

The Belt Road Initiatives and Regional Integration in South East Asia:

A Cultural Political Economy analysis of the Malaysia East Coast Rail Link

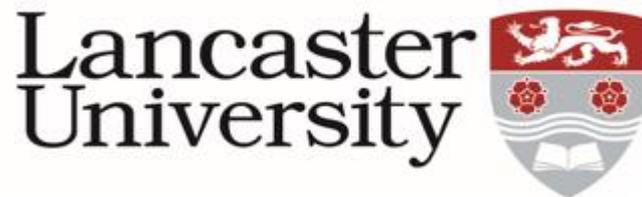
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Abstract

The East Coast Railway Link (ECRL) in Malaysia is a major (even 'flagship') project of China's Belt Road Initiatives (BRI), connecting the more developed west coast of Malaysia to its less developed east coast. Notoriously, the project was one of many that were paused in 2018 (e.g. the Kuala Lumpur-Singapore High Speed Railway) following a historical election in Malaysia that led to the first major change in government since its founding as an independent country. But it is also the only one that was subsequently restarted. This thesis deploys a cultural political economy (CPE) lens – combining discourse analysis with a critical political economic exploration – to explore Sino-south east Asian regional integration through examination of this case study. Through interviews with diverse agents in the ECRL project, both Chinese and Malaysian, across a range of positions and responsibilities (e.g. project management, construction and finance), three major and related themes present themselves. First are the repeated, sincere but also almost formulaic expressions of undaunted confidence in the project and its broader mission, especially from more senior and/or Chinese respondents. Secondly, the interviews foreground and illustrate the specific power/knowledge technologies of slogans and their efficacy in driving forward the project. Thirdly, there is the emerging shared common-sense of historical comparisons between the BRI and former, Western projects of infrastructure (e.g. Marshall plan or imperial colonialism). The thesis unfolds these issues towards insights regarding the BRI as a project of regional integration, its evolution as a broader geo-strategic initiative, and the ongoing transformation of globalized capitalism of which it is a key part.

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Author's Declaration

This thesis is the candidate's own work and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere. No sections of the thesis have been published to date.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Background

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), introduced in 2013, aims to transform global economic integration and regional cooperation. Inspired by the historical Silk Road, the BRI focuses on strengthening connectivity and collaboration across Asia, Europe, and Africa through infrastructure projects, trade networks, financial integration, and cultural exchanges. It reflects China's ambition to promote inclusive development, enhance global trade, and establish new pathways for economic growth among participating countries.

The East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) in Malaysia is a pivotal BRI infrastructure project, linking Kota Bharu, a northeastern city, to Port Klang near Kuala Lumpur. Designed to enhance Malaysia's transport infrastructure, economic development along its eastern coast, and connectivity with neighboring countries, the ECRL symbolizes China's strategic investment in Southeast Asia. Beyond economic implications, the ECRL serves as a microcosm of broader geopolitical dynamics within the BRI, shaping regional integration efforts and international relations.

The BRI's emphasis on enhancing linkages – infrastructural, trade, investment – could elevate Malaysia's infrastructure to global standards. Projects like the ECRL hold potential to improve Malaysia's domestic and regional connectivity, economic integration and market access.

1.1.1 Historical Background: Malaysia's Development Path

Malaysia's unique development trajectory provides crucial backdrop to understanding its role in the BRI. The British colonial administration segmented economic activities by race, with Malays focusing on agriculture, Chinese communities excelling in trade and tin mining, and Indian labourers primarily engaged in rubber plantations. This division laid foundations for Malaysia's economic diversity but also created structural inequalities.

Malaysia's post-independence economic policies prioritised industrialization and diversification,

moving from a resource-dependent economy to export-oriented manufacturing. This transformation was supported by strategic foreign investments, particularly in electronics, enabling Malaysia to establish itself as a regional manufacturing hub.

Singapore's brief union with Malaysia and subsequent separation in 1965 underscores geopolitical and economic complexities of the region. While Singapore's focus was becoming a global financial hub, Malaysia's was leveraging its resource wealth and fostering regional connectivity. Their divergent paths subsequently highlight the strategic importance of infrastructure and trade networks, themes central to the BRI and exemplified by the ECRL.

1.1.2 Malaysia's Strategic Position in the BRI

A founding member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and a critical partner in China's BRI, Malaysia has demonstrated commitment to fostering regional integration, with the ECRL as one of the flagship projects. China has been Malaysia's largest trading partner for over a decade, and BRI projects like the ECRL further deepen this economic interdependence. However, Malaysia's proactive engagement with the BRI is also driven by its ambitions to emulate Singapore's success in leveraging infrastructure and connectivity for economic modernization.

1.1.3 Regional and Global Integration

Since the late 1990s, Malaysia has actively worked to enhance its regional and global economic ties, strengthening its trade relationships within the ASEAN region and with major economies such as China. The trade relationship with China, for instance, has been significantly fortified, with both nations becoming key trading partners. Projects like the ECRL not only deepen this economic relationship but also position Malaysia as a vital link in broader regional integration efforts. This dual strategy reflects Malaysia's ambition to solidify its role within ASEAN and the global economy.

1.1.4 Geopolitical Implications of the ECRL

The ECRL is not only economic but also a geopolitical statement. Its location and scale reflect Malaysia's role as bridge between China and the ASEAN region. Enhancing regional connectivity, the

ECRL supports Malaysia's aspirations to become a logistics/trade hub in Southeast Asia. However, this strategic positioning also brings challenges. Regional tensions and concerns about economic dependency on China require Malaysia to navigate its partnerships carefully. The renegotiation of ECRL project terms in 2018 highlighted Malaysia's cautious approach, ensuring that BRI projects align with national interests and provide tangible benefits to its economy and people.

1.2 The BRI and ASEAN: the case of Malaysia

1.2.1 What is the BRI and What Questions Does It Raise?

The BRI represents China's ambitious transnational strategy to enhance connectivity and cooperation across Eurasia and Africa. Officially, it is framed as an inclusive development framework addressing global infrastructure deficits and promoting mutual economic growth among participating countries (Page, 2014; Hutzler, 2015). However, beyond stated goals, the BRI has sparked significant debates regarding its geopolitical motivations and implications, particularly in Southeast Asia and ASEAN.

Critics argue the BRI is more than a developmental initiative; it represents a strategic effort to position China as a dominant global power. Pitlo (2016) and Hutzler (2015) suggest the initiative be interpreted as a tool to expand China's geopolitical influence, particularly in regions like ASEAN, where its economic and political interests are deeply intertwined. Debate thus focuses on whether the BRI is a grand strategy for global hegemony or an altruistic framework fostering win-win outcomes.

Another dimension of these debates concerns the BRI's domestic drivers. Scholars highlight that it also functions as means to address China's internal economic challenges, including surplus capital and overcapacity in industries like steel and construction (Zheng, 2015). By channeling these resources into BRI projects, China both stabilizes its domestic economy and enhances its global economic footprint. However, this domestic agenda raises questions about the coherence of the BRI's implementation, with some scholars seeing a "messy hotchpotch" of loosely coordinated

projects not a unified global strategy (Liu and Lim, 2019; Zeng and Breslin, 2016).

In the context of ASEAN, these debates are pronounced. Southeast Asia's strategic significance as part of the Maritime Silk Road makes it a focus of the BRI, but this also amplifies concerns about economic dependency and geopolitical tension. While flagship projects such as the ECRL highlight the BRI's potential to foster regional connectivity, they also exemplify the risks of asymmetric power dynamics. Chinese financing, while essential for infrastructure development, may inadvertently undermine the negotiating capacity and sovereignty of host countries (Parameswaran, 2017).

At a broader level, questions also arise about the long-term impacts of BRI projects on regional economies and global capitalism. While the initiative seeks to reshape regional trade and connectivity, critics highlight the uneven distribution of benefits, often favouring Chinese enterprises and interests over those of host countries (Ferdinand, 2016). This dynamic not only risks exacerbating existing inequalities but also challenges narratives of mutual development and shared prosperity underpinning the BRI.

Finally, the BRI's intersection with geopolitical conflicts, particularly in the South China Sea, further complicates its implementation in Southeast Asia. Maritime security and unresolved territorial disputes pose significant challenges to BRI goals of regional integration and stability (Pitlo, 2016), breeding mistrust among stakeholders (Parameswaran, 2017; Thuzar, 2017). Despite agreements like the Code of Conduct, effective mechanisms for dispute resolution remain elusive, thereby complicating the realization of BRI objectives in the region (Pitlo, 2016). Observers argue that further escalation of this conflict could jeopardize the entire Maritime Silk Road framework, a key component of the BRI (Summers, 2016). The question remains whether the BRI can effectively navigate such complex political landscapes while fulfilling its developmental promises.

In this context, the BRI is evidently not merely an economic initiative but a multidimensional strategy raising profound questions about the future of global development, regional integration, and international relations. These questions, particularly in ASEAN, underscore the need for further

qualitative empirical research to understand the BRI's evolving role and impacts.

1.2.2 Challenges in Executing BRI Projects in ASEAN, with a Focus on Malaysia

International Challenges

The BRI faces significant international challenges, particularly in infrastructure project execution across ASEAN. As well as geopolitics (discussed above), one major issue is financing and debt sustainability. Large-scale infrastructure projects demand substantial initial investments, creating reliance on institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). However, such reliance raises concerns over debt sustainability for host countries and potential erosion of their economic sovereignty (Yu, 2017). Additionally, financial leverage strategies employed by institutions like the AIIB, seeking to attract private sector participation, require careful management to mitigate risks associated with long investment cycles and uncertain returns (Yoon, 2015; Zheng, 2015).

Another persistent issue is technical and regulatory discrepancies across participating countries. Variations in technical standards for infrastructure, like railway gauge systems, complicate cross-border connectivity. The Singapore-Kunming Rail Link, a flagship transnational project, has faced delays due to inconsistent standards and regulatory frameworks (Boyer, 1990; Jessop and Sum, 2006). These discrepancies hinder integration efforts and increase project costs.

Domestic Challenges in China

Internally, China faces its own set of challenges in implementing BRI projects. Lack of coordination between local governments is a critical issue. Different provinces and municipalities often compete for projects, creating inefficiencies and even duplication of efforts. Moreover, local officials may prioritise less impactful projects that boost short-term GDP growth over those aligned with long-term strategic goals (Parameswaran, 2017; Liu and Lim, 2019, neglecting projects critical for regional connectivity).

Additionally, financial regulation inconsistencies within China pose significant constraints. Central government pushes for financial innovation and international collaboration, but local institutions often struggle to manage the complex financial demands of BRI projects. This is compounded by uneven economic development across Chinese regions, which affects their ability to engage in large-scale foreign investment effectively (Lagarde, 2017; People's Bank of China, 2017).

Another notable challenge is corporate cultural adaptability. Chinese enterprises often lack cultural and legal acumen to operate in foreign environments effectively. Many projects face delays or resistance due to inadequate stakeholder engagement or failure to align with local cultural norms. This issue is particularly relevant in ASEAN countries, where trust-based relationships and community alignment are critical for project success (Thuzar, 2017).

Challenges Within ASEAN

ASEAN itself presents a unique set of challenges due to its diverse economic, political, and cultural landscape. Economic disparities between member states, such as highly developed Singapore and less developed Laos, create uneven capacities to participate in and benefit from BRI projects (Bouzanis, 2016). Countries with limited financing and technical capabilities struggle to meet the demands of large-scale infrastructure projects, further exacerbating regional inequalities.

Policy and regulatory misalignments also hinder progress. Many BRI projects require multi-country coordination, yet ASEAN's relatively loose organisational structure lacks the mechanisms to enforce effective collaboration. This issue is particularly evident in land acquisition processes, where differences in property laws between countries can lead to significant delays and cost overruns (Gan & Mao, 2016).

Land acquisition is another critical obstacle, especially for projects like the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) in Malaysia. Unlike China, where land ownership is largely state-controlled, many ASEAN countries, including Malaysia, have private landownership systems. This creates opportunities for

speculation and inflated land prices, posing severe risks to project timelines and budgets (Gan & Mao, 2016).

1.2.3 Toward a Qualitative Analysis of BRI in ASEAN

The BRI has emerged as one of the most ambitious transnational development strategies of the 21st century, aiming to reshape regional economies and create a global network of connectivity. However, the diverse perspectives and complex realities associated with the BRI necessitate a more nuanced understanding of its multifaceted impacts, particularly within the ASEAN context. This section highlights the imperative for close and qualitative empirical analysis of BRI projects in ASEAN, addressing key questions about the initiative's character, functioning, and broader implications.

How Do BRI Projects Work, and What Are Their Local Impacts?

The practical implementation of BRI projects reveals critical insights into how the initiative functions on the ground (Oliveira, 2020). While flagship projects such as Malaysia's ECRL illustrate the potential for transformative infrastructural and economic change, they also highlight significant challenges. Issues such as land acquisition, environmental sustainability, and the equitable distribution of economic benefits often surface during project execution (Gan & Mao, 2016; Gallo, 2017). These local dynamics demand a closer examination of how BRI projects are embedded within specific political, economic, and cultural contexts, influencing not only their feasibility but also their long-term impact on local communities and regional economies.

What Are the Broader Impacts of the BRI on Global and Regional Dynamics?

Beyond its immediate effects, the BRI has profound implications for regional economic integration, geopolitical stability, and even the structure of global capitalism itself. By fostering deeper trade and investment linkages, the BRI has the potential to reshape regional economies, aligning them more closely with China's strategic objectives. At the same time, the initiative challenges existing

global economic frameworks by proposing alternative financing mechanisms, such as the AIIB, and by prioritizing South-South cooperation (Yu, 2017; Yoon, 2015).

However, the BRI's transformative potential also raises concerns about economic dependency, power asymmetries, and the risks of over-reliance on Chinese capital and expertise (Bouzanis, 2016). These broader macroeconomic issues require a critical assessment of whether the BRI represents a genuinely inclusive and equitable model for global development or whether it perpetuates existing inequalities within the global capitalist system.

Toward a Research Agenda

To address these pressing questions, there is a need for rigorous qualitative research into how the BRI operates and what it produces in ASEAN contexts. This entails, first, clarifying how the initiative is evolving in practice—its narratives, motivations, internal tensions and contradictions—rather than treating it as a fixed, coherent strategy. Second, it requires close analysis of operational dynamics: how projects are implemented, the practical challenges encountered during delivery, and the uneven effects on local communities and regional economies. Third, it calls for a critical assessment of macro-level implications, including the geopolitical and political-economic shifts associated with the BRI and their consequences for regional integration and the longer-term trajectory of global capitalism.

A Case in Point: The ECRL in Malaysia

Malaysia's East Coast Rail Link encapsulates many of the issues discussed in this section, from debates about the initiative's nature to the operational difficulties of large-scale infrastructure projects and their broader geopolitical implications. The next section delves deeper into the ECRL as a case study, offering a detailed examination of its development and its role within the BRI framework, further illuminating the BRI's complex dynamics and its evolving impact on ASEAN and beyond.

1.2.4 The ECRL: A High-Profile Case Study

The East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) in Malaysia represents one of the most prominent BRI projects in Southeast Asia. As a flagship infrastructure development, it provides a lens through which the opportunities, challenges, and broader implications of BRI projects can be critically examined. The ECRL is more than just a transportation project; it is emblematic of China's strategic engagement in the ASEAN region and Malaysia's role within the BRI framework.

The Strategic Importance of the ECRL

The ECRL, connecting the eastern and western coasts of Peninsular Malaysia, spanning over 600 kms, aims to enhance domestic connectivity and integrate Malaysia more deeply into regional and global trade networks. Officially launched in 2016, the ECRL is envisioned as a transformative project linking the underdeveloped eastern region of the country to the more prosperous west coast. This strategic positioning not only supports Malaysia's economic development but also strengthens its role as a critical hub in the BRI's Maritime Silk Road (Panda and Parameswaran, 2017).

For China, the ECRL serves as a critical node in its broader efforts to promote regional connectivity. It is part of a larger vision to create seamless transportation networks that enhance the flow of goods and services across Asia, reducing dependency on traditional chokepoints such as the Strait of Malacca. This project thus embodies the dual objectives of addressing Malaysia's domestic development needs while advancing China's strategic ambitions in Southeast Asia (Hutzler, 2015). Positioned as a vital node in the BRI's Maritime Silk Road, Malaysia's geographic location makes it a natural partner for China. The ECRL was not merely a transportation project but a symbol of China's financial and infrastructural commitment to fostering economic integration across the region (Teoh, 2017).

Economic Benefits and Local Opportunities

The ECRL is anticipated to generate significant economic benefits for Malaysia. By stimulating economic activity along the rail corridor, the project is expected to contribute to regional economic development and reduce inequalities between Malaysia's eastern and western regions. It is projected to create thousands of jobs, both during construction and through the subsequent economic activity spurred by improved connectivity (Gan & Mao, 2016). Moreover, the integration of local contractors and labour into the project highlights the potential for skill development and technology transfer, aligning with Malaysia's broader industrialization goals. Additionally, the project is designed to align with Malaysia's long-term development goals, such as the Eleventh Malaysia Plan (2016–2020), which emphasizes sustainable and inclusive growth across all states (Koen, Asada, Nixon, Habeeb Rahuman and Arif, 2017).

Additionally, the ECRL underscores the importance of leveraging foreign direct investment (FDI) to achieve infrastructure goals. China's financial and technological involvement has provided Malaysia with access to critical resources and expertise, enabling the realization of a project that might otherwise have been beyond its immediate fiscal capacity (Bouzanis, 2016). Such collaborative efforts exemplify the potential for BRI projects to serve as catalysts for development when managed effectively.

Challenges and Controversies

Despite its promise, the ECRL has faced significant challenges and controversies, particularly after the Malaysian general election in 2018, when a new administration led by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad reassessed many BRI-linked projects. The government suspended the ECRL project, citing concerns over debt sustainability, project transparency, and national interests. Critics have argued that the project's financial structure, heavily reliant on Chinese loans, could exacerbate Malaysia's debt burden, undermining its fiscal stability (Liu and Lim, 2019). These concerns were amplified following Malaysia's political leadership change in 2018, which prompted a renegotiation of the project's terms to ensure greater alignment with national interests. Subsequent renegotiations led to a reduction in project costs and adjustments in terms of local participation

and benefits (Koen, Asada, Nixon, Habeeb Rahuman, and Arif, 2017). This pause and reevaluation underscore the complexities of executing large-scale BRI infrastructure projects in host countries with dynamic political and economic environments.

Additionally, the ECRL has highlighted broader issues related to the implementation of BRI projects, including land acquisition challenges, environmental sustainability, and community engagement. For instance, delays due to disputes over compensation for landowners have underscored the importance of early and comprehensive stakeholder consultation. Similarly, environmental concerns related to the project's potential impact on ecologically sensitive areas have raised questions about the adequacy of regulatory oversight and sustainability measures (Gan & Mao, 2016).

Geopolitical Implications

The ECRL's strategic location near the South China Sea adds a geopolitical dimension to its significance. As a key maritime route and a site of ongoing territorial disputes, the South China Sea is central to regional power dynamics. The ECRL's potential to enhance Malaysia's connectivity and economic resilience could bolster its regional influence, but it also positions the project within broader geopolitical tensions involving China and other regional actors (Gallo, 2017). This dual role highlights the complex interplay between infrastructure development and geopolitics, a hallmark of many high-profile BRI projects.

A Case Study of Broader Dynamics

The ECRL encapsulates many of the themes explored above: the transformative potential of BRI projects; the challenges of implementation; and the broader economic and geopolitical implications. As a case study, it offers valuable insights into how BRI projects are negotiated, executed, and experienced at both local and regional levels. By examining the ECRL in depth, this research aims to shed light on the evolving role of the BRI in reshaping Southeast Asia's economic landscape and Malaysia's position within it.

This project not only serves as a practical example of the BRI's ambitions but also underscores the need for balanced and informed approaches to infrastructure development, ensuring that such initiatives deliver tangible benefits to host countries while addressing the complexities of international cooperation. In the chapters that follow, the analysis of the ECRL is further expanded to explore its specific contributions and challenges in greater detail.

1.2.5 Quick Historical Introduction to the Economic and Trade Development of Malaysia

The economic and trade evolution of Malaysia provides crucial context for understanding the rationale behind the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) project. Over the decades, Malaysia's economy has transitioned from being primarily resource-dependent to becoming a regional hub for manufacturing and trade, while facing challenges of uneven development across its regions.

Historically, Malaysia's trade-centric economic policies date back to its colonial era, when rubber, tin, and palm oil dominated exports. Post-independence, the country embarked on a journey of economic diversification, focusing on manufacturing and industrialization. During the 1970s and 1980s, Malaysia embraced foreign direct investment to bolster its electronics and machinery sectors, leading to the emergence of export-driven industrial hubs, particularly in the western parts of the country (Athukorala & Menon, 1997).

In contrast, the eastern states of Kelantan, Terengganu, and Pahang, despite their resource wealth in oil, gas, and minerals, have remained underdeveloped, with limited access to modern infrastructure. This disparity has hindered Malaysia's goal of achieving equitable regional development. The ECRL seeks to address this long-standing imbalance by creating a vital transportation corridor linking the underdeveloped east to the industrialized west, thereby enhancing connectivity and economic integration.

More recently, Malaysia has positioned itself as a key trading partner within ASEAN and a significant node in China's Belt and Road Initiative. As one of the founding members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Malaysia has actively embraced regional economic integration. Its

participation in initiatives like the ECRL underscores its strategic intent to leverage infrastructure development as a driver of inclusive economic growth, regional integration, and global trade connectivity (Koen, Nixon, Habeeb Rahuman and Arif,2017; Ngeow, 2018).

1.2.6 Conclusion: Malaysia's Role in the BRI and the ECRL as a Stand-Out Example

Malaysia serves as a pivotal site for understanding the regionalization potential of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Positioned in Southeast Asia—China's "backyard"—Malaysia offers a unique vantage point to explore how BRI projects translate promises of economic development and regional integration into tangible outcomes. The country is an active proponent of international economic cooperation, eager to harness external assistance for its development agenda. At the same time, Malaysia is not entirely committed to aligning itself within China's sphere of influence, reflecting a cautious and pragmatic approach to its engagement with the BRI.

This duality underscores Malaysia's significance as a "test case" for the BRI's broader ambitions. It highlights how such projects are not guaranteed successes but rather contested sites where local priorities, regional dynamics, and global strategies intersect. The East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) epitomizes this complexity. As a flagship BRI project, the ECRL exemplifies the potential of large-scale infrastructure initiatives to stimulate economic growth, enhance connectivity, and foster regional integration. However, it also illuminates the challenges inherent in these projects, including issues related to financing, political negotiations, and public reception.

In sum, Malaysia represents an illuminating case for analyzing the empirical realities of BRI projects, where the anticipated advances in economic development and integration must contend with real-world challenges. The ECRL stands as a symbol of this dynamic interplay, providing critical insights into how the BRI's ambitious goals unfold within diverse socio-political and economic contexts. This project, as part of Malaysia's broader engagement with the BRI, serves both as a beacon of the initiative's possibilities and a reminder of its inherent complexities.

1.3 Outline of the thesis

1.3.1 Research Questions: How the ECRL Illuminates the Broader Impacts of the BRI

The East Coast Rail Link, as a case study within China's BRI, exemplifies the intersections of infrastructure development, regional integration, and global political economy. This thesis leverages the ECRL to explore a central research question: *"How does the ECRL illuminate the BRI's contribution (or lack thereof) to regional integration in Southeast Asia, and what does this signify for reshaping the global political and economic order?"*

The ECRL represents a tangible manifestation of the BRI's ambition to enhance connectivity, facilitating regional trade, reducing logistical barriers, and enhancing economic integration, all reflecting the material impacts of the BRI. Simultaneously, it serves as a platform for examining immaterial aspects, including the discursive power of BRI slogans like "win-win cooperation" and "shared prosperity." Through the ECRL, this thesis critically examines how the BRI's dual nature—as an economic development initiative and a geopolitical strategy—impacts local and regional dynamics. This exploration positions the ECRL as a microcosm for understanding the BRI's broader implications for global economic governance.

1.3.2 Need for a Theoretical Framework: Cultural Political Economy (CPE)

To address the multifaceted dynamics of the ECRL and the BRI, this thesis adopts a Cultural Political Economy (CPE) perspective, as it integrates material and immaterial dimensions within a single analytical framework. As outlined in Chapter 8, CPE provides the tools to analyse how belief systems, discourse, and material practices coalesce to shape economic and political outcomes.

CPE's focus on power/knowledge systems (Foucault, 1972) and its emphasis on the interplay between cultural narratives and economic structures are particularly relevant to this study. For instance, the ECRL is not merely an infrastructure project; it is a site where Chinese ideological narratives (e.g., "shared prosperity") are materialized through capital-intensive investments and technological cooperation. At the same time, these narratives encounter resistance in local contexts,

as seen in Malaysia's renegotiation of the project terms to balance foreign investments with domestic interests. This tension underscores the need to analyse how material and discursive elements mutually shape the outcomes of BRI projects.

Moreover, CPE sheds light on the emergence of a distinctive Chinese regime of capital accumulation, exemplified by state-led public-private partnerships (PPPs) and the integration of cultural exchanges into economic strategies. As discussed in Chapter 8, this regime reflects an alternative to Western neoliberal models, highlighting the BRI's potential to reconfigure global economic governance. By framing the ECRL within this theoretical lens, the thesis captures the complexity of regional integration processes while situating them within broader global transformations.

At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that this analytical lens is not applied from a neutral nowhere. As a PRC national conducting fieldwork in Malaysia and Indonesia while being affiliated with a UK university, I occupy a complex positionality shaped by the intersecting structures of Chinese state-capitalism, global capitalism and the commercialised UK higher education system. These locations afforded particular privileges of access—especially to Chinese project managers and engineers—while also generating specific constraints, suspicions and asymmetries in my interactions with Malaysian and third-country stakeholders. Prior to the fieldwork, I held a broadly optimistic view of the developmental potential of the ECRL and the wider BRI; the research both reinforced and complicated this orientation, as critical voices from civil society, opposition parties and international media highlighted distributional tensions and risks of politicisation. Rather than erasing these commitments, the thesis makes them explicit and seeks to mitigate bias through triangulation, iterative coding and systematic reflexive practice. A fuller discussion of these issues is provided in Chapter 4 (especially §4.4.3), but they are flagged here because they are integral to understanding the data environment and interpretive stance adopted throughout the study.

1.3.3 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is structured to provide a comprehensive analysis of the ECRL regarding the research

question, with three empirical chapters and a final discussion/conclusion:

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the research background, objectives, and structure, emphasizing the interplay between material and immaterial dimensions of the ECRL project within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Chapters 2 and 3 establish the theoretical framework, drawing on Cultural Political Economy (CPE) to connect discourse formation, power/ knowledge dynamics, and capital accumulation in a way that is suitable for analysing BRI-related projects such as the ECRL.

Chapter 4 outlines the research methodology, including discourse analysis and semi-structured interviews. Ethical considerations, data collection processes, and fieldwork challenges are discussed to ensure transparency and rigor. (Given the politically sensitive nature of the ECRL and the researcher's positionality as a PRC national based at a UK university, Chapter 4—especially §4.4.3—develops a reflexive account of access, interactional dynamics and interpretive bias, clarifying how these conditions shape both the production and interpretation of the empirical material.)

Chapters 5–7 develop the core empirical analysis in three steps. Chapter 5 examines narratives of confidence and optimism around the ECRL, contrasting the strategic optimism articulated by many Chinese actors with the more varied and cautious attitudes expressed by Malaysian stakeholders, shaped by cultural norms and political concerns. Chapter 6 then analyses slogans as power/knowledge technologies through which infrastructure projects are legitimised, showing how sloganised discourse shapes public opinion, aligns stakeholders, and embeds ideological narratives within the broader BRI framing. Chapter 7 turns to the material and institutional dimension, exploring a distinctive model of “Chinese characteristic” capital accumulation and its relationship to regional integration through state-led investment and infrastructure-oriented growth, while also highlighting the tensions this may generate in local socio-political contexts and the broader BRI strategy.

Chapter 8 synthesizes findings to explore the dynamic interplay of "belief" and power/knowledge technologies in fostering win-win cooperation through the ECRL project. It also critically examines the risks of paternalism and unbalanced integration, illustrating how the same dynamics could either support or undermine regional integration.

The thesis also incorporates a reflexive consideration of the researcher's positionality. As a Chinese national based at a UK university conducting fieldwork in Malaysia, my identity shaped both access and interaction during interviews. Some Chinese respondents expressed caution, concerned that the project might be portrayed in negative terms, while certain Malaysian stakeholders projected alignment, assuming a supportive stance towards China's approach. These dynamics, together with the researcher's evolving normative standpoint on the ECRL, are explicitly addressed in the methodology chapter and form part of the broader context within which the empirical material is interpreted.

1.4 Contribution to Knowledge

This thesis makes three main contributions to knowledge. First, it advances understandings of power/knowledge dynamics in BRI infrastructure governance by analysing how slogans and narratives shape perceptions and everyday practices within the ECRL project. Second, drawing on empirical insights into Sino–Southeast Asian relations as instantiated in Malaysia–China cooperation around the ECRL, it refines accounts of regional integration by specifying both the openings it creates and the risks it generates for growth, coordination and development. Third, it contributes to debates on global economic governance by theorising how Chinese-characteristic regimes of capital accumulation operate through infrastructure delivery and associated financial mechanisms, and by showing how these dynamics may rework established assumptions about development models within global capitalism.

1.5 Preview of Key Findings

As documented in the key “results” chapters (Chapters 6–8), the findings from this study provide crucial insights into the dynamics of regional integration under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through the lens of the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) project. Overall, they contribute to a nuanced understanding of how the interplay between belief, material infrastructure, and discourse shapes the trajectories and outcomes of BRI projects.

A first key finding concerns the distinct forms of faith and confidence attached to the ECRL. Chinese stakeholders exhibit a significant degree of confidence in the project, largely driven by strategic imperatives, cultural confidence, and economic expectations. This contrasts with the more varied perceptions among Malaysian stakeholders, whose support is shaped by economic concerns, domestic political stability, and cultural considerations. This divergence highlights the role of belief systems in sustaining—or, at times, complicating—the dynamics of transnational infrastructure projects. The evidence further suggests that such confidence can play a pivotal role in pushing forward both the material and immaterial dimensions of the ECRL, even amid political uncertainty and economic scepticism.

A second finding highlights the power of slogans and discourses as key power/knowledge technologies within the BRI framework. Slogans such as “Connecting Life and Accelerating Growth”, deployed in the ECRL context, demonstrate a capacity to resonate emotionally with stakeholders, shape public understandings, and mobilise support for the project. These discourses not only help legitimise infrastructure investment, but also work to align local perceptions with broader regional and global narratives promoted by the BRI. In this sense, discourse is not simply rhetorical: it becomes a practical mechanism through which cultural and political barriers are negotiated, and through which a sense of shared purpose may be fostered among diverse stakeholders.

A third finding concerns the ECRL’s role in reflecting a distinctive model of capital accumulation with “Chinese characteristics”. This model integrates state-led investment strategies with public–private partnership arrangements (PPP) and export-oriented financing mechanisms (EPC+OM), designed to sustain long-term economic collaboration. For local stakeholders, however, the emphasis remains

primarily on tangible outcomes—such as infrastructure improvements, employment opportunities, and enhanced regional connectivity—rather than ideological or geopolitical narratives. At the same time, challenges associated with Malaysia’s domestic political (in)stability underscore the fragility of this approach, suggesting that its effectiveness depends heavily on careful alignment with local contexts and sustained efforts in cultural and economic exchange.

A final finding emphasises the interdependence between material infrastructure and immaterial elements such as cultural and ideological exchanges. In the ECRL case, trade and cultural exchange can act as mutually reinforcing mechanisms that help bridge gaps between Malaysia and China. This integrated approach has the potential to generate a dynamic feedback loop, whereby improved connectivity supports economic development, which in turn may strengthen cultural and political ties. However, this dynamic is not without risks: the same mechanisms that enable cooperation can also unravel through misaligned expectations, paternalistic attitudes, or resistance from local stakeholders, as further illustrated in Chapter 9. Achieving the desired “win–win” outcomes therefore requires a sustained balancing of material and immaterial strategies.

Taken together, these findings illustrate the complex and contested nature of regional integration under the BRI. They underscore the need to critically examine how belief, power/knowledge technologies, and distinctive economic models converge to shape the outcomes of infrastructure projects. By addressing these dynamics, the study contributes to broader debates on the potential of the BRI to reshape regional economies and the wider global political economy.

Chapter 2: Towards CPE for the BRI – Critique of mainstream IR theories

Chapter 2 focuses on our first step in building up the theoretical perspective of this thesis, namely regarding the limitations of traditional International Relations (IR) theories—Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism—and introduces Cultural Political Economy (CPE) as a more dynamic framework. The chapter discusses how CPE integrates materialist and cultural-relational analyses to offer a synthetic perspective on global geopolitical transformations, particularly regarding China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

This first step, here in Chapter 2, critically evaluates realism, liberalism, and constructivism to show their respective strengths and shortcomings when applied to contemporary global dynamics. Realism focuses on state power but fails to address the cooperative and ideational dimensions of international relations. Liberalism emphasizes cooperation and global markets but often reflects Western-centric ideals, overlooking equity issues in global governance. Constructivism enriches IR analysis by highlighting the role of shared ideas, norms, and identity in shaping global systems. However, it lacks a robust engagement with economic structures.

This chapter concludes that while these theories contribute valuable insights, they cannot adequately address the multifaceted challenges posed by initiatives like the BRI. This section sets the stage for introducing Cultural Political Economy (CPE) as a more integrative and comprehensive framework.

Looking ahead, Chapter 3 develops this discussion by tracing the theoretical development of Cultural Political Economy (CPE), including its roots in Marxist political economy and regulation theory, and its subsequent “cultural turn”. Here, CPE is introduced as a post-disciplinary framework that integrates material economic forces with cultural and discursive dimensions. It draws on Marxian concepts and the regulation approach to examine how economic structures are stabilised and transformed, while also foregrounding symbolic processes—discourse, meaning-making, and

ideology—as constitutive forces in shaping capitalist dynamics. In addition, CPE offers an account of dynamic capitalism in which crises and accumulation pressures can trigger shifts in economic strategies that are subsequently legitimated (or contested) through dominant narratives and wider cultural processes.

2.1 – Connecting geopolitics with Cultural Political Economy

This thesis begins by acknowledging the limitations of traditional International Relations (IR) paradigms—realism, liberalism, and even constructivism—in explaining the complex interplay of discourse, ideology, and material infrastructure within China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These paradigms tend to either overemphasize material state interests or idealist norm diffusion (Keohane, 1984), while neglecting the dialectical and recursive interactions between ideational and material processes in geopolitical projects. A more integrative framework is required—one that addresses the symbolic dimensions of power, the selectivity of institutions, and the recursive formation of legitimacy in infrastructural development.

Cultural Political Economy (CPE) provides such a framework. It foregrounds the dialectical relationship between semiosis and structuration, wherein discourses shape, and are shaped by, material institutions and practices (Jessop & Sum, 2013). This is especially relevant for understanding how Chinese infrastructural projects like the ECRL are promoted not merely as economic strategies but as expressions of political rationality and civilizational vision. In this framework, slogans like "win-win cooperation" and "community of shared future" are not just rhetorical flourishes, but performative elements embedded in selective mechanisms of governance, investment, and regional influence (Callahan, 2016; Zeng and Breslin, 2016).

2.2 – Limitations of Mainstream IR Theories

Mainstream International Relations (IR) theories—including realism, liberalism, and neoliberal institutionalism—offer limited insight into the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), especially when applied to cases like the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL). These paradigms assume rational state

behaviour, prioritise material interests, and often universalize Western experiences of governance. While they may account for power asymmetries or institutional design, they struggle to address how discourse, emotion, belief, and ideology shape the material and political trajectories of infrastructure projects.

Realism focuses on states as unitary actors engaged in power competition within an anarchic international system. However, this perspective cannot explain how ideas such as "shared prosperity" or "civilizational revival" become central to legitimating cross-border investments and political alignment. Liberalism and neoliberal institutionalism, meanwhile, emphasize rules-based cooperation (Keohane and Martin, 1995), markets, and multilateral institutions, but underplay the symbolic and selective nature of China's global engagements. They often assume that more institutional connectivity automatically produces mutual trust and efficiency—an assumption that does not hold in contexts like the ECRL, where legitimacy is contested and mediated by historically situated narratives.

Moreover, these theories largely ignore the uneven internalization of BRI discourse across different regions, actors, and media systems. For instance, the suspension and renegotiation of the ECRL project by the Mahathir administration in 2018 revealed how domestic political actors may reinterpret China's rhetoric of "win-win" in relation to concerns about sovereignty, debt, and national interest (Chong & Pham, 2020). Such dynamics cannot be fully captured by IR paradigms that treat states as coherent, strategic units.

Hence, the thesis adopts Cultural Political Economy (CPE) to better conceptualize the recursive and contingent relationship between discourse, institutional change, and capital accumulation. CPE allows a closer reading of how legitimacy is constructed, challenged, and reconstituted across transnational infrastructure governance processes.

2.3 – Constructivism and Its Limits

2.3.1 The birth of constructivism and its core concepts

Constructivism fundamentally challenges the basic assumptions underpinning traditional international relations theories such as realism and liberalism, which presume that the units of the international system are pre-formed entities with fixed identities and roles. In contrast, constructivism posits that both nation-states and the international system are continuously reconstructed through social interactions, cultural practices, and shared understandings. It argues that interests and identities of states are outcomes of social constructions reflecting evolving dynamics (Jessop, 1990).

Constructivism highlights how international norms, rules, and institutions are actively produced and maintained through state interactions rather than serving merely as external constraints. This perspective re-evaluates the understanding of international relations, emphasizing the contingent and malleable realities of global politics. It thus challenges foundational premises of realism and liberalism while enhancing our understanding of the fluid and constructed nature of international relations.

For constructivism, anarchy—often seen as the foundation of international politics—is not an objective material reality but a socially constructed phenomenon. This implies that anarchy is variable, shaped and reshaped by state interactions. Each state, influenced by its cultural, political, and historical context, may interpret and respond to anarchy in distinct ways, leading to diverse strategies from competitive power politics to collaborative international order. This nuanced view challenges traditional perspectives, emphasizing the dynamic interplay of state actions in shaping global politics (Wendt, 1992).

Alexander Wendt's social constructivism recognises the existence of an objective material reality in international relations but emphasizes that this reality is shaped by actions and practices. Through practice, meanings are constructed, understood, and transformed (Wendt, 1999). The world system, therefore, is not merely a fixed doctrine but a dynamic text, shaped by mutual understanding, interpretation, and communication mediated by language and symbols (Krzyżanowski, 2016; Fougère, Segercrantz and Seeck, 2017).

To understand the influence of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it is necessary to look beyond its material structures and analyse the immaterial cultural meanings it generates. From a Gramscian perspective, discourses are both material and immaterial, emerging from and shaping political-economic relations while producing tangible effects (Jessop & Sum, 2013).

Discourses encompassing ideas, norms, and cultural meanings are key to understanding how the BRI reshapes international relations. These discourses influence perceptions and guide interactions, playing a crucial role in transforming global geopolitics.

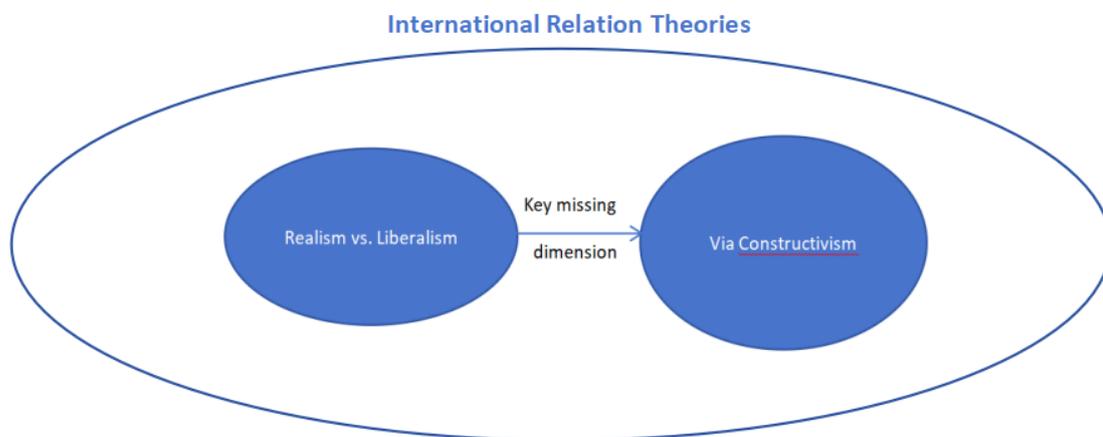
Exploring the 'text' of international relations reveals how states negotiate identities through both hard power and the soft power of discourse. Conventional IR theories often overlook the complexity within states, such as China's internally diverse agencies and interests. Recognizing these internal dynamics is crucial to understanding the BRI's implications (Zeng and Breslin, 2016).

Therefore, to fully grasp the nature of China's engagement in the BRI, it is essential to challenge the oversimplified view of the state in traditional IR theories. This approach enriches our understanding of China's role in the international system and enhances insights into the reciprocal nature of international relations, where textual and practical dimensions intersect. In short, China's material and tangible interests in the BRI can only be understood through the interpretation of emerging texts and identity definitions (Chong & Pham, 2020). This shift is significant because the conceptual resources shaping China's influence do not align with the Euro-American intellectual tradition that underpins realism and liberalism.

While realism and liberalism have dominated IR theory alongside Western-led global power structures, China's growing impact necessitates accommodating new perspectives. The BRI is reshaping how identity and interests are constructed globally, influencing China's definition by the world and vice versa (Yeophantong, 2013a, 2013b, 2014). This evolving process highlights the need for IR theories to expand empirically, embracing creative feedback loops that may lead to a new understanding of geopolitics.

In constructivism, two core concepts are central to understanding international relations. First, the structure of international relations is shaped by political culture—shared norms, values, and beliefs—rather than mere power dynamics (Keohane and Nye, 2012; Wendt, 1992). These cultural elements influence what is considered normal within the system, shaping state behaviour. Second, the culture of international politics constructs state identities and interests, which are not static but continuously reshaped through interactions. As such, international political culture defines how states perceive themselves and others, influencing their actions on the global stage.

Figure 1: The landscape of IR theories vis-a-vis the BRI



By emphasizing the role of international political culture in structuring the system and shaping identities, constructivism challenges reductionist views of realism and liberalism. This approach underscores the dynamic interplay between state behaviour and systemic cultural forces, highlighting how changes in norms and values transform international relations. Constructivism enriches our understanding of the fluid and evolving nature of global politics and emphasizes the significance of cultural and ideational factors in shaping outcomes (Dalby, 2008).

Both ideational and material factors shape state behaviour. This includes how China defines itself within the international system and how it is defined by other international agents. This reciprocal process highlights the relational nature of identity formation. When other states react to China's

actions, they contribute to shaping its identity and interests, which in turn influences their own strategic responses. This dynamic underscores the importance of reciprocal identity construction in international relations.

Wendt demonstrates how intense rivalry, such as during the Cold War, constructed the identities of the USA and USSR, defining their actions for decades (Wendt, 1999). Similarly, Finnemore highlights how international norms, such as those promoted by UNESCO, reshape what states consider their national interests (Finnemore, 1993). These examples underscore how shared norms and interactions influence state behaviour beyond material incentives.

For bilateral relations like those between Malaysia and China, analyzing mutual perceptions and political culture is crucial. By examining how each country constructs its identity in relation to the other, researchers can gain insights into dynamics of cooperation or conflict. These examples support constructivist claims and provide a methodological foundation for examining international relations that integrates ideas and material conditions.

To summarize, the social interaction between Malaysia and China—whether cooperative or competitive—can be broken down into several interrelated components (Table 1). These components include shared ideas (how the two countries perceive bilateral relations and the international situation), culture (rules, language, and symbols), identity (mutual recognition within the global political system), interests (win-win or relative gains), and behaviour (how the two countries and their internal actors respond to these dynamics). The following table organizes these key components to provide a clearer understanding of how social interaction shapes bilateral relations and international engagement (Wendt, 1992; 1995; 1999).

The components summarized in the table provide a structured understanding of how social interaction between Malaysia and China evolves through shared ideas, cultural practices, and identity formation. These elements demonstrate that international cooperation is not simply the result of material interests but is deeply embedded in cultural and ideational contexts.

Table 1: Social Interaction Framework: Key Components in Malaysia-China Bilateral Relations

Social Interaction	Types: Cooperation or Competition	This is the starting point where Malaysia and China engage either cooperatively or competitively.
Common idea	Description: Cognition of bilateral relations and international situations by Malaysia and China	This interaction leads to a shared understanding or common perception of their relationship and broader international dynamics.
Culture	Components: Rules, Language, Symbols	The shared ideas crystallize into a distinct set of cultural elements (rules, language, symbols) that both countries begin to use in their dealings.
Identity	Description: New acknowledgment of both countries within the world political system	This emerging culture influences how each country sees itself and the other within the global political arena, leading to a new or transformed identity.
Interests	Types: Can be win-win or relative	These identities shape the countries' interests, which may align for mutual benefit (win-win) or be based on relative gains.
Behaviour	Description: Responses of these two countries and even the smaller units within the countries, such as people	Ultimately, these interests drive the behaviour of the countries and their smaller units, affecting how people in each country respond to various situations.

2.3.2 What about material structures and capitalism?: An orientation to CPE

The main contribution of constructivism is its reframing of traditional notions of anarchy,

emphasizing how discourses and dominant ideas shape moments of disruption and transformation within a 'global system' and the reconstitution of statehood in international politics.

Constructivism asserts that anarchy in the international community is not determined by material forces but emerges as a product of shared ideas, cultural practices, and constructed relationships between states and people (Dalby, 2008). The system's structure, inherently social, is continuously shaped and reshaped through interactions guided by cultural and ideational contexts (Onuf, 2013; Klotz and Lynch, 2014). This perspective highlights the mutual constitution of actors and structures, rejecting inherent ontological priority and emphasizing the influence of shared meanings and cultural frameworks.

This approach underscores the fluid nature of international relations, where both actors and architectures evolve in tandem, shaped by dominant ideas and cultural practices. Constructivism does not prioritise the material structure of capitalism, as material factors are not its primary focus (Van Apeldoorn et al., 2008). Instead, it emphasizes that national identity emerges through interactions within the international community, and interests are defined only after identity formation. Since identity is not fixed, the determination of national interests is inherently dynamic (Wendt, 1995).

Constructivism challenges traditional assumptions by suggesting that foundational elements like identity and interests are not static or given but are achievements of continuous interaction. Wendt's theory illustrates how these elements, often considered stable, are fluid and continually reconstructed through social, diplomatic, and cultural engagements, emphasizing the dynamic nature of international relations.

However, constructivism has its limitations. Like realism and liberalism, it assumes that actors in the international system engage in rational decision-making, whether through cooperation or competition (Cudworth, 2013). This focus on causality can oversimplify the intricate realities of international systems, which often extend beyond rationality and causality. This critique opens the

door to Cultural Political Economy (CPE), which offers a more integrative framework to address these complexities.

Critical theories, including constructivism, challenge the notion of "objective knowledge," arguing that such knowledge is often shaped by cultural, ideological, and historical biases—particularly within Western and capitalist frameworks. Constructivists emphasize the role of social constructions, shared beliefs, and intersubjective understandings in shaping global affairs. They argue that identities and interests are not merely outcomes of objective structures but are continuously constructed and reconstructed through social interactions. This intersubjective dimension highlights the need to consider how collective meanings and norms influence political actions and systemic arrangements.

In light of these critiques, a more nuanced approach to understanding international relations involves a dual analysis: one that considers traditional objective factors, such as economic and military capabilities, alongside a deeper exploration of subjective and intersubjective factors that construct the reality of international politics. This integrated perspective provides a more comprehensive view, reflecting the complexities of global interactions beyond the simplistic framework of Western-centred objectivism (Chun, 2009).

A related issue, regarding the need for analysis that gives balanced consideration to both (largely material, but also ideational) actuality and (largely ideational, but also material) possibility, concerns how the three major schools of thought—realism, liberalism, and constructivism—are often critiqued for their tendency to reinforce the immediate status quo. While each offers valuable insights into the existing world system, they are criticised for lacking the capacity to fundamentally challenge or rethink its underlying structures and dynamics. This limitation risks constraining actors within these frameworks, reducing their ability to critique and transform existing structures and ideologies.

However, while these frameworks may appear to reinforce the status quo, their practical influence

and applications vary, affecting their capacity to critically reassess the existing world system:

Realism, by focusing on state sovereignty and power dynamics, often supports existing power structures, thereby aligning with the status quo. Nevertheless, it offers critical insights into power relations and state behaviour, providing a pragmatic lens for understanding global challenges.

Liberalism, advocating for international cooperation and governance, promotes transformative changes through institutions and democratic values. However, in practice, it can sustain existing inequalities by privileging established powers and reinforcing global hierarchies.

Constructivism challenges the foundations of international norms and the constructed nature of state identities and interests. By emphasizing that identities and interests are not fixed but continuously shaped through social interactions, it underscores the potential for change through shifts in perceptions and norms. While constructivism offers pathways for transformative change, its indirect and long-term focus often struggles to influence immediate policy-making. Consequently, entrenched power structures may persist in the absence of actionable mechanisms for change, even as its critique implicitly challenges static understandings of the global order.

In sum, these theories offer differing perspectives and varying degrees of practical influence. They are not merely tools for maintaining the status quo but provide unique insights that can alter or reinforce the world system depending on how they are applied in specific contexts. This differential impact highlights the complexities of translating theoretical frameworks into practical strategies for international relations, where the ability to critique and reconstruct structures is intertwined with theoretical and real-world limitations (Roberts, Secor and Sparke, 2003).

Under realism, liberalism, and constructivism, the discourse on international relations shapes how people engage with objective knowledge. While these frameworks offer valuable insights into global structures, they often reflect and reinforce existing power dynamics dominated by elites within capitalist systems (Simon, 2007, 2008). Specifically, the methodologies of realism, liberalism, and constructivism often prove inadequate for engaging in a dialectical analysis of the global system,

which remains largely structured around Western capitalism. This limitation stems from their embeddedness within the very structures they examine, as these frameworks frequently preconfigure and affirm existing capitalist norms rather than fundamentally challenging or reimagining them (Harvey, 2005, 2006).

These abstract considerations are crucial for this thesis's analysis of (a project in) the BRI that is seeking both to offer a faithful reflection of the (emerging) material and structural reality *and* to do so in ways that engage critically with those realities, keeping open, or highlighting openings regarding, possibilities for shifting how the future unfolds from here. Consider, for instance, some key elements of the historical trajectory of parallel evolution of the global order of the capitalist political economy and its material and technological forms.

Advancements in automation and information technology have enabled manufacturers to maintain production levels with fewer workers (Oliveira,2021), significantly reducing demand for middle-level manufacturing jobs. Concurrently, developed economies transitioned toward service-oriented sectors such as finance, technology, and healthcare, transforming the industrial employment landscape. China's accession to the World Trade organisation in 2001 marked a critical turning point, solidifying its role as a global manufacturing hub and accelerating job offshoring. This shift diminished middle-end manufacturing roles in developed nations as these jobs moved to economies with cheaper labour. The interplay of global economic policies, technological advancements, and shifts in focus has reshaped the industrial sector, leading to socioeconomic changes in developed countries and fueling widespread opposition to neoclassical liberalism among those most affected (Olesen, 2014).

The global stagnation of the 1970s, attributed to limitations of Keynesian economic policies, catalyzed the rise of neoliberalism. This ideology, championed by economists like Milton Friedman and leaders such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, prioritised deregulation, reduced government intervention, and market liberalization as solutions to stimulate growth (Harvey, 2007). While these policies initially delivered economic growth, they also widened income inequality and

increased economic instability over time.

The 2008 financial crisis exposed vulnerabilities inherent in neoliberalism, particularly its reliance on unregulated markets and deregulation (Stiglitz, 2002, 2011). This sparked calls for alternative economic models prioritizing social equity, environmental sustainability, and resilience. After a generation of neoliberal dominance, the absence of a dominant global system conceptualization has created opportunities and urgent demands for replacements, such as the geopolitics reshaping project embodied by the BRI.

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) stands as a counterpoint to conventional economic paradigms, offering a novel model for regional connectivity and economic cooperation. Between 2013 and 2017, the BRI saw rapid expansion through large-scale infrastructure projects, addressing gaps left by traditional neoliberal frameworks. However, from 2020 to 2021, the BRI faced backlash due to debt sustainability concerns, geopolitical resistance, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted progress (Hillman, 2021).

More recently, the BRI has shifted toward smaller-scale, financially viable, and sustainable projects, signaling a recalibration of China's approach (Cai, 2022). This evolution reflects China's commitment to addressing criticisms while advancing its vision of the BRI as a practical and inclusive development model. By aligning with emerging priorities like environmental sustainability and social equity, the BRI positions itself as a flexible alternative to neoliberal doctrines (Callahan, 2016).

Evaluating the BRI's impacts requires closer analysis of trade connectivity, debt sustainability, and geopolitical dynamics. Incorporating context-specific data from BRI projects in Malaysia can provide deeper insights into observed benefits and challenges. Although this thesis focuses on qualitative and theoretical analysis, it invites future research into quantitative evaluations, particularly those aligning with regional integration expectations. Engagement with post-pandemic economic recovery patterns, emphasizing sustainability and resilience, will strengthen understanding of how

the BRI reshapes Southeast Asia's economic landscape. Overall, though, it should be clear that neither the historical background that has led to the BRI and the ECRL, nor its ongoing unfolding, into the future, can be understood without reference to *both* material and cultural factors; a judgement that is further clarified by a direct engagement with the existing literatures on the BRI, to which we now turn.

2.3.3 Mapping the BRI Scholarship and Positioning This Study

A key illustration of the strengths and limitations of (IR) constructivism – and one of paramount relevance to this study - is the now voluminous literature on the BRI. The now extensive literature on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can be organised into several overlapping strands: (i) IR and geoeconomic accounts framing the BRI as grand strategy and statecraft (Rolland, 2017; Prakash, 2023; Nordin & Weissmann, 2018); (ii) political-economy and development-governance studies focusing on finance, regulation and implementation (Jones & Zeng, 2019; Gelpern et al., 2021; Dreher et al., 2022); and (iii) discourse-centred analyses tracing how slogans such as “win–win cooperation” and “a community of shared future” travel transnationally and are recontextualised through domestic politics (Ferdinand, 2016; Zeng, 2020). Within this third strand, Chubb (2022) develops a particularly useful framing of the BRI as a geotechnical imaginary—an imagined order that becomes actionable through technopolitical projects and ongoing imaginative work.

While these strands illuminate vital aspects of BRI research, each also leaves gaps that matter for this study. Grand-strategy accounts clarify strategic logics but often under-explain how meaning translates into specific financing and regulatory choices; governance-oriented work specifies instruments and implementation dynamics but can under-theorise how discourses stabilise or destabilise those arrangements across sites; and discourse-centred scholarship traces slogan trajectories yet seldom connects them to project-level material outcomes. A Cultural Political Economy (CPE) approach addresses these disjunctures by theorising the recursive coupling of semiosis and structuration—how selective interpretations are institutionalised through organisational routines and financial practices, and how those practices feed back into meaning-making (Jessop & Sum, 2013). This is compatible with Chubb's (2022) emphasis on

imaginative work, while also helping specify how imaginaries become materially consequential in concrete project settings.

Accordingly, this study positions the ECRL at the intersection of strands (ii) and (iii): it traces how discursive framings enable or constrain financing and governance arrangements, and how those arrangements in turn shape project practices and local responses. Analytically, I operationalise a CPE recursive loop as follows: slogan/imaginary → confidence mobilisation → financing/regulatory selection → project practices → recalibration of meanings. This generates three guiding questions. First, how are BRI-related imaginaries mobilised, and by whom (Chubb, 2022)? Second, how does such mobilisation translate into specific financing and regulatory selections (Jones & Zeng, 2019; Gelpern et al., 2021; Dreher et al., 2022)? Third, how does domestic politics recontextualise and contest these selections over time?

Related scholarship on China's maritime politics and episodes of assertiveness debates how nationalist sentiment and public discourse become politically salient in periods of tension, and how this can shape the signalling environment without implying a simple, linear 'public opinion → policy' pipeline (Chubb, 2019; Chubb, 2020). In a more cultural register, work on 'ocean culture' shows how state-linked symbolic projects help construct China as a maritime great power, supplying narratives and repertoires that can be mobilised in external engagements (Mallory, Chubb and Lau, 2022). Extending these concerns beyond the maritime domain, Chubb (2022) conceptualises the BRI as a 'geotechnical imaginary': an infrastructure-centred vision of global order whose practical force is realised—and contested—through specific projects. This is directly relevant to the ECRL, where slogans and campaign narratives can translate broad imaginaries into organisational routines and policy trajectories (Zeng, 2020; Chubb, 2022).

In line with the discourse strand, Zeng's (2020) *Slogan Politics* shows that slogans operate as performative devices that translate ideology into policy traction by coordinating expectations around otherwise ambiguous programmes. Meanwhile, culturally inflected work—e.g., Wang & Futák-Campbell (2021)—explores how Confucian/civilisational framings shape reception and moral

expectations in regional settings. Taking together, this consolidates the analytical basis for our CPE-informed analysis of the ECRL, connecting imaginaries and slogans to concrete financing and governance selections.

In positioning this thesis, I build on Chubb's (2022) conceptualisation of the BRI as a geotechnical imaginary and develop it through a CPE lens that keeps symbolic and material dimensions in view simultaneously. Where Chubb foregrounds the imaginative and discursive work through which the BRI is rendered actionable, CPE allows me to specify how imaginaries are selectively stabilised through planning, finance and project governance, and how they are reworked through implementation frictions and local contestation (Jessop & Sum, 2013). On this basis, the chapter investigates how economic imaginaries are selectively institutionalised via planning, finance and project governance; how regulatory selectivities embed and filter discourse; and how these dynamics unfold in the ECRL case, where legitimacy is produced, contested and reassembled over time (Zeng, 2020; Chubb, 2022).

2.3.4 Our Ontological Emphasis in CPE (after Jessop & Sum, 2013)

At the highest level of abstraction, this thesis adopts an ontology in which social reality is co-constituted by semiosis (meaning-making) and materiality (institutional and organisational forms). Semiosis furnishes economic imaginaries that render complex projects thinkable and actionable; materiality selectively stabilises those imaginaries through rules, routines and resource flows (Jessop, 2009). Rather than privileging either moment, the analysis tracks their dialectical, recursive interplay across time and scales.

My emphasis is specifically on Chinese regulatory selectivity: planning instruments, cadre evaluation and policy campaigns can operate as filters and amplifiers that confer legibility, legitimacy and durability on particular narratives as they move from discourse into practice. This complements Chubb's (2022) account of the BRI as an imaginary sustained through imaginative labour by specifying institutional mechanisms through which certain meanings gain traction while others remain marginal. This prepares the ground for the discussion that follows, where I introduce

CPE as it evolved out of Regulation Theory and clarify how crisis dynamics, accumulation pressures and institutional restructuring shape the conditions under which imaginaries are stabilised and contested.

If Chubb (2022) offers a macro-concept—the BRI as a geotechnical imaginary enacted through technopolitical projects and sustained through imaginative labour—CPE helps specify how such imaginaries are consolidated through selective institutional and organisational mechanisms. At the mechanism level, strategic selectivity highlights how administrative routines, evaluative systems and governance architectures can privilege some interpretive frames and render others less speakable, less legible or less actionable. The durability of an imaginary is therefore not only discursive: it also depends on how meanings are organised into procedures, incentives and routines that structure what can be credibly promised, contested and delivered on the ground (Jessop & Sum, 2013; Chubb, 2022).

This resonates with Jasanoff and Kim's (2015) concept of sociotechnical imaginaries—collectively performed visions of desirable social order that become materially embedded in sociotechnical projects (see also Jasanoff & Kim, 2009). Building on this tradition, Chubb (2022) conceptualises the BRI as a geotechnical imaginary oriented to an imagined global order and enacted through infrastructure-led technopolitical projects. His account also foregrounds contestation: imaginaries can mobilise imaginative labour in both affirmatory and oppositional directions, and are continually reworked through friction, critique and negotiation across audiences and sites (Chubb, 2022). These considerations lead to the next discussion, where I introduce CPE's roots in Regulation Theory to better ground how imaginaries interact with accumulation dynamics and institutional restructuring.

2.4 From Regulation Theory to Cultural Political Economy

2.4.1 The Rise of Regulation School

The Regulation School emerged in France during the 1970s as a response to the inability of neoclassical economics to account for the institutional and historical dynamics of capitalist

development. Rather than viewing markets as self-regulating mechanisms, theorists such as Aglietta (1979) and Boyer (1990) argued that capitalist accumulation is stabilized through historically specific configurations of institutions, norms, and practices. These include "modes of regulation"—such as wage relations, monetary regimes, and state forms—and broader "regimes of accumulation" that support long-term capital expansion.

What distinguished the Regulation approach was its emphasis on structural contradictions and periodic crises within capitalism. It recognised that economic stability is not automatic but must be institutionally secured, often through compromises between capital and labour (Lipietz, 1987a). This opened up new avenues for analysing the shifting role of the state, governance frameworks, and political legitimacy across different historical periods.

Although informed by Marxist political economy, the Regulation School departed from deterministic readings of capitalism by stressing institutional contingency and social embeddedness. This institutionalist orientation laid crucial theoretical foundations for Cultural Political Economy (CPE), which further extends the framework to include semiotic processes and the cultural construction of economic meaning (Jessop & Sum, 2006; Jessop & Sum, 2013).

2.4.2 Differences between CPE, Regulation School, and Orthodox Economics

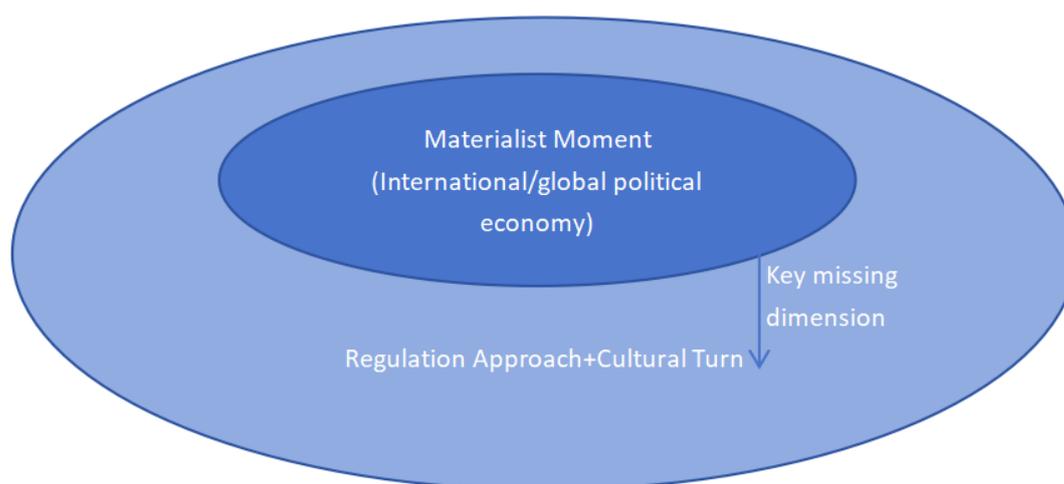
Cultural Political Economy (CPE) builds upon the Regulation School but distinguishes itself in several key dimensions. While both reject the equilibrium assumptions of orthodox economics and emphasize historically specific institutional forms, CPE introduces an additional emphasis on the semiotic and cultural construction of economic meaning (Jessop & Sum, 2013). Regulation theory typically explains economic stability through institutional configurations such as wage-labour relations and monetary regimes (Boyer, 1990), whereas CPE further interrogates how these institutions are symbolically legitimized through narratives, discourses, and imaginaries (Jessop, 2009).

Compared to orthodox economics, which treats economic actors as rational and decisions as utility-maximizing, CPE regards agency as socially and discursively embedded. It acknowledges that beliefs, ideologies, and representations shape not only policy decisions but also how economic crises and reforms are perceived and justified (Jessop & Sum, 2006).

Additionally, while the Regulation School tends to focus on national models of capitalism, CPE is more attuned to multi-scalar processes—including global financial flows, international discourse networks, and transnational ideological projects (Jessop, 2010). This makes it particularly suited for analysing complex initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative, where material infrastructure development is accompanied by ideological storytelling and cultural alignment efforts.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the Regulation Approach provides a strong foundation in understanding institutional dynamics but misses critical cultural and relational dimensions necessary for a holistic analysis of political economy. By incorporating a cultural turn, this framework bridges the gap between materialist and ideational factors, paving the way for the application of Cultural Political Economy (CPE).

Figure 2: Demand of Integrating the Regulation Approach with the Cultural Turn



To summarise, this section has traced the intellectual lineage from the Regulation School to Cultural Political Economy, clarifying how CPE extends institutional political economy by incorporating

semiotic, discursive, and ideational dimensions. In contrast to both neoclassical rationalism and institutional determinism, CPE offers a layered, reflexive approach that is capable of analysing complex material–ideational interactions across scales. Both sharing a grounding in Marxian political economy, though, the more obvious question may be how either of them can engage at all in analysis that gives respectful explanatory attention to cultural factors – the mere epiphenomena of 'superstructure' in classical Marxist analysis. The answer to this question is 'the cultural turn'.

2.5 CPE'S Intellectual Lineages and Main Approaches

2.5.1 Interdisciplinarity and Power/ Knowledge

Jessop (2010) introduces Cultural Political Economy (CPE) as a post-disciplinary approach that integrates the 'cultural turn' into political economy, emphasizing the intrinsic relationship between symbolic processes and economic materiality within broader social forms. This approach addresses the limitations of traditional economics, which often neglects ethical, political, and cultural dimensions. Historically, political economy evolved from an interdisciplinary perspective during the Enlightenment to a more narrowly focused field of 'economics,' dropping the 'political' and favouring specialized theories and methods (Jessop & Sum, 2013).

Critical geography, in particular, plays a significant role in this context. Scholars such as David Harvey (1973) and Jamie Peck (2005) have integrated concepts from political economy, sociology, and cultural studies into geographical analysis. These contributions illustrate how critical geography intersects with and informs broader political economy frameworks.

2.5.2 Marxism and the Cultural Turn: towards *Cultural* Political Economy

Jessop and Sum argue that cultural turn has been given extensive and multiple explanations, covering the study in the forms of discourse, ideology, identity, narrative, argument, rhetoric, reflexivity, hermeneutics, and semiotics (Jessop & Sum, 2013). It is the acceptance of the cultural turn that enables CPE to combine concepts and methods derived from critical semiotic analysis and critical political economy, providing a unique post-disciplinary approach to the structure of capitalist

societies (Jessop, 2004).

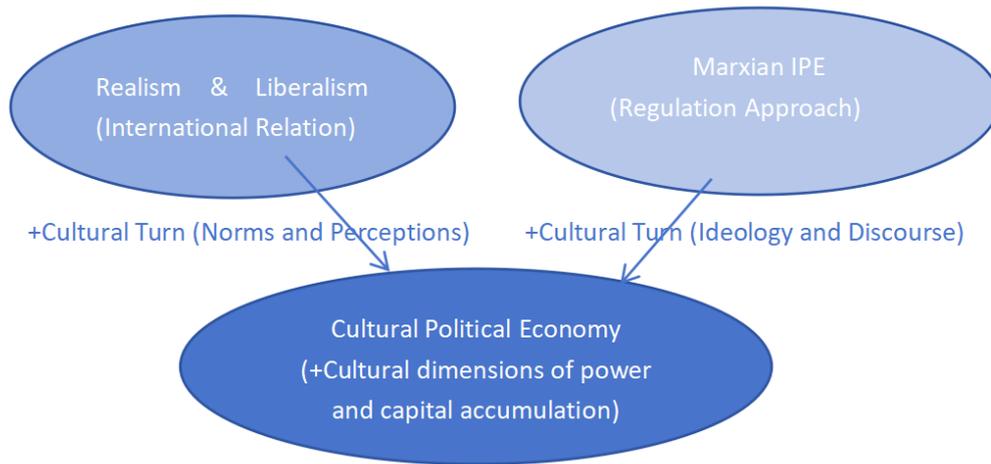
CPE situates key categories within specific historical contexts and hence avoids essentialized analyses of capitalism's varieties (Jessop & Theodore, 2006). Jessop's theoretical framework emphasizes the interaction between material political-economic changes and symbolic processes. These nuanced processes reflect CPE's comprehensive capacity to analyse and explain the complexities of contemporary capitalist transformations (Jessop & Sum, 2006). This perspective is rooted in Regulation Theory, which highlights how different state forms and modes of regulation stabilize or transform capitalist economies. Jessop and Sum build on this tradition, integrating insights from critical semiotic analysis to understand these nuanced processes.

The introduction of this concept considers the real world as a realm of meaning, emphasizing the importance of symbolic operations in economic structure changes. Unlike Baudrillard's (1976) focus on symbolic operations as the primary cause, Jessop's Cultural Political Economy (CPE) maintains an attenuated materialism. This perspective asserts that while material social relations ultimately drive economic structures, these relations are continuously mediated by immaterial, ideational, and semiotic processes. Thus, CPE integrates both material and symbolic dimensions in its analysis of capitalist societies (Jessop & Sum, 2006).

From the point of view of symbolic process, Jessop (2004) actually raises three questions regarding symbolic processes.

First, how do factors within and beyond semiotics influence the selection, implementation, and optimization of economic ideas—such as policies, visions, or imaginaries—in practice? Jessop emphasizes that symbolic processes reflect the evolution of systems, where theories and ideas are tested, adapted, and selected based on their practical applicability and discursive support. This process involves a resonant discourse, enabling certain systems to become the dominant choice.

Figure 3: Cultural Political Economy: Integrating IR and Marxian IPE through Cultural turn (Cf Figures 1 and 2)



In the Chinese setting, regulatory selectivity can dampen some frictions while anchoring preferred narratives in organisational practice. However, both sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015) and geotechnical imaginaries (Chubb, 2022) also benefit from closer connection to the political-economic contexts in which they operate—especially shifts in regimes and crises of global capitalism that shape what projects are thinkable, fundable and governable. Here that grounding is provided through a stronger engagement with Marxian political economy and Regulation Theory, which helps explain how crisis tendencies and accumulation imperatives condition the institutional pathways through which imaginaries are stabilised, contested and recalibrated over time (Jessop & Sum, 2013). This provides the rationale for the transition to Section 2.4.

Moreover, how does the symbolic process relate to the practice of adjusting, reproducing, and changing the social structure of capital (Jessop, 2004)? Specifically, how does the symbolic process fit capitalist social reality as a form of analysis? The symbolic process refers to the ways in which meanings and discourses are constructed and disseminated, shaping economic policies and social structures. For example, during the transition to neoliberalism in the 1980s, the discourse of market freedom and deregulation, championed by political leaders like Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, was widely disseminated and accepted (Jessop, 2002; Jessop & Sum, 2013).

This symbolic process helped to reshape the social structure of capital by promoting policies that

favoured privatization, deregulation, and the reduction of state intervention in the economy. The success of these policies was not just due to their economic rationale but also to the powerful symbolic narrative that framed them as necessary for economic growth and individual freedom – though, of course, the subsequent economic 'success' of these policies, in creating now drivers of capital accumulation and profit, in turn acted to strengthen the forces supportive of, and generalized societal credibility of, these narratives, in self-reinforcing feedback loops. This illustrates how the symbolic process can influence and legitimize significant changes in the capitalist social structure to the point where certain trajectories may come to be seen as 'necessary' and (politically) unarguable, even as they were only contingently and conditionally successful.

Semiotics is a discipline that studies meaning, and specifically how social process is actually achieved through the production, circulation and exchange of meaning (Kuah, 2021). As a social process, the accumulation strategy of capitalist society and the social form embedded in it are also the production process of meaning. This points to the significance of semiotics process to analyse capital accumulation with CPE lens, as it is a study process of producing, circulating and exchanging the meaning (as explained in the first point above). The practice of adjusting, reproducing and changing the social structure of capitalism is operated by the real subject of action (which, as discussed above regarding IR (theories), could mean states not just individuals).

Jessop (2004) highlights that symbolic processes are central to the transformation and reproduction of existing capitalist structures. By embedding arbitrary elements into carefully organized discourses, actors legitimize particular meanings and actions. Cultural Political Economy (CPE) emphasizes this constructive role of symbolic processes, showing how they interact with material forces to enable systemic change. Unlike certain geographical political economy approaches, which prioritise how material forces generate discourses that reshape conditions, CPE underscores the dynamic interplay between symbolic processes and material realities. Material forces are mediated through discourses, while these discourses simultaneously shape and influence material conditions (Jessop & Sum, 2006).

Importantly, symbolic processes are not peripheral but foundational to understanding capitalist society. Jessop (2004) and Jessop & Sum (2013) argue that these processes guide the creation, stabilization, and transformation of capitalist social structures. They highlight that analyzing how symbols and meanings operate within discursive processes allows us to better understand the functioning and reorganisation of social systems. By focusing on the role of symbolic processes, CPE offers an integrated perspective that bridges material conditions and cultural dynamics, enabling a deeper analysis of systemic changes in capitalism.

Jessop's approach validates the use of semiotic analysis for interpreting capitalist society, enabling traditional political economy criticisms to be reframed within this symbolic process. While Marxism offers a profound critique of capitalism's overall nature, the symbolic process allows for a more nuanced examination of specific systems and their mechanisms, bridging traditional Marxist theory with contemporary and future developments.

CPE thus represents a significant evolution in this theoretical landscape. It draws on earlier theories such as realism, liberalism, and constructivism in IR, and incorporates the regulation approach, which emphasizes how different state forms and modes of regulation stabilize or transform capitalist economies. This trajectory illustrates how CPE integrates insights from both materialist and symbolic analyses, moving beyond abstract critiques to study capitalism as it actually operates in practice. As Jessop and Sum (2013) thus put it, CPE aims to chart a course between the 'Scylla' of a 'hard' materialist, economic or political economy analysis that neglects the inescapable mediation of these considerations by semiosis (and so tends towards overly settled abstract theories that impose premature deductive logics to analysis of any given geohistorical development of interest); and the 'Charybdis' of a 'soft economic sociology', that opts instead entirely for semiotic analysis but to the neglect of the enduring systemic imperative of capital accumulation.

In short, the contribution of CPE lies in its constructive approach to understanding capitalism, understood as the pervasive, if evolving, systemic condition of contemporary global society. It provides actionable insights into how capitalist systems function and evolve – and are functioning

and evolving at present, 'here and now' – , rather than merely critiquing them in the abstract. This approach integrates material and symbolic factors, thus offering a more dynamic understanding compared to "sole realist" perspectives, which emphasize material conditions as the ultimate determinants of social phenomena without considering symbolic and discursive dimensions. This approach also enables going beyond zero-sum analyses, which often see outcomes as fixed and competitive, such that CPE provides a framework for understanding how capitalist systems adapt and transform in response to both material and symbolic changes. Of course, this is also, then, exactly the context of interest for our study of the BRI – a 'hard', 'material' programme of geopolitical interest through infrastructure construction – as a vehicle in the – 'soft', cultural – influence of China on (transformation of) the global system.

Moreover, there is existing evidence that CPE is particularly useful in addressing contemporary issues of political economy that have disproportionate cultural dimensions, notably in its analysis of the 'knowledge-based economy'; an issue that thereby illustrates key parallel concerns for our analysis of the BRI/ECRL and regarding a mode of global capitalist competition that also remains a crucial background and context regarding the contemporary imaginaries of 'development' underpinning the BRI's offers of construction of infrastructure and their prima facie appeal to recipient governments. A brief tour of this work thus serves both to illustrate the explanatory power of CPE on issues of relatively recent global political economy and with significant relevance to analysis of the BRI as global infrastructure project, and to offer some substantive background to the geopolitical context of the BRI regarding the rest of this study.

2.6 Knowledge-Based Economy and Strategic Selectivity

CPE has been particularly useful in explaining how the transition to a knowledge-based economy is not merely technological or economic, but also discursive and selective. Drawing from the concept of "strategic selectivity" (Jessop, 2002), CPE views institutions and governance arrangements not as neutral containers but as terrains structured to privilege certain strategies, actors, and rationalities over others.

This is especially relevant in the context of neoliberal globalization, where knowledge is framed as the driver of innovation, competitiveness, and economic growth. CPE helps reveal how such framings are not self-evident but are actively constructed and promoted through education reforms, media campaigns, and policy narratives (Jessop, 2010). In doing so, it also highlights the limits of such hegemonic framings, especially in politically diverse contexts like Southeast Asia, where alternative knowledge logics may persist or be selectively integrated.

This interpretive dimension underscores the recursive relationship between symbolic legitimacy and institutional durability—two dynamics that are central to understanding large-scale infrastructure and development initiatives like the ECRL.

2.6.1 Capital Accumulation, Crisis, and Legitimation (applied to ECRL)

Classical political economy links infrastructure booms to historically specific regimes of accumulation stabilised by modes of regulation (Aglietta, 1979; Boyer, 1990; Lipietz, 1987a). A CPE perspective adds that crises are also semiotically mediated: they are named, diagnosed, and addressed through narratives that enable some policy options while foreclosing others (Jessop & Sum, 2006; Sum & Jessop, 2013).

Bringing in Habermas's (1973/1975) notion of "legitimation crisis" helps clarify what is at stake when governance arrangements lose credibility and the justificatory narratives that sustain them begin to fracture. Read alongside Chubb's (2022) emphasis on imaginative labour, such crises can be approached as moments when an imaginary must be repaired, re-narrated or re-institutionalised to remain governable. In the ECRL case, the suspension period can be interpreted as such a critical juncture: competing interpretations intensified, confidence work became politically salient, and governance choices were forced into the open—creating conditions in which legitimacy could be contested and subsequently reassembled.

2.6.2 From Accumulation Stress to Imaginary Management (ECRL)

The World Bank (2019) shows that BRI corridor gains are contingent on reforms (transparency, debt

sustainability, procurement, ESG), making fiscal/contractual stress not just technical but politically legible. When such stress meets contested imaginaries—"prudence" vs "development," "sovereignty" vs "partnership," "debt-trap" vs "win-win"—the issue shifts into Habermasian legitimation crisis terrain: institutional outputs fail to secure normative consent.

Drawing on Chubb's (2022) conceptualisation, legitimacy work in the ECRL episode can be analysed as an effort to keep an infrastructure project governable by sustaining a credible imaginary under conditions of contestation and uncertainty. This involved discursive labour (reasserting "win-win" framings, reaffirming commitments, re-describing the pause as recalibration rather than failure) and material-institutional adjustments (renegotiating contractual terms, resequencing delivery, strengthening oversight). In CPE terms, the mechanism is recursive: meaning-making and institutional restructuring feed back into each other. The pause therefore becomes analytically valuable not as an interruption to bracket out, but as a window into how imaginaries are defended, disputed and re-stabilised through concrete governance practices (Jessop & Sum, 2013; Chubb, 2022).

2.7 Adapting CPE to the Chinese Context

2.7.1 Chinese Political Economy and the Regulation Approach

There is one final issue that merits consideration regarding CPE and the BRI, namely how this Marxian-inspired framework, originally formulated primarily with a view to dominant, Western capitalist political economies, relates to and illuminates the distinctive case of contemporary China; and including regarding how it has been taken up by influential scholars/governments in what is still officially a 'socialist' country.

The global financial crisis of 2008 exposed the limitations of Western economic models, highlighting the need for theories better suited to China's unique context. This led to a revival of Marxist political economy, with Chinese scholars exploring how the Regulation School (RS) could be applied to China's political economy. Regulation School, particularly its French origins (Boyer, 2001; Aglietta,

2000), emphasizes institutional forms at the meso-level and the role of the state in regulating economic systems. It focuses on how different regulatory modes—based on institutional and cultural contexts—shape capital accumulation systems and economic growth. In the Chinese context, the Regulation School's emphasis on institutional diversity and state intervention resonates with China's approach to balancing market forces and state control, particularly in sectors like banking, infrastructure, and energy (Boyer & Saillard, 2002).

China's development model aligns with Regulation School's understanding of how institutional frameworks influence economic outcomes, especially in the post-2008 global economic environment. The role of the state, as discussed in the Chinese Regulation School, is not just about intervention but also about fostering long-term growth through selective regulatory measures that differ across regions and sectors (Katzenstein, 2024). However, while the Regulation School provides an important foundation, it falls short of fully capturing the complexity of China's fragmented authoritarianism (Lieberthal & Oksenberg, 1988), where political authority is dispersed across levels of government and among various state agencies.

2.7.2 Why CPE Suits Socialist Political Economy with Chinese Characteristics

A breakthrough in the existing theoretical difficulties of the Regulation School is urgently needed to address the specific political-economic system with Chinese characteristics. The Regulation School, while offering valuable insights into the interplay between economics and broader social, political, and cultural influences, struggles with adapting its framework to the complex and fragmented nature of China's governance and economic structure (Heilmann & Perry, 2011).

Polanyi's (1944) concept of the "double movement"—the tension between the expansion of the market and society's pushback to protect itself—provides a valuable framework for understanding this process. Within the context of cultural political economy (CPE), this perspective emphasizes the importance of understanding how economic practices are socially embedded and how cultural and political factors shape and constrain economic activities. CPE highlights the necessity of re-embedding capitalist markets within broader social frameworks to maintain stability and address

the inherent contradictions of market economies. This approach offers a nuanced reading of Polanyi that complements Jessop's analysis, providing a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between economic and social dynamics.

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter establishes Cultural Political Economy (CPE) as a comprehensive framework that addresses the theoretical gaps left by other traditional perspectives across a spectrum of social science disciplines concerned with critically illuminating the ongoing unfolding of global capitalist political economic order. By incorporating insights from International Relations (IR), International Political Economy (IPE), and the Regulation Approach (RA), CPE integrates cultural and economic dimensions to create a more dynamic and multi-dimensional analytical tool.

Explicitly, the chapter proceeds stepwise: we move from mainstream IR theories, which foreground state strategy and inter-state cooperation, through the Regulation School, which explains the institutional–material stabilisation of accumulation, to Cultural Political Economy, which incorporates the cultural turn by theorising semiosis, meaning-making and symbolic power as constitutive of capitalist political economy. The chapter highlights that CPE transcends the static models of traditional theories by focusing on the interplay between material processes (e.g., capital accumulation and regulation) and symbolic processes (e.g., discourse, ideology, and meaning-making). This integration allows CPE to analyse how social and economic realities are constructed, contested, and legitimized within capitalist systems.

CPE's interdisciplinary nature, particularly its inclusion of semiotics and the cultural turn, redefines how we understand governance, power, and economic transformation. Unlike reductionist approaches that treat culture as secondary, CPE places cultural dynamics at the heart of its analysis, recognizing their critical role in shaping political and economic orders.

In summary, chapter 2 concludes that CPE is not merely an extension of existing theories but a significant advancement that bridges the gap between material and cultural analyses. It offers

scholars and policymakers a robust framework to explore the complexities of contemporary global capitalism and regional transformations. What is of greatest importance in these regards, though, is the relevance of such a perspective for analysis of the BRI as itself a global initiative that is simultaneously and inseparably both a major geopolitical strategic programme in 'hard' (including economic) power and an ambivalent and still-forming cultural development, involving the dispersed agency of multiple parties; and both a programme of the construction of 'hard' infrastructures and one concerned with and oriented to the development of cultural influence. Only an approach such as CPE that systematically and deliberately bridges both sets of concerns can adequately illuminate the BRI and its specific projects, like the ECRL. The key question, then, is how to apply such a framework, to which we turn in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Pulling it all together - Applying the CPE framework

3.1 CPE critique on Capital accumulation technology and Capitalism Crisis

The final step in our exposition of CPE, thus, concerns three key elements:

First, how attending to the dependence of continual, unbroken and accelerating capital accumulation upon discourses (of state governance) foregrounds the challenge of 'running (ever faster) to stand still' facing such state institutions, regarding constant reinvention of cultural discourses that keep up with capitalism's accelerating growth and socio-technical change;

Secondly, how this in turn foregrounds the constant possibility of failure in this regard, in terms of, and/or resulting in, crisis of (a particular regime of) capitalism; and

Finally, in the light of such considerations, a characterisation of the present – and hence the broader context for this exploration of the BRI/ECRL – as precisely such a moment of widespread and profound crisis of capitalism, demanding an ongoing attempt to rebase global capitalist hegemony, with China as a leading contender for that role.

3.1.1 State governance and meta-governance theory - regarding new, intensifying challenges of capitalist dynamism.

As already noted above, institutions play a significant role in the theoretical development of Marxist state theory with focus on how the institution is operated, reproduced, and regulated, the relationship among different institutions, between institution and national system and how to control the system environment they are in (Jessop, 2001, p. 201). Jessop pursues this programme of research via a 'strategic relational' approach that aims to reconstruct Marxist state theory on the basis of Marx's critique of political economy through integrating institutionalism, discourse theory, regulation theory and self-generating system theory. This approach also, then, enables Jessop (2002, p.01) further to integrate and develop governance theory and spatial scale theory, introducing the concepts of governance failure and meta-governance, as well as advancing a neo-Gramscian theory

of the capitalist state. From this perspective, he illustrated its explanatory power by analyzing the crisis and reconstruction trends of the Western Keynesian welfare nation-state, thereby contributing to the revival of Marxist state theory, particularly within the neo-Gramscian framework, in the era of globalization.

On this basis, then, it is proposed that the critique of cultural political economy is to introduce cultural analysis into the Marxist critique of political economy, focusing on the production process of capitalist social consciousness and meaning mediated by culture (Sum; Jessop, 2013). The use of this theoretical concept and analytical tool can provide a more powerful explanation and critique of the relationship between the cumulative logic of capitalism and the social forms embedded in it, since social processes are actually achieved through the production, circulation and exchange of meaning. Like the introduction of institutional analysis, the introduction of cultural analysis is to deepen and promote, rather than replace, the political and economic criticism of Marxism.

As capitalism evolves, leading to greater complexity in its operational systems and their modes of reproduction, Marxist critiques of capitalism and the state must introduce new analytical elements and corresponding categories. This approach not only enriches and develops Marx's foundational critique of political economy but also deepens the theoretical understanding of the nature and operational logic of capitalism and the state. Capitalism functions as a complex system composed of interconnected domains such as politics, economy, culture, law, and religion. This system tends to be self-sustaining, self-organizing, and capable of self-regeneration – and, indeed, must be to the extent that this mode of social organisation is able to sustain its historically unprecedented dynamism and expansion without disintegrating. However, the co-existence and evolution of these domains rely on their mutual interdependence (Jessop, 2001, p.217). In this sense, cultural political economy plays a dual role: it offers unique contributions to Marxist critical theory while simultaneously deepening its core foundations.

A key corollary of such a cultural and institutional/state turn in Marxist critiques of capitalism, already evident in early progenitors of cultural political economy, particularly those by Gramsci,

concerns significant insights into the concept of capitalist ideological leadership, influentially shaping cultural and discursive 'common-senses' across global capitalism as a whole (at any given point). Gramsci (1971) argued that the ruling class's leadership over civil society in capitalist countries is more crucial than the use of political or social coercive power. The function of the social leadership and political management tasks is achieved by intellectuals who work as regulators of a ruling group, and the production and reproduction of capitalism and state sovereignty are mainly the production and the reproduction of ideology leadership. Under the influence of Gramsci (1971), Althusser and Poulantzas further revealed the key role of the leadership of law and political ideology in maintaining the operation of the capitalist economy and the political rule of the bourgeoisie (Jessop, 2007). In turn, at its limit this insight led to the idea that the struggle between cultural and ideological leadership was to be regarded as the main strategy of socialism. For Laclau and Mouffe (2014), as the theoretical representatives of post-Marxist "radical politics", for instance, the economy, society and state of capitalism are to be understood as the construction of "discourse", and the power relationship, political practice and social struggle were all struggles for discourse leadership (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014).

Jessop's (2005) analysis method of cultural political economy advocates acceptance of useful aspects of discourse theory, but opposes simplifying the criticism of capitalist countries to such discourse reductionism. At the same time, this approach not only inherits the classic Western Marxist analysis of cultural and ideological leadership but also adopts a practical, realist critique to examine the cultural functions that support the development of capitalism and the diversity of its accumulation strategies. This includes understanding how culture shapes minds and incorporates elements such as knowledge, theory, and both material and non-material technologies (Sum; Jessop, 2013, p. 4). The critical path of cultural political economy has the important characteristics that it emphasizes several key issues including: the role of cultural evolution mechanism in shaping social structure, especially the production of governance and leadership; the learning mechanism of individuals, organisations and society in response to problems or crises; and the consolidation of leadership and reproduction of social relations dependent on important factors such as structure,

discourse, technology and system. It is also stressed that the economic and political imagination and design is a kind of meaningful production shaped by material reality and mediated by culture or discourse (Sum & Jessop, 2013, p.23-25).

The criticism of cultural political economy from Jessop primarily follows the Gramscian tradition and analyses the cultural leadership of capitalism, but mainly focuses on the mutual shaping of the accumulation strategy and cultural strategy of capitalism. For example, the accumulation mode of post-war Western Fordism (mass production and mass consumption) corresponds to the Welfarism culture constructed from the form of welfare state. Capitalist countries shape the dependence of citizens upon the state through welfare supply, which in turn supports the legitimacy of the state through the Welfarism culture of the society.

Secondly, by integrating some viewpoints of discourse theory, in fact, there is always the struggle for discourse leadership or the production and reproduction of anti-leadership culture in capitalist society, which come from within the ruling class. The struggle for discourse leadership can erode the reproduction of dominant culture and meaning, thereby disrupting the structural consistency of capitalist accumulation strategies, state forms, and cultural leadership, potentially leading to systemic crises in capitalism. As we shall see, this dynamic is evident in the case of the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) in Malaysia, where political power changes led to a pause and renegotiation of the project. This disruption highlights how challenges to discourse leadership—such as shifts in political narratives or public sentiment—can significantly impact the execution of major initiatives like the ECRL, which are crucial for China's Belt and Road Initiative and its broader strategic objectives.

Thirdly, unlike the past emphasis on the diversity of capitalism, contemporary capitalism is characterised by significant variability or 'variegation' (Jessop, 2012) if always in ways that are fundamentally connected as parts of the same global system. The increasing complexity and variability of capital accumulation technologies challenge the institutionalization and stability of accumulation strategies. As a result, these once-stable strategies have become obstacles to further evolution, leading to a dilemma where the production and reproduction of capital, mediated by

state forms and cultural leadership as social relations, constantly threaten to descend into chaos, since a widely shared 'common-sense' understanding of the economic model is eroding, particularly in the face of accelerating technological changes—a hallmark of capitalism's evolution. This is evident, for instance, in terms of the accelerating technological change that is the hallmark of capitalism ("all that is solid melts into air"), as the current mode of capitalist accumulation is shifting not just beyond Fordist industrial production to a post-Fordist knowledge-based economy, but also now increasingly toward digital capitalism characterised by the gig economy, platform-based business models, and the centrality of data and technology.

Hence, capitalism needs to transform learning and knowledge into production performance for economic production, establish indexable cultural policy paradigms for leadership, and develop individual, organisational, and social network learning mechanisms for state regulation and governance through state mediation or organisation (Sum; Jessop, 2013).

As Tyfield (2012a) argues, the growing commodification of knowledge means that knowledge production and innovation are increasingly central to capitalist accumulation, rather than external supports to it. In this view, "knowledge-based" development is not simply a technical matter of R&D investment: it also depends on institutional arrangements—especially governance capacities and innovation policy—that shape how knowledge is produced, circulated, appropriated, and valorised. This emphasis on political-economic mediation also highlights the continuing significance of the state in organising knowledge-intensive accumulation within global capitalism (Tyfield, 2012; Tyfield, 2013).

3.1.2 From governance and regulation failure to capitalism crisis

Bob Jessop's concept of competitive governance offers a multi-scalar approach to understanding governance dynamics in cultural political economy. This concept integrates two levels of competition: the first within capitalist systems over strategies for economic growth and accumulation, and the second among governance modes—such as market, state, and network governance—as mechanisms for economic regulation. By highlighting the interaction between

these dimensions, Jessop demonstrates how economic and governance competition jointly shape the stability and effectiveness of governance structures (Jessop, 2013, p.173).

Unlike traditional perspectives focused solely on national governance, Jessop's framework adopts a broader, multi-scalar perspective that spans regional, local, and global levels. Governance is framed as a complex interplay among multiple scales and actors, rather than being confined to a single level. This approach underscores how various governance modes—market, state, and network—interact and compete, thereby shaping the overall effectiveness and adaptability of governance systems.

Jessop's (2000) concept of governance failure describes the inability of existing governance structures to effectively manage evolving socio-economic complexities. This failure, framed as a crisis in established crisis-management processes (Jessop, 2002), arises when traditional governance mechanisms can no longer adapt to shifting conditions. Meta-governance emerges as a response, introducing frameworks and practices to coordinate diverse governance modes and levels. By integrating multiple actors and levels, meta-governance provides a more adaptive and nuanced approach to addressing socio-economic challenges.

While Jessop's multi-scalar framework extends Marxian state theory, it also aligns with cultural political economy (CPE) by addressing governance and power dynamics across scales. Traditional IR theories, which often treat states as unitary rational actors, fail to account for these complexities. In contrast, Jessop's approach emphasizes that state power and governance emerge from networks of interactions across public and private levels. This perspective avoids the reductionism of conventional IR theories, offering a more comprehensive view of how state power operates in contemporary governance systems.

Jessop's governance theory underscores the importance of cultural and cognitive mechanisms in governance processes. Beyond formal rules and procedures, the theory highlights the role of reflective rationality, strategic adaptability, and collaborative learning among actors. These shared

learning processes and mutual understandings are critical for achieving effective governance outcomes, emphasizing adaptability and strategic coordination over static rule-based approaches.

Unlike governance strategies that rely on fluid common interests, which are subject to change, goals grounded in the material conditions of production and reproduction tend to provide greater stability. Materialist perspectives argue that economic structures and material conditions shape and constrain governance objectives, offering a more enduring foundation for governance strategies. This perspective underscores the role of material factors—including infrastructure and economic systems—in ensuring the stability and evolution of governance frameworks.

Bob Jessop's governance theory stems from a framework that integrates accumulation strategies, political strategies, and leadership operations within the constraints of capitalist structures. The consistent coordination of economic imagination, accumulation strategies, and governance is crucial for sustaining capitalism's growth, political order, and social stability. The dominant role of industrial capitalism's accumulation model ensures the stability and replication of economic strategies through two interconnected processes: economic culturalization, where cultural elements are incorporated into economic strategies, and cultural economization, where cultural practices align with economic logics (Jessop, 2009; Jessop & Sum, 2013). These dual processes reinforce capitalist stability and accumulation strategies.

An illustrative example is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which demonstrates how industrial capitalism's accumulation strategies are exported globally. As argued by Summers (2016) and Callahan (2016), the BRI is not merely an economic project but a cultural and geopolitical endeavor that combines infrastructure development with cultural exchange and political alliances. The BRI exemplifies economic culturalization by integrating local cultures into global frameworks and cultural economization by framing cultural exchange within economic contexts (Summers, 2016; Grimmel & Li, 2018). Through this dual process, the BRI sustains the global dominance of industrial capitalism while securing political alliances and fostering social stability necessary for continued capital accumulation.

These dynamics help maintain the coherence of capitalism's historical bloc by simplifying its regulatory and governance mechanisms. However, the diversification of competitive economic imaginations—ranging from industrial, financial, and knowledge economies to newer paradigms like the digital and green economies—has intensified competition among accumulation strategies (Jessop, 2013, p.183). The rise of digital technologies, such as big data and artificial intelligence, has introduced new dimensions to this competition, as companies leverage these tools for competitive advantage (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). Concurrently, the green economy's emphasis on sustainability is prompting shifts in accumulation strategies to align with environmental goals (Newell & Paterson, 2010).

The competition among these diverse economic imaginations not only drives innovation but also expands governance options for addressing crises. The integration of digital and green technologies into capitalist practices reflects ongoing adaptations aimed at achieving accumulation success and economic sovereignty. These competitive strategies offer governance mechanisms to address crises, ensuring capitalism's adaptability and resilience.

Despite offering diverse crisis-response strategies, capitalist accumulation faces challenges of coherence in political and cultural leadership. For instance, infrastructure projects like the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) illustrate efforts to mitigate fragmentation by fostering regional economic integration, reinforcing political stability, and consolidating governance structures. However, competition among political strategies and accumulation approaches risks undermining this coherence and exacerbating governance failures (Jessop, 2013, p.243, 248). The 2008 global financial crisis prompted renewed interest in Marx's critique of capitalism. Western Marxists argued that the crisis stemmed from excess capital accumulation, echoing Boccaro's (2014) view of cyclical crises and Sayers's (2009) critique of neoliberal growth paradigms. These analyses reinforced Marx's argument that unregulated markets lead to economic stagnation and crises.

However, declaring capitalism's end may be premature. Global initiatives like the BRI highlight how capitalism adapts and evolves. A Cultural Political Economy (CPE) perspective situates Marxist

critiques within a broader framework, showcasing how projects like the BRI stabilize and enhance global capital accumulation. By investing in infrastructure, the BRI reflects capitalism's resilience and dynamism, challenging deterministic narratives of its decline.

Capitalism, as an inherently imperfect economic system, is marked by periodic crises and self-repair attempts. Although financial economy and monetary capital accumulation dominate the current stage of capitalist development, they remain fundamentally reliant on the industrial economy. This dependence introduces contradictions, as financial leadership often undermines industrial stability, leading to real economic crises originating from financial crises (Jessop & Sum, 2013). While competitive strategies may temporarily address these failures, the accumulation strategies of financial capitalism and neoliberalism have largely fallen short (Jessop, 1990).

China's economic system, operating under "socialism with Chinese characteristics," offers a contrasting model. characterised by state ownership of key industries, strategic planning, and industrial production, China diverges significantly from Western neoliberal models reliant on deregulation and financialization (Brenner et al., 2010). This blend of state control and market mechanisms raises questions about its resilience and interactions with the global financial system.

China's model, while successful in maintaining high growth and avoiding Western-style crises, is not immune to capitalist contradictions. As China integrates more deeply into global financial markets, tensions arise between state-led financial governance and pressures for liberalization. These tensions highlight the balance China must strike between industrial stability and global financial expectations that prioritise short-term gains. A key factor in China's resilience is its centralized financial system, which enables strategic coordination and crisis management—in contrast to the deregulated, speculative systems of neoliberal capitalism that are prone to instability. Although Jessop and Sum's cultural political economy (CPE) framework has not yet directly analysed China's case, its theoretical insights are valuable for understanding the interplay between state governance, capital accumulation, and industrial strategy. This framework helps to elucidate China's ability to navigate financial vulnerabilities while sustaining economic growth and political stability.

The current crisis of capitalism extends beyond accumulation; it encompasses critical challenges in regulation and crisis management. These dimensions—accumulation, regulation, and crisis management—are deeply interconnected, each shaping and being shaped by the others. For instance, the accumulation mode relies on profitable reinvestment avenues, yet financial capital dominance and speculative activities, such as digital and technological investments, create vulnerabilities. Harvey (2006) describes this as a "crisis of overaccumulation," where excess capital lacks profitable outlets, leading to economic stagnation and social instability.

Regulation plays a pivotal role in mitigating or exacerbating these crises. Jessop (2013) highlights how modern capitalist states struggle to maintain effective regulatory systems amid global economic pressures. His "strategic-relational approach" reveals how the state's regulatory capacity both shapes and is shaped by capital's strategies. As global capitalism evolves, particularly with financialization, regulatory frameworks often fail to adapt, becoming contested sites that risk precipitating deeper crises. Crisis management often relies on what Harvey (2010) terms the "spatial fix"—strategies to manage crises by expanding into new regions or restructuring existing spaces. For example, relocating production to low-cost regions or creating new financial instruments may provide temporary relief but often generate new contradictions. These "displaced crises" reemerge with greater intensity, reflecting the systemic inability of capitalism to resolve its core contradictions.

The interaction of accumulation, regulation, and crisis management creates a self-reinforcing cycle of crises within capitalism. As Thomas Piketty (2014) notes, the persistent inequalities generated by capitalist accumulation exacerbate these crises, fostering social and economic tensions that undermine regulatory frameworks and increase the frequency of crises. Piketty underscores the systemic nature of these crises, arguing they are inherent features of capitalism rather than anomalies. This framework is particularly relevant to state capitalism, such as China's model, which blends state intervention with market reforms. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), for instance, serves as a spatial fix by expanding Chinese economic influence and creating new opportunities for capital accumulation. However, as Harvey (2010) warns, such expansion risks generating new

conflicts and crises, both domestically and globally.

In summary, contemporary capitalism's crises are multidimensional, deeply rooted in the contradictions of capital accumulation, regulatory failures, and the limitations of crisis management strategies. Understanding these interconnected dimensions provides a nuanced perspective on capitalism, moving beyond simplistic narratives of decline or resurgence.

The global financial crisis represents not only a failure of neoliberal accumulation and regulation strategies but also a construction crisis of new regulatory strategies to address these issues (Jessop & Sum, 2013). Beyond market, state, and governance failures, Jessop highlights the role of cultural failure in today's regulatory crisis, focusing on theory and policy paradigm breakdowns. This cultural dimension is critical for understanding the broader crisis tendencies of capitalism, particularly in the context of large-scale initiatives like China's BRI. Projects like the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) in Malaysia illustrate this phenomenon, embodying the "spatial fix" (Harvey, 2003) capitalism often employs during crises. However, challenges such as the project's temporary suspension due to political shifts in Malaysia reflect deeper ideological and cultural conflicts underpinning the regulatory crisis.

Jessop's (2013) concept of cultural failure emphasizes how crises in theory and knowledge, especially regarding regulation and crisis management, destabilize capitalist economies. The ECRL highlights these challenges, where misalignment between economic ambitions and local cultural realities led to a temporary project suspension. This reflects Jessop's argument that existing policy paradigms often fail to address the complexities of global capitalism. As Agnew (2018) argues, failing to integrate local cultural and political dynamics into global economic strategies can cause significant setbacks. The ECRL underscores this failure, revealing how ambitious initiatives like the BRI require nuanced approaches to navigate the complexities of local and global intersections.

3.1.3 The need for new mechanisms despite the inability to overcome capitalism's endogenous structural contradictions

The stable operation of capitalism largely depends on the structural consistency of its accumulation

strategies, policy frameworks, and leadership. These dimensions work together to provide what Harvey terms a 'spatial fix' when crises arise. However, the production and reproduction of this stability are often mediated by state intervention, as capitalist states play a central role in maintaining coherence across economic, political, and social spheres. For instance, following the Second World War, Western economies experienced a 30-year 'Golden Age' of development, characterised by the Keynesian welfare state and the Fordist accumulation strategy. This period relied on state intervention to ensure economic stability and fostered the structural consistency of capitalism across its core dimensions—industrial production, policy regulation, and cultural reproduction—through the promotion of welfare-oriented policies. Despite these efforts, capitalism's inherent contradictions remain, as its reliance on continuous accumulation makes it prone to cyclical crises and systemic instability.

Since the late 1970s, the structural consistency of capitalism has eroded, leading to a deep systemic crisis. The Keynesian welfare state, which once stabilized economic and social systems, gradually gave way to neoliberal economic policies, characterised by flexible production, deregulation, and financialization. This shift resulted in a series of interconnected crises, marking distinct phases in the life cycle of hegemonic regimes.

First, an economic crisis emerged from the breakdown of traditional Fordist accumulation strategies. The transition toward post-Fordist production and knowledge-based economies brought uncertainty, particularly in the West, where global financial instability persisted. In contrast, China's economic transformation, exemplified by state-led initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), reflects an alternative strategy that prioritises infrastructure development and regional economic integration as pathways for sustained growth (Cai, 2022).

Second, a fiscal crisis in the West arose due to contradictions between shrinking economic bases and growing welfare demands. While China's fiscal policies have enabled significant mobilization of resources to support global infrastructure projects, such as the BRI, this approach is not without challenges. Mounting debt in the real estate sector and an overreliance on manufacturing exports

expose vulnerabilities in its perceived economic resilience (Summers, 2016; Liu & Dunford, 2016).

Third, a political crisis characterised by the inefficiency of interventionist strategies in Western states contrasts sharply with China's centralized political structure. By leveraging state power, China has adapted its policies to maintain domestic stability and support global economic ambitions, with the BRI serving as a key tool in this strategy (Jones & Zeng, 2019).

Finally, a discourse crisis in the West, shaped by ideological shifts towards neo-conservatism and other paradigms, highlights broader tensions in global capitalism. China's promotion of the BRI as an alternative model challenges the Western neoliberal order but simultaneously reinforces forms of state capitalism underpinned by economic globalization (Nordin & Weissmann, 2018; Arrighi, 1994, 2007).

Collectively, these crises reflect structural transformations within capitalism, signaling the potential emergence of new economic paradigms centred around evolving state-led or international frameworks. A key example of this shift is the reliance on spatial fixes—strategies aimed at mitigating crises by reshaping economic and infrastructural systems. However, such fixes often fail to resolve underlying contradictions, as demonstrated in both historical and contemporary cases.

This situation illustrates the failure of spatial fixes, which were intended to reconstruct neoliberal strategies within the capitalist state, and exposes the inadequacies of new social democracy and conservative cooperation strategies in addressing the persistent crises of capitalism (Jessop & Sum, 2013). A critical body of work, beginning with Marvin and Graham's 'Splintering Urbanism' (2001), explores how infrastructure projects, often viewed as solutions to economic and political crises, can instead exacerbate existing inequalities and deepen spatial and social fragmentation. The East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) in Malaysia potentially offers a compelling example of this phenomenon within the context of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Originally designed to stimulate economic growth in the underdeveloped east coast regions of Peninsular Malaysia, the ECRL has faced numerous obstacles, including political controversies and delays, particularly following Malaysia's electoral

turnover in 2018, which resulted in the project's suspension and subsequent renegotiation.

This case highlights the potential limitations of relying on large-scale infrastructure projects as a means of addressing structural inequalities and stabilizing capitalist economies. While infrastructure development is often heralded as a strategy for economic integration and crisis management, projects like the ECRL demonstrate how such initiatives can become entangled in political and economic challenges that undermine their intended objectives. These critiques suggest that infrastructure, rather than resolving the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, may often reinforce existing disparities and contribute to societal fragmentation. Thus, we explore the ECRL as a potential illustration of broader challenges within neoliberal strategies that rely heavily on physical infrastructure. Such challenges need to be examined further to determine whether they are symptomatic of larger failures in neoliberal governance to address systemic issues within capitalism, particularly in the post-Fordist era where traditional Keynesian mechanisms have diminished in efficacy (Jessop & Sum, 2013).

From Jessop's view, the future of capitalism should be expected to establish the dominant position and accumulation strategy of the knowledge economy through globalization and the post-Fordist economic paradigm, rather than relying on the accumulation strategies dominated by non-financial sectors. Jessop envisions this shift leading to the creation of a Schumpeterian Workfare Post-national Regime (SWPR), which would align economic activity with the demands of a globalized, knowledge-driven economy while addressing the welfare and workfare needs of an increasingly mobile global workforce (Jessop, 2002).

However, Tyfield (2018) complicates this optimism by challenging the tendency to treat innovation—particularly “green” innovation and digitalisation—as a straightforward route to overcoming capitalism's contradictions. He emphasises that innovation is never purely technical: it is socially embedded and politically selective, and therefore can reframe structural problems as matters of managerial or technological optimisation. As a result, innovation-centred crisis narratives may leave underlying relations of power and accumulation largely intact, and can even generate

uneven outcomes and new forms of inequality and injustice (Tyfield, 2018).

Tyfield (2018) further uses China's experience—particularly in arenas of low-carbon innovation and transitions in urban mobility—to foreground how innovation politics can be entangled with state capacities, development strategies, and wider struggles over socio-economic futures. Rather than reading the knowledge-based economy as a linear endpoint, this perspective suggests that innovation-led transformations are uneven and contested, and may involve hybrid forms of governance that do not fit neatly within liberal “knowledge economy” narratives. Read in this way, Jessop's SWPR trajectory can be treated less as a settled destination than as a problematic, conflictual, and politically mediated process whose outcomes remain open (Tyfield, 2018).

This regime emphasizes knowledge innovation as a key driver of economic growth, while aligning social policies to address global inequalities through redistribution. In response to international competitiveness, Jessop (2001, p.250-254) highlights the significance of multi-scalar governance—coordinating global, national, regional, and local levels of governance—to ensure spatial and economic adjustments. However, this approach is increasingly challenged by the uneven dynamics of global capitalism, where governance frameworks are no longer unified under a single, US-centric 'global' system. Instead, new modes of governance are emerging, shaped by state-led strategies and cultural leadership, as seen in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This raises critical questions about how such models can assert cultural and economic leadership on a global scale.

Given China's distinct political and cultural context, this question is crucial. The PRC's domestic political structure and state-capitalist model present significant challenges to positioning itself as a universally appealing leader, especially among global capitalist elites. Yet, China's extensive global infrastructure initiatives under the BRI could provide a pathway to establishing this leadership. These projects, including the ECRL, are not merely about fostering economic connectivity; they are also strategic efforts to extend China's influence and project its narrative of modernization and progress.

Drawing on Tyfield and Rodríguez's (2022) analysis of how contemporary infrastructuring can be bound up with shifting political-economic orders and their legitimating projects, China's overseas infrastructure initiatives can be read as more than connectivity-building in a narrow technical sense. They may also function as sites where developmental narratives, governance rationalities, and geopolitical-economic positioning are articulated and contested. On this reading, projects such as the ECRL can become arenas in which material construction and symbolic meaning-making co-evolve, with implications for legitimacy and for how different actors interpret "development" and "partnership" (Tyfield & Rodríguez, 2022).

Jessop pointed out that the development of a system like the Schumpeterian Workfare Post-national Regime (SWPR) is a complex, time-consuming, and difficult process. During this process, capitalist crises are inevitable, and there is a high likelihood that the inherent structural contradictions and crises within capital relations cannot be fully overcome even after such a system is established (Jessop & Sum, 2013). This observation is particularly relevant when considering China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI, over the past several years and looking ahead to the coming decades, can be seen as an attempt to establish a new type of global mechanism aimed at fostering economic integration and capital accumulation. However, just as Jessop predicted, such a novel mechanism is not immune to crises. If China's approach aligns with the type of system Jessop describes, it may still struggle to resolve the endogenous crises of capital.

Recent analysis by David Tyfield highlights that even with the shift towards a knowledge-based economy and the integration of digital infrastructure, the fundamental contradictions of capitalism remain unresolved. Tyfield's work underscores that China's strategy, while innovative, may still be vulnerable to the same types of crises that have historically affected capitalist economies. This raises crucial questions about whether China's capital accumulation strategy is indeed centred around the dominance of the knowledge economy or if it represents a different form of accumulation strategy altogether (Tyfield and Rodríguez, 2022). This question is critical for understanding the long-term viability of China's economic model. If the BRI and related strategies do not fundamentally differ from previous accumulation models, they may ultimately face the same

structural crises that have plagued other capitalist economies. Thus, a deeper examination of China's capital accumulation strategy—whether it truly represents a shift towards a knowledge-based economy or remains entrenched in traditional forms of accumulation—becomes essential for assessing the potential success or failure of China's global economic ambitions.

3.1.4 Conclusion

Within the field of International Relations (IR), traditional theories such as Realism, Idealism/Liberalism, and Constructivism have each contributed significantly to our understanding of global geopolitics. However, these theories, along with Regulation Approaches, have evolved over time and now exhibit notable limitations when addressing the complexities of the current geopolitical landscape. For instance, Realism's focus on state-centric power dynamics, Liberalism's emphasis on international cooperation, and Constructivism's exploration of social constructs often fall short in capturing the intricate interplay between global capitalism and geopolitics today. This creates a theoretical gap in analyzing contemporary global and regional developments, particularly amidst multifaceted crises. Moreover, such considerations and limitations of understanding become particularly stark when turning to the question of the ongoing reconstruction of a new global order, and one, to boot, that is potentially centred on a polity, culture and nation-state characterised by and founded in logics distinct to those of the modern West that is presumed by contemporary IR orthodoxy; viz. China.

In light of these limitations, Cultural Political Economy (CPE) emerges as a necessary and more suitable theoretical framework. CPE transcends the boundaries of conventional IR paradigms by integrating cultural, political, and economic dimensions into its analytical scope. This allows for a more comprehensive explanation of the dynamic evolution of the geopolitical context as inseparably that of global capitalism and its processes of periodic system crisis and (transition between) global hegemons. CPE's focus on the intersection of economic structures and cultural meanings offers a robust lens for maximally open and empirical understanding of the strategies employed to manage global and regional crises, particularly through spatial fixes in response to capitalist crises. As such, CPE is indispensable for examining the global implications of capitalism

and the specific strategies employed by states, notably China.

The Regulation School in China (Jessop and Sum, 2006; Wu, 2016) has made significant contributions by exploring the intersection of regulatory practices and capitalist dynamics, offering forward-looking insights when integrated with the CPE framework. Specifically, CPE's emphasis on the transformation of capital accumulation strategies in response to capitalist crises—particularly through spatial fixes—provides a powerful tool for analyzing regional development strategies, such as the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Through the application of CPE, it becomes possible to discern whether these projects function successfully (and to what extent, and in what specific ways) as spatial fixes addressing China's internal challenges, such as overcapacity, and/or if they serve as instruments to further China's hegemonic ambitions by fostering regional economic integration. This analysis, especially when conducted through CPE's semiotic approach and cultural turn, reveals the deeper strategic intentions behind China's capital accumulation policies and their broader implications for regional geopolitics.

One final piece of our theoretical puzzle is needed for this investigation, though, namely regarding the integration of discourses and theories, political and academic, of 'regional integration' into this CPE framework. For it is in these terms that discursive explanation and justification regarding the ECRL and BRI, especially in southeast Asia, is overwhelmingly conducted.

3.2 A supplementary Literature Review on Regional Integration

3.2.1 Regional Integration Defined

"Regional integration" refers to the process through which countries within a specific region enhance cooperation to achieve greater economic, political, and social interconnectedness. This concept has been central to the formation of regional blocs like the European Union (EU), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the African Union (AU). The primary goals include promoting trade, reducing barriers, coordinating policies, and fostering economic development and political stability among member states (Mattli, 1999).

3.2.2 The Evolution of Regional Integration Theories

Theories of regional integration have evolved significantly, reflecting the complex and multifaceted nature of the process. Early theoretical approaches, such as "neofunctionalism" and "intergovernmentalism," were largely Eurocentric, focusing on the benefits of trade liberalization and market integration. Neofunctionalism, proposed by Ernst Haas, suggests that integration progresses through a "spillover" effect, where cooperation in economic sectors leads to deeper political integration (Haas, 1964). This approach emphasizes the role of supranational institutions in driving the process.

Intergovernmentalism, articulated a generation later by Andrew Moravcsik, posits that national governments are the primary actors in regional integration. States cooperate in areas where such cooperation aligns with their national interests, thereby retaining control over the process (Moravcsik, 1993). This perspective emphasizes state sovereignty and highlights the strategic considerations that guide regional cooperation. While intergovernmentalism has been foundational, it has been critiqued for its Eurocentrism and limited applicability to regions with distinct historical, economic, and political contexts, such as Southeast Asia. However, its contrast with neofunctionalism—which focuses on supranational institutions—and with broader theories like realism and IR liberalism, provides a valuable framework for understanding regional integration dynamics.

While these traditional approaches have been foundational, they have been critiqued for their narrow focus on Europe and their inability to fully explain regional integration in other parts of the world, particularly in regions with different historical, economic, and political contexts, such as Southeast Asia.

3.2.3 The Emergence of New Regionalism

New Regionalism" emerged in response to the limitations of earlier theories, offering a broader, multi-dimensional perspective on regional integration. Unlike traditional approaches, which prioritised state-led processes, this view incorporates political, economic, social, and cultural

dimensions. It emphasizes the significant role of non-state actors—such as businesses, civil society, and international organisations—in driving integration processes (Hettne, 2005). By integrating these diverse actors, New Regionalism offers a more nuanced understanding of regional dynamics, particularly in regions like Southeast Asia, where integration often reflects unique historical, political, and socio-economic characteristics. Additionally, the framework resonates with IR constructivism, which highlights the role of shared ideas, norms, and identities in shaping regional cooperation, further enriching the analysis of regionalism beyond state-centric paradigms.

In Southeast Asia, regional integration is characterised by a more flexible, non-binding, and consensus-based approach, as exemplified by ASEAN. This has led to the concept of "open regionalism," where the focus is not only on intra-regional ties but also on how the region interacts with the global economy (Breslin & Higgott, 2000). This concept is particularly relevant for understanding how infrastructure projects like the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) fit within broader regional integration efforts, i.e. in terms of a rationale focused on both increasing regional integration but precisely so as to enable greater integration, and associated development, into the global economy.

3.2.4 The Role of the ECRL in Regional Integration

The East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) in Malaysia, a key component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), serves as a critical case study for regional integration in Southeast Asia. The ECRL is designed to enhance connectivity between the east and west coasts of Peninsular Malaysia, facilitating deeper integration with the broader Southeast Asian market. Regional integration, in this context, involves not just physical infrastructure but also economic and political integration. The ECRL is intended to facilitate trade by reducing transportation costs, improving logistics, and linking economic hubs across the region. It exemplifies economic integration that strengthens Malaysia's position in regional supply chains and enhances its economic ties with neighboring countries and China (Liu&Lim, 2019), but also thereby to secure for Malaysia a share of the huge flows of global trade passing by southeast Asia, e.g. by taking this route rather than the major maritime route through the straits of Malacca/Singapore. The ECRL thus also plays a strategic role in Malaysia's regional and

global economic positioning. By connecting Malaysia more closely with the regional economy, the project contributes to the broader objective of ASEAN's open regionalism, which seeks to integrate Southeast Asia more fully into the global economic system.

3.2.5 Applying the Cultural Political Economy (CPE) Framework

When turning to these regional integration theories, the Cultural Political Economy (CPE) framework again – as for theories of IR and global political economy, discussed above – offers an additional analytical lens that complements these theories. CPE integrates economic analysis with cultural and political dimensions, providing a more comprehensive approach to understanding how regional integration unfolds. Unlike traditional economic theories that focus primarily on market dynamics, CPE considers how cultural narratives, state strategies, and spatial policies intersect to shape regional integration processes (Jessop & Sum, 2013).

Applying CPE to the ECRL allows for a deeper analysis of how the project is embedded within broader geopolitical and economic strategies. The ECRL can be seen as part of China's strategy to manage its own economic challenges, such as overcapacity, by exporting capital and enhancing its influence in Southeast Asia. Simultaneously, for Malaysia, the project represents an opportunity to integrate more closely with regional and global economies, strengthening its economic position and development prospects (Harvey, 2003). CPE's emphasis on "spatial fixes"—the geographical reallocation of capital as a response to crises of overaccumulation, and, crucially, as both and inseparably a material/economic/financial and cultural/regulatory phenomenon—provides a critical lens to understand the ECRL as a strategic infrastructure investment. This approach allows us to view the ECRL not just as a transportation project but as part of a larger strategy of regional integration shaped by economic and cultural factors (Jessop, 2009).

3.2.6 Recent Developments and Empirical Evidence

Incorporating the most recent research and empirical data is crucial for understanding the evolving dynamics of regional integration, particularly in the context of infrastructure projects like the ECRL. Since 2020, new studies have provided updated insights into how China's Belt and Road Initiative

(BRI) and related projects are reshaping Southeast Asia's regional landscape. These studies offer fresh data on the economic, social, and political impacts of such initiatives, shedding light on their broader implications for regional integration by focusing on a high-profile case. Applying the Cultural Political Economy (CPE) framework to these recent developments allows for a more nuanced analysis. CPE helps to interpret how these projects are not merely economic endeavors but are deeply embedded in the cultural and political fabric of the region. For instance, recent empirical evidence (Cai, 2022; Lim and Syailendra, 2021) suggests that the ECRL is playing a significant role in altering regional trade routes and economic dependencies, reinforcing China's influence in Southeast Asia while simultaneously integrating Malaysia more closely into the global economy. This aligns with the CPE perspective, which emphasizes how economic activities are intertwined with cultural narratives and political strategies.

Moreover, the latest research (Callahan, 2016; Abdullah, Embong & Daud, 2020) highlights the dual role of the ECRL as both a catalyst for economic growth and a tool for geopolitical manoeuvring. For Malaysia, the ECRL project represents an opportunity to strengthen its economic infrastructure and enhance its regional connectivity, thereby positioning itself as a critical node in the ASEAN economic network. From a CPE standpoint, this can be seen as a strategic "spatial fix," addressing regional economic disparities while also responding to the broader economic and political challenges posed by globalization and regional power dynamics. But, as discussed above, the associated risk with such a strategy is that the ECRL fails to achieve the spatial fix promised, and instead even seeds new and worse forms of crisis of capital accumulation and/or its (regional/global/national (viz. in China and/or Malaysia)) regularization.

3.2.7 Conclusion and Research Implications

The ECRL project is not merely a significant infrastructure initiative within Malaysia; it also represents a crucial juncture in the broader process of regional integration in Southeast Asia. By integrating the Cultural Political Economy (CPE) framework with traditional regional integration theories, this study reveals the multifaceted impact of the ECRL on economic, political, and cultural levels. The project not only facilitates economic integration by strengthening Malaysia's position

within Southeast Asian supply chains but also reflects China's strategic intent to expand its influence in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative. A CPE perspective enables maximally open, empirical investigation of this two-fold process, aiming to presume as little as possible in terms of the substantive regional/global (ongoing re)ordering of international relations and capitalism, while also seeking to understand this as a complex, dynamic and systemic process structured by multiple, diverse and deeply sedimented power relations.

This multidimensional analysis suggests that regional integration is far more complex than the simple accumulation of economic cooperation. It is a dynamic process shaped by the interplay of power and interests among states within a nuanced geopolitical landscape. The ECRL is a manifestation, and enabler, of regional economic integration, but it also embodies the cultural and political interactions between regional and external forces. Through an in-depth examination of the ECRL, this study underscores the importance of considering the interwoven cultural, political, and economic factors that drive regional integration and the complex dynamics of cooperation and competition among states.

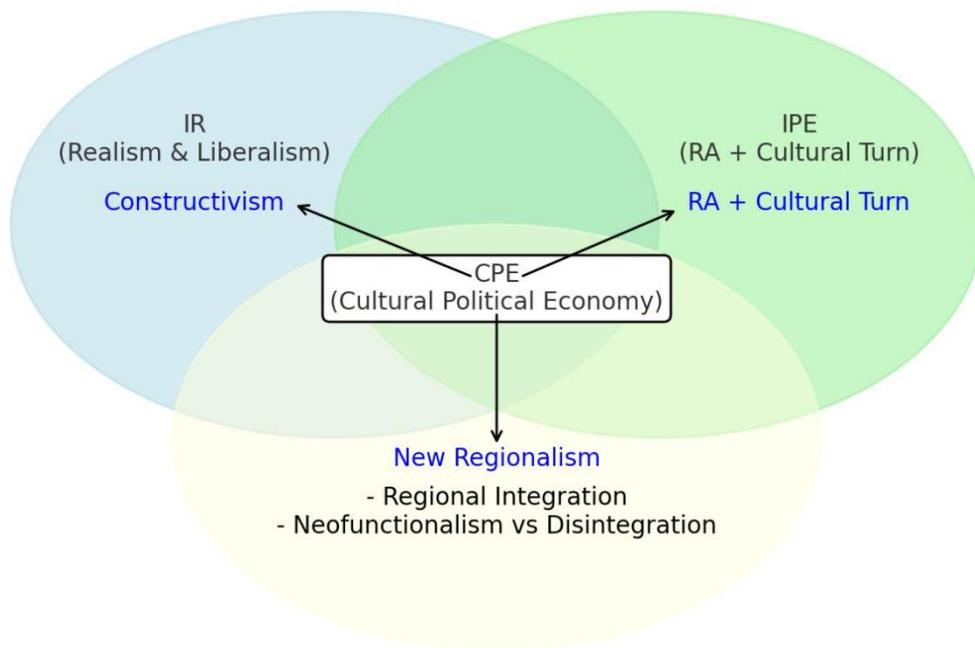
3.3 Overview of the theoretical framework

This section consolidates the theoretical richness and versatility of Cultural Political Economy (CPE) as an integrative framework. CPE bridges the key strengths of International Relations (IR) and International Political Economy (IPE) while addressing their limitations through the cultural turn and the emphasis on symbolic and material dimensions of power and governance. CPE emerges as a response to the shortcomings of existing theories, including IR (Realism & Liberalism), IPE (Regulation Approach & Capital Accumulation) and New Regionalism and Regional Integration.

Traditional IR theories emphasize state sovereignty, institutional cooperation, and the balance of power but often neglect discursive dynamics and cultural processes that shape global political structures. CPE builds on IR by incorporating meaning-making processes, ideational forces, and the cultural narratives underpinning international governance. IPE, particularly the Regulation Approach, focuses on global capitalism, economic regulation, and crises. However, it tends to

prioritise materialist analysis while overlooking the symbolic and discursive dimensions of economic systems. CPE complements IPE by linking economic regulation to broader cultural and ideational processes. Building on New Regionalism, CPE addresses the multi-scalar, cultural, and ideational drivers of regional integration and disintegration. By analyzing cases such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), CPE illustrates how material and symbolic processes intersect to shape regional governance and economic cooperation.

Figure 4: Pulling everything together: CPE vis-a-vis IR, IPE and economic geography of regional integration



The provided figure 4 encapsulates the theoretical synthesis that IR (Realism & Liberalism) and IPE (Regulation Approach & Cultural Turn) serve as foundational approaches. CPE occupies the centre, integrating IR and IPE through the cultural turn and applying these insights to contemporary issues of regional integration and global capitalist transformations.

The figure highlights CPE's ability to address the symbolic dimensions of power and the contradictions of capital accumulation, while offering a robust framework to analyse dynamic

processes of regional governance and discourse-driven cooperation.

In conclusion, this theoretical framework underscores the significance of CPE in bridging the gap between materialist and cultural analyses within political economy. By synthesizing IR's focus on power and institutions with IPE's insights into economic regulation and crises, CPE provides a holistic analytical lens. It allows scholars and policymakers to better understand global and regional dynamics, offering practical tools to address the challenges of capitalist transformations and regional governance. CPE not only advances theoretical debates but also enhances practical responses to contemporary issues, such as the BRI and ECRL, where material and cultural processes are inseparably intertwined.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This section outlines the methodology employed in this research project, detailing the approach to research questions, and the design of the data collection process. As I have learned during the development of this thesis, methodology is not a simple linear process. Instead, it involves navigating the complexities and uncertainties inherent in qualitative research. The section begins by reviewing the formation of the theoretical framework, which ties back to the framing of the research questions discussed in the Introduction. Following this, an overview of the methods used in the fieldwork is provided, including interviews, participant observation, and questionnaire design. While direct data extraction from official databases is also a crucial part of the research, this process is not elaborated here. However, it is important to clarify how this data were gathered and used within the research. The remainder of the section focuses on the actual fieldwork practices, from the initial pilot interviews to the follow-up study, detailing the steps taken to collect and analyse the data.

4.2 Formulating the research questions

Three progressively deepening levels of questions based on theoretical framework of the thesis are used to formulate the research questions of this thesis, focusing on the central inquiry: "How does the actual process and/or experience of building specific BRI-related projects of hard infrastructure contribute (or not) to regional integration in Southeast Asia?"

The first level begins with a critical review of mainstream political economy theories within International Relations (IR). This level asks whether Critical Political Economy (CPE) can provide a more suitable theoretical foundation for analyzing BRI-related issues, compared to traditional approaches. Specifically, it explores whether CPE's focus on immaterial components—such as discourse, language, symbols, and culture—along with its dialectical approach to the capital accumulation process, offers a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play.

Building on the insights gained from the first level, the second level questions how CPE itself can be defined and applied within the context of the BRI. Here, the inquiry deepens by examining how CPE challenges traditional capitalist and material structures, and how it can be adapted to analyse new technologies of capital accumulation associated with the BRI. This level is crucial for understanding how CPE's theoretical framework can specifically address the complexities of BRI projects.

The third and final level moves from theoretical exploration to practical application. It examines how the cultural and political-economic discourse emphasized by CPE, as well as its analysis of the capital accumulation process, actually influences—or fails to influence—regional economic integration in Southeast Asia. This level of questioning brings the analysis full circle, linking back to the broader research question and defining what "economic integration" means within this specific context.

In the context of the theoretical framework discussed in the previous chapter, particularly when considering Bob Jessop's analysis, the state is not merely a tool or an apparatus but is better understood as a social relationship. This perspective is crucial because the social activities that occur within global or national systems are often too complex to be fully captured in their entirety. To address this complexity, these activities must be simplified to allow for theoretical analysis, even if this means that not every aspect can be covered.

When studying collaborative projects like those between Malaysia and China, such as the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), it becomes necessary to focus on specific aspects that serve as discourses, revealing the underlying ideologies of the people, governments, and regions involved. Considering the state as a social relationship offers a simplified yet effective lens to examine one dimension of the state's composition. Similarly, ideology can be understood as a pervasive framework, akin to an "ideology cage," which simplifies the complex interplay of societal influences on individual behaviour. This metaphor highlights that all behaviours within society are, to some extent, shaped by prevailing ideologies. In essence, Cultural Political Economy (CPE) provides an interdisciplinary approach grounded in Marxism, yet it also incorporates the "cultural turn," allowing for the analysis,

redesign, and stabilization of capitalist societies through dynamic semiotics and power discourse.

In practical terms, the ideologies of China and Malaysia, as key participants in the ECRL project, manifest in the daily practices of these two states and the individuals involved, whether they are constructing the project, managing it, or simply observing it as concerned citizens. High-level agreements between governments, the social conformity of workers, and the discourses that emerge from these interactions all serve as effective and simplified intermediaries for studying the complex social processes at play during the construction of this Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure project.

Furthermore, the economic and political institutions that underpin capital accumulation are not spontaneous phenomena. Instead, they are constructed and maintained by hegemonic states through selective discourse and strategic design. These institutions can be reconfigured during times of crisis, indicating that while CPE is rooted in an analysis of capitalist societies, it is also flexible enough to accommodate future economic conceptions that may diverge from the current knowledge-based economy. In other words, CPE enables a critical interdisciplinary analysis of BRI practices within the framework of capitalist society. However, it does so without being confined to the existing structures of capitalism, acknowledging the potential for change and adaptation. This theoretical guidance informs the focus and methods of data collection outlined in the following section, ensuring that the research remains grounded in both the complexities of the subject matter and the practical realities of the field.

4.3 Methods of data collection: from pilot conversation to follow-up study

For clarity, the data collection process was divided into three stages: a pilot study, fieldwork, and follow-up observation. It is important to note that follow-up observation is treated as an ongoing component of the research process and overlaps with both the pilot study and fieldwork stages.

4.3.1 Pilot Study (Informal Conversations)

In the pilot study, I maintained contact with several informants through WeChat, a popular mobile

messaging application in China. My initial motivation was to familiarize myself with their working environment and project progress as part of my role as a researcher. While in Beijing, I met with these informants in person, and we continued our conversations online at various times. Sometimes they appeared and started to chat at odd time of the day and scheduled a in person meet up casually around their working place. It seems like meeting openly and in person in a place they are much more familiar makes them more willing to open up and answer interview questions. In contrast, they are resistant to be interviewed in Malaysia. They also revealed that local leaders in Malaysia of ECRL management team might not fully agree with employees participating in face-to-face field interviews. Therefore, I am grateful that they provided me with sufficient contact information of workers from different departments and job positions, even various nationalities within the team (some of them even being assisted to download and register WeChat), ensuring that online interviews could serve as the primary source of data.

These informal online interactions have provided valuable insights and can be considered a form of preliminary fieldwork, especially once formal ethical approval is obtained. This experience challenges the traditional concept of the 'field,' suggesting that fieldwork can extend beyond physical proximity as long as all interactions, including formal interviews, are properly and effectively recorded. However, the comfort and consent of the participants are crucial, as some may be uncomfortable with virtual communication or unwilling to participate in recorded conversations, even with guaranteed anonymity.

4.3.2 Fieldwork

Following the above efforts, due to the privacy concerns and sensitivities surrounding the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) project, particularly after its interruption, and the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, all fieldwork was conducted in China. The staff from the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) involved in the ECRL project preferred to be interviewed in Beijing, where they feel more secure. Conducting interviews outside China was not feasible due to these sensitivities and the ongoing travel restrictions during 2023 when I was conducting the field. Luckily, based on earlier-stage pilot study, this hasn't become an obstacle to

my research. I was able to design mix methods for my practical field in the experience of desk-research activities and those informal information I extracted, which include direct data (general and transparent information) extraction from official database, semi structured interviews, participant observation (from casual informal chats, in person conversations and access to their social networks), and two questionnaires.

These methods aim to identify the differences and representations of Chinese and Malaysian workers' work-related activities on the ECRL, as well as their varying perspectives on the BRI during their working experience. Interviews and participant observation are crucial to my project, and I spent considerable time collecting and analyzing data through both methods. Interviewing and participant observation had different emphases. The former has been the most direct approach to obtain their views towards BRI when they put themselves as narrators and presenters of the issues. The latter, however, have been a suitable method for observing how they potentially perceive the BRI and how these thoughts are reflected in their behaviours. Moreover, the empirical data on ideas and actions of humanity that mentioned in cultural political economy, were largely been drawn from participant observation and interviews. In contrast, data on financial activities related to the ECRL, which mostly originated from online sources, were challenging to observe directly in the field. The reasoning behind why and how I use each method is explained later. The following is the practical fieldwork scheme based in Beijing and GuangZhou, China.

Fieldwork focus on non-financial group

I have planned a series of interviews with key personnel and various groups involved in the ECRL project under the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC). These participants were drawn from diverse departments, including humanities, technical, logistics, and support, which were integral to the project's functioning. By engaging a broad spectrum of employees, I have aimed to gather a comprehensive understanding of the different dimensions involved in the project—from technical execution to logistical challenges and human resource management.

Furthermore, I interviewed core leaders within the CCCC, including one of the original founders of the ECRL project. These interviews were strategically set to take place in Beijing, a location where participants were likely to feel more at ease, thus enabling more candid discussions. This comfort is crucial given the sensitive nature of the ECRL project, especially in light of its recent interruptions. The interruption has heightened concerns among staff about data privacy and the potential for political or legal repercussions if project details are disclosed outside of China.

In addition to collecting qualitative data through interviews, I also performed a detailed analysis of official Chinese documents related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This analysis specifically focus on documents related to the ECRL project. These documents include the latest updates on construction progress, technical instructions, and policy directives available through the official CCCC website and other formal discourses channels. The purpose of this document analysis was to construct a dynamic timeline of the ECRL project, identifying key events, decisions, and shifts in strategy that have shaped its development. This allowed me to triangulate the insights gained from interviews with the formal, documented narrative provided by official sources.

By synthesizing data from both interviews and official documents, I aim to create a nuanced understanding of the ECRL project's trajectory, the decision-making processes involved, and the broader implications for the Belt and Road Initiative. This mixed-method approach has ensured that my analysis has been grounded in both the lived experiences of those directly involved in the project and the official discourse surrounding it.

Fieldwork with Financial Group Workers

The financial aspects of the ECRL project have been highly sensitive, with workers involved in these areas particularly concerned about maintaining strict confidentiality. This sensitivity stems from the potential impact that leaked financial information could have on the project's viability, stakeholder confidence, and broader geopolitical dynamics. Interviews with employees from the Export-Import Bank of China (EIBC), a key financial institution supporting the ECRL project, was therefore

conducted discreetly in Beijing. This choice of location is deliberate, as it allows these workers to discuss their roles and insights in a secure environment. Ensuring their privacy and addressing their concerns about the possible implications of sharing sensitive financial information are top priorities for this research.

Given the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside the inherent privacy and sensitivity issues surrounding the ECRL project, conducting all fieldwork within China offers distinct advantages. The pandemic has complicated international travel, making it difficult to meet with stakeholders outside China. Moreover, carrying out the research domestically allowed for deeper engagement with key informants, ensuring they were comfortable and secure in their surroundings. This strategy also mitigates the risk of breaching confidentiality agreements or facing legal repercussions that could arise from discussing sensitive topics outside China's jurisdiction. By keeping the research localized, I accessed relevant data more effectively, while minimizing the challenges that international fieldwork presented.

Before finalizing this fieldwork plan, I thoroughly evaluated the research objectives, logistical challenges, and ethical considerations involved. Despite certain limitations, conducting fieldwork within China emerges as the most viable option for gathering the necessary data while safeguarding the privacy and concerns of all participants. Given the ongoing restrictions on global mobility due to COVID-19 and the fluctuating political and economic conditions surrounding the ECRL project, this approach not only ensured the protection of sensitive information but also represented the most practical and feasible solution under current global circumstances. By staying within these constraints, the research can proceed effectively without compromising its integrity or objectives.

4.3.3 Semi-Structured Interviews in Fieldwork

During the preliminary stages of my research, it became evident that a single methodological approach would be insufficient to fully capture the complexities of the experiences of Chinese and Malaysian workers on the ECRL project. Consequently, I adopted a multifaceted research strategy

that integrates various data sources and analytical tools, aiming to gain a more comprehensive understanding of workforce dynamics and the underlying perceptions of these workers.

One of the core elements of this strategy was the triangulation of data from diverse sources. I prioritised the collection of both macro-level data, derived from official databases, and micro-level insights, obtained through direct interaction with workers via social networks and in-person engagements. To systematically analyse their perceptions and reactions to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), I also developed two distinct questionnaires, each designed to capture different dimensions of their experiences and viewpoints.

In addition to quantitative data, I placed significant emphasis on participant observation. This method allowed me to immerse myself in the daily lives of the workers, observing their behaviour patterns and social interactions both within and beyond the workplace. Such an approach enabled me to uncover not only their overt attitudes but also the more subtle, underlying cognitive processes that influence their responses to the work environment.

The integration of these diverse methodologies and data sources has provided a robust foundation for a nuanced analysis of the ECRL workforce, offering deeper insights into the socio-cultural and economic factors that shape their work-related experiences. This comprehensive approach was essential for advancing our understanding of the broader implications of the BRI on labour dynamics in the region. There were three critical considerations regarding the semi-structured interviews that I employed as a key data collection method.

Types of Interviews and Adaptability:

The type of interview conducted depend on both the research questions and the personal preferences of the interviewees. During my pilot research in 2020 and 2021, I initially attempted to use narrative conversations based on the informants' knowledge and experiences with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, I found that some informants were more comfortable with a straightforward Q&A format, which made it challenging to conduct narrative interviews. Given this

feedback, I adapted the interview format to match participants' comfort levels, employing semi-structured interviews that provide flexibility in both structure and interaction.

Semi-structured interviews are particularly suited to this study because they offer a balance between structured questions and the opportunity for interviewees to elaborate on their thoughts and experiences. This approach is aligned with the Cultural Political Economy (CPE) framework, where understanding cultural influences—such as customs, laws, and national ideologies—is crucial to interpreting how individuals perceive and engage with the ECRL project. The diversity in ideological perspectives, both within and across different cultural systems, is significant for understanding the broader implications of the BRI and the ECRL project.

Selection of Informants:

The selection of informants was strategic and mindful of potential biases that can arise from self-selection or convenience sampling. Drawing on the insights of Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), I ensured that the process of selecting interviewees is intentional, aiming to include a broad range of perspectives that reflect the diversity of the workforce involved in the ECRL project. Although some informants emerged naturally during fieldwork, I actively seek to include individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, ensuring diversity in gender, age, birthplace, educational level, and job position within the BRI framework.

Group interviews were conducted when informants express comfort with this format. The rationale for including group interviews was to capture the dynamic interactions that occur when participants respond to each other's views. This method not only encouraged the sharing of individual opinions but also revealed how collective ideas and attitudes form and evolve—a key focus of CPE. Observing these interactions has provided deeper insights into how cultural and ideological factors influence group behaviour and attitudes towards the ECRL project.

In cases where interviewees were uncomfortable with narrative interviews, I predominantly used structured interviews that consist of both closed-ended and open-ended questions. This approach

allowed for the collection of consistent data across interviews while also providing opportunities for interviewees to offer additional insights or elaborate on their responses. The semi-structured format was designed to accommodate both concise answers and more detailed, narrative responses, depending on the interviewee's personality and willingness to share.

Dynamic and Interactive Interviewing Process:

Interviewing and analysis were treated as dynamic and interactive processes. This means that as new issues or themes emerged during the interviews, they were incorporated into subsequent discussions. The original topic guide for the interviews had been primarily designed to explore how attitudes towards the BRI have evolved among Chinese and Malaysian workers involved in the ECRL project. However, the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for the flexibility to delve into emerging topics or follow up on unexpected responses.

Participants were grouped according to their preferred interview format: those who favour Q&A-based questionnaires, those open to individual interviews (potentially including narrative questions), and those comfortable with group interviews. This grouping strategy ensured that the interview process were tailored to the interviewees' communication styles and preferences while also facilitating the collection of a wide range of data. By using narrative questions where appropriate, I aim to obtain a detailed understanding of the participants' ideas and experiences related to the BRI and the ECRL project, especially in terms of how these ideas are shaped by cultural and ideological factors as outlined in the CPE framework.

Additionally, financial-related data were primarily gathered through direct collection from transparent and open channels, given the sensitivity of this information. The combination of structured and narrative questions, along with the flexibility to adapt the interview process as needed, helped ensure that the data collected is both comprehensive and ethically sound.

In summary, the semi-structured interviews offer a flexible and adaptive approach to data collection, enabling a deep exploration of the research questions while upholding the privacy and

sensitivities of participants. This method, coupled with strategic informant selection and a dynamic interview process, was designed to yield rich, nuanced data that contributed significantly to the understanding of the ECRL project within the broader context of the BRI.

4.3.4 Participant Observation

Relying solely on interviews may be insufficient to fully explore the experiences of participants involved in the ECRL project, as interviews alone may not capture the complete context of their actions and interactions. Scholars such as Maxwell (2005) and LeCompte and Schensul (2012) argue that interviews can sometimes be detached from the realities of daily life and may not fully reflect the complexities of participants' behaviours and experiences. Spoken words during interviews may express only immediate moods rather than reflecting consistent, everyday actions. Therefore, participant observation is a crucial complementary method, offering a deeper and more contextual understanding of behaviour.

LeCompte and Schensul (2012) describe participant observation as "the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the researcher setting" (p. 91). This approach is integral to fieldwork, where researchers actively engage with the environment, observing and sometimes participating in the daily activities of those being studied.

During my fieldwork in 2022-2023, I employed participant observation to closely examine the daily behaviours, interactions, and thought processes of workers involved in the ECRL project. Initially, this observation was planned to take place both in Malaysia and Beijing, where key organisations such as the ECRL, CCCC, and EIBC are headquartered. However, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic during this period, alongside the resulting travel restrictions, required an adaptation of my approach. Moreover, concerns about privacy and sensitivity among the staff—particularly those associated with the ECRL project—led to further significant modifications. Many workers were hesitant to participate in interviews within Malaysia, especially given the disruptions to the ECRL project, which heightened their concerns about participating in interviews conducted outside of China. Consequently, these circumstances necessitated conducting most of the fieldwork within

China.

Due to the strict pandemic policies in China during 2022-2023, which limited access to certain public and office spaces, remote observation methods became essential. This included utilizing social media platforms to maintain a virtual presence within the digital environments of the workers. These adjustments were critical in ensuring that the privacy of participants was respected while still enabling comprehensive data collection.

Throughout this period, I meticulously recorded field notes, interview summaries, and monthly reports. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, with the appropriate ethical approvals obtained from both the university and the interviewees. Given the sensitivity of the information and the privacy concerns of the participants, additional precautions were taken to ensure confidentiality and to create a comfortable environment for the interviewees. This thorough documentation aimed not only to capture the content of interviews but also to detail the nuances of everyday interactions observed in the field.

4.4 Practical Field

4.4.1 Identity information of interviewees

The interviewees are consisted of 8 Chinese who frequently travel from China and Malaysia for working and another 10 interviewees (both Chinese and Malaysian) working in Malaysia Kuala Lumpur geographically, 6 interviewees alongside railway routes (3 Malaysians and 3 from Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar respectively). These interviewees ranging from staff who work for various processes of public relations, technical and general management issues of ECRL project, and from heads of certain departments of China Communications Construction Company or Malaysian Railway Link, and also include non-China & Malaysian staffs who work for third party only although this sector is supervised by CCCC. and other Malaysian local government-related organisations.

Here is the example of one of the introductions for a certain interviewee and all of interviewees have been required holding a brief self-introduction like this. "The scope of my work is relatively

wide. I am responsible for the external liaison between the East Coast Railway and relevant enterprises and government departments in Malaysia and China. I am also responsible for some government relations, public relations, land acquisition, facility relocation and reform, investment along the line and joint intention." Most of interviewees (those 15 interviewees) have been working in Malaysia for more than 5 years since the construction of Malaysia Railway. During this 5 year-period, they have not returned to China even once. "The working team has a more international work environment, and the ratio of Chinese to territory-dependent Malays is 1:1. Besides, third party labour who are practically building the railway, there are also some foreign railway experts being hired to work together, but not belonging to China Construction Engineering Co., LTD (the company specializing in infrastructure projects and the main implementation party). Many interviewees are relevant talents in their sector and have been doing relevant work before ECRL. (From my judgement according to their introductions to themselves, but won't be listed here for protecting their anonymity.)

4.4.2 Data Collection Summary overview

Up to date, there are overall 26 interviews have been made, two groups of group interviews with 3-4 interviewees in each group, and 24 single-person interviews are held (People who joined group interviews also be interviewed solely initially). At the starting point of these interviews, all of interviewees were informed that the whole interview would be secured anonymity. Some of the interviewees holding a considerably high position in ECRL project, who are extremely prudent facing formal conversations. Thus, our interviews with those people are agreed being recorded by both interviewer and also the interviewees.

Some interviewees expressed concern that, if interview material were reused in this thesis, the accuracy and context of their remarks might not be preserved. They indicated that direct quotation was acceptable provided that occupational identifiers were removed and anonymity protected. Several also requested to be informed about which parts of their comments might be quoted directly (or otherwise paraphrased) in subsequent writing. Others emphasised that their responses reflected personal experience and should not be taken to represent the official position of their

organisation or team. Interview data were thematically coded; detailed ordinal rubrics (1–9), aggregation rules, triangulation procedures and the plotting protocol are documented in §4.4.4.

4.4.3 Interview Positionality

Given the political sensitivity of the topic and the fact that much of the empirical material was obtained through negotiated access, it is necessary to state clearly how interview data were produced and what shaped the conditions of disclosure. This subsection therefore develops the thesis's reflexive account of positionality by reflecting on interview dynamics as part of the research process, rather than treating interview accounts as self-evident facts. Throughout the project, I kept a written log of interview circumstances and followed-up conversations, and I relied on cross-interview comparison and documentary sources to check claims where possible. The aim is not to "correct" interviewees, but to make transparent the social and institutional context in which accounts were given, and how this affects what can be inferred from them. The reflexive discussion presented here is drawn upon in subsequent empirical chapters where relevant.

With some Chinese stakeholders, shared language and cultural familiarity facilitated access and eased rapport, but it also encouraged more formal, institutionally safe narratives in settings where organisational discipline and reputational considerations were salient. With some Malaysian stakeholders, my UK affiliation could sometimes function as a signal of academic distance and confidentiality, yet in other moments it heightened caution when questions touched on geopolitically charged issues or domestic contestation. In other words, while nationality-linked cues sometimes mattered, their effects were mediated by organisational position, perceived risk, and how the interview setting was understood. They varied with organisational position, perceived exposure to risk, and whether the interview setting was interpreted as internal discussion or as potential external scrutiny. Accordingly, the analysis treats interview material as situated accounts, and it is written with explicit attention to attribution, variation across interviewee categories, and points of divergence.

A further methodological issue concerns my access to senior management. This access was secured

through a combination of professional introductions and purposive outreach, including contacting potential interviewees directly. My positionality as a Chinese researcher affiliated with a UK university could facilitate initial access in some instances, but it also shaped what could be asked and how candidly it could be answered. Elite access was valuable in clarifying institutional rationales, decision timelines, and the justificatory language through which the project was presented, especially around financing, governance arrangements, and programme narratives. At the same time, it could constrain candour compared to interviews with stakeholders lower down institutional hierarchies: senior actors often carry stronger incentives to maintain an official line, minimise controversy, and speak in carefully managed terms, particularly on topics that intersect with political debate.

It should also be noted that interviewees with less institutional authority may face different—yet equally significant—pressures that shape disclosure, including concerns about workplace surveillance, job security, or reputational risk, and these pressures can similarly constrain full and frank accounts. Accordingly, I treat these interviews as analytically important for understanding organisational framing and strategic communication, rather than as a privileged route to unmediated truth. Where claims were consequential, I checked them against interviews with mid-level managers and operational staff, as well as against public records and critical commentary. This approach allows senior access to inform the account while limiting the risk that authority is mistaken for openness.

In all this research interactions, as a Chinese national conducting fieldwork in Malaysia and Indonesia during politically sensitive phases of the ECRL, and as a PhD researcher affiliated with a UK university, I occupied a complex positionality. This dual embeddedness shaped access pathways, research questions and interpretive horizons, especially around suspension, renegotiation and revival of the ECRL project. I treat reflexivity as an ongoing process through which identity, perception and ideological embedding inform how data are read, interpreted and contextualised.

Notably, some Chinese stakeholders—particularly state-linked engineers and project

managers—were cautious in their engagements, at times concerned that I might frame periods of suspension or renegotiation as failure. By contrast, certain Malaysian respondents occasionally aligned with what they perceived to be my probable standpoint as a Chinese national, offering unexpectedly cooperative or curated responses. These dynamics generated selective emphases, strategic vagueness and patterned silences, especially around legitimacy, elite coordination and distributional questions.

To navigate these dynamics, I employed several strategies: softening direct questions and sequencing probes; triangulating interviews across actors with divergent political positions and organisational locations (drawing on both supportive and critical sources); and maintaining a detailed reflexive journal. I coded iteratively with reflexive memoing; the formal coding protocol and reliability checks are specified in §4.4.4. Repetitions, omissions and emotionally charged statements were treated as meaningful signs rather than noise. I also recognised postcolonial sensitivities and power asymmetries that shaped how my intentions were read and how narratives travelled across languages and institutions.

As such, I do not treat interview testimony as self-evident fact, nor is the aim here to “correct” interviewees. Rather, the purpose is to make explicit the social and institutional conditions under which accounts were produced, and to read them accordingly. This subsection therefore treats interview interaction as part of the evidence-generating process rather than as a neutral conduit through which “facts” simply pass. Throughout the project, I kept a written log of interview circumstances and follow-up conversations, recording features such as the formality or privacy of the setting, whether others were present, shifts in tone when politically sensitive topics emerged, and the degree of rapport that developed over the course of an encounter. I used these notes to contextualise accounts and to assess whether particular emphases were stable across interviews conducted under different organisational positions and perceived risk conditions. Where claims were consequential, I triangulated them through systematic cross-interview comparison and, where possible, against documentary sources.

In addition, interviewees often spoke in light of who they assumed they were addressing, and this shaped both disclosure and interpretation. In different encounters I was variously positioned as a UK university doctoral researcher, as a Chinese researcher, as someone perceived to be connected to organisational networks including senior management, or, conversely, as a relatively junior student with limited institutional authority. Such positional readings tended to increase caution and self-management, but they also sometimes opened space for unexpected candour. I used this variation reflexively as an analytic resource while resisting over-interpretation. I do not psychologise accounts. Instead, I interpret differences in disclosure and framing as effects of setting, perceived confidentiality, organisational position, topic sensitivity, and perceived exposure to risk.

For example, on a small number of occasions Malaysian interviewees described practical frictions in working with Chinese colleagues in ways that would be unlikely if the interaction were understood as externally visible or reputationally risky. Conversely, positive appraisals of Chinese counterparts were interpreted with attention to the broader demeanour of the encounter. Where rapport was warm and sustained and the interview unfolded as a frank internal discussion, such remarks were more likely to reflect substantive appreciation and experience-based judgement. Where the interaction was cooler or more guarded, they were treated more cautiously as potentially routine politeness rather than strong evaluative evidence. This interpretive work increased the demands of analysis, but it also supported a more careful reading of patterns across interviews and informed triangulation in Chapters 5–8.

Finally, I acknowledge my own normative commitments (e.g. a prior belief in the developmental potential of the ECRL) and I have tried to mitigate bias through transparency of analytic decisions, peer debriefs and systematic cross-checks. Reflexivity did not eliminate positional misreadings, but it enabled a more dialectical engagement with the research process—situating knowledge production as negotiated and context-specific, and clarifying how legitimacy is both constructed and contested in infrastructure discourse. The result is an account and assessment of the ECRL that does not pretend to be the final and objective word on the matter, but it is one that is the outcome of a concerted effort at extended reflection, with an explicit concern for sensitivity to and learning

from the diverse positions of a wide range of stakeholders in the project.

4.4.4 Qualitative-Ordinal Mapping for figures 5&7

First, thematic coding was used to analyse the content of the interviews. This method identifies key expressions by participants when discussing "belief" and "confidence," and these expressions were then coded. For instance, statements such as "firm conviction" or "willingness to face challenges" were coded as representing strong belief or high confidence. This systematic coding approach provided clear criteria for scoring, minimizing subjective influence during the scoring process.

Once thematic coding was complete, frequency analysis was employed to quantify the occurrence of these themes among the 24 participants. For example, if 16 participants expressed strong beliefs and high confidence, this theme would receive a high score. The scoring scale ranged from 1 to 10, where higher scores indicate stronger belief and greater success in overcoming challenges. This frequency-based quantification enabled the scores to effectively represent collective attitudes within the sample.

To ensure the reliability of the scoring, triangulation was employed. Following initial scoring, the researcher discussed the possible scoring with other research interviewees and experts in related fields to improve its reasonableness. This triangulation method brought in multiple perspectives to verify the scores, reducing individual subjective bias and ensuring consistency in the results.

In addition to the interview data, secondary data sources—such as media reports, official project documents, and policies—were utilized to reinforce the scoring framework. As discussed earlier, media reports from both China and Malaysia emphasize the strategic significance of the ECRL project in regional development, reinforcing the belief and commitment expressed by participants. These sources highlight how individuals from different nationalities and professional backgrounds exhibit varying levels of "belief" in the project, which correspondingly affects their ability to overcome challenges. These secondary data sources not only add depth to the scores but also strengthen the academic foundation of the analysis by providing a broader context and validating

the different belief levels observed across groups.

While the sample size is 24, which is appropriate and standard in qualitative research (see Maxwell, 2005), this study's goal is not to draw universal conclusions but to gain a deeper understanding of participants' subjective experiences and beliefs. Thus, the purpose of the scoring is to descriptively showcase participants' specific expressions of belief and confidence in overcoming challenges, rather than to provide generalizable statistical findings. This approach is justified because it aims to capture the authentic beliefs and attitudes of participants rather than to produce generalized quantitative conclusions.

By combining thematic analysis, frequency scoring, triangulation, and secondary data validation, this chart presents a reliable overview of stakeholder beliefs and confidence levels. It visually represents not only the distribution of belief and confidence across hierarchical levels but also the variations in perceived strategic importance and engagement. The scoring approach underpins the persuasiveness of the chart, enabling readers to interpret each group's commitment and attitudes toward the ECRL.

4.5 Summary

This research examines the dynamic interaction between subjective perceptions and objective realities within the framework of Cultural Political Economy (CPE). The methodology is designed to capture the multifaceted nature of the ECRL project through a structured, multi-level data collection process.

The first level of fieldwork focuses on the grassroots participants directly involved in the ECRL project, including workers from Malaysian Railway Link, China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), and third-party contractors. Data collection at this level employs interviews and participant observation to explore the moral ideas and values of these individuals. This approach aims to provide insights into how these workers perceive their roles within the project and the broader implications of their daily experiences.

The second level investigates the political organisation and regulatory frameworks that influence the ECRL project. This analysis is conducted through a combination of official document reviews and political data analysis, supplemented by interviews and participant observations. This level seeks to uncover how political narratives and regulatory policies shape the project's implementation and impact, highlighting the interaction between political discourse and project realities.

The third level explores the economic activities and practical values associated with the ECRL project. This includes analyzing economic integration processes and material outcomes through extensive online data extraction from official databases. Given the sensitivity of financial data and the challenges of conducting interviews outside China due to participant reluctance and confidentiality concerns, the approach ensures accuracy and comprehensiveness while respecting participants' privacy. This level also considers immaterial factors such as the influence of societal ideologies and discourses on economic activities.

Each of these levels of fieldwork is detailed in separate chapters of this thesis. Together, they address the overarching research question: whether and to what extent the ECRL project contributes to the economic integration of Southeast Asia. By integrating findings from these diverse data sources, the research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the ECRL project's impact and its broader implications within the context of the BRI.

Due to the intermittent lockdowns in China during 2022 caused by the pandemic, the execution of fieldwork for this study faced certain constraints, as the researcher was unable to travel to Malaysia. Prior to conducting the fieldwork, there were concerns regarding the suitability of a research model based on face-to-face and remote interviews conducted from China. However, the research process demonstrated that this approach was both appropriate and, under the given circumstances, the only viable option. Considering the political and financial complexity of the ECRL project, obtaining primary interview data was particularly challenging. Most interviewees were unwilling to be interviewed at their workplaces, and even group discussions were formed from individuals who had

already participated in face-to-face interviews. These participants came from different organisations and were not acquainted with one another.

In summary, to ensure data authenticity and reliability while respecting interviewees' preferences, remote interviews were adopted in 2022 as the only practical option. Although not ideal, this mode—combined with careful scheduling, platform choice and triangulation with documents and media sources—proved effective in securing valuable insights. Here reflexivity operates not only at the level of researcher identity but as part of methodological validity: I treat it as constitutive of knowledge production, whereby perception, practice and ideological embedding co-shape how data are collected, interpreted and contextualised. This ensures that limitations are not overlooked but integrated into the analysis, reinforcing both transparency and analytical rigour.

Chapter 5 Confidence and specific "belief" to the project

5.1 Introduction

In international development projects, the role of stakeholder confidence and belief systems plays a pivotal role in shaping both the immediate execution and long-term success of the project (Callahan, 2016). This chapter delves into the interplay between confidence, belief, and behaviour within the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) project—a significant component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As an infrastructural megaproject, the ECRL exemplifies not only economic ambition but also the intricate cultural and ideological exchanges between China and Malaysia. By understanding how beliefs are formed, reinforced, and translated into action, this chapter explores how stakeholder perceptions evolve into behaviours that impact project outcomes.

This chapter is grounded in a Cultural Political Economy (CPE) framework (chapter 2-3 above), analyzing how culturally embedded beliefs influence both individual and collective actions within the project. Using qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews, the analysis draws on the experiences of a wide array of stakeholders, from senior management to ground-level workers. The research highlights how belief systems, rooted in cultural and organisational norms, shape decision-making processes, operational behaviours, and broader project ideologies.

Three linked arguments are developed in this chapter. It first shows how stakeholders' initial beliefs about the ECRL—often rooted in cultural and national pride—shape perceptions of the project's value and strategic significance, and guide everyday behaviours, including work ethic, decision-making, and problem-solving in high-pressure environments. It then argues that repeated behaviours aligned with these beliefs can contribute to the formation of a collective ideology (Jessop, 1985), including shared narratives of honour and responsibility within the workforce; this collective ideology can strengthen internal cohesion and sustain commitment to project goals even amid external challenges such as political uncertainty surrounding electoral transition, subsequent policy review, and economic pressures. Finally, it suggests that, as the project progresses, these

ideologies are further reinforced through organisational practices and communal narratives, generating a feedback loop that sustains confidence and commitment and can extend beyond the project itself to shape wider regional cooperation and integration under the BRI.urning cultural dynamics into significant political and economic capital.

By focusing on how confidence and belief systems are interwoven with operational behaviours and ideologies, this chapter seeks to offer a deeper understanding of how large-scale international projects are driven by more than just economic factors. The cultural and ideological frameworks surrounding such projects are essential for understanding their long-term success, making this analysis particularly relevant for international cooperation under initiatives like the Belt and Road.

The chapter proceeds as follows: in section 2, we set out the basic overview of how culturally-conditioned beliefs, especially amongst Chinese stakeholders/workers, shape the ECRL project. We specifically focus on the strong and widely shared sense of both self-efficacy, regarding one's own work and its competence, and the inseparable connection to *national* pride, which together underpin a deep commitment to both the successful completion of the project and to (assent to formal statements regarding) its supposedly 'transformational' positive impacts. But we also highlight elements of difference in perspective, including a disconnect between strategic vision of project leaders and views 'on the ground' amongst workers. To assess the influence of these specific 'cultural resources' on the ECRL project, we also then present an attempt to translate the qualitative findings presented here into more quantitative form.

Having then set out the main findings, we then turn to two key further issues that strengthen this basic argument, namely – in section 3 – the 'real-life test' on this shared belief presented by the pause to the project in 2017, and – in section 4 – the specific importance of the emotion/concern of honour, a term that is a far cry from the usual focus of (even, 'critical') research and commentary on the BRI, regarding more self-interested and materialistic concerns of maximizing (geopolitical) power and influence or profit and economic growth. The key role played by honour evident in the first-person experiences of interviewees serves to secure the importance of such irreducibly

cultural phenomena in any comprehensive understanding of the strengths or weaknesses, and likely successes or failures, of BRI projects like the ECRL.

5.2 Stakeholders' perceptions of ECRL within the framework of BRI

5.2.1 Interviewees initial understanding of ECRL and BRI

When queried about their knowledge of the relationship between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), lots of interviewees demonstrated a understanding of BRI with similar expressions, describing it as 'the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road,' a broad-reaching initiative proposed by China. This common understanding across various nationalities levels of involvement underscores a fundamental recognition of BRI's global impact and objectives. A senior Chinese government official, interviewed on March 15, 2022, in Beijing,¹ highlighted the ECRL as a 'flagship project of this initiative, as well as a critical economic and trade cooperation project between China and Malaysia.' This detailed definition not only reflects the project's strategic importance but also confirms a strong confidence in its role within BRI, influencing how other stakeholders perceive and engage with the project. This shared understanding facilitates smoother communications across different project teams and aligns stakeholder efforts towards common objectives, potentially accelerating decision-making processes and enhancing collaborative efforts.

Chinese interviewees from diverse operational levels, including those in higher-tier positions and front-line laborers, expressed a profound belief in the project's importance.² For example, in remote interviews conducted on April 3, 2022, in Beijing,³ some Chinese front-line staff who work in Malaysia noted that participating in the ECRL is both a significant responsibility and an honour. Furthermore, the significance of the ECRL extends beyond local attention, capturing considerable international interest. Interviewees with Malaysian nationalities acknowledged the project's critical

¹ Interview C2; See Appendix 11.1.2

² Interview C6&C4; See Appendix 11.1.2

³ Interview C6&C3; See Appendix 11.1.2

importance not just for China and Malaysia but also for the broader international community.⁴ This recognition enhances the project's profile and motivates stakeholders at all levels, boosting their confidence in the project's successful outcome and global impact.

The readiness of interviewees to discuss project details and their eagerness to share insights demonstrate a widespread willingness to disseminate and exchange knowledge about BRI and the ECRL. As observed during a focus group interview on May 15, 2023, this engagement reflects a global commitment to understanding and participating in the Belt and Road Initiative across diverse platforms.⁵ This commitment facilitates the exchange of innovative ideas and best practices, crucial in addressing and mitigating challenges during the project's implementation. A senior team member from the CCCC., interviewed on May 20, 2022,⁶ highlighted the tangible benefits of the ECRL in addressing developmental disparities between Malaysia's east and west coasts. He pointed out the stark underdevelopment of the east coast in contrast to the bustling west coast, with long travel times, such as the seven to eight-hour drive from Kuala Lumpur to Kota Bharu (around 500 km by road), serving as a vivid illustration of this gap. The ECRL is envisioned to bridge this divide by enhancing infrastructure and connectivity, promoting equitable regional development and serving as a catalyst for innovative urban planning and sustainable development.

Furthermore, in an interview conducted on June 5, 2022, a Chinese project engineer referred to the ECRL as a 'land bridge,' emphasizing its potential to boost economic growth, enhance job opportunities, and significantly improve transportation.⁷ Another interviewee who worked in ECRL project as initiator team, interviewed on June 8, 2022, pointed out the ECRL's role in bolstering the east coast's tourism sector, which has historically been hampered by poor infrastructure.⁸ Such data underpin stakeholders' beliefs in the project's capability to improve quality of life and foster robust national economic integration.

⁴ Interview M1; See Appendix 11.1.2

⁵ Interview GP1; See Appendix 11.1.2

⁶ Interview C5; See Appendix 11.1.2

⁷ Interview C6; See Appendix 11.1.2

⁸ Interview C2; See Appendix 11.1.2

To contextualize this significance within the broader narrative of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), this section explores how the recognition of the ECRL as a transformative project aligns with the international objectives of the BRI. Specifically, it examines how this alignment reinforces stakeholder confidence, both in terms of local operational effectiveness and global strategic ambitions. This dual-layered confidence—spanning both domestic and international spheres—provides a foundation for the project's broader socio-economic and political impacts, as analysed in the following sections.

5.2.2 Chinese confidence to the project from staff work in middle-high positions

In the context of Chinese projects like the BRI, leadership endorsement carries weight beyond bureaucratic formality. It reflects deeply embedded cultural values, such as respect for authority and a collective national mission. These cultural 'resources' foster alignment among stakeholders, ensuring that team members not only understand the ambitious goals of BRI but also internalize them as part of a shared mission, enhancing dedication and collaboration across all levels. For example, high-ranking officials, by publicly and credibly endorsing the project, instill a sense of urgency and importance, which trickles down through the ranks, enhancing dedication among ground-level workers. This shared belief in the project's significance fosters a unified commitment to project objectives which are not merely functional but culturally significant.

Such alignment is crucial, as it not only motivates participation but also solidifies the project's stature within the international community, reinforcing its perceived importance and enhancing its prospects for success. The observations reveal that most interviewees of Chinese nationality are confident not only in the successful completion of the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL), but also in its transformative impact. This transformation goes beyond bridging Malaysia's development gap; it promises profound economic and social change. More importantly, the project carries a moral mission to unify stakeholders under shared goals, fostering a collective belief in its ability to drive progress and overcome challenges. This shared belief in the project's transformative mission inspires dedication at all levels—from decision-makers to workers—unifying their efforts and creating momentum. Such alignment strengthens the project's capacity to deliver tangible benefits,

ensuring its role as both an economic and symbolic bridge. This divergence is not unique to the ECRL, but reflects broader global opinion trends regarding China's perceived economic role.

According to Pew Research Center's 35-country survey (fielded Jan–May 2024), perceptions of China's economic role vary systematically by income grouping. Across the middle-income countries surveyed, a median of 56% view China favourably, while across the high-income countries surveyed a median of 70% view China unfavourably. Views of China's economic influence show a similar split: a median of 47% in middle-income countries see China's economic influence as positive (29% negative), whereas in high-income countries a median of 57% see it as negative (28% positive) (Pew Research Center, 2024b).

Further, from China's perspective, the involvement in the ECRL project is seen as an opportunity to showcase China's advanced railway technology to the world. In an interview with a Chinese railway technician in June, 2022,⁹ it was noted that projecting China's railway technology internationally through the ECRL acts as a vital benchmark of China's engineering capabilities. He remarked, "The development of China's railway technology today is one of the fastest in the world, yet we have relatively few projects overseas." This statement reflects a sense of national pride among Chinese professionals in their country's technical capabilities. It highlights their belief that the ECRL serves as a 'beautiful business card' for China, showcasing the nation's technology and enhancing its global reputation in infrastructure development.

The following table summarizes how confidence and perception interact to establish the ECRL project as both a technological and cultural milestone for China.

⁹ Interview C4; See Appendix 11.1.2

Table 2 Key aspects of perception and confidence in the ECRL project

Aspect	Confidence	Perception
Technological Pride	High belief in China's railway technology	Recognition of ECRL as a benchmark of national capability
Cultural narrative	Confidence rooted in national progress	ECRL as a "business card" for China on the global stage
Stakeholder engagement	Broad alignment across leadership and technical teams	Reinforces shared mission and boosts individual ambition

This table highlights the synergy between confidence and perception in the ECRL project. It demonstrates how China leverages technological advancements to build global recognition while simultaneously fostering national pride and ambition.

The pride expressed by Chinese professionals involved in the ECRL underscores their confidence in their technical abilities and reflects a broader sense of collective national achievement. This double-layered pride—individual competence reinforcing a shared national mission—highlights how projects like the ECRL serve not only as infrastructure ventures but also as symbols of China's global leadership in railway technology. This aligns with Callahan's (2016) argument that China's infrastructure projects combine technical expertise with a cultural narrative, projecting national progress and mobilizing support domestically and internationally. Such pride operates as a reinforcing cycle: the recognition of China's success in overseas projects feeds back into national self-efficacy and ambition.

However, despite this confidence, international critiques persist regarding the ECRL's environmental impact, long-term debt sustainability, and implications for host countries like Malaysia (Grimmel & Li, 2018). Addressing these concerns with concrete data—such as environmental mitigation strategies, financing transparency, and economic benefits—will bolster stakeholders' belief in the project's transformative capacity and its contribution to national and regional development.

These criticisms, which have appeared in both local and international media reports,¹⁰ highlight the significant complexities and challenges inherent in international infrastructure projects like the ECRL. Such challenges often stand in contrast to the confidence and collective self-belief expressed by Chinese professionals involved. However, these complexities can paradoxically strengthen this widely shared collective commitment, as overcoming them becomes not only a demonstration of technical capability but also a matter of national pride.

In the interviews,¹¹ Chinese professionals emphasized their confidence in the project's success, which they see as crucial not only for China's reputation but also for achieving broader strategic goals within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Yet, this pride and confidence come with heightened stakes, as any failure may result in significant collective and national 'loss of face'. Such dynamics underscore the double-edged nature of these projects: while they unify and mobilize collective self-belief, they simultaneously generate anxiety and pressure for success at both personal and national levels. By navigating these challenges, stakeholders' commitment to the project's broader implications — including its potential to bridge development gaps and enhance regional integration — is reinforced, further elevating the perceived importance and significance of their roles.

5.2.3 Working attitude derived from this confidence and its cultural shocks

Furthermore, this belief not only enhances their personal commitment and pride in their work but also manifests in heightened diligence and quality of output. Several team members volunteered for extra shifts or undertook additional tasks to meet critical deadlines, reflecting their deep commitment. Such actions demonstrate how ingrained beliefs influence daily operations and align individual efforts with the broader goals of the BRI. Interactions with individuals of different nationalities working on the ECRL project have provided deeper insights into the diverse perceptions and the influence of strong nationalistic sentiments. Interviews with several Malaysian

¹⁰ The media material referenced here was compiled from mainstream Malaysian and international news coverage of the ECRL/BRI, including South China Morning Post, The Star (Malaysia), and The Straits Times. Items were identified through keyword searches (e.g., "ECRL", "BRI", "environment", "debt", "renegotiation") and then selected for relevance to the environmental and economic critiques discussed in this subsection.

¹¹ Interview C4; See Appendix 11.1.2

railway engineers and actual builders, who work closely with Chinese workers and CCCC, highlight a complex landscape of cultural and national pride. One Malaysian engineer shared insights into the integration dynamics, noting,¹² 'our Chinese colleagues display a robust national sense of mission.' This sentiment translates into a profound patriotism that not only fuels their dedication to the project but also permeates casual conversations about China-related topics, influencing the project's social dynamics. He further observed that while this strong sense of mission fosters a dedicated work ethic, it also introduces challenges in discussing politically sensitive issues.

One of them expressed "some Chinese colleagues express discomfort and even avoid discussions that could be perceived as critical of China's international strategies."¹³ This avoidance lead to a communication gap, where not all project-related concerns are fully addressed, potentially affecting the project's efficiency and the robustness of team collaborations. These dynamics reveal that, while a shared belief in the project's goals has the potential to foster cooperation, it also brings about complexities related to national pride and political sensitivities. This can create a communication gap, particularly when project-related concerns are intertwined with culturally sensitive topics. Recognizing these challenges is essential for understanding the project's social dynamics and the implications they may have for team collaboration and operational effectiveness.

In exploring the impacts of cultural dynamics within the ECRL project, the interactions and perceptions of Chinese staff among colleagues of various nationalities were particularly revealing. One notable example shared by interviewees from both Chinese and Malaysian staff in the same working team group involves a collaborative effort where Chinese workers demonstrated exceptional communal solidarity and proactive teamwork.¹⁴ This behaviour markedly contrasts with other foreign workers in Malaysia, who often experience integration challenges. Such solidarity not only enhanced project efficiency but also helped in overcoming language barriers. For instance, Chinese workers actively shared simplified communication methods-such as using translation tools

¹² Interview M5; See Appendix 11.1.2

¹³ Interview M3; See Appendix 11.1.2

¹⁴ Interview GP2, See Appendix 11.1.2

and non-verbal cues -to clarify instructions and streamline collaboration.¹⁵ Their proactive efforts reduced misunderstandings and minimized procedural errors, ensuring smoother task execution under tight deadline.

But this strong communal approach also sometimes created an echo chamber that reinforced shared views to the exclusion of diverse perspectives, potentially leading to group-think. This observation underscores the importance of cross-cultural understanding within project teams, as the ability to share different viewpoints and incorporate diverse strategies is critical in complex, international projects like the ECRL. Recognizing and addressing these cultural dynamics can enhance integration and foster a more inclusive environment where all team members feel valued and heard.

A Chinese interviewee who works mainly based in Malaysia, engaged primarily at the grassroots level and facing language barriers,¹⁶ provided insights into the dynamics within the workforce that required careful interpretation to ensure clarity. He noted that unlike other Southeast Asian foreign workers in Malaysia, who often experience isolation, Chinese workers form a tightly-knit and interactive community. This strong sense of community not only enhances work efficiency but also exerts significant cultural pressures on those who do not share the same level of commitment. He pointed out, "Due to my country not being a host of this project, I find it challenging to align with the perfectionism that Chinese workers pursue in their building tasks." As this interviewee expressed, their meticulous attention to detail and insistence on precision often require additional time and effort, which can seem unrealistic for workers accustomed to more flexible standards.

For instance, Chinese can sometimes work overtime just to correct every steps of their tasks on time when demanded to ensure the precision and efficiency. While, it seemed unrealistic for Malaysian and third party labours with other nationalities to work commonly in same way. This disparity in commitment highlights the different work ethics and cultural expectations between

¹⁵ Interview M7; See Appendix 11.1.2

¹⁶ Interview C3; See Appendix 11.1.2

Chinese workers and those from other nationalities, affecting not only collaboration but also individual job roles and satisfaction. Project management has attempted to address these issues by introducing cross-cultural training sessions aiming to align work practices and reduce friction, yet adapting these deeply ingrained work ethics continues to pose challenges.

Another international interviewee from Cambodia shared complementary observations. He noted that he feels well integrated and welcomed by the Chinese workers,¹⁷ who exhibit more positive attitudes towards their work compared to their Malaysian counterparts. This positive work ethic appears to drive the Chinese workers to be more hardworking, setting a high standard of diligence within their community. However, he also expressed discomfort with the overt pride some Chinese workers take in their contributions to the ECRL project, which can sometimes lead to feelings of alienation among non-Chinese staff. "Although there is a strong sense of camaraderie and acceptance within the Chinese community, the excessive boasting about their roles in the project can be off-putting," he added.

5.2.4 Disconnect between strategic vision and executive

These cultural dynamics further highlight a disconnect between the broader strategic vision and grassroots execution. Chinese workers, driven by their strong sense of national mission, often focus on efficient task execution and precision. However, their understanding of the overarching goals of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is relatively limited. For instance, two workers responsible for welding rail tracks mentioned that they rarely receive updates regarding the strategic significance of the ECRL within the BRI framework. While this may appear as an information gap, it also reflects the natural division of roles in large infrastructure projects: workers concentrate on execution, while strategic decision-making is left to management.

However, this division is not entirely independent of cultural dynamics. The confidence Chinese workers have in the ECRL project and their pride in their technical capabilities drive their high levels

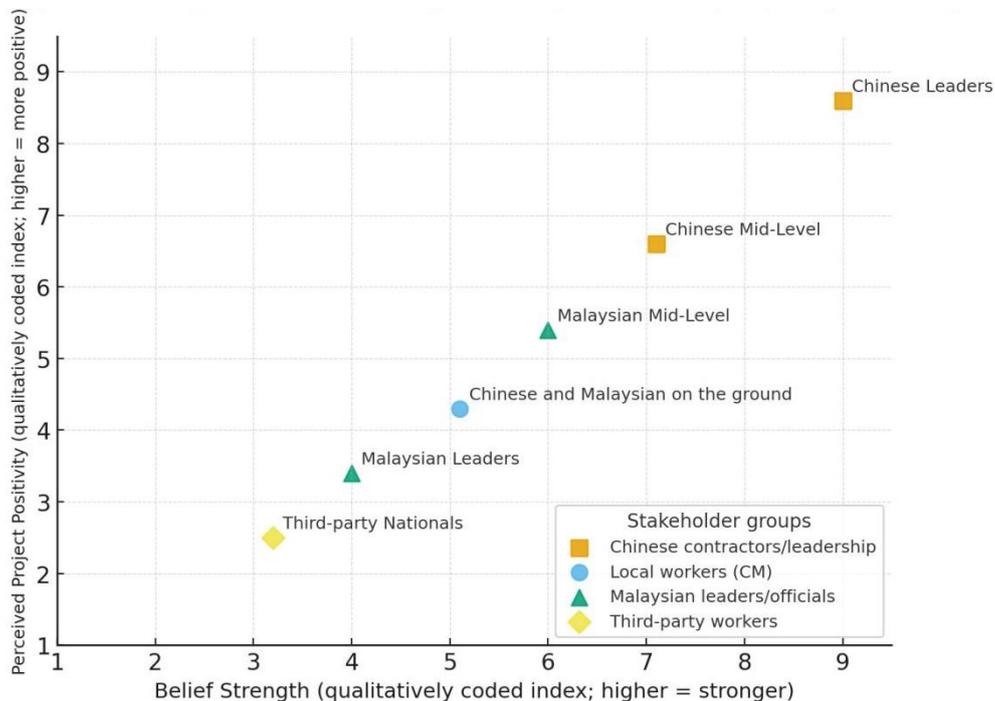
¹⁷ Interview E1; See Appendix 11.1.2

of efficiency and commitment. At the same time, this strong focus on execution may unintentionally reinforce a lack of awareness about the broader strategic context. This limitation resonates with the challenges faced by Malaysian workers, who often struggle to adapt to the rigorous standards and expectations of their Chinese counterparts, further amplifying the disconnect at the operational level.

This disconnect reflects not only the functional division between strategic planning and execution but also how cultural dynamics and work ethics influence the team's understanding and collaboration. While the confidence and work ethic of Chinese workers ensure the quality of execution, they may also limit the depth of cross-cultural interaction and diverse perspectives within the team. In this context, the gap between strategic goals and execution is not merely a functional issue but one deeply shaped by cultural dynamics and differing expectations.

5.2.5 Assessing the influence of interviewees belief on perception

Figure 5: Strength of belief vs. Positive perception (qualitative-ordinal mapping).



Axes are ordinal codes (1-9) based on interview coding.¹⁸ Points show relative positioning and clustering. This is a qualitative–ordinal visualization of covariation, not a statistical correlation or causal model. Source: Author's fieldwork and coding (see Methodology). Underlying data summarize coded themes from interviews across leaders, mid-level and ground workers (Chinese, Malaysian, third-country), aggregated to stakeholder groups; see Methodology for coding rubrics and reliability checks.

Chinese Leaders:

Belief Strength: 9 | Positive Perception: 8

Chinese leaders demonstrate the highest belief strength and the most positive project perceptions (coded score 8). Their confidence in the project's objectives and their leadership roles significantly influence organisational narratives and cultural cohesion.

Chinese Mid-Level Workers:

Belief Strength: 7 | Positive Perception: 7

This group exhibits strong belief together with positive project perceptions, playing a crucial role in bridging leadership directives with ground-level execution. Their confidence enhances their perceived effectiveness within the organisation.

Malaysian Mid-Level Workers:

Belief Strength: 6 | Positive Perception: 5

¹⁸ In this study, belief is defined as participants' confidence in the ECRL project, reflecting psychological trust or belief in the ECRL project's significance, encompassing personal motivation and collective alignment with its goals. Perception is defined as participants' observed evaluation or judgment of the project's outcomes, based on their direct experience or understanding of its impacts. Both terms are used here as interpretive categories derived from interview coding, indicating perceived orientations rather than statistical causality.

While Malaysian mid-level workers maintain moderate-to-strong belief strength, their slightly lower scores compared to their Chinese counterparts suggest a supportive but less central role in shaping organisational perceptions.

Chinese and Malaysian Ground Workers:

Belief Strength: 5 | Positive Perception: 5

Ground workers show steady belief strength, reflecting their confidence in daily operations. Their contribution, while moderate, is essential for maintaining organisational stability and achieving project goals.

Malaysian Leaders:

Belief Strength: 5 | Positive Perception: 4

Malaysian leaders exhibit moderate belief strength, with slightly less positive project perceptions. This may indicate less confidence in strategic alignment compared to Chinese leaders, potentially due to differing cultural or organisational priorities.

Third-Party Nationals:

Belief Strength: 3 | Positive Perception: 3

Third-party workers show the lowest belief strength and the least positive project perceptions. This reflects their peripheral roles and weaker integration into the project's broader objectives, highlighting potential areas for improving engagement and alignment.

As shown in Figure 5, stakeholder groups with stronger belief generally align with more positive project perceptions. Read as a qualitative–ordinal map, the display emphasizes relative positioning and clustering rather than statistical estimation. Interpretive scope and method note. Both axes use

1–9 ordinal codes derived from interview coding; points indicate relative (not absolute) distances. The figure visualizes qualitative co-variation on ordinal scales and should not be read as a parametric correlation or a causal model. Directional co-variation. Groups characterised by stronger belief tend to cluster toward higher values of positive perception. This directional association is visible as an upward tendency across most stakeholder clusters. The pattern is indicative rather than inferential.

Leaders more often appear in the upper-right area of the map, reflecting stronger belief coupled with more positive perception, consistent with closer exposure to strategy, information flows, and decision rationales. Mid-level staff typically occupy the middle band, combining pragmatic optimism with operational concerns. Ground-level workers show greater dispersion, reflecting heterogeneous day-to-day experiences and localized contingencies.

Aggregated by stakeholder group, Chinese project leaders and managers tend to exhibit stronger belief and more positive perceptions, aligning with roles in implementation and milestone responsibility. Malaysian counterparts generally display pragmatic positivity shaped by local coordination, permitting, and community engagement, with mid-level clusters trending moderately upward. Third-country specialists vary by task and tenure, resulting in a wider spread. These contrasts are read as relative positioning on ordinal scales rather than differences with statistical magnitudes.

The observed pattern is consistent with a confidence mechanism in which stronger belief is associated with more favourable readings of project prospects (e.g., timelines, spillovers, employment effects). In practice, such alignment can lower perceived uncertainty, smooth coordination, and encourage problem-solving behaviour. Conversely, where belief is weaker, perceptions are more sensitive to procedural frictions and information gaps, resulting in wider dispersion.

The figure does not establish causal direction; both belief and perception may be co-determined by

organisational communication, prior experience, and evolving project conditions. The display is a heuristic for pattern recognition. Evidence for mechanisms comes from triangulated interview narratives and documentary sources (see Methodology).

Belief strength and positive perception (directional co-variation)

Groups characterised by stronger belief tend to cluster toward higher values of positive perception. This appears as an upward tendency across stakeholder clusters. Read as a qualitative–ordinal map, the display emphasizes relative positioning and clustering, not parametric correlation or causal estimation. The pattern is indicative rather than inferential.

Higher belief strength observed among leadership may also reflect the functional demands of their roles rather than an inherent characteristic. Leaders are often required to project confidence to maintain authority and guide organisational narratives, which may naturally elevate their belief strength compared to other organisational levels. While the data highlights a strong co-variation association, this study does not establish belief strength as a direct driver of role advancement. Instead, the findings suggest that belief aligns with role expectations, creating a dynamic interplay between individual confidence and organisational structure.

Leadership and Mid-Level Workers

Chinese leaders stand out with the highest scores, indicating that their belief in their leadership abilities and their visibility or influence within the organisation is very strong. This contrasts with Malaysian leaders, who, while still impactful, are not perceived as strongly. This could reflect cultural differences, varying levels of authority, or challenges faced by Malaysian leadership in asserting their influence. Mid-level workers (both Chinese and Malaysian) have a substantial impact, especially the Chinese mid-level workers. Their roles, which often involve balancing leadership directives and operational challenges, are critical, and their belief translates into a significant influence on perception.

Ground Workers and Third-Party Nationals

Ground workers (Chinese and Malaysian) have moderate belief strength and impact, indicating that they are integral to the organisation but may not be as visible or impactful as leadership. Their belief in their contribution, while not as strong as higher levels, still affects how they are perceived. Third-party nationals, with the lowest scores, seem to have the least belief in their impact on the organisation and are perceived as less influential. This is likely due to their external status and the possible lack of integration into the core organisational culture.

Examining personal experiences and testimonies reveals that the ECRL project functions not only as a significant infrastructure initiative but also as a sophisticated social and cultural mosaic. This initiative serves as a microcosm of broader global interactions, where cultural identities, work ethics, and national pride are not merely coexisting but are actively shaping day-to-day operations and team dynamics. For instance, Chinese workers typically display a higher level of engagement and team collaboration, which significantly boosts overall work efficiency. However, this intense team spirit sometimes places pressure on employees from different cultural backgrounds, especially when they are expected to meet the same exacting standards of perfection as their Chinese colleagues. These cultural dynamics crucially impact the project's execution and the team's ability to collaborate effectively, particularly in resolving conflicts and advancing long-term goals such as regional integration and international cooperation.

In the ECRL project, a significant observation is the directional association between job positions among Chinese workers and their belief in the project's positive outcomes. Those in higher job positions, entrusted with greater responsibilities, often become vocal champions of the project, exhibiting a remarkable commitment. Their strong belief in project goals frequently shapes workplace dynamics through a system of strategic rhetoric, known as "HUA SHU (话术)" in Chinese—a structured communication strategy that serves to frame the project in a positive light, even when such advocacy is not explicitly required. These leaders often conclude discussions with strong, affirmative statements like, "This project is a flagship project, and we are proud of being a

part of it," reinforcing the project's value and their dedication. They thus present as well-disciplined in this way and are acutely aware of the cultural dynamics that contribute to the success (or failure) of the project. For instance, these leaders use weekly sessions to share organisational achievements and reinforce the sense of national pride and commitment within the workforce. This structured form of communication not only motivates Chinese workers but also fosters a collective focus among all staff, even those who might feel less connected due to cultural or national differences.

This propagation of belief is not arbitrary but is deeply rooted in the hierarchical structure of the organisation, representing a structured system of conviction rather than simple emotion. Senior staff members' beliefs and narratives about the ECRL are primarily shaped by strategic directives and ideological narratives from upper management and influential political figures, reflecting both national pride and the perceived strategic importance of the project. This may echo sentiments expressed at high-level forums, possibly including speeches by figures such as President Xi. However, as one descends the organisational ladder, the intensity of these beliefs tends to wane, reducing their impact on the behaviours and actions of lower-tier workers. Yet this process is not entirely linear; we have also seen that strength of belief and national pride can act as a double-edged sword when interacting with employees of other nationalities involved in the project.

Taken together, this phenomenon highlights a critical area of focus: ensuring that the strong belief system upheld by senior workers does not inadvertently lead to cultural tensions or alienation. For instance, the robust convictions and overt commitment displayed by senior Chinese staff have at times resulted in discomfort or estrangement among employees from other nationalities, despite an overall cooperative work environment. This underscores the need for management strategies that foster a unified belief in the project's goals while simultaneously creating a harmonious and inclusive workplace for all staff members.

However, this fervent belief can occasionally create a sense of cultural distance, especially for international team members who may feel alienated by the strong expressions of national pride. To address this issue, the ECRL management has implemented intercultural sensitivity training and inclusive discussion sessions. These programs create a platform where team members from diverse backgrounds can openly discuss work expectations and cultural values. By fostering an inclusive environment that respects cultural diversity, these initiatives have helped bridge potential divides and reduce cultural friction. The professional exchanges enabled by these strategies ensure that all team members feel respected and heard, contributing positively to the project's overall cohesion. But the central tension between strong and repeated avowals of national pride (and the operational benefits arising therefrom), on the one hand, and off-putting expression of national superiority (and its operational costs), on the other, remains a central cultural feature of the project that must continually be juggled by project managers, at all levels.

While the patterns observed in figure 5 appear to show strong association between confidence in leadership and optimistic project perceptions, these should not be read as claims of causal determination. Rather, they reflect co-occurring themes that emerged frequently in interviews—where expressions of trust in political leadership were often embedded in broader narratives of national strength and developmental optimism. These associations serve an interpretive function, highlighting how belief systems and symbolic legitimacy circulate within project discourse.

5.3 Effects for retrieving the project during the pause period in 2018

In this section, we consider the argument made above, and the operational strengths associated with the specific cultural resources of share national pride and sense of mission, by focusing on a specific 'real-world' test that arose in the course of the project, namely the pause in 2018 after the change of Malaysian government in the elections that year. How do the cultural dynamics outlined above help us understand how this potentially disastrous development for the project was in fact dealt with? And then, conversely, what further does this reveal about these cultural resources,

their specific nature and their strengths/weaknesses regarding execution of the project (and other similar BRI projects)?

5.3.1 Evolution of the "spirit" throughout key phases of the ECRL project

During the period of interruption of the ECRL project, most of the interviewees that have been interviewed so far were at the scene all the time. Below is a timeline summarizing the process according to the description of interviewees.

Figure 6: Timeline of key Milestones in the ECRL project 2016-2027



This data can also be presented in a table (Table 3) based on answers from all interviews in 2022-2023. These interviews involved participants reflecting on their experiences and perceptions across the different phases of the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) project, including the initial phase (2016–2018), the pause period (2018-2019), and the later phase (2019-present). These insights provide a retrospective understanding of the workers' initial enthusiasm, shaped by the project's alignment with broader national objectives and the influence of leadership rhetoric. The interviews also help contextualize the shifts in morale and perspectives as the project encountered various challenges, offering a comprehensive view of the evolving "spirit" surrounding the ECRL initiative.

Table 3: Spirit and challenges from different stages of the construction

Stage of the project	Dynamics about the "spirit" especially arisen during suspension
Initial Phase (2016-2018)	<p>In the early stages of the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) project, most Chinese workers displayed significant enthusiasm and optimism. Given the project's alignment with China's broader Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), participation was viewed as an honour, and there was a strong sense of pride in contributing to a major initiative aimed at fostering regional development and international cooperation. Early optimism was supported by positive propaganda from senior management, emphasizing the project's strategic importance. This sentiment was especially pronounced among higher-ranking employees, who often used skillful rhetoric or "HUA SHU (话术)" to affirm their unwavering support for the project during interviews.</p>
Pause Period (2018-2019)	<p>When the project encountered major challenges or delays, a noticeable shift occurred in the workers' attitudes. Uncertainties and the stress of project suspensions heightened anxiety levels among the workforce. Although senior leaders continued to promote the project positively, the focus of ground-level workers shifted towards addressing practical issues. This period tested their confidence, leading some to question the eventual success of the project and adopt a more reserved outlook on the future.</p>
Later Phase (2019-now)	<p>As the project neared completion or resumed after pauses, workers' attitudes began to rebound. The gradual emergence of tangible results rekindled confidence and pride among the workforce. Senior staff members reiterated the project's positive impacts on regional development, branding it as a "beautiful business card" showcasing China's advanced railway technology. During this phase, workers widely expressed satisfaction with their contributions and reflected on the lessons learned, fostering a renewed sense of accomplishment and commitment.</p>

Throughout the project, particularly within the multicultural team setting, the unique spirit discussed in this chapter persisted despite cultural differences and varying work practices. This resilience became especially evident during challenging periods, such as project suspensions, which highlighted the team's ability to adapt and overcome. The intense work ethic and national pride exhibited by Chinese workers sometimes clashed with the expectations and habits of workers from other nationalities, leading to mental tension and cultural friction. These dynamic changes in

workers' attitudes throughout the project phases reflect not only individual psychological adaptations but also highlight organisational challenges in communication, emotional management, and cultural integration. These dynamics mutually form as part of ideology, implicated in managing large-scale international cooperative projects, requiring strategic approaches to balance the expectations and behaviours of a culturally diverse workforce, especially for a project demanding long term cooperated operation between two stakeholders (Malaysia and China in ECRL case).

The interviewee with the highest job position among all interviewees recalled the extreme pressure he experienced during the second phase,¹⁹ "although that shutdown period has passed, the experience at that point is still vividly recalled now." He appraised this memory as unforgettable but not entirely miserable. These interviewees noted that, at the time, the project was interrupted and many people were concerned about how to view the interruption in 2018, which is now known to have been inevitably combined with the context of significant political changes in Malaysia.

In May 2018, Malaysia held the 14th General Election. Prior to this, the major parties had ruled Malaysia for 50-60 years in a very stable political environment. After the general election, their opposition party won and came to power, marking a change of government for the first time, which undoubtedly had a huge impact on the political economy and society of Malaysia. "So not only our project, but all the other large-scale projects approved by the previous government were affected," this "leader" of ECRL team added. From the talks of several interviewees of Malaysian nationality,²⁰ it was presented that all the projects approved by the previous National Front government were suspended and reviewed after Pakatan Harapan (the opposition party) came to power. The ECRL was also approved by the previous political power (National Front), so it was no exception to experience stoppages and suspensions from their understanding. An interviewee who works in the public relations department further added, "For example, Malaysia and Singapore signed a high-speed rail project to build a high-speed rail link from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore to promote economic and trade exchanges and traffic between the two countries. The project was

¹⁹ Interview C2; See Appendix 11.1.2

²⁰ Interview M1; See Appendix 11.1.2

halted after the two countries signed a framework agreement. The end result was that Malaysia paid Singapore an indemnity and formally dropped the project. In addition, MRT Line 2 and LRT Line 2 in Kuala Lumpur have also been suspended by Pakatan Harapan."

However, not all interviewees consider this to be a relatively normal phenomenon in the Malaysian political environment. One Malaysian interviewee who works with CCCC, but not being managed by the institution, mentioned the unaffordable cost of the project,²¹ that is to pay 500 million Ringgit (about US \$121 million) a year to China according to the original contract of ECRL. It must be acknowledged that the current Malaysian government is less favourable towards engagements with China compared to the previous administration. However, the negotiations resulted in a significant reduction in the project budget. (In April 2019, China and Malaysia finally reached an agreement on the ECRL project, which should be built continually with the construction cost being reduced by about a quarter. Meanwhile, the number of bridges and tunnels has to be cut down, and the length of the railway was also lessened. The contract value was directly reduced to 67.2 percent of the previous one).

Although the international reputation of Malaysia among this process is being questioned due to its unilateral breach of the contract at the beginning and wavering attitude after being informed with high-priced liquidated damages (as well as the risks of the deterioration of diplomatic relations with China), the local media still reported the story as a "diplomatic victory for Malaysia", said a Malaysian interviewee.²²

5.3.2 Navigating ideological influence and cultural commitment in the ECRL project

What does this interruption in the project reveal about its cultural dynamics? Perhaps most striking is the consistent view among most Chinese interviewees that as long as the project itself was sound, experiencing some twists and turns was considered normal. As one interviewee said, "As long as we are confident, and this project ultimately benefits the Malaysian government and local people, it

²¹ Interview M9&M10, See Appendix 11.1.2

²² Interview M2; See Appendix 11.1.2

will eventually resume smoothly." Another added, "The suspension was just a short-term obstacle in project implementation, and we all believed it could be overcome." Although they initially expressed concerns about the suspension, as mentioned earlier, they continued to believe in the project's critical importance for China-Malaysia relations. Particularly during group interviews, the belief and confidence of Chinese interviewees seemed to positively influence the feedback from their Malaysian counterparts. However, at the beginning of the discussions, some Malaysian interviewees did express the view that the government's decision to suspend the project was justified, given that the financial losses incurred outweighed the project's potential economic value.

However, during group discussions, more nuanced perspectives began to emerge. One Malaysian interviewee,²³ who initially held negative views about the project, remarked, "This project does not significantly contribute to the economic development of Eastern Malaysia, and the financial losses caused by its suspension are considerable." Later, however, the same interviewee added, "I believe the real aim of this project is to promote cooperation between China and Malaysia at a lower cost." Similarly, two other Malaysian interviewees did not fully agree with this viewpoint but acknowledged certain merits of the project—whether from a macro perspective of its regional economic significance or a micro perspective of Chinese approaches to infrastructure development.²⁴

It is particularly noteworthy that these shifts in attitudes were most evident when discussions focused on issues from 2018. During this period, the belief in the ECRL project among Chinese workers peaked, and many of the interview questions revolved around this specific context. As the discussions progressed, interviewees' attitudes gradually evolved from relatively indifferent or skeptical to more earnest and engaged views.

This phenomenon is significant, not only for understanding the interviewees' perspectives but also for highlighting the value of group interviews as a research method. By observing small sample

²³ Interview GP2, See Appendix 11.1.2

²⁴ Interview M8; See Appendix 11.1.2

groups in these interviews, we can gain insight into broader ideological flows within society—how these flows are embedded in social actors through communication, cultural narratives, and dialogue. This approach not only uncovers the process through which ideological consensus is formed within groups but also aligns with the methods and significance of cultural political economy, demonstrating the unique value of this theoretical framework in analyzing complex social interactions.

The interviewees from Indonesia and Vietnam were also affected more or less by this ideology among the Chinese,²⁵ although they are not included in the group interviews. In this study, the "ideology" of the ECRL project is not merely an abstract set of ideas; it is a distinctive organisational culture shaped by the collective beliefs and confidence of Chinese staff involved in the project. Specifically, this project ideology encompasses a profound trust in and commitment to the project's significance, forming an internalized drive that shapes the attitudes and behaviours of team members from diverse cultural backgrounds. This ideology is not simply an expression of belief and confidence in the project but serves as an internal cultural force that motivates actions and strengthens team cohesion. In short, from this perspective both the successful completion and the beneficial impact of the project *had* to be true, come what may. Such confidence and expression of it thus proved significant in convincing others who may otherwise have wavered regarding, or even been opposed to, the project.

Within this framework, the project ideology reflects a collective belief among participants, gradually establishing a shared value system within the organisation. This "project ideology" or "organisational ideology" not only influences the attitudes and behaviours of Chinese staff but also subtly impacts other national team members, fostering a sense of alignment with the project's goals. Notably, as Chinese staff exhibit high confidence in the ECRL project, this project ideology operates in an internalized way, influencing their work attitudes and behaviours and even, to some

²⁵ Interview E2&E3; See Appendix 11.1.2

extent, inspiring non-Chinese team members – and, crucially, in ways that helped successfully traverse a moment of potentially terminal hiatus in the project (compared, say, to the KL-Singapore High Speed Rail project). This unique system of beliefs creates a cross-cultural, shared project atmosphere, allowing other team members to perceive the project's importance and value, thus enhancing their sense of participation and mission.

When being asked whether these interviewees are encouraged by the working environment from CCCC, or other Chinese workers when the project gets suspended, they also mentioned words like "confidence" and "coverage" to describe the Chinese facing the crises. This "atmosphere", or what we are calling "ideology", in turn makes them take their job seriously, "I wish my performance is as good as workers from Malaysian or Chinese. Building a railway is not hard and I don't want to be fired at special period especially when others work hard all the time." The interviewer observed that third-party staff working alongside Chinese colleagues experienced significant pressure to meet expectations, but they were also influenced by the characteristic Chinese spirit embedded in the ECRL project. Thus, it could be pointed that this powerful cultural instrument, "belief," is one of the most significant driving forces to overcome the difficulties and sustain the progress of the ECRL project.

This account provides a comprehensive exploration of the varied perspectives and experiences during the ECRL project's suspension and resumption, demonstrating the profound impact of cultural beliefs and political changes on project continuity and stakeholder attitudes. The narrative showcases how belief and optimism, particularly among the Chinese interviewees, served not only as a coping mechanism but also as a transformative force that influenced other project participants, including those from Malaysia, Indonesia, and Cambodia. This ideological influence, characterised by confidence and a proactive approach during crises, highlights the role of cultural dynamics in managing international projects amidst political and economic fluctuations.

Such detailed accounts provide valuable insights into the complex interplay of national identity, cultural influence, and political economy in large-scale international projects. Furthermore, they

underscore the necessity for project managers and policymakers to consider these dynamics when planning and implementing such projects, as the human elements — beliefs, perceptions, and interactions — play a critical role in shaping the project's trajectory and outcomes.

During the 2018 suspension of the ECRL project amidst significant political turnover in Malaysia, the profound confidence and belief held by the project's leaders played a crucial role in steering the project through this uncertain period. Leadership confidence, particularly from Chinese project managers, was critical in maintaining team morale and focus. This was not merely optimistic but grounded in a strategic understanding of the project's long-term benefits for regional connectivity and economic growth. The unwavering belief in the project's success helped stabilize and realign stakeholder expectations, ensuring that both internal teams and external partners remained committed to the project's objectives.

The strong cultural ethos among the Chinese workforce underscored a collective commitment to the project's goals. This shared belief system fostered a cohesive environment where, despite interruptions, the focus remained on eventual success and continuity. The conviction and communication style of the Chinese leaders during group interactions effectively shifted the narrative from doubt to assurance among Malaysian and other international team members. This ideological influence was instrumental in transforming skepticism into support, demonstrating how belief can reshape stakeholder engagement in international projects.

Confidence in the project's utility and benefits also allowed leaders to effectively engage with the new Malaysian government. They articulated how the ECRL could align with the new political leadership's priorities, turning potential opposition into supportive collaboration. Negotiations that led to the project's cost reduction were underpinned by a confident assertion of the project's worth and feasibility. By presenting adjusted plans that maintained the integrity and objectives of the ECRL while addressing financial concerns, project leaders showcased an adaptive strategy rooted in a strong belief in the project's necessity.

5.3.3 Challenges of confidence and cultural pressures in crisis management

A key element of a CPE theoretical lens from Jessop on this case is the focus on the 'normal' processes of 'crisis management' that are so important for the regularization of the 'inherently improbable' turbulent and dynamic process of capital accumulation; processes that lead to genuine crisis when they, in turn, break down, viz. as a 'crisis of crisis management' (Jessop, 2000). This lens sheds further light on the case of the pause in the ECRL.

Empowering the workforce with confidence is a key element of crisis management in this case, ensuring that diligence and commitment remained high, even during uncertain times. In interviews, a senior employee mentioned, "Our goals and beliefs did not waver during the suspension, allowing us to stay focused." This type of cultural leadership ensured that the project did not merely survive the suspension but re-emerged with a stronger focus and direction. The 2018 suspension event provided a valuable example of how confidence and belief became essential in navigating significant challenges, demonstrating their crucial role in overcoming obstacles. The ECRL team's response during this period can serve as a model for other large infrastructure projects in crisis management, showing how team cohesion can be maintained.

The continuation of the ECRL project during its suspension was not just a result of political maneuvering or economic adjustments; it was deeply influenced by cultural, ideological, and leadership dynamics. One mid-level manager noted that the team's shared confidence acted like "glue that held project participants together," ensuring a unified vision. Even in the face of external pressures, the team was motivated to pursue the same objectives. For example, senior leaders reinforced trust by regularly communicating key challenges and progress updates, which further encouraged employee engagement. However, this strong confidence also carried potential risks. Some interviewees mentioned that such intense belief in the project's success occasionally led to blind optimism, causing certain operational risks to be overlooked.

While confidence and belief undoubtedly strengthened the project team's resilience, some employees acknowledged that this heightened sense of conviction could sometimes lead to overly simplified decision-making. A project manager reflected that, during the suspension, certain

management decisions leaned too heavily on the belief that "we will succeed," (i.e. because "we *must*") sometimes ignoring warning signals in operations. This indicates that while confidence and belief are powerful motivators, it's also essential to maintain a realistic perspective on challenges to avoid potential issues. In a word, the confidence and belief demonstrated by the ECRL team during the suspension period were pivotal. They drove the project forward and yet they also thereby brought certain risks. This phenomenon illustrates how cultural-psychological factors like belief and confidence can facilitate project progress during crisis periods in large infrastructure projects. However, it also highlights the need for balanced reflection and risk management to ensure the project's sustainability and success. Indeed, while crucial for sustaining the project in a moment of 'crisis', the downsides of this 'gung ho'(over-zealous) optimism are multiple and varied,²⁶ below section identifies three key risks observed during the suspension period, which highlight potential challenges in maintaining team dynamics and project management effectiveness.

Interviews highlighted concerns that prevailing high confidence might lead to complacency, with project risks being underestimated. This overconfidence can result in inadequate planning for potential setbacks or failing to adjust strategies in response to changing circumstances, delaying necessary interventions that could mitigate more significant issues. The optimism inherent in overconfidence could cause project leaders and team members to overlook or dismiss warning signs as minor hurdles, exacerbating challenges during the project suspension.

The expectation to maintain a consistently positive outlook placed considerable psychological pressure on team members. For some, particularly those from diverse cultural backgrounds, this expectation was mentally exhausting and unrealistic, especially during periods of genuine uncertainty and stress. The strong push towards maintaining a unified front of confidence might

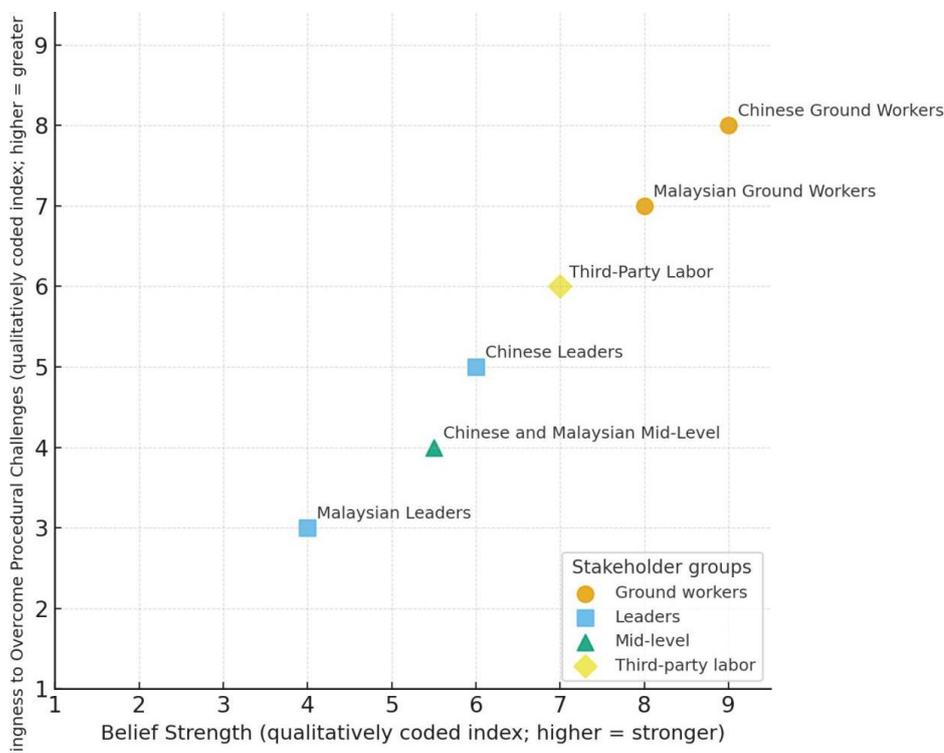
²⁶ McWhorter, J. (2019, 18 October). "The long, strange journey of 'gun-ho'." NPR Code Switch. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/10/18/406693323/the-long-strange-journey-of-gung-ho> (accessed 10 January 2026).

suppress individual expressions of doubt or concern, stifling critical discussions that might otherwise help adjust project strategies more effectively.

Data from group interviews indicated that the overwhelmingly optimistic and confident attitude promoted by project leaders sometimes marginalized more cautious or skeptical views. This can lead to homogenized group thinking where critical and possibly more realistic assessments are not given enough consideration. When optimistic perspectives dominate discussions, decisions may lean towards best-case scenarios, potentially overlooking the practical implications of worst-case scenarios which need to be planned for. Such a situation can create a feedback loop where only positive outcomes are discussed and expected, leading to strategic blindness. Important feedback from team members who see potential problems might be ignored or undervalued, undermining the project's ability to adapt to real challenges.

5.3.4 Assessing stakeholder confidence and project resilience through belief-effectiveness correlations

Figure 7: Strength of belief vs. impetus to overcome procedural challenges (qualitative-ordinal mapping).



Both axes are ordinal codes (1–9) from interview coding; the scatter visualizes relative positioning and clustering. It indicates tendency rather than causal estimation. "Impetus" refers to willingness/effectiveness to tackle permits, inter-agency coordination, compliance, and other procedural hurdles. Source: Author's fieldwork and coding (see Methodology). Underlying coding, triangulation and reliability checks are documented in the Methodology; here the plot serves as a heuristic qualitative–ordinal map, not a statistical model.

Chinese Ground Workers:

Belief Strength: 9 | Overcoming Challenges: 8

Chinese ground workers demonstrate the strongest link between confidence and overcoming challenges. Their high belief strength translates into proactive and resilient actions, making them a cornerstone of operational success. These scores reflect not only individual capabilities but also the effective integration of belief into practical problem-solving behaviours.

Malaysian Ground Workers:

Belief Strength: 8 | Overcoming Challenges: 7

Malaysian ground workers also exhibit strong confidence and success in overcoming challenges, albeit slightly less than their Chinese counterparts. Their role in the project is significant, and their ability to handle challenges is shaped by a combination of organisational support and cultural factors. However, slight gaps in resource availability or support systems may limit their ability to maximize their confidence in practice.

Third-Party labour:

Belief Strength: 7 | Overcoming Challenges: 6

Third-party labourers show moderate confidence and reasonable success in overcoming challenges. Their external status within the organisation may limit their full integration into the project's operational framework, which impacts their ability to maximize their belief potential in practice.

Chinese Leaders:

Belief Strength: 6 | Overcoming Challenges: 5

Chinese leaders demonstrate moderate belief strength and a lower ability to overcome challenges compared to ground workers. This discrepancy highlights the complexity of leadership responsibilities, where strategic decisions may not always translate into immediate behavioural results. Better alignment with operational realities could strengthen their capacity to bridge this gap.

Chinese and Malaysian Mid-Level Workers:

Belief Strength: 5 | Overcoming Challenges: 4

Mid-level workers show moderate confidence and limited success in overcoming challenges. Positioned between leadership and ground teams, they face dual pressures that may dilute their ability to act effectively. Strengthening their role through clearer communication and increased autonomy could enhance their contribution to the project.

Malaysian Leaders:

Belief Strength: 4 | Overcoming Challenges: 3

Malaysian leaders display the lowest belief strength and success in overcoming challenges. This suggests potential structural or cultural barriers that hinder their ability to translate confidence into effective action. Addressing these barriers—through leadership training, resource allocation, and greater alignment with project goals—could significantly improve their performance.

It could be summarized that ground workers, particularly Chinese ground workers, are the most confident and effective groups in overcoming challenges, which indicates that those working directly in operations are thriving and well-aligned with their roles. However, leadership groups, especially Malaysian leaders, are struggling more, both in terms of belief and effectiveness. This suggests that the organisational structure or culture may not be fully supportive of leadership roles, or that there are additional pressures at the leadership level that hinder their ability to act as effectively as ground workers. Mid-level workers are caught in the middle, with moderate belief and effectiveness, possibly reflecting their intermediary role in the organisational hierarchy. They may require additional support from leadership or clearer communication from the ground level to improve their performance.

As shown in Figure 7, stronger belief is generally associated with greater impetus to overcome procedural challenges. Read as a qualitative–ordinal map, the display emphasizes directional association and clustering rather than statistical estimation. Interpretive scope and method note. Both axes use 1–9 ordinal codes from interview coding; points indicate relative, not absolute, distances. "Impetus" denotes willingness/effectiveness to tackle permits, inter-agency coordination, compliance, and related procedural hurdles. The figure visualizes qualitative co-variation on ordinal scales and should not be read as a parametric correlation or a causal model.

Directional co-variation. Groups characterised by stronger belief tend to cluster toward higher values of impetus, visible as an upward tendency across stakeholder clusters. The pattern is indicative rather than inferential and should be interpreted as qualitative co-variation on ordinal scales. Leaders more often appear in the upper-right area of the map, reflecting stronger belief coupled with a greater drive to resolve procedural bottlenecks—consistent with responsibility for milestones and access to information flows. Mid-level staff typically occupy the middle band, balancing optimism with day-to-day coordination pressures. Ground-level workers show wider dispersion, mirroring heterogeneous encounters with site access, inspections, subcontracting interfaces, and documentation routines.

Aggregated by stakeholder group, Chinese leaders and managers tend to display stronger belief alongside higher impetus, aligning with implementation roles and accountability for delivery. Malaysian counterparts often exhibit pragmatic impetus shaped by local permitting, land matters, and community engagement; mid-level clusters trend moderately upward as coordination improves. Third-country specialists vary by task and tenure, producing a broader spread. These contrasts are read as relative positioning on ordinal scales rather than differences with statistical magnitudes.

Where belief is stronger, teams report quicker escalation and resolution of permitting issues, tighter inter-agency coordination, and more consistent compliance routines; this alignment helps contain delays and stabilize expectations. Conversely, when belief is weaker, impetus is more sensitive to friction points, information gaps, and shifting responsibilities, which appears as greater dispersion in the map. The figure does not establish causal direction; both belief and impetus may be co-determined by organisational communication, prior experience, and evolving project conditions. The display is a heuristic for pattern recognition. Evidence for mechanisms comes from triangulated interview narratives and project documentation (see Methodology).

5.4 Honour as an elevated perception shaping ideological cohesion

5.4.1 Honour commitment and resilience in the ECRL project

Our final discussion in this chapter foregrounds an orientation that is crucial for understanding the ECRL project and is irreducibly cultural rather than simply economic or political: honour. Across the interviews, many Chinese staff described a sense of honour and devotion that became especially salient during the project's suspension period. This orientation shaped not only work ethic and persistence under uncertainty, but also how staff narrated their responsibilities to Malaysian counterparts and local communities, and how they interpreted and responded to setbacks during implementation. In this sense, "honour" functioned as a culturally mediated commitment that helped sustain resilience and adaptability in the face of formidable obstacles.

The importance of honour is also evident in how staff narrated a second major operational disruption: the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. The pandemic interrupted routine operations and created immediate implementation difficulties. As one interviewee from the human resources department recalled, “There was no way to carry out the on-site implementation, and our on-site work was basically stagnant during that period.” The abrupt halt not only delayed construction, but also intensified uncertainty among staff, amplified by prolonged separation from home and the indeterminate duration of restrictions. As one expatriate put it, “We do not know how long the epidemic will last and how much impact it will have on this project.”

Interviewees also emphasised the pandemic's indirect effects on costs and resources. Staff involved in finance and procurement noted that even small material-price fluctuations—linked to broader global instability—could raise overall project expenditure. Labour mobility constraints compounded these pressures, as international travel restrictions and bilateral arrangements limited the movement of workers to Malaysia. A Malaysian HR professional explained: “Due to the epidemic and also some agreements between the two countries, our project has been in a state of shortage for labour for more than a year.” Despite these hardships, many Chinese staff framed their experience in terms of perseverance and responsibility, repeatedly emphasising a commitment to “keep going” through successive difficulties.

Despite these hardships, the overarching sentiment among the Chinese staff was one of steadfast commitment and a determination to persevere. The senior-most interviewee among them reflected on the project's journey, emphasizing, “In the whole implementation process of the project, we are in a state of constant overcoming difficulties.” This statement not only highlights the myriad visible and hidden challenges they faced but also underscores a collective ethos of resilience. He further explained that the narrative shared during interviews often only scratched the surface of their challenges, which ranged from logistical to socio-political, many of which remained obscure to the external observers.

How has this continuing commitment to the project been sustained in the face of all these

obstacles? The profound belief in their honourable mission is a key factor in explaining this, as it facilitated a deep sense of responsibility and commitment, which was pivotal in navigating the project through its most challenging phases. The staff's confidence and devotion were further reinforced by the encouragement and directives from project leaders on the Chinese side, who consistently framed these challenges as opportunities to demonstrate resilience and commitment to the project's success: i.e. again, reaffirming discourses of honour, albeit from the top-down, thereby establishing a mutually productive dynamic of reinforcement of 'honourable' commitment to the project between leadership/project management and workers that resonates with the dynamics explained in the last section.

The personal beliefs of honour and devotion among the Chinese staff – leadership and on-site workers – not only shaped their professional actions but also imbued them with a capacity to handle adversity with a unique blend of resilience and strategic foresight. This mindset proved essential not just for maintaining the momentum of the ECRL project during unforeseen global crises but also for fostering a supportive and motivated team environment. This analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how personal values and cultural beliefs influence project management practices, particularly in the context of international infrastructure projects where diverse cultural dynamics play a significant role.

5.4.2 Socio-economic empathy and personal commitment in the ECRL project

Within the framework of the ECRL project, the deep-rooted confidence and spirit of devotion displayed by Chinese staff members stem not only from professional commitment but also from profound personal convictions and cultural experiences that are widely dispersed across the whole population, regardless of seniority in the project. This sense of duty is particularly poignant in the narratives of those who see their work as part of a broader mission to assist the Malaysian populace, drawing parallels with their own experiences of hardship and development.

One quiet interviewee during a group session shared a moving account of his origins from Xihaigu in NingXia province, a region in China historically marked by severe poverty and significant

geographical challenges. He reflected on the parallels between the conditions he grew up with and those in East Malaysia, noting, "At least, the natural conditions of the East Coast are relatively good, and what is planted on the ground can grow, and even if it is not possible, you can fish out a little food in the sea." His narrative brings forth a vivid picture of the struggles faced by his community, where survival often depended on immediate natural resources and the harsh realities of their environment.

The interviewee recounted his memories of the socio-economic transformations in Xihaigu since the 1980s, describing how the region, once deeply impoverished, gradually overcame poverty through collective efforts. "Back then," he reflected, "we started to see changes with the development of public transport systems and the promotion of sustainable agricultural practices like mushroom and wolfberry planting." These transformations not only improved the living conditions in Xihaigu but also shaped his understanding of the potential impact of the ECRL project. Drawing from his own experiences, he expressed empathy and a strong belief in the possibility of similar positive transformations in East Malaysia, driven by carefully planned initiatives and collective action.

Another technical department staff member echoed this sentiment, observing that while the East Coast of Malaysia is not as impoverished as Xihaigu once was, its economic development remains limited. He highlighted the strategic importance of the ECRL in enhancing local logistics and economic conditions, stating, "Building this railway can definitely make some contributions to the logistics and thus local economic development." This statement not only reflects a professional assessment but also a personal commitment to leveraging his skills and experiences to foster regional development.

Over the past five years, the progress made on the ECRL project has been a source of immense pride for the team. "We have seen that a project has gone from nothing to now, the earth has been built, the foundation has been put up, and the next step is to start building bridges while some tunnels of them have been broken through," an interviewee noted, encapsulating the tangible

results of their hard work and dedication. The ongoing transformation of the project landscape serves as a testament to their enduring confidence and growing resolve, despite the myriad challenges they continue to face.

These narratives illustrate not merely the technical achievements of the ECRL project but also the human elements underpinning its execution; human elements, moreover, that are of strong personal resonance for the Chinese workers given their pre-existing life experiences. The personal histories, cultural backgrounds, and transformative experiences of the Chinese staff enrich their contributions, turning the project into a conduit for socio-economic development and intercultural exchange. The confidence and devotion they bring to their roles are imbued with a sense of honour, driving them to persevere through difficulties with an ever-strengthening resolve. This dynamic not only advances the project but also fosters a deep-seated connection between the team members and the communities they aim to serve, highlighting the profound impact of personal beliefs and cultural empathy in international development projects.

5.4.3 Bridging communities through shared struggles

The fuller discussion of positionality and interview dynamics is provided in Chapter 4 (Sections 4.4.3–4.4.4), including how my identity as a Chinese researcher affiliated with a UK university shaped access and candour across respondent groups, and how senior-management access could both facilitate and constrain disclosure. I do not repeat that discussion in detail here. Instead, I flag its relevance for this chapter: the empirical material analysed in Chapter 5 is produced through situated interactions, and patterns in confidence, caution, and narrative alignment should be read in light of who was speaking, in what setting, and with what perceived risks of attribution. Where appropriate, I therefore write with explicit attribution and attend to divergence across interviewee categories rather than treating any single account as representative.

While the strong sense of honour and devotion among the Chinese staff members of the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) project has led to significant personal commitment and a drive to contribute positively to the Malaysian community, it may also lead to several unintended negative

consequences. The interview data suggest a complex interplay between cultural self-perception and project dynamics that could potentially disrupt both individual well-being and collaborative efficacy. In short, while a source of unique strength and capacity for the project, this strong personal sense of honour and shared struggle also brings with it multiple challenges.

Interviews reveal that the profound sense of responsibility felt by the Chinese staff often transcends typical professional obligations, pushing them towards an intense personal commitment. Building on the socio-economic empathy narratives discussed in Section 5.4.2, such personal motivations can also intensify self-imposed pressure to prioritise delivery over rest and recovery. This strong identification with the project's goals, while noble, may lead to an unbalanced work commitment where staff prioritise project success over personal health and well-being. Such overcommitment could result in burnout, especially under the high-pressure conditions of an international infrastructure project. The potential for psychological strain was also evident in accounts of the COVID-19 period, as discussed in Section 5.4.1, several respondents described heightened uncertainty and stress during disruption. In section 5.4.3, however, the emphasis is on how this honour-centred devotion can, in some cases, normalise exhaustion and increase vulnerability to burnout under prolonged pressure.

The same cultural beliefs that inspire a strong work ethic might also cause tensions in a diverse workplace like the ECRL project. The narrative shared by the interviewee about bringing development lessons from China to Malaysia illustrates a positive intention but could also be perceived as cultural imposition. This is particularly problematic in multicultural settings where differing values and work norms prevail. The belief in one's cultural approach as superior can inadvertently lead to misunderstandings or resistance from local staff and other international collaborators, potentially hindering effective teamwork and mutual respect.

The interviews indicate that the Chinese staff's collective belief in their mission can create communication barriers. An echo chamber effect, where only similar opinions and approaches are reinforced, can stifle innovation and prevent the incorporation of diverse, potentially beneficial

perspectives into the project management. For instance, the staff's unanimous focus on overcoming difficulties, as highlighted by a senior team member, might overlook the need for adapting or reconsidering project strategies that are not working, reducing operational flexibility.

A further interpretive risk in the interview material concerns decision-making bias: a strong sense of duty and honour, and deep commitment to a project "mission", can incline participants to underplay risks or present overly optimistic assessments. This tendency surfaced in several accounts where overcoming challenges was foregrounded, while the strategic need to scale back, revise targets, or adjust expectations in response to on-the-ground realities was less emphasised. In analysing these narratives, I treat such statements as situated accounts shaped by organisational roles, incentives and cultural repertoires, rather than as straightforward indicators of project performance. To mitigate this risk, I compare claims across different organisational levels and stakeholder positions, and triangulate interview accounts with documentary materials and publicly available sources, so that optimism or reticence is interpreted as part of the project's meaning-making environment rather than taken at face value.

5.4.4 The role of honour and cultural commitment in shaping project ideologies

Table 4: Cultural dynamics across organisational levels in the ECRL project

Phase	Description	Main Actor
Confidence	Confidence and belief driven by leadership and team unity	Senior leadership
Influence their view	Aligning project goals across levels	Medium-tier staff
Influence their behaviour	Effective execution of tasks on-site	On-the-ground workers
Fluid ideology	Dynamic reinforcement of shared values and honours	All participants and stakeholders

Note: "Medium-tier staff" refers to mid-level personnel who often act as intermediaries between senior leadership and on-site teams. "Fluid ideology" refers to the dynamic and ongoing

reinforcement of shared values and a sense of honour/mission.

The interviews reveal complex cultural dynamics at play, with a de facto division of cultural labour across the organisational hierarchy, in sustaining the project. This dynamic begins with the formation of confidence, driven by senior leadership who articulate a unified vision and align team efforts with broader national goals such as the Belt and Road Initiative. Through strategic communication and a clear articulation of project priorities, leadership fosters a shared sense of purpose that connects individual contributions to the collective mission.

Influencing views across the organisational hierarchy is facilitated by middle-tier staff, who act as intermediaries between leadership and ground workers. They translate strategic objectives into actionable steps, ensuring alignment and clarity at every level. This feedback process strengthens internal cohesion and fosters consistency in how goals are perceived and pursued across diverse teams. Importantly, the mutual reinforcement between leadership and workers—where the positive reception of leadership's guidance reaffirms leadership convictions—creates a feedback loop that sustains goal alignment and trust.

At the implementation level, influencing behaviour becomes the primary focus. Ground workers, as the executors of project tasks, play a crucial role in embodying and operationalizing collective beliefs. Their ability to translate project expectations into practical actions ensures that strategic goals are realized on the ground. For example, workers who perceive the ECRL as vital for regional development often demonstrate enhanced resilience and effort, even in challenging conditions. These behaviours bridge the gap between abstract visions and tangible outcomes, turning leadership's strategies into measurable progress.

Finally, this dynamic interaction across levels contributes to the formation of shared values, where confidence, alignment, and behaviour converge into a cohesive organisational culture. This culture, reinforced through iterative feedback and consistent practices, creates an adaptive framework that sustains internal cohesion. While this table 4 emphasizes the dynamic processes underpinning

cultural alignment within the project, the following tables (table 5-6) focus on the outcomes of these interactions—particularly the development of honour, the integration of cultural ideologies with economic objectives, and their broader implications for regional cooperation

Table 5: Thematic breakdown of belief, behaviour and honour in the ECRL project

Theme/ Subtheme	Presentation of Belief and Commitment (from Chinese side)	Influence on their views and decisions (on both sides)	Influence on Practice (on both sides)	Formation of sense of honour
Description	Describes how different levels express belief and commitment to the project	Discusses how belief and alignment of goals exerts influence among their team	How ground-level workers reflect their understanding and belief in daily tasks	The development of superior perceptions, such as a sense of honour among the workers.
Interview Sources	Interviews 1-8	Interviews 2,5,7	Interviews 3,4,8	Interviews 1-4
Observations among interviewee	Varies by Nationality	Differences noted between Chinese and Malaysian teams	Insights from ground-level builders emphasized	Interacted across the team

Table 6: Comparative analysis of roles and correlations among stakeholders in the ECRL project

Actors	Presentation of Belief and Commitment (from Chinese side)	Influence on their views and decisions (on both sides)	Influence on Practice (on both sides)	Formation of sense of honour
Chinese/ Malaysian Senior Team	High Concern/High Correlation	High Correlation	Low Correlation	Medium Correlation
Malaysia/ Chinese ground workers	Medium	High/Low	High	Medium Correlation
Third party (Cambodian/ Indonesian etc.) ground workers	Low	Low	Medium	Medium Correlation

First column: Formation of Perceptions

Within the ECRL project, the formation of perceptions begins with the deeply held beliefs and commitments of the participants. These are influenced by broader narratives and cultural values, such as national pride and the strategic importance of the project under China's Belt and Road Initiative. For Chinese workers, there is a strong sense of participating in a project that not only enhances their country's global stature but also brings economic benefits to Malaysia. These deeply held beliefs, once established, set the stage for influencing behaviours at all levels, turning abstract perceptions into concrete actions that align with project objectives.

In CPE, these perceptions are not seen as passive or merely reflective; they are active constructs that guide economic behaviour, such as motivating workers to engage more actively in problem-solving and to align their individual contributions with the project's collective goals. The cultural and economic are intertwined, with the economic actions of individuals being guided by culturally formed perceptions.

Second column: Influence on behaviour

The behaviours of individuals within the ECRL project are direct manifestations of their initial perceptions. For instance, if workers believe that their contribution to the ECRL is part of a larger national agenda, this belief enhances their work ethic and commitment. Such behaviours include higher productivity, commitment to quality, and willingness to engage in problem-solving activities. At the same time, as the initial cultural anchors, these behaviours are continuously shaped and adapted through feedback loops between leadership and ground-level workers. Leadership's articulation of strategic goals fosters a shared understanding of the project's significance, which is reinforced through the daily practices of workers, such as prioritizing quality and adapting flexibly to operational challenges. This reflects a continuous negotiation between cultural values and practical demands on-site.

From the CPE viewpoint, these behaviours are critical as they translate cultural narratives into

economic actions. The project becomes a canvas where these narratives play out, influencing daily operations and strategic decisions. This perspective recognises that economic activities are not only about the maximization of utility but are also about fulfilling cultural and ideological roles.

Third Column: Development of Superior Perceptions (Sense of honour)

The consistent exhibition of behaviours aligned with initial cultural beliefs leads to the development of superior perceptions, such as a sense of honour among the workers. This sense of honour is both a personal and collective perception, growing from individual and group experiences within the project. It transcends basic cultural norms, becoming an ideology that signifies more than just pride in one's work; it represents a shared commitment to a cause seen as greater than the sum of its parts. This aligns individual motivations with collective economic objectives, such as enhancing regional cooperation and strengthening cultural integration along the Belt and Road Initiative. The formation of honour within the workforce is not static; it evolves dynamically as cultural norms are continually reinforced through consistent behaviours and shared values. This process creates a collective sense of purpose that links individual motivations to the broader cultural and economic objectives of the ECRL project.

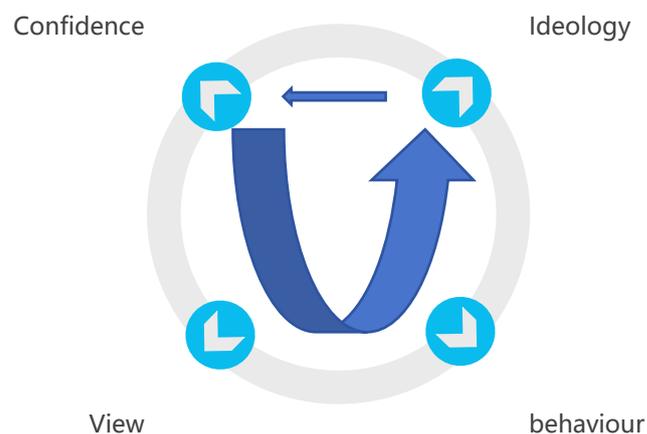
Cultural Political Economy helps explain how such ideologies are not merely by-products but are integral to the functioning of economic systems. These ideologies reinforce the cultural beliefs that initiated them, creating a feedback loop. In the case of the ECRL, the ideology of honour and commitment supports continued enthusiasm and dedication, even in the face of challenges, thereby sustaining the economic and cultural goals of the project. The cultural dynamics established within the project extend beyond its internal operations, influencing perceptions among local communities. Observations of dedication and collaboration within the ECRL workforce foster trust and recognition of the project's value, which in turn enhances the connectivity of regional economies under the Belt and Road Initiative. For instance, within the ECRL project, leadership's emphasis on shared cultural values not only motivated workers to maintain high-quality standards but also reinforced cross-team collaboration, showcasing how cultural

ideologies translate into measurable economic outcomes. In the ECRL project, the interplay of beliefs, behaviours, and shared values underpins a dynamic cultural framework that not only sustains internal cohesion but also drives broader economic and cultural integration under the Belt and Road Initiative.

5.5 Conclusion

Figure 8 summarises the feedback loop of cultural and ideological reinforcement discussed in this chapter.

Figure 8: Feedback loop in the ECRL project



This diagram represents a continuous feedback loop through which confidence, shared views, everyday behaviours, and ideology interact to sustain a cohesive organisational culture within the ECRL project. Confidence encourages shared interpretations of the project's objectives and significance; these shared views shape behavioural orientations on the ground; repeated behaviours, in turn, deepen attachment to an overarching ideology (including a shared sense of honour and purpose); and this ideological consolidation then feeds back into renewed confidence and commitment. The loop helps explain how individual attitudes and organisational practices remain aligned with strategic project goals over time, including within the wider framing of the Belt

and Road Initiative (BRI).

Firstly, the cycle begins with confidence instilled in employees, particularly those on the ground level. This confidence is not just about completing tasks but represents a deeper ideological connection to the project's goals. It fosters resilience and adaptability, encouraging employees to maintain their focus and motivation during operational challenges, such as suspensions or delays.

Secondly, confidence influences how employees form shared views and understanding about the project's objectives. This shared understanding creates alignment within the team and builds a foundation for a collective commitment to achieving the project's goals. Workers begin to see the project as part of a larger vision, linking individual actions to broader organisational and national objectives.

Thirdly, the shared views then translate into behaviours that align individual and team actions with the project's broader goals. Employees take proactive steps in their daily work, reflecting their understanding of the project's significance. These behaviours foster productivity, commitment, and teamwork, ensuring that every level of the workforce contributes to the project's success.

Finally, through consistent behaviours rooted in shared views, employees develop a deeper sense of purpose and belonging, which culminates in the formation of a "sense of honour." This sense of honour reflects the ideological alignment of employees with the project's overarching narrative. In the context of the ECRL, this honour is tied to their recognition of the project's broader significance within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), reinforcing their belief in the value of their work and sustaining the feedback loop.

This cyclical reinforcement—beginning with confidence, shared views, behaviour and flowing through ideology— establishes a robust feedback loop. By continuously reinforcing this alignment, the ECRL project ensures that its workforce remains motivated and committed, even in the face of external challenges or project suspensions. This process maintains a resilient organisational culture, aligning individual and collective goals with the strategic objectives of the BRI.

Through this feedback loop, a Cultural Political Economy (CPE) analysis significantly illuminates the ECRL project and the ways in which cultural and ideological factors are integrally and crucially embedded into the economic practices and outcomes of large-scale infrastructure projects. The iterative process not only enhances immediate project performance but also contributes to the long-term success and adaptability of the ECRL, showcasing how deeply cultural beliefs – including some that are specific, if not unique, to contemporary Chinese actors/projects – and economic objectives can intersect to support sustainable international development.

Chapter 6: The power of slogans and discourses

6.1 Introduction

The primary interest of this thesis is to explore, in rich empirical detail, how the actual execution of a 'flagship' project of the BRI is contributing (or not) to the BRI's agenda of regional economic integration of China's environs, and with that, even to the broader reshaping of a new Sino-centric global capitalism. Moreover, a key focus of this research, led by its cultural political economy (CPE) theoretical lens, is the role and efficacy of discourse, and specific 'power/knowledge technologies' thereof, associated with the management of this infrastructure project in shaping these broader outcomes. In this light, one particular issue stood out regarding the use and form of discourses around the ECRL, namely the use of slogans. This chapter thus explores the role of slogans more deeply regarding their significance and effects for the cultural politics of the ECRL project.

Though prompted by empirical observation regarding the case in hand, once noticed it was quickly evident that the use of slogans is well-documented to be a familiar and important element of (contemporary/PRC) Chinese politics more generally (Zeng, 2020). Slogans and discourses are celebrated as tools for fostering cohesion and alignment in Chinese politics, including in large-scale infrastructure projects like the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) (Zeng, 2020). This corroboration offers strong *prima facie* rationale to look more closely at the use of slogans in the ECRL project. And it turns out that closer scrutiny is merited, since the effectiveness of slogans is not without complexity. This chapter thus critically examines the use of slogans and discourses within the ECRL project, exploring how they function both as mechanisms of cultural exchange and as instruments of control.

The slogan 'Connecting Life and Accelerating Growth,' introduced by the Malaysian Rail Link (MRL) in collaboration with China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) during the ECRL launch ceremony in Kuala Lumpur on July 25, 2017, exemplifies this dual purpose. Promoted across various media channels—including public events, press releases, and social media—this slogan was

intended to communicate the project's vision to a broad Malaysian audience. On the surface, it appears to unite workers and communities under a shared vision of progress. However, this slogan—like many others used in transnational projects—serves less as a response to the actual needs and concerns of affected communities and more as a cultural and semiotic 'knowledge-power technology.' It enables project leaders to shape public sentiment and facilitate buy-in among stakeholders, subtly reinforcing the power dynamics between China and Malaysia. This chapter interrogates the ways in which such slogans effectively mobilize support by constructing emotionally charged sound bites that align with the broader goals of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), often at the expense of deeper local complexities and issues.

This chapter also investigates how slogans and discourses shape public understanding of the ECRL project. Many respondents echo the themes of development and progress highlighted in the slogan, raising questions about the authenticity of these responses. This chapter critically analyses whether such responses reflect the persuasive power of repeated discourse rather than an unconditioned, intrinsic belief. The concept of 'memorable and emotional' slogans, while effective in generating public support, raises questions about the extent to which they shape or manipulate public sentiment—potentially overshadowing more contentious aspects of the project, such as environmental concerns, displacement, or labour conditions. This analysis considers whether these slogans like "connecting life and accelerating growth" mold public opinion in a way that supports project objectives but may not fully address local concerns.

A significant aspect of this chapter involves the contrasting approaches to discourse by Chinese and Malaysian stakeholders. Chinese narratives often employ emotionally charged, ideologically driven slogans that resonate with national pride and regional integration themes. In contrast, Malaysian discourse tends to adopt a more formal, objective tone, focusing on economic benefits and technical specifics. This distinction underscores potential power imbalances within the project, potentially privileging the Chinese vision while sidelining local voices. To what extent do local workers and communities perceive themselves as having agency in engaging with these powerful narratives, and does this perception provide them with sufficient satisfaction to support the project

and the broader influence of Chinese investment and the BRI in their region?

Furthermore, the chapter questions whether slogans and discourses can truly facilitate the kind of cultural exchange necessary for the success of a project like the ECRL. While slogans may act as intermediaries between Chinese and Malaysian stakeholders, they often simplify complex cultural interactions into overly optimistic narratives of cooperation and development. This simplification serves as an effective mechanism to unify and harmonize the diverse parties involved in the ECRL project—facilitating collaboration among stakeholders with varying interests, cultural discourses, and roles. By distilling complex cultural interactions into more accessible narratives, it can strengthen cohesion and foster a shared purpose within the project. However, this approach also carries significant risks, as it may oversimplify underlying complexities and promote overly optimistic narratives that could obscure deeper cultural and ideological differences, particularly when scrutinized by critical social scientists.

As Jessop (Jessop, B. 2010) notes, the 'real world' is in fact overwhelmingly complex and hence no major societal project can possibly be pursued – and, moreover, successfully realized – without some degree of simplification in its discursive representation, which is thus necessarily at the cost of some (perhaps significant) loss of 'nuance' or multivocality. And yet, precisely this 'functionality' of such slogans risks overlooking the deeper cultural differences and tensions that may arise, and thus may contribute to a surface-level understanding of cross-cultural collaboration. The project's reliance on discursive cohesion will certainly be masking underlying frictions between workers, managers, and local communities, but the key question is: to what extent, and how sustainably? This chapter explores this critical tension between the intended and actual effects of slogans in shaping the ECRL's narrative.

As a foundation of interrogating the material and immaterial dimensions of the ECRL (for next chapter), this chapter highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of how communication strategies impact both the project's success and the broader socio-economic relations between China and Malaysia. In doing so, it calls for a rethinking of the role of

slogans—not just as tools of cooperation, but also as instruments of control that shape public perception in ways that may not fully align with local realities. While slogans are often seen as branding tools to foster unity and shared vision (Jessop, 2004), they also carry deeper ideological implications. For instance, in the context of the ECRL project, slogans like 'Connecting Life and Accelerating Growth' function as ideological bridges, aligning individual beliefs with broader project goals and reinforcing narratives that promote state-driven initiatives (Callahan, 2016; Du & Zhang, 2018).

6.2 The knowledge and technology of slogans

6.2.1 Strategic messaging: the simplification of slogan can also generate risk

During a high-profile ceremony marking the progress of the ECRL project, the slogan "Connecting Life, Accelerating Growth" was reiterated, emphasizing the project's ambition to unite Malaysia's east and west coasts. This event, attended by Malaysian Transport Minister Wee Ka Siong, Selangor State Secretary Amiruddin, Malaysia Rail Link Corporation CEO Darwis Abdul Razak, and CCCC General Manager Kong Qi, symbolized a formal commitment to the project's strategic goals (Xinhua, 2021). Interviews with ECRL staff who attended the ceremony revealed that the slogan was repeatedly referenced as embodying the project's mission to serve as a "land bridge" across the Malay Peninsula, connecting the east and west coasts and fostering economic integration. One of the main leaders at the ceremony emphasized the project's role in promoting development in the East Coast states by significantly reducing travel time, a change anticipated to enhance regional cohesion and align with Malaysia's long-term economic objectives. Additionally, the finalization of the northern line of Section C was highlighted as a critical step to ensure the smooth progress of the project, reinforcing the slogan's role as a memorable and emotionally resonant commitment to national development.

In the ECRL project, slogans function as powerful cultural triggers that not only foster emotional resonance among workers but also lay the groundwork for a shared ideological foundation across stakeholders. A Malaysian interviewee from the publicity department of on certain Malaysian

organisation involved in the ECRL project noted that "there is a lot of attention in Malaysia for this project,"²⁷ and attributed much of this public interest to the slogan "Connecting Life and Accelerating Growth." This slogan, frequently highlighted in both official communications and media reports (The Star Malaysia, 2015), encapsulates the project's dual objectives of connecting Malaysia's east and west coasts and promoting national growth.

The "Connecting Life" aspect is embodied in the project's 665-kilometre line with 20 stations, which aims to improve Malaysia's public transportation network. In contrast, "Accelerating Growth" has been emphasized by local media as indicative of China's role as a transformative partner in Malaysia's economy. Another interviewee observed that, upon completion, the ECRL will act as a "road bridge" between the east and west coasts, facilitating trade, tourism, and investment. This dual messaging aligns the slogan with national aspirations for economic progress, and its memorable phrasing has helped embed it deeply within public discourse as a symbol of Malaysia's future growth and connectivity. The slogan "Connecting Life and Accelerating Growth" is crafted as an emotional and memorable statement, intended to unify public perception around the ECRL's aspirational goals. By suggesting enhanced connectivity across Malaysia's east and west coasts and socio-economic revitalization, the slogan appeals to both national unity and the broader aspirations of equitable development.

However, the impact of this slogan depends on the ECRL's ability to deliver these benefits tangibly and equitably across affected communities. If the project operates problematically, the slogan risks becoming a hollow message, potentially leading to public disillusionment. Such disillusionment reflects an ever-present risk of strategic communication: because slogans condense complex realities into memorable claims, they set expectations that invite close public scrutiny. This raises the possibility of a widening gap between promise and lived experience if "accelerated growth" and "life connections" do not materialise as quickly, broadly, or equitably as anticipated. In that case, the slogan's ambitious claims may come to be read as unattainable, amplifying dissatisfaction and

²⁷ Interview M7, See Appendix 11.1.2

eroding public trust.

The disparity between the slogan's promise and the on-the-ground experiences can lead to public disillusionment if not managed carefully. Effective communication strategies must therefore evolve to address these complexities transparently, ensuring that the slogan remains a compelling reflection of the project's goals rather than a superficial layer masking less favourable realities. From this research's engagement with the project's discourse, it is clear that slogans like 'Connecting Life and Accelerating Growth' play a central role in the ECRL's strategic communication by inspiring and mobilizing public support. This is particularly evident in their consistent presence across promotional materials and public campaigns, which aim to align public perception with the project's socio-economic aspirations. However, the true effectiveness of such slogans lies not merely in their ability to convey high-level goals but in their capacity to elicit actions that contribute to the tangible delivery of these promises.

For instance, the slogan emphasizes equitable development and enhanced connectivity, which resonate with both local and national aspirations. Yet, whether these aspirations translate into measurable benefits depends on the project's ability to manage expectations and deliver visible outcomes. Public campaigns built around the slogan can amplify its impact, but their success ultimately hinges on transparent communication strategies and consistent progress reporting to ensure alignment between the slogan's promises and the realities of implementation. In this way, the slogan's effectiveness extends beyond its rhetorical appeal to its role in maintaining public trust and driving the project's momentum.

6.2.2 Emotional techniques in ECRL's slogans and discourses

The slogan of the East Malaysia Railway Project (ECRL), "Connecting Life, Accelerating Growth(融通生活,促进发展:RongTongShengHuo, CuJingFaZhan)," strategically blends simplicity and resonance, comprising four words in English and eight in Chinese. This design ensures that the slogan remains memorable across diverse audiences, including Chinese, Malaysian, and other English-speaking individuals. Interviews with a varied group of ECRL staff members reveal that the slogan's concise

phrasing effectively communicates across linguistic and cultural divides. This clarity and adaptability allow it to resonate with diverse audiences, encapsulating the project's ambition and fostering a lasting impression on all who engage with it. This memorability is crucial, as it helps to foster an emotional connection with the project, aligning with its goals of enhancing connectivity and spurring economic growth across regions.

On the other hand, the discourse surrounding the ECRL strategically employs emotional appeals to shape the Malaysian public's perception and support. Emotionally charged slogans, as disseminated through official media, are designed to influence public sentiment positively towards the project. Specifically, the slogans can be grouped into three distinct emotional appeals. One set centres on affirming the project's resumption, communicating belief, certainty, and confidence in order to reinforce the government's decision to restart the project with a sense of determination and security. A second set emphasises expectations of future benefits, projecting hope and desire by painting a vivid picture of the improvements and advantages that the ECRL is expected to bring to the region; these messages are intended to cultivate anticipation and enthusiasm among the public. A third set focuses on efforts to realise project benefits, highlighting plans, commitments, and encouragement by detailing the active measures being taken to ensure project success; in doing so, the slogans emphasise practical steps and the steady commitment of project managers and stakeholders.

These categories of emotional discourses are not merely communicative but are carefully crafted through a collaborative effort involving ECRL communication teams and external consultants. This process, as revealed in interviews with ECRL staff,²⁸ is guided under strategic communication principles, by Malaysian government, and project owning companies such as MRL aimed at resonating deeply with listeners and creating a positive narrative around the resumption of the ECRL. They are instrumental in generating public endorsement and emotional buy-in, which are crucial for the project's ongoing support and success. Each slogan is not just a tagline but a strategic

²⁸ Interview C5; See Appendix 11.1.2

tool used to build and sustain public confidence and enthusiasm for the ECRL's goals and impacts.

To further substantiate the effectiveness of the slogan, "Connecting Life, Accelerating Growth," it is essential to explore how its structure and word choice resonate with diverse cultural and linguistic groups. The use of the words "connecting" and "growth" speaks to universal themes that transcend linguistic boundaries. For Malaysian audiences, especially in the context of a multi-ethnic and multilingual society, such words appeal to collective aspirations for development and progress. The simplicity of the slogan allows it to be easily translated without losing its core message. In particular, the use of eight characters in the Chinese version—historically considered a lucky number in Chinese culture—adds an additional layer of resonance with Chinese-speaking communities, further enhancing the slogan's memorability and emotional appeal. This strategic selection of language, both concise and symbolic, ensures that the slogan remains impactful across different cultural spheres, reinforcing the project's goal of fostering both physical and cultural connectivity.

When examining the emotional appeals embedded within the ECRL's discourse, it becomes clear that each category plays a unique role in shaping public perception. The first category, the affirmation of the project's resumption, creates a sense of stability and reassurance. By reinforcing the government's decision to continue with the project, this type of discourse seeks to rebuild any lost confidence and mitigate public skepticism. The underlying message here is one of trust and certainty, which is crucial in large infrastructure projects often subject to political and economic delays. The second category—focused on the expectation of future benefits—functions to generate hope and anticipation. This type of emotional appeal projects an image of a better future, where the project promises to improve lives and boost economic prosperity. By evoking a sense of optimism, these slogans work to align the public's hopes with the project's goals, creating a shared vision of progress. The third category, centred on efforts to realize project benefits, offers a more practical appeal. It emphasizes ongoing work and commitment, signaling that the project's success is not just an abstract future hope but something actively being pursued in the present. This type of message reassures the public that the benefits of the ECRL are attainable through concrete actions, thereby bolstering trust in the project's leadership and management.

It is important to clarify the term 'manipulation' in this context. While 'manipulation' might suggest a negative connotation, in the realm of political economy and public communication, it is often used to describe the strategic shaping of public opinion. Emotional appeals, when skillfully employed, are less about coercion and more about guiding the public's emotional response in a particular direction. In the case of the ECRL, these slogans and discourses are discussed here not as deception, but as strategic affective framing designed to foster identification, sustain attention, and align public sentiment with stated project objectives. By doing so, the emotional resonance created by these slogans becomes a powerful tool to sustain public support and engagement, which is critical for the success of such a large-scale infrastructure project.

6.2.3 Communication to improve effectiveness of slogans and discourses

Official online resources play a critical role in validating the narratives and statements captured during interviews with the ECRL staff. These resources include dedicated sections on the ECRL and CCCC websites, where comprehensive project updates, press releases, and multimedia content are regularly published. These platforms are designed to provide stakeholders and the public with transparent and timely information about the project's progress and its broader implications.

For instance, the ECRL's official website provides a detailed timeline of the project's key events,²⁹ milestones, and significant updates, including ceremonial events where slogans like "Connecting Life and Accelerating Growth" were introduced to unify and communicate the project's goals to the public. This timeline not only contextualizes the project within a broader developmental framework but also corroborates the accounts provided by the staff during interviews. Similarly, the site includes downloadable press releases that detail the speeches and statements made by key principles of ECRL at various public engagements, further reinforcing the interviewees' recollections.

The CCCC's online portal offers an additional layer of information, particularly focusing on the

²⁹ MRL official website

multinational cooperation aspect of the project. It provides articles and news features that discuss the strategic importance of the ECRL as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, aligning with depiction of the project as a crucial economic and trade venture. These articles often include direct quotes from corporate executives and project managers, elaborating on the project's goals to foster regional connectivity and economic growth, as echoed in the staff interviews.

"Both websites host sections for FAQs and media inquiries, where responses to public and stakeholder questions are posted. These responses are formulated from internal communications and verified data, ensuring that the public receives accurate and consistent information about the project. Official online resources further support this research by providing access to key materials that cross-verify facts and enhance the credibility of information shared by the ECRL staff.

The strategic use of slogans and narratives effectively conveys the project's broader significance, ensuring alignment with diverse public aspirations. By presenting the ECRL as a lifeline for economic recovery, the communication strategy reinforces the idea that the project will bring tangible benefits to local communities. This framing is carefully constructed to ensure that the public perceives the ECRL not only as a tool for improving connectivity but also as a driver of local prosperity and job creation. Through targeted narratives and emotionally resonant messaging, the project is portrayed as part of a shared vision for the future that reflects the values and needs of diverse stakeholders. This alignment between project goals and community aspirations helps secure public buy-in, ultimately positioning the ECRL as an essential component of regional development and economic stability. Slogans such as "Connecting Life and Accelerating Growth" serve as emotional triggers, designed to immediately capture public interest and foster a sense of optimism. While job creation is a major concern for the public, confidence in the ECRL's continuity and success is equally crucial.

Moreover, the impact of these emotional appeals may vary across different demographic groups. Rural populations, for instance, might be more responsive to the promise of enhanced connectivity, as the ECRL could potentially transform their access to urban centres, healthcare, and education. In

contrast, urban populations might place greater emphasis on the economic growth potential of the project, particularly in terms of trade, investment, and job creation. By tailoring these emotional appeals to the specific concerns and aspirations of different segments of the population, the discourse surrounding the ECRL can more effectively garner widespread support. This strategic differentiation ensures that the project's communication is both broad-reaching and personally relevant, maximizing its persuasive impact.

The emotional resonance of the ECRL slogans and public statements undeniably plays a crucial role in garnering public support and shaping perception. One specific example shared by key stakeholders is this: 'We believe our company's proven track record gives better assurance to secure the ECRL project,' which effectively evokes trust and confidence. This statement, attributed to a representative from the construction group, demonstrates the self-conscious and deliberate choice of wording aimed at reassuring stakeholders and the public that the project is in capable hands, resonating with the overarching themes of connectivity and growth.

While these strategies effectively build emotional resonance and public trust, they also raise questions about their broader implications. For instance, relying on statements about past achievements to inspire confidence in future outcomes, as seen in the group interview, can be emotionally reassuring but may also overlook potential challenges such as project delays, cost overruns, or environmental impacts. By focusing primarily on proven success, such statements risk downplaying uncertainties and limiting public scrutiny, which are crucial for ensuring transparency and accountability in large-scale infrastructure projects.

6.2.4 Disparity of benefits can be masked

While the ECRL's multi-layered communication strategy successfully engages diverse audiences—from local communities to international partners—the reliance on emotional appeals carries certain risks. These emotionally charged messages, such as those emphasizing "growth" and "connectivity," have proven effective in building public support and excitement. However, these narratives can also oversimplify complex socio-political, economic, and environmental issues. The

focus on themes like "growth" may obscure structural questions about whether the project's benefits are equitably distributed among different communities. This raises concerns from a critical perspective, as such positive messaging might selectively highlight benefits while minimizing on-the-ground challenges, potentially masking inequalities in who truly benefits from the project's success.

For instance, a community leader of the eastern part of Malaysia, who worked closely with ECRL institutions,³⁰ noted, "Even though our region is along the ECRL route, we haven't received much support or investment from the project. Many rural areas still lack infrastructure improvements, while urban centres are quickly modernizing." Besides, a local who works in the business department of ECRL shared her disappointment, noting,³¹ "we hoped to get small subcontracting opportunities, but almost all contracts were awarded to large construction firms, leaving little room for local businesses." This example highlights how the narrative around "economic diversity" masks the reality of benefit concentration within a few large corporations, further exacerbating industry-specific inequalities.

The ECRL's communication strategy is not implemented in isolation but involves a coordinated effort led by various stakeholders, including Malaysia Rail Link (MRL), China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), and Malaysian government agencies. Each message—whether through corporate statements, diplomatic remarks, or media articles—is tailored to resonate with specific population segments. For example, statements by MRL and CCCC highlight the ECRL's role in fostering economic opportunities, aligning with local and national development goals. This coordinated approach ensures that the ECRL's message reaches a wide audience, building a shared foundation of optimism. However, a critical question remains based on previous two examples: to what extent do the knowledge these organisations deliver genuinely engage with the potential risks or challenges associated with the project?

³⁰ Interview M10; See Appendix 11.1.2

³¹ Interview M3; See Appendix 11.1.2

In conclusion, the ECRL's strategic use of slogans and discourses demonstrates the power of memorable and emotionally resonant messaging in shaping public perception. Through carefully crafted slogans and public statements, the project evokes a sense of trust, optimism, and progress, building a strong emotional connection with the audience. These messages, by being both memorable and emotionally charged, enhance the visibility and appeal of the project, creating a cohesive narrative that aligns with national development goals.

Recognizing that slogans and discourses primarily function as tools of state-led communication, it is crucial to analyse their limitations. These promotional messages are inherently designed to unify and inspire, rather than to deeply engage with nuanced community concerns. While they are effective in shaping public sentiment and enhancing the project's image, their reliance on emotional appeal may lead to the neglect of important socio-political challenges, such as unequal benefit distribution or the specific needs of local communities. A closer examination of how these communication strategies operate in diverse social contexts can provide a better understanding of their broader implications and potential responses from different audiences.

6.3 Influence on the understandings of the public to the project

6.3.1 Wording of discourses to shape the trust

Framing the ECRL as Malaysia's largest economic and trade cooperation project with China, its promotional messaging emphasizes broad potential benefits, often articulated through memorable slogans such as 'Connecting Growth and Connectivity.' These narratives resonate with local stakeholders, as evidenced by statements from a Kelantan government official: 'The ECRL will not only bring job opportunities but will also open up new markets for our local products by improving access to other regions.' Similarly, a business owner collaborating with the ECRL remarked on its trans-formative impact, noting, 'I was initially concerned about the project's impact on my land, but I now see potential benefits in expanding my business through easier transportation routes.' By emphasizing both national and regional economic development, these narratives—reinforced by slogans—align local aspirations with broader goals, fostering public support and confidence in the

project's transformative potential.

This largely intuitive judgement highlights the influential role of slogans and strategic communication in shaping and sustaining public support. The ECRL narrative operates as a cohesive discourse aimed at aligning the project with both national development goals and community values. These messages not only engage the public on a surface level but also subtly shape their perceptions through repetitive and emotionally resonant language. For example, one Chinese interviewee noted,³² 'the slogan makes us feel that the ECRL is not just a project, but a step toward a shared future,' highlighting how such slogans serve as a psychological anchor, reinforcing confidence in the project. Similarly, on the Malaysian side,³³ interviewees expressed that the slogan helped present the ECRL as a project that 'connects the east and west, creating opportunities for everyone,' making the project appear more accessible and acceptable. However, slogans alone cannot convey the full complexity of the project's goals and benefits; they are a key component of a broader communication strategy designed to shape perceptions and establish ideological alignment. The prominence of slogans in large-scale Chinese infrastructure projects, including the ECRL, reflects a deliberate strategy to integrate emotional resonance with national narratives, fostering widespread public support (The Straits Times, 2017).

The concept of "strategic communication" in the context of the ECRL project refers to a structured and deliberate effort by project stakeholders, primarily led by Malaysian government agencies and ECRL contractors, aimed at shaping public understanding and fostering support for the project. These communications emphasize the ECRL's potential as a catalyst for economic growth, aligning with the government's broader narrative of national development. For instance, a construction site manager highlighted the expected economic benefits by stating,³⁴ "The site is expected to attract private investment, bolstered by ease of travel from the Sultan Mahmud Airport to the city centre. (New Straits Time, 2019)" The statements serve as discourse, framing the ECRL project within a

³² Interview C11; See Appendix 11.1.2

³³ Interview M1; See Appendix 11.1.2

³⁴ Interview C3; See Appendix 11.1.2

broader narrative of economic revitalization and long-term prosperity for Malaysia. This kind of messaging is carefully crafted to frame the ECRL as not only an infrastructure project but also a driver of long-term prosperity that will enhance the economic landscape of the surrounding regions.

The President of the Malaysian Indigenous Contractors Association was quoted saying,³⁵ "We expect development activities to rise again with ECRL's progress. This is a project of promise, one that brings hope for our community's future." This Malaysian interviewee who quotes this statement,³⁶ a resident affected by land acquisition, shared in an interview, "Initially, I had concerns about this project, but seeing the government's commitment to fulfilling promises has reassured me."

These statements, both from local leaders and community members,³⁷ emphasize the ECRL's role in revitalizing local business and project confidence, which bolsters a narrative of stability and trustworthiness among the public. By projecting confidence in the project's resumption and its potential to rejuvenate local business activities, such statements tap into emotional appeals that shape how the public perceives the ECRL. They reinforce the view that the project is not just a physical infrastructure but an indispensable component of Malaysia's broader economic development. It reassures stakeholders and the broader public that the project will deliver on its promises, ensuring that any previous doubts or uncertainties are minimized through strategic and emotionally resonant communication.

As a result, the use of emotionally resonant phrases, such as 'we expect' and 'we believe' from speaks about ECRL of Malaysian side, is intended to create a narrative that instills a sense of certainty and optimism in the public. This language is carefully chosen to reinforce confidence in the project's continuity and its positive impact, positioning the ECRL. Such language choices are

³⁵ Interview M9; See Appendix 11.1.2

³⁶ Interview M10; See Appendix 11.1.2

³⁷ Interview M9; See Appendix 11.1.2

Carefully designed to instill confidence in the public and align their perceptions with the project's long-term vision. These phrases are carefully crafted to engage the public emotionally, shaping their understanding by embedding confidence and hope within the narrative surrounding the ECRL project. Through consistent repetition across official communication channels, these emotionally resonant messages collectively construct a cohesive narrative that positions the ECRL as a symbol of national progress and pride.

6.3.2 Narratives as a tool for promoting long-term collaboration

These communications, disseminated through official online channels and public statements, extend beyond simple slogans to create a coherent public narrative that emphasizes the ECRL's project's long-term benefits for Malaysian communities. Rather than using "strategic narratives" in an international context, this communication approach is tailored specifically for a domestic. While slogans like 'Connecting Life and Accelerating Growth' engage the public through emotional triggers, discourses provide the substantive arguments needed to shape a comprehensive understanding of the project's significance. By embedding these messages within an overarching ideological framework, the ECRL project becomes more than a mere infrastructure initiative—it transforms into a shared cultural and economic narrative that aligns with national and local interests.

An editorial published in *New Straits Times* (August 2023) praised the ECRL as "a monumental step forward for Malaysia,³⁸ showcasing our nation's capability in handling large-scale infrastructure projects." Local leaders ³⁹echoed this sentiment, with one state official stating, "ECRL is more than a project; it is a testament to Malaysia's growth and resilience." By aligning the project's messaging with national values, these narratives foster a sense of shared purpose and pride, encouraging widespread public support for ECRL's success.

³⁸ *New Straits Times* (2023). 'ECRL as a Catalyst for Economic Growth and Development,' 20 August 2023. Available at: <https://www.nst.com.my/> (Accessed: November 6, 2023).

³⁹ Interview C2; See Appendix 11.1.2

Most significantly, both Chinese and Malaysian institutional leaders echoed these sentiments, agreeing that the ECRL would not only provide immediate convenience but would serve as a catalyst for Malaysia's long-term economic and social development. One interviewee recalled statements from his Malaysian and Chinese superiors,⁴⁰ noting that the ECRL would reduce travel time from Kota Baru to Putrajaya to just four hours with trains running at 160 km/h and covering 20 stations. Once completed in 2026, the project is expected to boost economic growth, logistics, trade, and tourism, playing a crucial role in Malaysia's development, which is a proper example showing the promising narratives that recognise trans-formative force of ECRL

The statements surrounding the ECRL are not merely designed to inform but also to shape public sentiment, making the project's goals and benefits both memorable and emotionally impactful. For instance, phrases like 'we believe' and 'we expect' are frequently embedded into media reports, speeches, and interviews to resonate with public emotions and align perceptions with the project's broader narrative. By framing the ECRL as a symbol of hope, progress, and cooperation, these communications contribute to an 'imaginary' or shared vision around the project. This framing, supported by political communication strategies, ensures that the ECRL is perceived not just as an infrastructure initiative but as a shared national aspiration. Such alignment is essential for sustaining public support and fostering long-term success in both national and international collaborations.

Ultimately, the narratives surrounding the ECRL project construct a vision that aims to align national, local, and international interests, framing the project as a transformative force for Malaysia's future; all key discursive/semiotic work of regularizing capitalistic growth from a CPE perspective. These narratives, drawn from various sources—including media reports, policy documents, and official project communications—highlight the ECRL's potential benefits and aim to secure support from multiple stakeholders. Through strategic use of slogans like "Connecting Life and Accelerating Growth" and emotionally resonant messaging, these communications have cultivated a reliably and

⁴⁰ Interview M6; See Appendix 11.1.2

sufficiently consistent positive perception of the project among diverse groups: Chinese, Malaysian, and English-speaking workers alike.

However, the media's focus on these endorsements that can be seen as a strategic exercise in shaping public opinion is not necessarily positive for the sake of its long term development. According to a report by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia,⁴¹ the positive media coverage surrounding the ECRL has indeed influenced the public to develop a favourable outlook on the project. By predominantly highlighting the anticipated benefits—such as job creation and regional development—the media may overlook or under-report potential downsides, including social displacement or long-term environmental costs. This one-sided narrative may marginalize critical viewpoints, underscoring the need for a more balanced representation of the project's complexities.

As noted in a Ministry of Transport Malaysia announcement (2023),⁴² the ECRL project aims to boost long-term regional development; however, this broad narrative often lacks the transparency needed to address underlying socio-political challenges, such as equitable distribution of benefits. One environmental activist,⁴³ who investigated the areas near the ECRL route, shared, "Our water source has been contaminated due to construction, and the elderly and children in our community are often sick. They call this a 'green development,' but all we feel is environmental degradation." This critical perspective is often overshadowed by a positive framework that does not address the real environmental impacts on vulnerable communities, putting the long-term development of projects at risk

6.3.3 Work as cultural bridges during shaping perception

This shift in perception—from suspicion to acceptance—demonstrates how sustained strategic

⁴¹ Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia (ISIS Malaysia). (2022). *Media Influence on Public Perception of Infrastructure Projects: The Case of ECRL*. Kuala Lumpur: ISIS Malaysia.

⁴² Ministry of Transport Malaysia. (2023). *ECRL Project Announcement: Objectives and Expected Impacts*. Ministry of Transport, Putrajaya, Malaysia. Available at <https://www.mot.gov.my/> (Accessed on 2024)

⁴³ Interview M10; See Appendix 11.1.2

communication, particularly through the strategic use of slogans like 'Connecting Life and Accelerating Growth,' effectively reshaped public sentiment and built trust over time. By aligning the ECRL's messaging with shared aspirations for development and connectivity, these slogans illustrate the tangible success of this communication strategy in fostering public trust and cultural integration. Initially seen as intrusive, the Chinese messaging has come to be viewed as a marker of progress, illustrating the transformative power of consistent messaging. Through the strategic use of slogans, the ECRL's image has been redefined as a symbol of international cooperation and local development, underscoring the critical role of political communication in shaping public narratives around international projects like the ECRL. By weaving together discourses that resonate across cultural contexts, the project slogans successfully build a shared understanding that bridges national interests, aligns with local communities, and fosters cross-cultural cooperation.

One Malaysian interviewee noted that although there are various slogans used in China-Malaysia cooperative projects, not all are widely known to the public.⁴⁴ Yet, the consistency of their messaging helps create a unified narrative. 'People might not even be aware of the project itself, but they encounter the slogan everywhere,' the interviewee explained, referring to its presence on TV, at bus stops, and on billboards. The pervasive visibility of these messages acts as a constant reminder, subtly reinforcing the project's importance and benefits over time.

Another interviewee highlighted the novelty of seeing a foreign entity play such a prominent role in promoting a local Malaysian project.⁴⁵ Initially, the strong presence of Chinese slogans across various media channels—such as TV, bus stops, and billboards associated with Chinese-owned Malaysian businesses—felt intrusive to some viewers. However, over time, these messages began to take on a new meaning, symbolizing something much more significant than mere advertising. Slogans like 'Connecting Life and Accelerating Growth' shifted from being seen as foreign intrusions to symbols of cultural integration, portraying China's involvement as an enhancement to Malaysia's progress. This transformation in perception also reflects a broader shift in Malaysia's global

⁴⁴ Interview M2; See Appendix 11.1.2

⁴⁵ Interview M1; See Appendix 11.1.2

positioning. As these slogans became more widespread, they not only fostered a sense of international cultural integration but also redefined Malaysia's image from a previously localized and parochial context to a more interconnected and globally engaged nation. By aligning the ECRL project with the vision of shared progress and connectivity, these slogans have contributed to framing Malaysia as a bridge between regional aspirations and global networks of trade and cultural exchange. This global relevance underscores how strategic communication can reshape perceptions of infrastructure projects, positioning them as not just local advancements but as critical components of international collaboration.

A Chinese interviewee with expertise in public relations emphasized the difficulty of gaining local approval for these advertisements.⁴⁶ 'The messaging needs to effectively communicate what China is doing while respecting Malaysia's status as the host country,' he explained, referring to the Chinese idiom 喧宾夺主, meaning 'a presumptuous guest usurping the host's role.' This concept reflects the careful balance required in crafting slogans that highlight China's role without overshadowing local narratives. It is presented through the talks from this interviewee, a good slogan is a good starting point and a good introduction to all of the behaviours from Chinese. That is, for a same action, the public would tend to have a higher degree of adaptability if it is under a warm and well-accepted slogan and introduction. Conversely, poorly framed messaging can erode trust, especially when slogans are perceived as imposing foreign dominance. In such cases, public confidence diminishes at multiple levels, from grassroots communities to intermediary stakeholders involved in project implementation. This dynamic underscores how strategic communication, including slogans, functions as a critical tool for bridging cultural differences and ensuring the success of large-scale projects like the ECRL.

An interviewee, who serves as a spokesperson for ECRL's news release activities, possesses extensive knowledge about the specific discourses used in project progress announcements. Although he could not disclose exact statements from internal meetings, he shared some examples

⁴⁶ Interview C5; See Appendix 11.1.2

that have been adopted by well-known media outlets.⁴⁷ One such statement by the project owner MRL reads: "MRL highly encourages local industry players, especially local contractors, to proactively seize opportunities to participate in the ECRL project, not just as contractors but also as suppliers, consultants, and in other relevant capacities."

This statement reflects more than just an emphasis on the project's economic importance—it serves as a concrete example of how discourse functions as a cultural bridge. By encouraging local enterprises to engage at multiple levels, the statement transforms the economic narrative of China-Malaysia cooperation into a form of cultural dialogue, seeking to establish trust and reduce potential cultural gaps through inclusive language. This messaging strategy not only conveys ideas of technical and resource sharing but also underscores the value and capabilities of local industries, laying a foundation for cross-cultural collaboration. The language of the statement focuses on mutual interaction, acknowledging both the technical support provided by China and the pivotal role of local industries in the project's success. Such dual narratives demonstrate the function of discourse as a cultural bridge, fostering cultural integration and mutual understanding.

The efforts by both China and Malaysia to shape public understanding of the ECRL project demonstrate the pivotal role of slogans and discourses in constructing a cross-cultural bridge. For instance, a senior project manager emphasized the value of sharing railway construction expertise.⁴⁸ He recalls a conference which was framed as more than a technical exchange among Chinese and Malaysian contractors but as a symbol of cross-cultural communication to build mutual trust along cooperation. The discourse positioned technical collaboration as a means of cultural integration, presenting the sharing of expertise as a gesture of goodwill and respect for Malaysia's local capabilities. However, some respondents noted that these discourses occasionally prioritise efficiency over genuine cultural exchange, leaving local contributions underrepresented in the broader narrative.

⁴⁷ Interview M4; See Appendix 11.1.2

⁴⁸ Interview C9; See Appendix 11.1.2

This approach illustrates how slogans and discourses distill complex ideas into emotionally resonant messages, aligning both local and national aspirations. By integrating these messages into broader communication strategies—such as public speeches and media campaigns—the ECRL's discourses not only promote the project's technical achievements but also position it as a cultural bridge between China and Malaysia. Yet, the reliance on top-down communication channels may inadvertently exclude grassroots perspectives, which are critical for understanding the project's full cultural impact. Ensuring that these narratives resonate across different levels of society is essential to maintaining their role as effective tools for fostering trust and collaboration.

6.3.4 Contrasting narratives: Chinese and Malaysian approaches to public engagement

Following the exploration of slogans and discourses as cultural bridges, this section examines how Malaysian and Chinese stakeholders employ distinct strategies to align public perceptions and foster cooperation in the ECRL project. The contrasting communication strategies employed by China and Malaysia in the ECRL project reveal differing priorities in public engagement, shaped by cultural and political contexts. Table 7 outlines these differences across key categories, including slogans, discourses, public perception, cultural exchange, and potential risks.

Table 7. Comparison of Communication Strategies: Chinese vs. Malaysian Approaches in Promoting the ECRL

Category	Chinese Side	Malaysian Side
Slogans	Memorability and emotional resonance, emphasizing symbolic aspirations, e.g., Connecting Life and Accelerating Growth.	More formal and aspirational, e.g., "We believe" or "We expect," emphasizing collective progress.
Discourses	Integrated with leadership speeches and media narratives, creating a unified ideological framework	More data-driven and focused on technical and economic aspects, reflecting Malaysia's preference for objective and fact-based communication.
Public Perception	Successfully mobilizes emotional buy-in but risks being seen as overly	Emphasizes transparency and results but lacks emotional engagement to sustain

Category	Chinese Side	Malaysian Side
	symbolic without local impact	long-term support
Cultural Exchange	Activities fostering ideological alignment, such as cross-cultural training sessions and shared events	Limited to operational collaborations, focusing on practically rather than shared values
Potential Risks	Over-reliance on emotional appeal might lead to misaligned expectations and local skepticism	Pragmatic focus may lack the capacity to inspire unity or shared purpose among stakeholders

The contrasting communication strategies employed by China and Malaysia in the ECRL project reveal differing patterns in public engagement, shaped by cultural and political contexts. The table above outlines these differences across key categories: slogans, discourses, public perception, cultural exchange, and potential risks. While the preceding discussion compared official narratives from Chinese and Malaysian actors, recent public opinion surveys offer further insight into how these discourses are perceived and internalized across Southeast Asia.

A 2025 analysis published on the LSE Southeast Asia Blog (Lau, 2025), drawing on Asian Barometer Survey data (waves 3–5) and qualitative interviews, suggests that Singaporean and Malaysian attitudes towards China are often characterised by ambivalence rather than uniformly positive or negative evaluations. Consistent with this mixed picture, the ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute's *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report* (surveying Southeast Asian opinion leaders) finds that, if forced to choose, a slight majority would prefer China (50.5%) over the United States (49.5%), while Malaysian respondents show a stronger preference for China (75.1%). At the same time, the survey indicates reluctance to be drawn into binary alignment: 46.8% of respondents say ASEAN should “enhance its resilience and unity” to fend off external pressures, and 29.1% favour continuing not to side with any major power. China is also widely perceived as the region's most influential economic power (59.5%). Taken together, these findings underline how material attraction and political unease coexist in shaping perceptions of China-related investment and BRI-linked infrastructure across the region.

Slogans on the Chinese side are emotionally resonant, often promoting symbolic and aspirational

themes, such as "Connecting Life and Accelerating Growth". These slogans seek to create a shared vision of progress and integration. In contrast, Malaysian slogans are more formal and aspirational, such as "We believe", which reflects a focus on pragmatic progress and collaboration. While effective in conveying purpose, the Chinese slogans risk being dismissed as overly idealistic, whereas the Malaysian slogans may lack emotional resonance to inspire sustained commitment.

Discourses further highlight the divergence. Chinese narratives are deeply integrated into leadership speeches and media campaigns, crafting a unified ideological framework that reinforces the project's significance within broader geopolitical goals. In comparison, Malaysian discourses are predominantly data-driven and technical, emphasizing practical outcomes and accountability. This focus aligns well with local governance priorities but may lack the emotional connection to galvanize widespread support.

Public perception mirrors these distinctions. China's emotionally charged slogans and discourses effectively mobilize support but can be perceived as lacking tangible local benefits. Conversely, Malaysia's transparent and results-oriented approach successfully conveys credibility yet risks falling short of inspiring long-term public enthusiasm. Cultural exchange activities on the Chinese side prioritise ideological alignment through initiatives such as cross-cultural training sessions and shared events, fostering mutual understanding.

However, Malaysia's engagement remains primarily operational, focusing on project implementation rather than shared cultural values. This limited emphasis on ideological alignment could hinder deeper bilateral collaboration. Potential risks arise from these differing approaches. China's reliance on emotional appeals may create unrealistic expectations, leading to local skepticism if promises are not met. On the other hand, Malaysia's pragmatic focus, while effective for short-term goals, may fail to inspire unity or a shared sense of purpose among stakeholders.

The analysis above demonstrates the strengths and limitations of each side's communication strategies, reinforcing the need for a balanced approach. Emotional appeals and ideological

alignment must be complemented by practical measures and transparent engagement. Future initiatives could benefit from integrating these complementary strategies to foster a more cohesive and sustainable framework for cross-national collaboration.

6.4 Practical guidance when Chinese and Malaysian breaking cultural barrier

6.4.1 Building cross-cultural understanding: practical approaches to overcoming barriers in ECRL

One of the senior staff from China mentioned, "The relationship between Malaysia and China has always been friendly, and China has been Malaysia's largest trading partner for over ten years. Many Malaysian investors have also gone to China to build factories and invest. Economic and cultural exchanges between the two countries are very close, and this is well-known among most Malaysians." However, not all Malaysians share this sentiment. Two interviewees expressed reservations when they were initially involved in the ECRL project, noting that cultural barriers and a lack of mutual trust posed significant challenges. "I was responsible for the initial documentation coordination, and at the start, the Chinese colleagues I worked with were very stringent and formal," said one of the Malaysian interviewees. This highlights an important point: while slogans such as "connect life with us" and "help accelerate our domestic economic growth" convey a positive message, they alone cannot overcome deep-seated cultural differences or foster immediate trust.

This situation underscores a broader issue in cross-cultural collaboration: when do these barriers begin to dissolve? Based on the accounts of Malaysian interviewees, this transformation often starts with everyday interactions and practical cooperation on the ground. Through consistent engagement, public communication strategies—supported by slogans—helped frame the ECRL as a shared mission, fostering a sense of mutual responsibility and long-term collaboration. For instance, the emphasis on shared slogans not only underscored economic integration but also signaled cultural alignment, providing a common reference point for both groups. By embedding these slogans into broader communication strategies, the project gradually shifted perceptions, moving from suspicion to cooperation. This demonstrates how slogans, when integrated into practical

actions and reinforced through public narratives, can play a role in breaking cultural barriers and building trust over time.

Another interviewee mentioned that one of his children is currently studying at a campus in Malaysia established by China's Xiamen University, which he described as having a "warm and friendly" international environment. The school exposed students from various international backgrounds to the ECRL project and, more broadly, to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While many of the students did not have detailed knowledge about the specifics of the project—such as the exact length of the railway or the timeline of its construction—they were familiar with the slogan "connecting life and accelerating growth," which gave them a positive impression of the project. Although it is difficult to measure the precise influence that this exposure had on the students and their parents' perceptions, it can be inferred that the educational environment helped cultivate a sense of trust and goodwill toward the initiative.

This points to a broader dynamic: the role of education and cultural exchange in shaping public perceptions of international projects. However, while slogans and institutional efforts can foster an initial sense of warmth, the real test lies in whether these perceptions translate into deeper understanding and sustained support over time, beyond just surface-level awareness. More importantly, this process does not stop at fostering initial perceptions. As real connections develop through consistent communication, meaningful collaboration, and visible project outcomes, these connections reinforce the credibility of the slogans and deepen their resonance. In turn, the enhanced credibility and emotional impact of the slogans strengthen public trust and support, creating a positive feedback loop. This dynamic cycle highlights how public communication strategies, when effectively implemented, can transform initial goodwill into enduring commitment, bridging cultural divides and embedding the project within a shared sense of purpose.

Two notable examples further demonstrate how the relationships between Chinese working teams and local citizens were shaped by the project's slogan. The first took place during the construction period in Kelantan state, when a fire broke out near some homes. One of the ECRL project staff,

who was working in the village at the time, quickly called for a sprinkler truck that was being used for railway construction nearby. The fire was extinguished before the fire department arrived, preventing what could have been a significant loss of life and property. The local fire department, along with village chiefs and community leaders, expressed their gratitude and awarded the team medals, praising them for exemplifying the project's slogan, "connecting life and accelerating growth." Their act was seen as not only fulfilling the slogan but also building a real, tangible connection with the local community. This example highlights how tangible actions tied to the slogan can transform abstract messaging into meaningful, real-world connections, aligning project goals with community expectations.

The second example occurred in Pahang state, during the region's worst flood in recent history. An interviewee who worked in logistics for the ECRL project recalled that after the flood, his team visited over 100 families in the affected village. The project staff volunteered to assist with relief efforts, using their own resources, such as emergency boats and life jackets, to help people evacuate and move essential supplies. The villagers were deeply grateful for the support, and many shared personal stories of the devastation. One man, in his seventies, recounted how he had spent the night on a roof with his young son on his shoulders, highlighting the severity of the flood.

A Malaysian staff member of the project reflected on this experience, noting that while their primary responsibility was to ensure the success of the railway project, these incidents showed that their Chinese colleagues were equally committed to fostering a positive relationship with the local communities. He explained that their efforts, especially in situations like the fire and the flood, helped to build trust and goodwill. He remarked, "What my Chinese colleagues did was a true reflection of the project's slogan. I believe this is a powerful way for Chinese leadership to guide their teams, not just in words but in action."

These examples highlight the role of practical actions in bridging cultural gaps and building trust. The use of the slogan in these situations is particularly interesting because it moves beyond mere rhetoric; the Chinese workers' actions in emergencies reflected the spirit of the slogan, turning it

into a lived experience for local communities. While these acts of goodwill clearly won praise and appreciation from local residents, there is a need to critically evaluate whether these moments of solidarity lead to lasting cultural integration, or if they remain isolated incidents tied to specific events.

Moreover, the reliance on such actions to build relationships highlights the complementary relationship between the leadership-crafted slogans and the on-the-ground actions of Chinese workers. While slogans serve to outline broad visions and goals, the tangible actions of workers substantiate these messages, fostering trust and goodwill. This division of labour, a notable strength of Chinese infrastructure projects, effectively bridges cultural and trust barriers in the short term. However, it raises critical questions about long-term sustainability: can these efforts address deeper structural challenges, such as differences in working styles or broader geopolitical tensions, that remain unresolved? Additionally, there is the potential risk that, despite their immediate positive impact, such actions might inadvertently mask underlying tensions or foster unrealistic expectations for future engagement.

6.4.2 Stakeholders insights: practical reflections on economic, social and cultural collaboration

These examples suggest that fostering trust is not just about short-term goodwill but a crucial strategic issue for cross-cultural collaboration. The willingness of Chinese workers to engage directly with local communities illustrates how strategic messaging and on-the-ground actions can complement each other. By addressing alienation through sustained interaction, the project builds a platform for deeper cultural understanding, ensuring the ECRL's role as a symbol of long-term cooperation. Feedback from other Malaysian and Chinese individuals further underscores the role of effective communication and cultural exchange driven by the project's slogans and discourse. One interviewee, a high-ranking figure in the research, recounted a conversation with a Malaysian entrepreneur who emphasized that the project enabled cross-regional transportation, making it possible for his business to sell products like chips and biscuits to central and southern Malaysia. This fulfilled a longstanding goal for many businesses in the region, demonstrating how the ECRL project tangibly benefited local enterprises.

Another interviewee offered a unique perspective based on his family's livelihood in the fishing industry. After discussing the slogans and ideas of the project with his family, his father, a fisherman, remarked that the project had not only improved travel between cities but had also facilitated the growth of their fishing business. The railway, by improving transportation infrastructure, opened new opportunities for the industry, such as easier access to markets and faster delivery of goods, highlighting the broader economic benefits that the ECRL project could bring to diverse sectors of Malaysian society.

A notable feature of these shared discourses is their consistency across levels, seamlessly connecting grassroots workers and top decision-makers under a unified vision of economic advancement. Grounded in both practical benefits and symbolic messaging, these ideas illustrate how cultural exchanges may lead to a shared understanding of economic goals. This mutual alignment highlights the potential for broader regional development across ASEAN. By establishing a coherent narrative that integrates grassroots and leadership perspectives, the discourse fosters not only bilateral cooperation between China and Malaysia but also a foundation for regional collaboration, reflecting shared economic and cultural aspirations.

The emphasis on economic benefits, while important, may overshadow other concerns, such as environmental impact, displacement of communities, or unequal distribution of benefits across different social groups. For instance, while the project has clearly benefited businesses like those in the fishing industry, it is unclear whether smaller or marginalized communities will experience the same level of positive impact. Additionally, the portrayal of the project as a "catalyst" for regional development may create high expectations that are difficult to fulfill, particularly if unforeseen challenges arise during construction or operation.

Table 8: Role of slogans, discourses, and ideology in the cultural integration of the ECRL

	Description	Distinction	Example	Role in the project
Slogans → Cultural trigger	Slogans function as emotional and motivational triggers that initiate cultural exchanges at the grassroots level.	Unlike broader discourses or institutional narratives, slogans uniquely spark immediate cultural interactions by condensing complex ideas into emotionally resonant phrases, fostering shared identities across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts	Slogans, such as 'Connecting Life and Accelerating Growth,' act as cultural catalysts by invoking shared aspirations and values, encouraging workers to engage in daily interactions that transcend national boundaries. This initial emotional engagement lays the groundwork for deeper cultural exchanges.	Slogans have an immediate impact by acting as short-term motivators, fostering emotional belonging, and encouraging workers to engage with the project on a more personal level
Discourses → Cultural Integration	Discourses position the project as a cohesive effort, integrating diverse stakeholders into a shared vision of long-term regional and global collaboration	While slogans create immediate emotional resonance, discourses are more systematic and long-term, shaping perceptions through media narratives, policy discussions, and strategic statements. This broader narrative framework helps align the project's goals with long-term geopolitical and regional development objectives.	Discourses uniquely position the project within a global framework, emphasizing shared geopolitical ambitions and fostering a unified narrative of collaboration that transcends local interests. They provide the ideological coherence necessary for aligning stakeholders with long-term regional and global aspirations.	Discourses build on (and underpin) slogans by providing a larger narrative context, helping workers and stakeholders see their role within the broader strategy of the project. - Discourses work on a macro-level to align individual actions with long-term goals and strategic narratives.

<p>Interactions → Ideology</p>	<p>Ideology is the culmination of the interaction between slogans and discourses, forming a cohesive set of beliefs that guides behaviour and cultural exchange.</p>	<p>Ideology acts as a bridge that translates perceptions of confidence into actionable behaviours and a collective sense of mission. By integrating shared cultural values with economic practices, it establishes a cohesive framework that aligns immaterial aspirations, such as trust and identity, with material outcomes like collaboration and economic development</p>	<p>The formation of ideology represents the synthesis of emotional slogans and strategic discourses, resulting in a cohesive set of beliefs that permeates all levels of project participation. It is through this shared ideology that both countries perceive the ECRL not just as an infrastructure project, but as a symbol of bilateral cooperation and mutual development.</p>	<p>Ideology is formed through repeated cultural exchanges and narrative reinforcement. - Ideology represents a shared cultural and strategic alignment, leading to a sustainable cultural exchange where both parties have a common understanding of the project's goals.</p>
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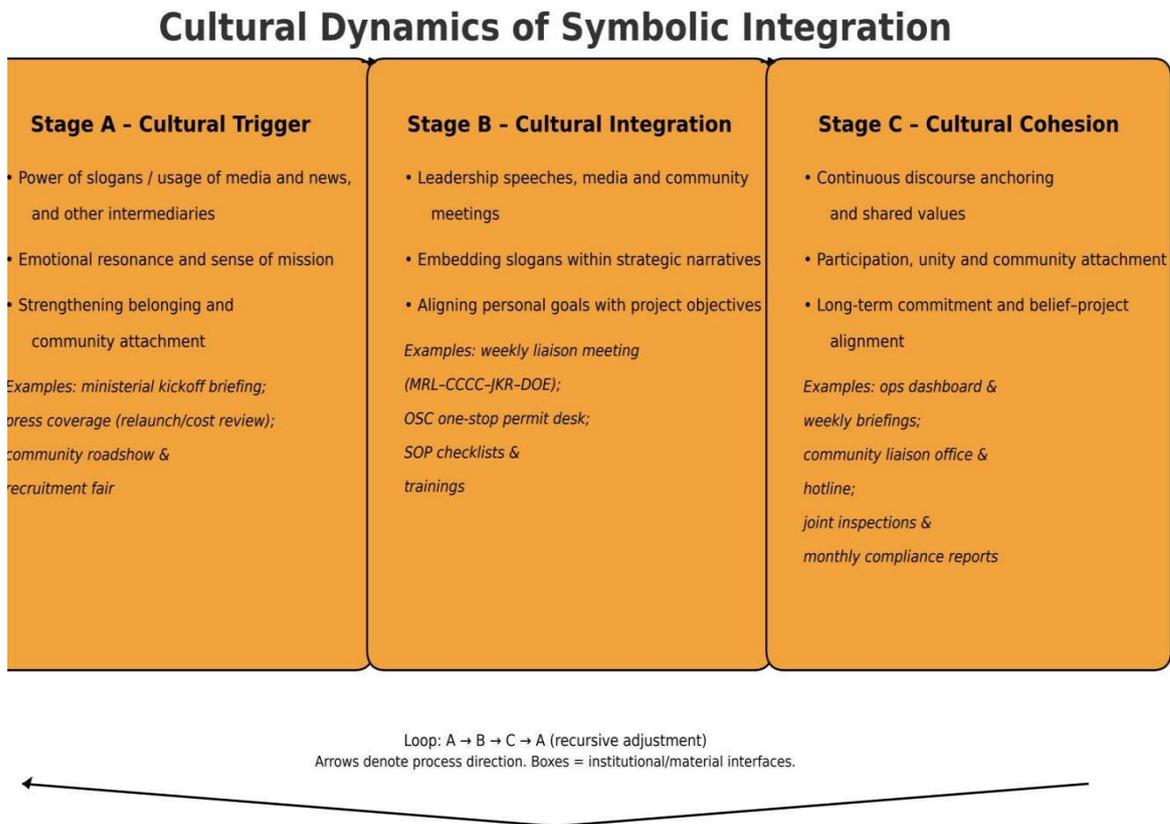
6.4.3 Simplifying narratives for practical cross-cultural collaboration

Slogans such as "connecting life and accelerating growth" act as cultural triggers that initiate the broader cultural dynamics of the ECRL project. As depicted in the diagram, these triggers play a pivotal role in setting the foundation for cultural integration, which involves aligning diverse stakeholder perceptions across both Malaysia and China. However, slogans alone cannot address the full complexity of cross-cultural collaboration and economic integration. The project's ultimate success depends on its ability to navigate the discourses and ideological frameworks that sustain cultural cohesion.

The practical realities of implementing such a large-scale initiative require more than inspirational messaging. Sustained efforts, including continuous communication with local communities, transparent governance, and equitable distribution of resources, are essential to ensure the project's promises are translated into tangible outcomes. The diagram underscores how these

efforts interact with discourses to reinforce shared narratives, creating alignment between high-level strategic goals and grassroots-level perceptions.

Figure 9: Cultural dynamics of symbolic integration- three stages and operator role



Reading the diagram. From left to right, Stage A triggers participation through slogans and media outreach; Stage B translates narratives into executable routines (weekly liaison meetings, OSC one-stop permit desk, SOP checklists/trainings) and aligns personal goals with project objectives; Stage C consolidates shared values through routinized messaging, participation, and everyday coordination (operations dashboard, community liaison office/hotline, joint inspections). The loop is recursive (A → B → C → A). Examples are embedded inside Figure 9, and brief elaborations are provided here. At Stage A (cultural trigger), key practices include ministerial kickoff briefings, press coverage (e.g., relaunch/cost review), and community-facing roadshows and recruitment fairs. Stage B (cultural integration) is operationalised through weekly liaison meetings (MRL-CCCC-JKR-DOE), an OSC one-stop permit desk, and the use of SOP checklists and trainings. Stage C (cultural

cohesion) is sustained via operations dashboards and weekly briefings, a community liaison office and hotline, and joint inspections accompanied by monthly compliance reports. This is a conceptual schema; see Chapters 4.3–4.4.

The diagram captures the dynamic interplay between cultural triggers, integration, and cohesion. It illustrates how stakeholders across varying societal levels contribute to the construction of a shared cultural narrative. For example, fishermen, entrepreneurs, and policymakers engage with the project through their own experiences, providing feedback loops that support cultural integration. Reported benefits include expanded market access, improved mobility, and better quality of life. These interactions reinforce the ideology that binds individual and collective goals.

The diagram also shows how slogans evolve into discourses, which then shape ideology. This progression ensures that cultural narratives are not static but adaptable, allowing the project to address challenges such as cross-regional coordination and stakeholder engagement. The alignment of material and immaterial components—depicted through these cultural dynamics—offers a pathway for sustaining long-term cohesion.

As highlighted in the diagram, cultural cohesion is the culmination of sustained interaction between cultural triggers and discourses, mediated by stakeholder perceptions. Broad-based support for the ECRL project reflects the robustness of this framework. For example, labourers view the project as a source of stable employment, while entrepreneurs see opportunities for cross-border trade. Together, these perspectives contribute to a cohesive cultural narrative that positions the ECRL as more than infrastructure—it is perceived as a symbol of economic and social advancement.

However, the diagram also points to challenges. Not all stakeholders fully align with the project's ideological narrative. For instance, some grassroots workers see the ECRL as "just another job," highlighting a gap between top-down messaging and ground-level experiences. Bridging this gap requires continuous adaptation of discourses to reflect the lived realities of all stakeholders, ensuring that cultural cohesion is maintained.

The Cultural Dynamics diagram offers a holistic framework for understanding the ECRL's cultural narrative. It bridges theoretical aspirations with practical implementation, illustrating how cultural triggers, discourses, and ideology collectively foster cultural integration and cohesion. This alignment is relevant to achieving the project's broader goals of regional collaboration and economic development. By addressing gaps and adapting to diverse stakeholder experiences, the ECRL project can maintain its cultural relevance while navigating the complexities of large-scale infrastructure initiatives.

Interviewees from a focus group of workers engaged in on-the-ground construction demonstrated a notable indifference toward the broader implications of the project.⁴⁹ At the time of the interview, some participants were deployed in Indonesia for another project, suggesting a project-based and cross-border mobility pattern among construction level. Reflecting on their experiences, an interviewee expressed a detached perspective, stating, "I'm just doing a project that is initiated and constructed by both China and Malaysia, and whether it's part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or not doesn't concern me." This sentiment highlights a recurring theme among workers: a focus on immediate tasks over broader strategic goals, reflecting the limited resonance of the BRI narrative at the operational level. This indifference suggests a potential disconnect between the strategic aspirations of the BRI and the day-to-day realities experienced by workers, raising questions about the narrative's effectiveness in engaging all stakeholders.

Most of the workers in this group were more focused on operational aspects—managing relationships with colleagues and completing tasks efficiently—rather than the symbolic or political meaning of their work. This pragmatic approach suggests that, for many grassroots construction workers, the ECRL project is simply another infrastructure project, much like the ones they have worked on in the past. Concerns about working in an international environment, if they exist, tend to be no different from those encountered in previous projects involving international partnerships. While they acknowledged that the procedures for the ECRL project are more formal and complex

⁴⁹ Interviewee GP1 (See Appendix 10.1.2)

compared to purely domestic projects, their worries about cross-cultural collaboration appear minimal.

This contrast between the perspectives of higher-level stakeholders and grassroots workers raises questions about the inclusivity of the project's cultural narratives. While the discourse from leaders and entrepreneurs emphasizes cross-cultural exchange and shared economic goals, the voices of the workers suggest that, at the ground level, these lofty ideals do not always translate into tangible experiences. The fact that many workers view the ECRL as just another job rather than a symbol of international cooperation highlights the potential gap between the project's top-down messaging and the realities on the ground.

The slogan 'Connecting Life, Accelerating Growth' serves as an emotional trigger that strengthens workers' commitment and collective sense of purpose. This emotional resonance not only enhances workers' identification with the project but also encourages them to view it as part of their professional growth. Many interviewed workers noted that the slogan helped them feel a sense of belonging and engagement, motivating them to participate more actively in project activities. The strategic narrative embedded in discourses frames the ECRL project within a broader context of regional cooperation and development. This framing, reinforced through consistent messaging, allows both the public and project participants to view the ECRL as a platform for Malaysia-China collaboration and shared regional progress. Through these narratives, the project is perceived not merely as an infrastructure initiative but as a symbol of bilateral cooperation and long-term growth.

Ideology functions as a bridge, connecting individual beliefs to the broader goals of the project. Through the repeated communication of slogans and discourses, participants gradually internalize the project's core values as a collective commitment. During the 2018 project suspension period, workers' continued loyalty and dedication illustrated the stability and resilience of this ideological alignment, which had become deeply embedded in their professional and personal identities.

Political figures and the media play a pivotal role in reinforcing public endorsement by portraying

the ECRL as essential to Malaysia's future. Through positive narratives and public speeches, leaders have highlighted the ECRL's role in advancing regional integration, thereby strengthening public recognition and ideological alignment. This narrative positions the ECRL not only as an infrastructure project but as an ideological symbol of national and regional advancement. Through these public endorsements and strategic narratives, the ECRL project is framed not merely as an infrastructure initiative but as an ideological symbol of regional progress, enhancing public alignment with Malaysia's national development goals.

6.4.4 Integrating grassroots practical feedback for sustainable cultural exchange

This disparity between macro-level narratives emphasizing economic benefits and the on-the-ground realities of workers reflects a broader issue in large-scale international projects like the ECRL. While public discourse often highlights the project's contributions to regional development and trade, the daily experiences and challenges faced by workers—such as navigating cultural differences and complex procedures—are frequently underexplored.

Beyond the perspectives of project implementers and senior managers, this study integrates critical voices from Malaysian civil society to more comprehensively assess questions of legitimacy. Notably, the Centre to Combat Corruption and Cronyism (C4 Center) released a 2018 report highlighting significant transparency deficiencies in the ECRL, citing opaque land acquisition processes and a lack of inclusive consultation procedures (Yap, 2018). Similarly, IDEAS Malaysia's 2020 report emphasized coordination gaps between federal and state governments in the East Coast, warning that centralised decision-making might marginalize state-level development planning (IDEAS, 2020).

These civil society statements function as "hidden transcripts" (Scott, 1990) that resist the official project narrative. In a 2020 online roundtable co-hosted by BERSIH 2.0 and C4, several speakers critiqued the ECRL's top-down logic as symptomatic of a broader "dependency-oriented" approach to national development. While these voices may not be institutionally embedded in the project, their mere articulation constitutes a symbolic disruption to its legitimacy narrative and underscores the need for pluralistic framing in policy justification.

Workers interviewed during the project emphasized that formal and complex procedures, often a necessity for cross-national projects, sometimes clash with the practical realities on-site. While public narratives emphasize cultural exchange as a cornerstone of the ECRL, these ideals often fail to fully resonate with grassroots workers, highlighting the need for more inclusive engagement strategies to bridge the gap between top-down goals and local implementation.

This gap raises critical questions about the effectiveness of the project's messaging in addressing the perspectives of all stakeholders, especially those at the grassroots level. A more nuanced approach is necessary to ensure that project narratives not only align with national and international goals but also reflect the lived realities of workers and local communities. While the ECRL project is framed as a driver of cultural and economic exchange through slogans like "Connecting Life and Accelerating Growth," these messages often overlook the direct concerns of workers who prioritise operational efficiency and workplace harmony over broader geopolitical or cultural ideals. Interviews with workers revealed that their engagement with the project is primarily shaped by practical factors such as task completion and local job security rather than alignment with the symbolic messaging promoted at higher levels.

This disconnect between lofty project narratives and grassroots realities highlights a broader challenge in large-scale infrastructure initiatives: ensuring that the cultural and economic exchange emphasized at the macro level is meaningfully translated into tangible benefits for workers and local communities. The ECRL's grassroots feedback demonstrates the necessity of refining project narratives to incorporate localized experiences and perspectives, rather than relying solely on overarching slogans and directives.

The gap between top-down narratives and grassroots realities raises questions about whether existing feedback mechanisms can effectively bridge the divide. Current practices, such as incorporating community input into station layouts, offer a glimpse of inclusivity, but they remain fragmented and context-dependent. While such measures suggest progress, they also highlight the inherent complexities of aligning symbolic messaging with grassroots needs.

It is also worth questioning whether feedback mechanisms, as currently conceived, truly address the diverse expectations of stakeholders or merely provide a framework for selective engagement. For instance, while grassroots input may improve specific operational aspects, it does not necessarily challenge or transform the overarching strategic goals set by project leaders. This dynamic underscores the importance of critically examining how feedback is framed, who it serves, and whose voices are amplified or marginalized in the process.

Rather than advocating for a fixed set of solutions, it is essential to approach these mechanisms as iterative and context-sensitive processes. Their success depends not only on the inclusivity of the framework but also on the willingness of stakeholders to engage with conflicting perspectives and adapt over time. Ultimately, the effectiveness of such efforts remains contingent on the socio-political environments in which they are embedded, suggesting the need for ongoing dialogue and critical reflection rather than prescriptive fixes.

6.5 Concluding Remark

This chapter explored the multifaceted role of slogans and discourses within the ECRL project, emphasizing their dual function as tools for cultural integration and mechanisms of ideological alignment. Slogans such as "Connecting Life and Accelerating Growth" effectively act as emotional triggers, fostering immediate resonance and creating a sense of shared purpose among stakeholders. These slogans simplify the project's overarching goals, making them accessible to diverse audiences and inspiring alignment with the broader vision.

However, while these emotionally appealing messages effectively mobilize public support, they also risk oversimplifying broader socio-political and environmental challenges associated with the project. For instance, by focusing on themes of connectivity and growth, such slogans may unintentionally obscure critical issues like the equitable distribution of benefits across regions and the potential environmental impact on local communities. Recognizing that slogans and discourses primarily function as tools of state-led communication, it is crucial to analyse their limitations. These promotional messages are inherently designed to unify and inspire rather than deeply

engage with nuanced community concerns. While effective in shaping public sentiment, their reliance on emotional appeal may lead to the neglect of important socio-political challenges.

This disconnect underscores the importance of bridging symbolic messaging with tangible outcomes to maintain trust and relevance across stakeholder groups. Discourses, on the other hand, provide a more enduring ideological framework, embedding the emotional appeal of slogans within narratives of regional cooperation and mutual development. By linking the project to Malaysia-China bilateral goals, these discourses reinforce the strategic positioning of the ECRL as a cornerstone of cultural and economic exchange. Yet, even these discourses face challenges in fully capturing the lived experiences of grassroots participants, whose perspectives often differ from top-down narratives.

A key insight from this chapter is the dynamic loop between perception, practice, and ideology. This iterative process ensures that project narratives are not only shaped by top-level strategies but also influenced by grassroots realities. Slogans and discourses operate within this loop to align perceptions and actions, reinforcing stakeholder trust and cooperation. However, the success of this loop depends on the systematic inclusion of diverse voices, particularly those at the grassroots level, to ensure that all stakeholders' concerns are addressed.

This chapter's exploration of the immaterial components of the ECRL—slogans, discourses, and ideological narratives—provides a foundation for understanding how cultural messaging shapes stakeholder engagement. Chapter 7 extends this analysis by examining the material dimensions of the project, such as infrastructure and economic frameworks, to reveal how tangible elements interact with cultural narratives. Together, these insights contribute to a holistic understanding of the ECRL as a model for sustainable regional development that integrates cultural and material dynamics.

Chapter 7 Understanding Chinese economic strategies and capital accumulation through the ECRL project

7.1 Introduction

While the previous chapters focused on the immaterial aspects of the ECRL project—such as cultural exchanges and ideological alignments—it is now essential to shift attention to the material foundations that support these dynamics. The ECRL is not merely a piece of infrastructure; it embodies China's broader economic strategies and political-economic frameworks. This chapter explores how construction, financing, and operational models of the ECRL intersect with China's economic ambitions, providing insights into the mechanisms of capital accumulation and their role in advancing global initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

At the core of this chapter is an examination of Chinese economic frameworks—particularly the structures that govern large-scale infrastructure projects such as the ECRL. Utilizing sophisticated models like EPC+F (Engineering, Procurement, and Construction + Financing) and O&M (Operation and Maintenance), Chinese institutions demonstrate a unique ability to integrate engineering expertise with financial innovation. For instance, the adaptation of EPC+F enables streamlined project management while ensuring sustained capital flows. This approach not only secures material aspects—such as trade logistics and resource allocation—but also facilitates the development of related soft infrastructures, including educational and financial services.

This comprehensive strategy underscores China's capability to align hard and soft infrastructure development within a unified framework. By doing so, it establishes a foundation for potential socio-economic advancements across multiple sectors, though these outcomes remain contingent on effective implementation and external conditions. The ECRL serves as a prime example of how capital accumulation is embedded into infrastructure development, functioning as both an enabler and a product of China's broader political-economic objectives.

The first section establishes the historical and ideological framework that drives China's contemporary approach to capital accumulation. Several interviewees invoked historical analogies (e.g., Zheng He) to frame China's engagement as trade-oriented and cooperative, sometimes contrasting this with 'Western colonial' trajectories. In this thesis, such contrasts are analysed as legitimising narratives that support particular interpretations of intent, responsibility, and mutual benefit, while recognising that these framings are debated and problematised in Malaysian public discourse. This historical narrative provides a foundation for understanding how capital accumulation under the Belt and Road Initiative reflects a long-standing emphasis on mutual benefit rather than conquest.

The second section focuses on the role of political stability in enabling capital accumulation. Using the ECRL as a case study, it examines how political uncertainty—such as Malaysia's change of government corruption scandals—disrupts financial flows and strains the capital accumulation process. Some interviewees and project-facing narratives contrast Chinese financing with 'Western' models, often presenting the former as less explicitly conditional and more compatible with host-country sovereignty. This thesis treats such claims as situated, contested framings rather than as a settled comparative judgement, and notes that Malaysian public debate also contains counter-frames (e.g., dependency, accountability, uneven bargaining power). This dynamic underscores the necessity of political stability in ensuring uninterrupted capital accumulation through projects like the ECRL.

The third section delves into the financial mechanisms driving capital accumulation in the ECRL. It explains how models like PPP (Public-Private Partnerships) and EPC+OM (Engineering, Procurement, Construction, and Operation and Maintenance) enable shared risks and rewards between China and Malaysia. These flexible financing arrangements—such as low-interest loans—support long-term capital accumulation by extending beyond the construction phase into operations and maintenance. This ensures sustainable profitability and regional economic integration, securing mutual returns over decades.

Together, these sections illustrate how the ECRL exemplifies China's capital accumulation strategy, integrating historical, political, and financial dimensions into a cohesive framework. By embedding infrastructure projects like the ECRL within broader circulations of capital, China advances its economic vision while fostering durable partnerships with host nations.

7.2 Interviewees' historical reflections and contemporary practices

7.2.1 Historical foundations of China's peaceful economic cooperation approach

In discussing China's economic objectives behind the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), one particular answer from a Chinese officer left a strong impression on the interviewer:⁵⁰ 'Malaysia was once invaded and colonized by the British during the Age of Great Voyages. Was this because Japan and Portugal were more advanced than China in navigation technology at that time? In the Ming Dynasty, what we sent out was not an army, but Zheng He. When Zheng He was in the Straits of Malacca and Malaysia, our sole focus was on promoting economic and trade exchanges, rather than engaging in invasions.' This statement reflects a common narrative within China's political discourse, emphasizing peaceful engagement and trade expansion rather than military force.

This historical perspective highlights China's long-standing emphasis on economic cooperation as a means of fostering economic prosperity and peaceful international relations—principles that remain avowedly central to China's strategy under the BRI today. This historical understanding aligns with China's economic model, especially in large infrastructure projects like the ECRL. By focusing on trade and investment rather than control or conquest, China's strategy positions itself as mutually beneficial, a sentiment echoed by other interviewees involved in BRI-related projects.

A Chinese officer involved with the ECRL remarked, "The project is about creating pathways for long-term cooperation and capital accumulation for both nations. It opens up new market opportunities and lays the groundwork for sustained economic development." His comments

⁵⁰ Interview C8; See Appendix 11.1.2

reflect a widespread belief that projects like the ECRL, underpinned by the EPC+F model, which not only focuses on physical infrastructure development but also integrates soft infrastructure components, such as educational and financial services. This dual focus ensures that both material and immaterial dimensions of growth are systematically addressed, creating a more holistic development framework. However, this multifaceted model and its implications for sustainable growth warrant further exploration.

These collaborations have long-term impacts on trade, industry, and soft infrastructure. They are not just about physical infrastructure, but about creating conditions for economic growth and the integration of local economies into broader trade networks." This reflects how BRI projects aim to contribute to capital accumulation by – and are often explicitly justified and publicized in terms of – integrating local industries into a larger, global system of economic exchanges.

7.2.2 China's economic model in practice: the ECRL and local impact

These goals, and the significance of their promise and then material realization, are also evident from the 'ground-level' host country perspective. A Malaysian interviewee⁵¹ living in East Malaysia shared how projects like the ECRL could bring positive economic changes to local residents: "I want an opportunity to live a better life, and I'm tired of being stuck in a rural area because it takes a whole day just to travel to a more bustling district near the west." He also personally considered that China seems like a better partner compared to Western countries. "I'm not an expert on Western politics or the ways developed countries assist less-developed regions, but based on the international news I follow, China's involvement seems more likely to bring tangible economic benefits." This sentiment reflects the hope many locals place in Chinese-led infrastructure projects to deliver real improvements, especially in terms of increased mobility and economic opportunities that directly contribute to capital accumulation.

For many local middle- to lower-class residents, the Belt and Road Initiative and the construction

⁵¹ Interview M3; See Appendix 11.1.2

process of the ECRL are not their primary concerns. Instead, they are focused on the immediate economic benefits these projects promise to deliver. The numerous job opportunities generated across various industries and fields then stand as proof of these material benefits. One Malaysian interviewee,⁵² who works for the Malaysian branch of CCCC, shared his experience of helping his previously unemployed mother secure a job as a cleaner in his department. Similarly, another worker employed at the construction site brought his family to live on-site.⁵³ His supervisor arranged a cooking job for his wife and enrolled their child in a community nursery school established for the workers' families. These examples illustrate how Chinese economic involvement extends beyond the construction phase to support the local economy, providing employment and social services that foster community development, which in turn reinforces capital accumulation at the grassroots level.

7.2.3 Soft infrastructure and cross-cultural collaborations drivers of growth

Furthermore, the cross-cultural exchanges fostered by these projects contribute to the mutual understanding between Chinese and Malaysian workers. Over time, camaraderie has developed, with workers supporting each other during climate emergencies and natural disasters. These interactions, while emerging from material cooperation, are supported by shared cultural exchanges and mutual respect, rather than being explicitly underpinned by a rigid cultural or ideological alignment between China and its partner countries. This reflects the deeper integration of China's economic conception with its political strategy, where cultural and economic cooperation go hand in hand to ensure the success of projects like the ECRL

As a result, the visible economic benefits and job opportunities associated with the ECRL project have driven many Malaysians to generally accept collaboration with the Chinese. Although there remains some distance and uncertainty about China's deeper intentions, there is sufficient willingness among the local population to engage in and continue working with Chinese partners,

⁵² Interview M8; See Appendix 11.1.2

⁵³ Interview M7; See Appendix 11.1.2

given the tangible advantages already emerging from the project, particularly in terms of capital accumulation and local development. This acceptance, despite reservations about fully understanding China's long-term goals, stems from the immediate economic advantages—especially the increase in employment and community engagement—offered by these projects: China, we might say, is seen to be 'walking the walk', whatever its 'talk' (and/or 'deeper intentions'), and the former is more compelling evidence for making up minds regarding stance vis-a-vis the ECRL project for the great majority of host country stakeholders, especially at 'ground level'.

7.2.4 Perceptions of China's economic intentions: trade vs. expansion

When asked whether they believe the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) represents a regional expansion strategy, one Chinese interviewee responded:⁵⁴ "I'm not sure about the definition of strategy because I'm not working in any academic areas, but I think it's a biased description." This sentiment reflects an unease with how BRI is framed in some discussions. Another Chinese interviewee, who has an educational background in international politics, offered a more critical response, arguing that the perception of BRI as expansionist reflects a Western view of international relations.

He explained that, historically, strong nations have often engaged in regional expansion as their economies grew. For example, he cited Britain during the Age of Exploration, describing its expansion as primarily driven by conquest and colonization, which shaped its global influence. Regarding the United States, he suggested its post-WWII global strategy included interventions in various regions; however, this was often framed as supporting self-determination and opposing colonialism, reflecting a distinct historical and ideological stance compared to earlier European powers.

However, he emphasized that China's global influence is exerted in a different manner. According to this interviewee, China's economic strategy is rooted in peaceful cooperation through trade and

⁵⁴ Interview C7; See Appendix 11.1.2

infrastructure projects, such as the ECRL, which foster long-term capital accumulation for both China and its partner countries. He stated, "While countries like Britain and the United States expanded through territorial conquests, China is expanding its influence by building economic partnerships and infrastructure that drive mutual economic growth." This viewpoint highlights a perceived distinction between China's approach and traditional Western expansionist policies.

At the same time, it is important to contextualize this distinction within a broader historical narrative. While it is true that emerging global powers often frame their strategies as peaceful and mutually beneficial, this framing can, over time, give way to criticisms of exploitation and asymmetry as power dynamics evolve. Historical examples, such as Britain's and the United States' transitions from commercial partnerships to formalized colonial systems, illustrate how early-stage win-win relations can become more rigid and militarized over time. This raises the question of whether China's current approach—while emphasizing economic partnerships—can entirely avoid similar trajectories, particularly in light of growing geopolitical tensions. By acknowledging both the unique elements and potential risks of China's approach, this analysis aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how contemporary economic strategies are shaped by historical precedents and future uncertainties.

Another Chinese interviewee,⁵⁵ working on the practical construction of the railway, offered a simpler yet aligned perspective: "We are not such a country in our long history." He echoed the belief that linking the BRI with regional expansion reflects a misunderstanding of China's intentions. Both interviewees emphasized China's historical focus on economic cooperation rather than geopolitical domination.

However, this perspective necessitates further context. While China's historical narrative often highlights figures like Zheng He, whose voyages symbolize peaceful global engagement, it is essential to acknowledge that these missions did not establish enduring international trade

⁵⁵ Interview C3; See Appendix 11.1.2

networks or long-term connections. Similarly, periods like the Mao era, which prioritised self-reliance and isolationism, contrast sharply with the cooperative and open economic strategies underpinning contemporary initiatives like the BRI. This complexity underscores the evolving nature of China's "long history" and its interplay with modern economic strategies.

The idea of "ambition" in the Chinese context, as articulated by the interviewees, is framed as a desire to promote global trade cooperation and economic development, rather than aggressive expansionism. Yet, this framing also raises the question of how China's current narratives address undeniable moments of territorial expansion in its history—such as into Central Asia or Mongolia—while avoiding parallels with Western colonialism. This divergence in interpretation reflects the broader cultural and ideological perspectives on international relations that shape the BRI's reception globally. They emphasize that their focus is on helping their Malaysian counterparts improve infrastructure, create jobs, and boost trade, rather than pursuing territorial or political expansion.

This assertion reflects an emphasis on pragmatic and mutually beneficial goals, aligning with the broader Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) narrative. However, as noted in the commentary, this framing warrants deeper interrogation. The articulation of China's non-expansionist intentions often operates as a response to international skepticism, aiming to distance these projects from historical patterns of territorial conquest or domination commonly associated with Western expansionism. Such framing positions China's activities within the BRI as a unique approach, emphasizing cultural and regional connectivity over direct geopolitical control.

A common pro-BRI narrative, echoed in several interviews, presents China's regional engagement as connectivity-driven and relationship-oriented, emphasising trade partnerships and economic interdependence rather than direct geopolitical control. Critics, by contrast, interpret the same initiatives through the lens of strategic influence and question whether the resulting interdependence is symmetric in practice. In this thesis, I treat these positions as competing framings within a legitimacy struggle, and I focus on how each is justified, by whom, and with what

evidentiary supports, rather than adopting either interpretation as the default.

Naturally, though, in taking one or other of these positions, various regional actors may also not share this meta-conception of the situation. A recurrent theme in Chinese stakeholder interviews, for instance, was the emphasis on China's non-expansionist historical identity, even to the point of presuming the self-evidence of Chinese beneficence; i.e. with no 'legitimacy struggle' even at issue. As one Chinese technical executive put it, "We are not here to take resources; we are here to share our technology" (Interview: CN-MGT-02). This aligns with the national discourse that China has never invaded other nations in 5,000 years. Yet such claims are far from universally accepted. More generally, research on China's maritime politics suggests that historical grievances and nationalist sentiment can heighten the salience of public discourse and increase the political sensitivity of external engagement during periods of tension, even if public opinion does not operate as a straightforward driver of policy choices (Chubb, 2019; Chubb, 2020).

In 2018, then-Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad publicly warned against Chinese investments resembling "a new version of colonialism" during his visit to Beijing (The Guardian, 2018). These perspectives do not necessarily imply active hostility to Chinese partnerships, but they certainly signal an alternative reading of China's regional presence and, at the very least, painfully-earned scepticism towards claims of unqualified benevolence on the part of China or Chinese agents. Following Sum and Jessop's (2013) cultural political economy model, legitimacy is not produced unilaterally via discourse – indeed, it cannot simply be compelled –, but emerges through recursive interactions between meaning, practice, and institutionalisation. The ECRL project's cultural resonance must thus be understood within a web of post-colonial sensitivities and regional historical memory; and ironically, the very determination by some to declaim China's 'self-evident' magnanimity can serve simply to demonstrate to others the very deafness and insensitivity to such concerns.

However, this analysis also raises the critical issue of acknowledging the structural asymmetries inherent in such relationships. While China's framing as a benign actor pursuing win-win

cooperation contrasts sharply with the narratives of overt domination associated with Western powers, it does not fully escape the complexities of global power dynamics. China's growing influence in regions like Southeast Asia carries its risks and criticisms, as the relationships established through BRI projects often evolve into asymmetric power relations. These dynamics highlight the need to understand China's approach as both a strategic and highly calculated effort to secure its own interests while addressing the developmental needs of partner countries.

From this perspective, the issue is not a simplistic binary between “good” and “bad” expansion, but the historically situated and politically mediated ways in which infrastructure-led development can be interpreted, contested, and institutionalised across different audiences and moments. This requires acknowledging both the strengths and potential limitations of China's model, particularly in managing perceptions of its role as a rising global power.

In fact, many Chinese workers on the ground emphasized that their work was primarily about providing economic opportunities for Malaysians. As one worker put it,⁵⁶ "We know exactly what we're doing here, and it's not about expansion. It's about building a railway that can bring economic benefits to both countries." This direct connection between economic development and the promotion of capital accumulation, rather than an overt political agenda, resonates strongly with the workers' daily experiences and underscores the Chinese approach to international economic collaboration. However, a Cultural Political Economy (CPE) approach suggests that treating “economic development” as separable from political agendas is analytically fragile. In large-scale initiatives such as the BRI, accumulation strategies, governance arrangements, and legitimacy work are typically intertwined. Projects like the ECRL can therefore be read as simultaneously material interventions in connectivity and sites of political meaning-making, in which developmental claims may contribute—intentionally or otherwise—to the reproduction of wider governing narratives and power relations.

⁵⁶ Interview C11; See Appendix 11.1.2

The distinction between "economic development" and "political expansion" presented by workers likely reflects the narratives propagated within China's national developmental framework. These narratives emphasize friendly and mutual collaboration while carefully avoiding the implications of territorial or political dominance. Yet, the underlying political project of the BRI—securing China's global economic influence and geopolitical stability—remains implicit in the workers' perspectives. The workers' focus on economic benefits and infrastructure development, while seemingly apolitical, aligns with the broader strategic imperatives of the BRI, including the reinforcement of China's regional and global influence.

This lack of critical engagement with the political dimensions of their work may stem from the broader ideological environment of the BRI. Workers, especially those embedded in state-driven projects, are more likely to align themselves with national goals and policies without questioning their deeper implications. This alignment is not accidental; rather, it reflects the success of the Chinese state in framing the BRI as an unequivocally "good" and apolitical initiative, focused solely on mutual economic benefit. Such framing enables workers to view their roles as contributing to economic development without delving into the broader political strategies underpinning these projects.

Some interviewees went further,⁵⁷ suggesting that the historical actions of Western countries have contributed to the misinterpretation of initiatives like the BRI. They argued that expansionist behaviours in history, particularly from capitalist countries, have shaped contemporary perceptions of infrastructure projects. Specifically, they believed that without such historical precedents, the idea of helping another country through infrastructure projects would not be so readily framed as expansionism.

However, while this perspective highlights a critical awareness of how historical narratives influence current perceptions, it may also risk oversimplifying the dynamics of power relations. Western

⁵⁷ Interview GP1&C7, See Appendix 11.1.2

experiences with global capitalism and infrastructure development, often characterised by asymmetric power dynamics, provide a cautionary tale of how even well-intentioned collaborations can escalate into relations of domination. This insight could be a valuable lesson for Chinese stakeholders, urging them to reflect on and address potential parallels within their own approaches to global projects like the BRI. Rather than distancing themselves from these historical patterns as exclusively "Western" problems, there is an opportunity to critically examine the risks and unintended consequences that might emerge from their own practices.

7.2.5 Navigating global criticism and local support for China's approach

The above statements reflect the perspectives of Chinese staff in CCCC. However, one of the interviewees with Malaysian nationality, fluent in both English and Malay, shared his thoughts on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from a local viewpoint. Regularly following news about the BRI and reading academic and media discussions, he noted, "Some academic institutions and Western media may carry a lens shaped by their own interests, using terms like 'ambition' to frame the Belt and Road Initiative in a somewhat skewed manner." He emphasized that while these viewpoints are understandable given the broader global economic context, they often fail to fully capture the nuanced motivations behind China's efforts.

From his perspective, given the current global economic recession, it would be unrealistic to expect China to launch such a massive political-economic initiative without considering its own strategic interests. He argued that China's efforts are not solely for Malaysia's benefit but are rooted in mutual economic gain, which is rational for any country engaging in international trade and infrastructure projects aimed at capital accumulation. However, this mutual gain is inseparably tied to political considerations. Such projects inherently reshape power dynamics, contributing to a broader narrative of empowerment and influence for both China and its partner countries.

Following this opinion, several voices from non-Chinese staff of CCCC and other third-party organisations echoed similar understandings of Western analyses. These interviewees believe that, based on their own experiences, Chinese workers and managers have integrated well into local

communities in Malaysia. For example, during past natural disasters like floods and fires (as mentioned earlier), Chinese staff showed considerable assistance to local Malaysians, who, in turn, responded positively. This reciprocal relationship has increased local acceptance of Chinese assistance.

However, some of the non-Chinese interviewees also expressed concerns about what they perceive as potential cultural influence and ideological presence from China. This perception suggests that the process might involve not only economic cooperation but also cultural and ideological integration—raising a sense of unease. While from a Chinese perspective, such integration might be framed as "universally beneficial" and aligned with mutual interests, these non-Chinese respondents perceive it as a potential imposition of cultural and ideological values. This divergence in perspectives reflects the complex interplay between China's global ambitions and local reactions, underscoring the multifaceted nature of cultural exchanges within projects like the ECRL.

Two Malaysian interviewees responsible for public relations on behalf of the Malaysian side offered more open and positive views on international perceptions of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). "Whether or not the terms used are biased, such as 'strategy' or 'ambition,' these words at least show that OBOR and our joint ECRL project are receiving significant attention globally," one noted. He emphasized that this attention should not negatively affect the commitment of Chinese staff involved in the project but rather serve as a reminder for all parties to work respectfully and cooperatively in this international environment. He added that the perceived bias in certain terms should be viewed not as a detriment but as an opportunity to approach collaborations with greater caution and respect.

This reflection highlights the recognition of irreducible cultural differences between stakeholders, which must be understood and negotiated. Unlike their Malaysian counterparts, the Chinese interviewees' responses to the term "bias" often suggest an assumption that bias is inherently a Western issue, framing it as external to their perspective or conduct. This subtle divergence underscores the need for a deeper understanding of how differing cultural and ideological

frameworks shape perceptions of international collaboration.

Another Malaysian interviewee questioned the origins of concerns about local resistance to Chinese assistance, noting, "In my experience, the local people have been very welcoming and eager for the project's completion. I don't understand why there would be concerns about rejection." He expressed a positive attitude toward China, saying, "I have always had a good feeling about China." From his perspective, over a decade of trade between Malaysia and China has demonstrated tangible advantages in terms of increased connectivity, both economically and culturally. He remarked, "China has had more than a decade to impose any form of cultural or economic domination, but it has not done so. Instead, China has played a constructive role in this cooperation." He described China's role as 'constructive' within the cooperation, and framed this in contrast to historical experiences of dominance and exploitation often associated with major powers. This thesis treats this as one narrative within the broader contestation, alongside counter-claims that foreground dependency, bargaining asymmetry, and governance risks.

Nevertheless, this interviewee acknowledged that while China's intentions appear positive, there may be unintended side effects of economic and political influence that naturally accompany such large-scale projects. He noted that, despite the absence of explicit cultural or political ambitions, the process of deepening economic ties through projects like the ECRL could result in some level of ideological exchange. This influence, he suggested, occurs gradually and often unconsciously through daily interactions, work collaborations, and Chinese assistance during local incidents.

As evidenced by earlier interviewees, the examples provided—such as Chinese staff sharing technical knowledge and providing assistance during emergencies—demonstrate that these interactions extend beyond economic exchange alone. Through regular communication, Chinese workers and managers convey not only technical expertise but also broader political, economic, and cultural ideas. These exchanges, while grounded in practical cooperation, also reflect deeper elements of China's economic and political frameworks. Such interactions naturally accompany the processes of capital investment and infrastructure development that are integral to the Belt and

Road Initiative.

7.3 Political stability as a key factor in China's financial assistance model

7.3.1 Host country political stability as the foundation of China's financial strategy

In the context of the ECRL project, the significance of political stability is paramount, particularly when considering China's distinctive approach to financial assistance. As discussed in the previous section, China's economic conception is rooted in long-term investment strategies that seek to balance mutual benefits with careful risk management. This strategy is heavily reliant on the political and institutional stability of the host country, as political turbulence can disrupt the process of capital accumulation and financial cooperation.

Instead of attributing the ECRL project's temporary suspension solely to the change of government in Malaysia, interviewees from the financial department provided a different perspective, suggesting that this change of government was closely linked, in interviewees' accounts to a major and high-profile corruption scandal in Malaysia's recent political history. The impact of this scandal reverberated through the financial management of the project, making the ECRL one of the most politically and financially sensitive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. For Malaysia, it has become a critical infrastructure project tied directly to the national political and economic landscape.

This political uncertainty posed significant challenges not only for the ECRL but also for the broader dynamics of capital accumulation, which depend on stable governance and transparent financial systems. The Chinese financial-assistance model, characterised by flexibility and long-term commitment, was put under strain yet sustained operations without breaking, highlighting its adaptability amid political and financial turbulence. By contrast, Western financial relations—often more sensitive to shareholder reactions and stricter due-diligence requirements—may have been more likely to falter under similar conditions. This comparison underscores the robustness of

China's assistance framework and its capacity to maintain progress in infrastructure projects despite external pressures, reinforcing its strategic viability in challenging environments.

However, regional perspectives on China's economic presence are not uniform. Across comparative measures, middle-income countries tend to rate the U.S. and China more similarly than high-income countries, which lean clearly toward the U.S. (Pew Research Center, 2023). In 2024, more people held favourable views of China than of the U.S. in Malaysia and Singapore, while views were broadly similar—and mostly positive—in Sri Lanka and Thailand (Pew Research Center, 2024a; 2024b). This comparative framing helps contextualise regional pluralism in how China's role is interpreted, particularly in relation to infrastructure initiatives such as the ECRL.

Electoral politics plays a significant role in heightening political risks for the ECRL. One interviewee,⁵⁸ a political analyst involved with the project, explained that "in election campaigns, political parties often exploit major infrastructure projects like the ECRL as part of their strategy to gain support or discredit their opponents." This politicization has transformed the ECRL from a purely economic initiative into a focal point of political contention. The interviewee emphasized that the project became a key topic of debate during Malaysia's elections, with different political factions weaponizing it to criticise their rivals.

This dynamic underscores the blurred lines between economic and political motivations, which complicates the project's financial environment. The successful functioning of such large-scale initiatives heavily depends on maintaining a widely credible distinction between economic and political issues. However, as seen in this case, when this line becomes obscured, it can derail financing mechanisms and undermine the trust necessary for sustaining functional cooperation. Consequently, the project risks being stalled not due to technical or economic shortcomings, but because of the entanglement of economic objectives with domestic political struggles.

Additionally, the conflict between Malaysia's central and local governments further exacerbated the

⁵⁸ Interview C9; See Appendix 11.1.2

project's challenges. "There's always tension between the federal and state levels, and that tension often spills over into how projects like the ECRL are implemented," noted a third interviewee, who works closely with the local government's planning department. This internal political friction between central and local authorities has caused delays and complications in project execution, which in turn affect the financial management and capital accumulation processes necessary for the project's success. This interviewee emphasized that protecting Chinese enterprises' rights is crucial, especially when political risks materialize. "We need to be prepared to apply diplomatic pressure, seek legal remedies, and even manage public opinion to protect our investments," they added, underscoring the comprehensive approach required to mitigate risks in politically unstable environments.

Political uncertainty poses significant challenges to capital accumulation in BRI projects, particularly because China's financial assistance is often presented by relevant actors as sovereignty-respecting; under conditions of political uncertainty, the durability and legitimacy of long-horizon financing therefore become more contested and more dependent on how accountability, renegotiation, and risk allocation are managed. The financial success of these projects is intricately tied to maintaining a stable political environment, which allows for consistent investment flows and project continuity. For Chinese financial institutions, the notion of "political risk" seems to centre on ensuring stability of form—namely, a political context that minimizes disruptions to the financing and execution of these projects. This often translates into navigating complex political realities through a mix of diplomatic engagement and legal frameworks, while maintaining the surface presentation of economic and political distinctions.

However, such efforts frequently bring cross-scalar tools into play, particularly in managing tensions between diplomatic and financial strategies. The reliance on increased transparency as a mitigation measure also reveals inherent contradictions. For instance, while transparency may stabilize a project in principle, it risks publicizing sensitive details, potentially transforming political disputes into widespread public controversies. As the ECRL case demonstrates, Chinese institutions must operate within these delicate dynamics, balancing the imperatives of financial continuity with the

political realities of host countries.

7.3.2 The role of political communication in managing financial crises

Political stability, or the lack thereof, directly impacts the execution of infrastructure projects like the ECRL. China's financial model, which emphasizes respect for the political autonomy of partner countries while fostering deep economic ties, relies heavily on the stability of local governance structures. Interviews revealed that effective political communication between China and Malaysia played a pivotal role in managing the financial aspects of the ECRL during periods of uncertainty. While the change of government was not presented as the direct cause of the project's suspension, interview accounts suggest that the wider period of political contestation—including high-profile corruption allegation—intensified uncertainty and complicated the project's financial management. In this context, finance emerged as a critical factor that both sustained the project's continuity and posed significant risks to its progress, highlighting the intricate interplay between political and financial dynamics in large-scale infrastructure projects.

One key aspect highlighted by the interviewees was that,⁵⁹ although the Chinese financial institutions involved—such as the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) and the Chinese Import and Export Bank—continued to support the project, the uncertainties surrounding Malaysia's internal political situation, mediated through the financial dimensions of the project, made it difficult to proceed smoothly. Several interviewees⁶⁰ hinted at internal complexities within these institutions, noting that they were unable to disclose detailed information due to the sensitive nature of the ongoing political and financial issues. This reluctance to discuss internal matters underscores the broader theme of how political uncertainty can complicate financial transparency and cooperation in large-scale projects.

This period was marked not by stability but by deep political uncertainty. The 2018 Malaysian general election represented a historic political rupture—the first time in over six decades that the

⁵⁹ Interview C7; See Appendix 11.1.2

⁶⁰ Interview C7&C9; See Appendix 11.1.2

ruling coalition lost power. The electoral outcome was accompanied by a series of high-profile corruption allegations and investigation, most notably the 1MDB corruption case, which drew international media attention and triggered domestic political upheaval. This unexpected political transition raised widespread concern both within Malaysia and among external stakeholders. For infrastructure projects such as the ECRL, this turbulence contributed to heightened risk perceptions, casting doubt on the continuity of elite consensus and policy commitments. It also suggested to observers that large-scale projects could be exposed to greater scrutiny and politicization under new administrations.

The situation in Malaysia in 2018 underscores the delicate balance between political stability and the implementation of Chinese financial assistance. For Chinese-led projects like the ECRL, political communication and stability are not only critical for the smooth execution of construction but also for maintaining steady financial flows and ensuring that capital accumulation processes remain uninterrupted. Interviewees from the financial sector consistently highlighted the importance of political stability in fostering confidence in long-term investment strategies,⁶¹ which are a hallmark of China's economic approach under the BRI framework. Equally significant, however, is the resilience of the Chinese financial mechanism itself, which ensured that the project was not completely derailed by the challenges posed by political uncertainty, thus demonstrating a robust capacity to adapt and sustain momentum in adverse conditions.

Moreover, the reluctance of financial staff to speak openly about the internal challenges further indicates how deeply the change of government and corruption scandal affected the ECRL project. The controlled and cautious responses from these staff members suggest that they were speaking within organisational constraints about what could be said publicly. Several interviewees framed this caution in relation to heightened political scrutiny and financial uncertainty at the time.

⁶¹ Interview C8; See Appendix 11.1.2

In response to these challenges, the research process faced notable obstacles. Many interviewees expressed reluctance to engage, and those who did participate often chose to pre-select the topics they were willing to discuss. Despite these limitations, it is evident that the political context in Malaysia during 2018 had profound implications for the financial viability of the ECRL project. However, these implications also shed light on the broader interconnectedness of political stability within both the host and home countries.

For instance, political stability in this context does not merely refer to the host country's governance but also involves a delicate balancing act that can reflect back onto China's own political dynamics. In interviews, several financial-sector participants framed the robustness of the financing arrangement as linked to how political and reputational risks were managed during periods of heightened uncertainty. This included, in some accounts, a preference for cautious and carefully sequenced public communication, with boundaries on what could be disclosed at particular moments. Importantly, this should not be read as an unqualified claim that limited disclosure is inherently “better”, nor as evidence of a simple China/West contrast. Rather, it points to how different financing systems operate within different accountability architectures and disclosure expectations—expectations that are themselves contested, situational, and shaped by political constraints.

The insights from interviews with financial experts involved in the ECRL project, as well as those who have transitioned to other BRI initiatives, underline the critical role of stable political environments in ensuring the successful execution of Chinese financial assistance. These experts emphasize that the interplay between political and financial stability is fundamental to the success of large-scale infrastructure projects. Such stability enables the long-term accumulation of capital, which is supported by robust governance structures and transparent financial operations. This focus on stability reflects a key material concern of capital accumulation, directly linking the observations of financial professionals to the broader theoretical framework of this chapter.

7.3.3 The impact of Malaysia's political shifts on ECRL's financial negotiations

The impact of Malaysia's political shifts on ECRL's financial negotiations reflects the interplay between domestic political stability and broader geopolitical dynamics. On July 3, under the influence of multiple political and financial factors, the Malaysian Ministry of Finance announced that the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) project would be temporarily suspended, necessitating contract renegotiations with Chinese enterprises. This abrupt decision heightened trade and investment diplomatic tensions between China and Malaysia, indirectly affecting regional cooperation across Southeast Asia.

"The loans and financial transactions across the entire Southeast Asia region were more or less negatively affected during that time," noted an interviewee⁶² from the China Export and Import Bank, though no specific financial data were disclosed. This disruption highlights how shifts in domestic and geopolitical stability can simultaneously open opportunities for renegotiation but also exacerbate risks for large-scale initiatives. The suspension of such a major project inevitably had ramifications both domestically and internationally, raising concerns about the long-term financial sustainability of China's investments under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

This example illustrates how geopolitical stability, alongside domestic political stability in both host countries and China, plays a vital role in enabling or constraining financial cooperation. Such interactions can foster non-zero-sum benefits when stable or devolve into significant risks with far-reaching consequences when stability falters.

One interviewee pointed out that this situation had caused significant anxiety within Chinese and international financial markets,⁶³ casting doubt on China's long-term investment approach and the viability of projects like the ECRL. The key issue for the Malaysian government was the perceived high cost of the ECRL project, coupled with concerns over opaque contract terms and ambiguous cost structures. Malaysia was reluctant to breach the co-construction contract with China, as doing so would involve costly compensation. A Chinese financial ministry representative responded to

⁶² Interview C10; See Appendix 11.1.2

⁶³ Interview GP2; See Appendix 11.1.2

these concerns, stating, "The raw materials for the ECRL project are sourced from hundreds of local companies in Malaysia, and their prices are fully in line with Malaysia's economic conditions. As for the so-called opaque terms and cost structures, this is more of a pretext used by those seeking to find fault." The interviewee⁶⁴ suggested that some of these criticisms stemmed from political motivations rather than objective financial realities.

Following the project suspension, Malaysian Finance Minister Datuk Seri Daim and Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad traveled to China to renegotiate the project's terms. One interviewee who participated in the negotiations explained,⁶⁵ "Mahathir insisted that the 39% deposit agreement, signed under the previous prime minister, was unreasonable in the current financial context." This deposit was seen as a point of contention, with both sides aiming to find ways to reduce costs and re-examine the project specifications. Another Malaysian interviewee, one of the only two from the financial focus group, acknowledged that while professionals understood the 39% deposit helped reduce interest rates and lower long-term costs, only 20% of the project had been completed by the time of the suspension. "As a Malaysian, I can understand some of Mahathir's concerns," he added, reflecting the internal political pressures that shaped the negotiation process.

This process underscored the resilience of China's financial mechanisms, which continued to operate effectively despite significant political turbulence, ensuring that financial cooperation and project negotiations moved forward (McGuirk, 2024). While the Malaysian government sought to reduce costs and increase transparency, Chinese financial actors remained focused on preserving the long-term economic benefits of the project. Both sides recognised that political stability and mutual trust were crucial for ensuring the project's completion and the realization of its economic potential. This episode highlights the intricate interplay between politics and finance in the context of China's broader economic vision, where the success of initiatives like the Belt and Road depends not only on sound financial planning but also on the stability of political relationships.

⁶⁴ Interview C5; See Appendix 11.1.2

⁶⁵ Interview M3; See Appendix 11.1.2

7.3.4 The triple political game: great power competition and local politics

Political risk has emerged as one of the major challenges facing the ECRL project, where multiple political games contribute to the complexity of these risks. An interviewee working in the finance team of the ECRL project described the situation as a "triple political game,"⁶⁶ involving the dynamics between great power competition, electoral politics, and central-local government conflicts. This insight highlights the cross-scalar power relational dynamics at play, where economic and political spheres are deeply intertwined. The overlapping factors significantly shape how the host government and ruling party engage with foreign investment projects like the ECRL, making them subject to political manipulation and uncertainty.

According to this interviewee, the great power competition between nations such as China and Japan has provided the host government with both opportunities and pretexts to maneuver within the international arena. The host country may choose to align itself more closely with one of these powers, extract more favourable terms by playing them against each other, or even adopt negative narratives about the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) pushed by competing nations. "When other powers stigmatize BRI, it creates uncertainties in the host government's approach to our projects," noted the interviewee, referencing how shifting international alliances can cause changes in public and governmental attitudes towards Chinese investments. Such loose 'sentiments' though have primary effect by, in turn, potentially posing *financial* risks to projects like the ECRL, where political shifts lead to instability in investment flows.

7.3.5 Negotiating with Japan and renegotiating with China

When Mahathir unilaterally interrupted the agreement with China, he turned his attention to Japan, a country with extensive experience and technology in railway construction. Japan had previously collaborated with Malaysia on similar projects, such as the Kuala Lumpur-Singapore high-speed railway. Under these circumstances, Mahathir initiated negotiations with Japan. According to one insider interviewee, "As an olive branch to Malaysia, Japan offered about 200 billion yen in 'samurai

⁶⁶ Interview C7; See Appendix 11.1.2

bonds' to help Malaysia overcome its debt difficulties, but the price for this low-interest loan was that the Malaysian government would have to allow Japan to set up their own schools in the country." The interviewee added that Mahathir formally sought Japan's assistance at the end of 2018 to continue the remaining works on the ECRL.

Japan did demonstrate its sincerity by offering attractive proposals, such as low-interest loans and promises of technology transfer and training. Another interviewee remarked, "These proposals were largely similar to the original contract with China, though with some minor differences." However, despite these seemingly favourable terms, the negotiations failed, and Malaysia eventually chose to forgo this "lifeline." The interviewee speculated that no matter what type of technical support or loans Japan offered, the overall cost would have been too high for Malaysia to bear. "At least the cost would have been higher than China's original proposal; otherwise, Mahathir would have agreed," he said. The interviewee suggested the possibility that Japan introduced additional requirements during the negotiations, which involved enhancing the project's management structure or taking control over decision-making powers related to the project. These conditions were seen as Japan potentially overstepping into Malaysia's autonomy, similar to its earlier proposal to establish Japanese schools in Malaysia. Such demands were perceived by some as exceeding the bounds of normal cooperation, leading to dissatisfaction on the Malaysian side and possibly contributing to the failure of the negotiations.

An interviewee with experience in long-term project management and financial returns summarized the situation: "For Japan at that time, Malaysia was not an ally. If providing bond assistance to Malaysia could generate revenue, Japan might have taken the deal. But it wasn't willing to take over a 'semi-finished' project, especially when Malaysia appeared to be trying to gain extra leverage through the project's transfer." This view suggests that Japan, while showing interest in supporting Malaysia, may have considered the financial risks and political implications of getting involved in the ECRL project, ultimately deciding that the potential returns did not justify the investment.

The interviews highlight the complexity of managing large infrastructure projects like the ECRL, especially in politically charged environments marked by fluctuating political leadership, competing economic priorities, and geopolitical tensions. In Malaysia, the 2018 change of government significantly impacted the project, as the newly elected government sought to renegotiate agreements signed by the previous administration amidst allegations of corruption. This created uncertainty regarding the project's continuity. At the same time, geopolitical competition, particularly interest from other major powers like Japan, added pressure to the decision-making process. While China's financial model, offering lower interest rates and flexible terms, made the project appealing to Malaysia, these politically sensitive dynamics introduced additional risks for the capital accumulation process. Despite these challenges, China's determination to maintain financial commitments and adapt to shifting political circumstances proved crucial in sustaining the project's progress and aligning with the broader goals of the Belt and Road Initiative.

7.4 From challenges to strategic innovations in infrastructure financing

7.4.1 The Financial Risks of China's Low-Interest Loan Strategy

China's low-interest loan strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has made projects like the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) attractive to partner countries such as Malaysia but has also created significant financial pressures for China itself. As one Chinese official noted, "The key challenge is how to ensure that the capital invested in these projects is returned with sufficient value, balancing the long-term benefits for both China and Malaysia." While these low rates appeal to Malaysia, they increase the financial risks for China, which must manage these pressures carefully.

Interviewees pointed out that such financial risks are part of a broader strategy to enhance regional connectivity and economic ties, which ultimately serve China's geopolitical and economic goals. The willingness to take on these risks demonstrates China's long-term vision under the BRI, where financial commitments are viewed not merely as transactions but as a pathway to strengthen influence and regional integration.

The provisional operation and maintenance phase of the ECRL plays a critical role in ensuring financial sustainability. A financial manager explained, "If the project operates smoothly during this phase, it will create a foundation for ongoing capital accumulation, benefiting both China and Malaysia." While China's flexibility and low rates enable large-scale infrastructure projects like the ECRL, the risks associated with these investments require strategic management and coordination to achieve desired outcomes.

Despite these challenges, China's approach to the ECRL reflects its commitment to long-term capital accumulation. By investing in the full lifecycle of the project—construction, operations, and maintenance—China aims to ensure not only the project's immediate success but also sustained economic influence through enhanced regional connectivity and trade growth.

7.4.2 Malaysia's Concerns and Structural Adjustments

Malaysia's primary concerns regarding the ECRL project centred on its high costs and potential debt burden, particularly after the 2018 change of government. These concerns led to renegotiations, with then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad demanding reductions in project costs, shortening the railway's length, and adjusting the financing structure to alleviate Malaysia's economic pressures. A participant in the 2018-2019 negotiations remarked, "Malaysia softened its demands but remained steadfast in reducing the project's overall cost."

The renegotiated agreement in 2019 resulted in significant adjustments. China reduced the cost per kilometre from \$23.2 million to \$16.7 million by leveraging advanced technologies and optimizing the route. The total railway length was shortened by 48 kilometres, reducing the overall project scope to 640 kilometres. A Chinese engineer highlighted, "These adjustments reflect the maturity and precision of Chinese railway construction skills." Furthermore, the financing model was revised to allocate 74% of funding through loans and 26% through Malaysian equity, balancing financial risks for both sides.

To address land acquisition costs, China revised the project's route to bypass expensive areas, such as the "Quartz Belt," and sensitive cultural sites, demonstrating flexibility in accommodating local demands. A Chinese financial official noted, "The high costs were not solely due to construction but significantly influenced by Malaysia's land acquisition expenses."

China also prioritised hiring local labour and engaging local enterprises, which bolstered Malaysia's economic development. A Malaysian interviewee remarked, "This shift stimulated local education and skill development, creating better opportunities for young people and strengthening the local economy." These changes not only eased Malaysia's financial burden but also fostered long-term cooperation between the two nations.

However, the renegotiations and project adjustments delayed the ECRL's completion. Originally slated for completion in 2022, the project is now expected to be operational by 2028 due to stoppages, negotiations, and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This extension has postponed anticipated economic benefits, reducing the project's peak potential in trade and development for both countries.

The structural adjustments demonstrate China's flexibility and commitment to ensuring the ECRL's success. By making concessions and refining the project's scope, China reinforced its strategic partnership with Malaysia while securing its long-term capital accumulation goals. This approach highlights China's ability to adapt to challenges and sustain momentum in large-scale infrastructure initiatives under the BRI framework.

7.4.3 Pioneering a new model: strengths and weakness

Based on information provided by financial technicians directly involved in the ECRL project, two key operational models were identified: BOT (Build-Operate-Transfer) and PPP (Public-Private Partnership). The BOT model allows the government or affiliated institutions in the host country to transfer the rights of infrastructure construction and operation to the project sponsor under a concession agreement. The project sponsor, typically a private entity, assumes responsibility for

financing, construction, operation, and maintenance, and bears the associated risks. The sponsor collects service fees, generates commercial profits, and recoups the investment over the concession period. Once this period ends, the project is handed back to the government at a nominal price or for free. Several interviewees highlighted that the BOT model has evolved into various forms, such as BOO (Build-Own-Operate), BOOT (Build-Own-Operate-Transfer), BLT (Build-Lease-Transfer), and BTO (Build-Hand-Operate), allowing for flexibility depending on project-specific needs. However, as noted by some financial experts, the BOT model can place significant financial risks on private sponsors, particularly for large-scale infrastructure projects like ECRL, making it less attractive without public sector guarantees.

The PPP (Public-Private Partnership) model, as explained by financial technicians involved in the ECRL project, is a collaborative structure where public institutions (such as the host government) and private entities (like CCCC) work together to provide public services or infrastructure. This model enables both sides to leverage their respective strengths while sharing the risks and benefits. For the host government, such as Malaysia, the PPP model significantly reduces the financial burden by tapping into private capital, expands the sources of funding for construction, and reduces overall operating costs. As several interviewees highlighted, PPP is widely used in international infrastructure projects because it helps balance risk-sharing between public and private sectors. It not only supports the public welfare goals of the Chinese government by boosting the economies of countries along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but also ensures that private companies like CCCC achieve profitability, making it a mutually beneficial arrangement for both governments and enterprises.

When comparing the PPP and BOT models as financing approaches for international infrastructure projects like the ECRL, financial technicians identified both similarities and important differences. Both models involve project orientation, risk-sharing, and credit diversification, but they differ significantly in their approach to execution. In the PPP model, the government remains involved throughout the project's life cycle, from financing and construction to operation and maintenance, ensuring continuous oversight and risk management. In contrast, the BOT model typically involves

the government issuing a concession agreement at the start, transferring responsibility for construction and operation to the private sector. After this initial phase, the government steps back, limiting its role to supervision, while the private sector takes on most of the project management and risk.

Interviewees from both the financial and project management teams noted that the PPP model is more suited to large-scale infrastructure projects that require ongoing government involvement, particularly in managing systemic risks such as political uncertainty or regulatory changes. One senior financial expert involved in the ECRL project emphasized that in the BOT model, private companies often do not participate in the early design and approval stages, which limits their ability to control risks later during construction. This can lead to challenges in securing financing and may reduce investor confidence, especially in politically complex environments like Malaysia.

In contrast, the PPP model offers a more balanced risk-sharing approach. Under PPP, the government bears broader systemic risks, while private enterprises, like CCCC in the case of ECRL, focus on managing commercial risks associated with construction and operation. This division of risk makes the PPP model more attractive for large-scale infrastructure projects, as it helps align the interests of both public and private stakeholders. Several financial analysts interviewed during the ECRL project pointed out that this model allows for more flexible financing structures and greater long-term stability. This stability is critical for projects spanning multiple years and requiring complex logistical and financial coordination, reinforcing the importance of integrating short-term operations with long-term planning.

Lastly, while the PPP model is more suitable for quasi-operational public infrastructure projects that require long-term government oversight, the BOT model is generally more applicable to fully operational infrastructure projects, where private companies can assume full responsibility after construction. Given that the ECRL project is financed by the Chinese government and constructed by CCCC, the project's financing and operation model leans more toward the PPP model, ensuring the involvement of both Malaysia and China in managing risks and achieving long-term

development goals for both countries.

7.4.4 EPC+F+OM model as a core framework for capital accumulation

The following sections of this thesis will further elaborate on why projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative are able to successfully implement this financial model through the core findings of this research: the feedback loop between immaterial and material factors. This dynamic feedback mechanism plays a pivotal role in ensuring the coordination, stability, and alignment of financial, operational, and economic benefits within the Belt and Road strategy.

The unique form of capital accumulation is exemplified in the ECRL project: the PPP→EPC+OM model. This model combines the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) framework with Engineering, Procurement, and Construction (EPC) practices, integrated with Operation and Maintenance (OM) strategies. While this model is widely adopted in cross-regional infrastructure projects, its potential has not been fully realized in some cases due to various challenges. The trade flows and economic benefits enabled by this model are key to sustaining “win-win” outcomes for both Malaysia and China—if such outcomes ultimately materialise—according to financial experts involved in the project.⁶⁷ He added that, under the PPP model, CCCC was authorized by the Malaysian government to manage the construction and operational aspects of the ECRL, providing essential public services and ensuring the long-term success of the project.

Interviewees emphasized that one of the key advantages of this model is the financial flexibility it provides.⁶⁸ By participating in PPP projects, companies like CCCC can share financial responsibilities with the government, thereby alleviating some of the heavy financial burden on public budgets while enabling private enterprises to achieve financial returns. This arrangement benefits both sides—Malaysia and China—helping them achieve their respective financial goals and making the project mutually beneficial. In the case of the ECRL, CCCC was given significant flexibility to control the design, procurement, and construction phases of the project under the EPC mode, which

⁶⁷ Interviewee M6, See Appendix 10.1.2

⁶⁸ Interviewee GP2, See Appendix 10.1.2

allowed the construction to proceed more smoothly and efficiently.

Moreover, during the project's suspension period, the application of the PPP→EPC model minimized investment losses by enabling flexible adjustments to the construction cycle and ensuring adherence to project quality standards. This was achieved by redesigning construction plans and optimizing risk management strategies, which allowed the project to adapt to a complex and fluctuating environment. Several financial experts highlighted that the model not only reduced construction time by streamlining procurement and resource allocation but also significantly lowered project costs through better coordination of design and operations. These efficiencies ensured the project's viability despite interruptions, safeguarding the anticipated economic benefits for both countries.

7.4.5 Long-term cooperation and economic cycles

Since the formation of the new Malaysian government, renegotiations with Chinese partners led to two key adjustments. The first adjustment increased localization requirements, raising local content to 40%, which created more opportunities for Malaysian contractors and allowed them to benefit from the expertise of companies like CCCC. The second adjustment established a 50:50 joint venture company between Malaysia Rail Link (the project owner) and CCCC, enabling the Chinese side to act not only as a contractor but also as an operator. This joint venture was designed to promote industrialization in Malaysia's less developed areas and foster mutual development through shared learning mechanisms.

The Malaysian interviewee involved in the renegotiation emphasised that these adjustments, especially the stronger emphasis on local content, were intended to strengthen Malaysia's longer-term economic and social gains.⁶⁹ By involving more local contractors and suppliers, the revised arrangements were expected to widen the base of experience for Malaysian firms and to support learning and capability development in future infrastructure work. Within the

⁶⁹ Interview M4; See Appendix 11.1.2

PPP→EPC+OM model, this was framed as aligning project delivery with local capacity building and knowledge transfer, although interviewees also noted that the extent of any such transfer would depend on procurement practices, firm capacity, and how incentives were implemented in practice.

Similarly, the establishment of a joint venture for operational management was presented by some interviewees as a mechanism to stabilise long-term O&M governance and to retain access to technical expertise beyond the construction phase. However, treating this arrangement as a guarantee of success would be overstated: it also raised questions about accountability, the distribution of risks and returns over time, and how day-to-day operational decisions would be overseen. These issues underscore why interview claims are interpreted as situated accounts and are cross-checked, where possible, against other interview categories and documentary sources.

As a livelihood project, the East Coast Railway will, upon completion, connect the east and west coasts of the Malay Peninsula, becoming the primary means of transportation for people in those regions. Throughout the construction process, the interviewees said that CCCC has embraced a "teach a man to fish" mentality rather than simply providing direct assistance. This was evident in their implementation of the "China-Malaysia Railway Personnel Training Cooperation Program (PLKI)," which aims to train 5,000 local railway professionals for Malaysia. A Malaysian interviewee responsible for overseeing the funding of this program shared that more than 1,000 students have already completed their training.⁷⁰ He believes that after the project's completion, the skilled railway technicians trained through this initiative will contribute significantly to other future railway construction efforts across Malaysia.

According to the findings from previous interviews, CCCC has consistently adhered to a people-oriented approach, fully integrating itself into the local community, and actively increasing its role as a local partner. This has led to the creation of numerous employment opportunities.

⁷⁰ Interview M5; See Appendix 11.1.2

Another Malaysian interviewee, who was involved in documenting the improvements in local employment and business participation, mentioned, "Currently, the ECRL has partnered with more than 1,800 local companies, including 1,072 suppliers and 838 subcontractors." He added that CCCC has already hired over 6,000 local employees to work on the project, and the total number of local jobs is expected to reach 18,000, creating diversified employment opportunities throughout the project's remaining phases. These practices exemplify how long-term operational strategies contributes to sustainable capital accumulation.

More importantly, based on these strategic adjustments, the economic cycles of projects like ECRL ensure profitability in each stage—construction, operation, and maintenance—for both China and Malaysia. As pointed out by interviewees working closely with financial aspects of the project, this model sustains long-term capital returns for Chinese stakeholders through the integrated EPC+OM framework, while Malaysia benefits from modern infrastructure without incurring unsustainable debts. An interviewee remarked, "I was worried about Chinese money, but all China is doing is trying to prove it has the capacity to overcome financing challenges and close any potential funding gaps in the future." This perspective resonates with concerns about China's recent decision to exempt bad debt in African countries, demonstrating China's flexibility in managing international financial relations while ensuring long-term profitability.

These renegotiations and structural adjustments demonstrate how the ECRL project continues to adapt to evolving economic and political landscapes, enabling both parties to pursue mutual gains through enhanced cooperation. The flexibility and adaptability shown by both sides highlight the dynamic and long-term nature of the relationship underpinning the project. These qualities align with the broader objectives of the Belt and Road Initiative, aiming to foster sustainable and mutually beneficial development.

7.4.6 Capital Accumulation through the EPC+F+OM model

Based on interviews with financial technicians involved in the ECRL project, a clear picture of capital accumulation emerges through the EPC+F+OM model. This hybrid approach, as described by key

informants, allows Chinese enterprises and the Malaysian government to share both risks and benefits over multiple phases—from financing to construction, and into operation and maintenance. One interviewee emphasized that by engaging in both project management and post-construction operations, CCCC (China Communications Construction Company) ensures long-term financial returns, securing its investment through ongoing operation contracts and maintenance fees.

Interviewees working within the financial sector, particularly those involved in the loan agreements between the China Import and Export Bank and Malaysia, provided insight into how low-cost financing was secured. One respondent noted that the favourable loan terms offered by China were pivotal in reducing Malaysia's financial strain, especially during the project's more vulnerable stages when political shifts in Malaysia threatened the continuity of ECRL. This aligns with the capital accumulation model highlighted by Chinese stakeholders, where state-backed financial institutions enable large-scale infrastructure projects to proceed without overburdening the host nation's fiscal budget.

Moreover, as another financial expert stated, "the integrated approach of PPP→EPC allows private enterprises like CCCC to generate steady cash flows from both the construction phase and long-term operation." This is particularly true in the case of the ECRL, where the revenue from ticket sales, freight services, and long-term maintenance contracts contributes to sustaining capital accumulation over several decades. The experts pointed out that this model also enables risk management, particularly during the project's suspension, by controlling investment losses and reconfiguring the construction cycle without compromising project quality.

7.4.7 Narratives of 'win-win' across trade and financial mechanisms

From the interviews conducted with Malaysian officials and project participants, it became clear that the ECRL's win-win cooperation is not just a theoretical concept but a tangible outcome observed by both Chinese and Malaysian stakeholders regarding the financial arrangements of the (renegotiated) project specifically. According to one interviewee who works closely with the

Malaysian Ministry of Finance, the project boosted Malaysia's GDP by 2.6% during the initial construction phase, creating thousands of jobs across multiple industries. This GDP growth was largely fueled by the project's demand for local materials, labour, and services, which directly benefited Malaysian businesses and workers. This observed cooperation is not only driven by financial mechanisms or localized implementation but is also sustained through high-level political discourse.

A notable example occurred during the ASEAN–Australia Special Summit in Melbourne in March 2024. At a joint press conference with Australia's Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim underscored Malaysia's diplomatic autonomy, stating: "We do not have a problem with China," while criticising "China-phobia" in the West (Prime Minister of Australia, 2024; McGuirk, 2024). His assertion articulated a stance of diplomatic autonomy and re-positioned the ECRL not merely as a technical ore economic project, but as one embedded within Malaysia's broader regional strategy. Such statements underscore the symbolic importance of leadership-level political legitimacy in cross-border infrastructure politics, where national narratives reinforce and consolidate material collaborations.

A Chinese project manager noted that beyond the short-term job creation, the ECRL has also led to long-term skills transfer. Through partnerships with local Malaysian contractors, CCCC helped train local workers in advanced railway construction techniques. Several Malaysian workers mentioned in interviews that this knowledge transfer had not only improved their technical expertise but also increased their employment opportunities in future infrastructure projects, both within Malaysia and internationally.

On the Chinese side, an interview with a senior financial officer from China Export-Import Bank revealed that China also benefited economically by securing long-term contracts for operation and maintenance, ensuring continuous capital inflows from the ECRL project. The officer highlighted that China's strategic interest in Southeast Asia's infrastructure network was enhanced through its deep involvement in the ECRL, not only by promoting Chinese engineering standards but also by

establishing stable trade routes. This was seen as critical in sustaining China's export-driven economy while enhancing regional trade integration.

One Chinese financial expert directly involved in the financing process emphasized that the low-interest loans provided to Malaysia were a strategic investment aimed at ensuring long-term economic returns for China. He noted that although there were concerns regarding the financial risks during the project's suspension, China's financial backing helped restructure the financing and avoid project failure. This type of flexible, long-term capital investment was seen as a hallmark of China's approach to capital accumulation in large-scale infrastructure projects, particularly under the Belt and Road Initiative.

Such strategic investment not only targeted long-term economic gains but also aligned with broader geopolitical goals. As the expert further elaborated, the investment facilitated the realization of political economic stability in the host country, which in turn safeguarded the success of the ECRL project. This connection between financial risk management and political risk sensitivity underscores the importance of China's state-backed model, which addresses host-country risks to ensure mutual benefits.

Returning to the broader context of this chapter, this example highlights both the benefits and costs of the state-backed financing model exemplified by the ECRL, and potentially by other BRI projects. While financial flexibility and state-led backing offer stability, they also depend on close coordination and an evolving relationship between China and its host countries. This dual focus on economic and geopolitical returns offers insights into how such a model could evolve in the medium to long term, fostering sustainable relationships within the Belt and Road Initiative framework.

7.4.8 Strategic regional impact of ECRL

Interviews with Malaysian and Chinese officials also highlighted the regional strategic importance of the ECRL. One Malaysian government official involved in the public relations of the project noted

that the ECRL was not merely a domestic railway but a key component in Malaysia's aspiration to become a regional logistics hub. By connecting Malaysia's less-developed eastern regions with the more economically advanced west, the railway provides new opportunities for foreign direct investment (FDI) and industrial growth. In particular, the official stressed that Chinese companies were already eyeing the potential for industrial park development along the ECRL corridor, which would further deepen economic ties between the two countries.

From the Chinese perspective, one CCCC project manager described the ECRL as a geopolitical asset for China, enhancing its presence in Southeast Asia's infrastructure landscape. By facilitating the flow of goods and reducing the cost of logistics between China and ASEAN nations, the ECRL project supports China's broader Belt and Road Initiative goals of promoting regional integration and establishing reliable trade routes. The manager noted that through projects like the ECRL, China is laying the groundwork for long-term partnerships with ASEAN countries, fostering a mutual dependence that strengthens both China's economic influence and regional stability.

This perspective also underscores the dual focus of the project, where economic and geopolitical objectives are deeply interconnected rather than conflicting. The reflections by both Chinese and Malaysian interviewees demonstrate that such projects contribute to significant strategic learning on both sides, aligning their respective national interests while creating shared frameworks for growth and collaboration. This evolving mutual understanding and alignment highlight the potential for a more dynamic and long-term partnership, where both sides actively contribute to sustaining regional development and stability.

7.4.9 Risk management and long-term capital accumulation

The political uncertainty that affected the ECRL, particularly during Malaysia's change in governing coalition, was a common theme in many of the interviews. One financial officer involved in the renegotiation of contracts after the project's suspension noted that the project's capital structure had to be re-evaluated due to the new government's concerns over debt levels and transparency. He emphasized that despite the political challenges, the Chinese side remained committed to

maintaining Malaysia's political autonomy while securing economic benefits for both countries. The flexibility demonstrated by Chinese financial institutions in adjusting loan terms and re-negotiating project specifications was critical in ensuring that the ECRL remained on track. This flexibility stemmed not only from China's strategic commitment to the Belt and Road Initiative but also from a broader willingness to adapt to the unique political and economic dynamics of partner countries.

Another interviewee from the Malaysian Ministry of Transport highlighted that the renegotiation process, although challenging, allowed for more localized benefits by increasing local contractor participation and ensuring that 40% of the project's content came from Malaysian sources. This was seen as a win for the new government, as it allowed them to present the project as one that benefited local communities, while still maintaining strong ties with China.

Despite these challenges, Chinese officials expressed confidence in the long-term profitability of the ECRL. According to one high-ranking official in the project's financial department, China's commitment to funding the ECRL was based on the broader economic benefits it would bring through increased trade and regional connectivity. He pointed out that the project's suspension period allowed for risk management strategies to be implemented, ensuring that the project could resume with minimized financial losses. The official also suggested that similar risk management frameworks would be critical in future BRI projects, particularly in politically volatile regions.

Based on first-hand interviews and project-related materials, this analysis does not treat “benefits” as given but examines how the EPC+F+OM arrangements are narrated as enabling capital accumulation around the ECRL. Interviewees frequently emphasised potential economic gains for Malaysia (e.g., employment, skills transfer, and growth expectations) alongside China's longer-term strategic and commercial interests in Southeast Asia's infrastructure landscape. While some stakeholders portrayed the project's mixed public-private arrangements as supporting financial viability and operational efficiency, such claims remain contingent on political volatility and implementation frictions. Accounts from financial experts, project managers, and officials therefore suggest that the project's prospects hinge not only on financing flexibility and operational design,

but also on how risk, cost, and benefit are allocated, contested, and perceived across Malaysian constituencies over time.

7.5 Concluding Remark

The historical perspective from Chinese and Malaysian interviewees highlights a shared belief in the deep-rooted nature of China's peaceful trade ambitions, contrasting with Western histories of expansion through conquest. Chinese participants in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly in projects like the ECRL, emphasized that China's historical approach focuses on economic cooperation and trade rather than military expansion, aligning with the goals of capital accumulation through infrastructure investment. Interviewees highlighted how projects like the ECRL serve as pathways to long-term cooperation, creating opportunities for economic growth and mutual capital accumulation. For local Malaysians, the project offers tangible economic benefits through job creation and enhanced mobility, illustrating how China's soft power is being used to foster development rather than territorial ambition.

Political stability was emphasized by interviewees as a vital factor for the success of Chinese financial assistance, especially in large projects like the ECRL. Following the 2018 general election and the subsequent change of government in Malaysia, the surrounding political uncertainty was widely seen as posing significant risks to the capital accumulation process. Project proponents and several Chinese stakeholders characterised the financing arrangement as flexible and oriented to long-term partnership. Malaysian political debate, however, contested this characterisation, with prominent figures raising concerns about costs, terms, and decision-making control; Accordingly, "sovereignty-respecting" claims are treated here as a situated framing rather than an uncontested description. The renegotiation of the ECRL contract after the project's suspension demonstrated the challenges posed by internal political turbulence but also underscored how China adjusted its financial approach to maintain cooperation despite these challenges, ensuring the continuation of capital accumulation under the BRI.

The EPC+F+OM configuration in the ECRL can be read as a distinctive mode of capital accumulation

that is frequently associated with China's BRI project-making. Many interlocutors described the combination of flexible financing and operational arrangements as allowing risks and profits to be redistributed across parties, and some characterised this as "mutually beneficial". From an analytical standpoint, however, whether such a framing holds depends on how risks, returns, and implementation frictions are allocated and perceived over time. Accounts of low-interest lending and financing flexibility were presented as helping the project remain viable amid setbacks. Yet long-term sustainability was tied, in these narratives, to O&M arrangements intended to stabilise returns across the project lifecycle, even as the magnitude and distribution of costs and benefits remained uncertain and politically contestable. In this context, renegotiated terms (e.g., local hiring requirements and revised financial structures) may be read both as responsiveness and as risk-management devices aimed at protecting expected returns and limiting reputational exposure under domestic contention.

These reflections work together to provide a comprehensive understanding of how China's capital accumulation strategy is articulated within the Belt and Road Initiative, and how this articulation is stabilised through the interaction of material arrangements and interpretive frames. Together, they illustrate that the "material component" in the context of the ECRL is not a single mechanism but a multi-layered process.

First, the analysis highlights how historical and ideological foundations are mobilised through the language of economic cooperation rather than political or military dominance. In interviews and public-facing discourses, project proponents frequently framed the initiative as a form of trade-based partnership and "peaceful" connectivity, at times drawing contrasts—explicitly or implicitly—with Western colonial trajectories. In this thesis, such contrasts are treated as part of a legitimising repertoire that supports particular understandings of intent and responsibility, while recognising that these claims are not uncontested and may be problematised within Malaysian public debate.

Second, political stability and policy predictability are shown to function as critical conditions for

sustaining long-horizon infrastructure financing and maintaining financial flows. Following Malaysia's 2018 electoral transition, interviewees repeatedly linked political uncertainty to risks around continuity, contracting, and renegotiation. In this context, statements about “respect for sovereignty” and mutually acceptable cooperation can be understood as normative claims that help justify long-term arrangements, yet they also invite scrutiny where domestic politics foregrounds concerns about accountability, dependency, or uneven bargaining power.

Third, the discussion emphasises the role of financial and contractual innovation—particularly PPP and EPC+OM—in organising long-term returns across the project lifecycle. These arrangements are presented by relevant stakeholders as enabling operational continuity and allocating risks across construction, provisional operation, and maintenance. At the same time, the legitimacy and perceived “win-win” character of such models depend on how costs, benefits, and risks are experienced and narrated across different Malaysian constituencies over time, rather than being guaranteed by the contractual form alone.

Taken together, these reflections show how China's economic political institution—rooted in particular historical narratives, reliant on a workable degree of political predictability, and supported by financing and delivery modalities—seeks to enable sustained capital accumulation in infrastructure projects. The ECRL therefore offers a case through which to examine not only how capital returns are organised materially, but also how legitimacy, risk, and mutual benefit are claimed, negotiated, and periodically re-stabilised within a contested political and discursive environment.

As this chapter has thoroughly explored, the material aspects of the ECRL project—ranging from the capital accumulation process, operational models like PPP+EPC+OM, and the physical construction of the railway—form the structural backbone of China and Malaysia's economic cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). These material outcomes have been crucial in setting the foundation for regional connectivity, economic growth, and long-term collaboration between both nations.

However, the material success of the ECRL project does not solely rest on physical infrastructure, financing strategies, or the efficiency of construction timelines. As discussed earlier and in the final chapter, its success is also deeply intertwined with immaterial factors such as ideological alignment, cultural exchanges, and strategic communication efforts between China and Malaysia. These elements contribute not only to smooth operations but also to the shared vision of a “win-win” outcome that strengthens regional economic and political ties.

In previous chapters (Chapters 5 and 6), this thesis has examined how immaterial aspects—including cultural narratives, semiotics, and strategic communication—shape perceptions and behaviours within the ECRL project. The cultural turn in China’s economic strategy and the soft infrastructure of communication have reinforced China’s leadership and sense of mission, making the Belt and Road Initiative more than just an economic plan, but a culturally cohesive endeavour that extends beyond material gains.

Chapter 8 examines how these immaterial forces (depicted in the diagram) work in tandem with material outcomes to create conditions for sustainable capital accumulation, regional cooperation, and political stability. This analysis shows that material infrastructure achieves its full potential only when supported by cultural, ideological, and strategic narratives that foster confidence, cooperation, and mutual benefit. By integrating the findings from the previous chapters with the material discussions developed here, Chapter 8 further unpacks the coordination between material and immaterial aspects and explores how this dynamic interaction secures long-term success for the ECRL and the broader objectives of regional integration under the BRI.

Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion – The ECRL as productive but risky geopolitical project

8.1 Objectives and Introduction

This chapter builds on the discussions in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, which explored the dimensions of belief systems, slogans, and material components in the ECRL project. It synthesizes these insights to address the overarching research question: How does the process of building BRI-funded hard infrastructure projects contribute to (or hinder) regional integration in Southeast Asia?

Drawing on the analytical framework outlined in earlier chapters, this chapter approaches the overarching question through three interconnected dimensions. At the local scale, it examines on-the-ground sentiment and interpersonal cultural dynamics, asking how belief systems and ideologies shape participant behaviour and influence project outcomes. At the national scale, it focuses on slogans, discourses, and partnerships to show how strategic narratives and intergovernmental agreements work to align national interests and consolidate the ECRL's role within broader trajectories of economic integration. At the regional and global scale, it turns to financial mechanisms, institutional support, and key technologies, highlighting how the interaction of hard and soft infrastructure systems (e.g., the EPC+F+OM model) contributes to sustainable regional development and the reconfiguration of global trade networks.

By addressing these dimensions, the chapter aims to provide a holistic understanding of how material and immaterial factors intersect to drive economic and political transformations through the ECRL project. The findings also underscore the significance of integrating cultural, financial, and technological components to achieve the broader objectives of the Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia.

Within this framework, this chapter begins by briefly revisiting the main findings of Chapters 5, 6 and 7:

Chapter 5 shows that the ECRL fosters a feedback loop in which confidence, behaviour, shared views, and ideology align the workforce with the strategic goals of the Belt and Road Initiative, integrating cultural and ideological factors into economic practices to support long-term project delivery and regional development.

Chapter 6 shows how slogans and discourses shape ideological alignment by motivating workers emotionally and embedding the project within narratives of regional cooperation, creating shared beliefs that sustain collaboration and align participants' actions with longer-term geopolitical goals.

Chapter 7 shows that the ECRL project reflects a distinctive approach to capital accumulation under the BRI, as it is framed through official development- and connectivity- oriented discourse and operationalised through an integrated division of labor across financial, engineering and diplomatic dimensions. This configuration is associated with long-term and 'patient' financing arrangements, relies on political stability, mutual respect for sovereignty, and is supported by innovative financial models such as EPC+F+OM to secure long-term economic benefits for both China and Malaysia.

It then builds on these foundations to examine the complex interplay between belief systems, slogans, and material components, ultimately drawing out implications for the ECRL's long-term viability as an infrastructure project and its role as a model for cross-national projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

8.2 Formation of the Perception-behaviour-Ideology Feedback Loop

The ECRL project exemplifies how belief systems and ideology influence perceptions, behaviours, and ultimately project outcomes. Drawing from the framework of perception-behaviour-ideology from chapter 5 of this research, this chapter expands on the interconnected dynamics that sustain the ECRL as more than a mere infrastructure initiative.

Stakeholders' initial perceptions of the ECRL are shaped by its framing as a symbol of regional cooperation and national progress. For Chinese participants, this perception connects closely with

the ideological narratives tied to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), emphasizing a sense of national pride and global responsibility. As discussed earlier, this alignment fosters emotional engagement, resilience and high levels of commitment among Chinese workers, who view the ECRL as an extension of China's international leadership.

In contrast, Malaysian stakeholders view the ECRL through a pragmatic lens, emphasizing tangible benefits such as job creation, improved logistics, and regional development. While less ideologically driven, their perceptions remain critical in shaping their willingness to collaborate, particularly when project outcomes align with local economic and social priorities.

8.2.1 Behaviour as the Manifestation of Perception

As perceptions solidify, they transition into observable behaviours. Chinese workers, driven by ideological commitment, often exhibit a collective approach to challenges, prioritizing project deadlines and quality standards over individual concerns. For example, during the 2018 project suspension, Chinese workers maintained a high level of motivation, interpreting delays as a test of their dedication to national goals. This reflects Jessop, Labrousse, and Lamarche (2012) concept of ideology as a binding force that transforms abstract objectives into practical actions.

In contrast, Malaysian stakeholders, while collaborative, often respond to the strong confidence exhibited by their Chinese counterparts in nuanced ways. On one hand, this confidence can be a motivating factor, encouraging diligence and commitment to the project. On the other hand, some Malaysian workers express discomfort with the intensity of this work culture, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive management strategies to bridge differing workplace expectations and foster a more inclusive environment.

8.2.2 Ideology as a Higher-Order Commitment

Ideology emerges as a unifying force that elevates individual efforts into a collective mission among staff working in ECRL project, though this might diverse according to their work positions and nationalities. For Chinese participants, ideological alignment fosters a sense of honour and devotion,

viewing their contribution as part of China's global vision. This shared narrative is reinforced through leadership speeches, repeated slogans, and media portrayals, creating a cohesive identity among workers. Even during operational challenges, this ideological commitment sustains morale and ensures productivity.

For Malaysian participants, while ideological alignment is less pronounced, shared cultural narratives about regional integration and mutual benefit help create a sense of inclusion. Strategic messaging emphasizing Malaysia's partnership role in the project makes a crucial contribution to a collective identity, albeit one rooted more in practical cooperation than ideological unity.

The Perception-Behaviour-Ideology Feedback Loop

This dynamic interplay between perception, behaviour, and ideology forms a feedback loop that sustains the operations of ECRL. As participants engage with the project, their experiences reinforce initial perceptions and deepen their commitment. For example:

Chinese stakeholders' ideological alignment strengthens their belief in the mission, motivating behaviours that directly impact quality and efficiency. Malaysian participants' positive experiences with employment and skills development validate their confidence in the project, encouraging continued engagement. The feedback loop highlights the reciprocal relationship between individual actions and broader ideological frameworks, underscoring how belief systems form the foundation for cultural cohesion and economic alignment within the ECRL project. This insights sets the stage for the subsequent analysis in Chapter 6, which examines how slogans and narratives operationalize their belief systems, further embedding them into everyday practices and organisational goals.

8.3 Slogans and Narratives: Bridging Ideologies and Strategic Goals

Slogans and strategic narratives play a pivotal role in aligning individual and collective actions with the ECRL's broader objectives. Acting as both emotional anchors and strategic tools, they reinforce ideological cohesion while simultaneously simplifying the project's goals so as to make them

memorable and attractive for diverse stakeholders.

8.3.1 Slogans as Emotional Anchors

The slogan "Connecting Life, Accelerating Growth" epitomizes the ECRL's dual aspirations of economic advancement and regional connectivity. For Chinese stakeholders, the slogan reinforces national pride and the broader ideological commitment to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It positions the ECRL as a microcosm of China's global ambitions, creating a sense of purpose among (Chinese) workers.

Field observations and interview data illustrate the slogans's emotional resonance among Chinese workers, who perceive their roles as contributing to a larger mission. This emotional connection motivates workers to navigate and overcome challenges, such as long working hours or construction delays, as workers perceive their efforts as part of a meaningful collective goal.

Among Malaysian stakeholders, the slogan simplifies the project's objectives into relatable themes, such as improved transportation and regional economic development. Surveys reveal that community members often associate the ECRL with modernization and increased economic opportunities, reflecting the slogan's effectiveness in shaping perceptions. However, this emotional appeal must be balanced with tangible outcomes if trust and engagement are to be sustained.

8.3.2 Strategic Narratives as Contextual Frameworks

Beyond slogans, strategic narratives operate as contextual frameworks that organise how participation is interpreted and justified. Among Chinese stakeholders, narratives of China's global infrastructure role can function as a repertoire through which the ECRL is narrated as diplomatic achievement and developmental contribution; leadership speeches and official media reiterate themes of regional connectivity and "mutual benefit", thereby stabilising a particular reading of what the project is for.

Among stakeholders interviewed in Malaysia, narratives more often foreground locally salient

concerns—jobs, procurement opportunities, skills, and distributive outcomes—and are frequently articulated as conditions for domestic legitimacy rather than as abstract commitments. Importantly, these narratives should not be read as simple reflections of interests: they are also instruments of governance that can be selectively taken up, reinterpreted, or resisted, especially when project experiences diverge from promised benefits.

8.3.3 The Double-Edged Nature of Slogans and Narratives

While slogans and narratives are effective in fostering engagement, they also present potential risks. Over-reliance on broad messaging may oversimplify complex realities, such as environmental concerns or local community displacement, and this, in turn, may lead slogans to backfire, becoming symbols of distrust and rejection rather than harmony and assent. For instance, some Malaysian communities have expressed dissatisfaction with construction impacts that were overshadowed by the project's emphasis on economic growth.

Furthermore, repetitive messaging can inadvertently suppress local agency, pressuring communities to conform to the project's narrative rather than addressing their unique needs. This tension underscores the importance of balancing top-down strategic communication with grassroots-level dialogue to ensure (perceived) authenticity and the long-term viability of the project.

The interplay between slogans and strategic narratives can be understood as operating on two related levels. Slogans often provide the initial emotional hook, resonating with individual aspirations and collective identity, while narratives then supply the contextual frame that connects these emotions to the project's broader goals and justificatory claims. In combination, this two-tiered dynamic helps the ECRL mobilise support across different cultural and social contexts and stabilise the ideological and practical cohesion required for implementation.

8.4 Material and Cultural Interactions -Integrating Economic and Ideological Dynamics

The ECRL project's success (to date) lies in its ability to harmonize material and cultural dimensions,

creating a mutually reinforcing dynamic. By integrating economic frameworks like the EPC+F+OM model with cultural and ideological narratives, the project fosters both tangible benefits and ideological alignment, ensuring its long-term viability and broader impact. The EPC+F+OM (Engineering, Procurement, Construction + Financing + Operations and Maintenance) model serves as the backbone of the ECRL's economic strategy. This comprehensive framework ensures the seamless transition from infrastructure development to operational sustainability.

Concretely, the EPC+F+OM framework can be unpacked into interlinked functions across the project lifecycle: it combines engineering and procurement priorities to secure efficiency and quality control across construction phases, financing arrangements to mitigate risks for both Malaysia and China through tailored funding mechanisms, and operations and maintenance to extend the project's impact beyond construction, with an emphasis on skills development and local capacity building.

The financial self-sufficiency embedded in this model creates a stable foundation for the ECRL, minimizing disruptions caused by external economic fluctuations. For example, during periods of project delays, the EPC+F+OM structure allowed operations to continue without significant financial strain, reinforcing stakeholder confidence.

8.4.1 Cultural Narratives as a Complementary Force

While the EPC+F+OM model ensures material stability, cultural narratives play a critical role in sustaining long-term social acceptance and operational effectiveness. By embedding ideological and cultural values into the project, these narratives create a vital bridge between economic and social dimensions, ensuring that material outcomes are supported by a cohesive cultural foundation.

For Chinese stakeholders: Cultural unity and pride in China's leadership role are reinforced through narratives emphasizing the Belt and Road Initiative's (BRI) vision of international cooperation. These narratives strengthen workers' commitment to maintaining high standards and overcoming challenges, ensuring the steady progress of material aspects such as construction and logistical

coordination.

For Malaysian stakeholders: Narratives centred on regional integration and mutual benefit foster a sense of ownership and alignment with the project's goals. Initiatives such as localized training programs and economic participation not only address practical concerns but also ensure the material success of the project by embedding it within the local social fabric.

Unlike the intra-cultural dynamics discussed earlier—such as how perception and narratives shape shared understanding within cultural frameworks—this section highlights the direct relationship between cultural narratives and material outcomes. By aligning diverse stakeholders under a shared vision and fostering trust through tailored messaging, cultural narratives ensure that material aspects like infrastructure and economic models achieve sustained impact and effectiveness.

This interplay is evident in initiatives such as localized training programs and financial support for affected communities, which not only address practical concerns but also foster trust and collaboration. These efforts align with Jessop, Labrousse, and Lamarche (2012) Cultural Political Economy framework, which highlights the co-dependence of economic structures and cultural practices in sustaining large-scale projects.

8.4.2 Feedback Loops Between Material and Immaterial Components

The integration of material and cultural dimensions generates a recursive feedback loop. Material outcomes—such as improvements in trade connectivity and employment opportunities—can be interpreted as evidence that validates and stabilises the ideological narratives used to frame the project. In turn, when stakeholders share and reproduce these cultural values and belief systems, they can foster resilience and coordination under uncertainty, helping to keep implementation on track despite recurrent challenges. In this way, material performance and cultural cohesion mutually reinforce one another over the duration of the project, shaping both practical delivery and contested legitimacy.

Moreover, these loops take numerous forms and can be seen across the whole duration of the

project, from inception to (currently anticipated) completion to future maintenance. For instance, the reduction in transportation costs and improved logistical efficiency resulting from the ECRL's railway infrastructure are complemented by soft initiatives like community engagement and skill-building. These outcomes not only enhance the project's economic viability but also validate the cultural and ideological commitment of its stakeholders.

8.5 Weaknesses and threats given the material-cultural framework

8.5.1 Risks and Critiques: Navigating potential pitfalls

The material–cultural integration discussed in this chapter is intended to support project delivery and to stabilise expectations around long-term returns. However, the same architecture can also generate vulnerabilities, especially where benefits, risks, and voice are unevenly distributed. In the ECRL case, critical accounts have clustered around recurring themes: transparency and accountability in procurement and contracting; distributional questions about who captures jobs, skills and supply-chain opportunities; the social costs of land acquisition and disruption; and longer-term concerns about fiscal exposure and policy dependence. These critiques do not necessarily deny the existence of material gains, but they contest the terms under which gains are produced, narrated, and allocated.

A distinctive feature of these critiques is the role played by watchdog organisations, opposition politicians, and investigative media. Even where such actors are peripheral to formal decision-making, they can be symbolically potent: they shape what is made thinkable and sayable in public debate, set agendas around risk and responsibility, and provide frames through which the project is judged as legitimate or questionable. In periods of heightened political contestation, these voices may amplify specific controversies, re-interpret technical decisions as political choices, and challenge the credibility of official narratives. Analytically, the point is not to treat these interventions as either "truth" or "noise", but to recognise them as part of the governance environment within which infrastructure legitimacy is negotiated.

For the thesis, this means the discussion of "risks and critiques" needs to be written in a way that is

careful about attribution and proportion. Where claims are interview-based, they should be presented as such; where critiques are grounded in documentary or media material, the sources should be explicitly signposted; and where competing interpretations coexist, the text should show the basis on which each interpretation is sustained. In this way, the chapter can acknowledge marginal yet influential critical voices without slipping into either promotional certainty or oppositional polemic.

8.5.2 The trap of over-reliance on Ideology

One of the ECRL's strengths lies in its ability to foster belief-driven engagement among stakeholders, particularly where a shared sense of purpose helps coordinate action across organisational and cultural differences. However, as the preceding analysis suggests, reliance on ideological alignment can also introduce governance risks. In practice, a strong emphasis on maintaining narrative coherence may produce a degree of rigidity, in which stakeholders become less willing to revise claims or acknowledge frictions as project realities evolve (for instance, concerns relating to environmental impact or community disruption during construction). At the same time, framing the ECRL as a “benevolent intervention” can unintentionally narrow the space through which local criticisms are articulated and addressed. If critiques from Malaysian stakeholders are interpreted primarily as misunderstandings to be corrected—rather than as substantive feedback—decision-making may be perceived as top-down and insufficiently responsive. The analytical point here is not to deny the coordinating value of ideology, but to underline how the same ideational cohesion that sustains commitment can, under certain conditions, weaken perceived legitimacy.

8.5.3 The trap of over-reliance on Slogans and Narratives

Slogans and strategic narratives are powerful tools, yet their effectiveness depends on whether they continue to resonate with stakeholders' lived experience of project impacts. Where slogans such as “Connecting Life, Accelerating Growth” compress complex trade-offs into a single positive frame, they can risk overshadowing issues that become salient in implementation, including

environmental disruption, land acquisition disputes, or uneven distribution of benefits and burdens. Moreover, repetitive narratives may create an organisational climate in which stakeholders feel compelled to display alignment even when their priorities diverge; this does not necessarily eliminate dissent, but it may displace criticism into less visible forms and reduce opportunities for learning and adaptation. To mitigate these challenges, the ECRL must balance narrative coordination with transparent communication that acknowledges and addresses localised concerns. In this sense, flexibility in messaging is not simply a rhetorical adjustment, but part of the broader institutional capacity to remain responsive as project realities develop.

8.5.4 Imbalances in Material Gains

The recurring source of scepticism is not the absence of material gains per se, but perceived imbalance in how gains are distributed and experienced. Interview and documentary accounts suggest that distributional questions can surface at multiple levels: at the macro level, around the allocation of financial returns and the visibility of fiscal obligations; at the meso level, around local procurement, subcontracting, and skill transfer; and at the micro level, around who bears the immediate disruptions of construction and land acquisition. When local stakeholders interpret benefits as captured disproportionately by large firms, external contractors, or politically connected intermediaries, the project's claims to "shared development" can be weakened even if aggregate economic indicators remain positive.

In this context, "imbalance" operates as both a material and a narrative problem. Materially, it is reflected in uneven access to jobs, training, compensation, and downstream opportunities. Narratively, it is reflected in how project success is framed: emphasising national-level growth while leaving unaddressed the grievances of directly affected communities can intensify the sense of exclusion. The implication is that distributional concerns should be treated as part of the project's legitimacy conditions, not as a peripheral add-on. Where the thesis discusses benefits, it therefore also needs to register who is positioned as a beneficiary, who is positioned as a cost-bearer, and how these positions are articulated and contested in interview material and public debate.

8.5.5 Perceptions of Neo-Colonialism

Perceptions of "neo-colonialism" can arise even when a project is formally presented as cooperative and mutually beneficial. In the ECRL context, such perceptions are typically expressed through concerns about asymmetric dependence: fears that financing terms, contractual arrangements, or operational control could reduce policy room for manoeuvre; suspicions that local capacities are sidelined rather than built; and anxieties that the symbolic language of "win-win" obscures unequal bargaining power. These claims are not uniform across actors, and they are often contested by counter-claims that emphasise sovereignty, national development priorities, and the negotiated nature of project agreements.

For analytical purposes, it is important to treat "neo-colonialism" less as a definitive diagnosis and more as a political framing deployed within domestic contestation over infrastructure, debt, and state strategy. Watchdog actors, opposition figures, and investigative journalism can play a pivotal role in sustaining this framing by linking technical or contractual details to wider narratives of dependency and loss of autonomy. At the same time, project proponents—whether officials, firms, or supportive interviewees—may frame the same arrangements as evidence of flexibility, long-term partnership, and respect for national choice. The thesis therefore approaches these competing framings as a legitimacy struggle: what matters is how each framing is justified, by whom, and with what evidentiary supports, rather than assuming one framing is self-evidently correct.

8.5.6 Sustainability Concerns

The sustainability of the ECRL is central to understanding the project through the Cultural Political Economy framework. Operational sustainability and cultural continuity are not isolated components but mutually supportive and interdependent dynamics. However, this interdependence also introduces potential weaknesses and threats that could undermine the project's long-term success.

The operational sustainability of the ECRL heavily relies on cultural factors, such as confidence in the project, a sense of honour, and shared social ideas. These perceptions create a foundation for long-term operational efficiency by fostering stakeholder responsibility and collaboration. However,

this reliance also poses risks: if cultural narratives fail to adapt to evolving local priorities or lose their relevance after the construction phase, operational efficiency and financial stability could be jeopardized. For example, a shift in community perceptions about the project's value might reduce support and lead to operational challenges.

Similarly, cultural continuity depends on tangible economic results. The diverse and sustained operational outcomes of the ECRL provide a platform for ongoing cultural exchanges among groups with differing levels of understanding and ideological alignment. However, insufficient operational returns—such as low usage rates or inequitable distribution of benefits—could weaken the cultural narratives that underpin stakeholder engagement. For instance, any perceived imbalance in benefit-sharing between Chinese and Malaysian stakeholders could erode local support for the project and diminish the relevance of shared cultural narratives.

This reciprocal relationship highlights the inherent complexity of sustaining the interdependence between operational and cultural dimensions. While this interplay is crucial for the ECRL's success, any imbalance in one dimension could amplify weaknesses in the other, posing significant threats to the project's overall sustainability.

8.6 Visual Analysis: Linking Material and Immaterial Interactions

To better illustrate the interplay between the ECRL's material and immaterial components, this section revisits key insights derived from two charts included in the analysis.

8.6.1 Interconnection Between Immaterial and Material Components

Cultural Dynamics of Immaterial Components

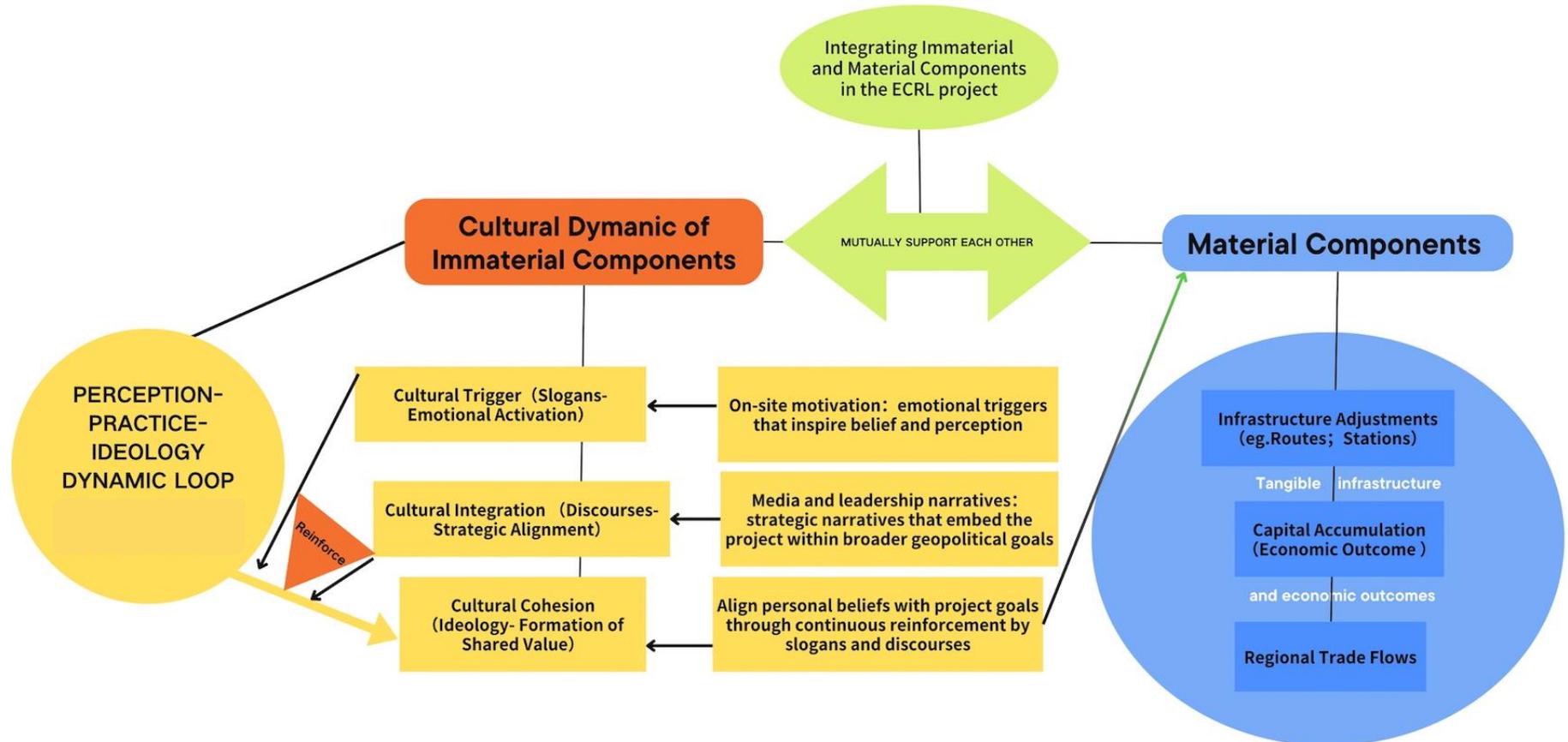
The Perception-Practice-Ideology Dynamic Loop, shown on the far left of Figure 10, is a key research outcome of Chapter 7. This dynamic loop illustrates how perception and practice interact cyclically to deepen the internalization of ideology. It provides the theoretical foundation for the cultural dynamics discussed in this chapter. In Figure 10, this loop is further integrated with Cultural

Trigger, Cultural Integration, and Cultural Cohesion, forming the overall cultural dynamics within the ECRL project.

Specifically, the Cultural Trigger phase activates emotional responses through slogans, such as "Connecting Life, Accelerating Growth," fostering emotional identification with the project's goals. This emotional activation, initiated through perception, further reinforces the foundational stage of the Perception-Practice-Ideology loop. In daily on-site activities, these emotional triggers enhance participants' sense of involvement and recognition, motivating them to actively contribute to the project.

In the Cultural Integration phase, strategic narratives and project discourses play a critical role. These narratives, disseminated through media coverage, leadership speeches, and consistent messaging, link individual practices to the broader goals of the project. For instance, the ECRL project is framed not only as a national infrastructure initiative but also as part of a grand narrative for advancing regional cooperation and development. This framing allows project participants to view their work from a broader perspective, thereby reinforcing the cyclical interaction between practice and perception and deepening ideological alignment with the project.

Figure 10: The Dynamic Feedback Loop of Material and Immaterial Components



Finally, in the Cultural Cohesion phase, continuous reinforcement of slogans and discourses ensures that ideology functions as a bridge, aligning personal beliefs with project goals (align personal beliefs with project goals through continuous reinforcement of slogans and discourses). This alignment fosters a sense of shared commitment and stability, particularly during critical moments. For example, during the 2018 project suspension, workers maintained their loyalty and dedication to the project, demonstrating the resilience of their ideological alignment. Such commitment is not a short-term phenomenon but a long-term outcome of the iterative interaction between cultural triggers and integration

Figure 10 emphasizes that the Perception-Practice-Ideology loop and the cultural dynamics (Cultural Trigger, Integration, and Cohesion) constitute the core immaterial components of the ECRL project. These immaterial components not only function independently but also interact dynamically with the material components, such as infrastructure adjustments, capital accumulation, and regional trade flows. This interaction forms a complete loop, reinforcing project implementation and ensuring alignment with regional and national goals. These outcomes are not only a manifestation of cultural dynamics but also critical steps toward achieving Malaysia-China cooperation and regional integration.

How Immaterial Components Support Material Components

Impact of Cultural Triggers: By enhancing workers' emotional identification, slogans provide motivation that translates into improved efficiency and quality of construction. This emotional and mental support contributes to tangible outcomes, such as shortened project timelines and enhanced teamwork.

Role of Cultural Integration: Strategic narratives disseminated through media and political leadership emphasize the ECRL's regional strategic significance, attracting greater public support and funding. This narrative support enhances resource allocation and policy implementation efficiency.

Support from Cultural Cohesion: Continuous ideological reinforcement through slogans and

discourses aligns individual beliefs with project goals, ensuring stability even during challenging times. For instance, ideological alignment enables participants to remain committed and confident in the project, even in the face of external disruptions.

How Material Components Reinforce Immaterial Dynamics

Visible Outcomes Reinforce Cultural Narratives: Tangible infrastructure achievements and economic outcomes provide visible proof to support cultural narratives. For example, increased regional trade flows allow the public to perceive the value of the ECRL, thereby deepening recognition of the project.

Symbolic Use of Project Milestones: Milestones achieved during the project are framed by the media and political leaders as exemplars of bilateral cooperation. This reinforces the ideological messages embedded in the cultural dynamics and enhances public trust in the project.

8.6.2 The Complete Feedback Loop Between Immaterial and Material Components

Through this bidirectional dynamic, the ECRL project achieves progress on both material and immaterial levels. While immaterial components provide the ideological, cultural, and motivational foundation for project implementation, material achievements validate and strengthen the narratives and ideological alignment. This feedback loop demonstrates how the ECRL project successfully integrates cultural and material aspects, achieving both infrastructure goals and a shared regional identity, thereby laying a solid foundation for its long-term success.

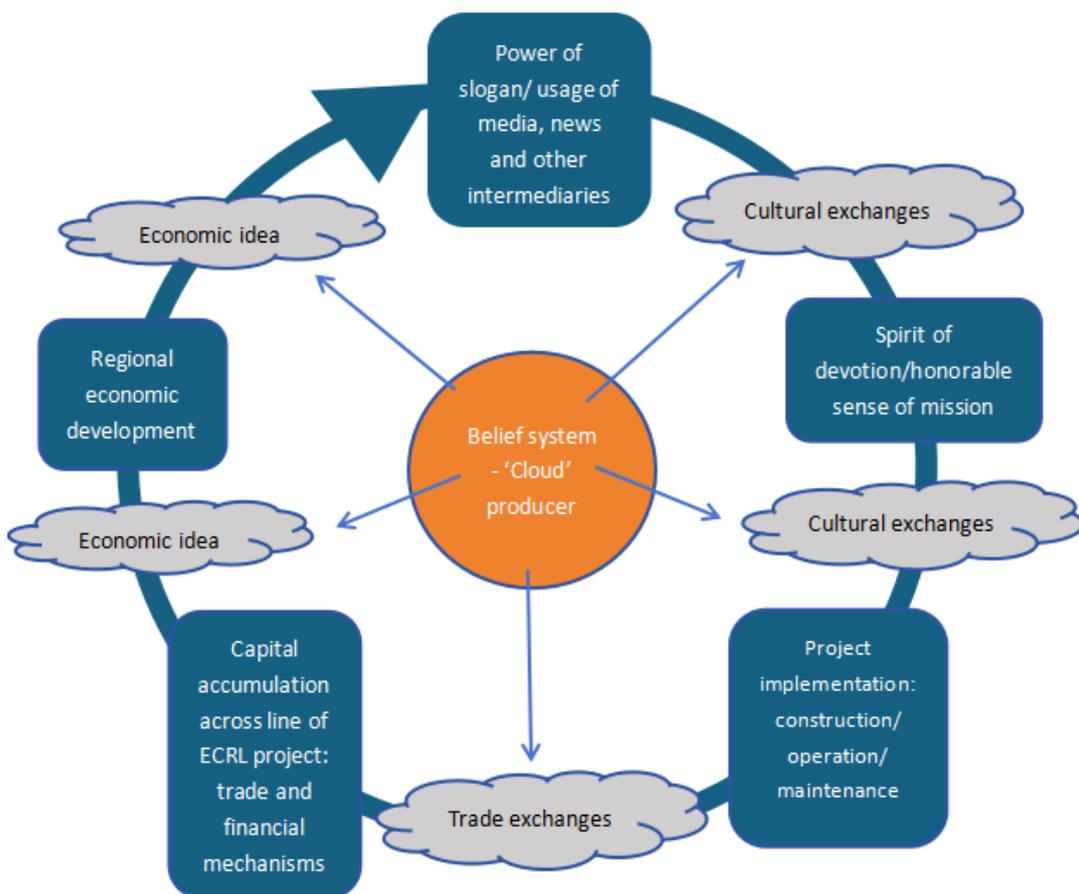
However, this feedback loop is not without risks. As Demirgüç-Kunt et al. (2018) notes, such loops can break down if material benefits are perceived as unequally distributed. Localized grievances—such as concerns over land acquisition or insufficient access to employment opportunities—pose challenges to the project's sustainability. Addressing these issues through targeted support and inclusive planning is essential for maintaining the positive dynamics highlighted in Figure 10.

Figure 10 also underscores the importance of aligning material outcomes with cultural narratives to

foster long-term engagement. The ability of the ECRL to validate its promises through measurable successes enhances its legitimacy, particularly in a context where stakeholders balance ideological alignment with pragmatic expectations.

8.6.3 The Core Role of the Belief System

Figure 11. The cultural-political economy framework in action: ECRL project dynamics



At the centre of the ECRL project's dynamic framework lies the belief system, represented by the spirit of devotion and honourable sense of mission. Rooted in Chinese cultural and ideological values, this belief system is a foundational force driving the project's success. It motivates Chinese employees by fostering a sense of pride and mission, enabling them to maintain high levels of performance even during challenging phases, such as the project's temporary suspension.

The influence of this belief system extends beyond Chinese employees, impacting Malaysian and third-party staff through behavioural demonstration and collaboration. It also plays a crucial role in fostering public trust in Chinese leadership, particularly in a geopolitical climate where skepticism toward foreign-led projects is prevalent. By creating a shared sense of purpose and mutual benefit, this belief system strengthens the legitimacy and collaborative foundation of the ECRL project.

The Intermediary Role of Slogans and Media

The power of slogans and media usage serves as both the entry and exit point of the cycle, functioning as a bridge between the belief system and broader stakeholder perceptions. Emotional and memorable slogans, such as "Connecting Life, Accelerating Growth," not only inspire individual stakeholders but also align their perceptions with the project's strategic goals.

Media channels and institutional narratives amplify these slogans, connecting cultural and economic narratives. For instance, Chinese and Malaysian governments and the project contractor (CCCC) leverage diverse communication platforms, including news outlets and official conferences, to frame the ECRL as a symbol of modernization, regional integration, and bilateral cooperation. By linking cultural narratives to tangible economic benefits, these efforts ensure that stakeholders view the ECRL as a shared and inclusive project.

Dynamic Interaction Between Cultural and Material Elements

The three grey clouds—Cultural Exchanges, Economic Idea, and Trade Exchanges—function as mediating drivers that connect the five hierarchical levels of the project and sustain the continuous feedback loop illustrated in Figure 11. First, cultural exchanges and economic ideas amplify the power of slogans and media usage by aligning public perceptions with the ECRL's vision—for instance, through media campaigns and localised narratives that cultivate trust and understanding among stakeholders. Second, cultural exchanges also deepen the spirit of devotion and an honourable sense of mission by fostering shared values and collaboration, as reflected in

cross-cultural training and everyday teamwork between Chinese and Malaysian staff. Third, at the level of project implementation, economic ideas and trade exchanges provide operational and financial support that enables cultural narratives to be embedded in infrastructural practice; here, soft-infrastructure inputs (e.g., education or financial services) can complement physical construction. Fourth, across capital accumulation and its trade/financial mechanisms, trade exchanges underpin longer-term economic returns that reinforce collaboration and trust, with institutional arrangements such as EPC+F+OM providing a basis for sharing risks and rewards over time. Finally, these cultural and trade exchanges culminate in regional economic development, where improved logistics and connectivity can stimulate economic activity and, in turn, validate the project's broader claims to integration and co-development.

This interaction creates a self-reinforcing cycle, where cultural elements support material achievements, and material results, in turn, validate and strengthen cultural narratives. The grey clouds—Cultural Exchanges, Economic Idea, and Trade Exchanges—play a pivotal role in driving the ECRL's dynamics by connecting cultural and material dimensions across all five hierarchical levels. On one hand, they act as enablers, fostering mutual understanding, aligning strategic goals, and delivering tangible benefits that reinforce trust and collaboration among stakeholders. For example, cultural exchanges strengthen shared values, economic ideas guide project planning, and trade exchanges ensure sustainable economic returns.

However, these grey clouds also pose potential risks. Misaligned or superficial cultural narratives may weaken stakeholder trust, while economic strategies perceived as overly favouring one party could provoke dissatisfaction and resistance. Similarly, an unequal distribution of trade benefits might disrupt the collaborative framework, creating tension among stakeholders. The grey clouds, therefore, embody both the driving forces behind the ECRL's success and the potential pitfalls that could destabilize its progress. Effective management of these dynamics is crucial to maintaining the system's balance and ensuring its long-term sustainability.

8.6.4 Insights from the Diagram

The diagram is intended as an analytical device for tracing how belief, cultural exchange, and

material strategies become linked in the ECRL case. It highlights a recursive relationship between symbolic work (slogans, narratives, and justificatory language) and material delivery (implementation practices, financing arrangements, and corridor development), showing how each can reinforce—or destabilise—the other over time.

The key implication is therefore not that the ECRL “succeeds” because these elements exist, but that project trajectories are shaped by how convincingly such elements are assembled and maintained across different organisational levels and publics. The framework draws attention to points of fragility: when narratives lose credibility, when governance arrangements intensify distributive conflict, or when promised spillovers do not materialise, the loop can weaken. This makes the model useful for comparison with other BRI projects where similar symbolic–material couplings are claimed but unevenly realised.

8.7 Comprehensive Analysis

8.7.1 Further discussion on diagram

Building upon the outcomes outlined above, this discussion delves deeper into the complexities and nuances of the ECRL's dynamic framework, focusing on its operational sustainability, potential tensions, and broader implications for regional integration under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). While the belief system, cultural narratives, and material strategies collectively drive the project's momentum, their interactions also reveal significant challenges that demand critical attention.

The ECRL's self-reinforcing loop between cultural and material elements underpins its ability to generate trust, foster collaboration, and deliver tangible benefits. However, sustaining this loop in practice requires balancing cultural adaptability, economic inclusivity, and equitable benefit distribution. For example, while the project's cultural exchanges—mediated through slogans and media—play a pivotal role in aligning perceptions, their long-term efficacy depends on their responsiveness to evolving local contexts (Cheung & Hong, 2019).

Operational models like EPC+F+OM, though innovative, face their own set of challenges in aligning financial mechanisms with local economic realities. Empirical materials collected for this study

suggest that, while such models can institutionalise shared risks and rewards, discrepancies in implementation—such as delays in operational returns or perceived inequities in the distribution of financial benefits—may destabilise stakeholder trust. These dynamics underscore the need for adaptive governance arrangements that can respond to evolving local conditions and maintain alignment between cultural narratives and material outcomes.

The three grey clouds—Cultural Exchanges, Economic Idea, and Trade Exchanges—are not just enablers of project success but also reveal critical intersections where tensions may arise. For instance, cultural exchanges, while fostering shared values, must navigate the balance between promoting universal narratives and respecting local specificities. Where imaginaries are contested across audiences and sites, externally articulated narratives may be received selectively and can become points of contention rather than straightforward resources for cooperation (Chubb, 2022).

Similarly, economic ideas must integrate cultural dimensions to ensure coherence across strategic planning. Jessop (2013) argues that without such integration, economic strategies risk being perceived as technocratic or exploitative. This dynamic is particularly evident in trade exchanges, where the tangible benefits of infrastructure improvements must be equitably distributed to avoid perceptions of inequality. For instance, while improved logistics undeniably enhance regional connectivity (Xu & Wang, 2017), the uneven allocation of trade benefits could exacerbate regional disparities, undermining the project's collaborative framework.

The ECRL's dynamic framework is not immune to disruption, and the preceding discussion points to three tensions that are especially salient for the sustainability of the cultural–material loop. First, because belief and narrative coherence are central coordinating resources, they also risk becoming rigid where they fail to adjust to heterogeneous local contexts. In practice, slogans that foreground national pride may resonate strongly with Chinese stakeholders while remaining insufficiently responsive to Malaysian communities' immediate concerns, including employment security and environmental sustainability (Brauteseth, 2023). This implies that sustaining inclusion requires continuous work of localisation—adapting narrative forms without abandoning the integrative claims through which cooperation is organised.

Second, trade exchanges can only stabilise trust if material benefits are perceived as sufficiently equitable. Where trade outcomes remain uneven—through differential access to infrastructure, unequal participation in corridor opportunities, or the concentration of gains among already-advantaged actors—dissatisfaction among marginalised stakeholders may accumulate and erode the project's collaborative ethos (Lim, 2021).

Finally, these tensions are intensified where governance arrangements lack transparency and accountability. Drawing on Tyfield and Rodríguez's (2022) emphasis on the political stakes of large-scale infrastructuring, opacity in decision-making can weaken perceived legitimacy, especially when projects intersect with heightened geopolitical sensitivities. This underscores the importance of institutionalised feedback channels and accountability arrangements that enable meaningful engagement across diverse stakeholders (Tyfield & Rodríguez, 2022).

The ECRL's experience offers broader insights into how large-scale infrastructure projects can influence regional economic development and integration. While its dynamic feedback loop provides a replicable model, its implication on observing interplay between cultural narratives, economic strategies, and material outcomes.

The ECRL exemplifies how integrating belief systems and material strategies can foster collaboration and deliver tangible benefits. Its operational framework, supported by cultural exchanges and economic ideas, demonstrates the potential for infrastructure projects to drive regional connectivity and economic growth (Cheung & Hong, 2019; Xu & Wang, 2017).

However, the project also highlights the risks of misalignment and exclusion. Without adaptive governance, inclusive narratives, and equitable benefit distribution, the very dynamics that enable success can become sources of disruption. For instance, a failure to address local grievances—such as environmental concerns or disparities in trade benefits—could undermine the project's legitimacy and long-term viability.

The ECRL illustrates the dual potential of large-scale infrastructure projects to drive regional integration while posing significant challenges. Its belief system and cultural narratives provide a

strong foundation for collaboration, but their effectiveness depends on adaptability and inclusivity. Similarly, while material strategies like EPC+F+OM deliver tangible economic benefits, their success requires transparent governance and equitable implementation.

For the ECRL—and similar BRI projects—the path to sustained regional integration lies in moving these dynamics. By leveraging its strengths while addressing inherent vulnerabilities, this research realized a nuanced framework for understanding how infrastructure projects can navigate the complexities of regional development in a globalized world. This discussion emphasizes the importance of continuous reflection and critical analysis in maximizing the transformative potential of such initiatives.

8.7.2 Compare with other China-Laos railway

This research emphasizes the role of strategic narratives, such as the slogan "Connecting Life, Accelerating Growth," in shaping stakeholder perceptions. While effective in fostering initial trust, the research also identifies limitations in addressing grassroots grievances, such as environmental concerns and displacement. Aligning with critiques of "slogan diplomacy" in other BRI projects, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (Callahan, 2016), repetitive messaging may fail to adequately address localized issues. This highlights the necessity of closer alignment between narrative strategies and tangible actions.

The ECRL offers a partial solution to these limitations by emphasizing Malaysia's active partnership role. This strategy underscores the project's practical application of its dynamic cycle between cultural exchanges and economic ideas. For instance, the ECRL's multimodal integration, including connections with transport hubs such as Port Klang and Kuala Lumpur International Airport, not only enhances regional trade dynamics but also demonstrates the synergy between cultural and material dimensions (Prakash, 2023). This approach strengthens trust among stakeholders while avoiding the erosion of trust that oversimplified narratives can cause.

To fully realize its integrative potential, the ECRL may further move beyond strategic narratives and prioritise the establishment of multidimensional linkages between land, sea, and air transport

systems. Such measures could better align with the research's emphasis on practical outcomes over abstract narratives, ensuring the project delivers on both local and regional expectations.

Industrial clustering has been a critical success factor in other BRI projects, such as the China-Laos Railway, where corridor development has been paired with plans for border/rail-linked industrial and special economic zones (Cherchia, 2025). The ECRL's domestic integration focus mirrors initial phases of the China-Laos Railway, where internal connectivity laid the groundwork for cross-border trade expansion (Thuzar, 2017). In contrast, the ECRL's limited emphasis on industrial development risks replicating patterns observed in African railway projects, where insufficient local economic integration led to underutilized infrastructure (Summers, 2016).

Malaysia's east-west economic inequity represents a microcosm of broader ASEAN disparities, where peripheral regions often remain excluded from economic growth and narratives of growth. The ECRL's potential to address these divides is contingent on equitable access and inclusion for marginalized communities. While the ECRL addresses internal economic fragmentation, its role in bridging ASEAN-wide disparities remains limited. Du and Zhang (2018) argue that regional integration projects must address both domestic and cross-border inequalities to achieve sustainable outcomes. The China-Laos Railway, for instance, integrates rural and urban markets through targeted investment in marginalized regions, creating a more inclusive economic landscape (Thuzar, 2017). Likewise, here we underscore the need for the ECRL to embed inclusive policies within its operational framework.

Another key issue meriting attention is the environmental and social challenges associated with large-scale infrastructure projects, particularly the ECRL's disruption of local ecosystems and displacement of communities. These concerns, if unaddressed, could undermine the project's broader integrative goals. Sustainability has emerged as a critical factor in regional integration under the BRI. Projects like the Laos–China Railway have faced prominent environmental and social safeguard challenges around land and compensation, underscoring why safeguards and meaningful engagement matter for project acceptance (DiCarlo, 2021). In contrast, the ECRL's limited emphasis on industrial development risks replicating patterns observed in African railway projects, where

insufficient local economic integration led to underutilized infrastructure (Summers, 2016). This BRI projects in Africa, where debt-heavy financing models often exacerbated dependency (Summers, 2016).

By incorporating long-term operations and maintenance, the ECRL mitigates these risks, providing a more sustainable alternative. However, even this innovative model faces challenges. Rai (2021) critiques EPC+F+OM frameworks for their potential rigidity, noting that such models can struggle to adapt to local socio-political contexts. In the ECRL, perceptions of economic asymmetry—where profits are seen as disproportionately benefiting Chinese stakeholders—highlight the need for transparent governance.

8.7.3 Discussion on whole thesis for future research implication

The Role of Belief Systems and Ideological Alignment

The ECRL exemplifies how belief systems rooted in national pride and global leadership can mobilize high levels of commitment among (co-national) stakeholders. Chinese workers often frame their participation as contributing to China's geopolitical vision, creating a strong ideological alignment with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). However, such reliance on belief systems is not without critique. Callahan (2016) argues that in projects like the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, overemphasis on ideological narratives risked creating a paternalistic dynamic, where local stakeholders felt marginalized. In the ECRL, this risk has been mitigated to date by emphasizing practical benefits for Malaysian stakeholders, such as infrastructure development and job creation. Unlike the rigid ideological framing seen in African BRI projects (Summers, 2016), the ECRL balances these dynamics, adapting narratives to local priorities.

While ideological alignment can foster cohesion among project participants, it may also risk alienating local stakeholders if perceived as detached from local realities. Jessop (2012) emphasizes the importance of adapting ideological narratives to specific contexts rather than applying rigid frameworks.

In line with Tyfield's (2018) insistence that innovation and socio-technical projects are politically

charged and socially embedded, large-scale infrastructure framed through the BRI can be approached as simultaneously material and ideological undertakings. This suggests a practical tension: overarching narratives of national or geopolitical ambition may not automatically translate into locally workable arrangements, and can generate friction when they fail to engage with operational realities and stakeholder expectations. For the ECRL, the implication is that legitimacy is likely to depend on how project narratives are mediated through tangible practices and outcomes on the ground, rather than asserted at an abstract level (Tyfield, 2018).

Strategic Narratives and Slogans as Bridging Tools

Slogans like "Connecting Life, Accelerating Growth" exemplify the use of strategic narratives to align diverse stakeholders. Drawing on Foucault's (1977) concept of "power/knowledge technologies" within a CPE analysis, one can see how such slogans embed the project's values within public consciousness. For Chinese participants, they reinforce a sense of national responsibility, while for Malaysians, they frame the project as a driver of modernization and economic opportunity. However, the simplicity of such narratives can become a liability. Summers (2018) critiques the phenomenon of "slogan diplomacy", where oversimplified messaging overlooks deeper socio-economic complexities. In the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, for example, top-down slogans failed to resonate with local communities, whose concerns about land use and displacement were inadequately addressed (Jones & Zeng, 2019). Similarly, in the ECRL, while slogans initially built trust, grassroots grievances over environmental and social disruptions revealed gaps in the project's narrative strategy. Zeng's (2017) exploration of China's soft power strategy underscores the ECRL's role in fostering a cooperative image for Chinese-led initiatives. By incorporating local stakeholders into decision-making processes, the project mitigates criticisms of neo-colonialism and reinforces perceptions of mutual benefit.

The ECRL offers a partial solution to this challenge by incorporating localized narratives. By emphasizing Malaysia's partnership role, project leaders created a sense of co-ownership that counteracts the risks of narrative saturation, which arise when repetitive or overly rigid messaging fails to adapt to the evolving priorities and concerns of stakeholders. However, the success of such

strategies remains contingent on their ability to evolve in response to local realities. As Demirgüç-Kunt et al. (2018) emphasizes, effective narratives must reflect the lived experiences of affected communities, addressing their concerns directly rather than subsuming them under broad messaging.

Material Components and the EPC+F+OM Model

The EPC+F+OM model—integrating engineering, procurement, construction, financing, operations, and maintenance into a unified framework for comprehensive project oversight and management—represents a significant innovation in the ECRL. By extending its scope beyond construction, this model ensures financial sustainability and operational longevity, aligning with Demirgüç-Kunt et al. (2018) recommendations for inclusive economic frameworks. For Malaysian stakeholders, the model offers tangible benefits, such as reduced transportation costs and improved regional trade logistics.

While the EPC+F+OM model addresses many structural limitations of earlier BRI projects, its sustainable economic returns and strengthened regional cooperation hinge on equitable benefit distribution. Callahan (2016) shows that the legitimacy of the Belt and Road is not secured by material delivery alone, but also relies on the production of wider political imaginaries and narratives that render projects socially acceptable. In this sense, for the ECRL, this means investing not only in infrastructure but also in community development initiatives, such as education and healthcare, that directly benefit local populations. Without these complementary efforts, the model risks perpetuating the same dependency dynamics it seeks to overcome.

Stakeholder Dynamics and Local Agency

The ECRL's emphasis on localized governance underscores the importance of stakeholder agency in transnational projects. Malaysian planners played a significant role in decisions such as route adjustments, minimizing environmental disruption and enhancing community acceptance. This approach reflects lessons from the Pan-Asia Railway Network, where insufficient local engagement undermined operational efficiency and trust (Thuzar, 2017).

In contrast to the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, where centralized governance marginalized local voices and led to widespread disillusionment (Jones & Zeng, 2019), the ECRL demonstrates a significant shift toward more inclusive and localized governance strategies. Drawing on the findings of this study, the ECRL incorporates mechanisms such as stakeholder participation and localized narratives to address the specific needs of both Chinese and Malaysian stakeholders. This approach mitigates risks of exclusion and fosters a collaborative framework, distinguishing the ECRL from earlier BRI projects that failed to fully engage with local dynamics.

The evidence from this study highlights key elements of the ECRL's success in adapting to local contexts. For example, the incorporation of cultural exchanges and economic ideas into the project's dynamic cycle creates feedback loops that align ideological narratives with practical local priorities. These adjustments, rooted in the spirit of devotion and the belief system driving the project, address earlier criticisms of BRI projects as overly top-down and disconnected from local realities. This reflects a deliberate effort to overcome the governance challenges identified in past BRI initiatives, emphasizing the ECRL as a model of improved inclusivity and adaptability.

This progression underscores how the ECRL exemplifies learning within the BRI framework. By balancing centralized decision-making with local agency, the project reconciles ideological alignment with localized benefits, as evidenced by its emerging financial and operational mechanism. Such measures combining with cultural exchanges not only enhance trust among stakeholders but also strengthen the project's legitimacy in fostering regional economic integration.

However, maintaining inclusivity is an ongoing challenge. Oliveira *et al.*, (2020) caution that perceptions of asymmetry in decision-making can erode trust, particularly in projects where local stakeholders feel excluded from strategic planning processes, as poorly executed inclusion efforts can sometimes exacerbate dissatisfaction rather than mitigate it. The ECRL's success depends on its ability to institutionalize mechanisms for grassroots feedback, ensuring that all participants perceive their interests as central to the project's goals.

Synthesis of Lessons Across Projects

The ECRL offers valuable lessons for transnational development, particularly in balancing ideological alignment with localized engagement. Compared to other BRI projects, its emphasis on integrating material and cultural dimensions sets a precedent for future initiatives. However, its experiences also underscore persistent challenges, including perceptions of neo-colonialism and unequal benefits.

Unlike projects that prioritise ideological narratives over tangible outcomes, the ECRL demonstrates the importance of aligning belief-driven engagement with practical benefits, such as job creation and infrastructure development (Jessop, 2022; Demirgüç-Kunt et al., 2018). The integration of operations and maintenance phases within the EPC+F+OM model reduces dependency risks while fostering long-term partnerships (Summers, 2016). However, these frameworks must remain flexible and context-sensitive to adapt to local socio-economic and governance conditions (Jessop, Labrousse and Lamarche, 2012). By tailoring narratives and governance strategies to local contexts, the ECRL addresses the divergent priorities of its stakeholders, fostering inclusivity and trust (Liu & Lim, 2019).

Despite its successes, the ECRL's experiences reveal that even well-designed projects are vulnerable to critiques of neo-colonialism. Summers (2016) warns that perceptions of unequal benefit distribution can undermine trust, particularly in regions with historical sensitivities to foreign investment. To counter these critiques, the ECRL may institutionalize transparency in governance and resource allocation, demonstrating its commitment to mutual benefit. The ECRL's integration of material and immaterial dynamics positions it as a flagship project within the BRI, offering lessons for sustainable and inclusive development.

By aligning ideological aspirations with localized engagement, it provides a model for balancing belief-driven motivation with practical outcomes. However, its experiences also highlight the complexities of navigating stakeholder dynamics and addressing perceptions of asymmetry. As the BRI evolves, the ECRL underscores the importance of adaptive strategies that prioritise transparency, cultural sensitivity, and equitable collaboration in transnational infrastructure development. Additionally, integrating environmental considerations into the material-immaterial dynamic could

provide a more sustainable development framework.

Last but not the least, aligning the ECRL with ASEAN's broader connectivity agenda would be beneficial to amplify its regional impact. However, the project's current focus on domestic priorities limits its contribution to ASEAN's integration goals. Unlike the Pan-Asia Railway Network, which explicitly connects multiple ASEAN nations, the ECRL primarily serves as a domestic infrastructure project. Liu and Lim (2019) highlight that regional integration requires seamless connections between national and regional frameworks. Without explicit linkages to ASEAN initiatives like the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity (MPAC), the ECRL risks being perceived as an isolated endeavor. This research aligns with the need for the ECRL to strengthen its ties to ASEAN's regional trade and infrastructure networks. By participating in ASEAN-led connectivity initiatives and enhancing cross-border linkages, the ECRL could evolve from a national project to a regional asset, fulfilling its potential under the BRI.

8.8 Concluding Remark

The ECRL project exemplifies how transnational infrastructure initiatives under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can integrate material and immaterial dimensions to achieve both economic and cultural objectives. This chapter has synthesised the research findings alongside comparative analyses, offering insights into the dynamics of the ECRL's success and challenges.

The analysis first highlights a perception–behaviour–ideology cycle through which stakeholder understandings translate into practical orientations and, over time, more stabilised commitments. Chinese stakeholders' belief-driven engagement—often rooted in national pride and the BRI's broader ideological framing—can generate a collective commitment to the project. This is reinforced, in different ways, by Malaysian stakeholders' pragmatic confidence in the ECRL's tangible benefits, such as job creation and regional connectivity.

The chapter then shows the mediating role of strategic narratives. Slogans such as “Connecting Life, Accelerating Growth” can serve as both emotional anchors and strategic tools, aligning individual motivations with collective goals. At the same time, the comparative references and the ECRL

evidence suggest that over-reliance on such narratives can oversimplify complex realities, which underscores the need for transparent communication and local adaptability.

Finally, the chapter foregrounds the importance of material-economic frameworks. The EPC+F+OM model represents a significant institutional innovation, aimed at financial sustainability and operational resilience. Its integration with cultural initiatives, including skill-building and community engagement, illustrates how material strategies can reinforce cultural and ideological alignment. This study therefore emphasises the importance of integrating economic strategies with cultural and ideological narratives to foster long-term engagement. The dynamic model discussed here helps create a foundation for trust and collaboration by reinforcing feedback loops between material outcomes and stakeholder cohesion; however, adapting narratives to localised contexts remains critical for maintaining trust and cooperation.

Additionally, incorporating Malaysian stakeholders into economic decision-making through appropriate financial mechanisms can provide a more mutually supportive basis for addressing cultural and political-economic diversity challenges in transnational projects, including pressures associated with leadership changes or work suspensions. Cross-cultural exchange and everyday practices of collaboration are also important for alleviating concerns framed in terms of neo-colonialism. The comparative discussions further suggest that more integrated governance can enhance the sustainability of BRI projects. The research also indicates opportunities for exploring the longer-term cultural impacts of BRI initiatives, particularly where intercultural collaboration contributes to strengthened regional identity and may help address perceived inconsistencies in social and economic benefits.

At the same time, the EPC+F+OM model's strengths appear contingent on the specific context of China-led BRI initiatives, where cultural dynamics and the comprehensive cycle analysed in this chapter play an integral role. If used independently, the model risks losing the long-term mutual benefits it is intended to deliver, as it relies heavily on the cultural and systemic feedback loops emphasised in this research. In other contexts, or under different leadership conditions, a standalone economic model may struggle to sustain collaborative profitability among project

participants over time.

The ECRL therefore provides a flagship case through which to examine the ambitions of the BRI, illustrating how material and immaterial elements can be integrated as one pathway towards regional integration and more sustainable economic development. By foregrounding the interaction between ideological alignment and localised benefits, this research highlights the importance of moving beyond purely physical objectives in large-scale infrastructure projects. At the same time, the analysis reveals persistent risks—such as asymmetry, oversimplified narratives, and insufficient stakeholder engagement—which reinforces the need for adaptability, inclusivity, and transparency. As a flagship BRI project, the ECRL offers lessons for future initiatives and provides scholars and policymakers with insights into the complex interplay of cultural, economic, and political dynamics in transnational development.

However, the limitations of this study should also be acknowledged. First, the analysis focuses on the ECRL as a single case study, leaving questions about the generalisability of its findings to other sociocultural and economic contexts. Second, while this research discusses the dynamic interplay between cultural and economic dimensions, it falls short of systematically assessing how these interactions influence project outcomes across different stages. Third, constraints in data collection may have affected the comprehensiveness and reliability of certain findings. (

Future research can build on this foundation in several ways: by conducting cross-case comparisons with other BRI projects to identify more widely applicable patterns; by adopting more systematic methodologies to trace the mechanisms through which cultural and economic dynamics interact and shape implementation; and by incorporating more direct feedback from local communities to better understand stakeholder perspectives and refine participatory mechanisms. By deepening understanding of the cultural, economic, and political dynamics of transnational infrastructure, future research can contribute to a more robust theoretical and practical framework for sustainable development in an increasingly interconnected world.

9. References

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10. Appendix

10.1 Field interviews

I would register some basic information including age, gender, birthplace and both full-time and part-time staff in the public area of ECRL project in order to get a general demographic understanding of the group. Following with more open-ended questions, in which the first focus is about their perception of the work (the project) and the initiative, and the second point emphasizes on examining whether they are pleased with working with Chinese workers.

10.1.1 Interview design

1. What is your gender? A. Male B. Female C. Prefer not to say
2. What is your nationality? A Chinese. B. Malaysian C. Other
3. Where do you live/and what is the live environment (Open question)? A. China B. Malaysia C.Other;
4. What is your job and job content (Open question)?
5. Who are you normally working with? A. Mostly Chinese B. Mostly Malaysian C. Both Chinese and Malaysian D. More international working environment
6. Do you feel comfortable with this working environment?A.Comfortable. B. Uncomfortable. C. Don't mind
7. What is your working mode (open question)?
8. Does this working mode make any changes to your life?
9. Do you know anything about Belt and Road Initiative?
10. How do you know about the relationship of this initiative and the ECRL project you are

working?

11. Have you and your companions received and get access to any information related to BRI during your work?
12. What influence do you think this EXRL project would exert on Malaysia and the relationship between China and Malaysia? A. Positive generally B. Negative generally C. Both positive and negative D. No significant influence
13. Have you exchanged your information among your colleagues and what normally you talked about?
14. Have you accepted or influenced each other's opinions after talking? (This question presents the possible formation of ideology among their team)
15. Why do you think China want to implement this project?
16. Why do you think Malaysia want to implement this project?
17. Do you think will China achieve its goal?
18. Do you think it is necessary to strengthen cooperation between China and Malaysia for this project? Why?
19. What efforts has China made, in your view, that have contributed to this cooperation?
20. What efforts has Malaysia made, in your view, that have contributed to this cooperation?
21. Do you think this project can be completed successfully? Why or why not?
22. Do you think the operation of the ECRL will be beneficial for China and Malaysia? In what ways?
23. What was your impression of China, Malaysia, and their relationship before working on

this project? Has it changed after working on it?

24. Would you like to see more projects like this initiated between Malaysia and China? Why?
25. What are the biggest changes this job has brought to you and your family?
26. What are the biggest changes you have observed among your colleagues because of this project?
27. Do you share your experience working on the ECRL with friends or on social media? Why or why not?
28. Have you noticed any changes in others' attitudes or actions after you shared your experience of working on this project? If so, what changed?

In addition to the questions listed above, the next part was designed for interviewees in relatively senior positions within the project, such as spokespersons or managers who could access official communications from decision-makers. The specific interview focus was refined during fieldwork once suitable contacts were established. Compared with the previous section, this part relied more on identifiable roles and organisational perspectives. Given the political sensitivity of such positions, responses were often more cautious and could, to some extent, reflect an organisational stance. This was particularly relevant when discussing regulation, discourse, or slogans that may shape public opinion and, in turn, feed back into policy directions. Where necessary, such material is paraphrased and anonymised in the thesis to protect participants.

1. In your view, why is it important for the public to better understand the nature of the BRI and related infrastructure projects?
2. If people ask, how would you explain the similarities and differences between the BRI and the Marshall Plan?
3. From your perspective, do you see any similarities or differences between historical

imperial expansion (e.g., the British Empire) and the implementation of the BRI, especially in relation to infrastructure assistance and the establishment of overseas economic footholds?

4. In relation to the ECRL project, what have been the most memorable instructions you have received from the government (or from your superior)?
5. How do you interpret the 2019 suspension/renegotiation of the project?
6. What information about this project do you think has been most widely communicated to the public?
7. What information do you think is most effective in helping Chinese and Malaysian publics understand the project?
8. Have you observed or heard that Chinese and/or Malaysian perceptions of the project have changed over time? If so, how?
9. What information releases or events do you think have most influenced public opinion, and why?
10. How has the government responded to these shifts (e.g., in policies, guidelines, or project instructions)?
11. Beyond this, have you observed any other impacts on the project, or on the BRI more broadly, arising from these changes?
12. Do you think these developments have encouraged cultural exchange and/or more effective cooperation between China and Malaysia? Why or why not?
13. Overall, do you think these developments have supported the implementation of the BRI, or generated negative effects? Please explain.

14. Have you observed any changes in China's international reputation, especially regarding international understandings of the BRI and related projects? Please explain.
15. Do you think the project has influenced bilateral relations between China and Malaysia, and China and Southeast Asia more broadly? What dimensions do you use to make this assessment?
16. What evidence, in your view, suggests that the project has been successful as a BRI project (for example, in generating 'win-win' economic benefits and supporting regional development in China and Malaysia, such as tourism, cultural links, and political connections)?

The final part focuses on financial activities related to the ECRL. As set out in the fieldwork plan, interviews in this part drew on informal descriptions and reflections on ECRL-related financial practices from staff in relevant organisations (e.g., China Communications Construction Company and relevant import-export banking institutions). Where appropriate, publicly available official data were also collected through document and website/database review.

1. How would you assess the efficiency of the financial processes related to the ECRL?
2. In your view, is this efficiency shaped mainly by policy directives from superiors, or by staff initiative and commitment to the project? Please explain.
3. When you work with counterparts in Malaysia/China, do you find the coordination environment cooperative? Why or why not?
4. Does CCCC/China Exim Bank/Malaysia Exim Bank attach high importance to this project? How can you tell?
5. Are you interested in the financial aspects of this project? What interests you?
6. Do you find your tasks difficult to complete? What challenges have you encountered?

7. Would you like to be involved in follow-on investment activities related to this project?
Why or why not?
8. Are you interested in working in more BRI projects?
9. Are there any differences between the work you do for this project and your previous work in financial industry?
10. How do you think this cooperation model influences the financial sector/industry?

10.1.2 Interview Record (with anonymity)

This thesis draws on a recorded interview corpus that is anonymised to protect participants and to meet the requirements of the Lancaster University ethics protocol. Interviewees are identified through coded labels that indicate broad category (e.g., country/sector/role level) rather than personal identity, and potentially identifying details (names, exact job titles, and specific organisational identifiers) are removed or generalised in the write-up. A separate interview log is maintained to document dates, locations, and interview conditions for audit purposes, but it is not reproduced here to preserve confidentiality. Where relevant to interpretation, the analysis notes interview setting (e.g., formal office meeting versus informal conversation) and the likely incentives shaping candour.

Code	Date of Interview	Interviewee	Description	Interview form	Group/Individual
C1	30/01/2022	Chinese Interviewee1	ECRL engineer (CCCC)	Face to face interview	Individual
C2	02/02/2022	Chinese Interviewee2	ECRL main Initiator (policy background)	Face to face interview	No
C3	13/02/2022	Chinese Interviewee3	ECRL construction staff (CCCC)	Remote audio interview	Both
C4	13/02/2022	Chinese	ECRL technical staff	Remote audio	Both

		Interviewee4		interview	
C5	13/02/2022	Chinese Interviewee5	ECRL project manager (CCCC)	Face to face interview	Both
C6	14/03/2022	Chinese Interviewee6	ECRL engineer (CCCC)	Remote audio interview	Individual
C7	28/03/2022	Chinese Interviewee7	Banking sector (related to ECRL financing)	Face to face interview	Individual
C8	03/04/2022	Chinese Interviewee8	Banking sector (BRI financing expert)	Remote audio interview	Individual
C9	18/04/2022	Chinese Interviewee9	CCCC senior representative	Remote audio interview	Individual
M1	21/04/2022	Malaysian Interviewee 1	ECRL project officer (MRL)	Remote audio interview	Individual
M2	05/05/2022	Malaysian Interviewee 2	ECRL local manager (MRL)	Face to face interview	Individual
C10	08/05/2022	Chinese Interviewee10	One of ECRL current leader	Face to face interview	Individual
E1	24/05/2022	Third party Cambodia Interviewee	Construction worker (subcontractor)	Remote audio interview	Individual
E2	25/05/2022	Third Party Vietnam Interviewee	Civil society representative	Remote Audio interview	Individual
M3	21/11/2022	Malaysian Interview 3	ECRL administrative staff	Remote Audio interview	Both
M4	25/11/2022	Malaysian Interview 4	ECRL manager (MRL)	Remote Audio interview	Individual

M5	26/11/2022	Malaysian Interview 5	ECRL engineer	Remote Audio interview	Individual
M6	30/11/2022	Malaysian Interview 6	MRL staff	Remote Audio interview	Both
M7	05/12/2022	Malaysian Interview 7	MRL staff	Remote Audio interview	Both
M8	06/12/2022	Malaysian Interview 8	MRL staff	Remote Audio interview	Individual
E3	08/03/2023	Third Party Indonesian Interviewee 1	NGO representative	Remote Audio interview	Individual
C11	08/03/2023	Chinese Interview 11	CCCC labour	Remote Audio interview	Individual
M9	15/03/2023	Malaysian Interview 9	NGO perspective (civil society)	Remote Audio interview	Individual
M10	21/03/2023	Malaysian Interview 10	NGO perspective (civil society)	Remote Audio interview	Individual
GP1	03/05/2022	Chinese and Malaysian	Construction Group of ECRL (engineers and managers)	Group Interview	Both
GP2	06/05/2023	Chinese and Malaysian	Management Group of ECRL (CCCC+MRL senior staff)	Group Interview	Both

