

# The Framework Construction of the Belt and Road Initiative in Malaysian Chinese Media: A Case Study of *Sin Chew Daily*

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This study takes Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's visit to China in November 2024 as its starting point to examine how Malaysia's largest Chinese-language newspaper, *Sin Chew Daily*, framed China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in the 10 months following the visit. The trip coincided with the 50th anniversary of Malaysia-China diplomatic relations and marked Anwar's second visit to China that year. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative content analysis (n = 512 articles) with qualitative framing analysis, the study identifies how the newspaper constructed a predominantly positive and government-aligned narrative of the BRI within Malaysia's multicultural media environment. Results show a strong emphasis on the economic cooperation frame (67.2%) and a consistently favorable reporting tone (76.6%), accompanied by a heavy reliance on government and elite sources (69.9%). Critical or risk-oriented frames were marginal (2.0%). Situated within theories of media framing and Asian media systems, the findings suggest that *Sin Chew Daily*'s coverage reflects both the commercial-economic interests of its Chinese-Malaysian readership and Malaysia's broader political communication norms, which encourage alignment with state foreign policy. The study argues that the newspaper's narrative construction reinforces a narrow range of perspectives on the BRI by privileging official discourses while marginalizing public voices and critical viewpoints. This contributes to understanding how ethnic-language media in Southeast Asia participate in nation-level foreign policy communication and how China-Malaysia media cooperation may shape reporting on cross-border initiatives. The article concludes by outlining implications for media pluralism and recommending comparative research across Malaysia's multilingual press ecosystem.

*Keywords:* Belt and Road Initiative, *Sin Chew Daily*, framing analysis, Chinese-language media, Malaysia

## Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched by China in 2013, has become one of the most influential frameworks shaping contemporary regional cooperation, infrastructure development, and geopolitical discourse (Yu, 2016). As Southeast Asia occupies a strategic position within the initiative, Malaysia has emerged as a particularly significant partner, maintaining long-standing economic and diplomatic ties with China (Liu & Lim, 2020). Malaysia's role as a central player in China's BRI further accentuates the need to scrutinize how Malaysian media discourses construct and interpret Chinese modernization (Wang & Liang, 2024). Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's official visit to Beijing in November 2024 reinvigorated bilateral engagement and renewed public

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debate about the BRI's economic and political implications for Malaysia. High-level diplomatic events of this kind often serve as important triggers for media agenda-setting and framing processes, shaping how large-scale international initiatives are interpreted by national audiences.

Within Malaysia's linguistically segmented media system, the Chinese-language press plays an important role in representing the interests, identities, and socio-economic concerns of the Chinese-Malaysian community, the country's second-largest ethnic group. *Sin Chew Daily*, the largest and most influential Chinese-language newspaper in Malaysia, serves as both an important cultural institution and a major agent of public communication. Previous research shows that Malaysian Chinese-language newspapers frequently function as Chinese community-oriented outlets and tend to emphasize economic opportunities, educational issues, and cultural identity in their reporting (Lim & Luan, 2009; Luan & Beng, 2018). Given that many Chinese-Malaysians maintain extensive business links with China, *Sin Chew Daily* is uniquely positioned to shape perceptions of China-related initiatives such as the BRI.

Media framing is central to understanding how international cooperation projects are constructed for domestic audiences. Framing, defined by Entman (1993) as the process of selecting certain aspects of reality to make them more salient in communication, influences how readers interpret complex geopolitical issues. Studies have shown that media coverage of the BRI varies considerably across nations, reflecting local political climates, media systems, and elite interests (Yang & Van Gorp, 2023; Zhang, 2024). In Malaysia, state-linked media outlets—particularly within the Malay- and English-language press—tend to align closely with government positions on the BRI, emphasizing mutual benefits and bilateral cooperation (Anunne, Thuy, Yan, & Lifeng, 2019). However, little research has examined how the Chinese-language press, with its distinctive readership, editorial traditions, and transnational orientation, frames the initiative.

These gaps are particularly salient given the deepening media cooperation between China and Malaysia. Joint reporting programs, exchange mechanisms, and content-sharing initiatives have intensified in recent years, with Chinese and Malaysian media encouraged to highlight “win-win” narratives and people-to-people connectivity. These cooperative mechanisms—ranging from joint reporting tours and journalist exchanges to content-sharing agreements—have created a structured transnational communicative space. Within this space, access to official sources and pre-packaged “success stories” from both countries is facilitated. Thus, to some extent, China-Malaysia media cooperation forms a significant part of the organizational and extra-media context within which *Sin Chew Daily*'s journalists operate, normalizing certain narratives about bilateral partnership.

This study addresses these gaps by conducting a systematic framing analysis of *Sin Chew Daily*'s BRI coverage in the 10 months following Anwar Ibrahim's 2024 visit, which coincided with the 50th anniversary of Malaysia-China diplomatic relations and marked Anwar's second visit to China within the year. Combining quantitative content analysis with qualitative framing analysis, this research seeks to answer the three key questions below:

1. What dominant news frames did *Sin Chew Daily* employ in its coverage of the BRI during this period?
2. What was the overall reporting tone (positive, neutral, negative), and how did it relate to different frame types?
3. Which sources were most frequently cited, and what does this reveal about the newspaper's construction of authority and legitimacy in BRI discourse?

By examining how Malaysia's largest ethnic Chinese media outlet frames a major international initiative, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of media-state relations, ethnic media behavior,

and China's growing communicative presence in Southeast Asia. It also offers insights into how multilingual media ecosystems mediate foreign policy narratives to diverse audiences within the same national context.

## Literature Review

### Media Framing Theory

Framing theory provides a conceptual foundation for understanding how news organizations select and organize information when reporting on complex political and international issues. Gitlin (1980) originally conceptualized frames as interpretive structures that journalists use to make sense of events, emphasizing patterns of selection and exclusion that become normalized within news routines. Entman (1993) later refined the concept, defining framing as the process of highlighting certain aspects of perceived reality to promote specific problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations.

Within political communication research, framing has been shown to influence public attitudes toward foreign policy, multilateral cooperation, and cross-border initiatives (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). International news framing is particularly shaped by ideological orientations, geopolitical interests, and relationships between media institutions and the state (Altuntaş, 2025).

Given the multidimensional nature of China's BRI, framing theory is especially useful for examining how media interpret the initiative's economic, political, and social implications. Previous studies have shown that media portrayals of the BRI vary widely across regions. Western media often emphasize geopolitical competition (Teo & Xu, 2023), while many media present the initiative through development and partnership frames (Anunne et al., 2019; Yang & Van Gorp, 2023). This demonstrates the importance of local political contexts and media systems in shaping the narratives constructed around global initiatives.

### Malaysian Media System and Ethnic-Language Press

Malaysia's media system is characterized by a hybrid environment in which commercial pressures, political affiliations, and ethnic segmentation interact to shape news content (George & Venkiteswaran, 2019). Although the country has a diverse multilingual press—Malay, English, and Chinese—regulatory structures and ownership patterns historically foster strong alignment between the media and state interests (Nain & Kim, 2004). Hallin and Mancini's (2004) framework of political parallelism and state instrumentalization has been applied to the Malaysian context to explain how media often reflect elite consensus, especially on foreign policy matters.

Within this system, Chinese-language newspapers play a distinctive role. As previous research notes, outlets such as *Sin Chew Daily* often act as cultural custodians and community-oriented institutions, serving the socio-economic and political interests of Malaysia's Chinese population (Lim & Luan, 2009; Luan & Beng, 2018). Their editorial choices reflect both the identity politics of Chinese-Malaysians and the commercial imperatives of appealing to an audience deeply engaged in trade and business networks.

Moreover, the Chinese-language press operates within a unique geopolitical context due to the community's cultural affinity with China and its active participation in Sino-Malaysian economic exchanges. This makes the Chinese-language press particularly relevant for analyzing narratives about China-led initiatives such as the BRI, as their coverage may reveal how ethnic media navigate and interpret international relationships within a multicultural society.

### Media Coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative

A growing body of literature explores how the BRI is represented in journalism and public discourse across

the world. Existing research on media coverage of the BRI has devoted considerable attention to Western media perspectives (Jan, Mehmood, & Hussain, 2018; Yang & Van Gorp, 2023; Jiang, 2022), while studies from Southeast Asia are still relatively scarce, with the current focus mainly on a few countries (Anunne et al., 2019). Yu (2016) argues that portrayals of the BRI reflect competing visions of China's rise, with Southeast Asian media often emphasizing opportunities for connectivity and economic growth. In contrast, Western media frequently foreground concerns over geopolitical influence and debt-trap diplomacy (Jiang, 2022). Huang and Chu (2015) find that Asians generally have a more positive and moderate evaluation of China due to intertwined economic interests and regional interdependence.

More specifically, Southeast Asian media studies reveal significant national differences. Kuik (2021) shows that some smaller states in Southeast Asia have responded to China's BRI inducement receptively, while others have responded cautiously and selectively. Anunne et al. (2019) show that while most of the Malaysian media reports have framed BRI positively, some Vietnamese reports are cautious optimism.

The study by Turcsanyi and Kachlikova (2020) shows that news reports constructed from an economic perspective tend to present a more positive stance, while reports focusing on geopolitical or security issues are generally more negative or neutral, with specific tendencies varying across countries. Wang and Liang (2024) further illustrate that Malaysian state-linked media often highlight cooperation, stability, and mutual gains, contributing to a generally positive framing of China-related issues.

Despite these studies, research focusing specifically on Malaysian Chinese-language newspapers remains limited. While some scholars have examined how Malaysian media portray China's political system, public diplomacy, or educational collaborations (Wang & Liang, 2024), systematic analysis of BRI framing in Chinese-language news remains largely unexplored. This represents a significant gap, given the Chinese-language press's role in shaping perceptions within a community that maintains close economic and cultural ties to China.

### **China-Malaysia Media Cooperation**

In recent years, media cooperation between China and Malaysia has intensified through joint reporting programs, content exchanges, media forums, and journalist training initiatives (Wang, Mohamed, & Hashim, 2024). These collaborations are part of China's broader soft power strategy, which seeks to enhance international narratives around initiatives like the BRI by promoting shared development stories (Repnikova, 2018). Although such collaborative arrangements do not necessarily impose direct editorial influence, scholars have observed that they can encourage the diffusion of favorable frames and reduce the visibility of critical perspectives (Wang & Liang, 2024).

In Southeast Asia, Chinese-language media have been identified as important intermediaries in transmitting China-related narratives due to shared linguistic and cultural ties. In Malaysia in particular, this cooperation has moved into practice, exemplified by joint initiatives like the *People's Daily* and Malaysian media high-quality cooperation on the "Belt and Road" joint interview, which included key outlets such as *Sin Chew Daily* (Li & Chu, 2025). Actually, *Sin Chew Daily* has participated in multiple China-Malaysia media exchanges and reporting delegations for a long time. Theoretically, these interactions can be understood through the "hierarchy of influences" model (Shoemaker, Vos, & Reese, 2009), which posits that institutional relationships and transnational partnerships shape news routines at the organizational level.

The existing scholarship suggests that media collaboration may reinforce a positive orientation toward China, but empirical research examining this effect within Malaysian Chinese-language news is still lacking. This study

contributes to filling this gap by situating *Sin Chew Daily*'s BRI coverage within this broader context of diplomatic cooperation and media alignment.

### **Research Gap**

The literature reviewed above highlights three key gaps that this study addresses:

1. Limited examination of Malaysia's Chinese-language press within BRI-related media research, despite its significance in shaping discourse among Chinese-Malaysian communities.
2. Insufficient integration of media-system theory into analyses of BRI coverage in multilingual contexts such as Malaysia.
3. Lack of empirical evidence on how China-Malaysia media cooperation may influence framing patterns or source selection in reporting on international initiatives.

By combining content analysis with framing analysis, this study offers a systematic investigation of how *Sin Chew Daily* constructs BRI narratives, providing new insights into ethnic media behavior, cross-border media collaboration, and the dynamics of foreign policy communication in Malaysia's pluralistic media environment.

## **Research Methods**

### **Research Design**

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative content analysis with qualitative framing analysis. This approach enables both the systematic identification of dominant patterns across a large sample of news texts and the interpretive examination of how frames are constructed linguistically and contextually. Content analysis provides generalizable insights into frame distribution, reporting tone, and source usage, while qualitative framing analysis allows for deeper interpretation of narrative strategies and discursive choices. Together, these methods provide a comprehensive understanding of how *Sin Chew Daily* constructs the BRI for its readers.

### **Sampling and Data Collection**

The sample consists of all *Sin Chew Daily* news items—news reports, features, commentaries, and editorials—published between November 5, 2024, and August 4, 2025, containing any of the following keywords:

“Belt and Road”;

“BRI”;

Related policy terms frequently used in Malaysian Chinese-language reporting.

This time period was selected to capture media coverage following Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's November 2024 official visit to Beijing, an event expected to generate heightened reporting on China-Malaysia cooperation and BRI-related developments.

Articles were retrieved from the newspaper's digital archive. After removing duplicates and items where the BRI was mentioned only tangentially, 512 valid articles were included for analysis.

An article was defined as “tangential” when the BRI appeared solely as a passing reference unrelated to the central narrative or when less than approximately 10% of the text addressed BRI-related content.

### **Codebook Development**

A detailed codebook was developed drawing from established framing frameworks, particularly Semetko and Valkenburg's (2000) typology. The codebook underwent multiple rounds of refinement during pilot coding to ensure conceptual clarity and coding reliability.

**Main frame.** Each article was coded according to its dominant frame. A dominant frame was assigned when at least 50% of the article's main content reflected a specific narrative dimension.

The following mutually exclusive categories were used:

1. Economic Cooperation Frame:

Focus on trade, investment, infrastructure development, employment, or business opportunities.

Frequent lexical cues include “co-operation”, “investment”, “agreement”, “growth”, “economic boost”, “win-win”, etc.

2. Political/Strategic Frame:

Emphasis on diplomacy, bilateral relations, ASEAN regional dynamics, foreign policy coordination, or geopolitical positioning.

3. Cultural Exchange Frame:

Coverage of tourism, educational collaboration, people-to-people ties, cultural events, media exchanges, and soft power activities.

4. Risk/Controversy Frame:

Focus on concerns such as debt, sovereignty, transparency, environmental impact, political tensions, or public criticism.

**Reporting tone.** The overall reporting tendency was coded into three categories based on evaluative language, narrative emphasis, presence or absence of criticism, and portrayal of outcomes:

Positive: Emphasizes benefits, opportunities, cooperation, or successful outcomes. Contains little or no criticism.

Neutral: Factual, descriptive reporting without clear evaluative judgements.

Negative: Highlights risks, problems, conflicts, criticisms, or failures.

**Source dominance.** Source dominance was coded according to the primary quoted or referenced source in each article:

Government sources (Malaysia or China): Ministers, officials, spokespersons, state agency representatives.

Enterprise/business sources: Company executives, industry associations, contractors.

Experts/academics: Scholars, think tank representatives, researchers.

International organizations: Entities such as the United Nations, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, etc.

Public voices: Citizens, community members, netizens, interview respondents.

The dominant source refers to the actor receiving the largest share of quoted or paraphrased statements.

**Frame intensity.** Frame intensity was measured on a three-point scale:

1 = Weak: The frame appears briefly or implicitly.

2 = Medium: The frame is clear but not strongly emphasized.

3 = Strong: The frame is central, repeated, and appears in the headline/lead.

**Coding procedures.** Two trained coders carried out the analysis. Coders participated in a training workshop that included:

1. Joint reading and discussion of sample articles;

2. Practice coding using draft categories;

3. Refinement of definitions and examples;

4. Pilot testing on 10% of the sample.

Coder training ensured consistent interpretation of frame definitions, reporting tone, and source categories.

Following training, coders independently coded a 10% subsample (n = 51 articles).

### Reliability Testing

Inter-coder reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa, a widely accepted measure for content analysis. All major variables achieved reliability levels beyond the commonly accepted threshold of  $\kappa \geq 0.80$ :

Main Frame:  $\kappa = 0.89$ ;

Reporting Tone:  $\kappa = 0.87$ ;

Source Dominance:  $\kappa = 0.86$ .

Disagreements were resolved through discussion until coders reached full consensus. The finalized codebook was then applied to the full dataset.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations to examine relationships between frames, tone, and source usage. Qualitative framing analysis was used to:

Interpret narrative patterns;

Identify typical linguistic constructions;

Examine how tone and authority were established;

Contextualize findings within Malaysia's media system and China-Malaysia relations.

This dual approach provides both breadth and depth in understanding *Sin Chew Daily's* BRI coverage.

## Results

This section presents the findings of the content analysis, including the distribution of frames, reporting tone, source dominance, and cross-tabulations among key variables. The results reveal clear patterns in how *Sin Chew Daily* framed the BRI during the study period.

### Distribution of Dominant Frames

Analysis of the 512 articles reveals a strong concentration around the Economic Cooperation frame. As shown in Table 1, nearly two-thirds of all coverage (67.2%,  $n = 344$ ) presented the BRI primarily as an engine of economic development, investment, and bilateral partnerships. This was followed by Cultural Exchange (19.5%,  $n = 100$ ) and Political/Strategic narratives (11.3%,  $n = 58$ ). The Risk/Controversy frame was marginal, appearing in only 2.0% of the sample ( $n = 10$ ).

These results indicate that *Sin Chew Daily* foregrounded the economic and cultural dimensions of the BRI, while minimizing potential political tensions or critical perspectives.

Table 1

*Distribution of Dominant Frames (n = 512)*

Frame type	Frequency	Percentage
Economic cooperation	344	67.2%
Cultural exchange	100	19.5%
Political interaction	58	11.3%
Risk/controversy	10	2.0%
Total	512	100%

### Reporting Tone

The overall reporting tone of BRI coverage was overwhelmingly positive. As shown in Table 2, 76.6% of articles ( $n = 392$ ) adopted a positive stance, highlighting benefits, collaborative outcomes, or developmental

progress. Neutral reporting constituted 21.4% (n = 110), while explicitly negative coverage was minimal (2.0%, n = 10), aligning with the low prevalence of the Risk/Controversy frame.

This distribution suggests a consistently supportive narrative, with the newspaper rarely foregrounding conflict, criticism, or uncertainty surrounding the BRI.

Table 2

*Reporting Tone (n = 512)*

Tone	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	392	76.6%
Neutral	110	21.4%
Negative	10	2.0%
Total	512	100%

**Source Dominance**

The dominance of government voices was one of the most striking findings. As shown in Table 3:

69.9% of articles (n = 358) relied primarily on government sources from Malaysia or China.

Enterprise sources were the next most common (18.9%, n = 97), reflecting frequent coverage of business delegations, trade fairs, and investment projects.

Experts and scholars appeared in 5.08% (n = 26), while international organizations accounted for 4.9% (n = 25).

Public voices—ordinary citizens, residents, or netizens—were nearly absent, appearing in only 1.17% (n = 6).

The heavy reliance on state and elite actors suggests a highly top-down flow of information in BRI reporting.

Table 3

*Sources Cited in BRI Coverage*

Source type	Frequency	Percentage
Government	358	69.9%
Enterprises	97	18.9%
Experts/scholars	26	5.08%
International organizations	25	4.9%
Public voices	6	1.17%
Total	512	100%

**Frame Intensity**

A majority of articles (84.0%, n = 430) displayed strong frame intensity, meaning that the dominant frame appeared prominently in headlines, leads, and repeated key phrases. Only 16% of articles were coded as medium or weak in intensity.

This suggests that the newspaper not only selected particular frames but emphasized them forcefully, contributing to the clarity and salience of its preferred narratives.

Table 4

*Dominant Sources (n = 512)*

Frame strength	Frequency	Percentage
Strong	430	84.0%
Medium	67	13.1%
Weak	15	2.9%
Total	512	100%

### Cross-Tabulation Findings

**Frame × Tone.** Cross-tabulations revealed strong relationships between frame type and reporting tone:

Articles framed as Economic Cooperation were overwhelmingly positive (82.0% positive).

Cultural Exchange stories were similarly positive (84.0%).

Political/Strategic framing produced more balanced coverage (51.7% positive, 46.6% neutral).

Risk/Controversy articles were never positive: 80% neutral and 20% negative.

These findings suggest that frame selection strongly conditions evaluative tone.

**Frame × Source Type.** Source usage also varied by frame type:

Government sources dominated Economic (72.1%) and Political/Strategic coverage (93.1%), indicating tight alignment with official discourses.

Cultural Exchange articles showed somewhat more diversity, though government and enterprise sources still prevailed.

Risk/Controversy articles relied mainly on experts and scholars (60%) and notably included no government sources, suggesting deliberate distancing by officials from contentious topics.

This pattern reinforces the centralized and hierarchical nature of information flows around BRI reporting.

The results reveal three overarching patterns:

1. A highly positive, opportunity-focused narrative dominated BRI reporting.
2. Government and business elites overwhelmingly shaped the discourse, with minimal representation of public or alternative voices.
3. Risk, controversy, or critical viewpoints were structurally marginalized, both in terms of frame prevalence and source diversity.

These findings align with characteristics of media-state alignment commonly observed in Southeast Asian media systems and provide a strong empirical foundation for the subsequent discussion section.

## Discussion

The findings of this study illuminate how *Sin Chew Daily*—Malaysia’s most influential Chinese-language newspaper—constructed a predominantly positive and government-aligned narrative of the BRI during the 10 months following Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim’s 2024 visit to China. By integrating results with media framing theory, Asian media-system literature, and studies of China’s growing communicative influence in Southeast Asia, this section discusses the broader implications of the observed patterns in frame selection, tone, and source dominance.

### Primacy of Economic Framing and the Marginalization of Risk

The dominance of the Economic Cooperation frame (67.2%) and the near absence of Risk/Controversy framing (2.0%) reveal a clear narrative tendency. *Sin Chew Daily* presented the BRI primarily as a platform for growth, investment, and bilateral development, while rarely foregrounding concerns such as debt sustainability, environmental impact, or political sensitivities—issues frequently highlighted in Western media.

This pattern can be attributed to a confluence of audience expectations and commercial imperatives. As previous scholarship notes, with the increasing business opportunities brought by the BRI, the Chinese business community in Malaysia maintains extensive trade exchanges with China (Ren, 2021), making Chinese economic news of high interest to readers. Newspapers targeting this segment thus have incentives to foreground business-oriented frames and minimize narratives that might create uncertainty or jeopardize economic optimism.

However, the overwhelmingly positive framing also raises questions about information diversity. By structurally limiting coverage of risks and critical voices, the reporting narrows the interpretive space available to the public. This echoes observations by Wang and Liang (2024) that due to political sensitivities and economic cooperation, Southeast Asian media tend to downplay the controversial aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative.

In this sense, *Sin Chew Daily's* coverage aligns with broader regional patterns of portraying the BRI as a development-focused, opportunity-rich initiative—yet does so to an even more pronounced degree.

### **Elite Source Dominance and Hierarchical Information Flows**

The heavy reliance on government sources (69.9%) reflects a strongly hierarchical news structure consistent with characteristics of Malaysia's media system. Hallin and Mancini's (2011) concepts of political parallelism and state instrumentalization help explain this pattern: Across many Asian contexts, political elites remain the primary definers of international news narratives.

The marginal representation of experts (5.1%), international organizations (4.9%), and especially public voices (1.2%) suggests a narrow construction of authority, where official actors—Malaysian and Chinese—monopolize interpretive power. Such top-down sourcing restricts the range of perspectives that can enter public discourse and fosters an impression of consensus, even on issues where debates may exist.

The source distribution also varied across frame types. Government voices dominated Economic and Political frames, but were almost completely absent from Risk/Controversy coverage. This selective withdrawal indicates strategic distancing, enabling officials to avoid association with sensitive topics. Overall, the sourcing patterns reinforce the BRI's positioning as an elite-driven project with limited avenues for grassroots perspectives or contestation.

### **Strong Positive Tone and the Influence of Media-State Relations**

The consistently positive tone (76.6% positive) suggests that *Sin Chew Daily* not only framed the BRI through beneficial lenses but also endorsed these narratives rhetorically. This aligns with the broader Malaysian foreign policy environment, where the government has active interaction and support for China's developmental initiatives (Kuik, 2021).

While it would be overly deterministic to attribute tone directly to state control, the results resonate with a hierarchy of influences, which highlights how organizational norms, political relationships, and structural incentives shape news output (Shoemaker et al., 2009). Given *Sin Chew Daily's* participation in China-Malaysia media exchanges, collaborative reporting programs, and content-sharing, its editorial culture exists within a transnational communicative space where positive narratives about bilateral cooperation are normalized.

Rather than suggesting direct pressure or propaganda, the findings indicate that institutional proximity, shared interests, and professional incentives collectively contribute to a supportive narrative environment. This nuanced understanding moves beyond simplistic explanations and highlights the interplay of commercial, political, and cultural factors in shaping international coverage.

### **Framing the BRI Within a Multilingual Media System**

Malaysia's multilingual media landscape—comprising Malay-, English-, and Chinese-language outlets—offers a unique context for understanding how different linguistic communities interpret foreign policy issues. Existing studies show that Malaysian media have integrated a unified narrative across English, Chinese, and Malay-language news in their coverage of China, particularly when reporting on China's modernization (Wang & Liang, 2024).

This study extends that observation to the Chinese-language press, revealing even stronger alignment with state positions and economic narratives. However, the logic behind this alignment may differ:

Malay-language press aligns due to political-nationalist imperatives.

English-language press aligns due to commercial logic and state-linked ownership.

Chinese-language press aligns due to ethnic community interests, transnational economic ties, and cultural proximity.

This demonstrates that media-state alignment in Malaysia operates through multiple pathways, not simply top-down control.

### **Implications for Media Pluralism and Public Discourse**

The findings raise broader questions about media pluralism within Malaysia's public sphere. Although the country's multilingual press suggests diversity, the evidence shows a convergence toward economically optimistic and government-endorsed narratives around the BRI. Such convergence may constrain democratic deliberation by:

1. Limiting exposure to critical or alternative perspectives;
2. Reinforcing elite-driven narratives in foreign policy;
3. Marginalizing community voices, civic actors, and policy critics.

Given the BRI's long-term developmental implications, the absence of public and expert debate in media coverage may narrow the public's capacity to evaluate future policy outcomes.

### **Summary**

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that *Sin Chew Daily's* BRI reporting reflects:

Strong economic and cultural optimism;

High levels of alignment with state and elite narratives;

Minimal engagement with critical or risk-oriented perspectives;

Limited participation from the public or civil society;

Influences from both domestic media structures and transnational China-Malaysia cooperation.

These findings contribute to broader debates about how Southeast Asian media negotiate international relations, economic dependency, and soft power influence in shaping public communication.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined how *Sin Chew Daily*, Malaysia's most influential Chinese-language newspaper, framed China's BRI during the 10 months following Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's 2024 visit to Beijing. The trip coincided with the 50th anniversary of Malaysia-China diplomatic relations and marked Anwar's second visit to China within the year. Through a mixed-methods analysis of 512 articles, the findings reveal a consistently positive and elite-driven narrative emphasizing economic cooperation, cultural exchange, and bilateral partnership, while marginalizing contentious or risk-oriented perspectives.

The dominance of the Economic Cooperation frame and the near absence of controversy-focused coverage demonstrate how the newspaper positioned the BRI primarily as a vehicle for growth, investment, and development. This narrative orientation aligns with the commercial interests and transnational business networks of the Chinese-Malaysian readership, which are key stakeholders in Sino-Malaysian economic engagement. At the same time, the heavy reliance on government and enterprise sources reflects the broader

logic of Malaysia's media system, where political parallelism and institutional relationships structure the flow of information.

These findings also suggest that Malaysia's Chinese-language press plays a distinct role within the country's multilingual media ecosystem. Although Chinese-language media offer distinct cultural and linguistic perspectives, their coverage of China-related international initiatives shows a discernible alignment with national foreign policy narratives and regional diplomatic expectations. This alignment is embedded within the broader context of deepening China-Malaysia media cooperation. Such cooperation facilitates the flow of official information and joint narrative production, which in turn serves to normalize optimistic narratives about bilateral collaboration. It should be noted, however, that this study does not assert a direct causal relationship between media cooperation and specific editorial outcomes.

The implications for public discourse are significant. When media reporting consistently foregrounds official voices and positive framings, opportunities for critical reflection on the broader consequences of large-scale international initiatives may be constrained. As the BRI continues to evolve, balanced reporting—including expert insights, public voices, and assessments of risks—will become increasingly important for informed public debate.

This study has several limitations. It focuses on a single media outlet, which limits generalizability across Malaysia's diverse press environment. Additionally, the study analyzes coverage within a specific 10-month period; longer-term trends may reveal variation in framing strategies over time. Nonetheless, the findings offer an important foundation for future research.

Future studies should adopt a comparative approach across Malaysia's Malay-, English-, and Chinese-language media to examine how linguistic communities interpret the BRI differently. Audience research would further illuminate how readers decode these media frames and whether they influence perceptions of China and Malaysian foreign policy. Comparative international studies could also explore whether similar patterns emerge in Chinese-language diasporic media in Singapore, Indonesia, or beyond.

By shedding light on how one of Malaysia's key ethnic media outlets constructs narratives about the BRI, this study contributes to broader scholarly conversations about media-state relations, soft power, and the role of ethnic-language media in shaping public understanding of international cooperation initiatives in Southeast Asia.

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