



A Study on the China-Laos Railway's Economic and Strategic Significance

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Abstract

To analyze the economic and strategic significance of the China-Laos Railway, this paper will examine its impact on both China and Laos from their respective perspectives during the construction of the railway. The results show that the China-Laos Railway significantly improves transportation efficiency in Laos, promoting rapid economic and social progress and development; the China-Laos Railway is fostering economic development and cooperation among the countries and regions along the railway; simultaneously, the successful construction of the China-Laos Railway has showcased China's prowess in high-speed railway construction to the international community, setting a positive example for China's future expansion into new high-speed railway markets. The successful construction of the China-Laos Railway, along with its later plans to connect ports on the west coast of Thailand and Malaysia, facilitates the opening of new Indian Ocean ports in China's southwest, ensuring the secure supply of energy transportation. Moreover, the China-Laos Railway also bolsters China's geopolitical influence in ASEAN, deepens economic and political cooperation between China and ASEAN countries, and plays a significant role in advancing the implementation of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Keywords: *The China-Laos Railway; BRI; The Trans-Asian Railway; Economic Development*

1. Introduction

On December 3, 2021, the China-Laos Railway, aimed at fostering the construction of a “community with a shared future” between China and Laos, commenced operations. The railway originates from Kunming, the capital of China's Yunnan province, and reaches its terminus in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, passing through the China-Laos border port of Mohan. It spans a total length of 1,035 kilometers. The inauguration of the China-Laos Railway not only fulfills the aspiration of constructing long-distance railway lines in Laos but also marks the first international railway directly linked to China's domestic high-speed railway network since the inception of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In essence, the opening of the China-Laos Railway stands as an accomplishment resulting from the collaborative efforts of the BRI—a testament to China's success in extending development opportunities to the world with a more open approach.

As one of the pivotal projects within the

BRI, the China-Laos Railway holds significant importance as a key component of the Southeast Asian segment of the “Pan-Asia Railway Network.” Despite officially commencing construction in December 2016, the project garnered international attention from its inception. Presently, academic research on the China-Laos Railway predominantly concentrates on financing methods in railway construction, railway transportation and management practices, and construction methodologies. However, there remains a noticeable gap in research concerning the economic and strategic implications of the China-Laos Railway. For instance, in their empirical analysis Xinzhe & Anoussa (2019) highlighted that the construction of the China-Laos Railway will transform Laos from a closed land-locked country into a land-linked country, realizing a significant developmental shift. This transformation is expected to facilitate the upgrading of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) and have a positive impact on Laos's economic spatial layout along the railway lines.

Additionally, Xinlan et al., (2022) pointed out that the completion of the China-Laos Railway has accelerated the interconnection of domestic and foreign facilities, fostering the development of the logistics industry at the China-Laos border ports. This addition of a new sea-land transportation channel for China has deepened bilateral trade cooperation and elevated investment and industrial cooperation between China and Laos, contributing to the upgrading of the industrial structures of both countries.

Furthermore, Huiyong (2023) examined the impact of the successful construction of the China-Laos Railway by analyzing the "Five Links" (policy communication, facilities connection, unimpeded trade, financial integration, people-to-people connectivity) under the BRI. Notably, while existing research has primarily focused on the economic benefits of the China-Laos Railway, there is a notable gap in the analysis of its strategic significance.



Figure 1. The China-Laos Railway

Source: The Author

This study adopts a bilateral perspective, focusing on the relationship between China and Laos, to comprehensively analyze the economic and strategic significance resulting from the opening of the China-Laos Railway. Through a thorough review of relevant literature on the China-Laos Railway, this paper first examines the motivations behind its construction and subsequently delves into the economic and strategic implications. By analyzing the economic and strategic benefits derived from the investment and construction of the China-Laos Railway for both China and Laos, this study aims to deepen not only the economic and political cooperation between the two nations but also to strengthen China's geopolitical influence in the Southeast Asia region. Additionally, it seeks to enhance economic and political cooperation and connections between China and Southeast Asian countries, thereby contributing to the ongoing promotion and implementation of China's Belt

and Road Initiative.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Analysis method

This research is a qualitative study that employs literature analysis and qualitative analysis methods to investigate the economic and strategic significance of the completion of the China-Laos Railway. Firstly, the literature analysis method is utilized to systematically examine relevant prior research and determine the research value of this study. Subsequently, the economic and strategic significance of the China-Laos Railway construction is examined from the bilateral perspective of the two countries. This analysis involves qualitative methods such as analysis, induction, generalization, and other analytical approaches.

2.2 Data

While this study primarily adopts a qualitative approach, it also incorporates relevant data to support its research objectives. The data

utilized in this study are sourced from Chinese Customs Statistics (providing information on import goods from Laos), China Railway Kunming Bureau Group Co., Ltd. (supplying data on the number of passengers), and China State Railway Group Co., Ltd. (providing data on employment figures).

3. Results

This chapter proposes three main motivations for the construction of the China-Laos Railway through a literature analysis of previous studies and a qualitative analysis of the time and background of the China-Laos Railway construction.

3.1 Economic development

1) The construction of railway networks plays a pivotal role in accelerating the economic development of southwest China. This infrastructure development contributes to the industrialization and urbanization of cities and regions along the railway line. Yunnan Province, situated in the southwest, lags behind the eastern provinces in economic development. Large-scale railway construction not only expands domestic demand but also boosts employment, fostering economic growth in Yunnan Province and the broader southwest region of China. Furthermore, a significant portion of the materials, including rails, sleepers, and trains, used in the construction of the China-Laos Railway were sourced from the Chinese market. The ongoing progress of the China-Laos Railway construction and the equipment planning along the railway have a substantial impact on the development of China's railway-related industrial chain, creating significant promotional effects. Additionally, railway construction generates a considerable number of jobs, effectively alleviating employment pressure in China. The opening of the China-Laos Railway not only stimulates tourism and real estate development in cities along the line but also enhances ancillary transportation networks and the establishment of new commercial centers and service facilities. This, in turn, generates numerous local jobs, effectively contributing to the accelerated economic development of southwest China and the cities along the regional railway lines.

2) Laos faces unique challenges in its economic development, being the only landlocked country in the Southeast Asia region. Historically, the country's import and export

trade heavily relied on seaports in neighboring countries, particularly Thailand and Vietnam. The inadequacy of its transportation capacity has been a notable economic shortcoming. Despite adopting the “Labop My” (New Economic Mechanism) policy in 1986, inspired by China's reform and opening-up policies, Laos struggled to achieve significant results due to challenges like poor domestic transportation.

Before the completion of the China-Laos Railway, Laos had only a 3.5-kilometer border railway from Vientiane to Nong Khai in Thailand. The reliance on road transportation for domestic passenger and cargo transport resulted in low efficiency and high costs. This deficiency severely hindered Lao agricultural products from accessing the Chinese consumer market, impacting economic benefits for the southern provinces. The completion of the China-Laos Railway is expected to alleviate these challenges, fostering better connectivity and economic benefits for Lao agricultural products entering the Chinese market. In October 2020, the Tariff Commission of the State Council of China exempted 8,256 products from Laos from 97% of the tariff fees. This move, coupled with the opening of the China-Laos Railway, has been instrumental in promoting the increase in Laos's exports of agricultural products to China. Notably, the total value of China's imports of Laos-produced fruits, a significant component of Laos's agricultural exports to China, witnessed substantial growth. In 2021, the total imports amounted to 252 million yuan, increasing to 292 million yuan in 2022. The latest data as of August 2023 indicates a further increase, reaching 345 million yuan.

Moreover, Laos also can benefit from the development of domestic railway-related industries. The majority of the railway lines are located in Laos, offering numerous employment opportunities for cities and regions along the route. Data from China State Railway Group Co., Ltd. indicates that various units involved in the construction of the China-Laos Railway have provided free training for nearly 12,000 railway and road construction talents in Laos, creating about 110,000 effective jobs for local residents. This infrastructure project also accelerates the modernization and urbanization development of northern provinces like Oudomxay, Luang Prabang, and Vientiane.

3.2 Geopolitical influence

1) The construction of the China-Laos Railway serves as a strategic initiative to expand China's economic and political influence in the Southeast Asia region. As a crucial component of the Southeast Asian section of the “Pan-Asia Railway Network”, the construction of the China-Laos Railway is instrumental in expanding China's geopolitical influence on the Indochina Peninsula. The subsequent integration of the China-Laos Railway with the Thai railway network will further extend China's geopolitical reach into the broader Southeast Asia region, reaching even the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. This expansion of influence contributes to creating a stable external environment, fostering sustained and stable development for China's economy.

2) The needs of the geopolitical environment. Despite the implementation of zero trade tariffs within ASEAN, low economic integration and the establishment of non-tariff trade barriers contribute to serious trade protectionism among member countries. The China-Laos Railway has the potential to enhance political mutual trust among countries in the “Lancang-Mekong River Basin” and strengthen economic cooperation within the Indochina Peninsula. This, in turn, contributes to the broader process of ASEAN regional integration. By fostering connectivity and collaboration through this infrastructure project, the railway serves as a catalyst for building stronger political relationships and promoting economic cooperation among nations in the region. This positive impact on geopolitical dynamics aligns with the broader goals of enhancing regional stability and integration within ASEAN.

3.3 The need of the BRI

The China-Laos Railway stands as a landmark project within the BRI, a global platform for mutual coordination and alignment of development policies among partner countries. As the 21st-century Silk Road, the BRI has garnered enthusiastic responses worldwide since its proposal. However, some Western countries have propagated the rhetoric that the BRI lacks transparency and has ensnared developing countries in a “debt trap”. This skepticism has influenced certain countries to question the Belt and Road Initiative. Essentially, the China-Laos Railway promotes economic development in

Laos and dispels doubts among developing countries.

4. Discussion

The previous chapter analyzed the motivations for the construction of the China-Laos Railway. This study will combine these motivations to analyze the economic and strategic significance of the construction of the China-Laos Railway.

4.1 The economic significance of the China-Laos Railway

As a pivotal project within the BRI and a cornerstone in the establishment of the “China-Laos Economic Corridor”, the China-Laos Railway has received robust support from China. This initiative aims to assist Laos, the least economically developed country, in overcoming the economic challenges posed by weak transportation capacity. The completion of the China-Laos Railway not only catalyzed economic development along the railway lines connecting China and Laos but also fortified economic ties between the two nations. China's substantial support has been instrumental in Laos's economic transformation. Since 2016, China has emerged as Laos's largest provider of government development assistance (ODA) and the primary source of foreign direct investment. Additionally, China stands as Laos's second-largest trading partner. The trade relationship is characterized by high complementarity, contributing to the economic growth of both nations. Chinese Customs Statistics reveal a sustained and substantial growth in trade volume between China and Laos since 2010, underscoring the rapid expansion of economic and trade exchanges between the two countries. This chapter will delve into a bilateral analysis of the economic significance of the China-Laos Railway, shedding light on the multifaceted impact it has had on both nations.

4.1.1 The economic significance for China

The opening of the China-Laos Railway has strengthened Yunnan's strategic border position, improved transportation infrastructure, and established an efficient international logistics network. Xinzhe & Anoussa (2019) emphasized that the railway's opening has facilitated the expansion of the economic hinterland in southwest China and spurred regional economic development. Additionally, the construction of industrial parks along the railway and the

Mohan-Boten Economic Cooperation Zone will further accelerate the rapid economic development of Yunnan and the entire southwest region.

While Laos has been a crucial land neighbor to China on the Indochina Peninsula, imperfect transportation infrastructure between the two nations hindered Laos from fully enjoying the economic dividends of China's early growth. Xinlan et al. (2022) highlighted that the predominant use of roads for passenger and cargo transportation between China and Laos resulted in high costs and limited transportation capacity. The completion of the China-Laos Railway has emerged as a catalyst, strengthening economic ties between the two nations. This transformative project facilitates the large-scale export of Laos's agricultural products to China and, reciprocally, opens up China's consumer market for industrial products, fostering a mutually beneficial and win-win economic relationship.

Beyond its immediate economic impact, the construction of the China-Laos Railway has strategic implications for China's high-speed railway technology. With the increasing urgency for high-speed railways in developing countries, China, possessing independent core research capabilities and the expertise to build high-speed railways, actively expands its business in the international market. This not only enhances China's standing in the global high-railway construction market but also showcases its formidable scientific strength. The successful completion of the China-Laos Railway serves as a testament to China's prowess in high-speed railway construction, playing a crucial role in demonstrating this strength to the world. It serves as a model, opening up new opportunities in the international high-railway construction market for China in the future. The project's success goes beyond regional cooperation; it positions China as a key player in the global high-speed railway arena.

4.1.2 The economic significance for Laos

Laos's underdeveloped transport infrastructure has significantly hindered the long-term development of the national economy (Value & Edi, 2023). However, the China-Laos Railway, spanning the country from north to south, has markedly improved its domestic transportation infrastructure. The railway plays a crucial role in reducing transportation and

logistics costs (Zoltán & Somsack, 2020). This transformative project also plays a pivotal role in driving economic development and urbanization along its route. Jianfeng (2023) pointed out that the China-Laos Railway has not only improved transportation infrastructure conditions in Laos but has also effectively opened up the country's economic arteries and boosted economic development. Therefore, the completion of the China-Laos Railway has transformed Laos's stable political environment, low labor costs, and abundant mineral resources into crucial economic factors, making it an attractive destination for international investors.

Somsamone (2017) noted that Laos's transport facilities have been unable to cope with the increasing number of tourists, while Sounthaly et al., (2018) pointed out that tourists had fewer types of transportation options to travel to tourist destinations. In other words, the condition of transport facilities affects the development of tertiary industries such as tourism in Laos. The construction of the China-Laos Railway has greatly transformed Laos's transportation system, impacting its tourism economy. As Xinzhe & Anoussa (2019) pointed out, the China-Laos Railway can drive the strengthening of Laos's tourism resources.

The completion of the China-Laos Railway has not only significantly improved the tourism service industry income in Laos but also ushered in a surge of Chinese tourists. Laos, with its rich cultural history and breathtaking natural landscapes, has become an increasingly attractive destination. Data from China Railway Kunming Bureau Group Co., Ltd. reveals that, as of September 2023, the China-Laos Railway has transported 20.09 million passengers, catalyzing the rapid growth of the Laos tourism industry. The flourishing tourism sector, in turn, has had a ripple effect on other service industries, including entertainment, accommodation, and catering. This comprehensive development has played a pivotal role in promoting the growth of Laos's tertiary industry, enabling the country, predominantly reliant on agriculture and primary industries, to advance its industrial structure. Therefore, Value & Edi (2023) highlighted that the China-Laos Railway has promoted the upgrading and optimization of Laos's domestic industrial and service structure.

Moreover, the China-Laos Railway has

been instrumental in cultivating railway construction talents and expanding railway-related industrial chains in Laos. Xiangming (2022) highlighted that the railway project has generated a total of 110,000 jobs in Laos, with over 6,000 Lao railway engineers actively contributing to the construction of the China-Laos Railway's power transmission system. In a strategic move, the Chinese government has established the Laos Constructs Railway Vocational Technical College in Vientiane, dedicated to training talents in railway construction and services for Laos. Additionally, the project's demand for construction materials has stimulated the rapid development of local railway construction material-related industries in Laos.

In summary, the completion of the China-Laos Railway has not only spurred tourism and job creation but has also fostered the convergence of production materials along the railway line. This has strengthened economic and trade cooperation between China and Laos, effectively playing a pivotal role in further enhancing the economic ties between the two nations.

4.2 The strategic significance of the China-Laos Railway

The completion of the China-Laos Railway has not only strengthened economic cooperation between China and Laos, but it has also played a crucial role due to its strategic location on the middle line of the Southeast Asian section of the "Pan-Asia Railway Network". This, in turn, has the potential to enhance political cooperation between China and Laos. As the first international railway to fully adopt Chinese-standard tracks and directly connected to China's domestic high-speed railway network, the construction of the China-Laos Railway holds significant economic and political importance. This chapter will analyze the strategic significance brought about by the China-Laos Railway from a bilateral perspective.

4.2.1 The strategic significance for China

1) Geopolitical influence. The China-Laos Railway, a key planned route of the BRI, is strategically positioned on the middle line of the Southeast Asian section of the "Pan-Asia Railway Network". In the route planning for the Southeast Asian section, Vientiane, situated at the southern end of the China-Laos Railway, can

be connected to Nong Khai in Thailand through the border railway. Subsequently, the railway can extend from Nong Khai to Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia, and Singapore. Consequently, the China-Laos Railway is poised to play a pivotal role in strengthening economic and political ties between China and Southeast Asian countries. Simultaneously, the China-Laos Railway significantly enhances China's geopolitical influence in the Southeast Asia region (Rowedder S., 2020). Xinzhe & Anoussa (2019) emphasized that the opening of the China-Laos Railway has vastly improved transportation links between China and Southeast Asian countries, thereby amplifying China's geopolitical influence in the region. This development plays a crucial role in advancing the implementation of the BRI.

2) Diversification of transportation routes. The China-Laos Railway forms a crucial part of China's strategic initiative to bypass the Strait of Malacca. The completion of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) in earlier years has already succeeded in reducing China's dependence on the Strait of Malacca for energy and resource transportation. The China-Laos Railway, along with its future plans to connect to ports on the west coast of Thailand and Malaysia, serves as a key component in establishing a new outlet to the Indian Ocean. This strategic move allows China to diversify its transportation routes for its energy resources, mitigating its reliance on the Strait of Malacca. By doing so, China can adopt a coordinated approach through three different avenues to enhance the security of its energy resource transportation. Furthermore, the China-Laos Railway's future extension to Bangkok, providing access to the sea through the Gulf of Thailand, essentially grants China an indirect new outlet to the Pacific Ocean (Wang Xinlan et al., 2022).

3) A landmark project within the BRI. Some Western countries, viewing it through the lens of their own historical experiences of colonial expansion and hegemonic transfer, have criticized the BRI with claims of environmental damage and a lack of project transparency. These criticisms, as highlighted by Ying (2021), have adversely impacted the construction processes of various projects under the BRI. Jing (2022) further emphasized that the China-Laos Railway,

positioned as a key demonstration project under the BRI, has received unanimous praise from Laos and the international community. The construction of the China-Laos Railway serves not only to showcase China's mature high-speed railway construction technology to Belt and Road partner countries but also to collaboratively cultivate local railway-related industrial chains with these partners. The China-Laos Railway has played a pivotal role in advancing the ongoing promotion of the BRI.

4) Addressing the geopolitical challenges. Against the backdrop of recent disputes in the South China Sea, particularly with neighbors such as Vietnam and the Philippines, the China-Laos Railway plays a pivotal role in strengthening China's geopolitical influence in Laos. It is anticipated that this influence may encourage Laos to align with China on matters related to its legitimate rights and interests in the South China Sea, to some extent. Yamada & Suwa (2021) similarly pointed out that the China-Laos Railway strategically positions China to exert influence over the land route of the Indochina Peninsula, west of Vietnam.

4.2.2 The strategic significance for Laos

1) The China-Laos Railway has played a transformative role in Laos, evolving it from a land-locked country into a land-linked one (Wen, 2019; Xinzhe & Anoussa, 2019). The China-Laos Railway transforms Laos's infrastructure shortcomings into "hub" advantages. It represents the best breakthrough to solve Laos's economic development difficulties and expand its political influence.

2) The increase in China's economic and political influence in Laos has elevated the strategic value of Laos in the geopolitics of the Southeast Asia region. The railway has not only bolstered Laos's fragile economic foundation but has also enhanced its transportation capabilities. This dual impact has not only spurred economic growth but has also contributed to an overall improvement in Laos's comprehensive national strength. Consequently, this elevation in economic and strategic capabilities positions Laos more favorably on the international stage, amplifying its economic status and strengthening its political voice. Additionally, Lumin & Lin (2017) highlighted historical grievances and interest disputes among ASEAN members, resulting in a lack of mutual trust within the

region. Despite the implementation of zero trade tariffs within ASEAN, low economic integration and the establishment of non-tariff trade barriers contribute to significant trade protectionism among member countries. Jun (2022) emphasized the China-Laos Railway's significant role in addressing these geopolitical challenges. The railway has enhanced Laos's political influence among ASEAN countries and facilitated the promotion of mutual political trust within the region.

In summary, the China-Laos Railway, a key railway route planned under the BRI, holds the potential to strengthen political cooperation between China and Laos. Simultaneously, it serves as a vital channel for China to engage with ASEAN countries, effectively functioning as a "bond" that strengthens political connections between China and ASEAN nations. This, in turn, enhances China's geopolitical influence in ASEAN countries.

4.3 Limitations

The economic and strategic significance of the China-Laos Railway hinges on its successful operation. However, it is essential to consider that the construction and operation costs of the railway are notably high. Given that a significant portion of the railway is situated in Laos, a country with relatively underdeveloped economic conditions and low levels of resident income, there is a potential challenge. The residents of Laos may have a low utilization rate of the railway, posing a risk of difficulty recovering costs and the possibility that the economic benefits may fall short of expectations. Moreover, the subsequent construction phase of the China-Laos Railway, which involves connecting to Thailand and Malaysia's west coast port, faces challenges due to the complexity of multinational interests. This has resulted in slower progress on the railway construction project, potentially limiting the strategic benefits from reaching the anticipated level.

Vigorously promoting economic development along the railway line will increase the income of residents living in the vicinity. Additionally, expanding the economic impact of the railway will increase Laos's per capita income and gradually enhance the efficiency of railway utilization. To strengthen intergovernmental economic and political cooperation, accelerate the implementation of the China-Laos Railway

extension plan. This will also promote the overall construction of the “Pan-Asia Railway Network”.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzes the economic and strategic significance of the China-Laos Railway from a bilateral perspective. The results of the study demonstrate that the China-Laos Railway will have multiple positive impacts: 1)It is poised to significantly improve transportation efficiency in Laos; 2)It fosters economic development and cooperation among the countries and regions along the railway; 3)It showcases China's expertise in high-speed railway construction to the international community; 4)Coupled with its later plans to connect ports on the west coast of Thailand and Malaysia, the railway will ensuring the secure supply of energy transportation; 5)It is expected to bolster China's geopolitical influence in ASEAN, deepening economic and political cooperation between China and ASEAN countries; 6)It plays a significant role in advancing the implementation of China's Belt and Road Initiative.

While this study examines the economic and strategic importance of the China-Laos Railway from both China's and Laos's perspectives, it suggests that the actual benefits may not be significant, considering Laos's specific economic situation and the challenges associated with the construction of the railway.

6. Conflict of Interest

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

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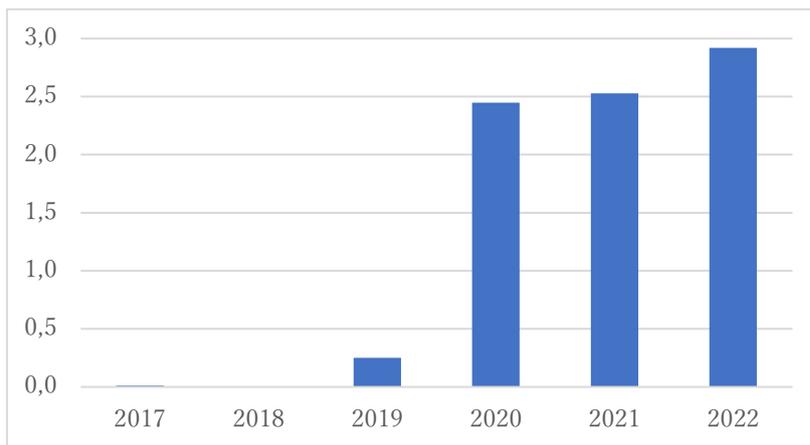


Figure 2. The total amount of fruit imported from Laos by China. (100 million Yuan)

Source: The Chinese Customs Statistics.