

Media's Perception of China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC): A Framing Analysis of Media Discourse on Chinese Investments in Myanmar

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Abstract

Since media liberalization in 2011, news media has played a critical role in shaping public opinion, impacting the government's policy-making process. After the emergence of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) in 2018, Chinese projects have increasingly attracted media attention in Myanmar. Previous studies mainly focus on Chinese projects with different perspectives, such as geopolitics and international perspectives, while lacking an understanding of media. Therefore, this article set out to study media perceptions of Chinese projects under the CMEC to examine how the news media frames Chinese projects in Myanmar. Qualitative content analysis with Entman's four frames was applied to find media frames with Chinese investments in Myanmar. Three news media outlets, Eleven News, The Irrawaddy, and Radio Free Asia (RFA), were selected to find critical news stories related to Chinese projects under the CMEC. 15 news stories (N=15) between 2018 to the present were selected, and the study was systematically conducted, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase-analytical process. The study proved that four themes addressed the research question, "How do news media frame news about Chinese projects in Myanmar?" It was concluded that news media primarily framed two factors, public concerns and domestic issues, that impeded the successful implementation of Chinese investments in Myanmar. Finally, the study found that news media called for effective collaboration between China and Myanmar to ensure mutual benefits. It also further recommended that future research should consider longitudinal studies to examine media framing impacts public opinion and policy changes, and to incorporate a wider range of media sources to improve the generalizability of findings to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of media perceptions over time.

Keywords: China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, problem definition, causal interpretation, moral consideration, responsibility attribution

1. Introduction

The suspension of the Myitsone dam hydropower project during President Thein Sein's presidency in 2011 and the revisiting of the China-Myanmar contract on Kyaukphyu seaport projects during the NLD-led government discouraged Chinese investments in Myanmar. The two occurrences concurred with the liberalization of news media in Myanmar, allowing the citizens a more open public sphere that facilitates the consumption of news and information and media to shape public perceptions of the government's key policy (Brooten et al., 2019).

However, Myanmar and China signed an agreement in September 2018 to establish the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC), and all Chinese investments were consolidated with the CMEC, which intended to enhance local and regional connectivity and potentially lift local populations out of poverty (Chan, 2018). Nevertheless, numerous news media depicted that Chinese projects are motivated by a geostrategic desire to secure access to the Indian Ocean and expand shipping routes for its oil supply from the Middle East, allowing China to circumvent the traditional sea lane of the Malacca Strait and potentially isolate India from the East (Myers, 2020). This has led both China and Myanmar to increase worries about a similar disruption in the CMEC investments due to news media influencing people's perceptions.

Previous studies focused on environmental, socioeconomic, political, geopolitical, and security factors concerning

Chinese investments in Myanmar. However, they rarely focused on the role of the media and its impact on Chinese projects. This has inadequately acknowledged the role of media in influencing public perceptions of CMEC projects (T. K. Htwe, 2020). Therefore, this article intends to explore “how the media frames the news about the recently emerged CMEC projects.” The study conducted a qualitative content analysis to identify media perceptions using Entman’s four frames to fulfill this objective. By doing so, this article contributes to the existing knowledge body of the CMEC projects in terms of news media theoretically and empirically.

2. News Media in Myanmar

After the military coup in 1962, there were reports of limitations on news media, resulting in constraints on freedom of speech and media until the Thein Sein government was formed. General Ne Win, who seized power in 1962, targeted the press by launching two state-run newspapers: Working People’s Daily and Forward Weekly (Smith, 1991). Subsequently, new censorship laws were introduced through the Printers and Publishers Registration Law in 1962 to scrutinize and approve all books and periodicals. In 1989, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) revised the 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Act, resulting in escalated penalties for breaches and constraining the activities of writers, journalists, and anchors. Despite these modifications, the populace of Myanmar did not regard the state-run media as a reliable source of information (Allott, 1994). Instead, it relied on international broadcasters, including the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Voice of America (VOA), and Radio Free Asia (RFA) (Lintner, 1989). Following his election to government in 2011, President Thein Sein loosened media control, thereby ushering in a proliferation of private journals and media outlets across the country. Consequently, journalists could exercise their freedom of expression by publishing materials without constraint. Around 300 newspapers and magazines that covered fewer sensitive topics were already permitted to print without prior approval. Moreover, restrictions were lifted on 30,000 internet sites, giving users unrestricted access to political content for the first time (BBC, 2012).

Following the abolition of prepublication censorship and media reforms to promote independent media, the populace has accessed a more comprehensive range of media platforms, significantly improving the overall situation (Ochwat, 2020). In 2021, the Ministry of Information in Myanmar declared the end of pre-publication censorship of the country's media, which had been in effect for 48 years since 1964. However, eliminating official censorship has brought new ethical challenges for journalists, such as handling fake news and the absence of verification in reporting, particularly on sensitive topics like ethnic tensions. After the State Administration Council took control, many media outlets left the country and began producing news from outside.

According to Burrett, although the media in Myanmar has developed significantly during the liberal period, there are still issues in relation to professionalism, independence, and contribution to democratization (Burrett, 2017). Gray (2014) believed that media plays a vital role in shaping citizens' knowledge, attitudes, and behavior and acts as public watchdogs to encourage officials to provide reliable information (Gray, 2014). Ochwat (2020) posited that the media is vital in shaping public opinion by disseminating relevant information and ideas and serving as a public observer (Ochwat, 2020). Chi (2023) contended that sensationalized news media coverage significantly shapes people's assessment of current events in Myanmar, thereby impacting public opinion (Chi, 2023). Despite efforts to promote unbiased news reporting, many media outlets persist in presenting a biased representation of Myanmar, significantly shaping public opinion (Reuters, 2022). While numerous scholars have investigated the media's legacy, challenge, and role in Myanmar, less attention has been paid to the media's significance in Chinese investments.

3. Chinese Projects under the CMEC in Myanmar

Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to Myanmar in 2019, commemorating 70 years of diplomatic relations, marks the first time a Chinese President has visited Myanmar in 20 years, underscoring China's commitment to strengthening its relationship with Myanmar and advancing the CMEC investments (Mahtani, 2020). Thirty-three MOUs were signed during his visit, which signified a notable development in China-Myanmar relations, particularly following the suspension of the Myitsone project in 2011. (RFA, 2020)

The CMEC is a 1,700-kilometer, inverted Y-shaped corridor that connects Kunming in Yunnan Province with Mandalay, Yangon, and Kyaukphyu in Rakhine State proposed in 2017 (Ahmad, 2023). It encompasses a range of initiatives, including the modernization and establishment of new Border Trade Zones, the development of several industrial zones, the construction of a deep-sea port and a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) at Kyaukphyu, the creation of a new city with a population exceeding one million people on the floodplain to the west of Yangon, and the interconnectivity of these projects through the construction of new railways and highways (Millar, 2023). The CMEC focuses on multiple dimensions, including human resource development, collaborative research, interpersonal interactions, and physical connectivity, encompassing infrastructure, manufacturing, agriculture, transit, telecommunications, and related technologies (Ahmad, 2023).

At the second Belt and Road Initiative Forum (BRF), convened in April 2019, Myanmar and China agreed to execute

nine "early-harvest infrastructure" undertakings. Furthermore, the two nations endorsed two Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs): The China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) Cooperation Plan (2019-2030) and the Formulation of the Five-year Development Program for Economic and Trade Cooperation (Lwin, 2019). The primary objective of these agreements is to strengthen collaboration in investment and productivity as well as economic and technology cooperation. The establishment of special economic zones in Kachin and Shan States, the Muse-Mandalay railway project, the Mandalay-Tigyaing-Muse expressway project, the Kyaukphyu-Naypyidaw highway project, the construction of a new bridge over the Salween River in Kunlong, and an outer ring road in Chinshwehaw (Lwin, 2020) are vital projects under the CMEC. The most critical project in the CMEC projects 2021 is the opening of the China (Yunan)-Myanmar (Yangon)-Indian Ocean sea-road-rail joint transport route. Currently, the two governments have been expediting significant infrastructure initiatives within the ambit of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) by relaunching the previously planned initiatives, including surveying Mandalay-Kyaukphyu highway and Mandalay-Muse railway surveys. Meanwhile, China actively engages with various communities, strengthening its commitment to building a 'community with a shared future.' Since the CMEC is the primary economic cooperation platform between Myanmar and China, it has become the most attentive and exciting topic among the news media in Myanmar.

4. Scholars' Perspectives on Chinese Projects under the CMEC

Li and Char (2015) concluded that there has been a noticeable surge in widespread dissatisfaction towards China in Myanmar since 1988 (Li & Char, 2015). Kobayashi and King (2022) noted that the people of Myanmar view China's growing influence since 1988 as a source of concern for their nation's cultural and national identity (Kobayashi & King, 2022). The ISP-Myanmar report (2022) highlighted that Myanmar's citizens' negative attitude towards China and its projects will likely persist due to their memories of the Myatsone Dam incident, posing a significant challenge to successfully implementing Chinese projects in the region (ISP-Myanmar, 2022). Ying Yao and Youyi Zhan (2018) noted that for Chinese ventures to achieve success in Myanmar effective social engagement and working with the right partners are both critical (Yao & Zhang, 2018). They also proposed that the general perception of CMEC is more likely to be positive if Chinese investors enhance their engagement with local communities and carefully select local partners. Mark (2020) also viewed a need for more substantial discussion with local communities, leading to conflicts between local people and investments. Chinese investments under the CMEC can potentially contribute to economic growth in Myanmar (Mark et al., 2020).

Although China implemented policy changes in its projects in Myanmar, such as emphasizing compliance with local laws, increasing corporate social responsibility efforts, and communicating with the local population, negative attitudes towards the Chinese have continued to increase (BANERJEE, 2022). Chanda (2021) assumes that the conventional Chinese method of executing significant infrastructure projects by offering Chinese loans and awarding contracts to Chinese firms is encountering impediments (Chanda, 2021). Swanstrom (2012) also posited that the local people have been increasingly resisting Chinese commercial ventures due to the detrimental effects of their projects on the local ecology and economy (Swanström, 2012). However, Sun (2012) concluded that the media wields substantial influence on public perceptions of Chinese investments, given the example of the suspension of the Myitsone Dam project (Sun, 2012). Therefore, the Chinese government and investors have stepped up their engagements with news media in Myanmar to improve China's image and cultivate favorable sentiments among Myanmar media members. Htwe (2019) believed that lifting media restrictions post-2011 in Myanmar has increased anti-China sentiment, impacting the image of Chinese projects, resulting in China's efforts to engage with media and NGOs in Myanmar to improve its image and address Myanmar's concerns (M. W. Htwe, 2019). Given such a scholarly background, previous studies may have overlooked the focus on examining news media's perceptions of Chinese projects.

5. Framing and Theoretical Context

Framing is a multi-paradigm research program encompassing various approaches, theories, and analytical techniques to study media effects from different perspectives (Terkildsen & Schnell, 1997). It is a concept that helps explain how communication can influence human consciousness. Analyzing frames can reveal how information from sources like speeches, news reports, or novels can shape human thinking and influence people's perception and understanding of the world (Edelman, 1993)(Entman & Rojecki, 1993) (Denzin & Keller, 1981). According to Pan and Kosicki (1993), framing is a cognitive tool that plays a role in how information is encoded, interpreted, and recalled (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). Framing can also be studied as a technique for constructing and processing news discourse or as a feature of the discourse itself (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). They argued that when framing an issue, emphasizing specific aspects can impact people's perceptions by making those highlighted elements seem more critical. Terkildsen and Schnell (1997) firmly believed that framing plays a crucial role in shaping people's perception of any issue that can be presented in multiple ways (Terkildsen & Schnell, 1997). Linstrom and Marais (2012) argued that framing is a process where journalists select some aspects of reality and create a narrative that promotes a specific interpretation that can influence how people think about an issue (Linström & Marais, 2012). According to Chong and Druckman (2007), the strength of frames is a critical factor in

shaping public opinion (Chong & Druckman, 2007b). In their study of “Framing Theory,” Chong and Druckman found that public attitude is influenced by how elites frame issues (Chong & Druckman, 2007a). This suggests that framing issues can significantly impact individuals' attitudes and opinions.

Entman's theory, proposed in 1993, is that how issues are framed can significantly impact the manifestation of authentic public perception, raising important questions about the nature of genuine public opinion and its susceptibility to framing effects (Entman, 1993). According to Robert M. Entman (1993), framing refers to selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of perceived reality in a communicating text to promote a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation for the item described. In his article “Framing: Towards Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” he discussed how framing can shape how an audience perceives and understands issues. He suggested that framing determines what aspects of reality are more salient in a text, influencing how people define problems, attribute causality, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies. (Entman, 1993) In this regard, frames may include certain elements and omit others, guiding the audience's attention and shaping their understanding of an issue. Frames can also be self-reinforcing, limiting the range of acceptable discourse and thus influencing policy and public opinion. He further argued in his study that a single sentence may serve more than one of these framing functions. However, many sentences in a text may only serve some of them, noting that a frame in a specific text may only sometimes encompass all four functions. In addition, Entman advised that, when analyzing textual meaning, it is crucial to identify and describe frames and avoid treating all negative or positive terms or utterances as equally important and influential in incorporating into the content analysis.

The article applied Entman's four frames theory, involving problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. This emphasizes the significance of framing in determining which aspects of reality are more prominent in a text, affecting how people perceive problems, assign causality, make moral judgments, and propose solutions. Within this theoretical context, the article breaks down the text into shorter sentences and assigns them to codes, making it easier for the reader to understand. It sheds light on the power of framing within the news media.

6. Research Methodology

We set up the research question, “*RS: How does news media frame news about Chinese projects being implemented in Myanmar?*” To prove it, we utilized qualitative content analysis within Entman's four frames theory to identify how news media frame the news related to the CMEC to shape public attitudes and impact Chinese projects. To conduct the study, we selected three of Myanmar's most influential news media outlets with the greatest number of followers: Eleven News, The Irrawaddy, and Radio Free Asia (RFA). We randomly collected 15 key news articles, which were categorized as: “opinion,” “analysis,” or “feature,” presented by the three selected news media outlets since the CMEC was signed in 2018 until the present. We examined these news stories, scrutinizing the language, structure, and themes present in the discourse to grasp the symbolic and thematic elements of the text and how they are narrated (Entman & Rojecki, 1993). To systematically conduct the study, we carefully selected the news related to Chinese projects after the CMEC was signed in 2018 and used thematic analysis to identify the most significant frames in each text (Braun et al., 2016). We follow Braun and Clarke's six-phase-analytical process throughout the analytical process, guiding the systematic conduct of qualitative content analysis (Byrne, 2022). While coding data items, we employed interpretation-focused coding to interpret the texts meaningfully and attach labels for each data item. We also used qualitative analysis software called “QDA Miner Lite” as an analytical tool to systematically code the data and develop sub-themes (categories) and themes that can address and be consistent with the research question.

7. Participants' Demographics

After the media liberalization in 2011, many news media outlets were registered to run in Myanmar as private news media outlets. Eleven News, The Irrawaddy, and Radio Free Asia (RFA) are among the most influential news media outlets in Myanmar, attracting millions of readers and having the capacity to influence public perceptions. Among other news presented by the three selected news media outlets from 2018 to the present, five key news stories from each news outlet, totaling 15 news (N=15) related to Chinese projects, with three categories, including opinion, analysis, and feature, and with different numbers of pages were randomly selected. There were 5 (opinion) which we categorized “opinion”, 4 “analysis”, and 6 “feature” included with the minimum number of pages: 2 and a maximum of 9 collected. Table 1 describes the participants' demographics of the study:

Table 1. Participants' demographics

Participant	News Type	Article	Length (page)
P1	Eleven News	Opinion	3
P2	Eleven News	Opinion	4
P3	Eleven News	Opinion	5
P4	Eleven News	Opinion	6
P5	Eleven News	Feature	3
P6	The Irrawaddy	Feature	3
P7	The Irrawaddy	Feature	5
P8	The Irrawaddy	Analysis	4
P9	The Irrawaddy	Analysis	7
P10	The Irrawaddy	Analysis	9
P11	RFA	Opinion	4
P12	FRA	Analysis	3
P13	RFA	Feature	2
P14	RFA	Opinion	3
P15	RFA	Feature	3

8. Data Analysis Process

The data were carefully chosen and systematically analyzed in the study, following a six-phase analytical process developed by Braun and Clarke (2019); Clarke & Braun (2013); Bryne (2022). The six-phase process was thoughtfully and sequentially structured. It is a cyclical and iterative process, requiring the researcher to move back and forth through the phases as necessary (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Data analysis is time-consuming as the researcher needs to navigate phase by phase to ensure relevancy and accuracy in making codes to develop sub-themes/themes. The six-phase process includes data familiarization, generating initial codes, generating themes, reviewing potential themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Byrne, 2022). The study followed a six-phase process to ensure the coded data and developed themes were relevant to the research question.

8.1 Data Familiarization

Understanding the data is a vital first step for a qualitative researcher. This involves thoroughly reading the entire dataset to identify relevant information for the research question (Byrne, 2022). We set out to familiarize ourselves with the data by reading the articles one to another to understand the context of the research questions. We restarted scrutinizing the first article (Participant 1) and jotted down the texts containing the relevant information. Then, we checked the notes numerous times by linking their meanings. Meanwhile, we also documented our thoughts, feelings, and senses with the data. Finally, we decided to code. Box 1 contains some preliminary notes made during the initial stages of getting familiar with the data.

Box1. Preliminary notes

Problem definition

It highlights concerns about the necessity and potential negative consequences of the new city projects, especially the Yangon New City Project. Discussions include the lack of a straightforward narrative for companies to participate, potential involvement of illicit funds, and questions about the need for such extensive projects.

Casual interpretation

The article revolves around the actions and decisions of the Yangon Region Government, particularly in relation to the Chinese involvement in the Yangon New City Project. It mentions the government's disregard for the president's orders to review the project and the handing over of the project to a Chinese government-owned company.

Moral Evaluation

The article questions the motives and implications of Chinese projects, especially regarding potential negative impacts on the country. Concerns about the lack of adherence to presidential orders, potential black money involvement, and the necessity of such large-scale projects are raised.

Remedy or Responsibility

The Chinese projects, notably the Yangon New City Project, should be thoroughly reviewed and reconsidered by the president's orders. The author emphasizes addressing concerns such as potential black money involvement and the necessity of such projects. The author implies that proper oversight and adherence to presidential directives are essential in addressing the issues surrounding the projects.

Note: Example of preliminary notes jotted down

8.2 *Generating Initial Codes*

According to Braun and Clarke (2016), codes should be concise yet provide sufficient detail to independently inform about the common characteristics among data items related to the research subject (Braun et al., 2016). They suggest that the researcher must systematically work through the entire dataset, giving equal consideration to each data item, and identifying interesting aspects to develop themes (Byrne, 2022). Before coding, we started screening the dataset as a whole line by line to engage the contextual understanding of the data. We thematically investigated the dataset with an interpretation-focused coding strategy to create codes relevant to each research question. We emphasized some parts of the texts in the articles, which depended on what contextual information was given related to the research questions, while dismissing the unrelated sentences or paragraphs. When coding the data, we first set up preliminary coding to identify the most relevant and highlighted data in the texts and assigned them to labels that conveyed the original meaning of the texts. After labeling, we rechecked the codes to see if they connected and aligned with the research questions. If the codes were irrelevant and conducive to developing the themes, we refined them until they became valuable. We coded the data using Entman's four-frame concept.

The coding process was conducted using the "code function" of QDA Miner Lite software that allowed the editing of the codes on the side margin while the area of text assigned to each code and double-codes or overlaps in data did not function in the system. Figure 1 shows the tree map of initial codes created by QDA Miner Lite.

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
Problem definition frame				
• Having concerns about debt trap and being positioned between China and India	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• The need to bridge infrastructure gap	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Having concerns about debt burden	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Having concerns about Chinese projects on national and regional security, and its negative impact	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Having concerns over potential negative consequences in dealing with Chinese company	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Having concerns over the risks of debt burden and potential political influence	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Having concern to getting Chinese debt trap	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Concerns over environmental and local concerns	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Government's prioritization of the Chinese projects	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Having domestic challenges	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Having domestic challenges in implementing the Chinese projects	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• The need to collaborate between the two countries	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Difficulty in implementing the Chinese projects due to domestic issues	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Concerns about social and environmental risks	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
Moral evaluation				
• Importance of prioritizing people to people relations	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Supporting the strategic importance of Chinese projects and neglecting the danger of debt trap	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Ensuring mutual benefits and responsible decision-making	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Ensuring benefit for the benefits of locals through transparency	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Ensuring for the benefits for the locals	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Making sure to be transparent with locals	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Concern over potential negative impacts on local people	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Emphasizing transparency and benefitting the locals	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Attempting to rely on the Chinese investments	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Collaboration between the two countries for strategic benefits	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Ensuring the need for transparency, economic benefits and environmental protection	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
Causal interpretation				
• Potential benefits from Chinese investments for regional development and poverty alleviation	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• The need to reevaluate the Chinese projects	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Having potential negative consequences and financial risks like debt trap	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Having concerns over environmental erosion, and unfair benefit over locals	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• The need to review the projects being implemented by the Chinese company	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Having financial risks like debt trap	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• The need to review the reason behind cancellation of Chinese projects by other countries	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• The need to make careful review and consideration	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Having financial and social risks	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Having influence of political instability	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Having challenges due to domestic factors	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Having challenges due to domestic problems	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Having lack of capabilities and relying on foreign currencies in trade	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Giving Myanmar's government to take economic breath	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Having issue of lack of regulations and transparency	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
Remedy/responsibility attribution				
• Transforming crises into opportunity				
• Improving economic cooperation with China for mutual benefits of two people	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• The need to make careful handling, and proper review of the Chinese projects	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Ensuring making equal benefits	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• The need to make carefully reviews	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Ensuring making equal benefits	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Ensuring to create the benefit of the local people	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Having transparency and negotiation with and compensation for locals	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Ensuring the benefits for the country	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• The need to make evaluation	1	2.0%	1	6.7%
• Ensuring mutual benefits of both country	1	2.0%	1	6.7%

Figure 1. Tree-map of initial codes

Note: The codes were created by QDA Miner Lite

Throughout the evolution of the coding process, we also tracked and recorded the code changes in the system and documented the overall analytical process. In the following, Table 2 shows that P6 offers sufficient detail to explain what and how we interpreted the related data items. Looking at the excerpts from P 6, all codes cover the respective texts within different frames. C1 represents the text “*Amid concerns that the multi-billion-dollar economic corridor agreement will leave Myanmar in a debt trap,*” showing the problem definition of the article. Concerning C1, C2 mainly refers to the text “*Beijing expects a degree of political influence in exchange for these large investments,*” referring to the causal interpretation of the author. In connection with C1 and C2, C3 represents the text “*the State Counselor said CMEC projects should support the long-term interests of both peoples,*” depicting the moral evaluation. C4 indicates the text, “*Such projects should be negotiated and implemented in a manner that is fair, transparent, and to the benefit of the host country, not just the investor,*” highlighting the remedy/responsibility attribution. In such a way, we moved back and forth and coded the data items conducive to developing the themes that could address the research questions.

Table 2. Extracts of preliminary coding

Extracts	Codes
<p><u>Amid concerns that the multi-billion-dollar economic corridor agreement will leave Myanmar in a debt trap, a senior government official has offered reassurances that the government will seek the lowest interest rates possible on loans from China for projects along the corridor.</u></p>	<p>[C1] Having concerns about getting debt burden (Problem definition)</p>
<p>“The biggest risks of the Chinese projects in Myanmar are taking on an unsustainable amount of debt and that <u>Beijing expects a degree of political influence in exchange for these large investments.</u>”, said Gregory Poling</p>	<p>[C2] Potential influences through investments (Causal interpretation)</p>
<p>“There are obvious benefits for Myanmar in projects like kyaukphyu and the CMEC, given the country’s infrastructure investment needs, but <u>such projects should be negotiated and implemented in a manner that is fair, transparent, and to the benefit of the host country, not just the investor.</u>”</p>	<p>[C3] Ensuring the equal benefits (Remedy/responsibility attribution)</p>
<p>However, the State Counselor said CMEC projects <u>should support the long-term interests of both peoples.</u> She stressed that <u>China needed to negotiate the projects systematically</u> and in accordance with domestic rules and regulations</p>	<p>[C4] Ensuring the mutual benefit (Moral consideration)</p>

Note: The codes were created that represent the meaning of the extracts from the texts

8.3 Generating Sub-themes/themes

In this phase, we moved from analyzing individual data points to interpreting the broader meaning across the entire dataset. We carefully reviewed all the coded data and assessed how codes could be combined based on common meanings to form themes. This involves consolidating similar codes into a single one and promoting one code as a sub-theme or theme. When developing themes, our primary focus was on how the pattern of codes and data items communicates something meaningful to help answer the research questions (Clarke & Braun, 2013). We maintained each theme’s unique and sometimes conflicting aspects while connecting them to create a clear and coherent representation of the dataset. We identified and separated any codes or potential themes that did not align with the analysis. (Byrne, 2022) We did not determine how many codes to develop sub-themes or themes to generate to obtain clear and relevant data for fully exploring the comprehensive nature and extent of the data.

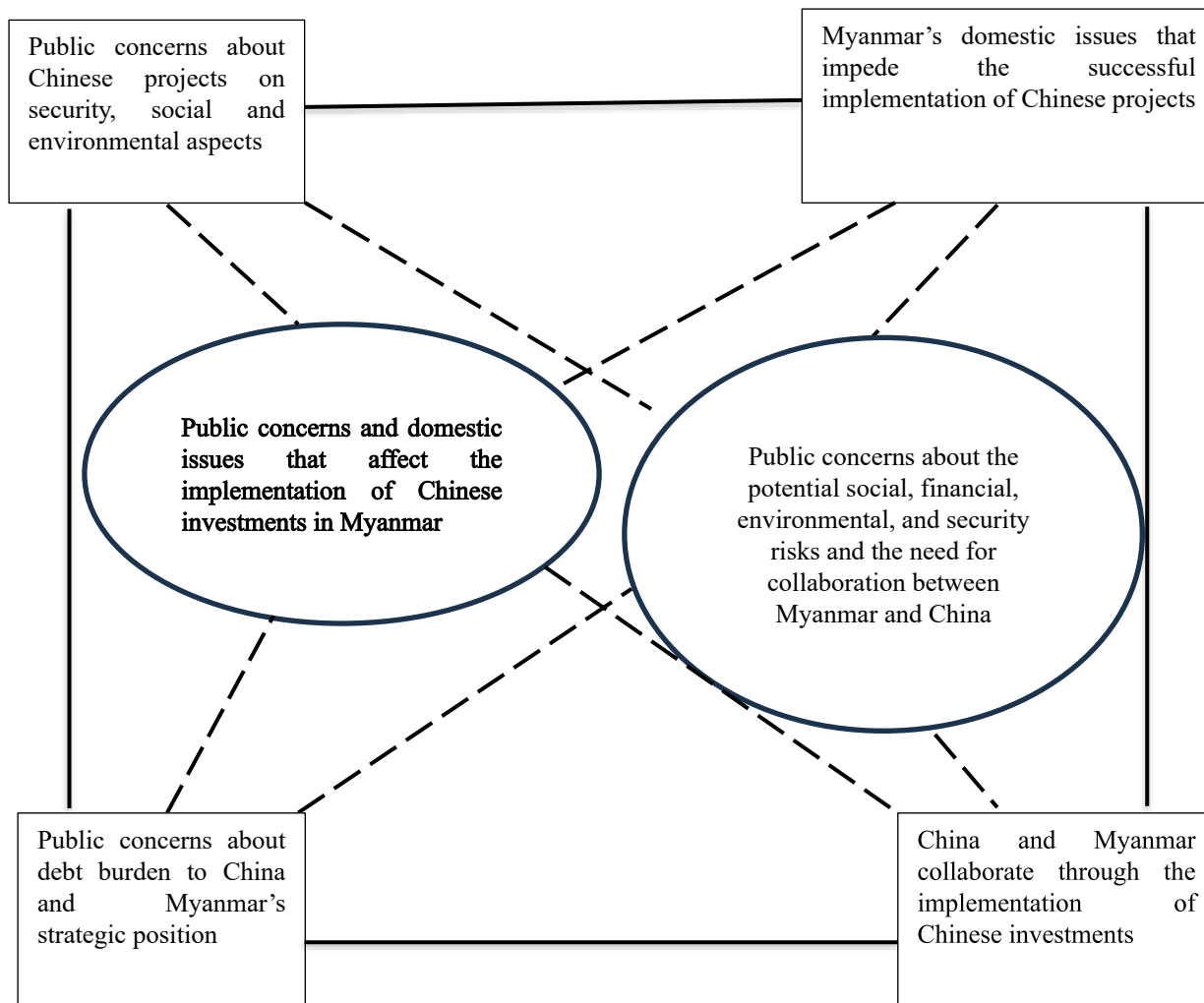


Figure 2. An Initial thematic map of candidate themes

Note: Example of developing candidate theme under problem definition frame

We finally produced a thematic map that compiles codes and data items related to the corresponding themes. Figure 2 shows how we generated sub-themes to the theme representing the research question with the problem definition frame. In Figure 2, the oval box represents the themes, while rectangle boxes refer to the sub-themes. The dashed lines indicate the relationship between themes and sub-themes, while the solid arrows show the links between the sub-themes. The two candidate themes were generated that capture the indicated meanings of sub-themes, bringing the information about public concerns such as the risk of strategic position, debt trap, environmental and social impacts, and Myanmar's domestic issues like political unrest, regional conflicts, and lack of resources impeding the successful implementation of Chinese projects in Myanmar. In such a way, we carefully generated themes under other frames that help address the research question. In this phase, some codes must be adjusted to facilitate the development of coherent and consistent sub-themes with the context and research questions. Figure 3 shows how the codes were distributed to the respective sub-themes.

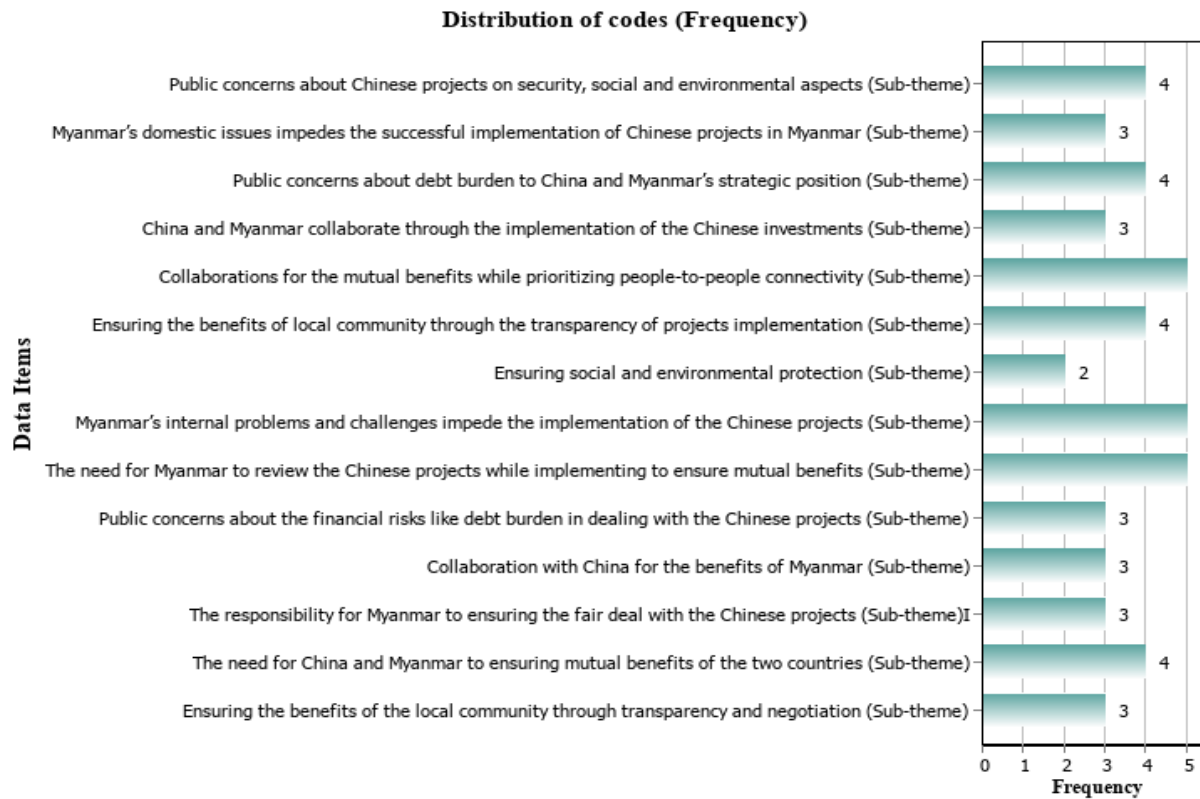


Figure 3. Distribution of codes with the sub-themes

Note: 14 sub-themes are representing 51 codes analyzed by QDA Miner Lite

8.4 Reviewing Potential Themes

During this phase, we carefully reviewed the candidate themes concerning the coded data items and the entire dataset in a recursive manner (Braun & Clarke, 2021). We identified potential themes and assessed whether they may effectively represent the data or address the research question. Additionally, we made necessary adjustments to some codes and data items to ensure the codes aligned with the identified themes. When reviewing the candidate themes, we used Braun and Clarke’s fundamental questions (Cooper et al., 2012), “*Is this a theme?*” “*If it is a theme, what is the quality of this theme?*” “*What are the boundaries of this theme?*” “*Are there enough meaningful data to support this theme?*” “*Are the data too diverse and wider-ranging?*”

We also utilized Byrne’s two levels of review for analysis (Byrne, 2022). We analyzed how the data items and codes relate to each theme and sub-theme in the first level. If they form a coherent pattern, it suggests that the theme/sub-theme presents a logical argument contributing to the overall narrative. In the second level, we reviewed the candidate themes related to the dataset. We assessed them to determine how well they provided the most interpretation of the data to the research questions. Concerning the two levels of review, we were keen to apply Patton’s “*dual criteria for judging categories*” to ensure consistency within themes at the first level and diversity across themes at the second level (Patton, 1990). We adjusted some sub-themes and themes during the review process, requiring restructuring by adding or removing codes or sub-themes or themes. We carefully revised the theme to ensure it presents a logical argument contributing to the overall narrative of the data and addressing the research question.

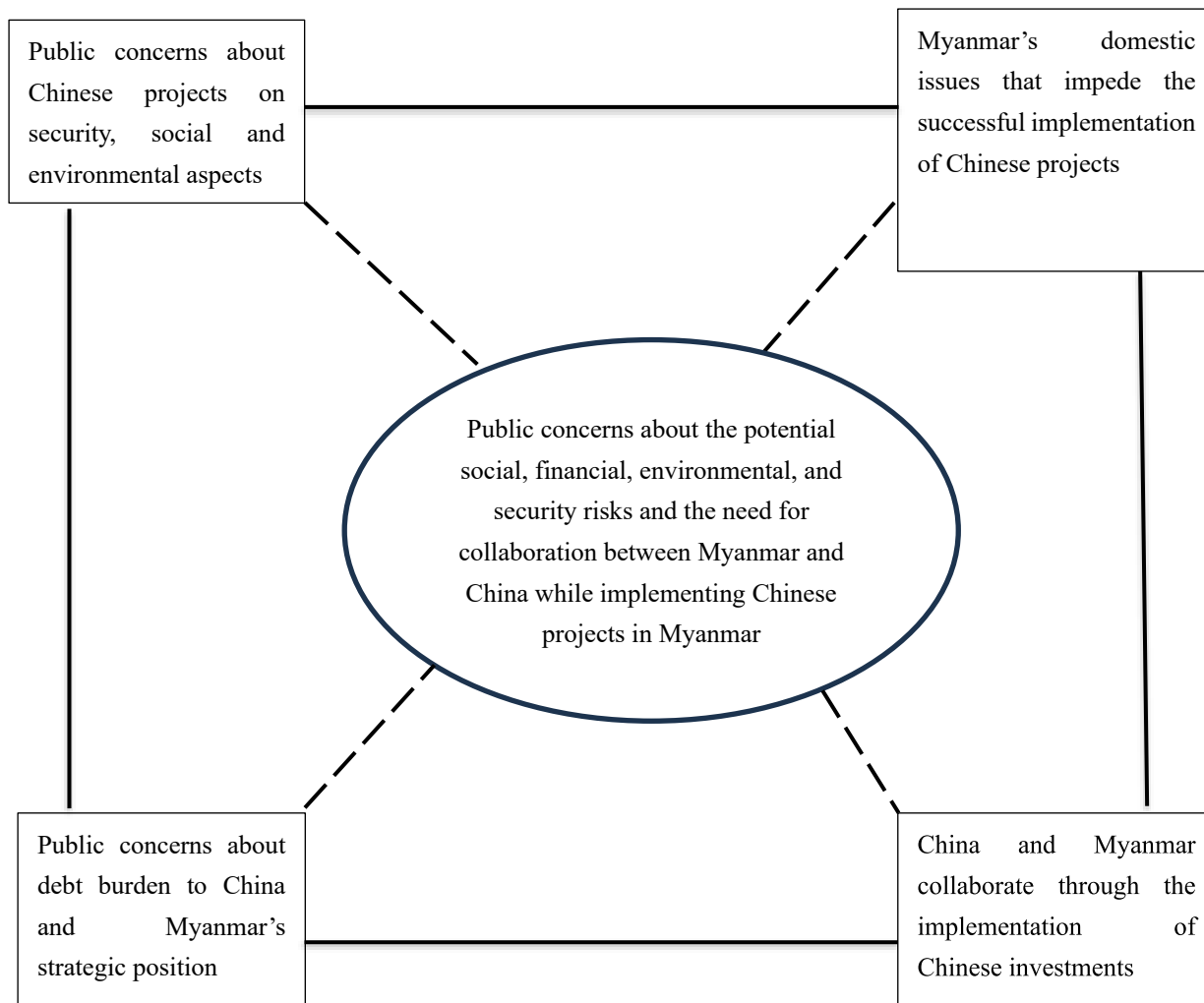


Figure 3. Finalized thematic map demonstrating themes

Note: Example of finalization of the theme under problem definition frame

Figure 3 indicates how we finalized the theme under the problem definition frame, which helps address the research question. Compared to selecting other candidate themes, this theme constitutes more coherent patterns, covers the coded data, and becomes more relevant to address the research question. In this way, we identified sub-themes and finalized themes for Entman’s other frames.

8.5 Defining and Naming Themes

In this phase, we collected themes to create a clear narrative aligning with the dataset and providing informative answers. We redefined and renamed themes as needed for the final version and observed multiple extracts from the entire pool of data items to demonstrate diversity and cohesion (Byrne, 2022). Each extract was interpreted concerning its constitutive themes and the broader context of the research question to inform the readers what is interesting about this extract and why (Clarke & Braun, 2013) (Cooper et al., 2012). For naming themes, Braun and Clarke (2019) encouraged “*creativity and advocate the use of catchy names that may more immediately capture the attention of the reader, while also communicating an important aspect of the theme.*” (Braun & Clarke, 2019). We followed their suggestions and finally defined and named the four themes that address the research question.

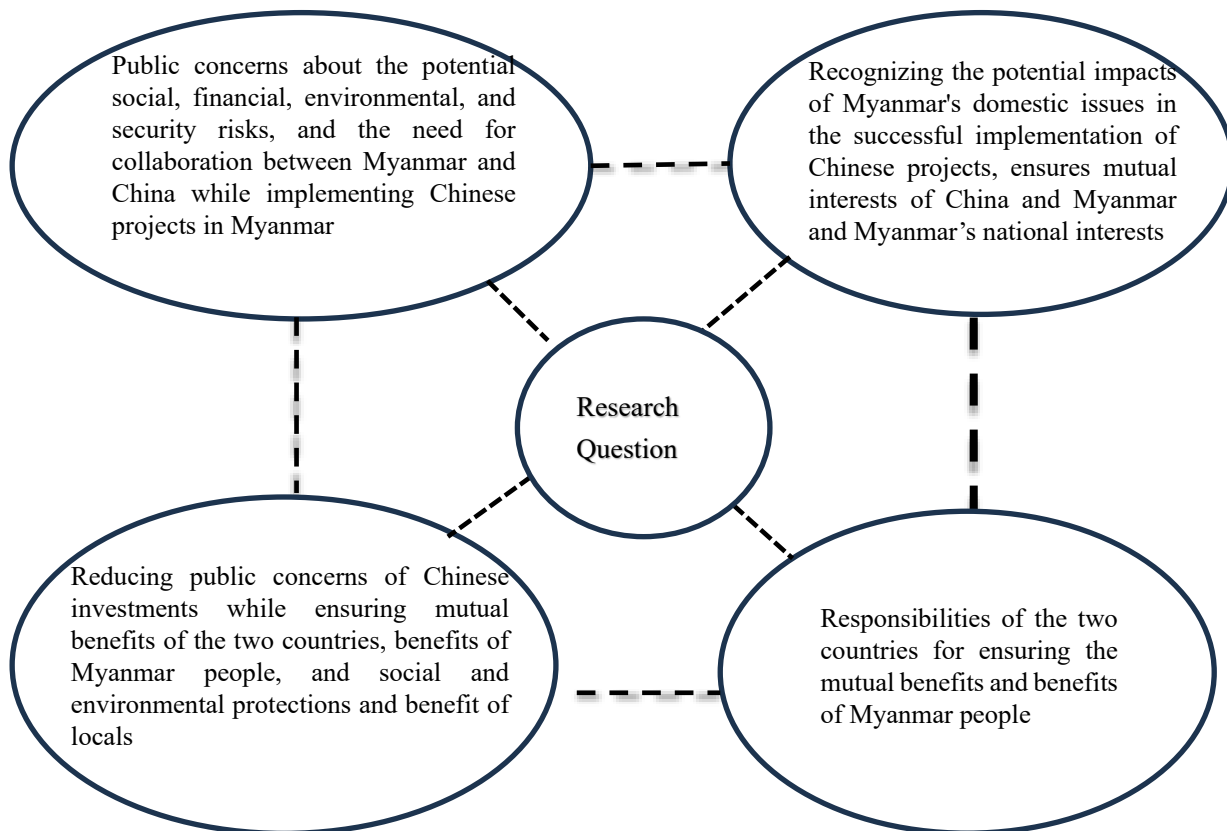


Figure 4. Thematic map demonstrating the defined themes, addressing the research question

Note: Figure 4 shows a thematic map demonstrating four defined themes, representing four frames that link each other and help address the research question.

8.6 Data Presentation

In the analytical process, 51 codes were created within Entman’s four frames. These codes were meticulously crafted, with 14 codes under the problem definition frame, 16 codes within the causal interpretation frame, 11 codes for the moral consideration frame, and 10 codes under the remedy/responsibility attributions frame. Four sub-themes were identified under the "problem definition frame," four under the "causal interpretation frame," three under the "moral consideration frame," and three under the "remedy/responsibility frame." In total, 14 sub-themes were generated to aid in developing themes for each frame. Four themes addressed the research question, "How do news media frame news about Chinese investments in Myanmar?"

Table 3. How do news media frame news about Chinese investments in Myanmar?

Frame	Theme	Sub-themes (Categories)				Code Counts
Problem definition	Public concerns about the potential social, financial, environmental, and security risks, and the need for collaboration between Myanmar and China while implementing Chinese projects in Myanmar	Public concerns over potential security, social, and environmental impacts with Chinese projects	Myanmar’s concerns over debt burden with Chinese investments and its strategic position	Domestic issues impeding the successful implementation of Chinese projects in Myanmar	Collaboration with China through implementing Chinese investments	14
Causal interpretation	Recognizing the potential impacts of Myanmar’s domestic issues in the successful implementation of Chinese projects, ensure mutual interests of China and Myanmar, and Myanmar’s national interests	Domestic problems and challenges impeding the implementation of Chinese projects in Myanmar	The need for Myanmar to review Chinese projects while implementing to ensure mutual benefits	Public concerns about the potential financial risks of debt burden with Chinese projects	Collaboration with China for the benefit of Myanmar	16
Moral Consideration	Reducing public concerns of Chinese investments while ensuring mutual benefits of the two countries, benefits of Myanmar people, and social and environmental protections	Collaboration for the mutual benefits while prioritizing people-to-people connectivity	Ensuring the benefits of the local community through transparency with Chinese projects	Ensuring social and environmental protections for the local community		11
Treatment Recommendation	Responsibilities of the two countries for ensuring the mutual benefits, and benefits of Myanmar people	The need for China and Myanmar to ensure mutual benefits for the two countries	Myanmar’s responsibilities to ensure a fair deal while implementing Chinese projects	Ensuring the benefits of the local community through transparency and negotiation		10

Note: Table 3 shows themes and sub-themes with related code counts within four frames

9. Findings and Discussion

9.1 Theme 1: Public Concerns about the Potential Social, Financial, Environmental, and Security Risks, and the Need for Collaboration between Myanmar and China while Implementing Chinese Projects in Myanmar

This theme represents the “problem definition” frame, and focuses on the worries surrounding implementing Chinese projects in Myanmar. These concerns encompass potential risks to the environment and local communities, the burden of debt, potential breaches of national security and Myanmar’s sovereignty, and consequences of Myanmar’s strategic position between China and Myanmar. The excerpts from P8, “*Naypyitaw’s recent agreement with Beijing for a multibillion-dollar economic project has raised eyebrows over its potential for creating a “debt trap” in a country with a low sovereign credit rating, and a low capacity to service the debt*” indicated that how the public concerns about getting into the debt trap, considering it as the potential threat to Myanmar. The extracts from P15, “*The country’s interests have not been developed, the environment and local people’s livelihoods have been affected, and many people do not want to operate with China,*” reflected that the Myanmar people have concerns over the potential risks to the environment and

the local community in implementing Chinese projects. The theme also reflects Myanmar's domestic issues that impede the successful implementation of Chinese projects. These issues include political unrest, regional conflicts, public opposition, and lack of resources such as electricity, budgets availability, and skilled workers. The extracts from P11, *"Chinese projects in Myanmar were facing trouble before Min Aung Hlaing overthrew the country's elected government on Feb. 1, 2021. Now they are beset by unrest, power shortages, and transport woes,"* clearly defined the problems that slow down the progress of Chinese investments. The theme also emphasizes the need for collaboration between Myanmar and China in specific areas of cooperation to achieve mutual benefits and to support Myanmar's development, including addressing infrastructure gaps. The excerpts from P6, *"In addition, establishing a direct connection between the digital Renminbi and the upcoming CBDC Myanmar Kyat is a strategic forecast for Nay Pyi taw and China, which will benefit from trade and financial opportunities for future projects,"* noted the need for cooperation and collaboration between the two countries for the mutual benefits. Generally, this theme suggested the need for transparent and equitable negotiations to address public fears and ensure mutual benefit. It also further suggested that policymakers should proactively address these concerns by ensuring transparency and public participation to build trust and support for these projects.

9.2 Theme 2: Recognizing the Potential Impacts of Myanmar's Domestic Issues in the Successful Implementation of Chinese Projects, Ensure Mutual Interests of China and Myanmar, and Myanmar's National Interests

This theme represents the "causal interpretation frame". Within this frame, the primary causal issues include internal problems and challenges in Myanmar, such as political instability, regional conflicts, insufficient electricity, lack of capabilities and resources, absence of regulations and transparency, and public concerns, including loan burden and financial and social risks. The causal interpretation frame also presented Myanmar's need to review Chinese projects before implementing the potential benefits for Chinese projects regarding regional development, poverty alleviation, and economic benefits. The extracts from P12 stated, *"Seven months after the military coup, the military council tried to restart the Kyaukphyu deep seaport project, but it was stopped due to local protests and regional unrest. Another problem with restarting these projects is the lack of electricity,"* informed that the local protest, regional unrest, and lack of electricity are causally connected to the delay in implementing Chinese projects. The descriptions from P6, *"The biggest risks of the Chinese projects in Myanmar are taking on an unsustainable amount of debt and that Beijing expects a degree of political influence in exchange for these large investments,"* suggested that Beijing's potential influence in exchange for debt loans while implementing Chinese projects in Myanmar. The extracts from P8 stated, *"Myanmar also has to be careful about other strings attached, such as land use rights and other concessions and terms for these projects. Doing so will allow Myanmar to safeguard its sovereignty and economic national interest,"* indicating the need for Myanmar to review Chinese projects for its national interest and sovereignty carefully. The coded texts from P15, *"I think it's lying. For example, how many tons of copper and how many cars are produced per day? How much is shipped? We haven't seen any announcements yet,"* suggested that Myanmar lacks an adequate regulatory framework and transparency to enable fruitful cooperation with Chinese companies, causing public concern. The descriptions from P4, *"There are no job opportunities for residents. If only the land were lost and the environment were affected, we would not accept such a project,"* reflected the public concern about the negative impact on the environment and local community. However, the excerpt from P1 stated that *"Chinese investments will contribute to regional development, poverty alleviation of local people, looking at employment opportunities,"* indicating that Chinese investments will benefit Myanmar and its people. Overall, this theme suggested that policymakers need to address these domestic issues by enhancing infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, and resource management to support successful project implementation. As Myanmar's political landscape stabilizes or further destabilizes, the impact on project implementation will fluctuate, necessitating adaptive strategies to maintain project momentum.

9.3 Theme 3: Reducing Public Concerns of Chinese Investments while Ensuring Mutual Benefits of the Two Countries, Benefits of Myanmar People, and Social and Environmental Protections

The theme represents the "moral consideration frame." The key issues within this framework include prioritizing people-to-people relations, collaborating for strategic benefits, ensuring Myanmar's national interests and the well-being of local people, cooperating with local communities, and ensuring environmental protection in implementing Chinese projects to address public concerns. The texts from P6: *"There are obvious benefits for Myanmar in projects like Kyaukphyu and the CMEC, given the country's infrastructure investment needs, but such projects should be negotiated and implemented in a manner that is fair, transparent, and the benefit of the host country, not just the investor"* clearly held the view that Myanmar should ensure the benefit of Myanmar and the local people through fair and transparent negotiations with China. The excerpts from P15: *"Currently, the investment law is being prepared, and to protect the environment and Myanmar's legal regulations, Burmese government officials believe that the projects will benefit both countries, as they have obtained comments from the Chinese government"* also suggested that cooperation between the two countries will ensure environmental protection and therefore mutual benefit. The code from P1: *"I remember Chinese President Xi Jinping's guidance that people-to-people relations must be prioritized regarding foreign investments. Naypyitaw-Beijing relations*

will certainly gain momentum only if facilitated,” clearly informed that only China-Myanmar cooperation will benefit the two people. On the other hand, the excerpts from P2, *“What China is doing is a neighborly enrichment policy. We fully support and agree,”* showed that the two countries have moral considerations to improve the relationship through Chinese investments. Overall, this theme underscored the necessity of thoroughly reviewing Chinese projects to ensure alignment with Myanmar’s national and economic interests. However, as geopolitical conditions change, Myanmar’s approach to these projects will need to be reassessed continually to ensure they remain beneficial and aligned with national priorities.

9.4 Theme 4: Responsibilities of the Two Countries for Ensuring the Mutual Benefits and Benefits of Myanmar People

The theme represents the “treatment recommendation” frame. News media highlighted Myanmar’s responsibility to deal fairly with Chinese projects. The theme discusses three issues, including Myanmar’s responsibility to deal fairly, and the benefit to the local community of transparent negotiation. The coded texts from P3, *“I would like to say that all officials should carefully review the distribution of these benefits, which seems to be handed over to China’s CCCC”* and the extracts from P4, *“In Myanmar’s participation in the OBOR project, it is necessary for Myanmar to demand and obtain the rights it deserves, as well as the ability of the Myanmar government to obtain those rights. Much depends on effort,”* suggested that Myanmar should take responsibility for carefully reviewing Chinese projects for equal benefits. The texts from P8 also reminded that Myanmar should ensure the benefits of national interests, stating, *“Myanmar needs to consider whether China’s mega-projects are for Myanmar’s national and economic interest or not.”* The excerpt from P15, *“Burmese government officials believe that the projects will benefit both countries as they have obtained commitments from the Chinese government and companies to follow the rules,”* reflected that China and Myanmar should work together to ensure mutual benefits. The extracts from P1, *“It is important not to lose sight of the political and peace debt. Have trust among fellow citizens. Problems with understanding face with the crises,”* suggested that Myanmar and China should focus on cooperation that will transform crises into opportunity. In summary, this theme suggested that policymakers should uphold ethical standards and engage in fair negotiations to foster long-term bilateral relationships and ensure mutual benefits. Moreover, as geopolitical dynamics shift, the moral imperatives guiding these projects should adapt to maintain ethical standards and promote sustainable development. Overall, all themes have captured all the meanings across the codes, reflecting the respective extracts, and were relevant and helpful in addressing the research question.

10. Conclusion

The two factors that mainly hindered the implementation of Chinese projects in Myanmar were public concern and Myanmar’s domestic issues. The terms “debt trap, debt burden, loan burden, Chinese interests, Chinese influences, land grabbing, land loss, the potential negative consequence, lack of transparency, unfair deal, lack of coordination and negotiation with the local community, lack of benefits for local, the need for mutual benefits,” were mainly framed in across the news articles as public concerns. The terms “political unrest, political instability, regional conflicts, public opposition against the government, lack of specific regulations, lack of capabilities, insufficient electricity, and financial incapability” were framed to highlight Myanmar’s domestic issues. The two causal issues were framed as encompassing Myanmar’s responsibility to ensure the benefits for the Myanmar people and those of the two countries to provide mutual benefits for the two peoples through improving cooperation and collaboration. The terms “careful consideration, evaluation, reevaluation, the need to review, fair deal, for the benefits of locals” were used to frame how Myanmar should do while dealing with Chinese investors. The terms “mutual benefits, benefits of two people” were framed to reflect the need for collaboration between China and Myanmar. Thus, “four themes” relatively interpreted the meaning across the data items and addressed the research question. Overall, the findings indicated a general skepticism towards Chinese projects, underscoring the need for transparent and fair negotiations to build public trust.

Moreover, the study acknowledged certain constraints, such as a small sample size and potential biases in the selected news outlets, which may limit the generalizability of the results. These constraints emphasize the necessity of broadening future research to incorporate a wider range of media sources and larger sample sizes for a more comprehensive understanding of media perceptions over time. Policymakers ought to proactively address public concerns and domestic issues highlighted by the media, such as potential environmental impacts, debt burden, and political instability, by ensuring transparency, public participation, and mutual benefits in Chinese projects. Addressing these concerns can enhance public trust and support for these projects, leading to more sustainable outcomes. The findings of this study indicated that effective communication and cooperation between China and Myanmar is essential for successful project implementation. By fostering open dialogue and collaborative efforts, both countries can work towards common goals and mitigate potential conflicts. Future research should consider the longitudinal impacts of media framing on public opinion and policy changes. Additionally, comparative studies involving other countries with similar economic corridors could provide deeper insights. Considering media effects on the public and policy agendas through agenda-setting theory can offer a sound basis for comprehending how media coverage shapes public priorities and influences policymakers. This approach illuminates how media emphasis on specific issues and attributes affects public perceptions and policy decisions over time.

In conclusion, it is vital to consistently observe and analyze the communication and media viewpoints on Chinese investments in Myanmar due to the potential fluctuating geopolitical circumstances. This continuous monitoring is crucial for comprehending the ever-changing nature of media portrayals and their repercussions on public perception and policy formulation. By employing a comprehensive approach, a thorough and insightful analysis can be carried out, facilitating academic research and practical policy advancements. Consequently, integrating these findings can result in more productive and mutually beneficial cooperation between China and Myanmar, ultimately fostering sustainable development and regional stability.

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Authors contributions

Zeyar Oo was responsible for data collection, study design and drafting of the manuscript. Yasmine Edderssi, Devkota Dipak, and Bandana Singh were responsible for data collection, and assisting for the drafting of the manuscript. Professor Dai Yonghong was responsible for proofreading and revising the manuscript.

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