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## China's Belt and Road Initiative: Fostering People-to-People Bonds through Media Presence and Chinese Diasporic Awareness

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# **China's Belt and Road Initiative** Fostering People-to-People Bonds through Media Presence and Chinese Diasporic Awareness

China's current large-scale soft power initiative, the "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI), seeks to re-open the ancient Silk Road, which aims to improve diplomatic, cultural, and economic relations between China and countries across Eurasia and Africa. While the concept of this initiative appears appealing, factors such as trust levels toward China, opinions on China's national image, and disputes between the Philippines and China have prevented these Chinese-Filipino young professionals from fully accepting the BRI. Focusing on the people-to-people bonds of this initiative, this study explores the opinions of third-generation Chinese-Filipino young professionals toward China and the BRI using Muzafer Sherif's Social Judgment Theory. It also suggests the usage of mass media to broadcast positive messages to a wider audience within a shorter amount of time to improve the image of China and increase awareness of the BRI.

**KEYWORDS:** Belt and Road Initiative, China, Filipino-Chinese, mass media, Philippines, soft diplomacy, Tsinoys

China launched its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 (Nie 2016; Estrada 2017). As one of China's latest large-scale soft power initiatives in Eurasia and Africa, this appears to be a "re-opening" of the land-based and maritime Silk Road (Estrada 2017). It is set to foster economic development, encourage cooperation, and strengthen diplomatic ties between China and the other countries involved in this initiative. One country that is on its way to become an active participant in this initiative would be the Philippines. Both Estrada (2017) and Veloso (2017) state that there are numerous prospects with Philippine involvement in the BRI, especially in terms of infrastructure developments. Despite these, Nie (2016) stated that the potentials of the BRI will be affected by China's national image as perceived by other countries.

Although China tries to project a positive national image to other countries, "none of the usually suspected factors—such as the number of Confucius institutes or the amount of Chinese investments in a particular country, the country's economic/diplomatic/strategic ties with China, or its political similarity to the Chinese regime—have any significant impact on its public's favorable perceptions of China" (Xie and Page 2013, 852). On the contrary, Pew surveys even show that many countries see China less favorably as the years go by (Xie and Page 2013; Gao 2017). In the Philippines for example, its perception of China is greatly affected by its current situation regarding the South China Sea (Nie 2016). Disputes like the one China has with the Philippines, undoubtedly affect the countries' willingness and speed in accepting and participating in China's international initiatives such as the BRI.

This study wishes to see the potentials of the BRI's people-to-people bonds in the Philippines, particularly the involvement of the Chinese community in the Philippines as an intermediary between China and the Philippine society. In order to do this, this study looks at perceptions of young third-generation Chinese-Filipino professionals and the effects of Chinese soft diplomacy through mass media. Young third-generation Chinese-Filipino professionals are Chinese people who lean toward a more Filipino identity while simultaneously acknowledging, maintaining, and practicing Chinese culture and tradition (Hau 2014). This position allows them to have a unique take on the matter. Media as a key soft diplomatic tool (Ding 2007; 2015; Gao 2017; Liu and van Dongen 2016) can foster the Chinese diaspora's "Chinese identity"; functions as a platform

where the diaspora can express their thoughts and respond to issues related to the motherland, China; and encourages people-to-people bonds through recurring images and messages of media products persuading people to have favorable perceptions of a specific country. Exploring the potentials of Chinese soft diplomacy through mass media allows us to see if Chinese mass media has affected the way the Chinese-Filipinos perceive mainland China and if this perception impacts the Chinese community's promotion of the BRI projects in the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> Mass media as a soft diplomatic tool has also been a success for other countries like South Korea, Japan, India, and the United States of America. After all, these days real power does not solely lie in monetary or military wealth but lies more in how well a country captivates the hearts of other countries.<sup>2</sup>

With the recent increased visibility of the mainland in the Philippines, this study aims to answer the following questions: (1) How do the diaspora youth perceive China?; (2) How open are they to the BRI?; and (3) From their perspective, how can China help the Chinese diaspora and the Philippine society become more accepting of China's (soft) diplomatic methods and goals? This study enriches the existing literature on China's national branding by presenting another angle of China's national image as perceived by the Chinese-Filipino youth. More importantly, the study sheds more light on the BRI's people-to-people bonds rather than highlighting the usual economic aspect. Focusing on young professionals instead of the government or big business conglomerates, this study gives a voice to those in the work force who are more exposed to mass media through their active participation in both personal and digital realms (Ding 2007). We must look at perceptions beyond the relations in the realm of "high politics" (Wang 2008, 260). As traditional Chinese diplomacy assumes, if there are healthy relations in high politics, everyone else will uniformly have the same perceptions toward China and vice versa.

## **CONCEPTS AND FRAMEWORKS**

### **DIPLOMACY IN CHINA VIS-À-VIS WESTERN MODELS**

Diplomacy in China can be explored vis-à-vis Western understanding of diplomacy, particularly soft diplomacy. Nye (2008), a leading

scholar in the field of diplomacy, stated that “soft diplomacy” is a kind of power where a state “co-opts people rather than coerces them” (95). He adds that “[t]he soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)” (96). Despite Nye’s essay on the undoubted presence and significance of soft diplomacy, Wang (2008) explains why public diplomacy and soft power are understood differently by China and how contemporary China has responded to the need of using soft power to establish better relations with other nations.

The “Chinese more usually use the term *dui wai xuan chuan* or *wai xuan* (external propaganda) and emphasize advertising Chinese achievements and boosting the country’s image overseas” (Wang 2008, 259). However, countries that follow or understand western diplomatic models such as the Philippines may be averse to China’s strategy, which may be perceived as “arrogant” (Nye 2008, 95). Also note how the Chinese term above (*wai xuan*) is translated as “propaganda” in Wang’s (2008) article, which usually carries a negative connotation especially when being compared to the term “diplomacy” as in Nye’s (2008) article.

In the recent years, China has understood the importance of people-to-people bonds and has begun exporting its culture. One of their strategies is setting up Confucius Institutes worldwide, furthering the place of their language/s (Xie and Page 2013; Wang 2008). However, compared to other countries that have aggressively used the power of media to export culture and entice other countries, China is lagging behind because of government control over the content and movement of national media (Wang 2008; Tao and Page 2013; Ding 2007; 2015). The advent of the BRI may be an opportunity to reach out to more communities by exporting more of China’s culture to add positivity to its national image.

## THE DIASPORA’S ROLE AND EGO INVOLVEMENT

Since the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council (OCAO) was established in 1978, China has long been in close contact with its diasporic communities to strengthen China’s soft diplomatic ties with other countries (Ding 2015; Diu and Longen

2016). With the diaspora serving as intermediaries between the home state (China) and the host state, Chinese diasporic communities can help improve its national image by promoting China, its values, and its culture (Ding 2007). To understand how the diaspora can help China conduct public relations, it is vital to know the perceptions of the diaspora toward China and the mainland Chinese (ibid.). This can complement other Chinese soft diplomatic strategies such as teaching traditional cultures, and if necessary, using China's media-influenced public image. With the power of the internet, tapping on diaspora youth is necessary (Ding 2007; Nye 2008).

To understand the perceptions of the Chinese diaspora youth on China and the BRI, this study uses Muzafer Sherif's Social Judgment Theory. In this theory, when a person receives a message, the person obtains an ego involvement. Ego involvement is the message's level of importance to the receiver allowing the receiver to judge the message along three latitudes: the latitude of rejection, non-commitment, or acceptance (Griffin et al. 2015). Depending on which latitude the message falls under, the person will either undergo an assimilation effect or a contrast effect (Griffin et al 2015; Sherif and Taub 1958). In the case of persuasion, the persuader's (i.e. sender of the message) knowledge of the audience's perception of the message can help the persuader pinpoint an angle to start persuading the audience until the audience eventually shifts their opinion of the message to their latitude of acceptance or at least to a higher level in the latitude of acceptance. Griffin et al. (2015, 184) states that this theory can be used in situations that "require highly ego involving issues where strong resistance to some persuasive messages is likely"; this is not to preempt or assume that Filipinos or the Chinese diaspora in the Philippines are averse toward China, but rather, this study references past encounters involving the relations between the Philippines and China (Nie 2016). Griffin et al. further notes that because of the flexibility and complexity of the use of the Social Judgment Theory, only a few studies are anchored on it despite its practicality. However, this theory is relevant to this study because of its relation to fields like political communication. Conceptually, this study looks at the potential of the Social Judgment Theory by applying it in a political setting. A political message is sent out by a political institution in order to influence a particular society. The members of the society then form perceptions on this political message that will be affected by the members' understanding and

prior knowledge of this political institution. The members of the society then each assess the message through their ego involvement in relation to the political institution and the political message being sent. This results to the message falling into the members' latitudes of acceptance, non-commitment, or rejection.

In a diplomatic setting, this can be interpreted as how a country, through its various institutions, forms its national image as its political message, and projects this through various channels (ex. through media, people to people schemes, etc.). The receiver of this message would be the citizens of other countries, especially countries that wish to be influenced by the message-sender country. The citizens may form their perceptions on the message-sender country's national image and assess it through their ego-involvement, which is based on the citizens' understanding of their own country's relationship with the message-sender country. The perception of the message-sender country's national image, then, may fall on one of three latitudes of the other countries' citizens.

The conceptual framework above was applied in this study by adding a diasporic angle. This diasporic angle is interesting because of their identities, which fall between homeland and host land. The Filipino-Chinese respondents of the study (i.e. third-generation Filipino-Chinese) are generally more Filipino than Chinese who continually hold on to different aspects of Chinese culture and tradition such as language, mentalities, and other social practices (Hau 2014).

This study also added variables that are technically inherent in the theory (Figure 1). These variables pertain to the factors that contribute to the audience's (i.e. the third-generation Chinese-Filipino young professionals) perception of China. Examples of these factors are personal/direct experiences with mainland China and mainland Chinese people; exposure to China's national branding strategies (ex. exposure to Chinese mass media); and other factors that may contribute to their perception of mainland China, such as family upbringing, education, and so on. This "national branding" of China refers to its credibility as a globally-connected, scientifically/technologically-advanced, culturally-rich, and economically-powerful nation.<sup>3</sup> Adanan and Sualman (2018) stated that "credibility" has three elements: trustworthiness, expertise, and dynamism (i.e. presence of constant activity). All of these have implications and influences on how the audience will trust and care about the message sender.

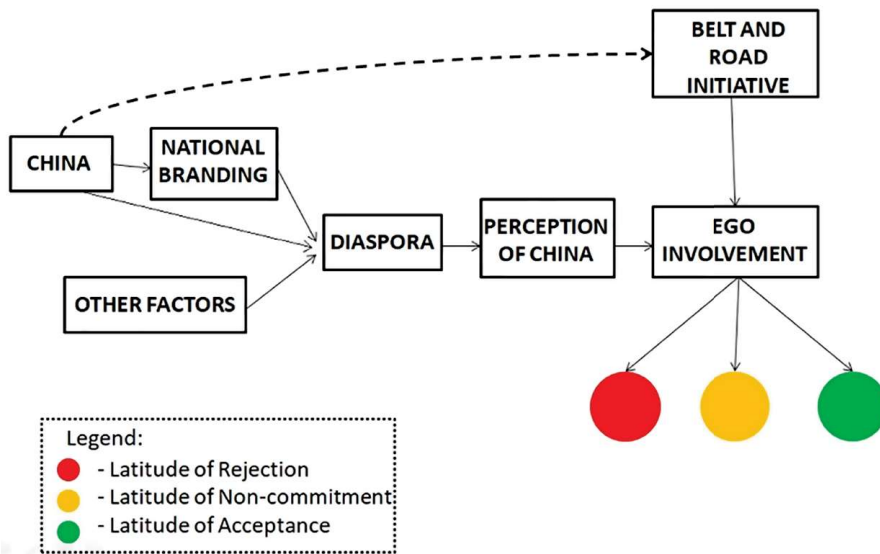


Figure 1. Application of Social Judgment Theory to the Study

Once the audience, in this case the diaspora, forms a perception of China, they can already have a level of ego involvement regarding the BRI as a special “message” from mainland China. It is a “special” message (as shown through the broken arrow in Figure 1) because the BRI is singled out from all other messages and issues that China sends out to its audience. The BRI is then assessed by the diaspora’s ego involvement—in this case, their judgment of the BRI depending on how much they care about the issue. Finally, the BRI and its range of ideas will fall on the diaspora’s latitude of acceptance, rejection, or non-commitment (i.e. they feel apathetic or indifferent regarding a particular idea).

## METHOD

This study focuses on the ego involvement of the receivers of the message (i.e. China and its national image) to see the various reactions and perceptions of a specific group (i.e. the Chinese diaspora in the Philippines) that were elicited from China’s projection of their national image and diplomatic strategies as illustrated by Xie and Page (2013) and Wang (2008).

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were utilized. A quantitative approach was used first to systematically see trends

and patterns in the different reactions of the respondents (Griffin et al. 2015); while the qualitative approach came later on in the data gathering. As previously mentioned, the respondents are third-generation Filipino-Chinese young professionals aged 21–30. The respondents that fall under this age range are more naturally connected through media hence their exposure to more things (Ding 2007). It is also believed in this study that in the long run, the effects of the BRI will be experienced by these young professionals. Within this age bracket, third-generation Filipino-Chinese were chosen because of the way they position their identities.

One-hundred prospective respondents were asked to answer a survey, but only 74 respondents, 37 male and 37 female, were willing to participate. They were recruited through acquaintances and referrals of these acquaintances, who graduated from 10 different Chinese high schools in Metro Manila and went on to study in various colleges and universities within the Philippines before engaging in their current careers. The prospective respondents were also considered after a background check, taking into consideration the following: if they are ethnically Chinese and still identify themselves as Chinese (as some members of the diaspora who are ethnically Chinese do not identify as Chinese due to their upbringing and other circumstances); if their upbringing was “Chinese” (i.e. parents or guardians instill Chinese values, studied in a Chinese school from preparatory school until high school or beyond, etc.); and their linguistic ability in Hokkien and Mandarin. Although the questions in the survey were in English, all the respondents understand English, Filipino, Hokkien (e.g. Fujianese, the main vernacular of the Chinese diaspora in the Philippines), and Mandarin with varying degrees of fluency. Not meant to ostracize members of the diaspora who are not proficient in Hokkien, Mandarin, or other Chinese languages, this simply ensured that the respondents can engage with various Chinese texts (ex. newspapers, books, flyers, songs, television shows, conversations, etc.).

The survey asked questions that pertained to their encounters with mainland China; their opinions and perceptions of China; their level of ego involvement (i.e. questions relating to interest or “caring” about China’s actions); and finally, their knowledge of the BRI and if they have favorable, unfavorable, or indifferent sentiments toward the BRI. The survey questions were based on sentiments and issues: impressions of China and China’s national image, level of trust,

engagements with culture, and so on.<sup>4</sup> The categories were based on the elements of credibility as stated in Adanan and Sualman (2018) in which they discussed Twitter as a medium to boost Malaysian leaders' credibility.<sup>5</sup> The responses range from Favorable/Positive/Yes; Favorable/Positive/Yes but with restrictions; Neutral; Unfavorable/Negative/No but with restrictions; and to Unfavorable/Negative/No.<sup>6</sup> These, of course, would determine the respondents' latitudes or range of acceptance, rejection, or non-commitment.

To enrich the study, the willing respondents participated in an in-depth interview. These interviews provided more qualitative responses to further understand the results from the survey. Contrary to what was advised in Griffin et al. (2015), Adanan and Sualman (2018) also used a qualitative approach in their study that used the Social Judgment Theory and aimed to get more insight on ego involvement, which cannot be obtained in a quantitative approach. For this study on China and the BRI, there was a total of four follow-up interviews—one male and one female from the higher age range (26–30) and one male and one female from the lower age range (21–25). The answers provided to BRI-related questions in the survey ensured that the interviewed respondents were aware of the BRI. The follow-up interview questions were semi-structured interviews pertaining to the following: their upbringing, their detailed exposure to mainland China, their opinions and observations on the potentials of the Chinese diasporic community in bridging mainland China and the Philippine society, their views on the potentials of China's BRI involving the Philippines, and if the BRI can help foster closer ties between the Chinese-Filipino community and mainland China (i.e. their ancestral land).<sup>7</sup> The respondents were given aliases (Maine, Bob, Phil, and Ming) to protect their real identities.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **PERCEPTIONS AND FORMING PERCEPTIONS**

The third-generation Chinese-Filipino respondents generally had a mixed perception of mainland China. Perceptions regarding China and the Chinese people were formed through a moderate to high frequency of personal experiences with mainland China (i.e. frequent

<b>China<sup>8</sup></b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-?</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>+?</b>	<b>+</b>
Based on my interactions with China, my impression of China is generally...(D <sup>9</sup> )	1.4%	21.6%	8.1%	<b>66.2%</b>	2.7%
Based on my experiences with Chinese culture and society, I think China is "cool." <sup>10</sup> (E)	1.4%	18.9%	12.1%	<b>63.5%</b>	4.1%
I think China can be trusted. (T)	6.8%	<b>37.8%</b>	20.3%	33.7%	1.4%
Based on my encounters with Chinese culture, society, and technology, I am interested to learn more about China. (E/D)	0%	2.7%	9.5%	<b>48.6%</b>	39.2%

### **Chinese People<sup>11</sup>**

My encounters with mainland Chinese people are... (D/T)	4.1%	<b>47.3%</b>	16.2%	31%	1.4%
I am interested to engage in business with mainland Chinese people. (E/D)	2.7%	17.6%	13.5%	<b>48.6%</b>	17.6%

<b>Legend</b>	
<b>D</b> Dynamism	<b>-</b> No/Unfavorable
<b>T</b> Trustworthiness	<b>-?</b> No/Unfavorable but with restrictions or reservations
<b>E</b> Expertise	<b>0</b> Neutral/Indifferent
	<b>+?</b> Yes/Favorable but with restrictions or reservations
	<b>+</b> Yes/Favorable

Table 1. Perceptions and Opinions on China and Mainland Chinese People.

trips to mainland China) and the mainland Chinese (whether in the Philippines or abroad). However, there is a disparity between their opinions toward China (as a country) and the mainland Chinese people.

As can be seen in Table 1, the respondents' opinions of China as a nation (i.e. through China's national branding,) are generally positive but lacking in keenness ("with restrictions or reservations") mainly because of their lack of trust in China and its thrusts. In the interviews, the four respondents mentioned that growing up in a Chinese household/community but engaging with the Philippine society made them more critical of how the Chinese people act—particularly, the mainland Chinese who often live within their proximity or who they usually encounter in their daily lives. Respondent Maine, who is an economics specialist and a lover of traditional and popular Chinese culture, claims that while she likes the Chinese culture and learning more about China, she has a concern with the mainland Chinese people and their lack of manners. She acknowledges that not all mainlanders act as such and states, "I thank my grandparents because they migrated [to the Philippines] instead of staying in China. I wouldn't want to lose my manners." The respondents' perception of mainland China was also shaped by recurring news about China and its territorial disputes with the Philippines and other nearby countries, while recognizing and commending China's status as a global economic power. As diplomacy-specialist respondent Bob would put it, "my perception of China would be somewhere in the middle, neither totally positive nor totally negative."<sup>12</sup> Situations like this can negatively affect one's overall perception of the message sender's credibility especially in the element of trustworthiness (Adanan and Sualman 2018).

From this data, we see that China's national branding strategies have been powerful in fostering the diasporic communities' (or even foreign communities') respect for China and heightening their interest in learning about China—a situation partly reflected in Wang (2008). China's status and reputation in global economy, history, and other fields have made it a necessity to look toward China and learn more about China. However, people may turn away and disagree with China's thrusts because of its largest ambassadors: the mainland Chinese people. Based on the respondents' perceptions of China and mainland Chinese people, China is leaning toward their latitude of acceptance, and their opinions on mainland

Chinese people are leaning toward their latitude of rejection. Based on Sherif and Taub's (1958) assimilation and contrast effect, any message by China could be met by neither assimilation nor contrast/rejection. Perhaps, this may hinder a more open or a more sincere engagement in people-to-people bonds with mainland China/the mainland Chinese despite great efforts by China to attract Chinese-Filipinos to be more involved with China and to even have regular participation by the Chinese-Filipinos in these kinds of bonds and exchanges. It can be argued that while some members of the Chinese diasporic community, specifically those who are descendants from earlier waves of migration, have a good reading and understanding of Chinese cultural texts, their upbringing in a unique Filipino and Chinese environment has allowed them to be more careful and critical of matters concerning both the Philippines and mainland China, especially situations involving both countries (i.e. Philippine-China relations.)

## PERCEPTIONS ON THE BRI

While China has been greatly promoting the BRI with the Philippines as part of the BRI's radar, Veloso (2017) and Estrada (2017) along with other commentators, analysts, and news agencies have given their opinion on the BRI. Within the Chinese community, there have been recent seminars about the BRI targeting the Chinese community. However, it comes to a surprise that most of the Chinese-Filipino respondents whose fields are applicable to the thrusts of the BRI are unaware or have a vague awareness of the BRI. Only 16.2 percent of the respondents (12 out of 74) claim to be informed, 28.4 percent (21 out of 74) have heard of the BRI but were not informed on the details of this initiative, and more than half at 55.4 percent (41 out of 74) were uninformed about the BRI until they were given the survey. Note that the survey provided a brief background of the BRI foreseeing respondents who would not have heard of the BRI. For those who have heard about the BRI, 21 of them said that they had learned about the BRI through the internet and 7 respondents heard about it from other people. The rest of the respondents have encountered the BRI through newspapers or television news, but this ranked lower than those encounters with the two main sources of BRI-

<b>BRI</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-?</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>+?</b>	<b>+</b>
I care about China's involvement with the Philippines. (D/T)	0%	4.1%	12.1%	<b>58.1%</b>	25.7%
I feel that the BRI is a good initiative/strategy. (E)	2.7%	5.4%	10.8%	<b>59.5%</b>	21.6%
I will care more about China because of the BRI. (D/E)	4.1%	5.4%	21.6%	<b>47.3%</b>	21.6%
I will trust China because of the BRI. (T)	10.8%	18.9%	25.7%	<b>44.6%</b>	0%

<b>Legend</b>	
<b>D</b> Dynamism	- No/Unfavorable
<b>T</b> Trustworthiness	-? No/Unfavorable but with restrictions or reservations
<b>E</b> Expertise	0 Neutral/Indifferent
	+? Yes/Favorable but with restrictions or reservations
	+ Yes/Favorable

Table 2. Sentiments on the BRI.

related information stated above. Despite that, when asked about the forms of media where they wish to learn more about the BRI, it was not surprising that the internet ranked first. A far second would be learning from other people, significantly establishing more people-to-people bonds in line with the BRI.

Table 2 shows that the respondents generally think of the BRI in a more positive light but with reservations or restrictions in their full “favorable” response. These reservations mainly stem from their level of trust with mainland China. The interviewed respondents provided diverse responses about their opinions on the BRI. Accounting specialist and financial consultant Phil sees the BRI as a good strategy that will economically benefit the Philippines and other countries because of the economic and trade opportunities. Although, he also states that “China would need to express more sincerity in its foreign policies on sticky issues like [the] West Philippine Sea to create [a] better relationship with the wider Filipinos. Through a policy that appeases the Filipino crowd,

will the Chinese government be able to start building better trade and [a better] relationship with the Philippines?”

Bob, Maine, and account manager Ming all agree with Veloso (2017) by stating that there are several factors to consider in jumping in with China’s BRI. Respondent Ming travels frequently for her job. She has seen how the BRI has manifested in other countries like Cambodia and feels strongly about the BRI. The following are her top implications of the BRI on the Philippines despite the possible benefits: “possible ballooning debt, possible loss of land/territory (what we see now), lots more building projects/infrastructure support from China, possible . . . illegal activities/money laundering can flow into the country.” Ming and Phil also believe that China has ulterior motives making them have second thoughts in fully trusting the potentials of the BRI. Here, the respondents put the BRI in their latitude of acceptance and were leaning toward “assimilating” in the context of the framework (Sherif and Taub 2015; Griffin et al. 2015). However, the reservations that hinder many of them from totally agreeing with the BRI stem from both their trust in China and trust in the system (i.e. the execution of the BRI).

## MASS MEDIA AS A POSSIBLE TOOL TO IMPROVE PERCEPTIONS

Liu and von Dongen (2016), Gao (2017), Ding (2015), Wang (2008), and Nye (2008) have mentioned the importance of mass media in line with soft diplomacy, such as the BRI and other foreign policies of China. Adanan and Sualman (2018) have also noted the importance of communication (through media) in building credibility especially in the field of politics. As has been mentioned, perhaps increased media exposure of the BRI in the Philippines can contribute to the people’s awareness of the BRI. Respondent Ming even hopes that the people in the Philippines will be more aware about this initiative just like other countries where the BRI projects are currently more apparent. However, mass media as soft power has not been fully maximized by China (Wang 2008) despite some successes in the past. “China’s music, movies, and fashions are relatively unpopular. Put another way, China is not seen as cool; its pop culture and pop stars lack global swagger” (Gao 2017, par. 1). There is a lack of emotional ties between the world and China due to the lack of

<b>Chinese Media</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-?</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>+?</b>	<b>+</b>
I like mainland Chinese media (ex. dramas, songs, movies) (E)	4.1%	4.1%	32.3%	<b>55.4%</b>	4.1%
I think popularizing Chinese media in the Philippines can help people appreciate China more. (D/T)	0%	6.8%	9.4%	<b>54.1%</b>	29.7%

<b>Legend</b>	
<b>D</b> Dynamism	- No/Unfavorable
<b>T</b> Trustworthiness	-? No/Unfavorable but with restrictions or reservations
<b>E</b> Expertise	0 Neutral/Indifferent
	+? Yes/Favorable but with restrictions or reservations
	+ Yes/Favorable

Table 3. Sentiments on Chinese Media.

exposure to China’s “soft” side (Gao 2017). Forming emotional ties is important in the people-to-people bonds of any foreign policy (Nye 2008), such as a long-term initiative like the BRI.

The two statements on Chinese media in Table 3 are consistent with their perceptions on Chinese national branding: favorable but with reservations. The interviewed respondents mentioned that they have consumed a wide range of mainland Chinese media from songs to television shows and movies, but their perception of China is not affected by these Chinese media. The respondents aren’t constantly exposed to mainland Chinese media unlike the Philippine society’s experiences and exposure to American or South Korean media. Phil even states that he mainly consumes mainland Chinese news through CCTV, but because of other non-Chinese news outlets featuring mainland Chinese news, he can now see the news from more (and sometimes clashing) perspectives. In other cases, lesser-informed Chinese Filipinos may lump together mainland Chinese, Taiwanese, and Hong Kong media like respondent Bob.

Taiwan and Hong Kong have unique relationships with mainland China—Taiwan remaining in a complicated situation with China and Hong Kong having returned to mainland China but possesses the status of being a “Special Administrative Region” (SAR).

Nevertheless, sometimes greater appreciation for Chinese language and culture may be attributed to the prominence of Hong Kong and Taiwanese media. Examples of these are Hong Kong martial arts films (also known as “wuxia” films) and the prominence of *F4* and their *Meteor Garden* series in the early 2000s. There were other mainland Chinese and Taiwanese series shown in the Philippines (dubbed in Filipino) but were not as popular as the ones mentioned above. Some mainland Chinese films also gained global recognition, such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), or *Hero* (2002), but again, exposure to these films is not frequent. One of the reasons why sentiments toward American and South Korean media remain favorable are due to ubiquity, frequency of exposure of the people, and, most importantly relatability of content.

These respondents may have varying degrees of fluency in Mandarin, the main language used in mainland Chinese media, but they have a good “reading” of these media texts because of their background in the Chinese culture—their home upbringing or their Chinese school environment. However, an appreciation of media may not always need fluency in the language to understand and appreciate foreign media texts: for example, there is a Filipino craze and avid appreciation for South Korean media welcoming Korean popular music (or Kpop) and Korean television series (dubbed or subtitled versions) even if they do not understand a word of Korean. This situation is also possible with Chinese media, or any other foreign media, with the proper packaging and execution.

Respondent Ming also gave the example of the US and South Korea, significantly mentioning the “halo effect” soft power can give a country, which will persuade more people to patronize a country, from learning more about the culture and increasing the tourism of that country to following certain practices or ideologies. Ming also states, “I think media just opens up a country to the world because it allows everyday facets of their lives to permeate . . . or infiltrate into the mundane until it becomes common place and accepted by the general public of the world.” In this case, by making China what Gao (2017) describes as “cool,” it may be easier for people to trust China or have an increased favorable view of China. However, Phil states that even though he agrees that media-based soft diplomacy can indeed help increase emotional ties that can foster people-to-people bonds, “there’s a bit too much political and geopolitical strain between both countries, which can easily wipe out the established

relationship between both countries.” Despite this, the interviewed respondents all agree that many Chinese-Filipinos—at least those who were taught Chinese culture, traditions, and languages—would even be willing “ambassadors” in helping promote Chinese traditional and popular culture to their peers.

## CONCLUSION

The study attempted to link soft diplomacy, the significance of the diaspora in soft diplomacy, and to some extent, media. To do this, the study asked three main questions relating to the third-generation Chinese-Filipinos’ perceptions of China and the BRI and what they think China can do to improve its relations with the Philippine society. Perceptions on China and the BRI have been generally positive, leaning toward the “latitude of acceptance” of these Chinese-Filipinos. This shows that despite these respondents being in a state of in-betweenness, as they identify themselves as both Filipino and Chinese, their ego involvement shows that they still care about the relationship between the two countries they identify with: China (in terms of some aspects of culture, language, and so on) and the Philippines (where they live and grew up). Their perceptions on mainland Chinese people, however, were leaning toward their latitude of rejection because of the respondents’ personal experiences with public behavior, which they deemed improper. Both latitudes affect China’s efforts in grooming its national image and branding.

The study showed that the BRI’s prospects were recognized by the respondents. The respondents even agreed that the BRI may benefit both Chinese-Filipinos and Filipinos alike due to the myriad of opportunities that may foster better relations between both mainland China and the Philippines. Despite these sentiments, trust issues kept arising. The respondents believe that China may have ulterior motives that can taint the goodwill of the BRI and, eventually, the relations between the two countries. The BRI’s media exposure should be increased to raise the people’s awareness about the BRI’s economic and diplomatic opportunity.

Despite current trust issues with China, the respondents still claimed that China can use the power of mass media to help groom its national image. This can in turn foster greater emotional bonds that can increase the willingness and the possibility of creating

people-to-people bonds between the Philippines and China. While there are many people who take advantage of China's people-to-people schemes like participating in programs by the Confucius Institute (Xie and Page 2013; Wang 2008), emotional investment levels are not as high as their sentiments toward other countries due to lesser ego involvement with China's image.

The presence of Chinese media in the Philippines is not as widespread and the frequency of exposure to Chinese media is far less than other forms of international media (American or South Korean). Increased frequency and better accessibility to relatable Chinese media may help people develop even better perceptions of mainland China. This, in the long run, will allow people to confidently and unquestioningly embrace opportunities for both countries. Mass media can also help persuade the perceptions of the diaspora and even the greater Philippine society to increase trust and agreement with China and the image it wishes to present to the world. Consistency between public relations done by the diaspora and positive images in mass media may greatly improve China's national image. China can further assess their perception in the country to guide the peoples' perceptions on mainland China and the BRI toward the higher ends of the latitude of acceptance. This will result in more assimilation and hopefully, better diplomatic ties.

## NOTES

- 1 This relationship between perception and its impact on promotion is based on Ding's (2007) article on the Chinese diaspora and its effect on Chinese national image building.
- 2 Nye (2008) in his article on soft power and public diplomacy even calls this the "art of seduction" (96).
- 3 This was reflected in Ding (2007; 2015), and Xie and Page (2013).
- 4 These sentiments and issues were presented in the studies of Ding (2007; 2015), Xie and Page (2013), Gao (2017), and Nie (2016).
- 5 Their study discussed how Malaysian leaders use Twitter to boost their credibility especially during election season, and how Malaysian voters perceive the leaders' credibility. This study also used the Social Judgment Theory in a local setting as compared to this study on the BRI vis-a-vis the Chinese diaspora in the Philippines.
- 6 These ranges (Favorable/Positive/Yes; Favorable/Positive/Yes but with restrictions; Neutral; Unfavorable/Negative/No but with restrictions; and Unfavorable/Negative/No) were based on the works of Xie and Page (2013).
- 7 These questions, as off-shoots from the survey, were also based on the discussions in Ding (2007; 2015), Xie and Page (2013), Liu and van Dongen (2016), and Nie (2016).
- 8 The section labeled "China" refers to experiences and interactions with mainland Chinese society, culture, and politics through personal experiences and media.

- 9 In Table 1, the letter beside each statement indicates the element of credibility that the statement shows. The three elements of dynamism, expertise, and trustworthiness were stated in Adanan and Sualman (2018).
- 10 “Cool” is defined as being popular, trendy, and with “swagger.” This definition was inferred from Gao’s (2017) article.
- 11 The section, Chinese People in Table 1, pertains specifically to people to people encounters.
- 12 The gathered data of the respondents’ perceptions and opinions on China and mainland Chinese people agree with Nie’s (2013) study.

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