

Bringing the Global Home: How China Shores Up Domestic Support for Foreign Policy on Social Media*

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Abstract

How do governments promote complex foreign policies to inattentive domestic audiences? Existing scholarship frequently points to nationalism as a necessary cognitive shortcut to translate abstract, distant foreign affairs into emotional narratives. However, this strategy risks domestic entrapment and limits long-term international cooperation. This paper challenges the assumed dominance of nationalist propaganda by identifying a viable alternative: localized communication of foreign policy. Focusing on China’s domestic promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), I argue that state media adapt to the digital media landscape by translating broad foreign policies into nuanced, audience-relevant, regional content.

Using computational text analysis on a decade of Sina Weibo posts from 36 national and provincial Party newspapers, alongside a comprehensive survey of over 3400 WeChat Official Accounts, I document consistent, localized reporting of BRI. Provinces emphasize how BRI brings about regional economic opportunities and cultural experiences, rather than chanting a slogan of nationalist mythmaking. I further demonstrate that this localized communication strategy successfully mobilizes diverse nonofficial actors to organically promote BRI to even more niche audiences with original content. This paper advances the literature on foreign policy communication by systematically documenting how states leverage localized digital media to build domestic support while avoiding the pitfalls of nationalism.

Keywords: Belt and Road, China, foreign policy, social media, localization; political communication

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1 Introduction

Observers of international politics frequently cite China as a prime example of stoking nationalism to promote foreign policies to its domestic audience (e.g., Cairns and Carlson, 2016; Wang, 2021; Chubb and Wang, 2023; Zhao, 2022). Domestic support is crucial for foreign policy, but effectively communicating with the domestic audience is challenging given the heavily abstract nature of the subject (Baum, 2002; Hamilton, 2011). Existing research highlights nationalism as a shortcut to make foreign policies relatable to domestic citizens by creating a halo of national honor around distant policies (Snyder, 1991) and facilitating immediate mobilization (e.g., Weiss, 2013; Dafoe et al., 2022; Chubb and Wang, 2023).

However, reducing complicated foreign policies to nationalist mythmaking risks serious backlash, especially when the goal is to foster long-term international cooperation, where temporary frictions are inevitable. Often tied to anti-foreignism, inflated nationalism can generate negative domestic sentiments that constrains a government’s foreign policy choices (e.g., Weiss, 2013; Ma and Weiss, 2022). How can governments promote foreign policies to domestic audiences without stripping away nuances? This task is particularly difficult in the digital media age, where audiences are already highly fragmented by platform algorithms and captured by ubiquitous immediate entertainment (e.g., Lu et al., 2025; Lu and Pan, 2021; King et al., 2017).

This paper argues that, consistent with the Chinese state’s evolved adaptation to digital media (e.g., Lu et al., 2025; Roberts, 2018), state media outlets have revamped themselves to produce localized reports of national-level foreign policies on social media platforms. Rather than exclusively relying on central media outlets to reach audiences and dictate content for other outlets to follow, China adopts a localized approach in its domestic promotion of its flagship foreign policy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In contrast to nationalism which uses an emotive shortcut, this localized approach reaches audience by producing regionally targeted content on social media.

Using computational text analysis methods, I analyze two original datasets of BRI-related social media posts from China’s two most prominent platforms, Sina Weibo and WeChat. The first dataset from Sina Weibo records a decade of Party newspaper activity between 2014 and 2023. By tracking the Weibo accounts of 5 national and 31 provincial Party newspapers, I establish the presence of a long-term, consistent, and localized reporting of BRI centered on local economic opportunities and cultural celebrations. Using structured topic modeling, I uncover communication patterns that are much more sophisticated than conventional assumptions of nationalist narratives. The second dataset from WeChat Official Accounts provides a comprehensive survey of BRI-related articles during a three-month window in early 2022, drawing from over 3400 unique accounts. The distinctiveness of these accounts show how nonofficial accounts are mobilized even in absence of a nationalist campaign, producing diversified content that caters to niche subscribers.

Taken together, this paper refines the literature’s pessimistic focus on nationalist propaganda as the dominant communication strategy for promoting foreign policies in domestic settings. Localized, digitized news on social media provides a viable alternative for communicating abstract, distant foreign policies to domestic audiences without necessarily stripping away policy nuances. Instead, the key to effectively reaching niche audiences in a highly fragmented social media space is to deliver locally specific content that piques genuine interest, which in turn, translates into popular mobilization and the broader transmission of content.

This paper makes several contributions to the literature on foreign policy and domestic opinion.

Theoretically, it challenges the traditional assumed link between nationalism and foreign policy communication (e.g., Chubb, 2022; Wang, 2021; Cairns and Carlson, 2016; Weiss and Dafoe, 2019; Bui, 2017), by showing an alternative communication strategy that relies on creating localized content instead. This paper also advances the literature on foreign policy communication by incorporating the shift to social media, consistent with developments in the political communication field where the dominance of traditional mass media has been challenged by digital alternatives (e.g., King et al., 2014; Lu et al., 2025; Van Aelst et al., 2017; Webster and Ksiazek, 2012; Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017; Hirsh et al., 2012; Liu and Ji, 2021). Finally, this paper makes a methodological contribution by using computational methods to systematically document the localization of content, moving beyond isolated case studies of short-term events or outlet-specific analyses (e.g., Zou, 2023; Bolsover and Howard, 2019; Cairns and Carlson, 2016; Ma and Weiss, 2022).

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the existing literature on nationalist strategies for promoting foreign policies at home and the challenges in a digital era. Section 3 describes the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, its potential for a localized promotion strategy, and the implicated empirical observations. Section 4 introduces the Weibo dataset of revamped Party newspapers, and presents quantitative evidence of provincial-level accounts’ localized communication strategies using topic modeling. Section 5 presents the related mobilization response from nonofficial accounts on WeChat, showing how nonofficial actors across the country actively engage in BRI-related discourse without merely echoing central messages. Section 6 concludes.

2 Pitfalls of Nationalist Narratives

2.1 Nationalism and Foreign Policy Communication

A long line of scholarship has emphasized the centrality of nationalism in foreign policy discourse at home. The most prominent articulation of this view is Snyder (1991), who argues that ruling elites weaponize nationalism to sell myths of national honor and patriotism in order to rally support for self-serving foreign policies. Snyder (1991) rests on the critical premise that foreign policies are often part of an imperial expansion project that does not benefit the masses. Thus, elites must package foreign policy with a nationalist aura for domestic consumption. Once the public is mobilized by nationalist fervor, however, the myths become political reality. If the elite coalition later needs to back down, compromise, or cooperate internationally, they cannot.

Snyder’s argument has inspired a prominent line of research in international security and domestic politics. Building on his work, international security scholars have explored the international implications of a mobilized, nationalistic domestic base. They often emphasize the high cost of de-escalation, even when cooperation would be the more beneficial choice for the masses (e.g., Fearon, 1994; Tomz, 2007; Weiss, 2013; Levendusky and Horowitz, 2012; Trachtenberg, 2012; Snyder and Borghard, 2011; Dafoe et al., 2022). Another line of scholarship focuses on the domestic dynamics of nationalism, arguing that nationalism could be a diversion from genuine crisis and internal problems (e.g., Cairns and Carlson, 2016; Blaydes and Linzer, 2012; Levy, 1988; Smith, 1996).

A limitation of this line of research is that it rests upon the foundational assumption that the state has no genuine interest in accurately communicating its foreign policies to the masses. Instead, the state’s intention is presumed to be either deceiving the public to mobilize support or diverting attention. While this assumption is more tenable during international and domestic crises, when

the immediate priority is weathering the storm, foreign relations are not defined solely by moments of crisis. International political economic ties, in particular, are forged through routine interactions rather than crises (Lipsy, 2020). A fervent, under-informed, and nationalistic population not only limits the state’s ability to de-escalate crises but also fosters anti-foreign sentiments that obstruct the formation of long-term economic relationships.

Political behaviorists studying domestic policies have established that accurate political knowledge is fundamental for stable governance and rational policy evaluation (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1997; Luskin, 1990; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Popkin, 1991). Contemporary empirical studies of China have confirmed that providing citizens with substantive policy information, rather than emotive propaganda, builds genuine political trust and long-term support (e.g., Ding et al., 2025; Xiang and Neo, 2024). This study extends this logic to citizens’ knowledge of foreign policies as well. To foster sustainable international cooperation, foreign policy communication must move beyond short-term nationalist mobilization and prioritize cultivating an informed citizenry.

2.2 A “Short Cut” to the Attention Problem?

Why does nationalism remain the most well-studied communication strategy in domestic foreign policy communication despite its pitfalls? This biased research emphasis stems partly from the disciplinary split between international security and international political economy (Lipsy, 2020). But more importantly, foreign policy is inherently difficult to communicate to the general public, making nationalism an appealing shortcut. Baum (2003) makes a distinction between “hard news” and “soft news”: hard news consists of traditional reporting on public affairs, which is complex, institutional, and requires high cognitive effort to process. In contrast, soft news focuses on human interest and entertainment, that is engaging, personality-driven, and requires limited background knowledge to understand. Traditional reporting of foreign policy is the quintessential form of hard news. It is inherently abstract and distant, involving foreign actors, complex institutional frameworks, and slow-moving diplomatic processes. For the vast majority of citizens who do not actively follow politics, traditional foreign policy reporting often fails to capture mass audience attention.

This problem is amplified by the rise of digital media, which provides users with an abundance of more user-specific content. The explosion of information makes attention an increasingly scarce resource, creating an environment where traditional foreign policy reporting cannot compete (e.g., Van Aelst et al., 2017; Blum et al., 2023; Chadwick et al., 2015). The prevalence of promotion algorithms on social media platforms further weakens the reach of traditional state media, fragmenting audiences into niche digital communities (e.g., Lu et al., 2025; Bolsover and Howard, 2019; Woolley, 2022). What is trending for one person may simply be ignored by the other 99 users.

In this context, nationalism acts as a cognitive shortcut for communication. Because the public is naturally inclined to ignore complex foreign affairs, nationalism strips away these nuances, reducing intricate policies to a binary “us versus them” narrative (e.g., Wang and Cooper, 2022; Pang et al., 2021; Han, 2015). By translating abstract policy into an emotional narrative, nationalism transforms hard news into a consumable story of identity and pride. This allows an otherwise inattentive audience to instantly rally behind a policy without needing to understand its actual mechanics.

Taking this shortcut, however, carries significant costs. Domestically, the public remains uninformed about the actual policy, leaving them prone to sentiment-driven opinions. This dynamic is especially risky for long-term international political economy, where episodes of friction are

inevitable (Lipsky, 2020). When frictions happen, the state’s ability to respond, particularly its capacity to de-escalate, becomes constrained by hyped domestic nationalism (e.g., Weiss, 2013; Dafoe et al., 2022; Fearon, 1994; Quek and Johnston, 2018). Internationally, rising nationalist sentiment can be interpreted as anti-foreignism, sowing doubt among potential global partners (e.g., Zhao, 2022; Nye, 2021; Liu and Shao, 2022).

Building on Wang (2021), this paper defines foreign policy communication as government-led efforts to use the media to attract public attention toward, and shape citizens’ views of, a specific foreign policy. As noted, the core dilemma of foreign policy communication is twofold. First, its inherent “hard news” nature makes audiences uninterested, a challenge amplified in the digital age. Second, while nationalism offers an emotive shortcut, it risks misrepresenting policies and ultimately limiting the state’s strategic choices both domestically and internationally. The next section proposes an alternative approach: localized communication of foreign policy. Instead of attempting to communicate the entirety of abstract international politics, the government can utilize local agents to translate the most relevant aspects of a foreign policy for social media. Aided by platform algorithms, these targeted messages reach a smaller, more parochial audience, who are much more likely to consume foreign policy news when it is translated into terms immediately relevant to their daily lives.

3 Belt and Road: Localizing Foreign Policy Communication

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has become the centerpiece of China’s global strategy since its official launch in 2013. Often described as China’s “Marshall Plan”, the initiative has an ambitious goal to improve international connectivity across policy coordination, infrastructure, trade, finance, and people-to-people relations, linking China to the rest of Asia, the South Pacific, East Africa, and Europe (Nordin and Weissmann, 2018).

3.1 Why Not Nationalism?

As China’s flagship foreign policy, its effective communication is paramount for two reasons. First, global skeptics remain critical about the intention behind BRI, whether it is another form of imperial expansion. Most notably, critics question whether infrastructure projects and foreign aid are intentionally designed to “debt-trap” partner countries, allowing China to seize valuable strategic assets upon defaults (Lee Jones, 2020; Hawkins, 2023). Neighboring countries with territorial disputes are particularly cautious, which makes cooperation unnecessarily harder. Nationalist narratives that amplify the “us-versus-them” story are highly dangerous in this context, as they feed directly into preexisting global anxieties regarding the securitization of China’s BRI projects.

Second, domestic nationalists are also highly skeptical of outward investment. The Chinese state committed over a quarter of a trillion USD to BRI projects in the years 2014 and 2015 alone (Wang, 2022; Wong, 2020). A “China first” nationalist perspective actively pushes back against outward investments that do not yield immediate returns for the domestic population, even when there are long-term gains (Jamali et al., 2024; Kivinen, 2022).

Beyond the risks of relying on conventional nationalist propaganda, BRI presents a fundamentally different challenge for domestic mobilization. Unlike well-studied cases of territorial disputes—where domestic opinion primarily acts as an indirect constraint on central state action (e.g., Weiss, 2013;

Chubb, 2022; Cairns and Carlson, 2016), BRI actively requires private entrepreneurs to participate in outward investments and state-adjacent institutions, such as universities and social organizations, to conduct cultural exchanges. These activities demand tangible investments of capital and resources, not merely lip-service cheerleading (e.g., Ye, 2021; Lee Jones, 2020).

3.2 The Localized Communication Strategy

To shore up genuine domestic support for BRI, the state’s communication strategy must steer clear of provocative nationalist sentiments. Instead, the messaging needs to clearly explain the policy in a way that mobilizes actors to invest. However, as established in Section 2, because the BRI is a distant foreign policy — a quintessential example of “hard news” — it inherently struggles to resonate with everyday Chinese citizens. To resolve this dilemma, I argue that the Chinese state adopts a localized communication strategy. Instead of attempting to sell the entirety of the BRI to a nationwide mass audience, local-level media outlets translate the most relevant aspects of the initiative for their parochial audiences. This localized content is significantly more likely to be consumed because it frames the policy in terms that are immediately relevant to citizens’ daily lives.

This localized communication strategy maps onto the localized implementation of BRI itself. Despite popular imaginations of the BRI as a centrally dominated grand strategy (Chang, 2019; Chan and Song, 2020; Callahan, 2016), empirical studies have thoroughly documented its localized genesis and implementation. In their in-depth study of Hainan and Yunnan provinces, Wong (2018) find that provinces can actively influence foreign policymaking through trailblazing, carpetbagging, and even resisting central directives. Similarly, Lee Jones (2020) argues that BRI policymaking in China should be viewed as “soft steering”, where the central leadership uses overarching narratives and organizational instruments to accommodate and incentivize subnational actors, rather than commanding its agents to act. Actual involvement in the BRI varies heavily based on local entrepreneurship. Overall, BRI implementation is very much a localized process (Wong, 2018; He, 2019), where local agents possess firsthand information about the economic opportunities it provides (Ang, 2019), the status of regional projects (Lee Jones, 2020), and the ultimate impact on local populations (Ye, 2021).

The localized communication strategy possesses unique advantages for three reasons. First, it aligns with the existing incentive structures of a broad network of subnational actors. Provincial and municipal leaders actively use the prestigious BRI label to attract foreign investment, expedite central funding approvals, and advance their standing within the cadre evaluation system (Chen, 2025). By framing regional developments as BRI achievements, local officials simultaneously signal economic performance and political loyalty to Beijing. Quasi-state and non-state actors, including universities and private enterprises, similarly rebrand overseas ventures or academic exchanges as official BRI contributions (Ye, 2021; Ang, 2019). This allows them to secure state subsidies, favorable policy treatment, and political protection. Because these diverse entities possess a vested interest in the initiative’s success, they willingly commit their own resources to generate the highly localized, pro-BRI narratives.

Beyond these political and economic incentives, local agents possess a distinct informational advantage over central media. Their proximity to ground-level conditions provides them with an intimate understanding of their target audiences and ample material to produce resonant, locally tailored stories (e.g., Das et al., 2022; Stockmann, 2013; Han, 2015; Zhao, 2000; Hassid, 2008). To capture public attention, these actors do not need to explain the BRI’s abstract, macroeconomic

framework in its entirety. Instead, they merely need to translate the policy by highlighting its direct, tangible impacts on the local community.

Finally, this localized approach exploits the architecture of contemporary digital platforms. Algorithm-driven social media environments inherently favor niche, highly targeted content, delivering these locally relevant stories directly to users who are most likely to engage rather than scroll past (e.g., [Lu et al., 2025](#); [Chadwick et al., 2015](#); [Webster and Ksiazek, 2012](#); [Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017](#); [Rimer and Kreuter, 2006](#); [Hirsh et al., 2012](#)). As summarized in Table 1, the decentralized strategy fundamentally differs from conventional nationalist messaging. By relying on local actors to translate abstract foreign policy into immediate regional interests, the localized approach effectively solves the “hard news” dilemma (e.g., [Kraft and Almond, 1951](#); [Holsti, 1992](#); [Guisinger, 2009](#); [Fowler, 2017](#); [Prior, 2014](#); [Van Aelst et al., 2017](#)) while avoiding the entrapment risks associated with nationalist mobilization (e.g., [Weiss, 2013](#); [Dafoe et al., 2022](#)).

Table 1: Comparison of Conventional Nationalism and Localized Communication

	Nationalist Mythmaking	Localized Communication
Primary Actors	Traditional, national, mass media.	Broad network of local agents (local newspapers, universities, enterprises).
Content	Nationalism; top-down geopolitical focus.	Diversified, locally tailored content; focus on regional economic/cultural impacts.
Target Audience	Nationwide, undifferentiated mass public.	Fragmented, niche digital communities.
Strategic Purpose	Setting ideological boundaries, signaling compliance, and crisis management.	Generating genuine persuasion and organic promotion.

3.3 Testable Empirical Observations

Building on this theory, a localized communication strategy should generate specific, observable empirical patterns. To test the validity of this theoretical framework, the subsequent sections evaluate two primary hypotheses using original social media data:

- **Hypothesis 1 (Localization of Content):** The promotion of the BRI by subnational actors will significantly diverge from nationalist geopolitical messaging. Rather than coalescing around a uniform nationalist narrative, local discourse will be highly diversified and tailored to emphasize regional economic opportunities and cultural ties.
- **Hypothesis 2 (Organic Diffusion):** If localized communication successfully resonates with target audiences, nonofficial actors will actively engage in organic content creation. Instead of merely echoing official government statements, these actors will produce increasingly diversified content that further localizes the initiative.

4 Party Newspaper on Weibo: Translating Belt and Road for Local Audiences

4.1 Data: Provincial Party Newspapers on Sina Weibo

To test Hypothesis 1 (content localization), I compiled an original dataset of social media posts scraped from Sina Weibo. The dataset captures all BRI-related posts from the official accounts of 5 national Party newspapers and 31 provincial Party newspapers (*jiguanbao*) over the ten-year period from 2014 —shortly after the initiative’s initial 2013 announcement — to 2023.¹

To ensure consistent comparisons across regions, the primary unit of analysis is the Weibo account of a provincial Party newspaper. Within China’s media hierarchy, these provincial outlets serve as local institutional counterparts to national Party papers such as the *People’s Daily*. As local Party papers, they are both structurally rooted in their specific localities and embedded in Party institutions, making them ideal subjects for testing whether they translate national policies into locally relevant discourse or simply reproduce national reporting.

Sina Weibo is an ideal setting for observing this shift in policy communication. Often described as China’s equivalent of X (formerly Twitter), it is among the country’s most influential microblogging platforms for real-time news and public discourse (Sullivan, 2012), with 591 million monthly active users in March 2025.² As print readership has declined significantly, provincial Party newspapers have increasingly redirected their operations toward digital platforms like Weibo. Unlike traditional print journalism, Weibo features open-network sharing, short-form posts, and trending hashtags (Guan et al., 2012), requiring news outlets to condense complex, abstract policy directives into engaging, bite-sized snippets.

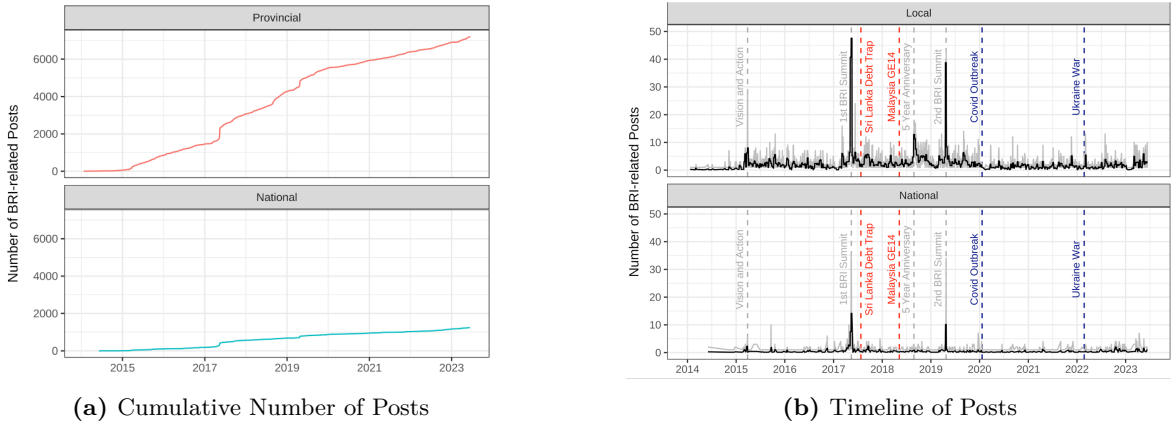


Figure 1: Temporal Trends of Weibo Posts by National and Provincial Party Newspaper Accounts.

Figure 1 provides an overview of BRI posting activity over time. Panel 1a plots the cumulative number of BRI-related posts. Panel 1b plots the daily (black line) and weekly (gray line) counts of BRI-related posts, with vertical lines marking major BRI-related events domestically and internationally.³

¹See Appendix A for a complete list of accounts and summary statistics.

²Weibo Corporation, “Weibo Announces First Quarter 2025 Unaudited Financial Results”, May 21, 2025.

³Gray vertical lines denote domestic BRI-related milestones, including the release of the “Vision and Action”

In total, there are 8,463 posts about the BRI, defined as any post that contains the phrase “One Belt One Road” (*yidaiyilu*). The earliest post was made on January 21, 2014, by *Hubei Daily*, and the last scraped post was made on June 15, 2023, by *Gansu Daily*. Of the 8,463 BRI-related posts scraped, 1,235 were made by national newspapers, and the remaining 7,210 were posted by provincial newspapers.⁴

On average, each account posted 235 times about the BRI between 2014 and 2023, which is roughly twice a month. The average post is about 395 Chinese characters long. Notably, these posts are longer than typical posts on X/Twitter, with the longest post exceeding 4,000 characters. While the absolute volume of posts is modest on most days, production is remarkably consistent over time, suggesting a sustained, institutionalized effort rather than a flash-in-the-pan propaganda campaign.

4.2 Method: Structured Topic Modeling

To identify long-term communication strategies rather than isolated propaganda bursts, this research adopts a computational text analysis approach, complemented by qualitative case studies. While qualitative evidence provides rich, event-specific insights, they risk “selection on the sensational”, namely focusing on high-profile events that may not reflect the day-to-day agenda-setting of provincial outlets. A longitudinal, big-data approach offers a more stable baseline to capture the underlying consistency of state communication strategies beyond temporal anomalies.

To operationalize the content of BRI discourse, I employ a Structured Topic Model (STM) following Roberts et al. (2019). Unlike traditional Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA), the STM framework allows for the inclusion of metadata — in this case, province and time — to improve topic estimation and account for subnational variations in vocabulary. The model estimates a “topic proportion” (θ) for each post, representing the probability that a given document discusses a specific theme. I specify a model with 30 topics, which is optimized by maximizing topic exclusivity while maintaining high semantic coherence.⁵

For greater interpretability, these 30 latent topics were further aggregated into four dominant “mega-frames”: International Relations, Economic Development, Culture, and Party. Table 2 presents an overview of representative topics and example posts for each frame. A complete list of model output can be found in Appendix B.3. International Relations includes topics emphasizing diplomatic events and foreign affairs; Economic Development reports local economic performance and projects; Culture features sports, tourism, television series, and other forms of entertainment; and Party emphasizes the Chinese Communist Party and President Xi Jinping. This categorization was performed by five trained human coders who achieved an inter-coder reliability score of 0.80.⁶ The final quantity of interest is the estimated proportion of each post dedicated to these four primary frames, allowing for a systematic analysis of how BRI messaging shifts across different provincial

document, the first and second BRI summits, and the fifth-year anniversary. Red vertical lines denote international BRI-related incidents, including accusations of “debt-trap” diplomacy in Sri Lanka and the Malaysian general election that overturned the ruling party United Malays National Organization (UMNO), which had supported BRI cooperation with China. Blue vertical lines denote major international shocks unrelated to the BRI, such as the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

⁴A detailed breakdown of posts is available in Appendix A.

⁵See Appendix B.1 for details on Chinese text preprocessing, Appendix B.2 for K topic selection and model specification.

⁶See Appendix B.4 for details on human classification.

contexts and over time.⁷

Table 2: Categorization of the 30 topics generated from the model into four themes.

Row	International Re- lations	Economics	Culture	Party
Topics	China-Italy United Nations	Firms Infrastructure & Trade	Tourism & Opera TV References	Party Celebration Xi’s Speeches
Example Post 1	Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy says joining the BRI saves lives	Inner Mongolia achieved 60.77 billion in im- ports/exports in the first four months	The BRI boosts tourism in western China	Xi delivers a keynote speech at a BRI forum
Example Post 2	Australia annuls Victoria’s “Belt and Road” agreement with China	The wine indus- try provides over 200,000 jobs for local (Ningxia) farm- ers	These foods would not be available without the ancient Silk Road	Inner Mongolia Party activities

4.3 Result: Localization or Nationalism?

This section evaluates the localization hypothesis against an alternative view of BRI promotion as nationalist mythmaking. First, I summarize the STM-derived framing distribution to show what provincial BRI discourse is primarily about. Model results show that BRI is primarily reported through an economic or cultural angle, with only limited mentioning of traditional international relations topics. Second, I map framing shares across provinces to assess whether subnational outlets simply reproduce a uniform national script about economics or culture. The spatial distribution shows strong variations in both economic and cultural posts, which supports localized heterogeneity. Third, I test whether this variation is meaningfully tied to local conditions by estimating two correlational models that link provincial economic attributes to the share of BRI coverage devoted to Economic Development. Both models suggest that the type of local economy, rather than the sheer size of the economy, is associated with how local newspapers promote BRI on Weibo. Finally, I present qualitative evidence of localized spin of a national event, the first BRI summit. Together, these results show that provincial BRI promotion is best understood as the translation of a macro foreign-policy initiative into locally salient stories, rather than nationalist mythmaking.

4.3.1 Economics and Culture Dominate Local BRI Coverage

Figure 2 illustrates the longitudinal prevalence of each macro-frame over the full ten-year period of the dataset. The x-axis represents time, and the y-axis shows the aggregated topic proportion for each category (calculated as the sum of all underlying topic proportions within that theme, bounded between 0 and 1 at any given point in time). The colored solid lines depict the monthly averages,

⁷See Appendix B.5 for the overview of dependent variable construction.

smoothed over the higher-variance weekly averages represented by the light gray lines. Over the past decade, the content proportions remain relatively stable, proving that this diversified, localized narrative environment is indeed a sustained institutional strategy.

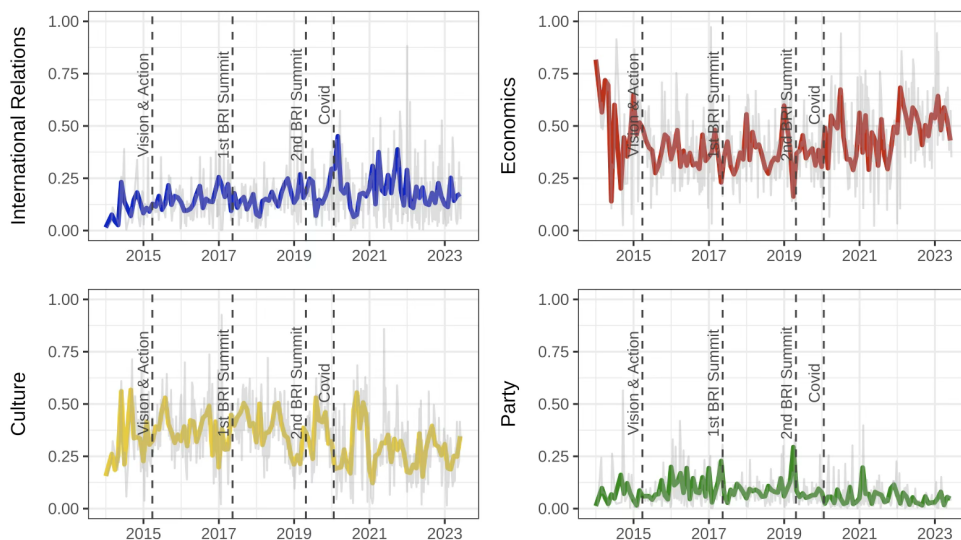


Figure 2: Proportion of each frame over time

If provincial BRI promotion were primarily nationalist mythmaking as conventional literature assumes, we would expect subnational Party newspapers to foreground the nation as protagonist: geopolitics, diplomatic events, and leader-centered stories about China’s global stature. Instead, the content distribution shows the opposite pattern. Topics that are most naturally suited to nationalist mobilization — International Relations (16.0%) and Party (10.5%) — constitute a minority of the corpus. These categories appear in provincial feeds largely as standardized “must-carry” items. Because foreign affairs and core Party messaging happen at the national level, it leaves little room for provinces to add locally meaningful detail. A Sha’anxi outlet can dutifully repost a state visit or an Italian minister’s statement, but it is difficult to translate that event into everyday stakes for local readers without additional local facts, local beneficiaries, or local projects. The result is thin, episodic coverage that signals compliance rather than setting the agenda of BRI discourse.

What dominates instead are precisely the frames that allow provinces to make the BRI legible as a local story. Economic Development and Culture together constitute 73.5% of all BRI coverage. Economic Development alone is the largest frame (37.1%), and its content is not abstract international strategy but concrete local deliverables: export volumes, logistics hubs, industrial parks, recruitment drives, tourism receipts, and county-level “success stories” attached to BRI-branded projects. BRI is narrated not as a distant foreign policy, but as a vehicle through which *our hometown* grows, connects, and upgrades. The incentives align with this move. Provinces have an informational advantage over Beijing in reporting local projects, and local officials are evaluated on performance indicators that these narratives showcase. In other words, the BRI label becomes a ready-made national umbrella under which provinces can publicize locally valuable achievements.

Culture is nearly as prominent (36.4%), and it functions as an accessibility strategy rather than ideological mobilization. Consistent with research on the reach of “soft news” (e.g., [Baum, 2003](#),

2002), cultural coverage links BRI to tourism, sports, television, heritage, and local history — topics that are easy to tailor to place-specific identities and attractive to less politically attentive audiences. Instead of grand narratives of national rejuvenation, local newspapers use the language of everyday consumption, travel, and entertainment.

4.3.2 Provinces Emphasize Different BRI Framings

Figure 3 visualizes how provinces differ in the composition of their BRI coverage across the four framings. Each panel is a provincial map for one framing. Darker shading indicates that a larger share of a province’s BRI-related posts is devoted to that framing, while lighter shading indicates less emphasis. The maps show what provinces choose to talk about when they invoke the BRI brand, not simply how much they post.

The spatial distribution of topic proportion shows two notable patterns. First, International Relations and Party are comparatively muted and spatially flat. Most provinces devote only a small share of their BRI discourse to geopolitics or central messaging, and there is limited geographic disparity in where those frames appear. Second, the strongest spatial differentiation appears in Economic Development and Culture. These panels exhibit visible cross-provincial heterogeneity, indicating that provinces place different weights on development-oriented versus culture-oriented ways of presenting the BRI.

This spatial pattern supports the localization hypothesis in two ways. If provincial outlets were simply copying a uniform national script, we would expect the maps to look broadly similar across framings or to show only weak, noisy variation. Instead, variation is concentrated in the two framings where provinces have both discretion and informational advantage: they can credibly connect the BRI to local projects, industries, and performance indicators (Economic Development), or to local tourism, heritage, and entertainment content that resonates with everyday audiences (Culture). The fact that the “hot spots” differ across the Economics and Culture panels further suggests purposeful agenda-setting rather than a generic propaganda intensity story. Overall, the maps demonstrate that subnational BRI promotion is not dominated by abstract international politics or leader-centered nationalist messaging; it is organized around locally salient narratives about development and daily life, with systematic differences across provinces in which of these local angles they prioritize.

4.3.3 Local Economic Characteristics Predict BRI Reporting

The first two pieces of evidence establish the basic descriptive pattern: provincial BRI promotion is dominated by Economic Development and Culture rather than International Relations or Party, and provinces vary in which framings they emphasize. The remaining question is why provinces diverge and if the divergence is correlated with local characteristics. The conventional nationalist mythmaking theory would predict little systematic relationship between local conditions and framing choices, whereas the localization hypothesis suggests that provinces should allocate BRI attention toward framings that can be credibly anchored in local conditions, such as local economic structure and development priorities.

To examine whether there exists systematic correlations between local conditions and BRI reporting, I estimate two correlational models, specified as follows.

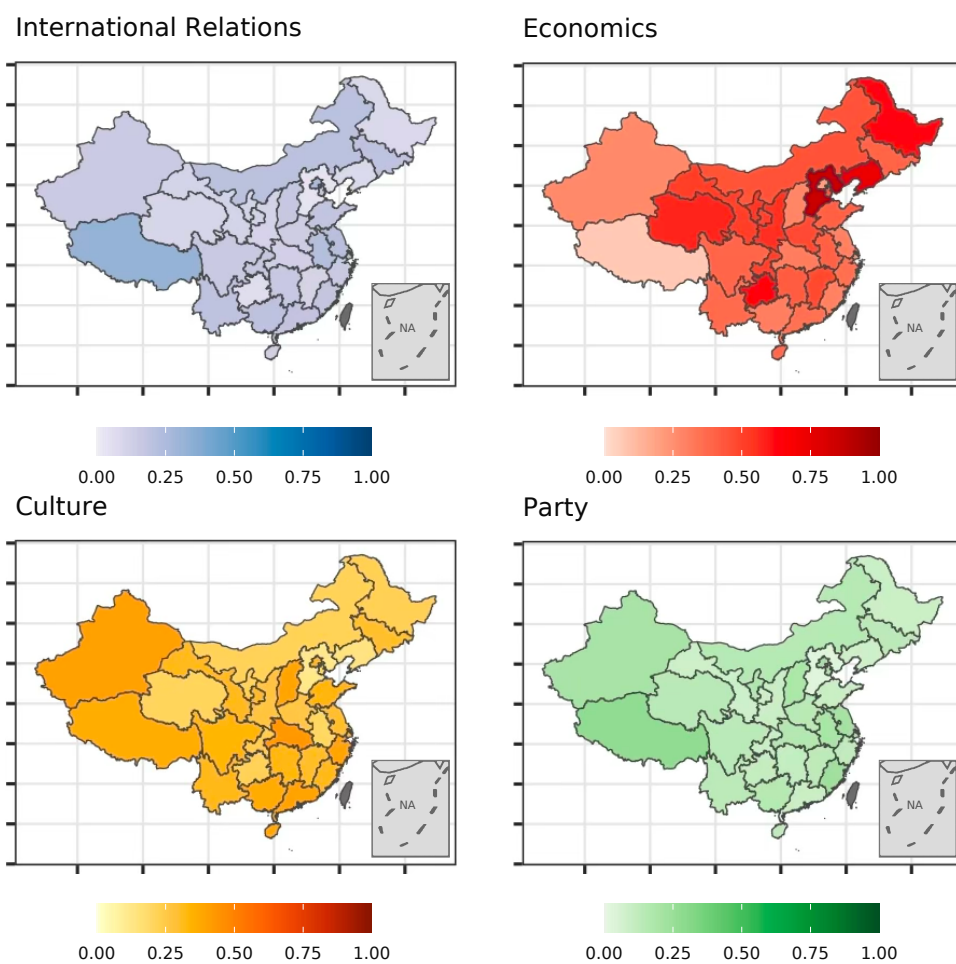


Figure 3: Topic Proportion by Province

Dependent variable. Let p_{it}^k denote the STM-derived share of BRI-related content devoted to framing $k \in \{\text{International Relations, Economics, Culture, Party}\}$ for province i in week t . These shares are computed by averaging post-level topic proportions within each province-week and then aggregating topics into the four framings.

OLS TWFE outcome. In the baseline specification, the dependent variable is the *Economic Development* share itself,

$$y_{it}^{\text{OLS}} = p_{it}^{\text{Econ}}, \quad (1)$$

which captures the fraction of BRI coverage in province i and week t devoted to development-oriented narratives.

Compositional outcome. Because the four shares sum to one, increases in one framing mechanically reduce the others. To respect this compositional structure, I also analyze the additive log-ratio (ALR) of Economic Development relative to *Culture*:

$$y_{it}^{\text{ALR}} = \log \left(\frac{p_{it}^{\text{Econ}}}{p_{it}^{\text{Culture}}} \right). \quad (2)$$

Intuitively, y_{it}^{ALR} increases when a province shifts attention toward Economic Development *relative to* Cultural content.

Model specifications. *OLS two-way fixed effects (TWFE).* The main specification estimates a two-way fixed effects model:

$$y_{it}^{\text{OLS}} = \beta' \mathbf{x}_{it} + \alpha_i + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it}, \quad (3)$$

where α_i and δ_t are province and time fixed effects. Province fixed effects absorb time-invariant differences across provinces (e.g., persistent industrial structure, geography, baseline media capacity), while time fixed effects absorb shocks common to all provinces (e.g., national news cycles and major BRI events). Identification comes from within-province changes over time relative to other provinces.

Compositional model (no fixed effects). As a complementary specification, I estimate a compositional model using the ALR outcome in Equation 2:

$$y_{it}^{\text{ALR}} = \tilde{\beta}' \mathbf{x}_{it} + \tilde{\varepsilon}_{it}, \quad (4)$$

which captures how predictors shift the Economic Development share *relative to* Culture, without imposing the TWFE structure.⁸

Independent variables and controls. The explanatory variables of interest are a set of standard economic predictors: (logged) GDP, (logged) number of private firms, and (logged) foreign investment. A complete list of controls are included as controls (Appendix C).

Table 3 reports two complementary results. First, more robust private economic activities is correlated with more provincial reporting of BRI in economic terms. In the OLS TWFE specification,

⁸The compositional results are estimated as part of a multi-equation system with Culture as the reference category. Because framing shares are compositional, the log-ratio transformation ensures that changes are interpreted as reallocations across framings rather than independent movements. In contrast, the OLS TWFE model in Equation 3 treats p_{it}^{Econ} directly as the dependent variable and uses province and time fixed effects to absorb unobserved heterogeneity and common shocks.

Table 3: Economic Development framing and local economic conditions

	OLS TWFE (share)		Compositional (ALR; ref = Culture)	
	Unweighted	Weighted	Unweighted	Weighted
GDP (log)	-0.363 (0.276)	-0.254 (0.255)	-0.085 (0.102)	-0.018 (0.083)
Private Firms (log)	0.167** (0.063)	0.167** (0.059)	0.545*** (0.139)	0.422*** (0.112)
Foreign Investment (log)	0.045 (0.062)	0.072 (0.049)	1.287*** (0.210)	0.961*** (0.170)
Controls	Yes (Appendix C)			
Province FE	Yes	Yes	No	No
Week FE	Yes	Yes	No	No
N (province-week)	2075			

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. In the OLS TWFE columns, the dependent variable is the province-week Economic Development share p_{it}^{Econ} and the model includes province and week fixed effects. In the compositional columns, the dependent variable is the additive log-ratio $\log(p_{it}^{\text{Econ}}/p_{it}^{\text{Culture}})$ with Culture as the reference framing and no fixed effects. “Weighted” uses proportional topic-to-theme weights based on coder vote shares. $^+p < 0.1$, $^*p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$, $^{***}p < 0.001$.

a 1% increase in the number of private firms is associated with a 0.167 percentage-point increase in the Economic Development share. In the compositional specification, coefficients are elasticities for the *Economy-to-Culture* ratio. A 1% increase in the number of private firms is associated with a 0.545% increase in the ratio $p_{it}^{\text{Econ}}/p_{it}^{\text{Culture}}$.

Second, the compositional model further shows that exposure to foreign investment is also associated with an increased use of Economic framing with respect to Cultural framing. A 1% increase in foreign investment is associated with a 1.287% increase in the Econ-to-Culture ratio.⁹ The OLS TWFE model produces coefficients in the same direction, but not precisely estimated.

GDP is not precisely estimated in either model, which suggests that the aggregate size of a province’s economy does not reliably predict how often local outlets frame the BRI as economic development. In other words, richer provinces do not automatically devote a larger share of BRI coverage to celebrating growth under the BRI label. What matters instead is economic structure, especially the presence of an active private sector and stronger investment-oriented openness. Provinces with more private firms and higher foreign investment systematically promote BRI from a development perspective, which is consistent with a localization logic. Where market activity and investment provide concrete projects, firms, and outcomes to point to, provincial newspapers can more credibly translate an abstract national initiative into locally relevant stories about jobs, upgrading, and prosperity.

⁹Because the compositional DV is $\log(p^{\text{Econ}}/p^{\text{Culture}})$, effects are most naturally interpreted as percent changes in the Econ-to-Culture ratio. Converting these to percentage-point changes in the Econ share requires a baseline share and an assumption about which framings absorb the reallocation. Using the sample mean shares (Econ = 37.1%, Culture = 36.4%) and assuming the adjustment occurs primarily between Econ and Culture, a 1% increase in private firms corresponds to roughly a +0.10 percentage-point increase in the Econ share, and a 1% increase in foreign investment corresponds to roughly a +0.23 percentage-point increase.

4.3.4 Qualitative Vignettes: Localizing a National Summit

The previous quantitative results show that provinces with different economic structures systematically report BRI in different ways. This section examines how provincial Party newspapers narrate the same highly coordinated national event through a qualitative reading of the First BRI Summit. If provincial outlets were simply echoing Beijing, a major summit should compress differences and produce a single, center-led script. Instead, even at peak centralization, provincial accounts translate the summit into locally legible stories that align with their own priorities and audience bases.

I focus on the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, held in Beijing in May 2017. The forum was the first major diplomatic milestone after the initiative’s launch, and it predictably triggered an upswing in domestic attention. During the summit month, 24 provinces published more than 700 BRI-related posts, averaging one post per day per province. Yet this synchronized increase in volume did not yield a unified narrative. Provincial outlets converged on the event, but diverged in how they made it meaningful for local readers.

To illustrate this divergence, I analyze the Weibo accounts of two provincial Party newspapers during May 2017: Liaoning and Yunnan. These cases are selected because they exemplify the two dominant domestic macro-frames observed in the quantitative analysis: Economic Development (Liaoning, 71% of summit-month BRI content) and Culture (Yunnan, 61%).¹⁰

Economic Development: Liaoning Province As a traditional industrial hub in northeastern China, Liaoning is a prominent exporter of steel, machinery, and raw materials. During the summit month, Liaoning Daily’s Weibo coverage largely bypasses ceremonial diplomacy and instead uses BRI as an occasion to showcase how Liaoning’s firms, ports, and export cities are participating in and benefiting from an outward-oriented development strategy.

On May 15th, when national outlets highlighted speeches and diplomatic meetings, Liaoning Daily posted about Dalian’s export performance and celebrated specific corporate victories: “Entering May, Dalian Huarui Heavy Industry has secured billions of dollars worth of orders from the Southeast Asia market; Dalian Machine Tool Group Corporation has received its first orders from Russia.” Throughout the month, Liaoning Daily continues to post about highly specific updates on regional firms, commercial deals, and job opportunities generated by the initiative. By doing so, the outlet successfully translated a ceremonial diplomatic summit into concrete, material benefits that directly resonated with its readers’ economic realities.

Culture: Yunnan Province Yunnan Daily localizes the same summit through cultural soft news. In the lead-up to the opening ceremony of the summit, Yunnan’s Weibo account engages users with trivia and light content about Yunnan’s cuisine, traditional music, and local dialects. Instead of emphasizing summit itineraries, Yunnan started a province-centered hashtag (“#BRI sees Yunnan”; *yidaiyilu kan yunnan*) and reshared posts that mention the province or its immediate regional partners. On May 14th, the day of keynote addresses, Yunnan posted a special cultural feature titled “The Glamorous Yunnan” (*meili yunnan*) rather than prioritizing political speeches.

¹⁰Despite the inherently international nature of the forum, none of 24 provincial newspapers uses International Relations as a primary framing. Yunnan has the highest foreign-policy share with only about 10% of its summit-month content to International Relations topics. The summit did not “pull” provincial discourse toward geopolitics. Instead, it amplifies the incentives and capacities provinces already possess to localize.

Even when reporting on the summit’s welcoming gala — arguably the most choreographed and symbolically national segment of the event — Yunnan filters the story through local cultural assets. Its posts focus on Yang Liping, a Yunnan-based artist performing the province’s signature peacock dance. Yunnan also constructs a localized historical bridge by highlighting Zheng He, a Ming-era explorer with origins in Yunnan, who inspired the idea of a maritime silk road. In these posts, the BRI forum is repackaged less as high diplomacy than as a cultural showcase of Yunnan’s identity and tourism appeal.

Together, the two vignettes reinforce the localization hypothesis. Even when provinces respond to the same nationally orchestrated foreign-policy milestone, they do not converge on an International Relations narrative. Instead, they translate the summit into locally resonant content, be it industrial performance in Liaoning or cultural branding in Yunnan. The BRI summit therefore functions less as a generator of uniform nationalist mythmaking than as a moment that provinces actively domesticate into “my province” stories aligned with local economic structure and cultural assets.

5 Organic Diffusion on WeChat: Evidence from Broad Participation and Narrative Independence

The previous sections show that provincial Party newspapers localize BRI coverage on Weibo. Hypothesis 2 examines the next step in effective communication. If localization makes an abstract foreign policy initiative more publicly legible, BRI promotion should diffuse beyond a small set of Party outlets and mobilize a broader network of content producers. I evaluate this implication using data from WeChat Official Accounts.

WeChat Official Accounts (*weixin gongzhonghao*) are institutional accounts that push longer-form articles directly to followers, enabling niche targeting and sustained content production rather than one-off reposts. This setting provides a more prudent test of organic promotion as sustained article production and audience engagement on WeChat is less likely cheap cheer-leading on Weibo (e.g., [King et al., 2017](#)).

To test this hypothesis, I construct a cross-sectional dataset of all WeChat articles published between January 23, 2022 and April 21, 2022 that contain “Belt and Road” (*yidai yilu*) in the title or abstract. Article URLs are obtained from GSdata (*qingbo zhishu*) and used to scrape full texts. The resulting corpus contains 5,536 BRI-related articles produced by over 3,400 unique Official Accounts, providing a quantitative snapshot of who participates in BRI promotion and whether these accounts produce diversified content or not.

This section presents two pieces of empirical evidence in support of the organic diffusion hypothesis. First, I document the breadth of participation by showing how many distinct WeChat accounts publish BRI-related articles and how geographically dispersed these publishers are. Second, I test narrative independence by comparing nonofficial articles to a central baseline of three officially verified national BRI accounts, asking whether nonofficial content mirrors central language or uses distinct vocabularies. I operationalize narrative independence using three complementary measures: overlap in high-frequency words, cosine similarity over full texts, and lexical diversity as a proxy for stylistic richness. Together, these tests support that there exists organic diversification of BRI promotion on Wechat.

5.1 WeChat Accounts: Mapping the Breadth of Organic Participation

BRI WeChat Articles by Account Location

County-Level Match, n=2071

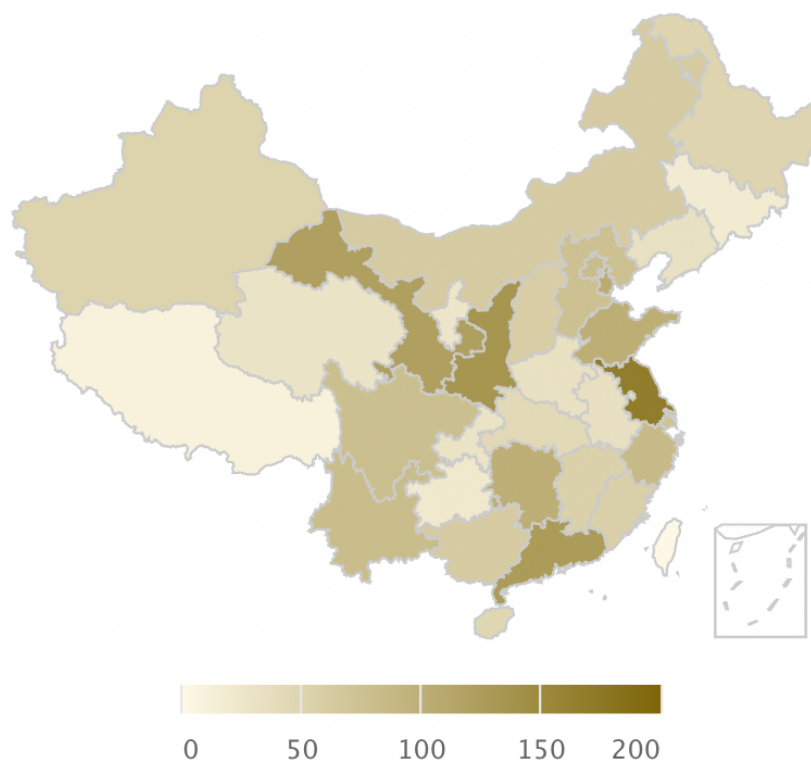


Figure 4: Spatial Distribution of WeChat Articles by Posting Accounts

The most direct evidence of organic diffusion is the sheer breadth of participation. In this three-month snapshot, 5,536 BRI-related articles were published by more than 3,400 distinct WeChat Official Accounts.¹¹ This high publisher-to-article ratio suggests that BRI communication on WeChat is sustained by a large, distributed network of content producers, many of which operate outside the core national propaganda outlets.

Figure 4 provides spatial evidence of broad participation.¹² Darker shading indicates a higher volume of BRI-related articles originating from accounts from a given province, capturing both the intensity and heterogeneity of subnational engagement. If WeChat promotion were government orchestrated in the conventional sense, we would expect less variation in spatial distribution and more concentration in Beijing. However, WeChat data shows that much of BRI posts happen outside Beijing, mostly in Jiangsu, Gansu, Sha'anxi, and Guangdong. Together, the volume and

¹¹On average, each article is viewed 534.35 times, marked “read” by 7 users, and liked by 9 users.

¹²Because WeChat Official Accounts do not consistently report geographic coordinates, I infer account locations by matching account names to standard administrative divisions using a progressive geo-coding procedure. Alternative matching schemes yield similar results, with inter-scheme agreement above 90%. See Appendix D for details.

geography of publishing indicate that BRI promotion on WeChat extends beyond a handful of state outlets and diffuses into a wider network.

5.2 Content Diversification: Measuring Narrative Independence

Broad participation alone does not establish organic diffusion. A mass publishing network could still function as a relay system in which thousands of accounts simply copy and paste a centrally authored script. Hypothesis 2 therefore makes a stronger prediction: if BRI promotion has diffused organically, nonofficial WeChat accounts should not merely repeat the official language, but should generate substantively independent content. I evaluate this implication by comparing the text of WeChat articles to a clear official language baseline.

Official baseline. The baseline consists of 119 BRI-related articles published during the sampling window by three officially verified national BRI accounts: *The Belt and Road*, *yidai.China* (BRI China Net), and *Belt and Road Energy Cooperation*. These accounts provide a conservative benchmark for official language because they are explicitly BRI-branded and therefore likely to use standardized official terminology. I do not manually remove other official state media outlets from the broader corpus to get a conservative estimation. Since only 3 accounts are singled out as the baseline, the comparison set likely still contains some officially affiliated account, mechanically biasing the analysis toward higher similarity with the baseline. In addition, all articles in the dataset contain the mandatory keyword “Belt and Road” (*yidai yilu*), which further inflates lexical overlap by construction. Despite these advantages for the centralized-script hypothesis, the results consistently show substantial divergence.

Operationalize Narrative Independence To measure narrative independence, I use three complementary measures that increase in strictness. High-frequency word overlap captures similarity in core vocabulary; cosine similarity measures overlap across entire documents; and lexical diversity assesses whether texts exhibit richer word usage indicative of independent writing rather than reproduction.

5.2.1 Measure 1: High-Frequency Words

Figure 5 provides a vocabulary-level test of narrative independence. I first extract the top 20 most frequently used words from each of the 119 official baseline articles and pool them into an official “reference dictionary” containing 666 unique terms. I then extract the top 20 words from each nonofficial article and calculate how many of its most salient terms appear in the central dictionary. If nonofficial accounts are simply repeating central talking points, their high-frequency vocabularies should overlap heavily with this reference set.

An article is considered as “highly similar” if at least 75% of its top words (15 out of 20) appear in the central dictionary. Under this cutoff, only about 20% of articles qualify as highly similar. This divergence is notable given that the dataset construction mechanically inflates overlap (all articles contain the phrase “Belt and Road”). Full distribution of overlap is reported in Figure 5.

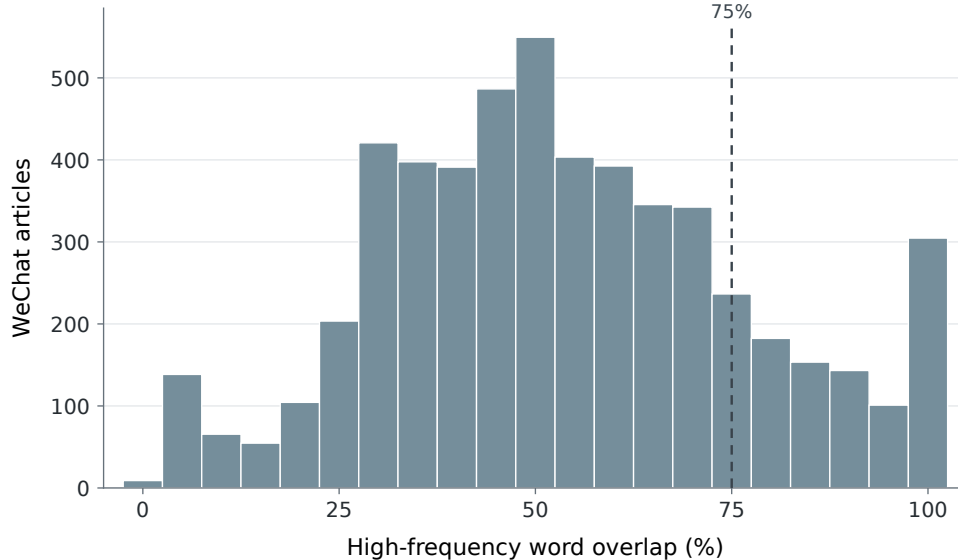


Figure 5: Distribution of overlapping high-frequency words

5.2.2 Measure 2: Cosine Similarity

High-frequency overlap captures core vocabulary, but it does not incorporate the full distribution of words across the document. To assess whole-text similarity, Figure 6 reports cosine similarity scores, a standard measure of how similar two documents are in overall word usage (ranging from 0 to 1).¹³ This figure presents three benchmarks that clarify the structure of the discourse.

First, official baseline articles are relatively cohesive: the average similarity among pairs of official articles is approximately 0.41 (red interval), consistent with the idea that the center speaks in a standardized language. Second, non-official discourse is much less internally uniform. A random sample of 500 nonofficial articles has an average within-group similarity below 0.15 (green interval), indicating substantial heterogeneity among nonofficial producers. Third, when comparing similarity across official and nonofficial accounts, the average similarity is only about 0.20 (blue interval). This gap suggests that nonofficial accounts are drawing on distinct vocabularies and emphases when writing about the BRI.

5.2.3 Measure 3: Lexical Diversity

The final test asks whether divergence reflects not only different vocabulary choices, but also different levels of lexical richness consistent with independent content creation. Figure 7 compares lexical diversity between official and nonofficial articles, operationalized as the proportion of unique linguistic units used within a text, adjusted for document length.¹⁴

¹³Cosine similarity is a standard measure of textual resemblance based on word-frequency vectors. After representing each document as a vector of term weights (e.g., counts or TF-IDF scores), cosine similarity is the cosine of the angle between two vectors, $\text{sim}(d_1, d_2) = \frac{\mathbf{v}_1 \cdot \mathbf{v}_2}{\|\mathbf{v}_1\| \|\mathbf{v}_2\|}$, ranging from 0 (no overlap in word usage) to 1 (identical word distributions).

¹⁴Lexical diversity is the extent to which a text uses a wide and varied vocabulary rather than repeating the same terms. It is typically operationalized as the proportion of unique word types relative to total word tokens (adjusting

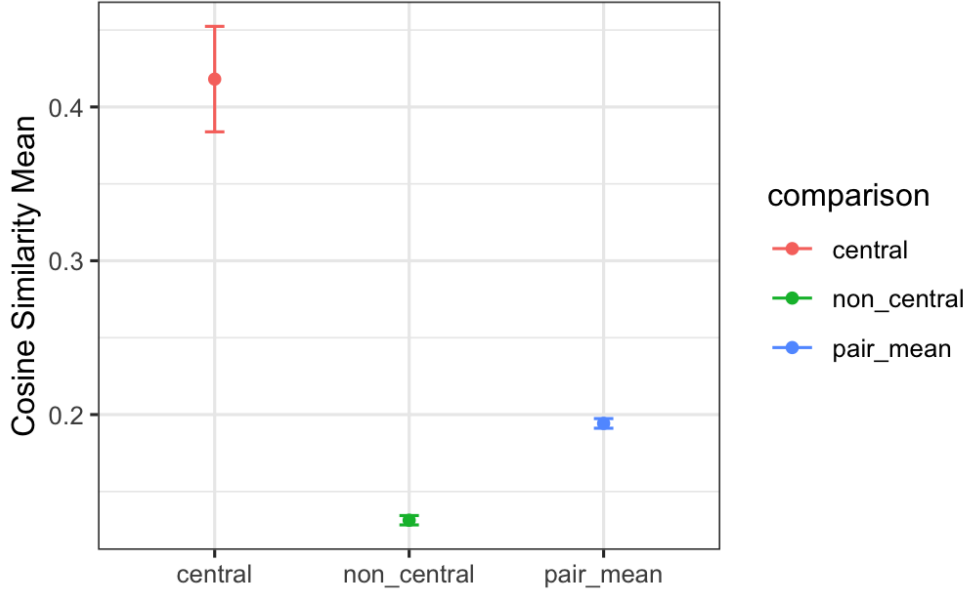


Figure 6: Cosine similarity between official, nonofficial, and cross-group article pairs

In Chinese text analysis, it is important to distinguish between individual characters (z_i) and multi-character words (ci). The stock of commonly used characters is relatively limited, so documents of comparable length tend to draw from a similar character pool regardless of topic. Character diversity therefore serves as a useful placebo test, where articles of similar length should have similar levels of character diversity. Words, however, are formed by combining characters in context-specific ways, making word diversity a more informative measure of stylistic complexity and content specificity.

Figure 7 shows no meaningful difference between official and non-official articles in unique character usage, but a statistically significant divergence in unique word diversity. This pattern is consistent with nonofficial accounts producing more varied and context-specific prose rather than reproducing a common centralized template.

The three tests converge on the same conclusion. Even under conservative assumptions that mechanically favor similarity, most WeChat BRI content produced outside the three official baseline accounts does not mirror central vocabulary, differs from official articles in whole-text comparisons, and exhibits greater word-level lexical diversity. Combined with the breadth and geographic dispersion of publishing documented above, these results are in favor of Hypothesis 2: BRI promotion on WeChat has diffused into a broad ecosystem of nonofficial producers who generate narrative content that is not simply a relay of official language.

6 Conclusion

Scholarship on foreign policy communication defaults on a pessimistic premise. Because international politics rarely feel relevant, states have no choice but to rely on nationalist mythmaking to mobilize

for document length, since longer texts mechanically contain more unique words).

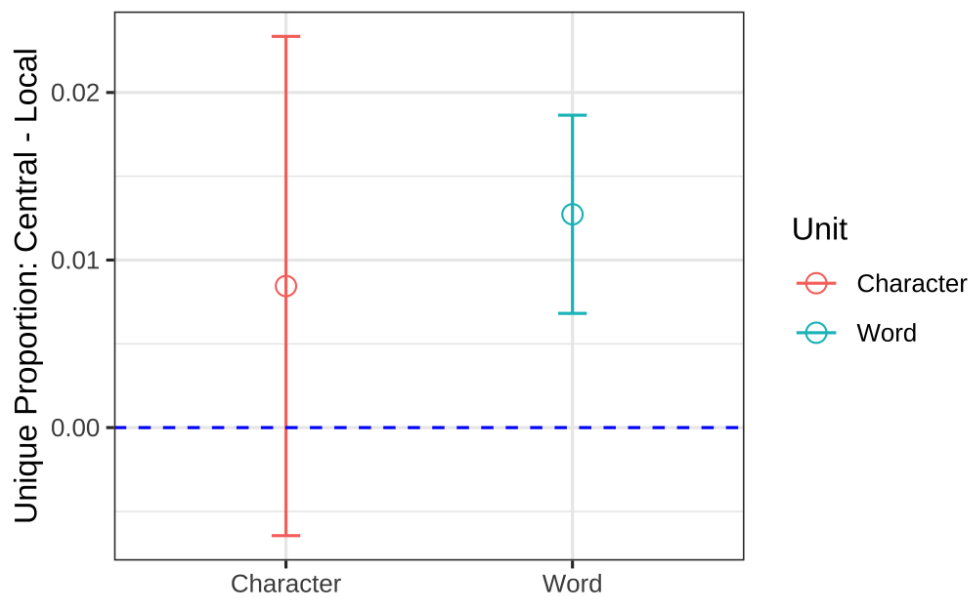


Figure 7: Lexical diversity between official and nonofficial articles

domestic support for foreign policies. While nationalist narratives can indeed function as a cognitive shortcut, they reduce complex international issues into a simple story about national pride and external threat. In a world where long-term cooperation needs mutual understanding and flexibility, nationalism is a dangerous weapon that can slip into costly anti-foreign sentiments.

China’s experience with domestic BRI promotion gives us a more positive outlook. Instead of promoting BRI as a unified geopolitical broadcast, China mobilized provincial Party newspapers to adopt a localized communication strategy in which the center supplies a prestigious umbrella label for subnational actors to fill in the content. On Weibo, provincial Party newspapers overwhelmingly frame BRI through local economic development and cultural life rather than foreign affairs or leader-centered mythmaking. This localized content paid off, as BRI content further diffused through a larger network of nonofficial accounts on WeChat. Nonofficial accounts continue to produce longer-form, diversified content that is textually distinct from official baseline. Taken together, these results show that BRI is made more relatable through “my province” stories about jobs, upgrading, tourism, heritage, and local pride, rather than “the nation versus the world” stories designed to mobilize nationalist sentiment.

This localization strategy offers a practical solution to a central problem of persuasion in the digital era. In a high-choice media environment, centrally produced “hard news” about distant diplomacy becomes increasingly costly and ineffective. Delegating narrative production to subnational actors substitutes local knowledge for centralized control. Local outlets are better positioned to identify concrete beneficiaries, familiar places, and emotionally resonant cultural symbols. The result is a communicative translation where an abstract foreign policy becomes a stream of locally meaningful, low-conflict content that can be repeated routinely without triggering the escalation dynamics associated with nationalist mythmaking.

The strategy also works because it aligns with the incentives of the decentralized agents who carry out BRI projects. Provinces and local enterprises have material and political stakes in BRI

branding, and they can plausibly attach the label to projects, exchanges, and accomplishments that already matter to local audiences and local bureaucratic evaluations. Framing a logistics upgrade, an export contract, or a cultural festival as a BRI achievement simultaneously signals alignment with the center and advances local goals. In this sense, localized communication is both a communication strategy for the citizenry, as well as a governance arrangement that recruits local actors to co-produce legitimacy using their existing incentives and informational advantages.

Domestic support for foreign policy need not be built on nationalist emotive narratives or simplification of facts. Governments can secure attention and acceptance for international initiatives through appropriate local translation of abstract national policies into everyday stories that audiences can recognize in their own lives. Understanding political communication in the digital age demands a shift in focus from centralized messaging and algorithms to the mass of local actors. The domestic success ultimately rests on the institutional structures that incentivize thousands of local storytellers to ground geopolitical strategy in tangible, regional interests.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Fieldwork and research procedures were reviewed and approved by the Stanford University Institutional Review Board (IRB Protocol 69199).

Consent for publication

Informed consent for publication was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Availability of data and material

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there are no competing interests.

Authors' contributions

Victoria Chuxuan Liu is the sole author of this manuscript and was responsible for all aspects of the research, including conceptualization, data collection, analysis, and writing of the manuscript.

A Sina Weibo Account Summary

In total, I have scraped 8463 posts about BRI, defined as any post that contains the phrase “One Belt One Road” (*yidaiyilu*). The earliest post was made on Jan 21, 2014, by Hubei Daily, and the last scraped post was made on June 15, 2023, by Gansu Daily. Out of the 8463 BRI-related posts scraped, 1235 posts were made by national newspapers, and the remaining 7210 were posted by provincial newspapers.

On average, each account posted 235 times about BRI in the between 2014 and 2023, and the average post is about 395 Chinese character long. Notably, these posts are longer than typically Twitter/X posts, with the longest post going over 4000 characters.

Comments and reactions are moderated. However, for reference, an average post is liked about 175 times, receives about 28 comments, and retweeted about 60 times.

Table 4 shows the complete summary data of accounts. Spatial visualization is presented in Figure 8.

Table 4: Newspaper Weibo account summary

Name (English)	BRI Posts	Total Posts	Followers	National
Guangming Daily	612	88176	25280000	1
Global Times	339	236889	30996000	1
People’s Daily	203	150555	150000000	1
China Youth Daily	73	124242	20167000	1
Economic Daily	26	118537	5731000	1
Shaanxi Daily	750	72955	1117000	0
Xinjiang Daily	679	80450	498000	0
Inner Mongolia Daily	663	124375	2361000	0
Guangxi Daily	659	150082	7247000	0
Gansu Daily	568	43342	89000	0
Tianjin Daily	362	149905	1756000	0
Yunnan Daily	317	86396	990000	0
Ningxia Daily	314	66160	2409000	0
Liaoning Daily	293	60734	2169000	0
Henan Daily	253	101846	6403000	0
Beijing Daily	252	112375	10533000	0
Zhejiang Daily	230	116156	2818000	0
Anhui Daily	217	99171	3568000	0
Shanxi Daily	204	96318	5678000	0
Hainan Daily	203	101290	7336000	0
Fujian Daily	199	109335	1412000	0
Hubei Daily	160	118507	5760000	0
Jilin Daily	141	105065	1190000	0
Hunan Daily	120	93201	1855000	0

Continued on next page

Name (English)	BRI Posts	Total Posts	Followers	National
Jiefang Daily	113	54756	3764000	0
Xinhua Daily	109	93249	10469000	0
Jiangxi Daily	108	110449	3935000	0
Qinghai Daily	95	26117	25000	0
Heilongjiang Daily	77	44284	575000	0
Dazhong Daily	65	41878	4801000	0
Nanfang Daily	19	44759	16208000	0
Chongqing Daily	14	86711	6172000	0
Hebei Daily	11	105094	3712000	0
Guizhou Daily (Official Weibo)	7	39953	1374000	0
Tibet Daily	5	3602	125000	0
Sichuan Daily	3	48579	12691000	0

Notes: Table 4 summarizes account-level information about all newspaper accounts. The first column shows newspaper names in English; the second column shows the total number of BRI-related posts each paper made from 2014 to 2023; the third column shows the total number of posts; the fourth column shows the number of followers each account has as of June 2023; and the fifth column shows whether the paper is national (1) or provincial (0).

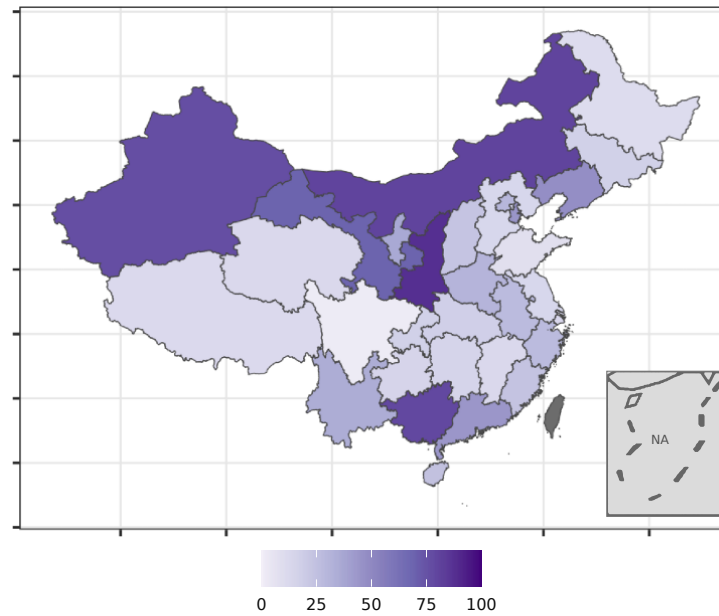


Figure 8: Number of Cumulative BRI Posts by Province

B Weibo Structured Topic Modeling

B.1 Text Preprocessing

A key difference between Chinese and English text analysis is that Chinese text requires segmentation because it does not contain whitespace-delimited word boundaries. Analyzing Chinese text at the character level is generally uninformative, since meaning depends on multi-character words and phrases. I therefore use `jiebaR`, a widely used Chinese text preprocessing package, to segment each post into tokens (multi-character words/phrases). Common stopwords are removed using a publicly available stopwords list.¹⁵

B.2 Structured Topic Modeling

The main model reported in this paper is a Structured Topic Model (STM) following [Roberts et al. \(2019\)](#), which extends the classic Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) framework. Standard LDA assumes that each topic is associated with a single, stationary word distribution shared across all documents. This assumption can be limiting in subnational settings: localities may discuss similar substantive themes (e.g., development or culture) while using systematically different vocabularies due to local events, place-specific terms, or institutional reporting routines. STM relaxes this restriction by allowing topic prevalence and, where relevant, topic content (word choice) to vary with observed document-level covariates. In this paper, I incorporate account (province) and time as covariates to capture locality-specific expression and the time-sensitive nature of social media discourse.

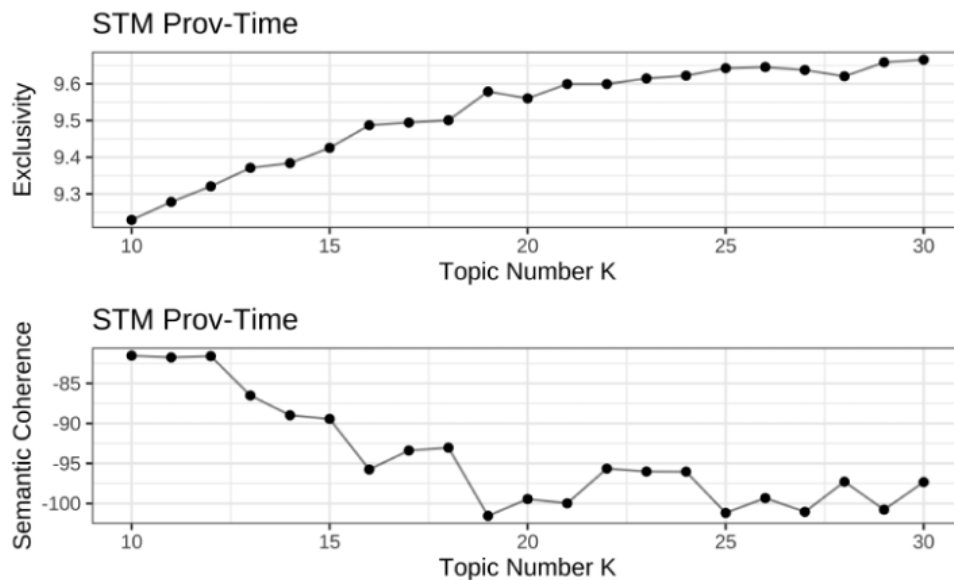


Figure 9: STM K Selection Test

Figure 9 supports selecting $K = 30$ topics. I estimate STM models under the same specification (including account and time as covariates) for values of K ranging from 10 to 30. The top panel

¹⁵I use the Baidu stopwords list.

reports topic exclusivity (how uniquely a topic’s high-probability words identify that topic), and the bottom panel reports semantic coherence (how frequently the topic’s high-probability words co-occur). The $K = 30$ model provides a favorable balance between exclusivity and coherence.

B.3 Model Output

The resulting $K = 30$ model produces the topics summarized in Figure 10 and Table 6. Figure 10 shows the raw output from the model: estimated topic proportion in all posts and related vocabulary ranked by FREX weights.

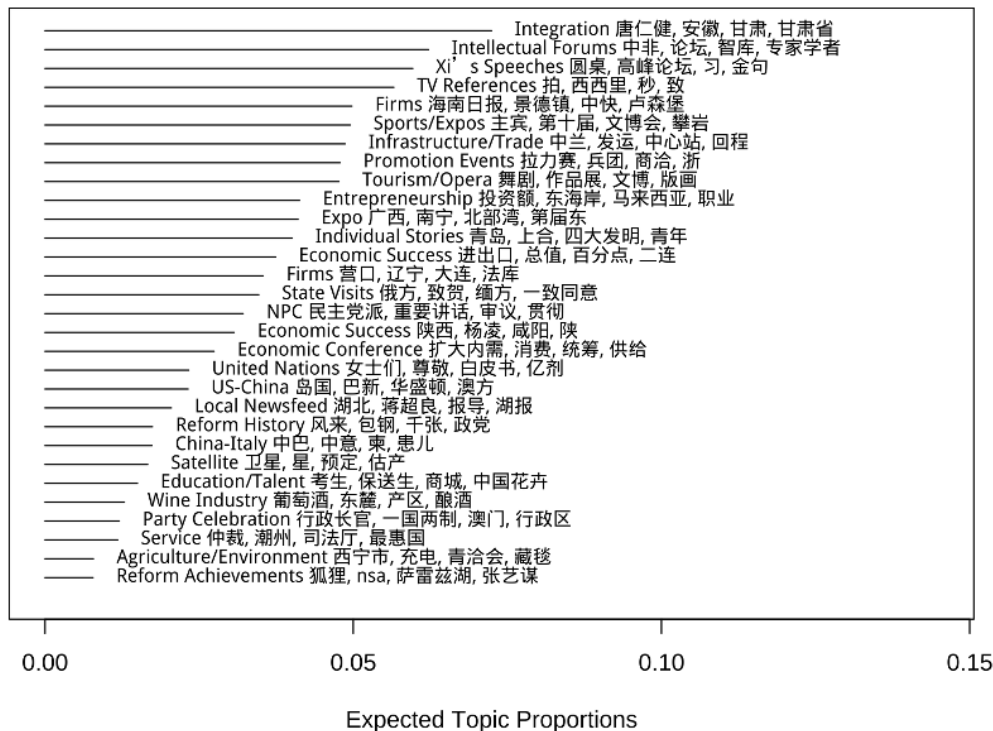


Figure 10: STM model output with top-relevant words by FREX weight for each topic.

B.4 Human Classification of Topics

For interpretability, the 30 topics generated by STM are further grouped into four broader themes — International Relations, Economic Development, Culture, and Party. International Relations includes topics emphasizing diplomatic events and foreign affairs; Economic Development topics primarily celebrate local economic performance and projects; Culture topics feature sports, tourism, television series, and other forms of entertainment; and Party topics emphasize the Chinese Communist Party and President Xi Jinping.

A topic is assigned to a theme if it receives the plurality of coder votes for that theme. For example, if Topic 1 is categorized as Culture by four coders and as Party by one coder, Topic 1 is categorized as Culture. In more evenly split cases (e.g., two votes for Culture and one vote for each other theme), the topic is still assigned to the plurality theme. While the main text reports this unweighted categorization, I also consider an alternative approach that assigns proportional

weights to each theme based on coder votes (e.g., 20% International Relations, 60% Culture, and 20% Party). This weighted variant does not substantively change the main results.

Five coders were trained on the BRI context and provided with representative posts and high-relevance keywords for each topic. Coders independently categorized each topic into one of the four themes. On average, four out of five coders agreed on the same classification for each topic, yielding an overall percent agreement of 80%. Table 5 reports agreement levels under different model specifications and selected values of K .

Table 5: Inter-coder agreement across model specifications

Model	$K = 25$	$K = 28$	$K = 30$
<i>LDA</i>	0.856	0.779	0.887
<i>STM (Province)</i>	0.800	0.793	0.753
<i>STM (Time)</i>	0.840	0.793	0.773
<i>STM (Province–Time, word)</i>	0.768	0.793	0.810
<i>STM (Province–Time, document)</i>	0.840	0.786	0.740

N (coders) = 5. Overall percent agreement (main specification) = 0.800.

Categorized result is reported in Table 6.

Table 6: Categorization of the 30 topics generated from the model into four themes.

International Relations	Economics	Culture	Party
China-Italy	Firms	Local Newsfeed	Party Celebration
United Nations	Economic Conference	Promotion Events	Xi's Speeches
Intellectual Forums	Economic Success	Reform History	NPC
State Visits	Entrepreneurship	Sports	
US-China Animosity	Wine Industry	Tourism & Opera	
	Infrastructure & Trade	Expos	
	Reform Achievements	TV References	
	Integration	Individual Stories	
		Satellite	
		Education & Talent	
		Service	
Example Post 1: Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy says joining the BRI saves lives	Example Post 1: Inner Mongolia achieved 60.77 billion in imports/exports in the first four months	Example Post 1: The BRI boosts tourism in western China	Example Post 1: Xi delivers a keynote speech at a BRI forum

Continued on next page

International Relations	Economics	Culture	Party
Example Post 2: Australia annuls Victoria’s “Belt and Road” agreement with China	Example Post 2: The wine industry provides over 200,000 jobs for local (Ningxia) farmers	Example Post 2: These foods would not be available without the ancient Silk Road	Example Post 2: Inner Mongolia Party activities

B.5 Overview of Modeling Process

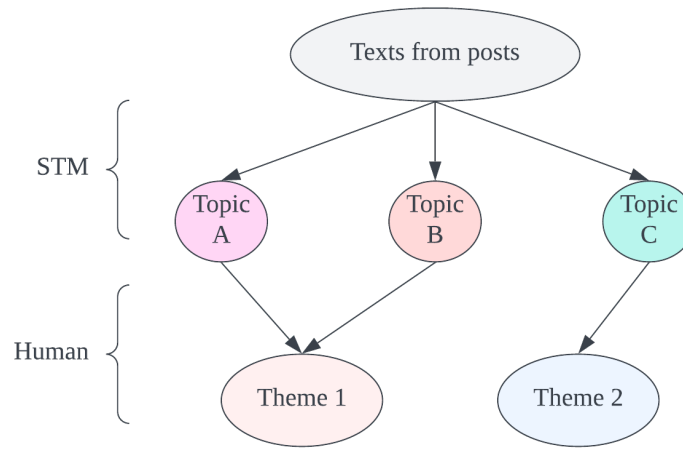


Figure 11: Illustration of the STM-to-dependent-variable construction process

Figure 11 illustrates the rationale for constructing the dependent variables from STM output, where the first step is automated through STM and the second step is categorized by human coders.

C TWFE Compositional Model Control Variables

Table 7 shows all the variables included in the regression analysis presented in the main text. The first column is the category of variables, the second column is the official name of the variable in Chinese as recorded by the Chinese National Statistics Bureau, and the third column is the variable name used in regression. The last column indicates whether the variable was included as a control (1) or a variable of interest (0).

Table 7: Regression controls and data codebook

Category	National Bureau of Statistics variable	Var Name	Control
Index	Province	Prov	1
Index	Year	Year	1
Geography	Built-up urban area (sq. km)	Geo_Area	1
Demographics	Urban population density (persons/sq. km)	Pop_Density	1
Demographics	Permanent resident population at year-end (10,000 persons)	Pop_Resident	1
Demographics	Population aged 0–14 (sample survey, persons)	Pop_Young	1
Demographics	Population aged 15–64 (sample survey, persons)	Pop_Adult	1
Demographics	Population aged 65+ (sample survey, persons)	Pop_Old	1
Demographics	Unmarried population aged 15+ (sample survey, persons)	Pop_Unmarried	1
Demographics	Population aged 6+ with senior high school education (sample survey, persons)	Pop_Edu	1
Economy	Gross domestic product (GDP) (100 million RMB)	Econ_GDP	0
Economy	Number of state-holding industrial enterprises (units)	Econ_SOE	1
Economy	Number of privately owned industrial enterprises (units)	Econ_Private	0
Government	Local general public budget expenditure (100 million RMB)	Govt_Expenditure	1
Government	Local public budget expenditure on culture, sports, and media (100 million RMB)	Govt_Expenditure_Culture	1
Government	Local general public budget revenue (100 million RMB)	Govt_Revenue	1
Foreign	International tourism foreign-exchange earnings (million USD)	Foreign_Tourism	0
Foreign	Total imports and exports of domestic destinations and sources (thousand USD)	Foreign_ImExport1	1
Foreign	Total investment of foreign-invested enterprises (million USD)	Foreign_Investment	0

Continued on next page

Category	National Bureau of Statistics variable	Var Name	Control
Internet	Broadband Internet access subscribers (10,000 households)	Internet_User	1
Internet	Mobile Internet data usage (10,000 GB)	Internet_Cellular_Data	1
Internet	Mobile Internet subscribers (10,000 households)	Internet_Cellular_User	1
Newspaper	Total newspaper copies printed (100 million copies)	News_Print	1
Newspaper	Number of newspaper titles (titles)	News_Type	1
Transport	Highway mileage (10,000 km)	Trans_Highway	1
Transport	Inland waterway mileage (10,000 km)	Trans_Waterway	1
Transport	Number of urban bridges (bridges)	Trans_Bridge	1
Transport	Railway operating mileage (10,000 km)	Trans_Rail	1
Transport	Road length (10,000 km)	Trans_Road	1

Notes: “Control” indicates whether the variable is included as a control (1) versus a main covariate of interest (0) in the regression specifications.

D Alternative Geo-Coding Results for Hypothesis 1 Broad Participation

Because WeChat Official Accounts do not systematically display verified geographic coordinates, I deduce the spatial origins of these articles by matching the names of the publishing accounts to standard Chinese administrative divisions. To maximize both precision and sample coverage, I employ a three-tiered geographic coding strategy. The baseline approach (Panel A) relies on explicit provincial-level matches, assigning an article to a province only if the account name contains the exact provincial title (e.g., an account named “Hebei Province Development and Reform Commission” is coded as Hebei). While highly accurate, this restrictive criterion limits the usable sample to only 865 of the 5,536 articles, as lower-level bureaucratic organs and local enterprises frequently omit the provincial prefix from their official names.

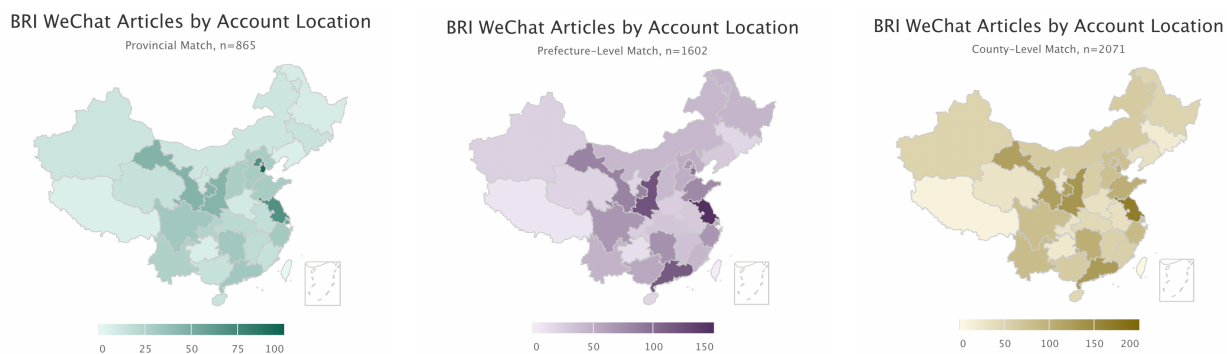


Figure 12: Spatial Distribution of WeChat Articles by Geo-Coding

To capture a more comprehensive geographic footprint and avoid systematically undercounting local participation, I progressively expand the matching criteria. The second tier (Panel B) matches account names based on prefecture-level cities, coding subnational accounts such as “Lanzhou Ecological Environment” to Gansu Province. The third tier (Panel C) extends this logic down to the county level, mapping granular accounts like “Yangxin Environment” directly to Shandong Province. To ensure the validity of this dictionary-based matching process, I conducted manual audits across the tiers; all three coding schemes achieve accuracy rates exceeding 94% and inter-scheme reliability rates above 90%.

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