

Commissioned book review

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Commissioned Book Review

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One Belt, One Road, One Story? Towards an EU-China Strategic Narrative edited by **Alister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin and Jinghan Zeng**. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. 282 pp. £89.99 (pbk). ISBN 9783030531522

This book, which brings together some of the most prominent scholars on European Union (EU)–China relations, offers a comprehensive discussion of the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) narratives on EU–China relations. At a time when the Covid-19 pandemic and competitions of great powers has set the EU to rethinking its role in global affairs and its very identity, this volume offers ways for the EU and China to get to know each other and forge better future cooperation.

The book opens with the editors' introduction on strategic narrative. They refer to Miskimmon et al.'s (2013: 2) previous study in defining strategic narrative as an instrument for political actors to construct 'a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics' in order to shape the behaviours of domestic and international actors. The editors also identify three types of strategic narratives at play (identity, policy and system narratives) as well as three phases constituting a complete strategic narration process (formation, projection and reception). It is these concepts that integrate the collection of works from various fields into one coherent theoretical framework, which also provides a common ground for future strategic narrative studies.

Section I (Chapters 2–4) focuses on policy formation. Miskimmon and O'Loughlin contribute a solid account of why and in what ways the EU's development strategy has convergence of interest with China's BRI, and thus suggest the EU's 'pragmatic turn' (p. 35) to a 'building block narrative' (p. 37) that is based on value pluralism and aims towards achieving win–win outcomes. Chunrong Liu, however, argues that a productive EU–China partnership narrative is likely to be impeded by a 'frame dissonance' (p. 47) between the two sides. In

Chapter 4, Zhiqin Shi and Vasilis Trigkas' discussion of the consensus and divergence between the two sides in terms of geographical positions, power dynamics and political values highlights the necessity for developing more local-based and issue-specific cooperation across the BRI. Although these chapters provide useful information on official rhetoric about the EU–China bilateral relationship, the discussions remain somewhat descriptive and more critical analysis could have been developed.

Section II (Chapters 5–9) penetrates into the projection and reception of the BRI narratives. Junchi Ma contributes an in-depth analysis on the paradoxes between China's narration and the Europe's reception of the BRI. Li Zhang likewise compares the narrative of the BRI in German, British and French news outlets and reveals how European media carefully project narratives to serve each country's interests. However, a deeper reflection on this would have been welcome. Due to the language barrier and the lack of transparency in Chinese politics, how a variety of Chinese strategic elites negotiate China's narratives about the EU remains mysterious to the global audience. On this, Zhongping Feng and Jing Huang contribute valuable insiders' insights. However, readers may feel that their claim that the European Model of development has been 'losing its appeal' (p. 157) might be partial and overly pessimistic. The last two chapters are particularly prominent in this book with strong methodological innovation. While Floor Keuleers creatively applies a Q methodology to compare how the EU and China's contested narratives on development are interpreted by South African university students, Carolijn van Noort conducts a visual analysis of how *China Daily* communicates the infrastructural development narratives to secure China's self-identity and geopolitics of Central Asia. These two studies successfully expand the sphere of application of the strategic narrative framework to third parties other than the narrator and the audience.

The major strength of this book is that it brings the EU and China's views on regional

development into conversation with each other and with those of third parties. In addition, the diverse backgrounds of the scholars contributing to this volume give this book a multi-perspective view, and thus enable it to bring strategic narrative research into cross-disciplinary and inter-methodological dialogues.

However, there is still room for improvement in the discussion of this volume. Notably, some policy analysis reads as fragmented and messy, as the writers tend to mix up theoretical points with historical facts. In addition, although recapping the theoretical framework in each chapter enhances the coherence of this book, it also creates a great deal of repetition. Last, at times, the texts read as a little over-endorsement of the BRI. More constructive critiques could have been incorporated when discussing China's policies and narratives so as to ensure the neutrality of the book.

Apart from the quibbles, this book makes a timely contribution to the EU–China relations

scholarship. It is beneficial for not only those who are interested in international relations and comparative politics, but also for media scholars who study political communication, media diplomacy and cross-cultural communication.

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