. This theory could be viewed as exhibiting the "box-ticking" component under a cumulative conceptualization by requiring that "empire" remain a flat concept that can only exist under specific conditions (capitalism and a certain level of development/power). This would mean that contemporary China is most certainly not exhibiting "imperialistic" behavior. Oppositely, one could argue that the Marxist/Leninist conceptualization of "empire" is more classical than cumulative in that it can be adapted to possibly encompass the behavior of a state like modern China, a state-capitalist society.

Lastly, China does not perceive itself as exhibiting “imperialistic” tendencies (Finding 5) because of the lack of explicitly stating these intentions. And oppositely, it is almost inevitable that someone, somewhere would perceive this behavior as being “imperialistic” because of the first-nature emotional response that is associated with a normative conceptualization of a word with such a long history (Finding 3).

Application

Why dredge up an old term? This term is already here, in media and in academic research. In fact, it never left. Adaptations to the term have been made and then disregarded, and prefixes have been added to alter the meaning of the term and then ignored. Talks of “empire” are all around of us, but it seems that sometimes the participants in these talks speak past one another due to differing conceptualizations. This study attempts to fill in part of the gap in understanding the many different conceptualizations of “empire” and how to practically measure and apply these conceptualizations.

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⁵ The author has asked to remain anonymous for security purposes.

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