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PUBLIC DIPLOMACY STRATEGIES REPRESENTED DOMESTICALLY THROUGH PORTS ALONG THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY MARITIME SILK ROAD

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Nancy Xiuzhi Liu,¹ Yi Wang and Dan Shi

Introduction

Stanley (2012) very vividly depicted that

port studies might be expected to involve the giant skeletal cranes that dominate quayside skylines, terminal logistics, dock-road layouts complex as airport runways, and the invisible diverse contents of all those seemingly identical containers differentiated only by their matt reds and blues and their stenciled names: Maersk, Lloyd and so on.

Little attention has been paid to “lives” at ports, which will be the focus of this chapter. We will examine “lives” of ports by investigating how ports are represented politically and culturally in the Chinese context as historically port cities were located along coasts and served as ports where people could congregate for economic, political and social purposes (Gordon, 2018).

Like the ancient Silk Road, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project is planned as a network of land and sea connections between Asia and Europe (Schinas & von Westarp, 2017). It is a strategy that focuses on connectivity and cooperation between Eurasian countries along the land-based Ancient Silk Road Economic Belt and the oceangoing twenty-first-century Maritime Silk Road (MSR). The MSR is one of China’s initiatives to create a peaceful and harmonious environment for further cooperation with other countries. The scope covers six island states with maritime transport, and 40 coastal states with multiple transport choices (Chang, 2018). It starts with some cities along the Chinese coast and extends further to

south-eastern Asian countries and down to Europe. Cities along the MSR coast line at home include Shanghai, Ningbo, Tianjin, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhanjiang, Shantou, Qingdao, Yantai, Fuzhou and Xiamen among others.

Ningbo, a city in the Yangtze River Delta – one of the most dynamic economic zones in China – has been quite renowned and prosperous in garment making and port transportation with a long history of over 7,000 years. The geographical location, being both at the mouth of the Grand Canal and open to the sea, has guaranteed Ningbo the exceptional advantage of being the starting point of the twenty-first-century Maritime Silk Road and linkage to the outside world, as well as having access to inland towns upstream (Liu, 2020). In 2015, Zhoushan Port was merged into Ningbo Port under the new name Ningbo Zhoushan Port (NZP) which marks a new turning point for the port's development and guarantees its first place of throughput capacity in the world to date. Now NZP is a state-owned enterprise (SOE) listed under Ningbo Zhoushan Port Company Ltd.

Since taking power in 2012 for less than a decade or so, Xi Jinping has been proactively promoting the strategy of rejuvenating China through a number of drastic measures such as anticorruption on an unprecedented scale, implementation of the BRI and so on. BRI, by harking back to its historical glories, together with other strategies are collectively endeavoured to make China “become strong” both domestically and internationally, as the catch phrase goes that historically China has “stood up” in Mao's period and grown rich through Deng Xiaoping's “reform and open up policy”. Distinguished from his predecessors of Hu Jintao or Jiang Zeming, Xi has systematically promoted his *Thoughts of Governance* and policy by seeking to advance the principles of this new China on the global stage (Economy, 2018). His doctrine has been invariably embodied in the discourse of websites of ports along the MSR as well as extensively construed in the general public.

This chapter will address the question of how *Xi Thought* as a narrative of public diplomacy has been represented domestically. We propose that *Xi Thought* as authoritative discourse of macro-level design finds its expression in the multimodal discourse of port websites as an important instrument of public diplomacy at the meso level. It will also be deeply resonated in the general public at the micro level. Methodologically, this project will adopt a mixed method approach. First, we have carried out qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis on *Xi Thought* as well as projections through published documents on the Thought. Second, we have conducted a multimodal analysis on the home page of the NZP's website to investigate how the port is represented in the media as a “middle” level of public diplomacy domestically. Third, we have carried out 51 in-depth interviews with local residents in Ningbo to further gauge *Xi Thought's* projections on the general public. Prior to that, a review on public diplomacy and *Xi Thought* will be conducted.

Public diplomacy in present China and *Xi Thought*

In political science studies, soft power and public diplomacy are both very useful terms that have found quite broad applications in different spheres. According to

Nye (2012), soft power is more about changing the mindset rather than tangible and measurable resources, which is the ability to obtain what you want through cooperation and attraction rather than the hard power of coercion and payment. A country's soft power is exercised as "intangible attraction" in contrast to "tangible" hard power in terms of weapons and missiles within a long-term process. The power is by and large measured by a country's representation through its cultural and political or otherwise non-military means (Rawnsley, 2012). In conceptualization, soft power has been developed into a six-pillar conception, in the context of analysis of China in particular: with the three main (re)sources of culture (in places where it is attractive to others), political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad) and foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority), plus economic development model and international image promotion, as well as economic temptation (Li & Worm, 2011; Men, 2017; Nye, 2012). As developed by Li and Worm (2011, p. 74), soft power can be exerted on three levels: "high" targeted at political elites, or "low", targeted at the broader public; more importantly, the third level "middle" targeted at interest groups, which include business associations, ethnic groups, trade unions, non-governmental organizations, among others. As pointed out by Rawnsley (2012), soft power is becoming a sort of bandwagon concept where every government claims to be seeking in order not to be falling out of step with the times. Cull (2008, pp. 31–32) has also rightly pointed out that "the most potent voice for an international actor is not what it says but what it does. It is possible for good policies to make no difference to a nation's 'soft power' if they are not publicized or coordinated". In fact, there are three basic channels through which a country can wield its soft power to influence another country: formal diplomacy targeting the political elites, economic and public diplomacy targeting interest groups, and public diplomacy targeting the general public of another country.

Public diplomacy (PD) is the means to promote a country's soft power and is essential in winning hearts and minds on the ground that it attracts others in world politics, and not only to force them to change through threat or use of military or economic weapons (Nye, 2008). It is an instrument that governments use to mobilize these resources to communicate with and attract the publics of other countries, rather than merely their governments (Nye, 2008, p. 95). Therefore, PD is a holistic effort based on a country's overall policy making. Its success lies in the coordination of public effort of stakeholders including local, international and businesses. It also carries with it a reciprocal nature, where it is done well or not well, it will feedback into policy making by potentially affecting further strategies. In this connection, Cull (2008, pp. 31–32) has established a simple taxonomy of public diplomacy, dividing its practices into five elements: listening (i.e., assessment of foreign opinions), advocacy (i.e., some activities, short term), cultural diplomacy (i.e., promoting cultural products), exchange diplomacy (i.e., students) and international broadcasting (i.e. news, long-term strategy). Among these elements, "advocacy in public diplomacy is an actor's attempt to manage the international environment by undertaking an international communication activity to actively

promote a particular policy, idea, or that actor's general interests in the minds of a foreign public" (p. 32). In this connection, ports stand as good examples of PD advocator by serving holistic functions for being at the forefront of government policies while in close contact with international personnel or business partners, in the case of the MSR for example.

Just as Wang (2012) has also confirmed that Chinese public diplomacy is considered the continuation of its internal affairs by suggesting that the Chinese government needs to stimulate the collaboration of Chinese domestic non-state actors in order to stimulate more collaboration with international civil society. Similarly, Yang (2020) has rightly pointed out that although public diplomacy is not intended for domestic consumption, it can still have an internal impact. He has examined the news reports on the Confucius Institutes and China's National Image Film by assessing how these influence domestic perceptions of China and the Chinese government. In present-day Chinese society, *Xi Thought* dominates ideologically in terms of policymaking or various undertakings. Xi Jinping's "thought", literally "Xi Jinping thought for the new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics" (习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想) was enshrined into the Party Constitution at the 19th CCP Congress in October 2017 (Cabestan, 2019). *Xi Thought* has provided a long-term two-stage development plan: the first stage from 2020 to 2035 devoted to the realization of socialist modernization, including the achievement of the BRI; and the second stage from 2035 to 2050 to develop China into a great modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful. Wang (2017) explains not only that the "Chinese Dream" is here to stay but also that it is based, as Xi indicates in a variety of sources, on the rejuvenation (复兴 *fixing*) of the modern Chinese nation, a rhetorical theme utilized by many Chinese leaders in the past. These thoughts (Peters, 2017) are

the essentials of the new "development philosophy" that also turns its gaze to structural market reforms as well as an enhanced governance with a system of socialist rule of law with Chinese characteristics based on "consultative democracy" and the promotion of Chinese culture in both its traditional and revolutionary forms as a foundation for soft cultural power, socialist culture and Chinese identity.

According to Holbig (2018),

the technocratic formula for this new mode of governance is "top-level design" (顶层设计 *dingceng sheji*), meaning a new emphasis on overall planning and the strategic coordination of reforms in the economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental fields instead of pursuing isolated ones in all of these fields – and always keeping in mind the "whole picture".

Concerning economy, in developing a modernized economy transitioning from a phase of rapid growth to high quality, the country must focus on real

economy. China will support state capital in becoming stronger, doing better and growing bigger, turning Chinese enterprise into world-class, competitive global firms (www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-10/18/c_136689568.htm, accessed 14 June 2019). The twenty-first-century MSR being part of the ambitious plan of BRI constitutes a major drive in realizing “the socialist modernization” of China whereby *Xi Thought* will find its representation along the ports in the name of “top-level design”. Henceforth, this chapter will proceed to adopt *Xi Thought* as the analytical framework by examining Ningbo Zhoushan Port as a case study to illustrate how *Xi Thought* is projected in ports domestically underpinned by the theoretical framework of public diplomacy.

***Xi Thought* represented at the macro level**

In order to evaluate the cultural and political representations from “top-level design” in the governance, this chapter applies thematic content analysis on *Xi Thought* through analysing the official documents of “Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era”. This is considered as the guiding ideology from PRC’s constitution on 13th National People’s Congress in 2018 (Klimes & Marinelli, 2018). *Xi Thought* has reflected the leadership in the governance, the importance at such a critical time and the opportunities for the future. Qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis are classified as sets of techniques used to analyse textual data and elucidate theme (Forman & Damschroder, 2008). Combining systematic process of coding, and a categorizing approach, thematic content analysis explores large amounts of textual information unobtrusively to determine trends and patterns of words used, their frequency, their relationships, structures and discourses of communications (Mayring, 2000).

With an open coding approach, the research has developed 57 codes from the official document. All codes then were categorized based on coding clusters. Together with further analysis on clusters’ relationship and themes, the researchers finalized six main themes, with a few sub-themes and codes. These six themes are “strong party”, “strong nation”, “BRI communication and collaboration”, “economic development”, “opening up” and “people’s consideration”. All themes and codes are listed in Table 2.1. These themes represent the public diplomacy considerations from top-level designs. In China, the government and political ideology are often taken as a development philosophy for many Chinese, and are influential regarding public representation and identity (Diamond, 1995; Harrell, 1990; Sofield & Li, 2007). Also, as Gladney (1994) argued, the Chinese government is capable of engaging in a “commodified orientalism” that demonstrates how political power leads the social and economic development. Therefore, *Xi Thought* gives us a macro level view on the advocacy of public diplomacy for China.

These themes and codes together express a few focuses and directions in China’s “top-level design”. First, besides putting “Party” at the top of the governance, *Xi Thought* has a clear focus of building up a “strong nation”. It points out that social and economic development would need a basis of a strong and democratic nation.

TABLE 2.1 Themes and codes of *Xi Thought*

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Explanation</i>	<i>Codes</i>	<i>Sub-codes</i>
1.0 Strong party	This theme indicates that the Party must be the first before anything else, and the Party guides all works.	1.1 strong party	
2.0 Strong nation	This theme indicates that a strong and democratic nation should be built first, to make sure social and economic development.	2.1 strong nation 2.2 democratic 2.3 national rejuvenation 2.4 all-round well-off society 2.5 harmonious and beautiful 2.6 moderately prosperous society 2.7 culturally advanced	2.5.1 ecological civilization 2.5.2 green ecology 2.5.3 green development 2.6.1 technologically advanced 2.6.2 technology and economy combined 2.6.3 living standard improved 2.7.1 culturally rich 2.7.2 culturally confidence 2.7.3 enhancing nation's cultural soft power 2.7.4 cultural creation 2.7.5 improvement of party's media/news dissemination
3.0 Belt and Road Initiatives	This theme particularly discusses the impacts from BRI on social and cultural representations.	3.1 policy communication 3.2 facility/people/trade/funds communications 3.3 new platform for international collaboration	

TABLE 2.1 Cont.

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Explanation</i>	<i>Codes</i>	<i>Sub-codes</i>
		3.4 trade and friendship	
		3.5 sild road	
		3.6 Maritime Silk Road	
4.0 Economic development	This theme indicates a strong focus on economic development other than cultural and social and other aspects.	4.1 high quality	
		4.2 meeting people's needs	
		4.3 leading economic development	
		4.4 innovation driven	
		4.5 cooperative development	
5.0 Opening up	This theme means that a further opening up for the country should happen at different aspects and facets.	5.1 expanding openness	
		5.2 opportunities more than challenges	
		5.3 reforms	
		5.4 new resources	
		5.5 technology	
6.0 People's consideration	Xi expressed that all development needs to be based on people's needs, people's living environment and people's considerations.	6.1 living environment	
		6.2 people's needs	
		6.3 social and cultural harmony	

In order to build the strong nation, technological advance, cultural confidence and green sustainability are the three main areas. These have since become the guiding principles in macro governance, and could be interpreted at a more local level. This “top-level design” also indicates the importance of BRI. It discusses that the nation needs to utilize the opportunities brought by BRI, to maximize our social and economic growth. Further opening up the country could be the initiative for us to look for new resources, new opportunities and reforms. *Xi Thought* points out that opening up the nation could bring more benefits compared to challenges. Overall, *Xi Thought* has a specific focus on “people”. It confirms that all development of the nation needs to be based on meeting people's needs and needs to position people's welfare as our top consideration. *Xi Thought* has a focus on people's empowerment and the overall sustainability of the nation. We believe that such macro-level design at the top will be projected at the meso-level in ports and the micro-level in local

residents. Therefore we have carried out further research into Ningbo Zhoushan Port (NZP) and the local people in the Ningbo city.

Meso-level analysis of Ningbo Zhoushan Port

Meso-level analysis

This section aims to examine whether top-level designs would affect meso-level cultural representations. Here, the meso-level represents industries, institutions and corporations. This research analyses Ningbo Zhoushan Port (NZP) as the case study to examine its organizational image building at the meso-level in order to find out how the top-level public diplomacy is projected domestically from their online promotional multimodal texts. The multimodal data under investigation is collected from the English website of the homepage on the basis that English is the language medium that contributes more to sense making to overseas viewers. Multimodality qualitative analysis has been employed to investigate how the corporate is presented in the media as a “middle” level of public diplomacy by looking into the home page of NZP. The home page of the Port is one of the key official platforms used for business management and promotion, where it is the interest groups’ first point of entry to get access to the information of the main page and other pages in the website. It is the place where all the information is intensively displayed, connected and contributed for meaning construction. Hence in the current chapter, the multimodal study is designed to explore how the home page of NZP has been semiotically constructed with interactions of displayed objects. This can lead to our understanding of what messages are delivered from the home page of NZP, and how *Xi Thought* is projected at this meso-level.

The analytical framework used for multimodal analysis is based on the grammar of visual design proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006). Based on different language functions adopted from Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), three layers of meaning have been explored. Representational meaning is used to trace the visual structure of representation involved in the transitivity experience; Interactive meaning to understand the relationship established with the viewer; and Compositional to explore how each multimodal element is coordinated in a coherent way. As noted by Baldry and Thibault (2010), the home page is “a functional component within the larger scale structure of the website as a whole” (p. 113). The structure of the home page is in general highly generic in the way it is organized, though with variation (Baldry & Thibault, 2010). A web page comprises different clusters displayed in different spatial locations on the screen. The layout of a typical home page is schematized via a unified combination of the site name, top banner, picture, left panel, top bar, top centre-right panel, bottom centre-right panel and bottom bars (Baldry & Thibault, 2010). Based on the genre scheme of web page, the home page of NZP can be divided into four clusters. Cluster 1 indicates the site name, which includes the company name and the logo of the company – Ningbo Zhoushan Port. Cluster 2 lies in the top bar, which is thematically related to the top banner

and corresponds to each information grid under each thematic headline at the lower part. Cluster 3 is the main body part at the top centre panel thematically integrated with verbal and visual clusters, which will be accentuated and focused for analysis in this chapter to explore the semiotic process of meaning construction. Cluster 4 is the panel on the right that mainly provides quick access to the latest news and information. In Cluster 3, the home page of NZP has three different rolling pages. When looking into each individual multimodal page, Cluster 3 has been upgraded into three different superclusters in order to understand the clusters involved in each supercluster as shown in Figure 2.1, Figure 2.2, and Figure 2.3 as follows.

Constructing corporate identity

As shown in Figure 2.1, Supercluster 1 mainly comprises five clusters, involving both visual and linguistic semiotic modes. Cluster 1 shows the transshipment base of containers berth; Cluster 2 shows the transshipment base of iron ore and specialized liquid chemical products berth; Cluster 3 shows the transshipment base of crude oil and coal terminals. From Clusters 1–3, the main services that are currently available in the port can be derived, where it is mainly involved in stevedoring, storing and transporting domestic and foreign trade containers, imported iron ores, crude oil, coals and liquid chemical products. Cluster 4 is a world map, which indicates its intention of linking the globe, serving the world. The visual images of Clusters 1–4 aim to show a multi-functional and comprehensive modern deep-water port, and are connected to the linguistic sign of Cluster 5 to co-express its current position as a first-class international deep-water hub port, building a strong port to serve China and the world.

The visual structure of representation is classificatory with some framing in it. Each cluster element of the composition is framed in three distinctive images by



FIGURE 2.1 Supercluster 1 in the home page of NZP

showing the different scopes of business and presenting the diversified corporate services available in the current port working system. Each of this pieces is offered itself as an item of information for viewers' knowledge, as an item of products or services on display. The viewers have been considered as potential customers or anyone who is interested in knowing more about the port business. All these three clusters were taken from high angles indicating a relatively higher power from the viewer in making a decision for taking on the services. Distinct from a sequential organization of text, visual images are structured spatially. Based on the compositional information value, all the information in Supercluster 1 is idealized in comparison with more detailed and realistic information shown below mainly in the linguistics semiotic modes. The left-oriented zone of image indicates the given information of the different scopes of port business conducted generally known to the viewers, while the right zone of image highlights the new information of building up a first-class international deep-water hub port to foreground the corporate identity. With a world map as background, the key message aims to open up and link this corporate identity to the globe as a microcosm of the world. Both of the linguistic and visual images have thus been integrated to co-construct its corporate identity.

Establishing company's credentials

In Figure 2.2, there are four clusters involved in Supercluster 2, which mainly focuses on presenting the port facility in addition to the diversified port business currently running in NZP shown in Supercluster 1. Here within Supercluster 2, Cluster 1 shows the Hangzhou Bay Sea-crossing Bridge that was completed in 2007, which halves the travelling time from Ningbo to Shanghai. Cluster 2 indicates the highly developed highway network around the Yangzi River connecting Shanghai, Hangzhou, Nanjing and other expressways within Zhejiang Province,



FIGURE 2.2 Supercluster 2 in the home page of NZP

which provides an ideal logistic condition for the port. Cluster 3 shows a breakthrough of 10 million TEUs (20-foot equivalent unit – standard container measurement) hit by the container throughput of Ningbo Port in 2008. Now according to the most recent records in late 2019, the annual container throughput has already exceeded 27 million TEUs. Cluster 4 shows the advanced indoor facility control, and computerized management for container operation.

In its visual image presentation in Supercluster 2, each element of the composition is even more strongly framed. This stronger framing allows an inclination of presenting each as a separate unit of information, illuminating its individuality and differentiation, rather than diversity as shown in Supercluster 1. The visual structure of representation follows distinctively an analytical process within an unstructured part-whole relation. The given well-known information has fallen into Cluster 1 and 2, as indicated by the information value of different zones of image, presenting intensively its rapidly developed and highly convenient traffic conditions. Cluster 3 and 4 have then been accentuated as the key information for the viewers. Interestingly, the historical moment in 2008 with a breakthrough of 10 million TEUs shown in Cluster 3 has been recorded from a rather low angle, representing the company's power over viewers to establish and build up its influential credentials. The building of the company's credentials has been further supported in Cluster 4 by the visual depiction of participants from an oblique angle with a detachment from the viewers and the frontal presentation of computerization, as one of the key signs and reflection of facilitating itself as a modern digital port.

Demonstrating readiness for service provision

When we move to the last rolling page in Supercluster 3 shown in Figure 2.3, it involves mainly two clusters, with one specifically for visual and the other linguistic. Cluster 1 shows the image of what is considered as the first-class container berth at



FIGURE 2.3 Supercluster 3 in the home page of NZP

the port, with its modern advanced facilities, advantaged unique environment and quality global services, which corresponds to the linguistic sign in Cluster 2 of aiming to build a main line port for international ocean-going container transport.

As explicitly shown in Figure 2.3, the linguistic sign in Cluster 2 is saliently situated in the middle covered by the imagistic background in Cluster 1, with the visual composition structure mainly constructed in the dimensions of centre and margin. In addition to its spatial placement in the centre, the salience of the linguistic element in Cluster 2 has been particularly reflected in its font size, colour, and formatting. The information value of the centre with the linguistic signs in a relatively large font size, sharp red colour and bold highlight is more eye-catching for viewers. The centre has managed to be more salient than the background, which intends to grab more of the viewers' attention to its established corporate identity from a deep-water port hub narrowing down specifically to container transport. Distinct from Supercluster 1 and 2, the visual representational structure here in Cluster 1 formulates a symbolic process, where the corporate identity is thus re-established. This established corporate identity is backgrounded consistently by the visual image of its corresponding comprehensive container berth at the port, co-expressing the meaning together to present the main container business available and meanwhile demonstrate the readiness of the company to render the needed services for the potential customers.

Derived from the NZP website, the home page is presented with different multi-modal pages co-constructed by both visual and linguistic semiotic modes. From the representational perspective, the visual structure of representation has been realized from the classificatory process showing different scopes of business and diversified port services globally linked, to the analytical process equipping itself with naturally and nurally unique resources, and finally to the symbolic process re-establishing its corporate identity localizing its status as the main port for international container transport. In the interactive meaning construction, all the images were taken either from a high angle offering itself as items of products and services for viewers' decision, or low oblique angles prioritizing its power in foregrounding the corporate credentials. The modern advanced facilities, advantaged unique environment and quality global services both linguistically and visually constructed bring a corporate image of professionalism, competitiveness and expertise in port business to the viewers, where this corporate image of "strong port" is successfully built up. Composition relates both representation and interaction into a coherent whole foregrounding its international connection with its backgrounded microcosm of the world to emphasize the opening up and global services currently available. Viewers as potential customers are then convinced through its organizational image building in establishing the company's credentials and corporate identity to demonstrate its corporate image of "strong port" under the leadership of "strong nation" and "strong party", and a socio-cultural image of global service to promote opening up and facilitating BRI communication and collaboration for economic development. This fits with micro-level residents' focuses in their lives, which as well reflects with macro-level on "building up harmonious and prosperous society" in

Xi Thought. In this case, the website of the Port acts out its role in PD similar to the role of a messenger. Just as Cull (2008, p. 49) has insightfully pointed out, the advocate can boost the credibility of an idea by working to associate that idea with the messenger who will give it the most credibility. It serves as a powerful channel of domestic representation of PD projected overseas through business connections and embodiment of soft power.

Micro level analysis on the general public

It is believed that *Xi Thought* as top-level design will be represented culturally, socially and politically at the micro-level of the people. Therefore, the research has conducted 51 in-depth interviews with local residents in Ningbo, regarding their impressions of the city, as well as their understanding of the city's representation. It is hoped that through in-depth interviews, we can find out social and cultural presentations at the micro-level, and whether such a local level could match with the top-level design of *Xi Thought*. This could further help us to understand how public diplomacy of a nation can penetrate into different levels.

Using a life history method, 51 unstructured and in-depth interviews were fully transcribed. Ethical issues have been cleared with the Research Ethics Committee at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China. Using a combined purposive sampling and snowballing approach, the research has approached more than 100 residents in Ningbo at various regions and districts, and finalized 51 interviewees. The life history approach allows the interviewees to talk more about their own stories, how they grew up in the city, their memory of the city and emotional connections with the city. The life history method comes from a narrative form, which explores the constructivistic story and the expression of self-representations (Dhunpath, 2000). It is considered as a helpful approach here to examine the social and cultural representations of *Xi Thought* from residents' perspectives. The research has conducted semi-open coding with these interviews in order to obtain as much information as we can. Because all interviewees have discussed their impressions on the city representations, "place identity" and "destination image" literatures are used here in order to acquire various themes for coding. In conclusion, from those literatures, perceptual/cognitive factors and affective factors have been selected (Baloglu & McCleary, 1999; Styliadis, Belhassen, & Shani, 2017; Pike & Ryan, 2004). The themes and codes are finally concluded in Table 2.2. Guided by those suggested themes and codes from literatures, the research applies a semi-open coding method, which allows extra codes to enrich the contents, meanwhile maintaining the structure of coding.

The coding procedure of interview transcripts explains how local residents view the city, and how they consider the cultural and social representations of the city. The research then compares the macro-level codes with micro-level codes to find out whether there are any matches and overlaps. These overlaps could indicate the penetrated influences from top-level design of *Xi Thought* at micro-level (residents' level).

TABLE 2.2 Themes and codes from interviews

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Explanation</i>	<i>Codes</i>
1.0 Strong nation	Interviewees might express a pride in the nation's strong development, or strong city's development.	1. Strong nation 2. Strong city development
2.0 Socioeconomic attributes	The interviewees consider many socioeconomic developments representing the city	2.1 Economic development 2.2 Degree of urbanization 2.3 Extent of commercialization 2.4 Political stability 2.5 Fame/reputation 2.6 Costs/price levels 2.7 Community harmony 2.8 Extent of opening up 2.9 Modernization 2.10 Innovation 2.11 Technologically advanced 2.12 Living standard improved
3.0 Amenities/facilities	These codes show the development in amenities and facilities for the city can represent the city as well.	3.1 Shopping facilities 3.2 Transportation 3.3 Accessibility 3.4 Architecture/buildings 3.5 Service quality 3.6 Restaurants
4.0 Natural environment	Natural environment includes their impressions on the importance of the landscape and scenery to the city representation.	4.1 Scenic beauty 4.2 Beautiful landscape rural areas
5.0 Cultural and historical environment	Their feelings towards culture, and how do they feel what should represent the city from a cultural aspect.	5.1 History of Ningbo 5.2 Ningbo Gang 5.3 Business oriented history 5.4 Cultural background (Liangzhu culture and etc) 5.5 Water element (importance of water in their lives and their family histories) 5.6 Port culture

TABLE 2.2 Cont.

<i>Themes</i>	<i>Explanation</i>	<i>Codes</i>
6.0 Attractions		6.1 Cultural attractions 6.2 Fairs, exhibits, festivals 6.3 Different customs/culture 6.4 Historic sites/museums 6.5 Gastronomy (food and drinks)
7.0 Social environment	Social environment determines the city's stability for local residents. Therefore, they would consider the overall sound social environment could represent the city's soft power.	7.1 Safety 7.2 Night life entertainment 7.3 Crowdedness 7.4 Cleanliness 7.5 Hospitality/friendliness/receptiveness

First, when macro level expressed the priority of development is a strong nation and strong party, the micro level has shown that a strong nation and social stability have increased pride and empowerment among the community. Second, the macro level indicates that building a viable and healthy society requires deep cultural sediments combined with modern cultural elements. While, at the micro level, many interviewees also agreed that both historical culture and modern culture are important for the city's cultural representation. However, they felt that Ningbo is a city lacking such cultural constructions. While the macro-level indicates that the strong nation provides the social stability, the interviewees at the micro-level have indicated that Ningbo can be considered as a very harmonious society, which could be taken as part of the city's reputation. This is as well a strong reason to enhance their place attachment and resident empowerment. Further, the green ecological system and overall sustainable development are key focuses at the macro-level. At the micro-level, interviewees indicated that the green and beautiful landscape/natural environment should be considered as the important city image for Ningbo, although they are not properly managed at the moment. At the micro-level, interviewees expressed that Ningbo is a city well known for its fast economic growth speed, history of family business development, and highly commercialization and modernization. These are an important basis for enhancing the city's representations, as well as people's empowerments through the meso-level. At the macro-level, *Xi Thought* also mentioned that a sustainable economic development should be continually taken as the development priority. Such priority needs the support of technological growth and social stability. Finally, there are some elements that are expressed at the micro-level, but have not been mentioned directly at the macro-level, for example, the port culture and "water element". Interviewees

pointed out that both port culture and the water element are important in Ningbo's representations. Even though many interviewees have never been to the port, they consider that the port should be the "representative" for the city, as this is what Ningbo is famous for. Similar to port, "water" has been mentioned by almost everyone. It could be dam, could be water, could be river, could be the sea, could be lake, and could be seafood. Interviewees consider water as the most important thing in their lives, and makes Ningbo unique from other cities. Although these elements are not directly mentioned at the macro-level, *Xi Thought* did mention quite a lot about BRI. Ningbo, as a very important port city of BRI, MSR in particular, has shown its strategical importance here. The coding exercise for macro level with *Xi Thought* documents, and for micro level with interview transcripts, has located a few matching focuses, including "strong nation"; "economic resilience"; "social stability and cultural viability"; and "green environment and sustainable development". These indicate that *Xi Thought* has provided a "top-level" initiative for the nation's development, while residents at the local level might feel similarly for their city's representations and developments. In other words, top-level design as advocacy resonates with people's perceptions from public diplomacy perspectives domestically.

Discussion and conclusion

Through our analysis at the macro, meso-level and micro-level, we can see that the three levels are intertwined and interwoven closely together. As was argued by Snape (2019), engagement with the Chinese academic literature can demonstrate how central documents and political discourse are used as a governance technique by both Party and government. Examinations into the three levels of approaches on public diplomacy ranging from *Xi Thought* at the top to the website of Ningbo Zhoushan Port, and further down to the civil society have exhibited that all of them have worked in a circuit with the macro level being the guiding principle while the meso level is the bridge with the micro as the projection of effects from both of the above. This has somewhat achieved the ideal public diplomacy structure proposed by Cull (2008, p. 48), which "would provide for systematic listening, research, and analysis within each strand of public diplomacy and ensure a mechanism to feed-back results and advice into the administration of public diplomacy and back into the highest level of policy making".

Companies as important stakeholders play a significant role in public diplomacy at the meso level in projecting soft power from the top. For SOEs in particular, they are the entities that implement specific collaborative projects of BRI and communicate China's BRI around the world (Yang, 2018). In an examination of the Chinese context, Yang (2018) has shown how Chinese soft power is both inward and outward, looking into the examples of the Shanghai Expo, China's national image films and the revival of Confucius. He argues that understanding this dual role of soft power is important in comprehending the underlying motivations

behind China's attempts to create and manage its identity as orderly, prosperous and legitimate. As rightly pointed out by Nye (2008), public diplomacy tries to attract by drawing attention to a country's potential resources through various means including broadcasting, subsidizing cultural exports, arranging exchanges and so forth. In this case, the website is employed to deploy China's public diplomacy domestically with the ultimate goal of producing soft power. Although no contract is involved in this context, the fact that the corporate is an SOE pertains to the fact that it has a binding relation implicitly with the government (Yang, 2018).

In this examination, we have found that the advocacy of public diplomacy has been effective domestically by "conveying information and selling a positive image" from the business perspective as well as the general public. In this sense, a long-term relationship has been fostered that will create an enabling environment for government policies, as was envisioned by Nye (2008). Ports constitute the "middle" level of public diplomacy targeting interest groups, which are one of the channels that China has tapped into among its soft power resources. With this proclamation of *Xi Thought* narrative, the world at large needs to understand the longer-term ramifications of the "new era" discourse for China's domestic politics as well as for its self-image in the international context (Holbig, 2018, p. 191). Gone are the days when the leadership were to "grope for stones to cross the river" at the time when the reform and open-up policy was first implemented in Deng Xiaoping's era, *Xi Thought* now serves as an overarching guiding doctrine in policies or strategies on development of not just ports but almost every front of the country. In this sense, the nation's "soft power" is not just publicized but also coordinated in the public effort of both local and business stakeholders domestically. Such an "enabling environment for public diplomacy" envisaged by Nye (2008) has thus created and will be sensed and experienced internationally in due course.

Ports in this study as a holistic conception will project the representation of a country because they are the first point of contact where ships and containers from overseas will land, construe and digest. Ports are not only represented by cranes and containers, or logos and slogans, they project their unique images so that various stakeholders may identify or be drawn to them in one way or another. If we compare cities to a complex cocktail, the spectacle of empty streets caused by the lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 will serve as a stark reminder of how people are making urban spaces, port city in this case, compelling and fascinating. Therefore, people irrespective of being at ports, in streets or anywhere else are the decisive factors that can testify to the success or failure of any moves in public diplomacy strategies.

Furthermore, the breakneck speed of change coupled with various "black swan" events in the world has confronted every nation with unprecedented challenges and unparalleled possibilities in the new era. A virtual environment such as the Internet allows geographically remote users to interact real-time, which constitutes one of the core problems of contemporary advocacy by disrupting old news boundaries and cycles. Information is power; in today's world almost every people has

access to that power. Those who can occupy the attention span long enough will be the winners. Those who may garner more attention and focus will gain power. Politics has become more about the competition to win credibility as politics in the information age may ultimately be about whose story wins (Nye, 2008, p. 95). In this sense, NZP has accomplished a lot by promoting its image in line with the public diplomacy strategies domestically. Recent access to the port's Chinese website has found it has been updated dramatically by making it more eye-catching and interactive with new features of motion graphics and animated movies with flashes.

This study has only focused on one of the ports along the Maritime Silk Road by examining how public diplomacy under *Xi Thought* has been projected from top-down and bottom-up levels domestically. It will be more constructive to look into other ports along the MSR to further gauge the representations. More importantly, how this domestic projection is resonated by international stakeholders calls for more probe in future.

Note

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