

Framing the Belt and Road Initiative: A Comparative Analysis of News Coverage in Western and Chinese Media

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Abstract. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013, represents one of the most ambitious international cooperation frameworks of the 21st century. While Chinese media emphasize its significance as a platform for “win-win cooperation” and “shared prosperity,” Western media frequently frame it as a tool of geopolitical influence and economic risk. This study employs framing theory to conduct a comparative analysis of 200 news reports from 2013 to 2024, published by Chinese state-affiliated media (People’s Daily, Xinhua News Agency) and major Western outlets (The New York Times, BBC, Financial Times). Through quantitative content analysis and critical discourse analysis, the research identifies key framing patterns, linguistic features, and ideological underpinnings in both corpora. The findings reveal significant framing divergence: Chinese media highlight themes of cooperation, connectivity, and mutual development, whereas Western media stress debt dependency, geopolitical competition, and environmental concerns. The study concludes that framing differences stem from distinct political values, media systems, and strategic interests, underscoring the role of media in shaping global perceptions of China’s rise.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative, framing theory, discourse analysis, media comparison, China-West relations.

1. Introduction

Since its proposal by President Xi Jinping in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been central to China’s strategy for global connectivity and development cooperation. As of 2024, more than 150 countries and 30 international organizations have signed cooperation agreements under the BRI framework, covering infrastructure, trade, finance, and cultural exchange [1-2]. However, global interpretations of the initiative remain polarized. Chinese media portray it as a manifestation of “a community with a shared future for mankind,” while many Western outlets frame it as a manifestation of China’s expanding global ambitions.

Media framing significantly shapes public perception of complex transnational issues[3-4]. As Entman (1993) defines, framing involves selecting certain aspects of reality and making them salient to promote a particular problem definition or causal interpretation. This study applies framing theory to understand how Chinese and Western media construct distinct narratives around the same global initiative.

This research is guided by three central questions designed to uncover the framing dynamics surrounding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Chinese and Western media. First, it investigates what dominant frames characterize coverage in each media system, identifying whether narratives emphasize cooperation, development, or geopolitical rivalry. Second, it explores how discursive strategies and narrative patterns differ, focusing on variations in tone, linguistic style, and storytelling logic that reflect distinct journalistic traditions and communicative goals. Finally, it examines the political, cultural, and ideological factors that underpin these framing differences, considering how national interests, media ownership structures, and historical perceptions of China shape global discourse. Together, these questions aim to reveal not only the surface-level contrast in reporting but also the deeper ideological mechanisms through which media construct competing interpretations of China’s global development vision.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Framing Theory and International Communication

Framing theory originates from Goffman (1974) and was later refined by Entman (1993), who conceptualized frames as mechanisms that define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. In international communication, framing plays a central role in how media construct and disseminate meaning about global actors and events. Studies by Scheufele and Tewksbury (2007) and De Vreese (2012) emphasize that frames are culturally embedded and ideologically charged, shaping audience cognition and policy discourse [5-6].

2.2 The BRI in Global Media Studies

Existing research reveals a stark contrast in BRI portrayals. Chinese studies (e.g., Zhang, 2020; Hu & Li, 2022) highlight the BRI as a platform for mutual benefit and sustainable development. Conversely, Western analyses (e.g., Hillman, 2018; Rolland, 2019) emphasize the risks of “debt-trap diplomacy” and “strategic dependency.” Comparative analyses (e.g., Chen & Stotler, 2021) suggest that these framing divergences reflect underlying ideological positions and media systems [7].

2.3 Chinese Media System and Narrative Logic

China’s media system operates under the principle of “guiding public opinion,” with state-affiliated outlets playing a strategic role in external communication. Research by Wang (2021) notes that Chinese global communication increasingly adopts positive narratives emphasizing harmony, development, and inclusiveness [8]. The BRI discourse often features keywords such as “mutual trust,” “shared destiny,” and “common prosperity.”

2.4 Western Media Perspectives on the BRI

Western media, guided by liberal journalistic traditions, prioritize critical inquiry and balance but are also influenced by geopolitical perspectives. Studies show that Western outlets often frame the BRI as a challenge to the existing world order, focusing on economic coercion, lack of transparency, and environmental implications (Callahan, 2019; Fuchs, 2020).

2.5 Research Gap

Despite growing literature, few studies systematically compare framing patterns using both quantitative and qualitative methods across multiple Western and Chinese media sources over a long time span. This study fills that gap by combining content and discourse analysis across an 11-year corpus (2013–2024).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-method approach, integrating quantitative content analysis with qualitative critical discourse analysis (CDA) to provide both breadth and depth in understanding how the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is framed across Chinese and Western media. The quantitative phase serves to systematically identify dominant frames, thematic frequencies, and tone distribution within the corpus, allowing for measurable comparison of media tendencies. Each article was coded according to its prevailing frame type—such as economic cooperation, geopolitical strategy, or debt risk—and assigned a tone classification (positive, neutral, or negative). This numerical analysis establishes a statistical foundation for detecting large-scale trends and shifts in reporting patterns over time.

The qualitative CDA phase complements these findings by delving into the linguistic, rhetorical, and ideological dimensions of media discourse. It examines word choices, metaphors, narrative logic,

and the use of evaluative language to uncover how meanings are constructed and power relations are embedded in texts. Drawing on Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework, this stage situates textual analysis within broader socio-political and institutional contexts, revealing how communicative practices reproduce or challenge dominant ideologies. Together, these two methodological components provide a comprehensive lens for analyzing not only what frames are present in BRI coverage, but also how and why they are constructed differently in Chinese and Western media environments.

3.2 Data Collection

The dataset for this study covers a period from January 2013 to December 2024, corresponding to the launch and subsequent global expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative. A total of 200 news articles were selected, comprising 100 reports from Chinese media and 100 from Western media. The Chinese corpus includes 50 articles from People's Daily and 50 from Xinhua News Agency, representing official and state-affiliated perspectives that articulate China's policy narratives. The Western corpus consists of 35 articles from The New York Times, 35 from BBC News, and 30 from the Financial Times, which collectively reflect major Western journalistic traditions emphasizing independence and critical inquiry. Articles were retrieved through advanced search functions on official media databases and digital archives, using the keywords "Belt and Road," "One Belt One Road," and "BRI" in headlines or lead paragraphs to ensure thematic relevance. This selection strategy ensures that the sample encompasses both early-stage conceptual discussions and later evaluations of implementation and impact, thereby providing a comprehensive longitudinal overview of the BRI's framing evolution across distinct media systems.

3.3 Coding Scheme

Frames were identified following Semetko and Valkenburg (2000)'s typology, adjusted for geopolitical content, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Frame Categories and Indicators

Frame Categories	Indicators
Economic Cooperation Frame	Emphasis on trade, investment, mutual benefit
Geopolitical Strategy Frame	Focus on power expansion or competition
Development and Connectivity Frame	Infrastructure, transport, technology
Debt and Risk Frame	Concerns over financial burden, dependency
Environmental/Sustainability Frame	Environmental impact and governance
Cultural Exchange Frame	People-to-people bonds, mutual understanding

Table 1 outlines six major frame categories adapted from Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) typology, refined to reflect the geopolitical dimensions of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These frames capture the diverse thematic orientations observed in both Chinese and Western media. The Economic Cooperation Frame and Development and Connectivity Frame dominate Chinese reporting, emphasizing mutual benefit, trade, and infrastructure as symbols of shared prosperity. In contrast, the Geopolitical Strategy Frame and Debt and Risk Frame appear more frequently in Western media, highlighting concerns about power projection, financial dependency, and strategic influence. The Environmental/Sustainability Frame and Cultural Exchange Frame represent relatively neutral or bridging narratives, often used to contextualize global cooperation and soft power. Overall, this typology demonstrates that framing choices reflect underlying ideological orientations: Chinese media adopt a developmental and cooperative discourse aligned with national policy goals, whereas Western outlets employ evaluative and critical frames shaped by liberal-democratic values and geopolitical skepticism.

3.4 Analytical Framework

The qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in this study follows Fairclough’s (1995) three-dimensional framework, which integrates textual, discursive, and social analysis to uncover underlying meanings and power relations in media discourse. The textual analysis examines linguistic features such as lexical choices, evaluative adjectives, metaphors, and modality to identify how each outlet constructs attitudes toward the BRI. The discursive practice dimension focuses on processes of text production and intertextuality—how media reproduce, reinterpret, or contest dominant narratives within broader communicative contexts. Finally, the social practice dimension situates these texts within their ideological and institutional environments, exploring how national interests, political systems, and journalistic norms influence the construction of meaning. Together, these levels provide a comprehensive framework for interpreting how discourse both reflects and reinforces geopolitical perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Findings

As shown in Table 2, the distribution of frames between Chinese and Western media reveals distinct narrative priorities. Chinese outlets predominantly employ the Economic Cooperation, Development/Connectivity, and Cultural Exchange frames, reflecting a focus on mutual growth, infrastructure, and cultural ties. In contrast, Western media highlight the Geopolitical Strategy and Debt and Risk frames, emphasizing power dynamics, financial vulnerability, and political influence. The Environmental/Sustainability frame appears moderately across both sides, serving as a shared concern linking economic development with global responsibility.

Table 2. Frame Frequency Distribution (2013–2024)

Frame	Frame
Economic Cooperation	Development/Connectivity
Cultural Exchange	Geopolitical Strategy
Debt and Risk	Environmental/Sustainability

4.2 Temporal Trends

As shown in Figure 1, the evolution of framing between 2013 and 2024 demonstrates a clear divergence in narrative orientation between Chinese and Western media over time. During the initial phase (2013–2015), both sides maintained relatively moderate tones: Chinese reports (70% positive) focused on the BRI as an emerging economic opportunity for regional cooperation and infrastructure development, while Western coverage (45% negative) was more exploratory and descriptive. In the second phase (2016–2018), the gap widened as the so-called “debt-trap diplomacy” discourse gained prominence in Western narratives, framing the BRI as a geopolitical strategy aimed at expanding China’s influence, whereas Chinese outlets (78% positive) intensified their emphasis on “win-win cooperation” and the vision of shared prosperity.

From 2019 to 2021, the global pandemic disrupted BRI projects, and both media systems adjusted their focus. Chinese media (82% positive) portrayed China’s resilience and commitment to sustaining international connectivity, while Western media (68% negative) questioned the initiative’s sustainability and transparency amid global uncertainty. By 2022–2024, China strategically reframed the BRI as part of the “Global Development Initiative,” integrating sustainability and digital cooperation narratives to counter external skepticism. Correspondingly, Chinese positivity rose to 85%, while Western negativity increased to 72%, indicating persistent ideological divergence. Overall, the longitudinal trend illustrates not only the evolution of the BRI’s global image but also how shifting international contexts continually reshape its media framing dynamics.

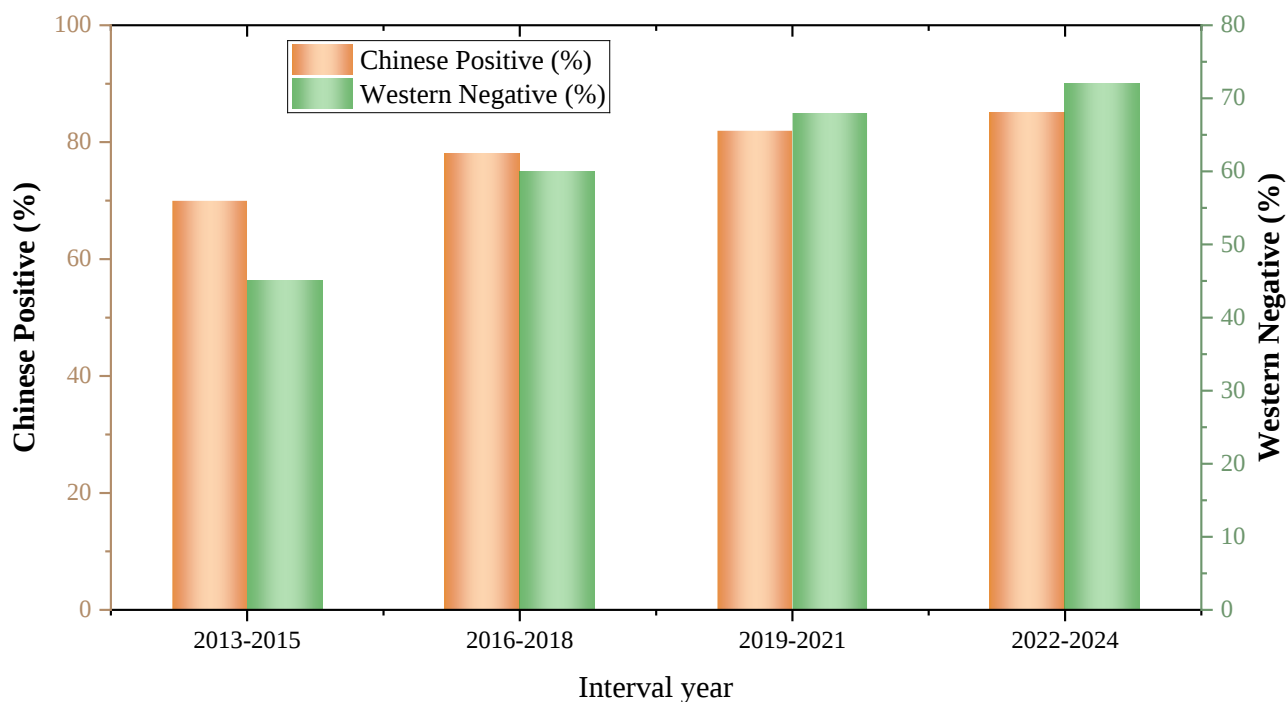


Figure 1. Frame Evolution by Year (Selected)

4.3 Quantitative Findings

The observed framing divergence is consistent with Hallin and Mancini's (2004) media system theory, which posits that media institutions mirror the political and ideological structures of their societies. In the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese and Western media embody fundamentally different communicative logics. Chinese media, operating within a state-guided model, emphasize a developmental and cooperative ideology, constructing the BRI as an extension of China's peaceful rise and its vision of a "community with a shared destiny for mankind." Conversely, Western media, shaped by liberal-democratic norms and a watchdog tradition, tend to approach the BRI through lenses of strategic competition, transparency, and power asymmetry, reflecting skepticism toward perceived authoritarian influence.

These divergent orientations stem from three structural drivers: political ideology, which defines the value system framing China as either a cooperative partner or a strategic challenger; media ownership and control, determining agenda-setting freedom and the degree of alignment with state narratives; and geopolitical interests, as each side seeks to preserve its position within the global order. However, post-2020, both Chinese and Western reporting began to exhibit convergent elements, particularly in discussions of environmental governance, sustainable development, and global recovery following the pandemic. This partial convergence suggests a gradual diversification of discourse, indicating that even amid ideological competition, shared global challenges can foster overlapping narratives and limited consensus within international communication frameworks.

5. Conclusions

This study demonstrates how the Belt and Road Initiative serves as a symbolic battleground of global discourse power. By comparing 200 news articles across Chinese and Western media, the research reveals that framing is deeply conditioned by political systems, cultural logics, and geopolitical alignments.

Chinese media predominantly use constructive frames (cooperation, connectivity, development), reinforcing China's soft power strategy. Western media employ critical frames (debt, risk, strategy), reflecting liberal and geopolitical perspectives.

These findings highlight that media are not neutral conveyors but active constructors of international reality. The BRI's image, therefore, is not merely a matter of policy performance but also of discursive negotiation in the global information order.

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