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“Tell China’s Stories Well”: Implications for the Western Narrative

Justyna Szczudlik

Under Xi Jinping, the PRC is pursuing the campaign “tell China’s stories well”. This multifaceted program is intended to refute negative stereotypes about China and spread its narrative across the globe. Under this umbrella, China promotes its own expressions in Chinese to disseminate their true spirit, uses existing Western concepts (e.g., globalisation) and universal values (e.g., rule of law) but with a distorted meaning, and tries to establish its own concepts (e.g., a community of shared destiny) to be acknowledged worldwide. The goal is to gradually phase out the existing global narrative and replace it with Chinese ideas as a means of shaping a China-led discourse.

The Concept behind “Tell China’s Stories Well”

During his first term, Xi launched the campaign “tell China’s stories well” (*jianghao zhongguo gushi*) or “spread the Chinese voice well” (*chuanbo hao zhongguo shengyin*). This concept was first put forward at the *National Propaganda and Ideology Work Conference in Beijing in August 2013* and reiterated at a similar gathering this year. Xi mentioned the necessity to reform and enhance China’s ability to disseminate its own voice and shape global public opinion.¹ Both expressions, considered buzzwords, are used by leaders, experts, and pundits and were included in a series of articles about the concept published in media, mainly in the *People’s Daily*, the party’s mouthpiece.² The campaign has domestic aspects, mainly to tighten patriotic and nationalistic sentiment, but also external dimensions as an element of China’s active foreign policy. It corresponds to Xi’s recent slogans of “strengthening strategic self-confidence” and “shaping the unique style of China’s diplomacy”.³ One of its dimensions is to export China’s own standards and values. A good example of this goal is a statement by China’s former ambassador to the UN, Liu Jieyi,

¹ “Xi Jinping: yishi xingtai gognzuo shi dang de yixiang jiduan zhongyao de gongzuo” [Xi Jinping: ideological work is extremely important for the party], *Xinhua*, 20 August 2013.

² Ren Zhongwen (ed.), *Jianghao Zhongguo gushi [Tell China’s Stories Well]*, Beijing 2017.

³ “Xi Jinping za Zhongyang waishi gongzuo huiyi shang qiangdiao jianchi yi xinshidai zhongguo tese shenhuizhuiyi waijiao sixiang wei zhidao nuli kaichuang zhongguo tese daguwaijiao xin jumian” [At the Central Foreign Affairs Conference Xi Jinping highlighted: under the framework of new era of socialism to create new chapter of China’s great power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics], *Xinhua*, 23 June 2018.

who said: “Xi’s diplomatic philosophy was formulated, providing strong theoretical support and practical guidance for promoting Chinese ideas in multilateral institutions and on the global stage.”⁴

“Tell China’s stories well” is an idea to redirect the world’s attention from China’s economic and social problems and reduce negative perceptions (e.g., manufacturer of low-quality products, intellectual property rights violator) into an image of a country that is a global power and norm-setter. Xi is trying to convince the world that China has the ability to set the tone. The concept assumes the use of modern communications and claiming “China’s international discourse rights” to implant Chinese ideas into others’ minds. This campaign has three faces. The first is “new ways of expression” (*xinbiaoshu*). Its aim is to refute negative stereotypes about China through the dissemination of Chinese cultural heritage (including philosophy and history), underscoring the country’s experience and achievements since the “reforms and opening” in late 1978. The rationale behind it is the assumption that others, mainly Western countries,⁵ do not understand China, underestimate its success, and do not know country’s real intentions. The belief is that this is why China still has a bad reputation in the West, where the phrases the “China threat” and “China collapse” have been coined.

The second dimension of this campaign is more sophisticated and blurred. It concerns ideas or principles and takes two forms. The first is called “new categories” (*xinfanchou*). It seems to be an idea that uses Western concepts, such as democracy or globalisation and even some universal values, but with a Chinese understanding. China uses the terms for these concepts in Chinese, English, and in other languages, but the meaning is not the same as in the West. The reason why China uses them are to create an image of itself as a fully-fledged power and to be understood in Western societies.⁶ The second form is called “new concepts” (*xingainian*).⁷ It assumes the creation of China’s own ideas or principles based on its traditional philosophical heritage (e.g., Chinese philosophers and their doctrines, such as Confucius, Mencius, Sunzi, etc.) and then disseminate them as an alternative to existing, mostly Western, concepts. The rationale behind this approach is that the global narrative still is Western-led, comprised as “Western centralism” or “strong West, weak China”, which prevail in the global perception and discourse.⁸ It assumes that to now the Chinese “international right to speak” has been passive, unclear, and in need of reform.

“New Ways of Expression”

The concept is based mostly on public relations, public diplomacy, and soft power. It is the popularisation of Chinese cultural heritage, including ancient philosophy and political thinking. One instrument is the Chinese language, not only teaching Chinese as a foreign language but also spreading globally selected Chinese expressions and ideas. An interesting trend is to popularise words and slogans mostly in Chinese but not necessarily in translated versions. A good example of this is a report about the use abroad of Chinese words in *pinyin*,⁹ published this year by the China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration. The report is based on media screening and interviews in eight English-speaking countries—the U.S., the UK, Australia, the Philippines, South Africa, Canada, Singapore, and India. It identifies 100 Chinese expressions mostly in *pinyin* that are well-known and used by people and media. The report measures the degree of recognition of selected expressions within society, as well as their popularity. The latter includes numbers of press articles and TV and radio programmes that contain Chinese words and slogans. The reason why *pinyin* was measured is also an argument that this is the best way to secure the real meaning of these words or slogans and to disseminate the Chinese spirit of their meaning. This is thus seen as a good

⁴ Liu Jieyi, “Chinese Ideas Make Waves,” *China Daily*, 10 October 2017.

⁵ The author defines “the West” and “Western” countries as the community of states based on liberal democracy, respect for human rights, and having a market economy. They mainly include countries in North America and Europe, as well as Australia and New Zealand.

⁶ For more about these phenomena, see the pioneering work of Alice Ekman, “China and the ‘Definition Gap’: Shaping Global Governance in Words,” *The Asian Forum*, 4 November 2017.

⁷ “Xi Jinping: yishi...,” *op. cit.*

⁸ Ren Zhongwen, *op. cit.* pp. 85-86.

⁹ *Pinyin* is a system of transliteration of Chinese characters introduced in mainland China in the late 1950s. It is the most popular system used globally, except in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau.

way to increase the global impact of the Chinese expressions. This effect cannot be achieved through translation.¹⁰

In the top 100 *pinyin* words or phrases are culture-related expressions mainly about the martial arts (*Shaolin*, *wushu*, *qigong*, *gongfu*, *taiji*, *wujia*). Others include Chinese festivals (e.g., *chunjie*, Chinese New Year), food, and easy greeting words. But apart from these phases, there are also political and economic-related slogans. The report argues that this is the result of Xi's active foreign policy and China's rising role as a norm-setter. In terms of the economy, the most well-known words or slogans, the report cites, highlight a Chinese economy that is in good shape, an RMB that has been internationalised, and the rising role of high-tech and innovation in Chinese development. Also in the top 100 are the names of ancient Chinese philosophers and their doctrines: Laozi and Taoism, Kongzi (Confucius) and Menzgi (Mencius) and Confucianism; Sunzi and the *Art of War*. It is worth mentioning that, according to the report, most of the top 100 expressions known abroad have a positive connotation.

Most Popular Chinese Political and Economic Expressions

| Pinyin, Characters | Translation |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Fanfu, 反腐 | Anti-corruption |
| Zhongguo meng, 中国梦 | Chinese Dream |
| Gongchandang, 共产党 | Communist Party of China (CPC) |
| Lianghui, 两会 | Two Sessions (parliament) |
| Hexie, 和谐 | Harmony |
| Zhongguo zhizao, 中国制造 | Made in China* |
| Yidai yilu, 一带一路 | Belt and Road Initiative, BRI |
| Zhongguo gushi, 中国故事 | Chinese Stories |
| Mingyun gongtongti, 命运共同体 | Community of Shared Destiny |
| Sichou zhilu, 丝绸之路 | Silk Road |
| Zhongguo daolu, 中国道路 | Chinese Path |
| Zhongguo shengyin, 中国声音 | Chinese Voice |
| Yuan, 元 | Yuan, Chinese currency |

¹⁰ "Zhongguo huayu haiwai renzhidu tiaojiu baogao" [Report about Overseas Recognition of the Chinese Narrative], February 2018, pp. 4, 13, 19.

| | |
|----------------|---------------------------------|
| Renminbi, 人民币 | Yuan, Chinese currency |
| Zhong Hang, 中行 | China's Central Bank |
| Chuangxin, 创新 | Innovation |
| Shisanwu, 十三五 | 13th Five-Year Plan (2016-2020) |
| Gaotie, 高铁 | High-speed railways |

* The report does not clarify whether this expression refers to information put on products manufactured in China or to the “Made in China 2025” programme launched by Xi to increase innovation in the Chinese economy.

Source: Based on “Zhongguo huayu haiwai renzhidu tiaojiu baogao” [Report on the Overseas Recognition of the Chinese Narrative], February 2018, pp. 8-14.

Another tool is speeches given by Chinese leaders, both at home and abroad, as well as articles published in the popular press in visited countries.¹¹ The speeches all have a similar template. In them, there are references to Chinese history, especially to the periods when China was a great power and contributed about 30% to the global GDP, equipped with catchy Chinese proverbs and philosophers’ quotations. Then, there are references to the PRC’s economic achievements: progress in the eradication of poverty, dynamic economic growth, contribution to global GDP, China as the world’s second-biggest economy, etc. Then, they mention the complicated global situation, listing problems such as uneven economic growth, protectionism, climate change, mass-migration, and claiming the decline of the West. Simultaneously, Asian growth is highlighted and appreciated and its solutions found to be more effective than Western ones.

These speeches are not only for external consumption but also for domestic use to make the Chinese (including the diaspora) believe the country is open, reformed and contributes to the global economy and security. This is also why under Xi China has strengthened the supply of media content to overseas Chinese newspapers to influence the nearly 60 million ethnic Chinese living abroad.¹²

The Different Meaning of Existing Categories

The “new categories” phrase within the “tell China’s stories well” project is a reference to the existing principles and values promoted in the West as universal. Although China has already accepted most of them by signing international conventions, it in fact understands them differently. This is to maintain CPC rule, considering domestic challenges (such as how to control the entire society to prevent instability). It seems that the Chinese political cultural heritage, such as a Sino-centric view of the world, also plays a role, especially bearing in mind China’s global ambitions.

The best example of this distortion is the term “democracy”. The *classic* definition of liberal democracy underscores a system based not only on elections among rivals but also procedures, guarantees of minority rights, and an independent judiciary. In China, it is argued there is democracy but with a socialist prefix (*shehui zhuyi minzhu*), which recalls the propaganda rivalry during the Cold War between the communist and capitalist camps. This Chinese version of democracy limits the voting act to within one party. An

¹¹ Wang Fan, Ling Shengli (eds.), *Zhongguo juesei, Zhongguo fangan: Zhongguo tese daguo waijiao* [Chinese Role, Chinese Solution: Great Power Diplomacy with Chinese characteristics], Beijing 2018, pp. 271-274.

¹² E. Feng, “China and the world: how Beijing spreads the message,” *The Financial Times*, 12 July 2018.

example is the group of solutions introduced under the influence of Deng Xiaoping. They were called “intraparty democracy” or “democratic centralism”. It was an intraparty checks-and-balances system known as “one party, two coalitions”, referring to two main party factions that compete with each other.¹³ Although the 19th party Congress and 13th parliamentary session erased these democratic elements, the slogan remains.¹⁴ It is argued in China that liberal democracy is overregulated and faces problems such as the recent worldwide rise of populism, with populist leaders duly elected through democratic procedures. Having its own kind of *democracy*, China avoids this unpredictability. Another example was an experiment of fully free elections in Chinese rural areas. Eventually the elections were put on hold, assessed as a failure. According to Chinese experts, its form of democracy is transparent because it is equipped with supervision tools that are more effective than those within liberal democracy.¹⁵

The second example is the term “**rule of law**”. The universal definition underscores that all are equal to the law or are accountable to the law in the same way, no matter their position in society or political domain.¹⁶ In China, the rule of law is rule *by* law, and in that sense the party is above the law.¹⁷ In reality, this phrase is used in China as an instrument to expand legal regulations about the party and its members to give CPC leaders greater control over the party and the state. In October 2014, the 4th Central Committee plenum, for the first time was devoted to the rule of law. In the communiqué, this notion was described as a “socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics” (*zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi fazhi*). It was mentioned that the process of introducing the rule of law should be conducted under the party’s leadership while the party provides fundamental guarantees for the socialist rule of law.¹⁸ The examples of democracy and rule of law show that China uses those notions as smokescreens. China argues that there is a vivid discussion about these ideas (e.g., a plenum only about the rule of law or elections of leaders, including “no” votes, for example, in the case of a government work report). In that sense, it is a kind of public diplomacy that aims to paint the notion that there is democracy or the rule of law in China, but showing those notions on their surface only, without going into details.

China also defines differently economic notions. The Chinese meaning of “**globalisation**” (as well as “**multilateralism**”) is limited to the economic dimension, such as free trade (with the WTO as an example of multilateralism), which literally means lifting barriers and expanding market access without any liberal norms, and very limited openness on China’s part.¹⁹ It is also worth mentioning its definition of “**investment**”. Generally, the widely used definition embraces greenfield, brownfield, and mergers and acquisitions (M&A), as well as public procurement schemes. Investment should facilitate the development of the host-countries, increase employment, etc. But what China calls investment is mostly loan- and credit-based projects with state guarantee requests, which shift the burden to the recipient country. Loans, which must be repaid, may increase the country’s public debt. What is more, the projects are mostly implemented by a Chinese workforce and contractors, which does not improve the employment rate in the host countries. In M&A, Chinese investment recently has been focused on takeovers mostly in segments of the high-tech sector but are seen by the other country as a threat to its security.

China’s perception of security-related words and slogans is different as well. A good example is “**militarisation**”, recently a hot buzzword due to China’s activities and territorial disputes in the South China Sea. China has embarked on numerous sea land reclamation projects, equipping artificial or enlarged islets with infrastructure (airstrips, radar, bases for aircraft carriers) that might have a dual-use purpose. The islets’ other claimants and the U.S. accuse China of militarisation of the sea. But China argues its perception

¹³ Cheng Li, *Chinese Politics in the Xi Jinping Era. Reassessing Collective Leadership*, Brookings Institution Press, 2016, p. 19.

¹⁴ “Juesheng quanmian jiancheng xiaokang shehui duoqu xin shidai zhongguo tese shehui zhuyi weida shengli. Zai zhongguo gongchandang di shijiu ci quanguo daibiao dahui shang de baogao” [Towards the society of moderate well-being and new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics. Report delivered at the 19th CPC Congress], www.cpc.people.com, 18 October 2017, point. 1.

¹⁵ Personal communication with Chinese experts, June 2018.

¹⁶ See: “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” Article 7; www.un.org.

¹⁷ C. Minzner, “What Does China Mean by ‘Rule of Law’,” *Foreign Policy*, 20 October 2014.

¹⁸ “Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu quanmian tuijin yifa zhiguo ruogan zhongda wenti de jueding” [Central Committee decisions about the important issue of the comprehensive promotion of the rule of law], *Xinhua*, 28 October 2014; A. Ekman, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ J. Szczudlik, D. Wnukowski, “China as an ‘Engine’ of Globalisation: More Words than Deeds,” *PISM Policy Paper*, No. 5 (158), September 2017.

of militarisation is narrow, limited to the deployment of soldiers and offensive equipment. China is also trying to convince the international community that what China is doing in the South China Sea is providing public goods and offshore support.²⁰ Even if the equipment or installations might be military-capable, they have a defensive character. In that sense, it seems that the U.S. military bases in Asia would be examples of militarisation. The same for freedom-of-navigation operations (FONOPS) conducted mainly by the U.S. and European countries (e.g. UK, France) as well as U.S. military drills in Asia-Pacific.²¹

It is also worth looking at the Chinese meaning of “**terrorism**”. Alice Ekman and Mathieu Duchatel argue that in Europe, terrorism is seen not only as a security threat but also a challenge to such values as freedom of speech. In China, terrorism is mostly linked to separatism, which refers mainly to the Uighurs, Tibetans, and Taiwanese. In that sense, from China’s perspective, terrorism is rather a domestic issue.²² As a result, China voices concerns that Europe generally does not perceive Uighurs as terrorists, and their actions (defined in China as terrorist attacks) are mostly seen as ethnic tensions and reactions to China’s policy of suppression. Moreover, China presents a specific stance on terrorism in Europe. For example, in the case of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris, China assessed it as an act of retaliation due to European interference in the Middle East and criticism of Islam.²³

China presents a similar understanding where “**separatism**” and “**sovereignty**” are concerned. Both terms are used not only to blame true separatist movements but mostly to get other countries’ support or acknowledgement for the Chinese policy towards Taiwan, the Dalai Lama (called not only a religious person but also “a politician in exile who, wearing a religious hat for a long time, engages in anti-China separatist activities”²⁴) and the restive Xinjiang province. When it comes to the concepts behind these two words, it is also worth mentioning China’s “**non-interference**” principle, part of its diplomatic core DNA. This concept is evolving, and in fact, China itself has become engaged in the internal affairs of other countries. Its reasons are to protect China’s overseas interests, test its active great-power diplomacy, shape other countries’ policies, or resolve conflicts. This change is visible both in informal and formal dimensions. An example of the informal is China’s recent economic and political infiltration of countries under the aegis of its BRI or “16+1” projects. What China is trying to do is to make countries economically and politically dependent on it, in part through credit-based projects that are difficult for the recipient to repay and attempts to gain access to politicians (both ruling and opposition parties) to influence the decision-making process. This approach is noticeable in Sri Lanka.²⁵ The formal dimension refers, for example, to China’s engagement in South Sudan, where, before partition the Chinese authorities had contact with the pro-independence South Sudanese politicians while now China tries to play the role of mediator in the civil war instead of withdrawing from the country, which would entail losing access to oilfields.²⁶

Another security-related term, frequently used in slogans, is “**corruption**”. Generally, the reason to fight corruption is to make public life more transparent, based on equal justice and access. In China, this notion has a broader meaning, especially under Xi. His anticorruption campaign, known as a crackdown on “*tigers and flies*”,²⁷ is mostly an internal fight with party factions and enemies. In that sense, anticorruption is an instrument to “clean” the party of Xi’s enemies, not only at home but also abroad.²⁸

²⁰ “Li Keqiang: Zhongguo wuyi nanhai junshihua, shifang heping haiyang qiangyin” [Li Keqiang: China does not intend to militarise the South China Sea, but to highlight maritime peace], *Takungpao*, 25 March 2017.

²¹ Xuan Loc Doan, “China’s hypocritical stance on maritime militarization,” *Asia Times*, 4 June 2018.

²² But it is also worth mentioning that due to China’s expanding global presence, international terrorism is becoming a direct threat to Chinese nationals living abroad. For more, see: M. M. Duchatel, “Terror Overseas: Understanding China’s Evolving Counter-Terror Strategy,” *Policy Brief*, ECFR, October 2016.

²³ M. Duchatel, A. Ekman, “Countering terrorism: an area for EU-China cooperation?,” *Brief Issue*, EUISS, May 2015, pp. 1-2.

²⁴ “Waijiaobu: yi jiu Aobama yu Dalai Lama ‘sirenhuijian’ anpai tichu yanzheng jiaoshe” [MFA: Obama-Dalai Lama “private meeting” means serious diplomatic interference], *Xinhua*, 15 June 2016.

²⁵ P. Tonchev, “Along the Road. Sri Lanka’s Tale of Two Ports,” *Brief Issue*, EUISS, April 2018.

²⁶ T. Raferty, “China’s Doctrine of Non-Interference Challenged by Sudan’s Referendum,” *China Brief*, 17 December 2010; Yanmei Xie, “To Intervene or Not? China’s Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan Raises Questions,” *South China Morning Post*, 20 June 2018.

²⁷ “Laohu cangying yiqi da” [To hit together tigers and flies], *Renmin Ribao*, 9 September 2017.

²⁸ “China’s int’l anti-corruption cooperation yields fruitful results,” *Xinhua*, 9 December 2016

There is a whole group of concepts used to support Chinese political, diplomatic, and economic expansion. A telling example is the Chinese own interpretation of “**public good**”. Generally, a public good is both non-excludable and non-rivalrous. No one can be effectively excluded from its use and one individual cannot reduce the availability to others. What is more, a public good primarily offers safety. China perceives itself as a provider of global public goods. But in the Chinese discourse, the best examples of its global public goods include the new facilities on the South China Sea islets but mostly BRI and the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).²⁹ While the AIIB in its initial stage has been assessed positively and might be seen as a public good,³⁰ there are rising doubts globally about BRI. These include the sustainability of BRI projects due to negative impacts on the environment and local communities, its credit-based model that increases public debt, as well as concerns about China’s political influence in the countries where the projects are implemented. In that sense, the Chinese definition of “public good” is distorted and focused on China’s own economic and political benefits.

Another concept in this group is “**result**”. Generally, this word means something tangible, “hard” or measurable, often in cooperation something from the final stage. But for China, a result is rather the beginning of cooperation, when there is no tangible effect or they are limited to political effects. It seems that the main reason for this switch is to avoid responsibility and dilute criteria that could indicate failure of a particular China-led project. A good example of this approach is the list of “16+1” *results* announced by the Chinese MFA on the fifth anniversary of the format. The document contains mostly meetings under this umbrella but not economic statistics or “hard” infrastructure.³¹ A similar approach is noticeable when it comes to BRI, especially the memorandums of understanding that China pushes other countries to sign. They are presented as “hard” results of the BRI. At the BRI International Forum in Beijing (May 2017), Xi mentioned that BRI has produced more than 270 results and that more than 100 countries and organisations support the initiative.³² In that sense, it is a notion used in domestic policy to show Chinese society of their country’s global ascendancy.

It is also worth looking at “**strategic partnership**”, a concept eagerly used in Chinese diplomatic language. Although in international relations the general notion of strategic partnership can be rather blurry,³³ it mostly perceived as a signal that relations are excellent. This may indicate that all topics can be discussed, including sensitive issues. In fact, for China, strategic partnership means that the PRC may require support for (or at least acknowledgement of) its stance on sensitive issues, such as human rights, and its core interests: Taiwan, Tibet or maritime territorial disputes.³⁴

New Chinese Universal Notions

Simultaneous with modifying existing concepts, China is setting up its own ideas and promotes them globally. There are several reasons for this approach. Similar to the process of distortion, China is trying to act with notions best suited to its political goals of being a superpower and preserving stability at home. The latter needs the CPC to be the sole source of power, sanguine relations with other countries to maintain economic growth, protect overseas interests, and create the perception that China is a valuable partner. The new concepts cast by China are based on Chinese traditional (political) culture: a Sino-centric view, which generally means a Confucian organic perception of the world and society. It seems that the traditional Confucian legacy is becoming more important under Xi and the new ideas are based on this tradition. New Chinese notions are marketed as inclusive not exclusive and based on moral values, not only

²⁹ Wang Fan, Ling Shengli (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 110-124; “Xi Jinping zai ‘yidai yilu’ guoji hezuo gaofeng luntan yuanzhuo fenghui shang de kaimuci (quanwen)” [Xi Jinping’s opening remarks at the roundtable summit of the Belt and Road Initiative International Forum (full text)], www.fmprc.gov.cn, 15 May 2017.

³⁰ S. M. Patrick, “AIIB: Is the Chinese-led Development Bank a Role Model?”, Blog, Council on Foreign Relations, 25 June 2018.

³¹ “Five-year outcome List of Cooperation between China and Eastern and Central Europe,” Chinese MFA, 28 November 2017.

³² “Yidai yilu guoji hezuo gaofeng luntan chengguo qingdan (quanwen)” [List of results of the International BRI Forum], MFA, 16 May 2017.

³³ K. Bałon, “Co to jest strategiczne partnerstwo” [What is strategic partnership], *PISM Bulletin*, No. 34, 2001

³⁴ D. Mierzejewski, “Uwagi wstępne o strategicznym polsko-chińskim partnerstwie” [Preliminary remarks about Poland-China strategic partnership], *Poland-China Business Magazine*, 1/2014, p. 7-8.

interests. In that sense, they are more effective than the existing ones because they are not as confrontational as the Western ideas. Chinese leaders argue that the new Chinese (or Asian) concepts are anxiously needed now because the world is in great change and the existing notions are not effective. China's new slogans comprise what is called the “**Chinese solution**” (or *wisdom*). It is an umbrella notion under which there are more detailed and lower-level solutions.³⁵ It is also worth mentioning that the Chinese solution is promoted as a global public good.

Under the umbrella, there are at least two wide and comprehensive concepts: the “**community of shared destiny**” and “right approach to morality and interest” (*zhengque yili guan*). It seems both might be compared to the modern version of the ancient Chinese idea of *tianxia*, which literally means “all under heaven”. *Tianxia* refers to the Chinese vision of the world, in which China is in the middle (centre) while the countries or nations living around it are (friendly but) dependent on China.³⁶ This concept is often seen as a kind of Chinese sphere of influence or a “friendship club”. Friends are needed both for economic and political reasons. Considering China's overdependence on export and rising worldwide concerns about its global ambitions, having more countries “all under heaven” is crucial for China.

The “community of shared destiny” is defined as a kind of Chinese version of globalisation, which means China would like to include all countries under this umbrella, so it is worth looking at the second *tianxia*-related slogan—the “right approach to **morality and interest**”. This notion is less visible (but appears in most of the speeches delivered by Chinese leaders) and narrower than “community”. But it shows in a better way China's real intentions to attract more political friends and in that way to shape a new global order with China in the centre. This is also an idea of inclusiveness, but this concept is tailored for developing countries (which is stated openly), perceived as victims of colonial powers and their hegemonism.³⁷ In that sense, this idea serves to win China those countries' hearts and minds. Highlighting this concept, China argues that what the world lacks is morality and justice and what it has too much of is the focus on interests and profits. Explaining this concept, Xi, who is presented as the “inventor” of this slogan, quotes ancient Chinese philosophers (Confucius and Mencius), who said that morality and justice (*yi*) should be considered first, and then interests and profits (*li*). It is also underscored that China does not accept that a “strong power should be a hegemon” and firmly opposes the idea that great powers have the right to impose their own political agendas. As China argues, this is why the PRC does not require any conditions when cooperating with other countries and highlights the principles of non-interference and sovereignty. What China is trying to achieve is a sort of global unity (*tianxia datong*).³⁸ The Chinese concepts are presented in opposition to Western solutions. It is said that under Western leadership, great powers compete for power and alliances and are even ready to launch wars. In presenting the morality-interest balance concept, China wants to protect the global peace and gradually reform the global order.³⁹

It is also worth mentioning that there are several China-led concepts promoted extensively as an alternative narrative under the BRI framework. It is worth looking at just the word “**initiative**”. China highlights BRI as an “initiative”, not as “strategy” or “policy”. In that sense, China is trying to convince others that the concept has no political goals and is not a political tool to exert pressure on others, that it is an open idea, based on the voluntary choice of any country to be part of it. Moreover, in BRI's case, Chinese officials reject any comparisons to the Marshall Plan, which they claim was guided by a Cold War mentality and founded on ideological, political, and security considerations to contain communism. Furthermore, the BRI, in contrast to the Marshall Plan, is not one-way development assistance for a limited number of countries. Other Chinese concepts are called similarly, “framework”, “vision”, “proposal”, “mechanism”, “forum”, or “platform”, to show that China does not want to impose anything on others.

³⁵ For more about this concept, as well as “community of shared destiny for mankind” and “new model of international relations”, see: J. Szczudlik, “Towards a ‘New Era’ in China’s Great Power Diplomacy,” *PISM Policy Paper*, No. 1 (161), March 2018, pp. 3-5.

³⁶ Feng Youlan, *Krótką historią filozofii chińskie* [Short history of Chinese philosophy], Warsaw 2001, p. 20.

³⁷ Recently, the expression *zhengque yili guan* was used in Xi's speech at the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation in Beijing on 3 September.

³⁸ Wang Fan, Ling Shengli (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 36-45; Sheng Wei, “Zhengque yili guan: goujian renlei mingyun gongtongti de jiazhi zhuiqiu” [Morality-Interest Balance View: values to build community of destiny for mankind on values], *Qiushi*, 15 May 2018. *Tianxia* and *tianxia datong* were mentioned by Xi at the latest party meeting devoted to the 5th anniversary of BRI in August.

³⁹ Wang Fan, Ling Shengli (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 37.

But the most visible Chinese-led ideas (under the BRI as well) are its version of “**win-win**” and “connectivity”. The English translation “win-win” is a little bit misleading because it suggests a fifty-fifty split in benefits. In Chinese, this idea is called *gongying*, which exactly means “win together”. In that sense, the Chinese concept does not assume “equal” victories and Chinese experts rather openly admit it is not a fifty-fifty idea.⁴⁰ It seems apparent that according to the Chinese understanding that in fact, for example, BRI provides China with more profits than the other country and that this is justified and apparent. When it comes to “**connectivity**”, this word is generally perceived in a broader sense, such as improving infrastructure and transport connections (e.g., railways, roads, sea lanes, cyber processes, enhanced economic cooperation and people-to-people contact). The general sense of the result should be an improvement in regional or even global development. It seems that China understands this word in a similar way but with additional meaning: “Connectivity” includes security and political reasons. In that sense, this idea serves China’s goals depicted, for example, in its military strategy (published in mid-2015), such as actions to protect “overseas interests”. The Chinese involvement in Sri Lanka is a good example of this approach. Plamen Tonchev argues that China’s engagement in the ports of Colombo and Hambantota shows in a nutshell the Chinese understanding of connectivity, both in terms of content and modality. “Connectivity” is for dual-use projects that contain a strong security component, such as potential military bases.⁴¹ A very similar situation is seen in China’s engagement in the port of Gwadar in Pakistan.⁴² What is more, the reinvigoration of the “string of pearls” concept, with not only economic but also political rationales (e.g., the Chinese military base in Djibouti, port alliances in Southeast Asia), vindicate the broader view of the Chinese understanding of “connectivity”.

Last but not least, it is worth mentioning “**development**”. Although, indisputably, it is not only a Chinese notion, China presents it as purely Chinese and includes within its mean, its own, distorted view of human rights. Chinese authorities argue that countries and people have the imminent right to development, which in reality refers to the second and third generations of human rights: economic and social, but not political and civil rights. The right to development that China promotes as its own agenda is mostly targeted to emerging markets. “Development” also serves as justification of the lack of civil rights in China.

Conclusions

“Tell China’s stories well” is a campaign being introduced behind the scenes or in the shadows. But the campaign seems to be effective. The fact that foreign media, experts, and decision-makers use Chinese expressions (including those in *pinyin*) is vindication of this premise. Those words and slogans include not only the BRI project itself but also “win-win”, “connectivity”, “Made in China 2025”, “Chinese dream”, and others. They are discussed and used globally. Chinese leaders seem to be effective at home as well. Considering Xi’s popularity and centralisation of power, the Chinese people, including experts, often repeat excerpts from Xi’s speeches as proof of China’s good intentions and to counter what they see as unreasonable criticism from abroad. One of the noticeable meanings for “tell China’s stories well” is the promotion of Chinese initiatives in a very positive manner. Sometimes, this leads to a distortion in remarks by foreign experts (on BRI or “16+1”, for example) in Chinese media. Mostly they are messages for the domestic audience to show the effectiveness of China’s diplomacy.

Apart from the use of Chinese words and slogans by people, media, or experts, which is a rather “soft” result of the campaign, the more important effect might be cooperation based on Chinese notions. Imprecise definitions and “intentional ambiguity” may be used to further Chinese goals and interests. China not only is trying to phase out existing (mostly Western) narratives but does so to achieve political and practical effects. To this end, the BRI was included in declarations of comprehensive strategic partnerships, such as those with Poland and Serbia, both signed in June 2016. Interestingly, in the Serbia-China document, the South China Sea issue is mentioned, which may suggest Serbia’s support for China’s position

⁴⁰ Personal communication with Chinese experts.

⁴¹ P. Tonchev, *op. cit.*

⁴² F. Grare, “Along the Road. Gwadar and China’s Power Projection,” *Brief Issue*, EUISS, July 2018.

on disputes in that area.⁴³ China is also trying to tie the BRI to other countries' and organisations' development agendas and seek synergy, such as with the Juncker Plan, Eurasian Economic Union, etc. The other way is to "insert" Chinese words and slogans into documents to be signed at multilateral forums, such as various mechanisms under the "16+1" framework. China creates dozens of such lower-level mechanisms and insists on adopting declarations or MoUs that include the Chinese notions.

The best example of this approach, which China is a very proud of, is in the UN. In late 2017, when for the first time the "community of shared destiny" was adopted by the UN in an official document, Chinese media underscored China's rising influence on shaping global discourse.⁴⁴ Those words and slogans in UN documents include "BRI", "community of shared destiny for mankind", "win-win", "multilateralism", and "development".⁴⁵ They have appeared in UN documents adopted by the Security Council, Human Rights Council, General Assembly, Economic and Social Council, and the Commission for Social Development.

But the most controversial aspect of this language-based phenomenon might be the expectation that states entering into cooperation with China accept the Chinese vision of the world. In April 2016, during the Polish minister of foreign affairs' state visit to Beijing, the *Xinhua* press agency published an article with a title that Poland supports China's stance on the South China Sea disputes. In June 2016, when an arbitration tribunal at The Hague rejected Chinese "historical rights" to maritime areas of the South China Sea, *China Daily* published a map in which Poland was marked as one of China's supporters in the ruling. Neither presented Poland's official stance in which it calls for talks and peaceful means to settle the dispute and acknowledges The Hague ruling. Both incidents were probably the result of China's own understanding of the strategic partnership idea, which means that, by default, a strategic partner acknowledges China's core interests.

The problems of different expectations and semantic differences are most visible in terms of Chinese investments. What Europe generally expects from China is greenfield investment, especially in manufacturing and R&D. But what China offers are loan and credit-based projects (e.g., in the Balkans) and acquisitions (e.g., in EU Member States). Especially challenging are high-tech takeovers in the western part of the EU (e.g., Germany and France), which raises concerns about maintaining a state's competitiveness and even security due to foreign access to critical assets and control over strategic companies.

This may have direct consequences for Central Europe, which assumed that political dialogue with China would lead to more balanced economic cooperation: greater exports to China, high-quality Chinese investments in Europe, and more investments in China. This was why some CEE countries, including Poland, invested heavily in political ties with China to make high-level contacts frequent and regular. Examples of this approach include European countries' participation in the Chinese-led "16+1" formula, applications to be AIIB founding members, and rejection of "megaphone diplomacy", which refers to open criticism on sensitive issues for China, such as violations of human rights, and policy towards Tibet, Taiwan, Xinjiang, etc. But the lack of Chinese greenfield investment, expanding trade deficits, credit-based projects, China's growing economic and political influence in Europe and worldwide, and its closer ties with Russia (including military cooperation) show that the idea of "political dialogue first" has not been successful. In that sense, "win-win" cooperation has "produced" benefits mainly for China.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the consequences of the different understanding of "terrorism", "cross-border crimes", and "corruption". Agreeing to cooperate with China on these issues, a country could be dragged into China's domestic tug-of-war within the CPC and used in internal politics, especially in an anti-corruption campaign. In the case of terrorism and cross-border fraud, China requests the extradition of Uighur, Taiwanese, or other people accused, for example, of separatist activities.⁴⁶ A good example of this

⁴³ "Zhonghua renmin gongheguo he saierweiya gonheguo guanyu jianli quanmian zhanlue huoban guanxi de lianhe shengmin (quanwen)" [China-Serbia Joint Statement about Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (full text)], www.fmprc.gov.cn, 19 June 2016.

⁴⁴ "Goujian renlei mingyun gongtongti shouci xieru Lianheguo jueyi" [Building community of shared destiny for the first time written into the UN resolution], *Renmin Ribao*, 12 February 2017; A; Ekman, *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ China was an initiator (and is very proud of) the UN Human Rights Council resolution "Promoting mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of human rights."

⁴⁶ A. Ekman, *op. cit.*

is the case of Taiwanese telephone scammers that operated in some African, Asian, and European countries (Croatia, Slovenia, Spain, and Latvia). China demanded that these countries where the crimes were committed deport the suspects to mainland China and not to Taiwan, putting the countries in an awkward position.⁴⁷ The other example is the Uighurs. China constantly ratchets up the pressure on neighbouring countries (namely Shanghai Cooperation Organization members) to deport Uighurs to the PRC.⁴⁸

China's rising assertiveness in imposing its own narrative and the potential consequences of that require extra caution from its partners. They should either avoid putting into documents words and ideas that are not precisely defined or balance them with their own narrative in support of their agenda. This could be the first step to more balanced cooperation.

⁴⁷ M. Strong, "Latvia deported 110 fraud suspects to Taiwan," *Taiwan News*, 20 January 2018; "97 Taiwanese Arrested in Eastern Europe for telecom fraud," *The Strait Times*, 25 January 2018.

⁴⁸ E. Feng, "China extends Uighur crackdown beyond its borders," *Financial Times*, 26 August 2018.