



Research on the Cognitive Changes of Lao Society on China-Laos Railway

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Abstract

This study investigates the evolving attitudes of Lao citizens toward the Lao-China Railway, from its planning and construction phases to its current operation, highlighting its multifaceted impact on Lao society. A set of interview-based questions was used to collect data from participants across nine occupational groups. The data were analyzed using qualitative descriptive methods. The study found that the Lao-China Railway is widely regarded by local stakeholders as a transformative project with the potential to stimulate economic growth, improve connectivity, and create new opportunities. However, across all groups workers, merchants, service providers, industrial owners, farmers, tour guides, students, teachers, and government officials there are shared concerns about equitable access to benefits and the risk of being overshadowed by more experienced or better-equipped foreign actors. Local workers hoped for employment opportunities but were concerned that high-skilled and well-paid jobs would largely go to Chinese workers due to a lack of technical skills and experience. Merchants appreciated easier access to Chinese markets but feared intense competition. Service providers expected increased customer demand, especially in tourism, yet worried about meeting international standards. Industrial owners saw potential in reduced logistics costs but were concerned about competing with large foreign companies. Farmers viewed the railway as a chance to export products but were uncertain about meeting quality and safety requirements. Tour guides welcomed more tourists but feared being sidelined by foreign tour operators. University students hoped for new career paths but felt unprepared for a competitive job market. Teachers and civil servants emphasized the need for education reform and stronger governance to meet future demands.

Key words: China-Laos railway, Conceptual change, Influence

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, transnational infrastructure projects serve as vital conduits connecting countries and regions. They not only facilitate physical connectivity but also exert significant influence on socioeconomic development and shape public perceptions along their routes. The China-Laos Railway, a flagship project under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), embodies this dual mission. Since its inception in December 2016, it has aimed to enhance economic cooperation between China and Laos while deepening regional integration. More than a transportation artery, the railway acts as a

cultural and emotional bridge between the two nations, with its construction and operation poised to exert far-reaching impacts on Lao society (CGTN ASIA, 2024).

As a landlocked country, Laos has long been constrained by limited transportation infrastructure. The completion of the China-Laos Railway represents a crucial opportunity to overcome geographical barriers and catalyze national development. However, the implementation of large-scale infrastructure projects often prompts complex shifts in public perceptions and social attitudes. For the Lao people, each phase of the railway from initial conception and construction to eventual

operation may elicit a range of expectations, concerns, and even resistance. These evolving perceptions reflect the project's broader implications for local social structures, economic models, and cultural landscapes, while also illustrating how communities adapt to external influences in a globalized world (Yan et al., 2024).

Therefore, examining the shifting perceptions of the Lao public toward the China-Laos Railway not only enhances our understanding of the project's localized social impact but also offers valuable insights into its long-term effects.

Most Chinese scholars adopt an optimistic stance toward the China-Laos Railway. Yuan (2023) through modeling calculations, concluded that the railway would substantially enhance transportation capacity, transform Laos's outdated logistics systems, and increase the proportion of rail transport, thereby stimulating trade. Qin (2023), focusing on logistics development, observed that Laos suffers from institutional weaknesses and lacks standardized logistics protocols. Bulk freight dominates, with containerized cargo remaining minimal. However, the railway is expected to enable large-scale commodity trading, improving logistics efficiency and shifting the mainstream toward containerized transport, thereby transforming local industries.

Luo (2022) using model-based index analysis and tourism assessments, argued that the railway would significantly boost tourism along its route, particularly through the development of the Boten segment, which is expected to enhance Laos's industrial capabilities and attract more tourists. Su (2023) emphasized that despite the relatively weak economic foundations of Yunnan (China) and Laos, the railway could change this dynamic by reducing industrial homogenization and promoting differentiated competition, thus accelerating the growth of specialized industries along the route.

Nonetheless, some scholars have expressed concerns about the railway's construction and long-term viability. Yang (2021) noted ongoing international skepticism about China's development, with the "China threat theory" still influencing perceptions in the Mekong region. Cross-border railways raise sensitive issues such as national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and impacts on local lifestyles. Zhu (2023) highlighted internal divisions within Laos regarding Sino-Laotian cooperation. While the Lao government has maintained a positive outlook, some

citizens remain wary due to lingering concerns tied to the "China threat theory." Given Laos's strategic position in the Indochina Peninsula, the United States may continue leveraging its strategic influence to shape the development of the China-Laos Economic Corridor.

Su (2016) argued that while governmental cooperation between China and Laos is robust, public opinion is often overlooked. Over-reliance on Chinese decision-making frameworks may lead to policy misalignment and undermine the railway's long-term success. Pan (2023) noted that Cold War-era thinking among some Western politicians and scholars has led to efforts to discredit China's diplomacy, sowing distrust among segments of the Lao public. This skepticism has, at times, hindered infrastructure cooperation under the BRI. Similarly, Liu et al. (2022) observed that U.S.-led initiatives through aid programs, media narratives, and non-governmental organizations have cast doubt on the China-Laos Economic Corridor, aiming to diminish China's regional influence.

Even prior to the railway's construction, scholars assessed its potential impacts. Bai Sheng (2017) predicted that the railway would accelerate the development of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area, attract Chinese investment, and provide new momentum for Laos's economic growth. Xiang (2023a) emphasized that the railway would not only foster economic development in China and Laos but also benefit neighboring countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, and Myanmar. By reducing transportation time and costs, the railway is expected to facilitate more efficient trade and lower overall logistics expenses across the region.

Vetsaphong (2022) while acknowledging the railway's positive potential, stressed that Laos must strategically harness its benefits. Critical challenges include securing financial support and achieving industrial upgrades. To fully leverage the railway's advantages, Laos must improve supporting infrastructure such as logistics systems, road network integration, and intermodal transport. Only by extending the railway's convenience beyond regional corridors to nationwide accessibility can Laos realize the full economic value of this major infrastructure project.

Thus, this study seeks to explore the cognitive and perceptual changes within Lao society concerning the China-Laos Railway, aiming to provide a comprehensive

understanding of its societal impacts and to offer guidance for future international infrastructure cooperation.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. The population and sample group

The population of this study consisted of people living along the Laos-China railway line, from Boten in the north to Vientiane in the south. The railway passes through five provinces, 13 districts, and 167 villages, with a population of approximately 1.5 to 2 million people (FN Fresh News, 2018). These communities represent a broad range of individuals who were directly or indirectly affected by the opening of the railway.

The researcher selected a sample group from five key cities: Vientiane (9 people), Luang Prabang (9 people), Oudomxay (9 people), Luang Namtha (9 people), and Boten (9 people), making a total of 45 participants in the study. And each 9 selected from very City has different job as one Farmer, one teacher, one civil servant, one merchant, one worker, one student, one service sectors, one industry owner and one tour guide.

2.2. The research instrument

Interview questionnaires were used to collect data for this study. The questionnaire was divided into three main sections: Part One gathered general information about the respondents; Part Two explored the respondents' opinions on the positive impacts of the China-Laos Railway on Lao society; and Part Three focused on their views regarding its negative impacts. The question included 10 items.

2.3 Data collection

Researchers spent two weeks in May 2024 conducting field surveys along the railway route. we developed a structured interview template to facilitate group interviews with the selected participants. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted between 45 to 60 minutes per person. During the interviews, conversations were recorded using a smartphone. The Lao language was used to communicate with the participants.

2.4 Data analysis

All data collected from interviews were analyzed using qualitative methods. The analysis focused on interpreting and describing the actual experiences, perspectives, and opinions shared by the participants. Responses were carefully reviewed to identify common themes, key insights, and any contrasting viewpoints. The qualitative approach allowed for a deeper understanding of

how individuals perceived the impacts of the Laos-China railway. Public documents were also examined to provide context and support for the interview findings. This method ensured that the analysis captured both factual information and the subjective experiences of those directly or indirectly affected by the project.

3. Results

From the interviews with participants from nine different occupations, the following concerns and opinions were shared regarding the construction of the Lao-China railway:

Mostly Farmers see the Lao-China Railway as a chance to access new markets, especially in China, which could increase demand for their agricultural products and improve income. Faster transportation may also reduce spoilage and lower costs. However, many farmers are concerned about meeting export standards, including quality control, packaging, and safety regulations. There is also fear that large-scale imports could drive down prices of local goods. Additionally, some worry about losing farmland to development projects linked to the railway. Farmers emphasize the need for government support, training, and infrastructure to ensure they can benefit fairly from expanded market access.

According to School teachers view the Lao-China Railway as a symbol of national development and a potential source of new opportunities for students, especially in fields like tourism, trade, and technology. They believe it can inspire youth to pursue careers that support the country's growth. However, teachers also express concerns about the education system's ability to keep pace with changing job market demands. Many worry that students lack the language, technical, and vocational skills needed to compete. They emphasize the importance of curriculum updates, teacher training, and investment in education to prepare students for the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Base on University students generally view the Lao-China Railway as a positive development that can create new job opportunities and promote regional connectivity. They are hopeful about careers in tourism, logistics, and international business. However, many express concerns about limited job readiness, particularly in language skills, technology, and professional experience. They worry that high-level positions may be taken by Chinese workers, leaving fewer opportunities for local graduates. Students

emphasize the need for improved university programs, internships, and language training to better prepare for a competitive job market influenced by increased foreign investment and economic integration through the railway.

According to Government civil servants recognize the Lao-China Railway as a major infrastructure project that can boost national development, trade, and regional integration. They see it as a tool to attract investment, improve logistics, and enhance Laos' economic position. However, they also express concerns about regulatory challenges, the need for cross-border coordination, and ensuring that local communities benefit. Some worry about the country becoming too dependent on foreign influence and investment. Civil servants stress the importance of strong governance, transparent policies, and capacity building within government institutions to manage the railway's impacts and ensure sustainable, inclusive national development.

Act of Many workers expected local employment opportunities but were concerned that most jobs especially higher-paying and skilled positions would go to Chinese workers and companies. Most of them said, "There were many tasks we couldn't take responsibility for. We could only do some jobs that did not require very high skills or advanced technological knowledge. Our salaries were also very different from those of Chinese workers, but we were able to learn a lot from them." Therefore, Lao workers need to further develop their job skills and ability to use modern technology.

Many local merchants view the Lao-China Railway as a promising opportunity for trade and tourism growth, expecting faster transport and access to broader markets. However, concerns remain. Some fear increased competition from Chinese businesses, which may offer cheaper products and dominate local markets. Others worry that small Lao enterprises may struggle to keep up with changing regulations, logistics demands, and language barriers. While merchants appreciate improved connectivity, they emphasize the need for government support, capacity building, and fair trade policies to ensure local businesses can benefit equally and sustainably from the railway's long-term economic impact.

The service sector sees the Lao-China Railway as a driver of economic growth, expecting increased tourism, customer flow, and investment. Hotels, restaurants, and transport services anticipate higher demand. However,

there are concerns about rising competition from foreign businesses and the limited capacity of local service providers to meet international standards. Language barriers, staff shortages, and lack of training also pose challenges. Many worry that without proper support, local businesses may be sidelined. To fully benefit, service providers emphasize the need for skill development, improved infrastructure, and government policies that protect and promote local participation in the growing market.

Industrial owners generally view the Lao-China Railway as a valuable opportunity to improve logistics, reduce transportation costs, and access new markets, particularly in China. They believe it can enhance production efficiency and attract foreign investment. However, there are concerns about increased competition from imported goods, which could challenge local manufacturers. Some worry that without stronger policies and support, domestic industries may be overshadowed by larger, more advanced Chinese firms. They also stress the need for improved technical skills, upgraded facilities, and better regulatory frameworks to compete effectively and ensure that local industries benefit fairly from the railway's economic impact.

Tour guides see the Lao-China Railway as a major boost for tourism, making travel to Laos faster and more convenient for Chinese visitors. They hope for increased job opportunities and income from a growing number of tourists. However, they also express concerns about language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and unequal competition from Chinese tour operators. Some worry that local guides may be overlooked if tourists rely on foreign-run packages. To fully benefit, they emphasize the need for language training, cultural exchange programs, and government policies that prioritize and protect local guides in the expanding tourism industry driven by the railway.

3. Discussion

The China-Laos Railway, as a core component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), represents more than just a logistical corridor it serves as a catalyst for structural transformation and a lens through which the Lao public navigates national identity, development, and globalization. The findings of this study illustrate a dynamic evolution in public perception, transitioning from skepticism and uncertainty to cautious optimism, and eventually, to widespread approval. These shifts reflect earlier

observations that large-scale infrastructure initiatives, particularly in developing contexts, often provoke mixed responses shaped by both material impacts and sociocultural factors (Su, 2016; Pan, 2023).

Initially, Lao citizens expressed significant concerns regarding land expropriation, compensation policies, and the potential for Chinese dominance. These apprehensions align with the broader discourse surrounding the "China threat theory" in the Mekong region, where cross-border projects often raise questions about sovereignty and long-term economic dependency (Yang, 2021; Zhu, 2023). Furthermore, the contrast between China's state-led development model and Laos's relatively limited governance capacity amplified these early fears (Su, 2016).

However, the operationalization of the railway has produced tangible socioeconomic benefits that have reshaped public attitudes. As this study shows, improvements in logistics, reduced transportation costs, and enhanced trade capacity have made Lao agricultural exports more competitive and accessible. These findings support the modeling studies by Yuan (2023) and Qin (2023), which predicted substantial upgrades to Laos's outdated logistics infrastructure and an increase in rail-based freight movement.

In addition, the emergence of new employment sectors particularly in railway-related services and tourism has expanded local economic opportunities. Luo (2022) and Vetsaphong (2022) highlighted the potential for tourism growth and industrial diversification along the railway route, and these prospects were affirmed by participants in this study. Educational institutions, for example, now attract students from diverse regions, fostering a multicultural environment that encourages knowledge exchange and inclusivity.

Culturally, the railway has become a bridge not only between countries but also between worldviews. Increased cross-border engagement with Chinese visitors and technologies has influenced local perspectives, promoting greater openness and future-oriented thinking. These social impacts Xiang (2023b) argument that regional integration under the BRI can extend beyond economic goals to shape human capital development and cultural cohesion.

Despite these benefits, the study also confirms the continued presence of geopolitical skepticism. Western narratives often disseminated through international aid

organizations and media frequently frame China's initiatives in a suspicious light, which can influence public sentiment in recipient countries such as Laos (Liu et al, 2022). This ongoing tension underscores the importance of transparent communication, inclusive local participation in decision-making, and mutual respect to build sustainable and equitable international cooperation.

4. Conclusion

The China-Laos Railway stands as a transformative symbol of transnational cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative, reshaping Laos's physical, economic, and sociocultural landscapes. Improved logistics have reduced transportation costs, expanded access to education, increased the number of service sectors and tourists, and enhanced trade capacity making agricultural exports more competitive and accessible. The railway has also fostered cross-cultural engagement and contributed to a shift in societal values, promoting greater openness, optimism, and a future-oriented mindset.

Infrastructure development projects like this have significant social and psychological impacts on local populations, particularly in relation to perceptions of China's intentions and the broader implications of the BRI. These dynamics underscore the need for more inclusive policymaking, transparent communication, and active local participation in transnational projects.

In this light, the China-Laos Railway exemplifies both the opportunities and challenges inherent in global infrastructure initiatives. It offers valuable lessons for future collaborations, demonstrating that successful development requires not only investment and engineering, but also trust, dialogue, and alignment with the aspirations of local communities.

5. Conflict of Interest

I certify that there is no conflict of interest with any financial organization regarding the material discussed in the manuscript.

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