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THE ROLE OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION IN SHAPING PERCEPTIONS OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS IN CHINA AND THE U.S

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of visual communication in shaping perceptions of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through a comparative analysis of educational and media materials in China and the United States. Visual communication, increasingly central in pedagogy and public discourse, functions not only as a learning aid but also as an ideological tool that frames global initiatives. This study employs a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) using a PRISMA-based selection process and thematic analysis. A total of 12 peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2024 were systematically reviewed, focusing on visual representations of the BRI in educational and media-based learning materials from China and the United States. The analysis identified three main themes: visual narratives as ideological framing tools, comparative representations across national contexts, and the impact of visuals on learners' interpretive skills. The research aimed to identify visual communication strategies in BRI-related educational materials, examine how these visuals reflect political, cultural, and ideological narratives, and compare cross-national differences in visual framing. The findings indicate that Chinese materials emphasize cooperation, development, and cultural symbolism to legitimize the BRI, while U.S. and Western materials predominantly highlight risks, debt, and geopolitical rivalry, reflecting caution and skepticism. European and Hong Kong narratives demonstrated hybrid framings, balancing opportunity with suspicion. The study concludes that visuals serve as powerful framing devices that influence geopolitical literacy by reinforcing national ideological positions. It further suggests that integrating visual literacy into education is essential for fostering critical analysis of international narratives and avoiding passive acceptance of biased representations.

KEYWORDS: Visual Communication, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Educational Materials, Media Framing.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background Of the Research

In an era dominated by visual media, visual communication has emerged as a central tool in the dissemination of political, economic, and cultural narratives. Unlike text alone, visuals such as maps, infographics, and photographs possess an immediate emotional and cognitive impact, enabling them to shape perceptions rapidly and effectively. As global initiatives like China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) seek international legitimacy and cooperation, their representation through visual media becomes not only a matter of communication but also one of strategic influence. Educational materials serve as a long-term mechanism for embedding values, ideologies, and perspectives into young minds, and the inclusion of visual elements within these materials plays a critical role in shaping how such global strategies are understood by future generations (Pawlik, 2023).

Educational materials in different countries interpret and present the BRI through their own political and cultural lenses. In China, the BRI is depicted in textbooks and learning platforms as a symbol of national pride, global leadership, and peaceful development, reinforced through celebratory visuals and harmonious imagery (Fang, 2017). In contrast, educational narratives in the United States are more likely to question the initiative's intentions, often accompanied by visuals that emphasize strategic competition, debt diplomacy, or geopolitical tension (Wu, 2024). These contrasting visual approaches reflect larger ideological divides and are instrumental in forming public and student opinions about China's global role. By examining how visual elements within educational materials communicate the BRI in China and the U.S., this research aims to uncover how such visuals operate as tools of soft power and cultural framing.

1.2. Problem Statement

Visual communication plays a central role in how complex international initiatives are explained in educational contexts. Educational and media-based learning materials in both China and the United States make extensive use of visuals to present the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, there is limited research examining how these visual elements frame the BRI and what cultural or ideological meanings they communicate to learners. Existing studies largely prioritize political or economic analysis, leaving the visual and

educational dimensions underexplored. As a result, it remains unclear how Chinese and U.S. educational materials visually construct narratives about the BRI and how these narratives differ across cultural contexts. This study addresses this gap by focusing on visual framing, educational representation, and ideological meaning-making.

1.3. Research Objectives

1. To identify key visual communication strategies used to represent the Belt and Road Initiative in Chinese and U.S. educational and media-related learning materials, as reported in published academic studies.
2. To analyze how visual elements in these materials convey cultural and ideological narratives associated with the Belt and Road Initiative.
3. To compare similarities and differences in the visual framing of the Belt and Road Initiative across Chinese and American educational contexts through a systematic review of existing literature.

1.4. Significance Of the Study

This study is significant because it sheds light on how visual communication within educational materials influences the way international initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are perceived by learners in different cultural and political contexts. By examining materials from China and the United States through a systematic literature review, the research uncovers how visual elements are used not only to convey information but also to frame ideological narratives and national interests. The study contributes to academic discourse on political communication, media literacy, and international education by highlighting the power of visual content in shaping public understanding. It offers valuable insights for educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers seeking to critically assess and develop educational content that fosters global awareness and critical thinking. Additionally, this research identifies gaps in literature and lays the groundwork for future studies on visual representation, cross-cultural education, and the role of soft power in shaping global narratives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Visual Communication in Educational Contexts

Visual communication plays a foundational role in modern pedagogy, as it significantly enhances

learners' ability to process, retain, and critically engage with educational content. As digital and visual media become increasingly integrated into teaching, visuals such as diagrams, images, maps, and infographics are not only supplementary but also central to the learning process. Research suggests that visual elements facilitate cognitive engagement by activating multiple channels of information processing, thereby improving comprehension and memory retention (Traboco, Pandian, Nikiphorou, & Gupta, 2022). This is especially critical in the study of abstract or global topics, where visuals can simplify complex systems and aid in constructing mental models.

The theoretical roots of visual communication in education lie in semiotics and multimodal discourse analysis. Semiotic frameworks interpret visuals as signs that carry meaning beyond their surface appearance. In the context of pedagogy, this enables educators to shape meaning through deliberate design choices such as color, composition, and spatial organization—which influence interpretation (Muna, 2022).

Furthermore, educational policy and curriculum design increasingly recognize the importance of visual literacy. In modern classrooms, especially digital and hybrid environments, the ability to decode and analyze visual content is now considered essential to developing critical thinking and media literacy skills (Udris-Borodavko et al., 2023). As such, visual communication is not merely a pedagogical tool but a powerful ideological and cultural vector within education systems.

2.2. The Belt and Road Initiative in Educational Visual Representations

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013, has evolved from an infrastructure-driven economic strategy to a global development framework with distinct political and cultural dimensions. It seeks to enhance regional connectivity through corridors, trade routes, and investment partnerships that span Asia, Europe, and beyond. China's official narrative emphasizes shared development, mutual benefit, and historical continuity, often invoking the symbolism of the ancient Silk Road as a cultural bridge.

Media discourse plays a pivotal role in shaping global perceptions of the BRI. In Europe, for example, countries have responded with varying degrees of optimism and concern, influenced by political alignments and domestic narratives. In Central-Eastern Europe, China employs a desecrated narrative, framing the BRI as an economic

opportunity and soft power tool, which some governments use strategically to negotiate autonomy within the EU framework (Jakimów, 2019). A case study from the Netherlands shows how strategic narratives tied to the BRI can influence foreign policy and non-coercively shift public discourse in China's favor (Langendonk, 2020).

Moreover, the symbolic elements of the BRI such as roads, bridges, and corridors are not just physical infrastructure but metaphors for connectivity, peace, and cooperation. These metaphors function as powerful tools of soft power that challenge Western discursive dominance and contribute to reshaping global norms (Turcsányi & Kachlikova, 2020; Miao, 2021).

2.3. Visual Framing and Ideological Messaging in International Education

Framing theory provides an essential lens to examine how visual communication in education constructs and conveys ideology. By determining what is emphasized or omitted, visuals in textbooks and educational media can promote particular national or political worldviews while downplaying others. For example, the use of culturally resonant symbols or selective historical references can guide learners toward specific ideological interpretations. This is evident in Chinese educational propaganda related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), where visuals recast historical events to legitimize contemporary policy goals, embedding political narratives within educational materials (Freymann, 2021; Gan, 2022).

The framing of visuals is not limited to China. A broader body of scholarship shows that visuals in educational contexts worldwide are employed to subtly reinforce ideological positions. For instance, analyses of multimodal news coverage of the BRI demonstrate that images and videos, when paired with selective textual content, establish dominant frames that construct public perception of geopolitical initiatives (Qi, Sannusi, & Rizal, 2024). Furthermore, visual propaganda in educational and political contexts often leverages emotional appeal, embedding cues that elicit psychological alignment with the intended narrative (Photiou et al., 2019). In this way, visual framing serves not only to educate but also to normalize ideological positions, positioning certain perspectives as "truth" within the learning process.

2.4. Visual Communication of the Belt and Road Initiative in Chinese Learning Resources

China has employed visual media as a central

strategy to promote the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly in educational and policy-oriented contexts. Textbooks, official documents, and digital platforms incorporate visual elements such as maps, diagrams, and imagery of successful infrastructure projects to present the BRI as a symbol of connectivity, progress, and inclusiveness. These visual strategies emphasize China's leadership in global development while framing the initiative as a collaborative effort that benefits partner countries. By standardizing the design and presentation of BRI-related visuals across official channels, the Chinese government ensures consistent messaging and alignment with national objectives (Yang, 2022).

The integration of cultural symbols alongside modern infrastructure visuals is a hallmark of China's visual communication strategy. Studies show that BRI branding often employs maps, roads, bridges, and railways alongside traditional motifs, such as flags and cultural landmarks, to reinforce both modern progress and historical continuity (Yuan & Krotova, 2023). The use of specific colors, particularly blue and gold, conveys stability, prosperity, and success, adding a symbolic layer to the initiative's visual representation. In addition, digital learning platforms and youth-focused media increasingly feature BRI narratives through animations, interactive maps, and promotional videos that simplify complex geopolitical themes for younger audiences. China's portrayal of partner countries is also strategically visualized to highlight inclusiveness while reinforcing China's central role in fostering cooperation. By embedding such imagery in educational and public media, the Chinese state uses visuals not only as tools of information but also as mechanisms of persuasion and soft power. These visual narratives legitimize the BRI domestically and internationally, shaping perceptions of China as both a leader and a benevolent partner in global development (Freyman, 2021; Dunford & Liu, 2019).

2.5. Visual Communication of the Belt and Road Initiative in U.S. Learning Contexts

In the United States, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is largely represented through the lens of strategic competition, debt diplomacy, and geopolitical rivalry. Educational narratives in social studies, history, and political science often reflect broader foreign policy concerns, highlighting risks of authoritarian expansion and economic dependency. Research shows that American media coverage emphasizes debt risks, ecological concerns, and questions of transparency, often framing the initiative as a geopolitical strategy rather than a cooperative development project (Wu, 2024).

Mainstream American newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* consistently portray

the BRI through frames of economic and security threats, integrating imagery that reflects concerns about authoritarian control and global dominance. Analyses of U.S. media discourses confirm that coverage is predominantly critical, portraying China as a geopolitical competitor while marginalizing narratives of collaboration (Yu & Yan, 2020; Huang, 2021).

At the same time, there is evidence of limited or absent coverage of the BRI in many American educational contexts, particularly at the K-12 level. Where it does appear, the initiative is more often linked to discussions of global power competition rather than its development aspects. The dominance of critical framing in both media and education reflects broader ideological concerns in the United States, where visuals and narratives around the BRI often highlight authoritarianism and economic coercion rather than mutual development (Yang & Van Gorp, 2021).

2.6. Comparative Analysis of Visual Strategies: China Vs. U.S.

Visual strategies surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) differ sharply between Chinese and U.S. contexts, reflecting deeper political and ideological divides. In Chinese educational and media materials, visuals emphasize infrastructure, maps, and cooperative imagery, projecting a narrative of connectivity and inclusivity. These representations often integrate cultural symbolism with modern technological achievements, creating a fusion of tradition and progress that portrays China as a benevolent and forward-looking power (Zhang & Wu, 2017). Such visuals are carefully curated to reinforce China's soft power and global development role, constructing an image of shared prosperity and collective advancement (Xu, 2023).

In contrast, U.S. media and educational resources often employ visuals that stress geopolitical rivalry and potential risks. Maps and infographics highlight contested regions or debt-related concerns, framing the BRI as a geopolitical maneuver rather than a neutral development initiative. This tendency aligns with a broader discourse in American outlets that focus on economic dependencies, authoritarian control, and security implications (Xiao, Li, & Hu, 2019). The ideological underpinnings of these visuals communicate caution, skepticism, and a defensive posture toward China's expanding influence (Wei & Hu, 2024).

A comparative analysis highlights that Chinese visual strategies are generally human-centered and development-oriented, while U.S. visual representations prioritize critical evaluation and interpretive distance. These differences reflect distinct cultural and educational approaches to visual meaning-making rather than neutral design variation. By framing the BRI through

contrasting visual narratives, educational materials in both contexts shape how learners interpret global initiatives, demonstrating the influential role of visual communication in constructing cultural and ideological understanding (Wu, 2024).

2.7. Implications For Curriculum Design and Global Citizenship Education

In the context of globalized education, visual literacy has become central to curriculum design, as students are increasingly required to interpret and critically engage with international visual narratives. Visuals are powerful tools for framing complex global issues, and fostering visual literacy enables learners to question ideological framing, assess credibility, and recognize cultural perspectives.

Integrating multimodal and image-based pedagogies into global citizenship education has shown positive results in expanding students' critical perspectives. Pedagogical approaches such as arts-based and multimodal teaching encourage learners to interrogate visual texts, uncover underlying ideologies, and engage with global themes through a participatory lens. Case studies demonstrate that such methods deepen reflection and broaden the understanding of global citizenship beyond traditional textual instruction (Kang, Mehranian, & Hyatt, 2017).

From a broader curricular standpoint, global citizenship education must address challenges associated with digital interconnectedness and the "flow" of information across borders. Scholars argue that curricula should balance fostering critical local citizenship with preparing learners to navigate and critique global ideologies (van der Walt & Wolhuter, 2021). Collaborative international learning initiatives further demonstrate the value of cross-cultural exposure, as students develop stronger analytical skills and global awareness when analyzing diverse visual and textual narratives together (King de Ramirez, 2019).

2.8. Literature Gap

Although scholarly research on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has expanded, existing studies predominantly examine political, economic, and diplomatic dimensions, with limited attention to visual communication and education. Prior research shows that visual elements such as maps, cultural symbols, and infrastructure imagery are commonly used to frame the BRI in both Chinese and U.S. media discourse (Wu, 2024; He, 2023). However, these studies largely focus on news media and public narratives, overlooking educational and learning-oriented contexts where visual communication plays a central role in meaning-making. There is a notable lack of comparative research

examining how visual elements are used within textbooks, classroom materials, and digital learning resources in China and the United States to construct cultural and ideological narratives about the BRI. As a result, it remains unclear how educational visuals shape learners' understanding of global initiatives and influence visual literacy and cultural interpretation over time. Addressing this gap is essential for advancing research on visual communication, education, and ideological representation.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Method and Design

This study adopts a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) design, combined with thematic analysis, to examine how visual communication in educational contexts frames the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This approach offers systematic guidance in gathering, reviewing and integrating pertinent literature in the most rigorous as well as replicable way. The selection of studies follows the PRISMA guidelines, ensuring transparency and consistency across all stages of the review process, from initial identification of sources to final inclusion, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the findings.

3.2. Data Collection

1. Search Strategies

- **Keyword Research**

Keywords were carefully selected to align with the research objectives, including "Visual communication in education", "Belt and Road Initiative", "Textbook representations of BRI", "Comparative media framing China US" and "Visual literacy".

- **Database Research**

The databases used to include the research were JSTOR, Web of Science (WOS), Google Scholar, and ResearchGate.

- **BOOLEAN Operator**

Boolean operators were applied to refine the search process. The operator **AND** was used to combine core concepts, such as "Belt and Road Initiative" **AND** "visual communication" and ensuring that retrieved studies addressed all key areas of the research. The operator **OR** was applied to broaden the scope by including synonyms and related terms, for example "visual communication" **OR** "visual literacy". The operator **NOT** was used to exclude irrelevant material, such as studies focusing on "Belt and Road Initiative **NOT** finance **NOT** infrastructure".

2. Inclusion And Exclusion Criteria

The review included peer-reviewed journal articles

that examine visual communication related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) within educational or media-

based learning contexts and excluded the financial infrastructure papers.

Table 1: Inclusion And Exclusion Criteria.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication	Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and credible reports published in last 15 years.	Non-peer-reviewed sources, grey literature, and articles before year 2015.
Research type	Empirical and theoretical studies relevant to Belt and Road Initiative narratives, China engineering education etc.	Studies with insufficient academic rigor, lacking relevance to the topic, or focusing solely on aesthetics.
Language	Articles written in English to ensure consistent analysis.	Articles written in languages other than English.
Focus	Studies addressing Visual communication, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) etc.	Literature not related to Visual communication, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) etc.

3. Prisma Framework

A systematic selection process was carried out following the PRISMA framework to maintain transparency and rigor. Out of an initial pool of 35 articles, 20 studies met the preliminary inclusion criteria. Further during this stage, 15 articles were

excluded as they were published before 2015 and did not align with the temporal scope of the study. After full-text assessment, 8 additional articles were excluded due to incomplete or inaccessible full texts 12 were chosen based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. The PRISMA flow diagram summarizing this process is presented in Figure 1.

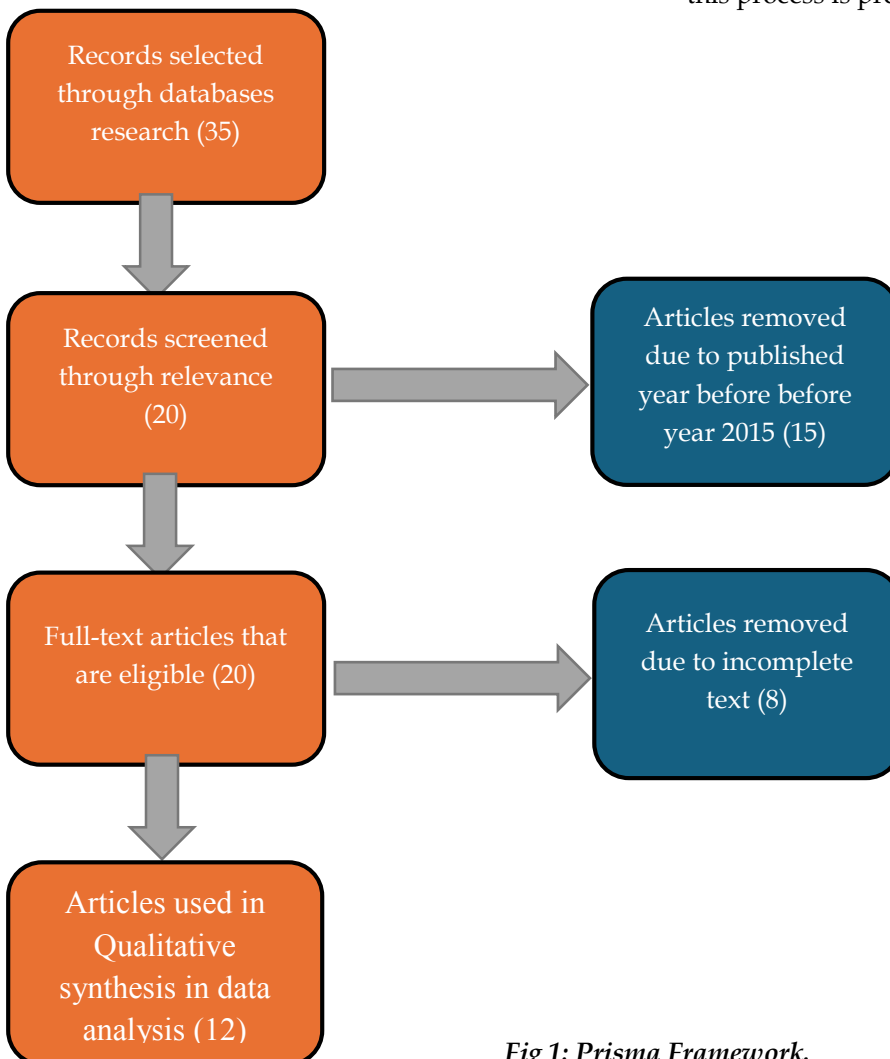


Fig 1: Prisma Framework.

The scale of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a global policy tool is broad but the sample size was

intentionally limited (12 studies) in order to ensure analytical depth, relevance and methodological rigour. The scarcity of the small sample size of the studies involved reflects the scant overlap of the core requirements of the review; i.e. visual communication, learning/education-oriented context, and direct participation in BRI narratives. Despite the already fruitful literature on the political, economic, and infrastructural nature of the BRI, only a limited number of peer-reviewed literature explicitly explore visual representations in a framework of education or pedagogy. The screening process based on PRISMA consequently depended

less on numerical depth but on conceptual correspondence and analytical applicability. Within the scope of qualitative practises of SLR, this small sample was conducive to a more thorough thematic exploration of visual framing strategies in the national context, the depth of interpretation, rather than sample size. The obtained corpus is therefore sufficient to generate valuable comparative information without undermining the methodological transparency and analytical integrity.

3.3. Data Analysis Method

Table 2: Thematic Analysis Steps.

Steps	Description
Familiarization	It includes reading and re-reading of all the collected dated.
Initial codes	Generating initial codes from the data by highlighting key points, concepts, and ideas relevant to the research objectives.
Initial themes	Codes are then grouped to develop the broader themes.
Reviewing themes	Themes are reviewed to ensure that they are not distracted from original research focus and objectives.
Defining and Naming themes	According to the focus of the data collected, it includes defining and naming themes according to the context of the content of the articles selected.
Producing the Report	Utilize these themes in data analysis and discussion

3.4. Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to established ethical standards for research by ensuring transparency, accuracy, and academic integrity throughout the systematic literature review process. Only peer-reviewed and credible sources are included to avoid bias and misinformation. Since the study relies exclusively on secondary data, no direct interaction

with human participants occurs, thus minimizing ethical risks. However, care is taken to critically evaluate the cultural and political contexts of the materials analyzed, ensuring respectful interpretation and avoiding misrepresentation of national narratives or ideologies.

3.5. Data Analysis

Table 3: Themes Extracted for Slr.

Themes	Description
Visual Narratives as Tools of Ideological Framing	This theme examines how visuals in educational materials function as framing devices that legitimize, contest, or communicate political and ideological narratives about the BRI.
Comparative Representations of the BRI in Educational Materials	This theme focuses on how Chinese and U.S. textbooks and learning resources differ or converge in their visual strategies, reflecting contrasting cultural and political perspectives.
Impact of Visuals on Perceptions and Geopolitical Literacy	This theme explores how recurring visual elements shape students' and the public's perceptions of the BRI, reinforcing national narratives and influencing global awareness.

Theme 1: Visual Narratives as Tools of Ideological Framing

This theme highlights how visual narratives

function as powerful tools for ideological framing within educational and media-based learning materials.

Table 4

Study	Objectives	Methodology	Data Analysis and Results	Conclusion
Van & Chatterje (2023)	To investigate how China and Russia used visual narratives in the 'Silk Road' documentary to frame the BRI.	Visual methodology and case study of a Chinese Russian media co-production.	Found that visuals highlighted nostalgia, cultural heritage, and future development. Russian perspectives were marginalized, while Chinese narratives dominated.	Visual media served as an ideological tool for China to project the BRI as human and cultural development, strengthening its soft power.

Turcsányi & Kachlikova (2020)	To analyze how European media adopted or resisted Chinese framings of the BRI as opportunity vs. threat.	Content analysis of leading newspapers in the UK, Spain, and Poland.	Found that media initially portrayed the BRI positively, focusing on economic opportunity. Security concerns were less emphasized.	Chinese framings initially succeeded in shaping European ideological narratives, though longer-term acceptance was mixed.
Zhang (2020)	To examine European media representations of the BRI across UK, French, and German outlets.	Media discourse analysis under EU-China strategic narratives framework.	Coverage was limited but varied: UK media was more critical, German media cautious, French media more neutral. Visuals reflected mixed framings of cooperation and suspicion.	European narratives about the BRI were fragmented, showing how visuals and framing mediated ideological interpretations differently across countries.
Kuteleva (2023)	To study China's use of social media visuals to promote the BRI and Xi Jinping's leadership.	Critical discourse analysis of visual-entertainment content on YouTube (2013-2019).	Found that visual content emphasized positivity, cooperation, and modernity, often through songs and animations targeted at foreign audiences.	Visual-entertainment media acted as an innovative ideological tool to promote the BRI globally and normalize China's rise.

Theme 1 highlights how visual communication serves as an ideological tool in shaping perceptions of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Studies reveal that Chinese media and co-produced content emphasize nostalgia, cooperation, and development, while marginalizing alternative perspectives. In contrast, European narratives vary, with the UK more critical, Germany cautious, and France neutral. Social media platforms further reinforce China's positive framing. Collectively, visuals legitimize the BRI and project China's rise, though international

interpretations remain fragmented.

Theme 2: Comparative Representations of the BRI In Educational Materials

This theme examines how educational materials in different national contexts visually represent the Belt and Road Initiative. The reviewed studies reveal contrasting visual approaches in Chinese and U.S. learning resources, reflecting distinct cultural and ideological perspectives.

Table 5

Study	Objectives	Methodology	Data Analysis and Results	Conclusion
Teo & Xu (2023)	To compare discursive strategies in reporting on the BRI between China Daily and The New York Times.	Comparative discourse analysis of newspaper reports.	China Daily framed the BRI as cooperative and beneficial, while The New York Times emphasized geopolitical risks and challenges.	Media framings diverged significantly, reflecting national ideological and political contexts.
Khoo & Datta (2023)	To analyze global and Hong Kong media perspectives on the BRI using sentiment and trend analysis.	Computational sentiment and trend analysis using the GDELT dataset.	Global media sentiment varied, with Hong Kong media showing more nuanced and shifting perspectives depending on political context.	Different geopolitical contexts shaped varying narratives, with Hong Kong showing hybrid perspectives.
Wei & Hu (2024)	To conduct a comparative ecological discourse analysis of Chinese, Indian, and American news reports on the BRI.	Corpus-based ecological discourse analysis of news reports (2013-2022).	Chinese media used positive ecological framing, while Indian and American media often employed skeptical and critical framings.	Cross-national analysis revealed sharp contrasts in ecological and political framings of the BRI.
Wangcheng, Jiayu & Ming (2024)	To investigate how Chinese media constructs China's image through BRI news discourse.	Corpus linguistics and positive discourse analysis of Chinese news outlets.	Chinese outlets consistently portrayed the BRI positively, emphasizing cooperation, development, and China's constructive global role.	Chinese media reinforced China's positive image through consistent framing of the BRI as a development-oriented initiative.

Theme 2 reveals significant contrasts in how the BRI is represented across Chinese, U.S., and global media. Chinese outlets consistently frame the BRI as cooperative, developmental, and ecologically positive, while American and Indian media emphasize skepticism, risks, and geopolitical rivalry. European and Hong Kong perspectives remain more nuanced and hybrid. These differences highlight

how geopolitical contexts, and national interests shape the visual and discursive framing of the BRI internationally.

Theme 3: Impact Of Visuals on Perceptions and Geopolitical Literacy

This theme explores how visual representations influence learners' perceptions and their

understanding of global initiatives. The findings indicate that repeated exposure to specific visual

framings shapes interpretive skills, critical awareness, and broader geopolitical literacy.

Table 6

Study	Objectives	Methodology	Data Analysis and Results	Conclusion
García-Herrero (2025)	To identify key determinants of global sentiment toward the BRI.	Quantitative study using GDELT global media dataset with sentiment analysis.	Found that geopolitical alignment and national interests strongly shaped sentiment; visuals and framing influenced whether the BRI was perceived as cooperative or threatening.	Global perceptions of the BRI are mediated by both geopolitical positioning and visual-discursive framings in international media.
Mokashi et al. (2022)	To explore global perceptions of the BRI through big data analytics.	Natural language processing (NLP) of 7,800+ news articles worldwide.	Showed a decline in positive sentiment toward the BRI over time, with visual and textual framings contributing to skepticism.	Large-scale media analysis reveals how recurring visual-discursive framings erode trust in the BRI.
Apirakvanalee (2023)	To analyze how BBC podcasts frame the BRI for Western audiences.	Discourse analysis of BBC's Stories from the New Silk Road podcast episodes.	Found that the BBC framed the BRI with cautious skepticism, using narratives and associated visuals to stress power imbalances and risks.	Western media employ subtle framing strategies that question China's intentions and influence perceptions of the BRI.
Miao (2021)	To examine how European discourse frames the BRI as soft power.	Discourse analysis of European media and political texts.	Identified that visuals and metaphors initially framed the BRI positively as cooperation but shifted toward suspicion and caution.	Visual and discursive framing significantly shaped European perceptions, showing the BRI as both opportunity and geopolitical challenge.

Theme 3 shows that visual and discursive framing strongly influences global perceptions of the BRI. García-Herrero (2025) found that geopolitical alignment shapes whether the BRI is viewed as cooperative or threatening, while Mokashi et al. (2022) highlighted declining positive sentiment due to recurring skeptical framings. Apirakvanalee (2023) demonstrated that Western media emphasize risks and power imbalances, and Miao (2021) noted Europe's shift from cooperation to caution.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Visual Narratives as Tools of Ideological Framing

Van Noort and Chatterje-Doody (2023) show how Chinese visual narratives in a co-produced documentary emphasized nostalgia, heritage, and development to legitimize the BRI. This supports earlier work by Callahan (2016) and d'Hooghe (2019), who argue that China strategically uses visuals and symbolism to frame the BRI as both historically grounded and globally beneficial.

Similarly, Turcsányi and Kachlikova (2020) found that European media initially echoed China's economic opportunity framing but later shifted toward skepticism. This pattern reflects findings by Gries et al. (2017) and Huang and Ding (2021), showing that while visual framings can influence perceptions, their impact is often moderated by geopolitical concerns and competing narratives.

Zhang (2020) demonstrates that European media

portrayals of the BRI are fragmented, with UK outlets being more critical, German media cautious, and French coverage more neutral. This reflects how visuals and discourse are mediated by national political contexts, confirming earlier findings by Stokes (2019) that European narratives on the BRI oscillate between cooperation and suspicion depending on geopolitical alignment.

Kuteleva (2023) highlights how China uses social media visuals, such as songs and animations, to project cooperation and modernity, particularly targeting foreign audiences. This aligns with Nye's (2021) concept of soft power, where cultural and symbolic media tools serve as strategic instruments for legitimizing China's rise. Together, these studies show how both traditional media and digital platforms employ visuals as ideological tools, either reinforcing skepticism (Europe) or promoting legitimacy (China).

4.2. Comparative Representations of the BRI In Educational Materials

Teo and Xu (2023) demonstrate how *China Daily* framed the BRI as cooperative and beneficial. This divergence reflects broader national ideologies, confirming earlier observations by Zhang and Wu (2017) that Chinese media constructs narratives of development and harmony, while Western outlets often stress skepticism and geopolitical rivalry. Their findings emphasize that educational and media representations are not neutral but shaped by

political orientations that reinforce differing worldviews of the BRI.

Khoo and Datta (2023) extend this by examining global and Hong Kong media perspectives, revealing that sentiment varied significantly, with Hong Kong offering more hybrid narratives depending on political context. This supports the argument by Li and McElveen (2018) that transitional or semi-autonomous regions often adopt nuanced framings that mediate between competing ideological discourses. The study highlights that representations of the BRI cannot be treated as homogenous; instead, they are contingent upon geopolitical positions and local contexts.

Wei and Hu (2024) found that Chinese media employed positive ecological framings of the BRI, while Indian and American outlets leaned toward skeptical and critical representations. This contrast supports earlier research by Yang and Van Gorp (2021), who noted that BRI narratives vary sharply across countries, reflecting divergent political alignments and perceptions of China's global role. Their findings suggest that international discourse on the BRI is not only mediated through text but also through symbolic frames that highlight either cooperation or suspicion.

Similarly, Wangcheng, Jiayu, and Ming (2024) showed that Chinese media consistently reinforced a positive image of the BRI by emphasizing cooperation, development, and China's constructive role in global affairs. This aligns with Nye's (2021) theory of soft power, where media framings function as tools to promote favorable perceptions of national initiatives. When compared with Wei and Hu's cross-national analysis, their findings illustrate how Chinese domestic narratives stand in sharp contrast to foreign skepticism, underscoring the ideological divide in how the BRI is represented globally.

4.3. Impact Of Visuals on Perceptions and Geopolitical Literacy

García-Herrero (2025) shows that geopolitical alignment and national interests strongly shape global sentiment toward the BRI, with visual framings influencing whether it is perceived as cooperative or threatening. This finding resonates with Callahan (2016), who argued that national positioning mediates how China's narratives are received abroad, and with Zhang and Wu (2017), who showed that visuals in Chinese media emphasize harmony while Western sources stress rivalry. Together, these studies highlight that the perception of the BRI is not solely about the initiative itself but how visuals intersect with geopolitical

contexts.

Mokashi et al. (2022) add a computational perspective, demonstrating that recurring visual-discursive framings across thousands of news reports eroded trust in the BRI over time, with positive sentiment declining globally. This trend aligns with Huang and Ding (2021), who found that repeated skeptical framings in Western media gradually diminish cooperative perceptions of China's role. It also echoes Gries et al. (2017), who showed that negative narratives, once entrenched, become more influential than initial optimistic framings. Together, these findings underscore the cumulative impact of visuals and discourse in shaping long-term geopolitical literacy about the BRI.

Apirakvanalee (2023) shows that the BBC framed the BRI with cautious skepticism, emphasizing risks and power imbalances through narratives and associated visuals. This aligns with Shambaugh (2020), who argued that Western media often frames China's rise as a challenge to global norms, and supports Stokes (2019), who found that subtle framing strategies in European outlets tend to reinforce geopolitical anxieties. Together, these works suggest that Western media use visuals and narratives not only to inform but also to construct ideological distance from China's global initiatives.

Miao (2021) highlights how European media initially framed the BRI through visuals and metaphors of cooperation but later shifted toward suspicion and caution. This echoes the findings of Gries et al. (2017), who noted that perceptions of China often begin with optimism but are reframed negatively over time through repeated critical discourse. It also resonates with Nye's (2021) notion of contested soft power, where visual framings can simultaneously promote opportunity and suspicion depending on political context. These insights confirm that visuals act as powerful mediators of geopolitical literacy, shaping how Europe balances cooperation with strategic concerns about China.

4.4. Implications And Future Research

This study shows that visuals used in educational materials are not neutral; they shape how learners understand and interpret global initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative. These findings highlight the need to strengthen visual literacy within education so learners can better interpret visual messages. Future research could look more closely at specific textbooks or digital learning platforms to see how visual narratives operate in practice. Further comparative work across different cultural settings would also help explain how educational visuals shape global

understanding over time.

5. CONCLUSION

The manuscript has discussed how visual communication affects the perception of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the educational and media-based learning texts in China and the U.S. grounded on a premeditated systematic literature review that was informed by PRISMA. The findings indicate that visual images are not neutral pedagogies, but powerful frames, which instil ideological, cultural, and geopolitical inclinations into education. Controversy The Chinese writings put a lot of dependency on visuals of cooperation, connectivity, and cultural symbolism to legitimise the BRI, but U.S. and West-oriented writings dominate with foregrounding risk, debt, and strategic contestation, which have perpetuated cynical perceptions of the Chinese role in the world. The key contribution of the research is that it extends the BRI literature beyond the sphere of political and economic research to anticipate visual culture as a central instrument of ideology delivery in pedagogy.

This review sheds light on the process of sedimenting learning visuals into the production of

geopolitical literacy and the normalisation of national discourses, thus destabilising the current research at the intersection of visual communication, pedagogy, and geopolitical discourse. The comparative approach also shows that visual framing is systematically dissimilar in cultural contexts, and it is crucial that visual analysis is contextualised in wider ideological and educational contexts. These findings suggest that visual literacy needs to be a more explicit ingredient of the educational practise particularly in global citizenship courses and international studies programmes. Educating learners about visual reading is critical to preventing the calculable intake of biased representations and training them to be creatively and more critically responsive to international actions. Despite the limitation of this study through the application of secondary sources, the study provides conceptual and methodological foundations to subsequent empirical studies addressing student interpretation and negotiation of visual storeys in classroom settings. By this, it cultivates the understanding of how visual communication may be operationalised in the formation of educational sense-making and global consciousness.

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