



Between Centrality and Re-scaled Identity: A New Role for the Chinese State in Shaping China's Image Abroad

The Case of the Twitter Account of a Chinese Diplomat in Pakistan

Alessandra Cappelletti¹

Received: 18 December 2018 / Accepted: 23 June 2019

© The Author(s) 2021, Corrected publication 2021

Abstract

China's image abroad is not anymore shaped by Party bureaucrats with no knowledge of foreign contexts and languages, nor by ideologically driven old-fashioned officials, but by an increasingly diverse network of multiple actors partnering with new players, adopting new channels of communication and continuously adjusting to local contexts, as well as proposing more and more sophisticated messages about China as a country and as an ancient civilization. This paper is aimed at assessing the activities that Chinese actors have been recently engaging in while presenting the country and spreading its cultural messages abroad, with a particular focus on the role and identity of the Chinese state [for a conceptualization of the identity of the Chinese State, see Brødsgaard (China Int J 16(3):1–17, 2018) and Heilmann (Das politische System der Volksrepublik China. Springer, Heidelberg, 2016; Red swan how unorthodox policy-making facilitated China's rise. Chinese University Press, Hong Kong, 2018)]. For instance, by highlighting the adoption of innovative channels in China's diplomatic practices, it is possible to get an understanding of the new identity of the state in communicating Chinese society and culture abroad. The author provides a theoretical framework to understand the re-scaling of the Chinese state identity, by looking at the specific case of engagement using digital media—in particular the microblogging social network Twitter—by the commercial attaché at the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan. With the caveat that the empirical analysis is still preliminary, the author concludes that the role of the Chinese state in sponsoring the country's image, or conducting “State branding”, abroad, albeit re-scaled, retains its centrality. The contribution of this paper consists in arguing that the identity of the State tends, thus, to take up different

This paper has been partly written during my postdoctoral fellowship at the Institute of East Asian Studies (IN-EAST) and at Kaete Hamburger Kolleg at the University of Duisburg Essen, and during my guest fellowship at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs—Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP). I would like to thank both these institutions, and above all Xi'an Jiaotong—Liverpool University, for the help and support received by colleagues and friends.

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

features and a more variegated character by playing at the intersection of traditional and non-traditional communication media, by increasingly relying on partnerships with local non-governmental actors, as well as by conquering different dimensions of “space” (in quantum physics, up to 11 dimensions of space (also called spacetime) have been conceived, while in bosonic string theory—a part of quantum physics—space is 26-dimensional. In this article, the understanding of “space” and its multiple declinations draws from conceptualizations proposed by quantum physicists. Spacetime as a concept has been explored by philosophers of science such as Hale (*Philos Stud Int J Philos Anal Tradit* 53(1):85–102, 1988), Healey (*Erkenntnis* 42(3):287–316, 1995), and Lam (*Philos Sci* 74:712–723, 2007). Brown (*J Mod Lit* 32(3):39–62, 2009), French and Krause (*Erkenntnis* 59(1):97–124, 2003), and Ney (*Noûs* 46(3):525–560, 2012) already worked on connections between the concept of spacetime in quantum physics and different disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.), namely a virtual space, an emotional space, a metaphorical space, an interactive space, and an informal space. This pragmatic approach does not mean that the state downsizes its role and that we should think the position of NGOs and non-state actors is more relevant, but it, instead, redefines its role and reframes its participation in activities abroad by re-thinking its involvement, occupying different spaces and communicating in a more sophisticated way. The novel contribution of this paper consists in framing a theoretical approach to analyze the Chinese state presence abroad, by linking of the concept of quantum spacetime and its dimensions to that of “state rescaling”.

Keywords Space · Spacetime · State re-scaling · Cultural diplomacy · Digital diplomacy · CPEC

1 Introduction

The genesis of this paper lies in the Twitter account of Mr. Zhao Lijian, a Chinese diplomat in Islamabad, Pakistan. The multiple narrative spaces that this Chinese diplomat creates in his online presence are preliminary empirical evidence of new expressions of the Chinese state abroad (Mr. Zhao being a diplomat, any activity which he engages in can be considered as a manifestation of the Chinese state presence). Since a single account cannot be taken as representative of a more general situation, this empirical evidence shall be considered as preliminary, and this paper emphasises the proposed theoretical approach to identifying new dimensions of the Chinese state in countries other than China, and aims at exploring the possibility to analyze this presence and dynamics by adopting the spacial concepts of State Rescaling borrowed from the field of urban studies, as well as that of spacetime from quantum physics.

The aim of this work is, thus, to adopt the concept of “state rescaling” for looking at the presence of the Chinese state abroad. I consider the dynamism and multiple angles of analysis that the concept in itself allows as particularly fit for the purpose of looking at new expressions of the Chinese state presence abroad. The paper is,

thus, aimed at making a theoretical contribution, and putting forward an exploratory empirical analysis. The next step in this research will consist of framing a framework for a systematic analysis of individual social media accounts directly or indirectly related to Chinese diplomats.

Chinese leaders, officials, and bureaucrats, as well as other Chinese actors within China and abroad, are well aware of the challenges which the country is facing within the international community. In a world where representation, image, and culture are considered effective tools of foreign policy, China has to cope with a series of issues when dealing with foreign counterparts, namely the concept of human rights, an authoritarian political system, unfair competition in trade and economic relations, and an ongoing environmental crisis. In many cases, fundamental misunderstandings are at stake, from the side of foreign audiences, due to a still scarce knowledge of Chinese society and politics.¹ The Chinese government is making important efforts and allocating substantial budget to activities abroad, including engagement with media and the organization of events and debates conducive to reshaping and renegotiating an identity which, up to now, has been perceived as dangerous and “other”, creating misunderstanding and incomprehension, on the part of foreign audiences. In this context, while the country is busy finding ways to avoid the middle-income trap by achieving the challenging task of upgrading its economic system, as well as to reach the international standing the Chinese leadership thinks it deserves, one of the most interesting and effective channels of communication, and evidence of state re-scaling, is the use of social media by state actors who have the aim of spreading Chinese culture, and substantiating Chinese presence and influence, abroad. The content and speed of communication of digital tools, especially social media, is particularly challenging for state actors in terms of management and control, mainly because the publication sequencing, as well as speed and range of information diffusion, are different from those found in media based on the traditional communication patterns. While, within China, the Party manages to control online communication by banning Western social media² and allowing access only to those platforms which are permitted within the Chinese web (such as Weibo, WeChat, and Douban), Chinese actors are free to use digital media abroad, but, at the same time, need to adjust to the communication tropes of different cultural and political contexts. As a consequence, the political space available for Chinese actors abroad is larger than at home, and more room is also available to deal with local players in foreign countries. To be convincing, persuasive, and influential

¹ With “scarce knowledge of Chinese society and politics” in the Western audiences, I mean to highlight that, aside from the increased understanding of China as a civilization and culture among academics, scholars, and politicians, the image that Western think tanks and media often convey for the general public consists of a misrepresentation of Chinese society and politics, in some cases, due to political reasons and specific tensions (an example of such a misrepresentation is Benner et al. (2018), published when the European Commission was discussing the possible granting of Market Economy Status—MES—to China), such as in the current trade conflict between the USA and China. Moreover, a number of Chinese academics who write about China are often considered to be “image-polishing actors” sponsored by the Chinese government, with their reputation and credibility called into question.

² Which can be accessed with a Virtual Private Network (VPN), whereas available.

while communicating with external audiences, Chinese actors need to re-position their identities in different socio/political spaces abroad, and, through hybridization and localization,³ conceive new State branding strategies. This said, contrary to the image of China that international media normally convey—a stiff and inflexible political system oppressing its people and run by kleptocrats—the Chinese state shows a significantly high degree of resilience in allowing its actors to interact with international audiences according to their own independent judgment. By adopting the concept of “state rescaling”, the author will look at the Twitter account of a Chinese high-profile diplomat in Pakistan, and delve into the different ways the Party perceives, presents, and “camouflages” itself.

2 State Re-scaling and Cultural Governance⁴

Systemic reorganization of the Chinese state presence in cultural and media circles abroad, aimed at gaining influence around the world, has been conceived and implemented for at least 1 decade. This phenomenon can be still considered recent, and thus, a strictly quantitative sociological analysis is not yet possible, but a qualitative approach based on the identification of new spaces abroad can help us get an understanding of the new patterns of influence of the Chinese state abroad. The topics of state rescaling and cultural governance can be framed within the context of globalization studies: researchers, particularly since the early 1980 s, have worked out a variety of methodologies meant to challenge the ‘iron grip of the nation-state on the social imagination’.⁵ This wide-ranging effort to transcend traditional state-centric epistemologies arguably represents one of the unifying theoretical agendas underlying contemporary research on globalization. Loretta Lees, in her studies of “global gentrification”,⁶ shows the multiple characters and variegated nature of state intervention in reshaping rural and urban areas around the world, highlighting that “the relative omission of the state and the focus on individualization does not aid conceptualization of the relationship between lifestyle and consumption and the state today—the role of the state is much more significant”.⁷ In this paper, I take into a particular consideration the concept of “space” and its dimensions, taking inspiration from space dimensions in quantum physics and linking this concept with “state rescaling”. To better understand these concepts and their interlinkage it is important to consider an online account (being it Twitter, Facebook, or any other social media) as a limited and encircled space, but containing dimensions which differ in terms of size, thickness, density, and so on.

³ Characteristics and challenges of hybridization at the institutional level are extensively explained in Schildt and Perkmann (2016), while the concept of localization is analyzed in Acharya (2014).

⁴ For the concept of “state rescaling”, see Brenner (2004); for “cultural governance”, see Schmitt (2011).

⁵ Taylor (1996), quoted in Brenner (2004), p. 29.

⁶ Lees (2016).

⁷ Lees (2016), p. 100.

The rescaled presence of the Chinese state is, thus, understood in terms of different dimensions of space, in a new perspective which the author puts forward as the innovative contribution of this paper. “State rescaling” as a concept originates from an idea which has been put forward in the field of urban studies by a variety of authors, with the role of the state being re-assessed and re-evaluated under the light of the new policies and dynamics affecting urbanization and globalization. This does not mean that state actors play a minor role, but that they reframe themselves and their identity on the basis of new conditions and inputs. Considering the state as a mimetic body which adjusts itself according to outside settings is resilient to harsh environments, and is adaptive enough to survive change and to respond to unexpected shifts, in the context of this paper, we will make an effort to reply to this overarching question: how is the authoritarian Chinese state coping with the ever-changing configurations and the increasing challenges to China’s image abroad, in particular to regional and local variations? New technologies and global connections as well as different political environments and social systems abroad do not allow Beijing to enforce policies and regulations aimed at information control, social engineering, and cultural–political management such as those implemented at home. The network of Chinese and non-Chinese players organising activities on China abroad is highly differentiated and easily avoid abiding by the usual practices which they would need to respect within China. These multiple and structurally differentiated socio-political and economic systems include actors with diverse and sometimes contrasting agendas, perspectives, and backgrounds.

These new configurations are not easily controlled and managed, even when the involvement of Chinese state actors is important. When these actors act as the main promoters and sponsors, there is a higher possibility that all the players involved abide by practices commonly accepted within China. On the other hand, foreign non-state actors are bearers of different ideological and operational patterns. Nevertheless, the degree of resilience of the central government—mainly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which is in charge of conceiving, sponsoring, and promoting official initiatives abroad—and of those Chinese actors involved, seems to be high, especially when there is a connection with the “operational space” of non-governmental and non-Chinese actors. The main idea is in this case that of a government allowing a space abroad which is not provided domestically.

It is then controversial and questionable to discard all actors projecting, and dealing with, China’s image outside of China as government agencies, instruments of the Chinese state, and carriers of its main narrative, whereas it is also not accurate to label any kind of official activity related to China as mere propaganda.⁸

In this context, we cannot say that the role of the Party in Chinese activities abroad is downscaled, but rather re-scaled. My assumption is that the Party retains its major role as a site, medium, and agent of contemporary China image restructuring,⁹ and keeps a striking relevance as a major locus of knowledge production

⁸ International media as well as academic circles often propose, and are victim of, this perspective.

⁹ This argument is linked to the production of knowledge and the construction of a “Chinese culture” suitable to be projected abroad, as per the construction of a Chinese cultural infrastructure and cultural diplomacy.

outside of the traditional boundaries of the nation. The roles of those Chinese actors involved in state branding activities abroad are constantly adjusted, as well as tuned, according to the new external inputs and shifting conditions, and to the necessity of responding to domestic challenges. These transformations have unfolded at divergent speeds and in diverse political–institutional forms within each national context, leading to highly variegated socio-spatial and political outcomes at national, regional, and local scales. What is, indeed, needed is to re-conceptualize geographies of state space as they are being transformed at various geographical scales in the context of the current Chinese cultural projection abroad, with state institutions still playing the crucial roles of mediation and facilitation.

The author, thus, argues that the Chinese government’s responses to the changing international environment and to new expectations of Chinese people in terms of China’s role and image in the international arena have re-designed the landscape of Chinese statehood abroad in a number of quite fundamental ways. For the moment, they can only be analyzed across multiple national contexts by looking at evidence for such an underlying structural transformation of state spatiality. In this paper, Pakistan, a key country in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, is taken as a focal point, while other areas where China is an important stakeholder in domestic economic patterns, even in the midst of otherwise persistently diverse institutional frameworks and regulatory geographies, are intended objects of future research. Multiple ramifications for the interpretation of contemporary Chinese statehood and the projection of Chinese culture abroad emerge from the study of these contexts.

While, in the realm of cultural governance an effort of selection, codification, and promotion aimed at an “engineered” knowledge construction is being made, restricting the possibilities for endorsing and channeling a “different” culture, looking at state branding gives the impression that a looser approach is adopted and that more space is allowed. This said, the overall emerging picture is that of a Party which is trying to better control which kind of Chinese culture is being promoted abroad, but, at the same time, is rescaling its presence and granting more space for expression to different actors. No matter how much space is allowed, these actors will still only be able to convey an already selected set of concepts and knowledge to foreign audiences.

2.1 Cultural Infrastructure and Cultural Diplomacy

The importance of cultural promotion abroad can be traced back to China’s mythical past,¹⁰ while continuity can be seen in the ways which China is presented to the world by the leadership of post-1949 China. Nevertheless, with the Xi Jinping

¹⁰ Meaning to the Shang Dynasty, when list of the local specialities of other countries appears in the written records. During the Zhou Dynasty, the list of names of the gifts given to the King of the Zhou by the 62 countries is reported, and linguistic studies on the oracle bone scripts illustrate the different names of “giving gifts to the kings by neighbouring regions or nations”. The gifts include slaves, animals, agricultural products, shells, jades, and so on. There are also linguistic studies on the practice of borrowing names of musical styles from neighbouring cultures and nations.

administration, we are apparently facing a new stance. The main idea is that it is now time for Chinese policy makers to assert the importance of Chinese culture not only domestically—where power seems to be consolidated—but in an international perspective. Reframing concepts and reconceptualising geographies of state space through a “cultural infrastructure”, thus, become top items in the agenda of the Chinese leaders.

I use the word “infrastructure” to represent the dynamic and ever-changing network of actors and policies encompassing the broad concept of transmission of Chinese culture abroad. The expression “cultural infrastructure” is an umbrella covering a wide range of geographical (tangible) and conceptual (intangible) network of actors. These networks are structured around physical (Confucius institutes, associations, diplomatic venues, and schools), virtual (digital ventures), and conceptual spaces (such as publications, events, and conferences). “Cultural diplomacy” is included under the broader umbrella of “cultural infrastructure”, and can be defined as the set of government-sponsored, organised, and led activities, carried out by professionals paid and specifically trained to popularize selected aspects of the national culture abroad, with a clear foreign policy agenda in mind. What is being disseminated through this specific official channel varies across cultural contexts, for example in Muslim countries—for instance in Iran and Pakistan¹¹—it is not uncommon to see events on Chinese culture promoting Uyghur culture as the Chinese national culture.¹² This phenomenon could be conceptualized as “appropriation of minority culture”, and could be directly related to the foreign policy agenda of the Chinese leadership, which aims at highlighting commonalities between Chinese culture and Muslim countries’ cultures.

Cultural activities conducted by networks of differentiated actors with programmes varying on the basis of the respective identities and strategies, and initiatives aimed at encouraging dialogue and mutual understanding among cultures in the direction of helping society coping with the challenges of globalization and migration, are also under the cultural infrastructure umbrella. These initiatives can be ideated and realized by a variegated range of actors, Chinese and not Chinese, committed to encouraging dialogue, intercultural communication, and the understanding of Chinese culture, mainly in response to specific societal challenges, ranging from a better integration of Chinese communities abroad to an effort to enhance intercultural communication and improve mutual understanding. These cultural and social activities rely both on the partial involvement of the Chinese government and on that of non-governmental actors.¹³ While conducting cultural diplomacy entails a clear foreign policy agenda, we need to consider that this kind of cultural diffusion is often initiated and implemented by actors with their own agendas and goals, which

¹¹ Xinhua (24th August 2016), in the case of Pakistan pictures of related events are available online in the websites of the Chinese Embassy and of the various “China–Pakistan” friendship associations.

¹² This kind of cultural appropriation is not uncommon in countries characterized by a national majority and a large number of minorities such as China.

¹³ The share of government involvement defines also the degree of government influence on the related activities.

are not necessarily in line with those of Chinese foreign policy. The conceptual ideas behind the initiatives, and the people involved in the project and implementation phases, as well as in the outreach efforts and aim setting, shape the very nature of the initiatives themselves.

The cultural infrastructure is organised around networks of actors with a multiplicity of identities, and the “Suggestions”¹⁴ entail this kind of geography (quote):

“It is important to explore *new patterns of international dissemination and communication of Chinese culture*, combining different tropes: dissemination through the broader audience, local communities and interpersonal relations, entailing the realization of a *pattern of dissemination* of Chinese culture which is poly-centric, multi-level and interdisciplinary. (...) Through overseas Chinese and Chinese nationals, celebrities in the field of culture and sport, as well as any person who goes abroad for any kind of purpose, as well as relying on Chinese diplomatic missions, companies and those organisations which friendly cooperate with China, as well as through the broad network of Chinese restaurants scattered around the world, we should tell *the good stories* about China, disseminate the *good sounds* of China, explain the *good Chinese characteristics*, presenting a *good image* of China.”

The verb *chuanbo* 传播 is used for the concept of “disseminating”, and it means also “propagate” and “broadcasting”, marking a shift from the traditional use of *xuanchuan* 宣传, a term with a derogatory meaning from a Western perspective, since it is rendered in English as “propaganda”. *Goujian* 构建 is adopted for “building” and it refers to the construction of something abstract (for instance: *qiaoshili goujian* 巧实力构建, “the construction of smart power”), *quan fangmian* 全方位 is used for “poly-centric” and *duo chenci* 多层次 and *kuan lingyu* 宽领域 for “multi-level” and “multidisciplinary”, respectively. *Zhonghua wenhua chuanbo geju* 中华文化传播格局 is used for “patterns of dissemination of Chinese culture”. The adjective *hao* 好 is used with a particular emphasis and it means “good”, while *xingxiang* 形象 is employed for “image”, in sentences dealing with China’s image abroad. We can, thus, notice an effort to adjust the semantics and the terminology, probably signaling an attempt to fine-tune the communication strategy according to foreign audiences’ receptiveness.

Chinese culture is, thus, proposed abroad through a multi-centric infrastructure: while state actors avail themselves of a broad network of organised venues and loci from where messages on Chinese culture are spread, not following a casual geography, but the economic and political interests of the Chinese state, foreign non-state actors follow a less identifiable pattern. Chinese non-state actors follow both patterns, the more strategic patterns as well as the casual ones.¹⁵ Foreign non-state

¹⁴ See Cappelletti (2017).

¹⁵ We can find schools of Chinese language or martial arts in locations where there is not any economic interest towards China and on the side of China, but simply where local schools or families want to include Chinese language in the curriculum or where, for some reasons, martial arts are particularly popular.

actors related to Chinese culture are located instead in those places where there are cultural or business interests for China, but not necessarily where China has interests. In synthesis, we can say that this geography of actors is mainly distributed along economic, political, and cultural lines following a multi-centric pattern, and at a first sight, the idea could be that what is at the center, namely in Beijing, is reproduced abroad. The expression “multi-centric” fits well into the context of the poly-centric mode of governance as it is explained by Scholte (2008). Moreover, it has a connection with the history of China and the tributary system.¹⁶ There are of course major changes in the current vision of the Chinese leadership, the main one being the idea of projecting what can be attractive for foreign audiences by re-scaling the role of the State¹⁷ and showing resilience in multiple locations.

This infrastructure is, indeed, flexible, because Chinese state actors follow and implement the main recommendations coming from Beijing, at the same time conceiving and adjusting their policies to local contexts, culture, and expectations. At the same time, a well-planned activity of networking is pursued to receive suggestions and hints from local actors and conceive the related cultural policies aimed at implementing at the local level what has been suggested and according to local characteristics. This approach makes the diffusion of Chinese cultural messages abroad a flexible and always re-negotiable process, which changes responding to the expectations of the officials in charge, as well as of the local population. This flexible approach is less evident with Chinese non-state actors not needing to conduct actions of image reshaping, and, since they are not directly associated to the Chinese government, they follow their own agenda. The same can be said for foreign actors.

3 Digital Diplomacy

One of the most interesting examples of the re-scaling of Chinese state actors' presence abroad can be found in the World Wide Web. While, on one hand, engagement in digital diplomacy can represent the attempt by a state to channel messages to foreign public opinion and to exert influence via the social media, it also represents a relatively new system for providing and obtaining information about China and Chinese cultural activities abroad. Digital diplomacy, intended as a means to “amplify traditional diplomatic efforts, develop tech-based policy solutions and encourage cyber-activism”,¹⁸ can be considered an important aspect of China's smart power, and the multiple potentialities of digital communication fit very much into the strategic agenda of the Chinese government, which is currently encouraging its actors abroad to find new channels of communication to promote Chinese culture, as well as to construct an intangible or abstract

¹⁶ See Hevia (1995) on the Macartney embassy and the tributary system. A neo-tributary perspective in Chinese IR has been theorized by Pan and Lo (2017) to understand China's current global standing.

¹⁷ See the related following paragraph.

¹⁸ Bjola and Holmes (2015), p. 38.

“infrastructure” (see the concept of *goujian* 构建, “to construct something in the abstract sense”) for content dissemination. Bjola and Holmes (2015) argue:

“By searching for recurring themes in Facebook profiles and Twitter channels operated by foreign ministries, one is thus able to gain insight into how countries portray themselves to the outside world in general, and to specific foreign publics, in particular.”

The digital infrastructure is the quintessence of an abstract/intangible infrastructure, and its power consists in:

1. multi-locality and multiple outreach;
2. exposure to foreign cultures;
3. engaging with the audience;
4. speediness in reaching the target audience;
5. broad outreach;
6. flexibility and resiliency in terms of content and outlook;
7. communication immediacy;
8. adoption of social media listening tools;
9. possibility of making use of different kinds of multimedia material;
10. possibility of projecting simple and inspiring messages.

These characteristics represent the perfect combination of what Chinese state actors would like to implement as part of efficient communication strategies aimed at reshaping the image of China abroad. The concept of an “infrastructure” still surfaces as a key one: three parallel infrastructures—physical, conceptual, and digital—work together on different and equally relevant levels both to shape and spread selected cultural contents.

A relevant example of the process of state re-scaling is the use of social media used in Western countries, and censored in China, by Chinese officials abroad whom make use of such media to communicate with foreign audiences. They engage with a multiplicity of actors adopting different language and communication codes, differentiating their messages on the basis of the platform which they are using and of its target users. These new communication channels, including dedicated websites, social media, specialized platforms, multimedia content with a fancy outward appearance and incisive and synthetic messages, online chat programs and forum, as well as any other kinds of digital tools aimed at spreading content, is adopted especially by Chinese state actors abroad, who acknowledge the power of these tools for reshaping a country’s image in a relatively short time period. Since 2014, every Chinese Embassy abroad has a Facebook page through which information about China’s current affairs, events, and initiatives, as well as any kind of “politically correct” content, is channeled to a broader public who can start engaging with Chinese state actors via digital channels. The digital tools are then recognized as an official infrastructure for disseminating information and conducting cultural diplomacy, tools included into the broader communication strategy together with the more traditional offline channels such as universities, cultural institutes, and events.

4 Chinese Culture in Pakistan

The relationship between Pakistan and China draws back to ancient times,¹⁹ when Buddhist monks migrated from India and found their way to China's Western regions, a broad area which includes the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Gansu, and Qinghai Provinces, and the Tibet Autonomous Region, and borders with today's Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Eastern Central Asian Republics. At the moment, Pakistan is more than a strategic ally for China, it is actually the country which will determine whether China's westwards ambitions—framed into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—will end in a triumph or in a failure. Moreover, the access to the Indian Ocean through the port of Gwadar, on the South-Western coast of the Pakistani province of Baluchistan, would allow Chinese mega-ships and goods to follow an alternative route and to avoid the Malacca Strait—which is under US influence and is still an obligatory maritime corridor for Chinese products exported Westwards. Due to these strategic underpinnings, the Chinese government has a deeply rooted interest in Pakistan being politically stable and economically wealthy, and able to perform as a key player in the relations between China and India, as well as to control and manage the Islamic fundamentalist movements within its borders, as well as—through its political connections and security services—in Afghanistan and in other Southern and Central Asian countries involved in the BRI. The major Chinese projects in the country are being realized in the fields of infrastructure and energy, and are framed under the umbrella of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC),²⁰ implemented at the government-to-government level, but still expected to yield additional economic activity and investment opportunities for actors in the private sector.

These projects have the potential to redesign power relations in Pakistan by benefitting and compacting the large majority of different interest groups in the country. By sharing the generated wealth, conflicts of power could be avoided and the success of the initiative could be foreseeable. At the same time, Islamabad is working on the realization of a major transformation of its economic system according to the document “Pakistan2025 One Nation-One Vision”,²¹ which includes information about politics, economics, and the role of a leadership whose ultimate goal is to transform the country into one of the ten largest economies in the world by 2047.²²

Ranked 131st out of the 141 countries listed in the Global Innovation Index 2015 report—which explores the impact of innovation-oriented policies on economic growth and development—in the 2018 Global Innovation Index Pakistan jumped to the 109th position. While the region has the potential to lead the world as it has the intellectual capital and the talent, politics and security are still important hurdles.

¹⁹ For a historical and analytical overview of China–Pakistan relations, see Small (2015).

²⁰ Wang (2016a, b) and Ma (2015a, b) provide an interesting overview on the project from the Chinese perspective.

²¹ http://www.mopdr.com/vision/uploads/vision/pakistan_vision2025.pdf.

²² Jaffrelot (2015) and Zaidi (2015) are recent publications providing a general but in-depth overview on Pakistan's economy, politics, and society.

CPEC in general would push Pakistan up, as global trade agreements would encourage transfer of technology, which would increase competition and innovation; and some global firms, like Robert Bosch GmbH and Volvo, have already entered the Pakistani market for security logistics and transportation, while some existing companies like China Mobile, which have a strategic edge, are planning to be major communication partners. For instance, the 820-km-long Pakistan–China fibre optic cable project from Rawalpindi to Khunjerab was completed in June 2018 at a cost of \$44 million, adding a digital component to the overall CPEC project.

4.1 Actors in Charge of Conveying Chinese Culture in Pakistan

The main actors involved in the Chinese cultural infrastructure in Pakistan are as follows:

- the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad;
- the Chinese Consulate in Karachi;
- Chinese universities with partnerships with local universities;
- four Confucius Institutes (CI) and one Confucius classroom;
- associations in charge of academic exchanges;
- around 700 small, medium and large scale Chinese companies currently working in Pakistan and investing in various sectors, including the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)—a number which is likely to grow in the future;
- the Pakistan–China Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCJCCI);
- organizations in charge of business forums;
- think tanks²³;
- Chinese and Pakistani Singers (a Duet Sang in Urdu and Chinese in Gwadar Port Inauguration Ceremony in November 2016);
- the Sino-Pakistan Media Alliance;
- tourism operators;
- museums—there is a plan to establish a museum within the next 3 years in Peshawar, while a “Pakistan Museum” and an Urdu language center would also be set up in China. The organization Cheng Mu works in the sectors of culture and tourism development, promotes cultural exchange visits between Pakistan and China, exchange visits as well as the establishment of a Chinese Aesthetic Museum and a language learning center in Peshawar;
- job market—recruiting agencies.

In Pakistan, there are currently four Confucius Institutes, located in the premises of the following universities:

²³ Among the others: Pakistan–China Institute (<http://www.nihao-salam.com/>); R.A.N.D.I (Research and Development International); Pakistan–China Institute (<http://www.pakistan-china.com/>); China–Pakistan economic corridor (<http://www.cpecinfo.com/institutions>); China–Pakistan Joint Research Centre on Earth Sciences.

1. National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad (established in 2007).
2. University of Karachi, Sindh province (established in 2013).
3. University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, Punjab province (no date available).
4. University of Punjab, Lahore, capital city of Punjab province (no date available).

One Confucius classroom²⁴ is located in Muzaffargarh (Punjab province). South Punjab is infamous for being a hotbed of extremism,²⁵ thus setting up a classroom in Muzaffargarh is an interesting and brave move. To a question about major inflow of Chinese investment in Punjab under the CPEC or business-to-business groups, the answer from the Chinese Chamber of Commerce was that Punjab is a big market with over 100 million people and its infrastructure and inter-city connectivity is much better than in other provinces. Confucius Institutes are usually the result of a partnership between a Chinese and a local university, which sign an agreement for the establishment of the CI in the foreign university. The Confucius classroom in Muzaffargarh represents an exception; however, since it was established not in a university but in an association called DX Council, which in Chinese is called *Muzhafaerge duanbo shouting julebu* 穆扎法尔格尔短波收听俱乐部, the name of a private club, while the Chinese Institution is a TV channel called *guoji tai* 国际台. The agreement was signed on the 12th September 2008.

If we take a look at the map of the projects related to the CPEC, we notice that Faisalabad, Lahore, and Muzaffargarh are all located along the Peshawar–Karachi Motorway (Multan–Sukkur Section), also called the Eastern Route.²⁶

4.2 The Commercial Attaché at the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad

Mr. Zhao Lijian is the commercial attaché at the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad in Pakistan, and has a very dynamic and vibrant Twitter profile. He is a very peculiar diplomat basically for his unique use of “digital diplomacy” and his Twitter²⁷ account, which is constantly updated. Mr. Zhao knows the local culture very well, and for this reason, his original Twitter account name was Muhammed Lijian Zhao. The Muslim name was adopted to make Twitter users in Pakistan feel a certain affinity with him. Mr. Zhao, being a non-Muslim coming from a culture alien to monotheism, was probably advised to delete the Muslim name from his Twitter account, because a non-Muslim adopting a Muslim name without being converted can be

²⁴ Courses of Chinese languages provided by a Confucius Institute in another location, usually foreseeing the establishment of a new CI.

²⁵ Burke (2015).

²⁶ The proposed Motorway: Length: 392 km, Project Name: Peshawar–Karachi Motorway, Project Title (Section): Multan–Sukkur: 392 km, construction/development of 6-Lane access controlled motorway having total length of 1100 km. Tolled facility. Status of Project: Commercial Agreement Signed December, 2015. Execution 1st quarter 2016, Work in Progress Completion of Early Harvest Project 2017/2018 Responsibility: Proposing Agency: Ministry of Communications Implementing Agency: National Highway Authority Supervising Agency: Ministry of Communications, Government of Pakistan.

²⁷ An extensive analysis on the connection between Twitter and diplomats can be found in Sandre (2013).

perceived as offensive by Muslims. “Muhammed” was deleted and now the account is under the name of Lijian Zhao 赵立坚, @zlj517. The tweets posted by Mr. Zhao show a certain knowledge of online tools, social media strategy, and content curation. The account is updated daily, and the contents have a broad degree of differentiation, and are interesting and engaging for the audience. A smart use of multimedia content, like videos and pictures, is noted in Mr. Zhao’s account. His knowledge of more advanced digital skills such as pinning posts to the top, hashtag use, mentioning, and re-tweeting is relevant, while his posts show careful selection and variation of different types of contents: information on the CPEC projects’ progress; data on CPEC economic and financial issues; figures on the number of jobs created in Pakistan by the CPEC; information on bilateral university and educational activities; information on positive spill over effects of the CPEC in the Pakistani economy; analysis and papers on the project; messages on people’s engagement in the project, including bilateral cultural and social initiatives; statements by Pakistani and Chinese politicians; information on CPEC-related transparency and accountability mechanisms; information at the corporate level; images of the former Amb. Sun Weidong giving presents to Pakistani politicians, like calligraphy and traditional Chinese paintings; information and pictures on mosques and the culture of China’s Islamic populations; scholarships available for Pakistani students who want to study in China.

He has a deep understanding of the inherent benefits of the Web 2.0 revolution for digital diplomats, including the assistance and speed (albeit not necessarily reliability) in connecting them with the wider public during their postings, to listen to how policies are perceived or received on the ground; of how bilateral relations are understood, if at all; how to project and disseminate unmediated information about the values, beliefs, and actions of their home countries; among others.

He practices knowledge management, which is not just about collecting, storing, and analyzing data, but rather controlling strategically what information is shared to the public, creating an important link between knowledge management and public diplomacy.²⁸ This is viewed as a key benefit of ICT and other information systems, and, at least potentially, allows the efficient handling of vast amounts of information (and subsequently, and arguably, knowledge). The advent of new web technologies included in the “Web 2.0”, such as Facebook, Twitter, and so forth, has spurred much attention in how states are able to disseminate information to particular constituencies and groups abroad. From a public diplomacy perspective, then, the goal of utilizing ICTs, or digital diplomacy strategies, is the production, dissemination, and maintenance of knowledge that helps to further state interests. Humanisation of the country is a process undertaken by Mr. Zhao simply by exposing himself through the web.

Direct answers to questions on the human rights situation in China, especially concerning religious freedom, the treatment of Uyghurs, Tibetans, and of prisoners,

²⁸ Many controversial issues are related to the CPEC, as land reclamations along the project corridors and the fact that part of the infrastructures and pipelines entailed by the project cross the North Eastern region of Gilgit Pakistan, where border definition is still an issue for India and Pakistan.

are provided with timeliness. Official statements of concern on the Dalai Lama visits to India are also posted.

4.3 The Twitter Account of Mr. Zhao Lijian—Lijian Zhao 赵立坚, @zlj517

Studies of Twitter²⁹ profiles and accounts related to political communication are relatively recent.³⁰ What is evident from the Twitter profile of Mr. (Muhammad) Lijian Zhao @zlj517 is that an umbrella space encompassing a multiplicity of spaces is created, and it including a virtual space, an emotional space, a metaphorical space, an interactive space, and an informal space. In this part of the paper, I present Tweets which have been chosen following a random sampling method through a process which “continues until the research reaches the point of saturation—that is, the point in the research when all major categories are fully developed, show variation, and are integrated” (Corbin and Strauss 2008, p. 135). I thus randomly selected the Tweets by following a Grounded Theory Approach,³¹ a rather dynamic methodology which puts emphasis on the research material in itself and, in this case, allowed the Twitter messages themselves to generate the semantic categories which have been identified to classify them.

The Chinese diplomat avoids on purpose the creation of an intellectual space, which would encourage reflection and would engage followers with memories and past events. His Twitter account is continuously updated, followers show their willingness to be engaged, and the speed of communication is high. These characteristics do not encourage reflection. Mr. Zhao has been a Twitter user since the 8th of May 2010. He is based in Islamabad, and from his Twitter profile picture, we can see that he is Chinese and likely Han Chinese. The caption under his picture has changed several times. While, at the beginning, the profile sub-heading was: “Follow me to get news about China and CPEC. Based in Chinese Embassy in Pakistan”, it has now changed into: DCM, Chinese Embassy. “Seek knowledge even in China”. “Chinese are awaking from heavy sleep. Fresh springs are bubbling forth from Himalayan heights”. The website of the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan is also mentioned: pk.chineseembassy.org/eng/.

From the website of the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan, we can get a number of pieces information: he was the Chargé d’affaires at the Chinese Embassy in Islamabad, and has now been promoted to China’s Deputy ambassador. Behind the profile information, as a background image of the account, there are two large pictures of the two Pakistani policemen killed during the terrorist attack against the Chinese Consulate-General in Karachi on the 23/11/2018.³²

According to Twitter Analytics, as of the 27th March, 45,695 Tweets have been sent from the account, it was following 162,448 accounts, and users following Mr.

²⁹ For more about Twitter as microblogging service, see Kwak, Lee, Park, Moon (2010).

³⁰ Yeste and Franch (2018), LoPiano (2018), Zafiroopoulos et al. (2014).

³¹ Glaser and Strauss (1967).

³² While two Pakistani policemen and three terrorists have been killed, no Chinese citizens were killed or injured during the attack.

Zhao account were 192,500. 85% are Tweets with @mentions, 41% are Tweets with #hashtags, 83 out of 100 were re-tweets by @zlj517, 29 on 100 are Tweets with links, and 4 on 100 are Tweets with media. The most linked domains are twitter.com, www.cpecinfo.com, nation.com.pk, epaper.thefinancialdaily.com, www.pscptv.tv, xhne.ws. Twitter clients' usage is identified as a Twitter for iPhone. The busiest times turn out to be 8 in the morning and 7 in the evening.

Speeches by Mr. Zhao are reported, and one of them, dated 09/09/2015, has been pronounced in occasion of the launching ceremony of “Salaam Confucius”:

“Cultural exchange is an important part of the all-dimensional China–Pakistan relations. Undoubtedly, people-to-people contact and mutual understanding are the basis of the good relations between countries and I believe cultural exchanges could play an instrumental role in this regard. Only when people from our two countries really understand each other, we can truly respect each other, support each other and integrate with each other. This will in turn translates into the solid basis to support and sustain our ever-lasting friendship and cooperation and help achieve the China–Pakistan community of shared destiny at early date.”

In another report dated 01/09/2015 and titled “Chinese Foreign Minister Extended a Message of Condolences to Adviser to the Prime Minister on National Security and Foreign Affairs of Pakistan” we read: “On the same day, Chargé d’ affaires of Chinese Embassy Mr. Zhao Lijian met with Dr. Rizwan Naseer, Secretary General of Pakistan Red Crescent Society, and passed on the urgent relief donation on behalf of the Red Cross Society of China to the Pakistan Red Crescent Society.” The author knows a number of his followers, since they are European analysts, portals on contemporary Chinese economy and politics, Chinese universities including the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Australian and American China experts, Pakistani politicians, Western and Chinese scholars, US journalists, and an Indian journalist. Andrew Small, author of the book “China–Pakistan Axis” (2015), is among his followers. Mr. Lijian Zhao shows a rather sophisticated ability to use Twitter, and on the 8th December 2018, he writes: “A 4-year-old girl from Shanghai is daughter of a Chinese engineer working in Pakistan. Mommy said that Daddy is building a big road for the local people. Daddy sacrificed our little family to help lots of people. Her dream is to see Daddy and the big road”. Attached to the tweet and re-tweeted, there is an official video by AirChina originally posted on YouTube. Another recent post reads: “Gwadar: The rise of a phoenix in the desert. As starting point of CPEC, Gwadar offers tremendous opportunity for investors home and abroad. @CathayPak @ChinaDaily @CGTNOfficial @PTVNewsOfficial @WorldPTV @CPEC_Official @RadioPakistan @PlanComPakistan @betterpakistan @KhusroMakhdum” (12/12/2018).

On the 14th of October 2016, Mr. Zhao fixed a tweet to the top of his Twitter feed: “Too dazzling to believe: this is on September 25. A Chinese ship named Tianfu docking at Gwadar. Gwadar will receive many more ships like it”.³³ Tianfu

³³ The texts of the Tweets are reported in Italic as they appear online, which means that possible spelling errors and slang expressions are not corrected by the author. The account name of the commercial att-

is written 天福 and it means “celestial happiness”. Two pictures are enclosed; one shows a megaship arriving at Gwadar harbour, escorted by a smaller ship during the night, with striking lighting, while the other shows the same ships moored at the harbour port and some white SUVs going towards them. At the time (14/10/2016), this single tweet had 384 re-tweets and 466 likes (the like button on Twitter is in the shape of a heart). In the official CPEC page homepage, there is a Twitter box including all the tweets by Mr. Zhao.

In another tweet, a link to the official page of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor is included under the caption: “*1 out of 16 in Balochistan*”. It probably relates to the visit of the Parliamentary Committee of CPEC’s visit to China, and numbers the related projects under the CPEC umbrella. On the website, several public diplomacy actions are listed: “*The Silk Road Economic Belt: Xinjiang Karamay Forum*”, “*Mushahid³⁴ addresses China–Eurasia Forum in Urumqi: CPEC flagship project of new Silk Road promoting corridors and connectivity*” (23rd September 2016). There is a picture of Mushahid talking to an audience from a podium, and at his back there is a banner where there is written “Second edition of the China-Central Asia Publishing Expo and Import–Export” (*dierju Zhongguo-Zhongya chuban bolanhui churu jingjian yanjian 第二届中国-中亚出版博览会出入境检验检疫*). In the sliding banner, there is also a notice about the 2nd Annual Meeting of the SiLKS at Warsaw:

“Delegates from 30 countries, representing more than 50 think-tanks are present in Warsaw, Poland for the 2nd annual meeting of the Silk Road Think Tanks Network, commonly known as the SiLKS. The \$46 billion China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is under speedy implementation, with a sizeable proportion dedicated to the overhaul of transportation infrastructure to efficiently connect Khunjerab on the Chinese border with Gwadar Port on the continental shelf of South Asia and Persian Gulf. It must be noted that President Xi Jinping is present in Warsaw for his state visit of Poland, and has also addressed the Silk Road Forum, appreciating the joint efforts of all members in making OBOR a project of converging interregional interests. Senator Mushahid Hussain, who holds charge of Pakistan’s Parliamentary Committee on CPEC, is diligently guiding the bilateral project through the process of implementation which will facilitate the materialization of the larger One Belt, One Road initiative”.

There is a reaction by a user called munir @dr_munirkhan who says, addressing Muhammed and another user (a Pakistani politician called Ahmed Quraishi), “*Is this 1 project out of those 8 main projects in Balochistan?*”. Quraishi then writes:

Footnote 33 (continued)

ché appears as (Muhammed) Lijian Zhao when the tweets were written under this account name, and as Lijian Zhao when the tweets were written under the new account name.

³⁴ Mushahid Hussain Syed is a Pakistani politician who serves as a member of the Senate and the Chairman of Senate’s Committee on Defence, in office since 2012. Previously, he served as a member of the Federal Cabinet.

“Schools in #Balochistan along #CPEC route. This one completed in 10 months. History is making as landscape changing”. He incorporated a tweet by Muhammed with four pictures of a brand-new female children school which says: *“Small and beautiful-1st project completed under CPEC is in Balochistan (Part II): School land donated by a local citizen, built in 10 months”*.

Relevant information is provided on Mr. Muhammad Lijian Zhao account on a daily basis, for example, on Saturday, the 15th of October 2016 at 09:08 a.m. Rizwan Hussain @RGwadari writes to Muhammad Lijian Zhao *“sir when work will start on Gwadar international airport and east bay expressway”*, and the answer comes 2 h later (a timely answer for social media interaction standards) and is *“Preliminary work has been going on. Feasibility study, design, etc. They shall be inaugurated the end of this year or beginning of next year”*. The core information in this case is that “works” for the construction of the Gwadar international airport shall start between the end of 2016 and the beginning of 2017. Another tweet states that *“China–Pakistan Government Primary school—now operational in record 10 months and inaugurated in Gwadar”*. The included hashtags are #InclusiveDevelopment and #CPEC4Pak. The fact that it is often not possible to find this kind of information in the media or other sources is remarkable, and, thus, shows that social media are becoming a valuable source of information and data collection not only for journalists and analysts, but also for researchers and scholars. Sometimes, twitter is also used for service alteration communications, such as when a Twitter writes to the commercial attaché that he has just sent an email to the Chinese Embassy in Pakistan and it bounced back, Zhao answers *“Thx for your reminder. I will tell the person in charge”*.

Another interesting element is that (Muhammed) Lijian Zhao is actually engaging in sensitive and off-limits topics with his Twitter followers. An example would be this Tweet: *“Mr. Zhao we don’t need Help and Charity. We r ready to be partner in Development that is fairly negotiated with #Baloch not only by #Islamabad and he answers Balochistan government is well on board. It was represented in the CPEC Joint Cooperation Committee. It was a national project. Issues like the Diaoyu islands and potential Chinese prisoners working in the constructions sites.”*

salma jafar @Chiltan is writing to Zhao and to @qissakhwani: *“I didn’t know CPEC has schools???”* on the 13th of October 2015. And Zhao answers in the same day by saying *“CPEC is for the well-being of all the people in Pakistan. It has not only power plants and roads, but also schools, colleges, hospitals”*. On just the same day, but earlier, he had written *“Small and beautiful—1st project completed under CPEC is in Balochistan (Part I): Gwadar friendship school, cute children, cute school!!!”*. Four pictures dated 8th October 2016 show classrooms with teachers and children during lessons, the furniture, the school, and happy children.

Someone asked Zhao *“wat abt Pak–China institute Islamabad? Located at blue area Islamabad”*, in reaction to a previous tweet by Zhao in which he wrote *“Where to learn Chinese? 4 Confucius Institute in Pakistan: NUML, Karachi Uni, Punjab Uni, Agriculture Uni. in Faisalabad. More in pipeline”*. All this on a single day, the 3rd of October 2016, and thus, we might assume that Mr. Zhao is spending a rather high share of his time online writing on social media. He shows that he cares about

his followers, their questions, and their concerns, and he is ready to answer to any kind of criticism or reaction.

@UsmanAcid asks “Sir is there any uni in KPK?” and Zhao answers “For sure. A China Study Center has been established in Peshawar University. It will become one of the best in China studies”. The messages are oversimplified, since Twitter, like the majority of social media platforms, does not accept long posts. Moreover, Twitter followers expect short and catchy messages, showing a high degree of interaction and public engagement, such as the ones listed here below.³⁵ Different dimensions of space are occupied: a virtual space, an emotional space, a metaphorical space, an interactive space, and an informal space. The majority of Tweets pertain to different spaces at the same time, but, nonetheless, make an effort to categorize, considering the primary meaning of the message contained in the related Tweet.

As in quantum physics, where there is a multiplicity of dimensions of space-time,³⁶ the Twitter account of Mr. Zhao Lijian can be defined as a discrete³⁷ space encompassing a series of dimensions. The random sampling selection of Tweets allows me to define a relatively small number of preliminary categories or space dimensions, which have been identified according to the content, the writing style and character, the generated reactions, the replies to the reactions, as well as the writing style and character of those reactions and the whole thread of tweets. As already mentioned, the contribution of this paper is rests primarily on a theoretical level, and this collection of empirical data must be considered strictly preliminary as it is not yet structured, and is subject to future adjustment, i.e., is an exploratory exercise to pave the way for a more structured design for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The very nature of the adopted grounded theory approach helped me in the process of “making the Tweets speak for themselves” and generating the following preliminary categories.

4.3.1 Interactive space³⁸

“Chinese Ambassador in Pakistan Yao Jing shared his view on how to counter propaganda against Belt and Road Initiative and CPEC. Find it out yourself in this interview”. @CGSS_Pakistan @ForeignOfficePk @CathayPak @XHNews @CGT-NOfficial @PTVNewsOfficial @WorldPTV (8/12/2018, the video of the interview is enclosed).

³⁵ Tweets are not classified by content/message, nor analyzed through coding but left as they appear in the analyzed account on purpose, to provide an idea on the variety of messages and meanings conveyed through the microblogging platform in a random pattern, as well as to provide an understanding of the different spaces of the Chinese State.

³⁶ In quantum physics, up to 11 dimensions of space (also called spacetime) have been conceived, while in bosonic string theory—a part of quantum physics—space is 26-dimensional. In this article, the understanding of “space” and its multiple declinations draws from conceptualizations proposed by quantum physicists. Spacetime as a concept has been explored by philosophers of science such as Hale (1988), Healey (1995), and Lam (2007). Brown (2009), French and Krause (2003), and Ney (2012).

³⁷ Meaning “non continuous”.

³⁸ Tweets intended for creating spaces of interaction between the Twitter user and followers.

“A media meeting was held btw CN economic net and the council of PK newspapers editors to discuss media cooperation btw two countries to promote the CNPK Economic Corridor (CPEC), Beijing CN”. @zlj517 @CathayPak @XHNews (re-tweeted on 12/12/2018, pictures of the event are enclosed).

“More foreign students are opting for China as it is best destination of education. The cost of living is comparatively less in China. Chinese society is stable and friendly. These elements encourage foreign students”. @ZamirAhmedAwan1 @CathayPak @ChinaDaily <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201812/11/WS5c0f2661a310eff30329053d.html> ... (12/12/2018).

“China has many students in International Islamic University and other colleges. There are a number of universities in China teaching Urdu” (tweeted on 13/10/2016 under the account Muhammad Lijian Zhao).

“#CPEC open to all countries: Chinese envoy. #CPEC has received interest from countries in Central Asia, Middle East, and Europe” (re-tweeted on 07/03/2017 from CPEC Official).

4.3.2 Metaphorical space³⁹

“Chinese ambassador Yao Jing talked about Conflict and cooperation in South Asia and role of major powers such as CN #BeltandRoad initiative is a Economic development, prosperity and regional connectivity projects including #CPEC CNPK Islamabad PK”. @zlj517 @CathayPak @adamgarriereal (re-tweeted on 12/12/2018, pictures of the event are enclosed).

“CPEC is moving on its fast track and there is growing demand to learn Chinese language, culture, economy, etc. This year, even more students will apply to Chinese universities. China graduates are guarantors of success of CPEC”. @ZamirAhmedAwan1 @ChinaDaily <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201812/11/WS5c0f2661a310eff30329053d.html> ... (12/12/2018).

“#CPEC will increase Pakistan’s regional importance: President Mamnoon Husain⁴⁰” (re-tweeted on 08/03/2017 from CPEC Official).

“China invested \$50bn+ in Belt&Road project since 2013: NDRC⁴¹ Flagship project #CPEC in implementation phase” (re-tweeted on 08/03/2017 from CPEC Official).

“China–Pakistan Relations have become a model of State to State Relations”—Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan (re-tweeted on 08/03/2017 from Emerging Pakistan).

³⁹ In this case, Tweets contain representations of situations which imply a shift in meaning. In this way, a “Chinese social space” is created, and the organization of the communication environment and activities is aimed at making the audience feeling comfortable. Valuable insights on metaphorical space can be found in the writings by Ilana Friedrich Silber, in particular Silber (1995).

⁴⁰ 12th and present President of Pakistan.

⁴¹ National Development and Reform Commission, agency under the Chinese State Council which has broad administrative and planning control over Chinese economy.

“We aspire to bring Regional Pivotal Role of Pakistan into full play for Common Development”—China Ambassador to Pakistan (re-tweeted on 08/03/2017 from Emerging Pakistan).

“Mr. Iqbar quoted Mr. DENG XIAOPING’s words, a good cat is a cat to catch mouse, no matter it is white or black” (re-tweeted on 06/03/2017 from Jong Khan).

“Experts have termed Pakistan–China–Russia nexus as ‘scenario-changer’ for South Asia” (re-tweeted on 05/03/2017 from Radio.gov.pk).

4.3.3 Informal space

“but Mr Zhao Chinese will learn Urdu 😊 bcz Both have same interactions @zlj517” (re-tweetwd from @Ahmad___Hussain on 13/10/2016 under the account Muhammad Lijian Zhao).

“Dear @zlj517, any possibility to include Pakistani work-force in these projects, as I’ve noticed, mostly Chinese companies and personal working”.

“PAK–CHINA media friendship association’s function for bilateral friendship” (re-tweeted on 03/03/2017 from Jong Khan).

“Debt is not always bad thing. It is not debt that is problem, but debt management and use which are real concerns” (tweeted on 05/03/2017).

“NPC spokesperson Fu Ying questions the claim that China’s defence spending growth is a threat to other countries: “Of all the conflicts, even wars that have inflicted so many causalities and damages, and left so many homeless in the past decades, which one was caused by China?” (re-tweeted on 04/03/2017 from People’s Daily).

4.3.4 Virtual space⁴²

Zhao: “China and Pakistan workers are working together. Thar block II and Hubco are China-Pak joint venture. Thousands of Pakistani people are there” (Twitter conversation between Muhammed Lijian Zhao and the Twitter user Ahmad Hussein—13/10/2016).

“ChinaRadioInternational interviews Mustafa Hyder⁴³ on importance of China’s NPC and CPPCC Annual Session” (re-tweeted on 08/03/2017 from Pak–China Institute—featuring a picture with the interview excerpt: “China is motivated to engage other developing nations into its growth, and the prospect has been welcomed by states in East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, as well as Eastern and Western Europe”⁴⁴).

⁴² An online, computer-based simulated environment populated by users who can simultaneously and independently explore the representation of China proposed by Mr. Zhao—which is virtual but meant to correspond to the offline one—participate in its activities and communicate with others.

⁴³ Executive Director of the Pakistan–China Institute.

⁴⁴ Another interview excerpt is posted: “China’s commitment to world peace is reflected by the fact that the Chinese government has not interlinked Belt and Road cooperation with military ambitions, thereby changing the global trend by purifying economic growth from military aggression”.

“#Historic_day 4 Pak Civil Works at Dasu Hydropower Project of 4300 MW started today by China Three Gorges Corp” (re-tweeted on 09/03/2017 from Ch. Amjad Farooq).

“Ishrat Husain⁴⁵: CPEC debt burden on external account should not exceed \$3.5b (\$910m paid by Pakistan+\$2.4b by Chinese companies) annually” (tweeted on 05/03/2017 and pinned to the top).

“The Belt and Road Initiative Scholarship 2017–2018 at Sichuan University of China Application period: March to May” (tweeted on 05/03/2017).

“#PPP senator presses #govt to build consensus on #CPEC” (re-tweeted on 07/03/2017 from Daily Times).

“#CPEC has very transparent mechanism. Govt of Pakistan is not holding a single dollar of #CPEC investment” (re-tweeted on 03/03/2017 from Planning Commission).

“#CPEC has created 13,500 jobs for locals so far, and the number is increasing: Chinese Envoy” (re-tweeted on 06/03/2017 from CPEC Official).

“Universities urged to develop skills for #CPEC, as HEC⁴⁶ presses on need for CPEC research” (re-tweeted on 06/03/2017 from CPEC Official).

“PTCL,⁴⁷ China Telecom Global to establish optical fibre network in Pakistan” (re-tweeted on 08/03/2017 from Times of Islamabad).

“China–Pakistan Collaboration entails: 1. Gwadar Port 2.CPEC 3. Energy and Infrastructure and Industrial Cooperation—China Envoy to Pakistan” (re-tweeted on 08/03/2017 from Emerging Pakistan).

“Belt and Road will benefit Afghanistan; ambassador says” (re-tweeted on 06/03/2017 from China Daily).

“Peshawar and Quetta are not playing against each other today they will jointly fight against enemies of peace and will definitely win” (re-tweeted on 05/03/2017 from the user Hamid Mir).

4.3.5 Emotional space⁴⁸

@CaptMX: “1700 Chinese prisoners are building one of the project for #CPEC. Clever China, good HR management #coal #sahiwal #criminals in #Pakistan”.

Muhammad Lijian Zhao: “Nonsense. Chinese workers are working on Sahiwal project on 3 shifts 24/7. Sahiwal speed is even faster than those projects in China”.

⁴⁵ Ishrat Hussain is a renown Pakistani banker and economist who served as the dean of the Institute of Business Administration and the Governor of the State Bank of Pakistan.

⁴⁶ Pakistan’s Higher Education Commission.

⁴⁷ Pakistan Telecommunication Company Limited.

⁴⁸ An interesting insight on emotional space as a semantic space with different dimensions can be found in De Sousa (2007), pp. 383–387, where a connection between emotions and colors is established and helps interpreting the emoticons’ colors in an emotional perspective. The diplomatic performance of identity conveying emotions in Twitter, as well as his personal and direct involvement in the situations depicted in the messages which he conveys through language, channel emotions to followers, whom, in the interactions, respond with emotional messages themselves (for an understanding of emotions in diplomacy, see Hall 2015).

@Iamدھوجج @CaptMX “he is an indian Raw agent operating fake account to misguide people of Pakistan” (Twitter conversation between Muhammed Lijian Zhao and the Twitter user Ahmad Hussein—October 11th–13th 2016).

“#CPEC to open new Era of development and prosperity for #Pakistan and #China. INSHALLAH.” #UpRisingPakistan (re-tweeted on 07/03/2017 from Atif Mateen Ansari).

“#CPEC projects are engaging people into economic transformation at the grassroots of Pakistan” (re-tweeted on 07/03/2017 from CPEC Official).

“China–Pakistan Friendship is deeply rooted in the hearts of our Peoples”—Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan (re-tweeted on 08/03/2017 from Emerging Pakistan).

“Baloch Culture Day restores confidence of Balochistan that there is peace and harmony, and CPEC will not disrupted” (tweeted on 05/03/2017).

5 Conclusions

The author, thus, argues that the Chinese state is taking over, at the same time and for different purposes, a multiplicity of space dimensions. The main ones are a virtual space, an emotional space, a metaphorical space, an interactive space, and an informal space. This means that the Chinese state presence is, indeed, increasingly sophisticated. What happens within these spaces—the agenda setting, targets and how they are achieved, what knowledge is being adopted and how those in the space experience it—is still determined by state actors. NGOs and other actors, thus, still play a minor role, since the communication towards foreign audiences is still monopolized by state actors.

This paper’s contribution is primarily theoretical, with some preliminary empirical testing, and it opens the way to future research which could further test the proposed theoretical perspective. We reconnect here the two concepts of “space” and “state rescaling”. As already mentioned, spatial analysis of state presence has been successfully conducted by scholars in the field of urban studies. The dimensions of space which the Chinese Party is occupying have not been considered nor analyzed in the literature, and the overall idea behind this article fits into the theorization of the reorganization of the state presence. Dealing with an ongoing process implies the impossibility of freezing the ideas put forward here within static concepts; therefore, the –ing form of the continuous tense (i.e., re-scaling) helps us in catching the multiple dimensions of space which are of interest to this study, and getting an understanding of the multiplicity of spaces which is being generated. While events and exhibitions about Chinese culture and civilization organised by Chinese state actors abroad have up to now been characterized by an evident and obvious physical presence of the Party (via flags, banners, videos, slogans, decorations, the presence of officials, and cadres), the gradually increasing interest in online platforms and social media, as well as the high potential of these platforms to effectively reach out a broad audience, offer these actors the opportunity to seize more and more sophisticated dimensions of space.

The analysis of how power is operationalized in the spaces of online platforms, and the exploration of how the experiences of those within the Twitter space are

shaped by online posts, can be objects of future research, taking the Twitter account of Mr. Zhao Lijian as a focal point. With his Twitter account, the diplomat creates a participatory multidimensional space which gives netizens the impression of being able to play an active role in decisions made at a strategic level in relation to wider contexts, in this case the Chinese presence in Pakistan and the activities related to the CPEC. What we can learn from Mr. Zhao's account is that Chinese diplomats and government officials understand that working on the *processes of knowledge construction* through the most advanced communication channels is fundamental to make people explore and interpret patterns through guidance, in the specific context of China's image projection abroad. This is why, we can reasonably argue that the channels of Chinese public diplomacy are increasingly sophisticated, carried out by a variety of actors and networks, through a multiplicity of communication channels, and that they support the Chinese government's goals of foreign policy. Knowing how digital communication, as performed by Chinese actors, works, can help us in getting a deeper understanding of China's rise and of the multiple ways which China presents itself to the world. By altering the conventional patterns of diplomatic interaction and introducing new meanings, digital diplomacy emerges as a communication strategy which has the potential to challenge the very nature of traditional diplomatic practices, with important implications for the constitution and distribution of relations of power in international politics.

Given the limited empirical contribution, the intent of the paper is mainly to provide a theoretical framework which could be tested through additional future research into manifestations of the Chinese state presence abroad in the different dimensions of space. Physical spaces of the Chinese state (architectural elements and building sites) as well as the offline presence via events or meetings could also be taken into consideration in future work.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

References

- Acharya, Amitav. 2014. *Rethinking Power, Institutions and Ideas in World Politics: Whose IR?*. London: Routledge.
- Benner, Thorsten, Jan Gaspers, Mareike Ohlberg, Lucrezia Poggetti, and Kirstin Shi-Kupfer. 2018. *Authoritarian Advance: Responding to China's Growing Political Influence in Europe: Global Public Policy Institute and Mercator Institute for China Studies*. Berlin: Global Public Policy Institute.
- Bjola, Corneliu, and Marcus Holmes (eds.). 2015. *Digital Diplomacy. Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.

- Brenner, Neil. 2004. *New State Spaces—Urban Governance and the Rescaling of Statehood*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, Paul Tolliver. 2009. Relativity, Quantum Physics, and Consciousness in Virginia Woolf's 'To The Lighthouse'. *Journal of Modern Literature* 32 (3): 39–62.
- Brødsgaard, Kjeld Erik. 2018. China's Political Order under Xi Jinping: Concepts and Perspectives. *China: An International Journal* 16 (3): 1–17.
- Burke, Jason. 2015. *The New Threat from Islamic Militancy*. London: Bodley Head.
- Cappelletti, Alessandra. 2017. *The 'Construction' of Chinese culture in a globalized world and its importance for Beijing's smart power: Notes and concepts on a narrative shift. Working Papers on East Asian Studies. 115/2017. University of Duisburg-Essen. Duisburg: Institute of East Asian Studies (IN-EAST)*.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe. 2015. *The Pakistan Paradox: Instability and Resilience*. London: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd.
- Corbin, Juliet, and Anselm Strauss. 2008. *Basics of Qualitative Research (3rd ed.): Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- De Sousa, Ronnie. 2007. Defining Emotional Space. *Social Science Information: Information sur les Sciences Sociales* 46 (3): 383–387.
- French, Steven, and Décio Krause. 2003. Quantum Vagueness. *Erkenntnis* 59 (1): 97–124.
- Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm L. Strauss. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Haewoon, Kwak, Lee Changhyun, Park Hosung and Moon Sue. 2010. What is Twitter, a social network or a news media? *Proceedings of the 19th international conference on World wide web*. pp. 591–600, Raleigh, North Carolina, USA, April 26–30, 2010.
- Hale, Susan C. 1988. Spacetime and the Abstract/Concrete Distinction. *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 53 (1): 85–102.
- Hall, Todd H. 2015. *Emotional Diplomacy: Official Emotion on the International Stage*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Healey, Richard. 1995. Substance, Modality and Spacetime. *Erkenntnis* 42 (3): 287–316.
- Heilmann, Sebastian. 2016. *Das politische System der Volksrepublik China*. Heidelberg: Springer.
- Heilmann, Sebastian. 2018. *Red Swan. How Unorthodox Policy-Making Facilitated China's Rise*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.
- Hevia, James Louis. 1995. *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Lam, Vincent. 2007. The Singular Nature of Spacetime. *Philosophy of Science* 74: 712–723.
- Lees, Loretta. 2016. *Planetary Gentrification*. Cambridge: Polity.
- LoPiano, James. 2018. Public Fora Purpose: Analyzing Viewpoint Discrimination on the President's Twitter Account. *Media and Entertainment Law Journal* 28 (3): 511–570.
- 马卓敏, 中巴经济走廊建设落地, 《中国城市报》, 2015年04月27日 第13版.
- Ma, Zhuomin. 2015a. Zhongba jingji zoulang jianshe luodi. *Zhongguo chengshi bao*. 04 yue 27 ri, di 13 ban.
- Ma, Zhuomin. 2015b. Explaining the origins of the construction of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor. *The Journal of Chinese Cities*. 13: 24–39.
- Ney, Alyssa. 2012. The Status of our Ordinary Three Dimensions in a Quantum Universe. *Noûs* 46 (3): 525–560.
- Pan, Su-Yan, and Joe Tin-Yau Lo. 2017. Re-conceptualizing China's rise as a global power: a neo-tributary perspective. *The Pacific Review* 30 (1): 1–25.
- Sandre, A. 2013. *Twitter for Diplomats*. Geneva: DiploFoundation and Istituto Diplomatico.
- Schildt, H., and Perkmann, M. 2016. Organizational settlements: theorizing how organizations respond to institutional complexity. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 26: 139–145.
- Schmitt, Thomas. 2011. *Cultural Governance as a conceptual framework. MMG Working Paper 11-02*. Göttingen: Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity.
- Scholte, Jan Aart. 2008. From Government to Governance. In *Global governance and diplomacy: worlds apart?*, ed. Andrew Fenton Cooper, Brian Hocking, and William Maley, 39–62. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Silber, Friedrich Ilana. 1995. Space, Fields, Boundaries: The Rise of Spatial Metaphors in Contemporary Sociological Theory. *Social Research* vol 62 (2): 323–355.
- Small, Andrew. 2015. *The China-Pakistan Axis*. London: C Hurst and Publishers Ltd.

- Taylor, P. J. 1996. Embedded statism and the social sciences: opening up to new spaces. *Environment and Planning A*, 28 (11) : 1917–1928.
- 王惜梦, “中巴经济走廊2030年完工 翻开南亚新一页”, 参考消息网, 31/08/2016.
- Wang Ximen. 2016a. “Zhongba jingji zoulang 2030 nian wangong fankai Nanya xinyiye”, Cankao xiaoxi wang, 31/08/2016.
- Wang, Ximen. 2016b. The end of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor in 2030 means a new page for Southern Asia. *Reference News Network*, 31st August 2016.
- Yeste, Elena, and Pere Franch. 2018. Trump vs. media. Treatment of the press from the US president’s Twitter account. *Profesional de la informacion* 27 (5): 975–983.
- Zafiroopoulos, Kostas, Konstantinos Antoniadis, and Vasiliki Vrana. 2014. Sharing Followers in e-Government Twitter Accounts: The Case of Greece. *Future Internet* 6 (2): 337–358.
- Zaidi, S. A. 2015. *Issues in Pakistan’s Economy: A Political Economy Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Alessandra Cappelletti Associate Professor in the Department of International Relations at Xi’an Jiaotong Liverpool University and member of the Board of Directors and Senior Researcher at the Italian Research Centre on Contemporary China, Dr. Cappelletti has a Joint Postdoctoral Degree at the Institute of East Asian Studies (IN-EAST) and at Käte Hamburger Kolleg/Research Center for Global Cooperation of the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany, and a PhD in Asian Studies at the Oriental University of Naples and at Minzu University of China (double degree). Alessandra was visiting Research Fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik-SWP) and a consultant for the Sino-German Poverty Alleviation Program Xinjiang. Among the others, she studied and conducted research at Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Beijing Normal University, Free University of Brussels, Aristotelous University in Thessaloniki, Xinjiang University, Shihezi University and Kashgar Teachers’ College. Alessandra’s research interests are focused on Chinese foreign policy in Central Asia, Belt and Road Initiative, agricultural development and agribusiness in North-West China, Muslim communities in China. She published book chapters, scientific articles and analysis for, among the others, Routledge, Springer and the Baillet Latour Chair of European Union – China Relations and the EU-China Research Centre. Her monograph on socio-economic development in Xinjiang is going to be published by Palgrave in autumn 2019.

Authors and Affiliations

Alessandra Cappelletti¹ 

✉ Alessandra Cappelletti
Alessandra.Cap@xjtlu.edu.cn

¹ Department of International Relations, Xi’an Jiaotong Liverpool University, Dushu Lake Higher Education Town, Suzhou Industrial Park, Ren’ai Road 111, Suzhou, China