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The Mediated Engagement of Switzerland with BRI: A Transnational Comparative Framing Analysis

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Abstract: This paper offers a transnational comparative framing analysis of leading legacy news media in Switzerland (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, abbreviated to *NZZ*, in German) and China (*China Daily* in English) in their coverage of Swiss engagement with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2017 and 2019. The results implied a clear dominance of both newspapers' economic and political actors and related frames. By introducing a geopolitical frame into the generic frame categories and adding an economy-driven frame into domestic frame categories based on the current framing pool from Transcultural Comparative Framing Model (TCFM), the study discussed how the two newspapers shared the same focus by frequency but differed from each other in the contextual discourse through argumentation. *China Daily* preferred to report from a general and positive overview, focusing on bilateral relations between China and Switzerland. In contrast, *NZZ* intended to cover more about specific Swiss industries and international actors such as the European Union and the United States, presenting a hybrid perspective towards BRI. The study found a clear presence of ideology-driven and political-position-driven frames on both newspapers—*NZZ* in particular. Given the importance of cultural congruence in framing studies, the study calls for an inclusion of more cultural notions and a general transcultural frame for reporting and researching emerging transnational topics through TCFM. Only when a discursive space is created with respect to different cultural patterns, might resonance in communicative encounters and conceptualization repertoires become possible.

Keywords: transnational comparative framing analysis, Belt and Road Initiative, generic frames, domestic frames, Switzerland, China

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1 Introduction

Beijing unveiled the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 as one of the most promising pro-globalization projects that reconnect China with Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa through improved regional cooperation. Europe, as the destination of this new silk road, has been framed into the massive initiative from the beginning. However, a general European attitude toward this initiative up till now has been still fragmented, confusing, and uncertain (Zhang, 2019). This is evidenced by the fact that when Italy announced its declaration to sign the memorandum of understanding (MOU) on BRI cooperation as the first G-7 member in 2019, Rome's move caused significant tensions within the European Union (EU). Switzerland also signed an MOU with China on BRI cooperation in 2019, focusing on third-market cooperation. However, as a non-EU country that maintains neutrality by staying out of the NATO bloc and the economic union, the strategic move of Switzerland engaging with the BRI did not cause any storm of international attention. Swiss stakeholders consistently applied a low-profile and practical approach in working with China. As a global leader in innovation, leading technology, and modern forms of organization, Switzerland has a lot to offer to the vast Chinese market and emerging markets along the BRI as part of the global value chains. Moreover, as a neutral and developed economy, Switzerland also sees itself being able and responsible to advocate higher transparency, legal security with international environmental and social standards in BRI projects (KOF Swiss Economic Institute, 2019) and to serve as a "bridge" for cooperation between countries in Europe and Asia along the new silk road (Stephens, 2019).

Indeed, Switzerland has played a unique role in Europe in keeping its relationship with China in reasonably good shape over the past decades. It was one of the first Western states in the early 1950 that recognized the People's Republic of China, the first and the only country in continental Europe to have a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with China (since 2014). It is also the first country that placed its relationship with China under innovative strategic partnership (since 2016). Therefore, the growing Chinese influence on the Swiss economy and its potential to restructure the orientation of the Swiss foreign policy provoke increasing attention among the social elites and the public.

Studies of BRI in Europe focused heavily on the economic and political challenges, opportunities, and impact that the initiative would bring upon the EU and its member states (e.g., Ciurtin, 2017; de Vergeron, 2018; Konings, 2018; van der Putten, 2015). Much less attention has been paid from a media and communication perspective, and from the perspectives of countries that are not EU member states. By viewing the unique bilateral relation Switzerland has with

China and understanding the globalization of framing would impact the meaning-making of transnational issues in different societies, this paper applies a transnationally comparative framing analysis to look at the Swiss case in BRI engagement. With recent geopolitical development following the Sino-US trade conflicts and waves of protectionism and populism in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic, Europe faces significant challenges for its internal integration and common strategy in foreign policy. The Swiss case became even more interesting in the wave of relocation of Chinese resources and investment from key EU member states to the country. Moreover, by comparing the Swiss and Chinese media's framing strategies on the same topic, the study also presents some discursive limits of China's outbound communication in reaching Western-European audiences.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Comparative Framing Analysis in International News

Erving Goffman (1974, p.21), the first to introduce the concept of framing, highlighted the functions of frames to help people use the “schemata of interpretation” to find, understand, and label information and recognize a particular event. Other scholars (Entman, 1993; Reese, 2001) extended the definition, and the framing process became more widely recognized as “select[ing] some aspects of perceived reality and mak[ing] them more salient in the communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p.52). By understanding newsrooms inevitably work with frames to simplify, prioritize, and structure the narrative of events (Norris, 1995), researchers identified five dominant generic news frames in analyzing news texts (see Hallahan, 1999; Neuman et al., 1992; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Valkenburg et al., 1999). They cover the attribution of responsibility frame, the human interests frame, the conflict frame, the morality frame and the economic frame.

The globalization of news production and the widespread of the international discursive community further evidence the importance of news frames in the meaning-making of international affairs with global audiences. Especially when certain “generic frames” could be applied across issues, arenas, national barriers and cultural experiences (Benford & Snow, 2000; Guo et al., 2012). However, “news domestication” still plays a vital role in adapting international news to suit domestic audiences in different societies. van Gorp (2010) named it as “culturally embedded-frames” that contribute to the narrative and rhetorical structure of texts and relate them to a condensing symbol as part of a shared culture. By recognizing

these cultural notions, we could understand how culturally shared elements function in news coverage. Ideologies, political positions, and the different media systems where the media organizations operate their news practices are the other elements impacting the process of “news domestication” (Clausen, 2004; Dai & Hyun, 2010; Lee et al., 2002; Peng, 2008).

Many researchers have used the framing analysis from a comparative approach to examine narrative strategies in different news outlets situated in different cultural contexts. American news media, to some extent, was compared most frequently with news media from other countries and regions. For example, Good (2008) examined news frames of climate change in the United States, Canada and other international newspapers. Strömbäck and Shehata (2007) investigated American and Swedish elite newspaper’s coverage of Muhammad. Zhang and Hellmueller (2016) compared CNN and Al Jazeera in reporting ISIS threat, and Dai and Hyun (2010) compared news media in the United States, China and South Korea in framing the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea’s nuclear tests. A few studies compared a wide range of European national media in framing the EU-related topics (Cauwenberge et al., 2009; de Vreese et al., 2001). However, fewer studies applied a comparative framing analysis to European and Chinese news media.

Based on the analysis of a decade of scientific articles in comparative framing analysis, Guo et al. (2012) proposed a framing pool of Transnational Comparative Framing Model (TCFM), which includes generic frames, domestic frames, and issue-specific frames. This article thus uses this TCFM framing pool¹ to measure how the Swiss and Chinese news media have highlighted certain features but overlooked other features in reporting the Swiss engagement with the BRI to the domestic (in the Swiss case) and global (in the Chinese case) audiences. By recognizing news framing as a mechanism through which cultural values and norms are reproduced, reinterpreted, and communicated, this article pays particular attention to cultural frames as part of the domestic frame analysis.

2.2 Framing China and BRI in European News

Studies of media presentation of China in international news began in the 1990s with the same dominance on media outlets from the United States (e.g., Chang, 1993; Li & Cyr, 1998; Peng, 2004). Transnational comparative analysis also followed the same trend: i.e., selecting news outlets mainly from the United States,

¹ Unlike Guo et al. (2012, p.1925), who modified the classic five generic frames, this article tested the classic five generic frames together with the listed domestic frames from the TCFM framing pool.

the United Kingdom, and China (e.g., Luther & Zhou, 2004; Zhang, 2011). Fewer comparative studies included news analysis from non-English speaking European media in the region (e.g., Seib & Powers, 2010; Wilke & Achatzi, 2011; Zhang, 2016). The discussion of Swiss media about China is only documented in Knüsel's (2012) longitude analysis from a historical perspective between 1900 and 1950 and a recent study about Chinese outbound tourists in Swiss-German print media (Hasenzahl & Cantoni, 2021). There is a noticeable lack of studies on the mutual understanding and media comparison between China and Switzerland (Zhang et al., 2019).

Since the Belt and Road Initiative entered the European public discourse, media analyses from different European countries toward China have been increasingly documented (e.g., Dagtas, 2019). García-Herrero and Xu (2019) applied a big data analysis to assess the global attitudes toward BRI, pointing out that EU member states are more optimistic about BRI than non-EU countries, which are direct recipients of BRI investment. However, according to Zhang's (2019) qualitative analysis, most of the positive storytelling in Europe is generated by Russia and South-eastern European countries, whereas suspicions remained high in Western European countries. Compared to most of the EU member states in the South and non-EU countries from the Eastern bloc that hopes to lure Chinese investment at home, the case of Switzerland stands out with uniqueness and significance. The model of Sino-Swiss cooperation is much more comprehensive concerning bilateral trade, business innovation, technology cooperation, and financial collaboration. Therefore, a detailed look at Sino-Swiss cooperation through the lens of both Swiss and Chinese mainstream media becomes necessary to test the existing shared knowledge, mutual understanding/misunderstanding, and strategic focus among multiple stakeholders.

A transnationally comparative framing analysis of *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and *China Daily* in their coverage of Switzerland's engagement with BRI in 2017 and 2019 is motivated to find out:

RQ1: *Who are the main reported actors in the news coverage of the two newspapers?*

RQ2: *What are the issue-specific news frames in reporting Swiss engagement with the BRI?*

RQ3: *What do the two newspapers have in common or differentiate from each other in the use of generic frames and domestic frames?*

RQ4: *How are cultural frames functioning in the recorded news from the two newspapers?*

3 Data & Methods

The data of this paper consisted of German-language news articles from all sources of *NZZ* and English-language news articles from *China Daily* on the Factiva database in the entire years of 2017 and 2019 (when the two BRI forums took place in Beijing). *NZZ* was chosen, as it is the most trusted quality newspaper in Switzerland with high reputation reaching back to 240 years in the country as well as in the German-speaking world. *China Daily* was chosen, as it is the first English-language newspaper in China and has the widest print circulation in the country. *China Daily* was established as a state-owned news outlet to communicate with the international public—especially the Western audiences (Wang, 2008), and due to the high frequency *China Daily* being quoted by other international press, it has access to the mainstream international community (Liu, 2006).

Searching for the keyword combinations in the full texts “Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)/Neue Seidenstrasse/OBOR” and “China”, “Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)/New silk road” and “Switzerland/Swiss”, the study retrieved a total of 53 articles from *NZZ* (18 in 2017, 35 in 2019) and 42 articles from *China Daily* (7 in 2017 and 35 in 2019) (without duplication).² To ensure that the retrieved articles are relevant to the topic of Switzerland’s engagement with the BRI, the author went into the context of each article and collected the complete paragraph where the keywords are situated in the text. This generated four contextual corpuses grouped with the two newspapers in the two selected years.

To avoid the risk of the traditional qualitative approach’s inherent subjectivity due to selection bias and robustness (Coleman & Dysart, 2005; Simon, 2001), the author applied the word frequency test to all the words from the four generated contextual corpora through computer-based tools, with the basic idea that specific words are the building blocks of frames (Entman, 1993). Prominent actors as framing elements were identified based on the number of tokens (see Table 1). A qualitatively transnational comparative framing analysis was then applied to the contextual corpora to improve the identified frames’ validity and topical coherence (Schäfer & O’Neill, 2017).

² The author also applied the exact keyword search on Factiva for *20 Minuten*, which is the most widely circulated daily commuter newspaper and popular tabloid in Switzerland. No news articles were retrieved, which implies that the BRI-related topics are not (yet) of the interests of the general public in the country.

Table 1: Reported actors about BRI and Switzerland based on word frequency.

2017 NZZ	No. of tokens	2017 China Daily	No. of tokens	2019 NZZ	No. of tokens	2019 China Daily	No. of tokens
China	19	China	22	China	77	China	73
Switzerland	19	Switzerland	22	Chinese	65	Switzerland	60
Swiss	16	Countries	15	Switzerland	54	Countries	36
Chinese	10	President	12	Swiss	38	Cooperation	28
State	9	Cooperation	11	Countries	35	Chinese	26
Bank	8	World Economic Forum	11	Projects	31	Trade	23
Financial	7	Infrastructure	8	State	29	Swiss	22
Cooperation	6	Bank	7	Beijing	28	Economic	21
Countries	6	Investment	7	Companies	28	World	20
Europe	6	Xi (Jinping)	7	Foreign	21	International	19
Xi Jinping	6	Chinese	7	Government	19	Development	18
Banking	5	European	6	MOU	19	Economy	17
Finance	5	International	6	EU	17	Financial	17
Market	5	Swiss	6	Maurer	17	Wang	16
President	5	Beijing	5	Agreement	15	European	15
Visit	5	Central (Europe)	5	Europe	15	Maurer	13
Delegation	4	Davos	5	America/US	15	President	13
AIB	4	Development	5	Business	14	Bilateral	12
Asian	4	Education	5	International	14	Europe	12
Beijing	3	Government	5	Investment	13	Investment	11

4 Results & Discussions

4.1 Dominance of Economic and (Geo)political Focus—Based on Frequency

The overall media coverage of Switzerland's engagement with BRI on *NZZ* and *China Daily* significantly increased from 2017 to 2019, in terms of the number of registered articles and the number of tokens of the reported actors on both newspapers (see Table 1). Economic actors, among which financial actors in particular (e.g., bank, finance, AIIB), received the highest attention on *NZZ* in 2017, followed by political actors (e.g., Xi Jinping, president, delegation) and other economic actors (e.g., market). Political actors topped *China Daily* in 2017 (e.g., president, Xi, Central Europe, government), followed by economic actors (e.g., infrastructure) with financial actors (e.g., bank, investment) as the main subgroup as well. A clear drop in the importance of financial actors is registered on *NZZ* in 2019 as a wider variety of economic actors became the lead (e.g., projects, companies, business, investment). However, political actors kept the same importance and extended the range to involve other regional or international actors (e.g., government, the EU, Maurer, Europe, America/US). Like *NZZ*, *China Daily* also gave priority to economic actors in 2019 (e.g., trade, economy, etc.). What needs to be highlighted here is that the political actors on *China Daily* are mostly from China and Switzerland with only a few actors from other places like the Central-Eastern European countries.

As *NZZ* and *China Daily* share the same dominant actor groups when reporting about Swiss engagement with BRI, it is not a surprise that the identified issue-specific frames from the two newspapers followed the same themes (see Table 2 & 3). Based on the TCFM framing pool proposed by Guo et al. (2012), the author introduced the geopolitical frame as a new type of generic frame into the analysis as most of the political actors identified from the contextual corpuses connected to international relations instead of domestic politics. And, considering economic actors in the contextual corpus closely connected to the domestic economy in related countries, the author also added the economy-driven frame to the domestic frames.

To summarize, nine out of eleven issue-specific frames on *NZZ* and nine out of ten issue-specific frames on *China Daily* referred to economic consequence and development as the most dominant generic frame. Eight out of eleven issue-specific frames on *NZZ* and five out of ten issue-specific frames on *China Daily* are identified with political-position-driven elements or geopolitical implications (see table 2. & 3). Frequency-wise speaking, the two newspapers shared the same categories of reported actors and thematic focus.

Table 2: News frames from NZZ reporting BRI and Switzerland.

Frame	Year	Issue-specific Frames	Generic Frames	Domestic Frames
NZZ 1	2017/2019	China's conception of BRI and Switzerland	economic/geopolitical	economy/political-position-driven
NZZ 2	2017/2019	The long-standing Sino-Swiss relations	economic/conflict	economy-driven
NZZ 3	2017/2019	Risks for BRI	responsibility/economic/geopolitical	economy-driven/political-position-driven
NZZ 4	2017/2019	The Swiss Engagement and future opportunities	economic	economy-driven
NZZ 5	2017/2019	Switzerland as a geographic location	–	background info
NZZ 6	2017/2019	Difference between Switzerland and China	economic/conflict	economy/ideology/political-position-driven
NZZ 7	2019	Switzerland signed BRI MOU	economic/conflict/geopolitical	economy/political-position-driven
NZZ 8	2019	Switzerland as pioneer in the BRI process	economic/responsibility/geopolitical	economy/political-position-driven
NZZ 9	2019	Reaction from the United States	conflict/geopolitical	political-position-driven
NZZ 10	2019	Reaction from the EU and other European countries	conflict/economic/geopolitical	economy/political-position/ideology-driven
NZZ 11	2019	Critics on BRI	conflict/economic/moral/geopolitical	economy/ideology/political-position/culture-driven

Table 3: News frames from *China Daily* reporting BRI and Switzerland.

Frame	Year	Issue-specific Frames	Generic Frames	Domestic Frames
CD 1	2017/2019	Switzerland to play a (key) role in the BRI	economic/geopolitical	economy-driven
CD 2	2017/2019	The historical good Sino-Swiss relations	responsibility/economic	economy/political-position/culture-driven
CD 3	2017/2019	Switzerland as an example for other European countries	economic/geopolitical	economy/political-position-driven
CD 4	2017/2019	Switzerland as a geographic location	–	background info
CD 5	2017/2019	Switzerland as part of the international community	responsibility/economic	economy-driven
CD 6	2019	Switzerland signed BRI MOU	economic/geopolitical	economy/political-position-driven
CD 7	2019	Opportunity for Switzerland	economic	economy-driven
CD 8	2019	Benefits for China (and BRI) to engage with Switzerland	economic	economy-driven
CD 9	2019	The Swiss perspective about BRI	economic/geopolitical	economy/political-position/culture-driven
CD 10	2019	The western doubts about BRI	conflict/moral/geopolitical	ideology/political-position-driven

4.2 The Dominance of Economic and (Geo)political Focus—Through Argumentation

4.2.1 Economic Focus

China Daily mainly described a generic and positive outlook by highlighting how the economic and trade relations between the two countries “have continued to deepen” and should “be further assured” within the BRI framework (Wei, 2019). The tight economic bonds between the two countries based on the FTA and the fact that China remained Switzerland’s third important trading partner were mentioned repetitively by *China Daily*. It demonstrates the past’s fruitful outcome and foresees such trade agreement and cooperation “are to be upgraded and strengthened” (Chen, 2019). *NZZ* instead discussed more details in specific Swiss industries and companies to understand the opportunities BRI might bring to the country, including ABB’s electricity division (energy industry), Lafarge-Holcim (construction industry), and Swiss Re (insurance industry). According to *NZZ*, “es gibt erhebliche Opportunitäten für Schweizer Unternehmen” (there are significant opportunities for Swiss companies), however, to what extent a signed MOU on BRI cooperation could give Swiss companies a “Rückenwind” (tailwind) for the BRI business remained “Fraglich” (questionable) (Kamp, 2019a).

Being a leading world financial centre, according to what *China Daily* quoted from the Swiss Finance Minister Ueli Maurer in 2017, Switzerland should play “a proactive role in the initiative” (Luo & Chen, 2017). The status of Switzerland as a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) was also highlighted by the Chinese media in both years to demonstrate the Swiss commitment to “integrating the Chinese financial market into the global market” (Maurer, 2019). Instead of looking at how Swiss banks could engage in the initiative and support Chinese financial institutions, *NZZ* looked at how Chinese banks are opening their branches in Switzerland. “Der Schweizer Finanzmarkt für ausländische Investoren offen ist, gilt dies für China nicht” (Swiss financial market is open to foreign investors, but this is not the case in China) (Müller, 2017a). *NZZ* also mentioned Switzerland being a member of AIIB, but the focus is more on how “staatliche chinesische Banken die Anschubfinanzierung gewährleistet” (Chinese state banks have provided start-up financing), how “dass private Banken ihren Teil zum Gelingen des Projektes beitragen sollten” (private banks should make the project a success), and how “Die Finanzierung müsse dann jedoch international gängigen Regeln entsprechen” (the financing would then have to comply with internationally accepted rules) to avoid the risks that “dass Gelder in dunklen Kanälen versickern” (money will seep away in dark channels) (Müller, 2017b).

4.2.2 (Geo)political Focus

Both newspapers gave a lot of space reporting the official visits by the leadership of the two countries, quoting directly leading politicians from Beijing and Bern. Xi Jinping's name, for example, was listed as one significant reported actor on both *China Daily* and *NZZ* in 2017, focusing on his "globalization proposal" during the World Economy Forum in Davos and the first BRI forum in Beijing that year. *China Daily* quoted Xi's speech in Davos since "new models of collaboration" are needed to "adapt and guide economic globalization, cushion its negative impact and deliver its benefits to all countries and nations" (Jia, 2017). *NZZ* narrowed down Xi's proposal from the BRI Summit as "In bewusstem Gegensatz zum US-Präsidenten Donald Trump" (a deliberate opposition to the US president Donald Trump): when Trump demonstrate "America first", Xi promoted globalization for "zum Vorteil aller fördern und dem Welthandel neue Märkte erschliessen wolle" (the benefit for all and the opening-up of new markets for world trade) (Fischer, 2017). However, the "geostrategic ambitions" of BRI, according to *NZZ*, are interpreted as "möchte Peking den darbenenden Volkswirtschaften in Zentralasien, im Nahen Osten und in Afrika helfen, um sich dadurch Macht und Einfluss zu sichern" (Beijing wants to help the ailing economies in Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa in order to secure power and influence) (Müller, 2017b). Discursive connection to the United States is drawn again by *NZZ*, emphasizing the classic Western logic of "Thucydides Trap" as "Heute will sich das wirtschaftlich und politisch erstarkte China nicht länger mit der amerikanisch geprägten Weltordnung abfinden ... den das bevölkerungsreichste Land der Welt als ihm historisch zustehend betrachtet: im Zentrum der globalen Ordnung." (economically and politically strengthened China no longer wants to put up with the American-influenced world order ... the world's most populous country sees as its historical right: at the centre of the global order) (Zoll, 2019).

In reporting about the MOU signed between Switzerland and China on BRI cooperation in 2019, *China Daily* quoted directly from the Swiss president Maurer's speech at the BRI forum in a general and positive way. The BRI is "advancing globalization" and would allow "an increasing number of countries to benefit from economic development". *NZZ* echoed the fact that Switzerland welcomes the Belt and Road Initiative "in principle". However, the Swiss president's concerns about the initiative and the five central principles to form the foundation of BRI from his same speech was also quoted, namely "privates Kapital für private Projekte, soziale Verantwortung, grüne Kriterien zum Umweltschutz, Transparenz und nachhaltiger Umgang mit Schulden" (private capital for private projects, social responsibility, green criteria for environmental protection, transparency and sustainable debt management) (Müller, 2019).

Even though the Chinese official discourse's emphasis on BRI stated clearly that it should be jointly built through consultation to meet the interests of all, the Swiss media always kept its skeptical view by seeing BRI as Beijing's logical continuation of its development model, to sustain the Chinese state-owned companies' over-capacities (Fischer, 2017). According to *NZZ*, BRI shows China's attempt to "die dominierende Macht der östlichen Hemisphäre wiederzuerlangen" (regain its former position as the dominant power in the eastern hemisphere) (Radunski, 2017), and would preliminarily benefit Chinese companies (Kamp & Settelen, 2019). Such interpretation about Beijing's geopolitical attempt through BRI was criticized loudly by *China Daily*, not targeting Switzerland in particular, but on "some Western politicians" as a whole: "They do it simply because they look at it through the prism of ideology or geopolitics. They just feel uneasy about China's rise as a world economic power and are reluctant to participate in the initiative simply because it has been proposed and launched by China, a reality they find hard to accept" (*China Daily*, 2019). When it comes to geostrategic discussion, *China Daily* gave more geopolitical importance to Switzerland. On the one hand, Switzerland "has set very good condition for the third-party cooperation by involving Switzerland and China in the Central and Eastern Europe" (Fu, 2017a). On the other hand, it is home to "a raft of European headquarters of international organizations, which helps in promoting the BRI concept and exerting influence on member states of these organizations" (He, 2019).

Despite the common frequency from the two newspapers on reported actors and dominant frames, a sheer contrast is evidenced here. *China Daily* always intended to talk about the general information and to present a whole picture (from a bird's-eye view), while *NZZ* preferred to pinch specific details (from a worm's-eye view) as the path to understand some parts of the big picture. The positive attributes by *China Daily* (Liu et al., 2018; Zhang & Wu, 2017) are also documented in this case, which not only positively portrayed the Chinese stakeholders, but also highly spoke about the Swiss stakeholders in the context of the long-lasting relationship between the two countries. *NZZ*, instead, remained much more critical with diversified perspectives. It pragmatically analyzed the opportunities and reasonable outcome for Switzerland and some Swiss industries to take benefits from joining the BRI. At the same time, it also kept a neutral stance by alerting the potential risks. Comparatively speaking, *China Daily* positioned a much more open and compassing narrative environment towards Swiss stakeholders when perceiving Switzerland as a decade-long pioneer among Western countries in deepening relations with China (Fu, 2017b; Wagner, 2019). *NZZ* confirmed Switzerland's pioneering role, and the fact that "Die Schweiz genießt in der Volksrepublik China hohes Ansehen und Respekt" (Switzerland enjoys a high reputation and respect in China) (Wagner, 2019). However, it didn't contribute to

forming the same opening attitude towards China in its narrative, and instead, it enforced the doubts and uncertainties when connecting the BRI with Swiss stakeholders.

4.3 Bilateral Focus vs. Transnational Focus

From the discussion above, it was stated that *China Daily* gave more space for Chinese and Swiss stakeholders in both years while *NZZ* involved more international actors (see 4.1). *China Daily* also gave more geopolitical importance to Switzerland due to its bilateral focus, while *NZZ* frequently referred to the United States when discussing China (see 4.2). In *China Daily*'s contextual corpus, the United States also appeared, but mainly as a contrast to the EU in terms of their relations with China or as a background when it referred to the trade conflict. "The US regards China as a strategic competitor, which is all about maintaining its hegemonic position", while with "competition and cooperation coexist in China-EU relations, the latter was more prominent." (Shi, 2019). *China Daily* didn't discursively connect the United States directly with BRI in the recorded corpora, just as what *NZZ* observed, "In chinesischen Reden und Erklärungen findet sich aber für fast jedes Land der Welt ein Platz. Einzig die Vereinigten Staaten tauchen nirgends auf" (in Chinese speeches and explanations, however, there is a place for almost every country in the world. Only the United States does not appear anywhere) (Zoll, 2019).

The Swiss media instead discussed a lot about the United States, as "in Washington sitzen die grössten Kritiker der BRI" (the biggest critics of the BRI are in Washington) (Kamp, 2019a). The American government not only criticized on Italy's signing MOU on BRI with China (Kamp, 2019a), it also intervened in local infrastructure projects in Southeast Asian countries like Myanmar (Kamp, 2019b). According to the Swiss perspective, "Kein Wunder, reagiert die herausgeforderte Supermacht USA äusserst empfindlich auf das chinesische Grossprojekt" (there is no wonder that the challenged superpower USA is reacting extremely sensitively to the major Chinese project) (Zoll, 2019). Just as "die Amerikaner im vorigen Jahrhundert Handelsrouten schützten" (the Americans protected trade routes in the last century), now the rising world power China would "ihren Einfluss ausdehnen und sichern" (expand and secure its influence) through BRI (Rasch, 2019).

A lot of conflict frames are used here by *NZZ* in comparing the United States and China. For example, when discussing about China's growing influence in the Middle East through BRI, *NZZ* quoted a Chinese professor's voice by saying that "Peking sei im Gegensatz zu Grossbritannien und Amerika nie in die dortigen Konflikte involviert gewesen und habe keine Position beziehen müssen"

(Unlike Great Britain and America, Beijing has never been involved in the conflicts there and has not had to take a position) (Müller, 2019). More importantly, when referring to Switzerland's signing MOU with China in BRI cooperation, conflict frames also appeared on *NZZ* as the country is striving for an FTA with the United States at the same time. "Maurer und Stoffel gehen nicht davon aus, dass Washington durch das Abkommen verärgert ist" (Maurer and Stoffel—State Secretary for International Finance— don't think Washington is upset by the deal), according to *NZZ*, that "Vielmehr biete das Engagement der Schweiz die Möglichkeit, liberale Werte in das Projekt einzubringen" (Switzerland's commitment offers the opportunity to introduce "liberal values" into the project) (Müller, 2019). The Swiss media strategically grouped Switzerland into the liberal countries where America is the leading power, by carefully accessing the possible American critics on Switzerland's engagement with the BRI. Therefore, being the bridge and pioneer, Switzerland would represent "liberal values" in dealing with China (see more discussion in 4.4).

Europe also appeared as a key regional actor in both newspapers. *China Daily* paid particular attention to Central-Eastern European countries. For example, Switzerland's role of working as an observer in the cooperation framework of China and the 16 CEEC countries was highly appreciated by *China Daily* (Fu, 2017b). On the one hand, *China Daily* reaffirmed that BRI is by no means an approach for China to compete for spheres of influence. Rather, it "facilitates balanced development in Europe" and is "beneficial for the integration of Europe" (Shi, 2019). On the other hand, with Switzerland, Italy, and the Central and Eastern European nations signing up BRI MOU, *China Daily* anticipated "the fear mongering" of "Trojan Horse dividing Europe" (Tan, 2019).

NZZ responded to the same fear and went further when discussing the *EU Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia* presented by the EU Commission and the European External Action Service in 2018. "Auch wenn das in Brüssel kaum jemand offen zugeben will: Der Plan ist auch eine direkte Antwort auf Pekings Belt-and-Road-Initiative" (Even if hardly anyone in Brussels wants to openly admit it: the plan is also a direct response to Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative) (Kamp, 2019b). In the same article, *NZZ* traced the Trans-European Transport Network, launched early in 1996 to expand the transport infrastructure in Eastern and Southeastern Europe and reflected on the EU's past effort under the Western Balkans Investment Plan. Although the EU investment has been more profound than the Chinese investment and bank loans in the region, according to *NZZ*, "in der öffentlichen Wahrnehmung gewinnt China die Argumentation" (in public perception, China wins the argument). Nevertheless, the fact that "Europa ist in einer denkbar schlechten Verfassung und zurzeit kein verlässlicher Partner für China" (Europe is in the worst possible shape and currently not a reliable partner

for China), became one pragmatic reason why Switzerland as a neutral country situated at the heart of Europe should get actively involved in the BRI (Wagner, 2019).

China Daily documented a clear bilateral focus when discussing Swiss engagement with BRI, giving Switzerland great discursive importance even when it referred to other European countries. *NZZ* instead gave a lot of importance to the United States and the EU. Therefore, Switzerland either remained part of Europe with respect to the general European framework in dealing with China or stayed as a member of the liberal societies where America's leading position is profoundly visible. What's more, *NZZ* recorded a lot more generic conflict frames than *China Daily*, emphasizing the differences, challenges, and ongoing competition between China and the United States, and between China and the EU. With *China Daily* trying to distinguish Switzerland from its European neighbors and to distinguish Europe from its American ally, *NZZ* did the opposite—it positioned Switzerland in the matrix closely connecting to Brussels and Washington, whereas China became, discursively, the contrasting power.

4.4 The Presence of Ideology-Driven & Political-Position-Driven Frames and the Lack of Cultural Frames

Both newspapers utilized the concept and keyword of *Western* to represent both the abstract and broad beliefs in ideology as well as the concrete policies and political stances (Guo et al., 2012). Therefore, such narrative is identified as both ideology-driven and political-position-driven domestic frames, which falls into the generic morality frame (see Tables 2 and 3). By elaborating the problem of *transparency*, *NZZ* commented the “konstruktive Unschärfe” (constructive fuzziness) as a characteristic of Chinese politics. It raises the example that there is still no official map of BRI: “Was Belt and Road genau umfasst, hat Peking nie definiert” (Beijing has never defined exactly what Belt and Road encompass) (Zoll, 2019).

Similar to what Peng (2004) found out that American news media's coverage of China was “often motivated by ideology rather than newsworthiness”, the Swiss news media in this study also recorded an emotional overtone of its coverage about BRI highly critical of “selective aspects” of China in terms of the Western emotive and ideological quality (Dorogi, 2001). Ideology and political position are central components of people's belief systems and social-cultural values that are not easily changed over time. Therefore, we should not expect swift change concerning political and ideological news frames in the short term (Peng, 2004). But what we could expect is a broadened frame variety with more cultural frames that may link to some mutual understanding between societies involved in the same

international affairs. In the case of Swiss engagement of BRI, only one shared cultural frame is registered in the contextual corpuses. When *China Daily* discusses the Swiss perspective about BRI, it discussed that such a massive project would “take a generation to come true and yield its full benefits”, quoting what Maurer said, “(the BRI) really drives us to aim high and plan big, with a long-term vision at least 20 or 30 years ahead” (Luo & Chen, 2017). Such “long-term” cultural-embedded vision is echoed by *NZZ*, when it discussed how “Zwar denkt und handelt der chinesische Staatsapparat nach langjährigen Plänen” (the Chinese state apparatus thinks and acts according to long-term plans). While in the Chinese context, “us” may include both Swiss politicians and Swiss public, the Swiss media focused again only on political actors and discussed the matter in a totally different context. *NZZ* talked about the fact that the Chinese politicians have learned to adapt to the government change in some recipient countries of BRI due to local elections. Ideology-driven and political-position frame got further enforced, as “dass Wahlen auch zu Machtwechseln führen, mag aus westlicher Sicht eine Binsenwahrheit sein” (from a Western perspective it may be a truism that elections also lead to changes in power) while to Beijing, it takes more time and more rounds of negotiations to stick to the BRI plans as some Asian countries (like Malaysia) may put BRI projects temporarily on hold due to the change of their leaderships (Zoll, 2019).

Besides the critical argument on “some Western politicians” from *China Daily* (see 4.2), the contextual corpus of this study didn’t register other ideology-driven frames or comments responding to the different political value systems from *China Daily*. With much fewer conflict frames registered on *China Daily*, the Chinese media didn’t discredit what *NZZ* raised as problems questioning the feasibility and rationale of BRI. Therefore, an entire reasoning mechanism is missing here to represent an alternative Chinese explanation towards what *NZZ* presented as ideology and political values. “Alternative” here means not only simply telling from a general & positive Chinese perspective but also creating a detailed response that responds to what Swiss media selected and prioritized to the public. If *China Daily* considers the Swiss stakeholders as part of its targeted international readership, it must broaden its frame diversity—in terms of generic frames and especially domestic frames—and restructure its argumentation schemes, so that a presumptive and nonmonotonic reasoning pattern can be followed to reach communication goals (Walton, 1996).

Although the people-to-people exchange is one crucial element of BRI construction, this study did not find any human-interest frames or individual stories in both newspapers. *China Daily* briefly mentioned that education, tourism, and sports are part of the cooperation areas the two countries should strengthen (Fu, 2017b), without giving any further details. *NZZ* did not even mention these

cultural cooperation areas at all. The common values in people's well-being, environment protection, cultural respect and exchange, and the multilateralism approach both China and Switzerland strongly support were not found in the contextual corpus on both newspapers in this study. Without offering enough cultural notions to connect the individual experience to the meaning-making of BRI in the two societies, both newspapers failed to go beyond the economic bargain and political ideology constraints. There is an urgent need to introduce more cultural frames, or better to say, transcultural frames, in international news reporting and transnational comparative framing analysis. BRI-related topics can be one testing field for further investigation, as it is still a concept in development with multiple national players involved, and it is in high demand of multilevel human interactions. And only by looking at such "human interactions" with more emphasis on co-existence and inter-dependence and by seeing culture as not the barrier but the catalyst for good human relationship (Jiang et al., 2021), a more solid common ground for transcultural conversation can be established despite social-cultural differences between China, Switzerland, and other countries involved in BRI.

5 Conclusion

The trends of globalization and the emergence of transnational issues require reliable performances from news media, as the globalized media network and innovative communication technologies bring individuals from every corner of the world to the same village of dialogue (Guo et al., 2012). Tailoring international awareness to the national audiences is critical (Clausen, 2004), but telling the stories to the international audience with diversified voices is also crucial to the meaning construction of the global reality in-making. Considering BRI as one typical transnational issue that evokes intensive international attention, this paper applied a transnational comparative framing analysis on how *NZZ* and *China Daily*—as the mainstream Swiss and Chinese news media—reported about the Swiss engagement with BRI in 2017 and 2019.

A significant dominance of economic and political actors prevails in both newspapers. The two newspapers documented a significant discursive gap in their detailed coverage despite the same frequent use of economic and geopolitical frames. *China Daily* offered a more general outlook and registered a much more positive attitude in looking at the Sino-Swiss relations under the BRI framework. *NZZ* paid more attention to specific Swiss industries and companies and permanently held its critical view by presenting both opportunities and risks.

China Daily clearly focused on bilateral relations and engaged actors mostly from the two countries, while *NZZ* involved various international actors including the United States and the EU. *NZZ* also registered more conflict frames (generic) and ideology-driven & political-position-driven frames (domestic). No cultural actors and very few cultural frames were recorded in both newspapers.

The findings shed light on the importance of TCFM research and responded to the call to use a common framework—TCFM framing pool—to research transnational media coverage. Based on Guo et al.'s initial model (2012), the paper introduced the geopolitical frame as a new category of generic frames into the TCFM framing pool as international news about the involvement of multiple nations always implies international relations and geopolitical developments. The paper also suggested the economy-driven frame as part of the domestic frames as the economic consequence for local industries was highlighted a lot in the Swiss case. More importantly, the paper calls on the introduction of trans-cultural frames, in both newsroom practice and TCFM research, to bridge the (mis)understandings of the same transnational news topic between different societies.

Cultural congruence, as a key concept in framing theory, determines whether the use of the frames is “noticeable, understandable, memorable and emotionally charged” (Entman, 2003, p. 417). Therefore, the better the frame of a news story matches the culturally dominant patterns in a society, the more effective it may be in connecting with the local audiences. It also entails that to reach a common understanding between different societies on emerging transnational topics, it is important to create a general “noticeable and understandable” transcultural news frame, under which different cultural patterns are fairly respected, memorized and “emotionally charged”. Enough discursive space must be given to such frames to support opinion exchange, argumentation, and reasoning, so that the creation of new meanings beyond the dominant cultural difference could be possibly reached. Besides resonating in communicative encounters, the use of such transcultural news frames could also contest other existing general or domestic frames and extend conceptualization repertoires. Especially for news outlets like *China Daily*, which is supposed to charm the minds and hearts of the international community, the effectiveness of its outbound communication is very important. Without resonating cultural notions from the other society or associating its coverage with local media's selection and salience to its public, *China Daily* is facing more challenges instead of mastering “natural advantage above other types of frames” (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989, p. 5).

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