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# **China's framing of 'development' in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative**

A Case Study of the China-Laos Railway

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This thesis explores how the China-Laos railway is represented in the articles of the English-language newspaper China Daily and within the broader context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Through a qualitative approach, based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study examines how China Daily frames the railway project, investigating how such framing contributes to constructing a particular conceptualization of 'development' and to what extent it reflects dominant discourses and theories of development.

**Key words:** Belt and Road Initiative, China-Laos Railway, Development, Media Framing, China Daily, Critical Discourse Analysis

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## 1 Introduction

This thesis examines how the China-Laos Railway is discussed in the Chinese state-run newspaper China Daily, with the goal of understanding how English-language media in China create and disseminate narratives of development and cooperation within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The project of the Vientiane-Boten railway, launched in December 2021, represents Laos' most ambitious investment, marking an important milestone in China's vision for regional connectivity. From a geopolitical perspective by connecting Vientiane to the border city of Boten, the railway integrates Laos into the broader infrastructural project of the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) (Medina, 2021).

The present research aims to analyse how China Daily frames the railway project, what kinds of narratives of development emerge from the textual analysis and to what extent this framing reflects dominant discourses and theories of development. The analysis is carried out with a qualitative and discursive approach, aimed at exploring the ideological, economic and geopolitical dimensions of the discourses produced by this globally oriented media outlet surrounding the cooperation between China and Laos.

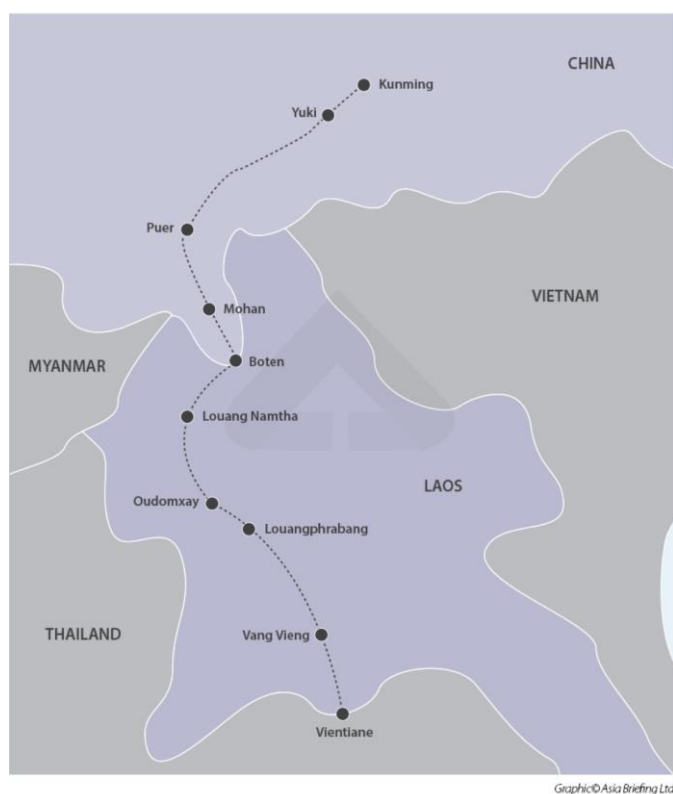
The selection of the China-Laos Railway as a case study comes from a personal experience. During a trip from Vang Vieng in Laos to Kunming in southern China, I was struck by the contrast between the modernity of Vang Vieng's train station, characterized by an imposing architecture and contemporary design, and the surrounding environment, which was far simpler and rural. This contrast prompted a reflection on the deeper meanings and implications of the project: What concrete benefits is the railway bringing to the Laotian population? What economic, social and environmental implications has the project had? In what ways has such large infrastructural project impacted the relationship between the two countries? These reflections led to the present exploration of the railway not only as a physical infrastructure but also as a discursive space. Through an analysis of the articles published in China Daily, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of how China, through this international media platform, contributes to the production and dissemination of specific development discourses.

## 1.1 Context of the research: The Vientiane-Boten Railway and the Belt and Road Initiative

From an historical and geopolitical perspective, the Vientiane-Boten Railway – also referred to as China-Laos Railway – is Laos’ largest investment project, aimed at driving Laos’ transformation from a land-locked country to a land-linked one (Kuik & Rosli, 2023). The vision of becoming a land-linked country is a key component of Laos’ national development strategy. The country’s participation in China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a continuation of development strategies formulated in the context of the government’s long-lasting cooperation with multilateral frameworks – notably, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Economic Cooperation Program (Rowedder, 2019).

Inaugurated on December 3, 2021, the Vientiane-Boten Railway connects Laos’ capital Vientiane to China’s border town of Boten, covering a distance of 422 kilometres (Medina, 2021). As indicated in the map below the landmark project is part of a broader development partnership within the BRI framework, including the establishment of special economic zones, road development and hydropower projects (Rowedder, 2019).

Figure 1. China-Laos Railway Map (Medina, 2021)



China's Belt and Road initiative has been a key driver in growing China's regional presence in Southeast Asia, becoming a symbol for cooperation structured around the concept of connectivity (Vörös & Somsack, 2020) and strengthening Beijing vision of "a community of common destiny" in Southeast Asia (Boisseau du Rocher, 2020). Through the BRI initiative, China aims to increase its connectivity and strategic collaboration in the areas of infrastructures, trade, and investments on a global scale (World Bank Group, 2018). This flagship project, conceived as a long-term plan for a China-inspired globalization, is at the core of President Xi Jinping national strategy (Boisseau du Rocher, 2020).

Laos and China share a relationship of long-standing cooperation. China is Laos' second-largest trading partner, main aid provider and foreign investor, while Laos is its third largest recipient of investments within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) (Vörös & Somsack, 2020). As a result of the BRI framework of cooperation, the relations between the two countries are currently regarded to be at their historical high (Philakone, 2023). This position the China-Laos Railway project at the centre of broader geopolitical dynamics, due to its notable cost of approximately US\$7 billion and geopolitical significance – particularly among the tensions between China and the United States – drawing broad media attention (Zhang, 2023).

Furthermore, even if the relationship between the PRC and Lao People's Democratic Republic (LPDR) is rooted in their common legacy of communism, it is important to note that their close relations are a result of a gradual evolution rather than a historical constant. After decades of isolation and an almost exclusive alliance with Vietnam, Laos progressively increased its cooperation with Beijing, particularly starting from 1997 when the two countries signed an agreement of economic and technical cooperation. Since then, China became a major investor, especially in the sectors of energy and infrastructure, while the historical rivalry with Vietnam continues to strongly influence the PRC-Laos relations (Lintner, 2008). The rapid growth of the China-Laos relations, particularly in the economic sector, has impacted the country's historic alliance with Vietnam, which perceives China's growing presence as a form of strategic expansion within its sphere of influence. In this context, large-scale investment such as the China-Laos Railway has the potential to weaken Vietnam's traditional role as Laos' principal partner (Nguyen & Dinh, 2019).

Laos sees the Belt and Road Initiative as a mean of overcoming its geographical challenge of being the only land-locked nation in Southeast Asia through better infrastructures and

connectivity (Vörös & Somsack, 2020). The railway system has, for a long time, been regarded as a necessary answer for advancing Lao's regional economic role. The idea of transforming Laos into a land-linked hub of connectivity has been central to its national planning strategies – that have been prioritizing the transportation sector as a key mechanism to achieve development goals such as poverty reduction. The central benefit of road and railway development is to facilitate the country's access to regional markets, thereby driving economic benefits (Oraboune, 2008).

The China-Laos Railway project has therefore been framed by a geo-economic win-win rhetoric aligning Lao PDR's strategy with China's BRI ambitions, which resulted in an unprecedented infrastructural project adopting a joint-venture model (Rowedder, 2019). The central idea behind the win-win rhetoric is that Beijing's focus on the Pan-Asia Railway network would be beneficial for China by linking Kunming to Singapore – therefore creating a major economic corridor, while Laos would benefit from transit services – among them increased tourism and trade cooperation (Vörös & Somsack, 2020).

Figure 2. Pan-Asia Railway Map (Medina, 2021)



Within this joint-venture model structure, 70% of the shares are held by Chinese partners while 30% are owned by Laotian stakeholders. However, Laos' equity was largely financed by the China Export-Import bank, raising concerns within international financial institutions over the country's rising indebtedness (Rowedder, 2019). Reflecting these concerns, research by Gu (2024) – focusing on an analysis of the China-Laos relationship from the perspective of political economy – brings to light the debate around international development partnerships, particularly with regards to the impact of unbalanced power dynamics. While still advising towards prioritizing higher diversification within Laos' international development partnerships, the author also illustrates China's response to this central issue driving the discussion around China's Belt and Road Initiative. Gu (2024) highlights the fact that China has for a long time adopted conceptual distance from the idea of having outcomes to development that generates “winners” and “losers”. Accordingly, Beijing's framing of development partnerships under the “win-win” narrative challenges this notion, as seen in the government official statements and policies. In this regard, research suggests that the Belt and Road partnership between China and Laos holds promising potential in creating a solid base for shared economic growth. Laos, owing to its strategic geographical location, holds the potential of serving as a bridge while representing a favourable environment for Chinese investments due to its political stability and lack of social tensions. Moreover, the development partnership with China also proves pivotal in advancing social development, particularly in the domain of workforce training. As Laos possesses a substantial human capital with a young demographic – with more than half of the population being under 25 years old – but lacks skilled labourers, the Chinese investments are creating opportunities for Laos to develop a more and more skilled labour force (Vörös & Somsack, 2020). Research by Cheng (2022) also underlines China's commitment in supporting Laotian human capital's development, particularly in the domain of talent cultivation specifically in relation to the China-Laos Railway project.

## **1.2 Thesis objectives**

This dissertation has been developed following the “what-is” question logic (Della Porta & Keating, 2008). With the objective of carrying out an analysis of the implications of the Boten-Vientiane railway for Laos' development, this study was designed starting from an exploration of what *development* is. The process of clarifying the nature of development, due to the multifaced and contradictory dynamic of defining development, shaped the purpose of the investigation. The central objective, rather than attempting to assess an essentially non-

objective concept like development, became analysing the way development is thought of, conceptualized, and evaluated in the news articles of the Chinese newspaper China Daily in the context of the Boten-Vientiane railway. More in particular, this study aims to examine how English-language articles frame the flagship project of the Boten-Vientiane railway, to also illustrate not only how Chinese media frame development but also how China actively participates in the development narrative internationally.

Therefore, there are three primary questions that this study aims to answer:

1. *How is Chinese investment in the Boten–Vientiane railway represented in the news articles of China Daily?*
2. *In what ways do ideological, theoretical, and regional assumptions shape the framing of development?*
3. *In what ways these discourses reproduce or challenge dominant development narratives?*

By employing a qualitative research methodology, specifically through i. Documentary analysis, ii. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) iii. A case study approach, focusing on the Boten-Vientiane railway, this investigation aims to contribute to the broader discussion around how development is conceptualized and framed in Chinese international media.

The present study is grounded in the epistemological perspective of relativism, calming that there are multiple ways in which reality is experienced. In this view, the aim of knowledge is constructing a more nuanced understanding of these multiple realities (Sumner & Tribe, 2008). It seeks to explore and highlight the dominant narratives that surrounds the Chinese investments in Laos, particularly those related to the effects on Laos development of the Boten-Vientiane railway. Secondly, it aims to provide insights into the way Chinese perspectives shape the interpretation of development within its international media, through a reflection on the discursive construction of development and on the central themes historically present in the development studies discussion.

The need for analysing and clarifying the concept of development has been of particular concern, both historically and in present times. However, in recent years, there has been an increasing need to deconstruct the way development is defined and framed. A widespread use of the concept has accentuated the urgency of questioning its often superficial and uncritical

use, where it can become a simple and self-evident slogan (Payne & Phillips, 2013).

Ultimately, this research aims to contribute to the ongoing debates around China's role in reshaping development narratives within the current geopolitical context, particularly in the frame of the Belt and Road Initiative.

## 2 Methodology

The present research examines how the discourses surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative infrastructure project of the Boten-Vientiane Railway are framed and presented in the English-language newspaper *China Daily*. By drawing from *China Daily*'s publications, this study sets out to explore how the Chinese investments in Laos' infrastructural development mirrors China's approach and views on development and development-partnerships. The objective is to identify what are the recurring narratives in framing the impacts of the Boten-Vientiane railway on the economic, social, environmental, and cultural aspects of development in Laos. The second aim of this study is to explore more deeply the dialectic around development itself, by reflecting critically on the ontological and epistemological assumptions embedded in the discourses, and its ties to the broader debate on development.

A qualitative methodology, characterized by both descriptive and analytical elements, is employed in this study. The analysis conducted is grounded in the qualitative interpretative tradition of the social sciences, more specifically situated within the cross-disciplinary field of development studies (DS), while drawing on approaches from critical discourse analysis. The significance of adopting a qualitative methodology lies in the focus on contextual interpretation over measurement, and orientation towards understanding the underlying meanings of a phenomenon (Gillham, 2000), which are key areas of focus in the present analysis. Furthermore, the qualitative nature of this research reflects its final objective of carrying out an exploration of how development is constructed in specific geopolitical and ideological contexts.

In line with the case-oriented nature of qualitative research (Schreier, 2012), the current study adopts a case study approach as part of its research design, to narrow down the multidimensional topic of Chinese infrastructural development projects in Laos. The major advantages of the case study approach are i. Being a comprehensive method that allows a detailed analysis of a particular situation in the context of its setting (Blaxter et al., 2008), and ii. Its broad applicability (Cousin, 2005). Furthermore, it helps mitigate the obstacles related to the limited resources of small-scale research projects, by focusing on a single case within a defined space and time. The goal of case study research is to offer a picture of the analysed setting, enabling an advanced understanding of it – an approach that aligns with the specific objective of this study. According to Cousin (2005), another benefit of case study research is its transferability, meaning that the understating of the observed context can serve as a tool for

other similar cases. In the context of this study, the reflections on the Boten-Vientiane railway aim to offer a critical analysis of how this specific case is framed within discourse, seeking to explore how the framing of this project can reveal a broader pattern in the conceptualization of Chinese infrastructure investments in Laos. In doing so, this study also aims to contribute to the broader discussion of analysing development.

## **2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis**

Rooted in the core assumption that discourse both reflects and constructs society (Paltridge, 2012), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a lens through which analysing the role of language within its contextual setting (Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

Research (Wodak & Meyer, 2001) defines CDA as essentially concerned with uncovering and exploring structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, and power – as expressed in discourse. The ‘critical’ dimension of CDA, involves uncovering the interconnectedness of those extralinguistic elements that contribute to the production of a text – placing it in contrast with Discourse Analysis, which is primarily concerned with language structures and patterns.

While Paltridge (2012) proposes a definition of Critical Discourse Analysis as a subcategory of Discourse Analysis, van Dijk (1995) – recognised as instrumental in shaping the field of CDA, according to research (Wodak & Meyer, 2001) – argues that CDA is not a subdiscipline of Discourse Analysis but rather an interdisciplinary critical approach concerned with all dimensions of discourse.

In their introduction to Critical Discourse Analysis, Wodak & Meyer (2001) place the concepts of power, history and ideology at the core of CDA. These concepts are regarded as key elements for text interpretation and analysis within the traditions of classical rhetoric, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics. These fields, forming the foundations of CDA, are rooted in the critical tradition developed from Discourse Analysis, which was particularly shaped by sociolinguistic and influenced by the work of post-modern social philosophers, most notably that of Michael Foucault. Ideology, in this context, is intended as a system of social structures and practices that are both enabling symbolic forms to spread and influence the social world and concurrently shaped by those forms. This understanding of ideology is crucial for understanding how discourse itself becomes a tool of power, by normalizing ideas that are socially constructed and presenting them as seemingly natural. Therefore, power is positioned as central in CDA approach to text analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Similarly van Dijk

(1995), while acknowledging the impossibility of clearly defining the conceptual and methodological foundations of Critical Discourse Analysis, due to its transdisciplinary nature, also emphasises the centrality of power in his proposed characterization of CDA – particularly in terms of power relations and legitimization of structures of dominance. Van Dijk also suggests that what distinguishes CDA from other approaches also rooted in critical linguistics and semiotics is the attention to the broader societal and political structures, in a critical approach to language analysis that intends to expose the discursive strategies of control and social influence connected to power. Van Dijk (1995) further defines Critical Discourse Analysis as being problem-issue oriented – as opposed to a paradigm-oriented approach, and ultimately identifies in uncovering hidden ideologies and implicit meaning, the practical goal of Critical Discourse Analysis.

Research by Wodak & Meyer (2001) proceeds with outlining the historical development and theoretical foundations of Critical Discourse Analysis. Among the key figures who have influenced the development of CDA, contributions from Fowler et al. (1979), van Dijk (1985), Fairclough (1989), and Wodak (1989) are recognised as foundational in establishing the core principles of Critical Linguistic (CL), a term that in Wodak & Meyer (2001) is often used interchangeably with CDA. Emerging from discourse and text analysis, the term Critical Discourse Analysis became more consistently adopted by the 1990s, with key contributions from scholars such Fairclough and Wodak in outlining its core principles. CDA was further developed through the work of Fairclough and Chouliaraki particularly in the context of mass media, to demonstrate the active role of discourse in shaping social and cultural transformation. Van Dijk's contribution in outlining the principles of CDA in its earlier stages also focused specifically on media discourse, emphasising the centrality of power and discourse relations in determining the ability to access and influence public communication by different social groups (van Dijk, 1993), later broadening the focus of CDA to include the use of language within institutional contexts. According to research (Wodak & Meyer, 2001), the inclusion of the institutional context within the framework of analysis has been fundamental in introducing historical perspective in the framework of Critical Linguistic research, which they identify as a core component of Critical Discourse Analysis.

Following the framework presented in Wodak & Meyer (2001), and van Dijk (1993), Paltridge (2012) identifies in Critical Discourse Analysis a tool for uncovering those values and perspectives embedded within a discourse, although not necessarily explicitly stated and identifies in the analysis of how discourse is used in relation to its broader social and cultural

context, the primary aim of CDA. Furthermore, research by Paltridge (2012) and Wodak & Meyer (2001) converges on the idea that the analysis and interpretation of discourse within CDA involves a process of deconstruction within the language. Specifically, deconstructing the language serves as a mean to reveal underlying biases and ideological presupposition.

Fairclough (2013) identifies relationality, transdisciplinarity and dialectical reasoning to be the foundational components of Critical Discourse Analysis. The relational dimension is concerned with the idea that CDA essentially focuses on social relations rather than single entities, while the dialectical dimension relates to the dialectical attributes of these relations. Fairclough further underlines the function of Critical Discourse Analysis in examining both the dialectical relations between discourse and the structures that shape social relations, as well as the internal relations within discourse itself. Therefore, reflecting its transdisciplinary nature, CDA draws from theories and analytical frameworks from various disciplines. However, within this transdisciplinary dimension, Fairclough (2013) identifies a central challenge in the process of integrating and meaningfully combining concepts from different disciplines, particularly because each conceptualization carries different ways of thinking of those concepts.

This issue is framed in terms of conceptual translation, which is exemplified through a reflection on the concepts of 'discourse' and 'power'. For instance, Fairclough discusses the limits faced when trying to reach a given level of coherence in the analysis of their relationship, given that the two concepts belong to different disciplinary frameworks, namely discourse theory and political theory. To bridge this conceptual gap and establish a coherent link, without falling into eclecticism, he suggests that the researcher should aim for 'commensurability', which is the capacity to compare different concepts based on the same criteria. This requires finding meaningful ways of connecting the concepts and improving their compatibility.

Paltridge (2012) offers a complementary perspective to those previously discussed in this chapter, by presenting an outline of the constituent principle of Critical Discourse Analysis based on the works of foundational contributors to the CDA approach. The suggested comprehensive characterization of CDA comprises four different aspects: the social and political dimension of discourse, the role of power, discourse as a means of sustaining social relations and the ideological function of discourse. Paltridge (2012) illustrates the social and political dimension of discourse with a simple example that effectively represents the social

and political aspects reflected and created through and within discourse. The example involves two letters regarding a new building development project in his neighbourhood: one letter, from the local council neutrally outlines the processes and formal actions related to the development project, while the other one, from a local protest group, highlight the negative impacts of the project on the neighbourhood. Although both letters address the same topic, their contrasting discursive approaches reflect different social and political dimensions. Through this example, the author underscores a central dimension of CDA, showing how it can easily be demonstrated in the context of daily social life.

As argued by Gasper (2022) adopting a critical stance towards the text facilitates a clearer understanding of the social and political implication that motivated particular writing choices and communicative strategies over others.

Finally, the other key theme that consistently emerged as central in this review of Critical Discourse Analysis is the concept of power. This principle, which will be further explored in the theoretical section of this research within the context of development studies, is framed by Paltridge (2012) as relating to social interactions through the practices of ‘negotiation’ and ‘performance’, suggesting a certain degree of tangibility, rather than abstraction. Research (Gasper, 2022) on critical analysis within development studies, highlights the significance of applying Critical Discourse Analysis, both as a tool for deconstructing how power systems are manifested through language and as a mean to stimulate independent thinking, enabling a deeper understanding dominant power hierarchies and dynamics.

## **2.2 Choice of data analysis techniques**

The empirical foundation of this research lies in the discourse found within China Daily news articles regarding the China-Laos Railway.

Particularly to answer Research Question 2 (RQ2) ‘*In what ways do ideological, theoretical, and regional assumptions shape the framing of development?*’, the present study adopts the foundational principles of Critical Discourse Analysis as a mean to uncover the ideological and theoretical assumptions underlying the dialectic and linguistic structures found in the news articles. With the aim of critically reflecting on the ontological and epistemological assumptions embedded in the selected sources, this analysis focuses on identifying the presence of conceptualizations and narratives of development, along with recurring themes

and ideologies – which will be discussed further in the theoretical framework of the present research, found in Chapter 4.

Due to the multifaced nature and often controversial conceptualization of development, along with the cross-disciplinary character of development studies, Critical Discourse Analysis with its interdisciplinary, dialectical, and relational approach to text analysis was identified as an effective approach for this investigation. However, as argued by van Dijk (2015), CDA does not constitute a practical and well-defined method of analysis, but rather represents a critical perspective drawing on a variety of approaches from Discourse Studies, among them argumentation analysis and discourse analysis. Given this consideration, the following section outlines the practical strategy adopted to conduct this research.

### 2.2.1 Documentary Analysis

In their review of research methodology, Blaxter et al. (2008) highlight the idea, central to Critical Discourse Analysis, that our perspectives and interpretations shape – while being concurrently shape by – the external world, pursuant to the belief that subjectivity is, at least partly, constructed through discourse. Documentary analysis techniques, as outlined by Blaxter et al. (2008) reflects this belief, in line with the argument that reality is shaped by language, through the way it is chosen to be represented, which is itself influenced by subjectivity. The methodological approach to this study adopts the view that documents are treated as opinion-based and fragmented accounts (Blaxter et al., 2008).

The set of questions proposed by Blaxter et al. (2008) to support documentary analysis, are used as a tool to guide the first step of analysis of the selected sample of news articles, with the primary aim of investigating *how* the knowledge presented in the articles was produced. For RQ1, the questions ‘Who is the author?’, ‘What are their biases?’, ‘Where is the document produced?’, and ‘When was the document produced?’ are asked with the objective of identifying how geographical origin and regional context influence representations of Chinese investment in the construction of the Boten-Vientiane railway. For RQ2: ‘What are its underlying assumptions?’, ‘How was it produced?’, ‘For whom was it produced?’ are asked to critically approach the underlying social and political implications, as well as the deeper epistemological assumptions of the articles.

### 2.2.2 Argumentation Analysis

I found in Gasper (2022) a solid foundation to further apply the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis in this research. The strategy he proposes is designed to achieve what is defined as ‘defamiliarization’ – a technique that helps the researcher adopt a more critical approach to documentary analysis, through the deconstruction and reconstruction of the documents’ texts.

Research by Gasper (2022) is concerned with identifying and questioning those frameworks that are typically accepted as given. He underscores the necessity of actively questioning the text through a comparative approach that engages with other perspectives and scenarios. Therefore, for the second step of the analysis of the selected academic articles, I have chosen to adopt Gasper’s (2022) proposed approach. Criteria for selecting this approach among the several forms of Critical Discourse Analysis was based on its accessibility and clear definition of tools to operationalize discourse analysis. Additionally, since it was developed in the context of international development studies research, both in the Netherlands and internationally, Gasper’s approach to text analysis utilises a form of close reading developed from and for students, aimed at fostering critical thinking.

The argumentation analysis approach presented in Gasper (2022) as a key area within Discourse Analysis, has three principal characteristics: i. Adaptation of Scriven’s argumentation analysis-and-evaluation procedure, ii. Adaptation Toulmin’s model for examining arguments, iii. Integration of the two with supplementary analytical methods.

The analysis of each document is therefore structured in two phases. In the first phase of the argumentation analysis process I employ, the adapted version of Michael Scriven procedure as elaborated by Gasper (2022), with the objective of systematically analysing the argumentation patterns in the selected texts. This procedure is divided into two main stages, ‘argument specification’ and ‘argument evaluation’, as outlined in the following table.

Table 1. Argumentation analysis procedure

Adapted from Gasper (2022)

Stage	Step	Description
Argument Specification	1	Comments on language choices
	2	Analysis of the main conclusions
	3	Creation of an argument map
	4	Consideration of external assumptions
Argument Evaluation	5	Critical evaluation of premises and inferences
	6	Consideration of potential counter arguments
	7	Overall evaluation of the text

The stage of argument specification involves a preliminary reading of the text– found in Gasper (2022) as ‘step 0’, aimed at identifying the sections and key components of the text, and the overall textual tone. This initial reading also includes analysing the author’s language choices and reflecting on the word’s meaning, while considering possible alternative formulations. The second step focuses on identifying the main conclusions of the text, both explicitly and implicitly stated. Central for the purpose of visualizing the connections between the core component of the text, is the creation of an argument map, described by Gasper (2022) as the process of ‘portraying’ the structure. The goal of the argument map is to clearly illustrate how the key elements of the text lead to the main conclusion of the article. Finally, the fourth step is concerned with examining the text’s underlying ideology, the hidden assumptions (rooted in the cultural, social, political, or historical context). The last three levels of the analysis are concerned with argument evaluation. The evaluation of ‘premises and inferences’ refer to the process of critically assessing the reliability of the statements and their coherence, followed by a consideration of possible counterarguments. Lastly, an overall evaluation of the article is drafted, based on the conclusions from the earlier stages of the analysis. (Gasper, 2022)

In considering the potential limitations of this methodological approach within the present research, I have acknowledged the central and most debated concerns regarding the application of Discourse Analysis methods, particularly within development studies. The

limitations include the risks of being overly abstracts, a tendency towards generalization and the adoption of an overly critical approach to the text. Gasper (2022), citing Wodak, also highlights the possibility of ‘selective quoting’, a problem that might arise if the analysis is carried out superficially, leading to potentially misleading interpretations. However, while recognizing the concerns, Gasper (2022) argues that these risks can be addressed and mitigated through the use of a structured framework of analysis, the practice of close reading and the adoption of content analysis techniques.

### 3 Theoretical Perspectives

This chapter will establish the theoretical framework adopted in this study to develop a critical analysis of the discourses that surrounds the Chinese investments in Laos infrastructural development, particularly focusing on the Boten-Vientiane railway project.

In establishing its theoretical framework the present study draws strongly on the work of Sumner & Tribe (2008). The following analysis is designed to present a critical reflection on the ontological and epistemological assumptions embedded in the sources examined in this research. In line with Sumner & Tribe (2008) understanding of the deterministic role of the different development theories in creating the knowledge foundation for any reflection and conclusion made within development studies, the framework elaborated here builds on existing theories in development studies (DS).

The perspectives discussed in this chapter were reviewed with in mind the purpose of establishing a set of criteria aimed at facilitating a critical exploration of the different conceptual approaches used to examine development. However, the limitations in the scope of this study in addressing the numerous theoretical and conceptual approaches surrounding development discourse, should be and have been acknowledged. A major limitation arises from the nature of the discipline itself, which not only covers a vast array of subject areas, but also includes divergent conceptualizations and approaches (Sumner & Tribe, 2008).

Furthermore, while the conceptualization of development is central to the theories examined and presented, its secondary aim is to serve as a platform for the exploration of those concepts and ideologies that are related to the development discourse, and therefore often found in the dialectic surrounding infrastructure development. This framework further underscores the interdisciplinarity at the core of development studies, which as Madrueño & Tezanos (2018) define, comprises not only social, economic, and political aspects, but also technological, cultural, and ecological dimensions. All these elements carry a weigh in the way development –and more broadly the world itself – is perceived and defined, and relate, to varying extents, to the development discourse at global, national, regional, and local levels.

Finally, this research has made a conscious effort to include the perspectives of Chinese academics into the theoretical framework presented. The aim of the framework is to serve as an analytical tool that can be effectively applied to analyse the collected data while referring to theoretical perspectives originating from both Wester and non-Western context. This

clarification is important to avoid the potential criticism that the discourses under analysis are being interpreted solely through a theoretical lens shaped by Western scholarship. In other words, the aim is to legitimize the application of the theoretical framework to both Western and Eastern sources.

### **3.1 The meta-narratives of development—Review of early theories**

In their book on the theories and methods of development studies Sumner & Tribe (2008) address the controversy of the discipline itself, due to i. The essential nature of development, ii. The research quality in the field of DS.

Concerns regarding the quality of research arise from the cross-disciplinary nature of development studies, questioning whether DS research addresses issues that differ from those traditionally examined within the domain of social sciences. Sumner & Tribe (2008) were able to effectively address the problem of the domain of study of DS, by proposing three alternative conceptions of development, namely development as modernization, instrumental development and post-modernist development. These conceptions have been adopted as a conceptual map to navigate the history around development, chart the different theories, select which ones to include in the present framework, and present them in a structured manner.

#### **3.1.1 Modernization**

Sumner & Tribe (2008) identify the first definition of development in its earlier conceptualization, around the late 1950s. An historical moment where structural transformation was initially perceived as a carrier of liberation. In the optic of long-term transformation, development was conceptualized as the result of interconnected discourses of structural, social, and economic change – a change which, reflecting the historical context in which it emerged, was involving, or implying a shift from rural to urban, and from traditional to modern. This conceptualization is rooted in the “meta-narratives” of development. Sumner & Tribe (2008) use the term “meta-narratives” to refer to the dominant theories adopted to analyse the dynamics leading to societal change, throughout the Cold War period.

This conceptualization of development is inherently tied to modernization, as evidenced by Black (1977), in a critical review of development and modernization theory, where he reflects on the increasingly common use of these two terms interchangeably.

'Modernization theory' refers to a broad set of theories across different disciplines – rather than a unified framework – that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, especially within the social sciences, and focused on understanding and explaining the process of modernization (Gwynne, 2009). However, Gwynne (2009) argues that the most significant contributions to the theory came from the field economics. The theory has been widely discussed and applied also beyond western academic discourses and is found in Cao (2009) defined as a 'tool' to analyse the different paths taken by countries as mean of transformation from traditional to modern.

Bernstein (1971), in his critical examination of the conceptualization that shaped the theoretical framework of the sociology of development, discusses the notion of modernization in the context of the modernization theory. Similarly to Black, Bernstein (1971) also suggests a strong association between development and modernization, the latter being an indicator of the former. In his account of the "traditional-modern dichotomy", Bernstein identifies a correspondence between modernization and economic growth and characterizes modernisation as a standardized social process involving economic development. He then turns to the issue of ethnocentrism, which may result from the universalization of how modernization is conceptualized in the modernization theory. He further argues that, since from a historical perspective this process of modernization had its origins in Western Europe and North America between the 17th and 19th century, adopting it as an indicator of development makes it a product of the West. Consequently, the stereotyped idea of what constitutes a traditional society is product of the "westernization" and implies the use of a dominant cultural lens. Bernstein (1971) concludes by questioning the role played by power and exploitation in determining the dynamics addressed in the paper. It's in relation to this concern that divergent emancipatory approaches, and particularly the dependency theory, emerged as part of the debate surrounding the modernization theory – identified by Black (1977) as one of the dominant meta-narratives of development.

Similarly to the views presented above, Wang (2009) begins his analysis by noting that modernization theory is, indeed, fundamentally a product of Western scholarship and therefore carries the limitation of being essentially Western-oriented. Nonetheless, due to the success of modernization in the West is has often been adopted, historically, as a default pathway or prescriptive model. Wang's research specifically, is being cited here because it raises a critical question for the present framework, which concerns how the role of Western

influence on ‘modernization’ and more specifically on China’s modernization is perceived among Chinese scholars.

Furthermore, Wang (2009) reference to Deng Xiaoping’s statement “development is the top priority” employed to delineate the history of modernization in China and how it became central to the Chinese vision after 1978, reflects Black (1997) conceptualization of development and observation on the overlap of the term with the one of modernization.

The western-influenced idea of modernization as a dominant discourse post-1978 is further supporter by Cao (2009) who argues that China, over decades has gradually adopted economic, political, and social structures similar to the ones of the West. However, Cao (2009) also underscores that, from the Chinese perspective, their approach to modernization only adopted what is defined as the ‘useful’ elements of modernization theory and shaped a new vision of modernization, describe by the author as ‘socialist modernization’ with Chinese characteristics. At its core, Cao (2009) indicates three foundational features i. Socialist characteristics, ii. Integral harmony, iii. People-centred approach. In relation to these characteristics, Cao further evidences the impact of modernization not only on development but also on social and ideological systems and denies the influence of capitalism over China’s modernization process.

Research by Guo Han (2008), discussing China’s harmonious society campaigns in the context of the country’s rapid economic growth, offers a valuable exploration of the Chinese ideal of “harmony”, a fundamental and historical value of Chinese culture. The PRC vision of harmonious society, of which people participation and cooperation are core characteristics, partly draws from concepts of the ideal society and the communist society. On this line, the PRC adopted the view that only and harmonious society is able to fully develop its productive forces. In this conception, development is seen as the preferred path to increase material wealth and bridge economic differences, with the final goal of realising social harmony.

This view shows how the three foundational features of Chinese modernisation are deeply intertwined with each other’s, further evidencing how the Chinese view of development is not necessarily resemblant or equivalent of the Western one.

### 3.1.2 Dependency

The critiques to modernization theory and the idea of a “westernization” in the conceptualization of development discussed in the previous section motivated the decision to

investigate the contemporary debate around dependency theory and its legacy. Although dependency theory is considered outdated and frequently excluded from the contemporary framework of development analysis (Kvangraven, 2020), I found in Kvangraven (2020) approach to the categorization of dependency as a research programme, instead of as singular theory, a solid foundation for including the dependency discourse in the present framework. Kvangraven offers an analysis of dependency theories, which serves here as a foundation for exploring questions related to the understanding of the contemporary issues found in development studies, but also to think about the Chinese presence in Laos, particularly in light of its attention to the considerable challenges faced by peripheral countries.

In historical terms, dependency theories primary developed from the Latin American dependency school of the 1950s (Cairó-i-Céspedes & Palacios Cívico, 2022), and remained central to the Latin American sociological discourse on development through the 1960s and 1970s (Tausch, 2010). Briefly stated, to provide an overview of the historical background of dependency, Latin American theorists adopted the Marxist perspective on development and underdevelopment as the starting point of their analysis. Then, significantly shifted from the initial concept, focusing on the analysis of exchange relations rather than the production ones (Ghosh, 2001) investigating the process that led to uneven development through an historical and sociological lens (Cairó-i-Céspedes & Palacios Cívico, 2022).

These initial studies on dependency theory argued that the integration of developing countries into the global (capitalist, industrialized and westernized) system never results in an effective contribution to the country's development. In contrast, it inevitably leads to an exploitation of the least developed countries (LDCs) resources by the developed countries (DCs), resulting in a system that produces dependency and establishes a relation of dominance as an integral aspect of development itself (Ghosh, 2001). In the introduction to his critical examination of dependency theory, Ghosh (2001) offers a foundation for the exploration of dependency within development studies. Dependency is framed as “a form of unequal international relationship between two sets of countries” (p.1), one set being identified as the centre (of the relationship) and the other the periphery. Whereas research by Kvangraven (2020) cites Dos Santos frequently referenced definition of dependency as “a situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another” (p.78).

Similarly, Tausch (2010) analysis on the relevance of classical dependency theory in the contemporary development discourse, highlights – drawing on previous research by

dependency-theory-oriented scholars, the idea that the development of countries located in the periphery and semi-periphery will remain unbalanced in comparison to that of the developed countries, classified in this structural model as the centre. Based on classical dependency studies analysing the negative effects of dependency, Tausch (2010) identifies in the presence of multinational corporations and the long-term negative effects of foreign direct investments (FDI), specifically increased social inequalities and unequal exchange, the core feature of the dependency relationship.

Research by Babones (2005) offers a more in-depth explanation of the centre-periphery model, by presenting an analysis of the three-tier structure, best-known through Wallerstein's world-system theory of the 1970s. This structure, which consists of core, semi-peripheral and peripheral groups of countries, builds on the core-periphery approach originally developed by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) (Cairó-i-Céspedes & Palacios Cívico, 2022). Babones (2005), by referencing the work of the world-system analyst Arrighi, recognises the view, rooted in dependency theory, that the world economy tends towards polarization. A polarization which is itself attributed-to and generated-by the existence of developed countries and least developed countries. This self-reinforcing structure is the product of the global distribution of wealth, where the high concentration of wealth in DCs (the centre or core) generate self-reinforcing advantages, and vice versa, with the peripheral activities of production generating little or no value. This view is supported, as Kvangraven (2020) notes, by the number of restrictions resulted from the analysis of the structure of production. These restriction – including technological dependence, unequal exchange, foreign ownership and extraction, that peripheral economies encounter and their relationship with the country's structure of production, would explain uneven development. Furthermore, on the dependency hypothesis of the polarizing nature of development in the global economy, Kvangraven (2020) evidence that the heavy reliance of dependency theories on the claim that is it particularly unlikely – if not impossible, for LDCs to achieve the same degree of development as DCs, is among the key reasons for its exclusion from the contemporary development analysis.

This conceptualisation has been included in the present theoretical framework not so much for its rather pessimistic view on the inevitability of uneven development, but rather because the concepts of technological dependence, unequal exchange, foreign ownership, and extraction are particularly timely within the ongoing debates around Chinese investment in Laos' development. In the context of this research, the conceptualization of uneven development

through the lens of dependency theory is recognized as a valuable tool for critically engaging with the discourses framing infrastructural project and foreign direct investments in the broader development narrative.

Finally, as observed by Brown (2018) in his analysis of how Laos' geographically central yet politically peripheral position in Southeast Asia has shaped its regional role, the core-periphery model is rightly criticised for being overly simplistic. However, Brown (2018) highlights the significance of the model in drawing attention to the asymmetries in global power dynamics and on their impact on societies and development trajectories. A perspective that offers a critical tool to question the contemporary models of development cooperation, encouraging a reflection on whether they foster mutual benefit or risk generating new forms of dependency. In light of the research questions posed, I am particularly interested in exploring if the dependency-theory concepts of unequal exchange and relations of dominance can be found in the case of China-Laos infrastructure collaboration. In particular, to critically examine China's "win-win dialectic", which has been central to the framing of Belt and Road Initiative projects, such as the China-Laos railway.

### **3.2 Instrumental Development**

In contrast with the macro-narratives outlined in the previous chapter, Sumner & Tribe (2008) place a technocratic, or instrumental view of development. This approach to development is described as having a short- to medium-term outlook, in contrast with the previous approaches that were seeking an understanding of long-term development through a broader historical and structural lens.

This shift in development thinking emerged during the 1970s and 1980s, a period of significant global changes. Which – marked by post-colonial transitions, growing environmental concerns, and increased activism – saw the expansion of development studies as a discipline and the establishment of new United Nations (UN) institutions. During this period the radical theories of the 1960s, with their macro-narratives of development – from modernization to underdevelopment, were revisited in light of the post-colonial turn (Corbridge, 2007). Among them, the modernization theory was particularly criticized, because of its assumption of a linear, universal path to development as the impact of industrialization on the environment became evident.

The one of instrumental development is defined in Sumner & Tribe (2008) as a vision of progressive change, that is measurable and focuses on the outcomes of development. In this perspective the meaning of development corresponds to the achievement of certain target outcomes – such as poverty reduction, and economic growth – making instrumental development particularly suited to technocratic implementations. Notably, it has been embraced by bilateral-aid and international development agencies – namely the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the World Bank.

However, numerous criticisms have been moved to this type of approach to development, one of the majors concerning its depoliticizing nature. By presenting development as a technical matter to solve through expertise, the risk is to overlook fundamental aspects related to power, inequality, and participation (Sumner & Tribe, 2008),

Wilson (2006) argues that the term technocratic carries itself a meaning of depoliticization, justifying interventions – particularly in the context of international development agencies – as being exclusively based on expertise. In this context he draws from research of previous scholars on the “development industry”, observing that often development challenges result presented not only in a depoliticized but also ahistorical manner, in the context of international development agencies and practitioners. Sumner & Tribe (2008), further underline the ahistorical and potentially paternalistic dimension of this model of development, in which development goals are often refined by international agencies and might not reflect the real needs of the communities concerned. This observation particularly questions whose values are represented, showing an asymmetry that not only raises the issue of ownership, but also shows a universalizing influence around what is considered “good”.

Shapiro & Li (2022) describe the approach to development adopted by China – both on a regional and a global level – as being characterized by technocratic governance and a strong emphasis on quantitative target goals. I found research by Shapiro & Li (2022) particularly insightful, as it offers a lens for comparing China’s top-down and target oriented governance with the instrumental approach described by Sumner & Tribe (2008) in their discussion of development in the context of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Comparing these models prompted a reflection on the degree to which China’s approach intensifies the technocratic tendencies associated with instrumental development. One of the most striking distinctions is seen in the way the development frameworks are framed and presented. In

contrast to the MDGs which were, at least on a rhetorical level, created on the ideal of global cooperation and through multilateral dialogue, China's development model is marked by a state-led logic. There is a clear tendency of the Chinese government to use technocratic governance as a mean to tighten state control, openly limiting the participation of both local communities and civil society (Shapiro & Li, 2022). Shapiro & Li (2022) further argue that this model is also projected on an international level, particularly through the export of potentially intrusive technologies – such as drones and face-recognition technologies – under the slogan of 'win-win' cooperation, as a tool to expand the state's influence.

### 3.2.1 Sustainable Development Goals

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) could be argued to be one the most recent manifestation of the instrumental model of development described by Sumner & Tribe (2008) using the MDGs as a representative case. Launched by the United Nations in September 2015, the SDGs constitute an outcome-oriented framework, focused on 17 measurable goals and 169 targets, to promote sustainable development on a global level (Zhang et al., 2022). The emergence of the SDGs, in the context of development has its roots in the idea of achieving poverty reduction, embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948 and followed by the first "UN Development Decade" in 1961 (Chiba & Katsuma, 2022).

At the forefront of the movement that helped centre poverty as a key concern of development agendas was research by the International Labour Organization (ILO), appearing in the early 1970s (Payne & Phillips, 2013). Payne & Phillips (2013) discuss this approach to development in terms of 'basic need approach'. This approach was mainly concerned with moving the focus from the material dimensions of development to the realization of human potential, stressing the need for food, access to services and social participation. The basic need approach stood in contrast to the neoliberalist currents that shaped development thinking from the 1960s until the end of the 1990s, where development was largely driven by economic growth. One of the most remarkable turning points in this approach was the launching by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) of the annual Human Development Report and the introduction of the Human Development Index which by the end of the 1990s became central to the global development discourse. The term sustainable development was introduced in the development discussion following the publication by the UN commission of 'Our Common Future' in 1987, the landmark report by the Brundtland

Commission defining sustainable development as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987; Payne & Phillips, 2013).

While research by Sumner & Tribe (2008), in its review of the instrumental model of development focused on the Millennium Development Goals – adopted by the UN members states in September 2000 (United Nations, 2015) – Chiba & Katsuma (2022) offer a comparison of SDGs and MDGs. They argue that, even if both the SDGs and MDGs share a policy-oriented approach, the key difference between the two is the ‘transformative’ character of the Sustainable Development Goals. As Lawrence & Lawrence (2019) argue, the SDGs respond to the need to approach development challenges from a multidisciplinary perspective. Given that sustainable development challenges are present at every level of society and in every developmental context, the goals are tightly interrelated and intertwined. Furthermore, the MDGs were formulated by the UN members states but only targeted at developing countries, in line with the idea of a North-South aid agenda – a top-down approach that has been often criticized. On the other hand, the SDGs were drafted for all member states, which puts emphasis on the SDG’s approach of bringing together countries at different stages of development, aiming to promote a reconceptualization of development as a global effort (Chiba & Katsuma, 2022). Efforts to tackle issues of inclusiveness and enhance cooperation on a global level were, in part, aimed at addressing those critiques moved to MDGs and broader instrumental approaches to development. As Payne & Phillips (2013) argue, the MDGs played a role in prompting critical enquiry into the nature of globalization and its relationship with human-centred issues, such as poverty and inequality. However, as observed in parallel research on MDGs, among the key criticisms identified are their lack of inclusiveness, the reduction of development strategy to a set of technical issues, the dominance of a donor-country perspective, and the exclusion of the challenges presented by power-structure dynamics within the discussion (Payne & Phillips, 2013).

Chiba & Katsuma (2022) research offers valuable insights for the present framework, challenging the assumption that SDGs are content-fixed norms by analysing the way different actors interpret and apply these norms, with the goal of demonstrating their dynamism and adaptability during the diffusion process. However, in relation to the way the UN measures each goal’s target outcomes with indicators, Chiba & Katsuma (2022) recognise the common critique moved to SDGs of converting complex social or ethical norms into simple and

measurable data points, further considering that concepts such as sustainability or inclusion might result oversimplified or misrepresented due to their level of abstraction. The authors also point out an important paradox of this model of development: the Sustainable Development Goals' intention of being universal and inclusive is also what challenges their implementation on a global level.

### 3.2.2 SDGs and BRI: contrasting narratives.

China's adoption and implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, particularly in the context of the Belt and Road initiative, was met with mixed reactions within the academic debate. The relationship between the BRI and SDGs is viewed with both optimism and skepticism. While some scholars view China's approach to development as pragmatic and collaborative and the BRI as a pivotal mechanism to achieve the SDGs – in particular the SDG 9 (focused on industry, innovation, and infrastructure) – others highlight the PRC's geopolitical ambitions and their implications in terms of state control and coercion (Senadjki et al., 2022). To address the complexity of these contrasting narratives, I have reviewed and compared different academic contributions. The aim of this section is therefore to provide a comparative summary, highlighting the diversity and complexity of the discussion surrounding China's engagement with SDGs.

According to research by Feng et al. (2019) on the integration of Sustainable Development Goals within the Belt and Road Initiative, China and the BRI countries have a vast potential for collaboration towards the achievement of SDGs. In contrast to Shapiro & Li (2022) critical views of China's approach to SDGs norms diffusion and application – framed in the areas of environmental sustainability in terms of 'coercive environmentalism', Feng et al. (2019) emphasize China's policy practices as a valuable reference for the BRI countries, particularly highlighting its macro-level development strategies as a model to learn from. In this context, 'macro-level strategies' refers to a coordinated and systemic approach to development challenges, which are placed in contrast to isolated interventions (Lawrence & Lawrence, 2019). In the context of China's development strategies, research by Yin (2019) explores the potential of the BRI to serve as an investments-led sustainable development model shaped by China's historical infrastructure-driven economic development framework, highlighting its capacity to address the challenge of infrastructure development and economic growth in developing countries. Yin (2019) contributes to the ongoing debate in the context of BRI investments by comparing the United Nations SDGs agenda with the BRI investments

one. The centrality of mutual support and cooperation – fostered through macro-policy communication and interaction mechanisms, together with investments in sustainability and infrastructures, are among the key areas of alignment between the two agendas. The potential of BRI to have a positive impact on a global level is undeniable, considering the central importance of infrastructures in achieving numerous SDGs targets. However, research also highlights the risks of the BRI of generating new environmental pressures and regulatory issues. Governance challenges are especially present in matters of environmental protection – a critical area that needs to be addressed to fully achieve the social and economic advantages of infrastructure development (Yin, 2019).

Views on governance and inclusiveness present as key themes of divergence in the analysed articles. In this context, Shapiro & Li (2022) address China's top-down approach and lack of public participation as a central problem for the implementation of SDGs. The authors further underscore how the transition towards sustainability is often instrumentalized as a justification for the centralization of power. Research by Yin (2019) also discusses the concerns around the so-called China's "infrastructure-driven and debt-oriented" model. In the research, estimate of the risks and challenges associated with the BRI, concerns over debt sustainability and what is referred to as neo-colonialist debt traps, emerge among the primary causes of concerns for the countries along the BRI, particularly considering that the majority of them are countries at different stages of development.

Jin (2018) offers a perspective that stands in clear contrast with the most common criticisms moved to China's governance approach on a geopolitical level. Jin's research compares the BRI and the SDGs from the perspective of development, focusing in particular on the concept of ownership as a core pillar of the Belt and Road initiative. The principle of ownership is explained in relation to national self-governance. Established during the era of decolonization within the international political discourse, it refers to the ability of governments to exercise authority on development strategies and policies even when they are dependent on external actors. The author underscores the significance of the SDGs in representing a clear attempt to overcome the "donor-receiver" dichotomy. In this context, Jin (2018) makes a comparison with the BRI and observes how the emphasis placed ownership aligns with the contemporary global development narrative. This approach is argued to address those critical issues that emerged from the implementation of the MDGs, favouring a vision of equitable partnership.

In conclusion, the discussion around the Sustainable Development Goals and the Belt and Road Initiative is, even within the Chinese academic debate, shaped by contrasting narratives. While some authors support the Chinese government framing of the BRI as a valuable mechanism to achieve the UN SDGs, by providing loans and supporting infrastructural project essential for sustainable development, other scholars raise significant concerns. At their core, the concern for the Chinese investments to threaten the governance of the BRI countries, particularly due to the high risk of debt and economic dependency towards China. In this context, despite the formal alignment of the BRI investments, the use of an instrumental approach to development carries the important risk of underestimating possible power imbalances and establishment of new inequalities. Which challenge China's win-win dialectic due to the possible negative consequences for the receivers' countries (Jin, 2018).

## **4 Critical Discourse Analysis**

The aim of this section is to identify the discursive strategies and theoretical frameworks that are being employed by Chinese media – specifically China Daily – to present the China-Laos railway project. The present analysis is centred around the production of the discourse itself, rather than the public perception of it, with the aim of examining the modalities through which China’s leading English-language broadsheet newspaper China Daily, frames development in the context of the Belt and Road initiative. The present analysis is based on 50 articles about the China-Laos railway found in China Daily’s online database and published between 2023 and 2025.

The analysis of each article is structured in three main parts, in line with my methodological approach. Firstly, through a documentary analysis of the publications I identify who the article’s authors are, their possible biases, the intend public and the core intent of each article. The goal of this first level of analysis is to understand the context of production of the railway’s development narratives. The second part focuses on the specific contents of the articles. By carrying out an argumentative analysis of the language, tone and rhetorical choices made to construct the discourse, I analyse the explicit and implicit conclusions of the publications – particularly focusing on the use of quantitative data, personal accounts, and linguistic strategies. In the final part of the analysis, I confront the findings from the previous sections with the research’s theoretical framework. The goal of this section is to evaluate in what ways the China Daily’s articles align with dominants development theories – specifically the modernization theory and the concept of instrumental development. At the core of this analysis is the objective of showing the ways in which the Chinese narratives of the project both reproduces specific models of development while simultaneously challenging Western criticisms.

### **4.1 News coverage in China Daily**

The choice of China Daily as primary source of analysis is motivated by its importance, being the main English language newspaper in China – reaching over 150 countries, and because of its wide distribution, a large international audience. This daily national newspaper functions as both a mean for public diplomacy and as a tool to understand the state’s position on global issues (He et al., 2020). Accordingly, central to China Daily’s mission is the nation’s branding. By reporting economic, political, and social issues the newspaper aims to shape the

world's perception of China – in particular regarding strategic projects such as the Belt and Road initiative (Zhang & Wu, 2020). Research by Li and Ruan (2025), which specifically focuses on the techniques through which China shapes its global image, further highlights this concept of “self-construction” of the national image through China Daily articles. Finally, China Daily has also been referred to as “the official mouthpiece” of the Chinese Communist Party. The analysis of the newspaper content and use of language has shown a clear alignment with the government's ideologies, consistently reflecting its political positions (Gong & Firdaus, 2022). Research (Gong & Firdaus, 2022) further evidenced its similarities with the state-led newspaper People's Daily, arguing that it is often regarded as its English language version.

Analysing China Daily allows me to examine the narration that China wants to present to the world – due to its unique access to the global community as it's the only Chinese newspaper regularly reprinted by foreign press (Zhang & Wu, 2020) – enabling an analysis of China's preferred narrative of development in the context of a flagship project as important as the China-Laos railway.

Research by He et al. (2020) describes China Daily news coverage strategies as being predominantly neutral and highlights that the newspaper centres its coverage on people's livelihood and experiences as well as statements from specialists, which function as a tool of legitimization. The authors refer to the framing strategies adopted by the newspaper as “science education” – consisting in employing scholars and specialists' statements as means to enhance credibility – a narration strategy that is further described as reflecting of the Chinese government communication policies.

Moreover, research by Zhang & Wu (2020) highlight a further characteristic of the discourses in China Daily's publications, particularly when related to initiatives like the Belt and Road. This discursive strategy is defined as “positive framing”; among the positive terms repeatedly used in the articles, the authors list “embrace”, “welcome”, “boost”, “growth”. Furthermore, particularly focusing on the Belt and Road initiative, “co-build” and “connect” are noted to be often found in the descriptions related to the initiative – standing in contrast with the terminology employed by Western Media when discussing Chinese initiatives.

Finally, Li and Ruan (2025) research findings identify four central themes around which China's image is shaped in China daily, this embrace: openness and inclusiveness, self-improvement, fairness and progress and leading scientific and technological innovation.

Themes that further emphasises China’s image as an international partner and responsible power (Zhang & Wu, 2020).

#### 4.1.1 Documentary analysis of China Daily publications on the China-Laos Railway

This subchapter focuses on the documentary analysis of China Daily’s publications regarding the China-Laos railway, particularly exploring how the knowledge presented in the articles was produced. The objective of this part of the analysis is to go beyond each article’s content to understand its underlying purposes. The first level of this documentary analysis aims to identify how the geographical origin and regional context of the articles influence the representation of the project. This is done by analysing the context of production of each article by focusing on the authors and their possible biases. Furthermore, the second part of this analysis is targeted at identifying their intended public, to uncover the underlying social and political assumptions shaping China Daily’s narrative of the railway project.

The documentary analysis evidenced different types of articles and authors, each one of them with their own different function in shaping the narrative.

Table 2. Types of authors and discursive functions found the analysis of China Daily’s articles

Type of Author	Frequency %	Function
Journalists (China Daily writers)	64 %	Provide data-driven reports. Highlighting efficiency and economic benefit. In line with the logic of instrumental development and modernization.
Academic experts, analysts	18%	Ground claims, give scientific and technical legitimacy.
Chinese diplomats, ambassadors	9%	Public diplomacy function. Represent the state’s official viewpoint, counter Western media criticism.
Lao officials (government and industries representatives)	9%	Provide validation from partner country, supporting mutual benefit and “win-win” narratives.

Certain publications such as the one from the Chinese ambassador to Laos Jiang Zaidong, “Railway improves economy, livelihoods in Laos” published on June 12th, 2023, functions as clear act of public diplomacy. Due to his authority as high-ranking diplomat, by authoring the China Daily article, the ambassador is representing an official state position. Similarly, the article from the 3rd of January 2024 “Railway turns Laos from landlocked to landlinked”, is

based on interviews to a Laotian diplomat and a Chinese scholar, conferring authority and officiality to the information presented in the article. More specifically, the choice of citing a Laotian diplomat, describing the railway as the fulfilment of a national dream, has the function of legitimizing the project from the standpoint of the partner country. This pattern is also evident in the article “Cross-border rail link welcomes first Laotian drivers” from August 5th, 2024, where the author employs a Laotian Deputy Minister’s quote, which as the function of giving a more official stamp, coming from Laos’ government to the legitimization of the project as a “milestone of joint efforts” (Han, 2024).

Most of the publication have been authored by journalists working for China Daily, for instance Luo Wangshu or Yang Han. Which, due to the newspaper affiliation and alignment with the Chinese Communist Party (Li & Ruan, 2025; Gong & Firdaus, 2022; Zhang & Wu, 2020), implies that their news coverage is also mirroring the government social and political narratives.

Most articles, approximately 80% of the publications analysed – among them “China-Laos Railway clocks up 30m passengers” (March 15th, 2024), “China-Laos train successful” (April 15th, 2024) and “China-Laos railway marks second anniversary” (April 12th, 2025) – are almost exclusively based on the statistics provided by the China State Railway Group. In the case of “China-Laos Railway clocks up 30m passengers”, the article might not directly report official statement, however it is exclusively based on statistics grounded in state sources. The reliance on interest-driven data suggests that the biases do not only reside in the authors but also in the data provided.

A comparison of the articles’ publication dates highlights two significant occasions: the yearly anniversary of the railway (April 15th, 2024, and April 12th, 2025) or the need to address criticisms coming from Western newspapers. For instance, “Railway improves economy, livelihoods in Laos” (June 12th, 2023) was published as a direct response to “Reuters” a global news agency headquartered in London (Reuters, 2025). The article directly mentions Reuters’ report and proposes an explicit counter-narrative to contradict the criticisms over the alleged environmental impact of the railway.

Among the underlying assumptions that stand out from the documentary analysis of the China Daily articles, this thesis has evidenced three fundamental ones guiding the railway’s narrative. These assumptions are i. Presenting infrastructures a key for development, which is seen in the repeated framing of the railway as “*transforming Laos from a landlocked country*

*to a landlinked one*” (Baijie & Chenchen, 2024; Han, 2024; Jie, 2025; Ran & Hanmeng, 2024). ii. Offering a benefits-oriented narrative, reflected in phrases such as “*the line has brought tangible benefits to people along the route, boosting tourism and trade*” (Han, 2024b). iii. Positioning altruism as the principal motivation for Chinese investments, which is not only reflected in the repeated portrayal of China as a “*friendly neighbour*” but also by reports such as “UN agencies' representatives in Laos visit China-Laos Railway” (June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2025), noting that “*UN representatives praised the China-Laos Railway for its positive impact on Laos' economic and social development*” (Xinhua, 2025). Consequently, even if there are different approaches to the mode of production, the articles' narratives seem to always be strategically controlled and built around the three foundational ideas of development, benefit and benevolence.

Furthermore, whereas some articles focus on statistical milestones, presenting an abundance of numerical data others adopt a more narrative approach. For instance, “Tracks of Change Lead to Prosperity” (July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024) and “Faster by Rail, the line liking China and Laos” (September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2024) rather than relying on official diplomacy statements or data-based reports adopt a more human-centred approach. Shifting the primary focus of the articles on personal experiences – the account of tour guides, train drivers and entrepreneurs – enables to engage the audience on a more emotional level. The use of people's anecdotes and experiences further underline the benefits of the project at the level of social development level. While these types of articles are grounded in the underlying assumption that China's support is primary altruistic, the topic area of talent development and technological transfer is grounded in the key theme of infrastructures as a key for development. As seen in “Cross-border rail link welcomes first Laotian drivers” from August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024, this theme directly links to the thematic area of the human element but also to the long-term beneficial impacts of the project on Laos' development.

Considering that China Daily is both a national and international newspaper, the public for which the articles are intended is English-language speakers living both in China and abroad. From the documentary analysis of the analysed articles the final goal seems to be validate the Chinese “win-win” narrative in the eyes of English speaker and more broadly the international community. This is particularly done through the use of local sources and practical proofs – a legitimization that serves as a platform to contrast those implications related to possible negative consequences for Laos, particularly in relation to the accusations of debt-trap, and implications related to ownership.

#### 4.1.2 Argumentation Analysis of China Daily Publications on the China-Laos Railway

Based on Gasper's proposed approach to argumentation analysis, this subchapter will examine the rhetorical strategies and implicit assumptions adopted by China Daily to shape the narrative of the China-Laos railway. The analysis evidenced recurring thematic areas in the use of language: the rhetorical strategies employed in the articles are mainly triumphalist, celebrative and at times authoritarian.

In the articles that openly address Western criticisms, the language used is noticeably defensive and authoritarian. This is evident from the use of expressions such as "*groundlessly sought to smear*", "*maliciously disregard*" and "*will not tolerate stigmatization*", carrying a strongly confrontational tone. This kind of terminology is clearly aimed at suggesting that those views opposing the Chinese narrative of the project are distorted and biased. An evident example of this rhetoric is seen in the article "Railway improves economy, livelihoods in Laos", in which western critics are described as wearing "*colored spectacles*".

Nonetheless, most articles employ a celebrative and optimistic language. The railway is repeatedly described as a "*landmark project*" – which is a term that is also being extensively employed in the scholarly articles reviewed for the present research – while its impact is describe exclusively through terms such as "*vitality*", "*prosperity*", "*growth*". The most frequently employed verbs are also radically positive, these include "*boost*", "*leverage*", "*upgrade*" and "*transform*". This terminology is deeply connected with a metaphor of transformation, appearing in every one of the analysed articles. Notably, the phrase "*landlocked to landlinked*" is repeatedly used to underscore the transformative change brought to Laos through the project. Furthermore, together with the references to the wider framework of Belt and Road Initiative, it also succeeds in positioning the project within as part of a wider positive narrative. Other similar expressions include "*golden line*", employed in the article "Railway turns Laos from landlocked to landlinked" (January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2024) to convey an image of the railway as a source of immense wealth, prosperity, and development, and "*tracks of change*". The use of this expression is instrumental in positioning the China-Laos Railway as a key tool driving Laos transformation from its disadvantaging geographical position of being the only landlocked country in Southeast Asia to becoming a regional connection hub. Furthermore, this terminology also succeeds in framing the project as part of

a wider historical narrative, becoming a catalyst for the historic fulfillment of Laos' development goals.

Another core linguistic feature evidenced through this analysis, is the use paternalistic terms and a constant emphasis on the friendship between the two countries. The collaborative nature of the project, within the broader “win-win” ideology, is repeatedly emphasised. Words such as “*friendship*”, “*community*”, “*exchanges*” and “*shared future*” are used to describe the partnership between the two countries, underscoring a deeper bond and a shared objectives – based not merely on economic benefits but on a shared community, culture, and future. The use of this terminology suggesting overarching goals and shared destiny is further emphasised by phrases and quotes, for instance “*the mountain from Kunming to Vientiane is no longer high, and the road no longer long*” (Baijie & Chenchen, 2024) from President Xi Jinping.

Similar rhetorical patterns can also be observed in China Daily's coverage of the relations between China and Vietnam, in the article “China, Vietnam start new chapter of traditional ties” (August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024), expression such as “community with a shared future” and “comrades-plus-brothers” are employed to highlight solidarity and interdependence between the two countries, rather than rivalry due to China's growing influence on Laos-Vietnam relations.

The rhetorical techniques and celebratory tone employed in the articles to highlight the success of the China-Laos railway are consistent with the use of statistical data and personal anecdotes, which are presented as a tangible proof of the benefits for regional development brought by the project. This type of narrative is, on the one hand, employing a more practical tone rather than the paternalistic or triumphalist one, as it aims to offer concrete evidence of the project's success by focusing on statistical data, while on the other hand, is incorporating real-life testimonies to humanize the narrative. For instance, in the article “China-Laos train successful”, the story of a Thai student explaining how the railway greatly impacted his family's travel agency further broadens the portrayal of the railway as a catalyst for successful development and national connectivity while also making the article more relatable on a personal level. This personal anecdote is part of a secondary level of the railway's success narration as it is integrated in the article in addition to statistics on passenger numbers (700,000 passengers, 180,000 cross-border) which, in this case, are shown to support a narrative centred on how tourism is contributing the development.

The article “Railway comes as a boost for Laos business” (July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2024), mainly focusing on regional economic development within the broader context of the Belt and Road Initiative, also adopts similar narrative techniques. It presents precise statistics – such as the number of specific goods and cargo volume growth percentages – and operational details, along with personal storytelling. The story of a Laotian transport officer functions as a tool to emphasize how the railway has created opportunities for professional development and boosted employment in Laos, as well as that of a Chinese operation director who, by stating that the railway brought “*high demand since the beginning*”, contributes to further strengthening the narrative of the railway as a catalyst of development also on a social level.

Based on the argumentation analysis of the articles the present research evidenced both explicit and implicit levels of meaning that are being presented to the reader. Broadly speaking, the explicit conclusions for the public result from the practical information contained in the articles, which are demonstrating the tangible positive impact of the project on commerce, employment, and tourism. Presenting data and personal accounts of success, from both China and Laos, is done with the goal of highlighting the success of this bilateral model of development, supporting the Chinese “win-win” narrative – central to the Belt and Road Initiative projects. The implicit assumptions that the reader might draw by reading the articles are more ideological; the use of a paternalistic tone and the constant repetition of words such as “*friendship*” construct an image of China as a generous partner. This is particularly evident in the article “Tracks of change lead to prosperity” (July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2024) where the Chinese term “*shifu*” meaning mentor. is used to describe a Chinese colleague training a Laotian driver. The use of this term is further reinforcing the idea of China as a supporting partner, dedicated to promoting the development of the region, which is done not only on the basis of economic interests but of a shared culture, history and future.

#### 4.1.3 Applying the Theoretical Framework to China Daily’s Coverage of the China-Laos Railway

The framing of development that arose from the documentary and argumentation analysis of China’s Daily coverage of the China Laos Railway is closely aligned with the dominant development theories previously analysed in the present research, even if clearly ideologically influenced and readapted through a Chinese lens. The railway’s narrative inserts into the wider debate of the meta-narratives of development and appears to be especially in line with the concept of instrumental development. Furthermore, the Chinese narrative promoted

through the China Daily's articles, embraces the core ideas seen within the modernization theory, while openly opposing the dependency theory.

The representation of development promoted through China Daily appears to be rooted in the modernization theory, having at its core the idea that there is a strong association between modernization and development, being the latter tied to the first, often through the adoption of new technologies and infrastructures as a mean for transformation (Cao, 2009; Black, 1977; Bernstein 1971). The news articles analysed clearly support this vision of development by displaying the railway as a key catalyst in Laos' economic growth. Presenting the railway as a central instrument in transforming the local activities and professions, China Daily's narrative of rural transformation strongly aligns with the view of development a transformation from traditional to modern (Cao, 2009).

Furthermore, the project is portrayed as pivotal in unlocking the country's potential as connection hub and in promoting its integration in the global economy by showing the railway's role in contributing to growth in key indicators of economic and social development, such as tourism, business exchange, international mobility, and education. Furthermore, the articles' representation of the railway's effects on Laos consistently avoids mentioning possible negative effect, proposing an entirely optimistic image of the project and its impacts. Notably, there are also no tangible discussions regarding the SDGs, nor of the possible environmental and social implication that such a large-scale infrastructural project might have. When sustainability is mentioned, it is in superficial statements – always charged with a celebratory tone – such as “*the project's achievements in promoting regional connectivity, enhancing livelihoods, and advancing sustainable development*” (Xinhua, 2025).

Laos' transition from landlocked to landlinked is portrayed as linear and harmonious, as seen in the article published on the 16<sup>th</sup> of September 2024, “Faster by rail, the line linking China and Laos” which describes the railway as “*a crucial corridor for enhancing trade*” and emphasises the GDP growth and industrial development achieve in China through the investments in the railway, which are simultaneously supporting Laos' economy an image of balance and collaboration, constructing an image of balance and collaboration.

This “win-win” framing of the project strategically challenges narratives of dependency. China Daily presents concern of about possible debt trap and the economic subordination of Laos to China, which might result from high levels of foreign direct investment and loans, as a production of Western media. As part of this narrative, which explicitly positions itself

against criticisms of dependency, the articles put in the foreground a narrative of mutually beneficial cooperation and friendship. The result is the construction of an image of the broader Belt and Road initiative as a model for a more equal and fraternal alternative to Western's narratives, thereby defusing concerns about dependency and potential limitations to Laos' sovereignty in the name of the ideology of shared development.

In parallel with this framing of the relationship between China and Laos, the narrative presented in China Daily's news articles reflects an instrumental approach to development. The articles evaluate the success of the project based on its efficiency in reaching pre-established goals, which are measurables in terms of economic growth, efficiency and connectivity. China's strong emphasis on quantitative target goals (Shapiro & Li, 2022) aligns with the findings of the argumentation analysis of China Daily's articles, which often constructs their accounts on numbers, volumes of trade and the railway's speed. This reflects a definition of development as the achievement of several measurable objectives (Sumner & Tribe, 2008); in this view, infrastructures become not only a mean for achieving development but also a tool for measuring it.

## 5 Discussion

The analysis of China Daily's coverage of the China-Laos Railway project demonstrates how the newspaper functions both as a tool for China's public diplomacy and as a means to legitimize its role not only in Laos and Southeast Asia, but also on the global scene. Through the use of a celebrative and paternalistic language, the narrative presented in the articles explicitly seeks to promote consensus. Based on these findings, the analysis further highlights that the newspaper does not conduct solely informative reporting but actively participate in constructing a framing of development that is coherent with the ideologies and policies promoted by the People's Republic of China (PRC). The media representation of the railway project reflects and reproduces those ontological and epistemological assumptions that, according to Sumner & Tribe (2008) are characteristics of development paradigms. In this regard, China Daily can be understood as operating within the broader production of knowledge on development, in which theories of modernization, dependency and development intertwine in the construction of meaning around the Belt and Road Initiative.

Research by Bahoo & Alon (2020), which focuses on how policymakers and governments influence public opinion through the framing adopted in the news, defines framing theory as a process aimed at shaping public perception and interpretation of a topic. The framing of the China-Laos Railway project in China Daily's coverage mirrors this definition, aligning with the idea of constructing a central thematic narrative while emphasizing selected and preferred elements that reinforce it. From the perspective of public diplomacy and legitimization, it is evident from the analysed publications that the authors implicitly assume a negative framing of the Belt and Road Initiative in Western media. Consequently, one of the key functions of media outlets of global reach, such as China Daily, is to address and challenge negative portraits while promoting China's preferred narrative (Bahoo & Alon, 2020). Furthermore, Bahoo & Alon (2020) analysis of major Western media outlets found that, although the general framing of China's international cooperation within the context of the BRI generally aligns with China's vision of "win-win cooperation" — possibly suggesting a perceived bias in China's interpretation of Western narratives. However, when tackling issues related to geopolitics and specific geopolitical contexts, Western media often highlights themes such as debt crisis and so-called "Chinese debt traps". This directly relates to China Daily's attempts to counter these accusations through the construction of that curated counter-narrative of success, friendships and cooperation.

From a geopolitical perspective, the China-Laos Railway is represented as a “*crucial corridor*” for regional commerce and as a tool to strengthen China’s strategic position in Southeast Asia. This framing supports the purpose of the Belt and Road initiative as a platform for collaboration but primarily as a means of further consolidating China’s role as a regional leader. However, considering the concepts found in the dependency theory (Ghosh, 2001; Kvangraven, 2020), this narrative appears bivalent. While the China Daily insists on the “win-win” rhetoric of cooperation, the asymmetric economic and financial relations dynamics between China and Laos can also be seen as a potential environment for the reproduction of a centre-periphery type of relationship. In this context, the discourses found in the articles tend to neutralize the possibility of interpreting the relationship between China and Laos through a lens of subordination by presenting the economic interdependence as a process of emancipation and shared development.

From an economic perspective, the analysis of the China Daily’s articles highlights the direct benefits that the railway offers to both Laos and China, describing it as a “*vital cog*” for regional development and economic integration of the Yunnan Province with the Southeast Asian region. While the main focus of the articles is often on the benefits brought to Laos, several of them also emphasize the ways in which the project also supports China’s interests. Specific examples, such as the one of the city of Pu’er, show how the railway supports the growth of strategic sectors, particularly the tea and coffee industries while also promoting the growth of tourism and trade between the two countries. This framing of development aligns with the logic of modernization (Sumner & Tribe, 2008; Black, 1977). Echoing the conceptualization proposed by Sumner & Tribe (2008) China Daily presents development as a linear process of economic and social transformation, oriented towards growth and modernization. However, as evidenced by Cao (2009) and Wang (2009), China places technocratic intervention as a vehicle for modernization within the framework of socialist modernization, emphasizing social harmony, connectivity and state intervention. In China Daily’s news coverage, this characteristic is evident in the emphasis on terms such as “harmony” and “mutual benefit”, concepts that echo the Chinese vision of development as “socialist modernization with Chinese characteristics” (Cao, 2009).

Finally, the framework of instrumental development, discussed in Sumner & Tribe (2008) offers a further tool for interpreting the technocratic and pragmatic levels embedded the coverage of the China-Laos railway project. By focusing on quantitative indicators, the articles convey a framing of development that is measurable and depoliticized. This

perspective is in line with the findings of Shapiro & Li (2022), mirroring the tendency of the PRC to employ discursive techniques centred around economic growth and efficiency as a means to legitimize its vision of development.

## 6 Conclusion

In conclusion, the representation of the China-Laos Railway in China Daily is representative of both a China-led framework of ideologies and classical development paradigms. This results from combining elements of modernization with Chinese characteristics, measurable target goals in line with an instrumental approach to development, and the rhetoric of mutual benefit.

The discursive analysis showed that the language used in the news articles combines the use of the rhetoric of cooperation and mutual benefit, aligning with the broader “win-win” narrative, with a technocratic, measurable and depoliticized perspective, coherent with the instrumental approach theorized by Sumner & Tribe (2008). The combination between discourses of modernity and tools of technocratic governance contributes to the construction of an image of development centred on economic growth and efficiency, positioning China as a guiding leader and a model of reference.

The relevance of the findings of this thesis lies in showing how media coverage serves as a tool for shaping development narratives and supporting ideological positions. The analysis of China Daily’s coverage reveals that the framing of development in the context of the BRI, and more specifically regarding the China-Laos Railway project, is not limited to describing the project but contributes to constructing a specific vision of the concept of development itself, rooted in values of harmony, cooperation and progress but also intrinsically tied to the legitimization of China’s hegemonic role within the region. In this regard, this thesis contributes to the understanding of the discourses through which China shapes and broadcasts its worldview, presenting itself as an alternative, though not necessarily opponent, to Western models and narratives.

From a methodological standpoint, the application of CDA to the analysed articles proved effective in deconstructing the linguistic mechanisms used in the media discourse around the railway project.

This approach could be further enriched by incorporating the present findings with an analysis of the audience reception, for instance through interviews or social media analysis, to evaluate the extent to which the narratives proposed by China Daily are accepted, negotiated or contested by the public.

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