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The Evolution of the Public Discourse Landscape on the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, "Cultural Discount" and the Negotiation of Meaning

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Abstract: As a flagship project of the Belt and Road Initiative, the "China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" (hereinafter referred to as CPEC) has achieved significant economic and social outcomes after more than a decade of construction. At the same time, a transnational public opinion dynamic has emerged around CPEC, with the Pakistani public exhibiting a complex attitude characterized by a blend of "significantly increased favorability" and "limited trust in Chinese media." This tension reveals deep-seated issues in the cross-cultural communication surrounding CPEC—namely, how is meaning constructed, eroded, and renegotiated within the current pluralistic public opinion environment and amid cultural differences? This paper employs literature review, theoretical deduction, and textual case analysis to systematically examine the internal logic of CPEC's cross-cultural communication. The study argues that the evolution of the CPEC public opinion ecosystem is driven by diverse factors, and its communication faces a triple "cultural discount" in terms of language, values, and politics. Furthermore, Pakistani audiences do not passively accept the message but instead engage in preference-based, negotiated, and confrontational forms of decoding within a complex, multi-layered information environment; the resulting negotiation of meaning is the most effective mode of communication.

Keywords: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor; public opinion ecosystem; cultural discount; meaning negotiation; cross-cultural communication

I. Research Background and Objectives

In May 2013, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang visited Pakistan, where the two sides reached a consensus on the construction of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). With the highway, railway, energy, and fiber-optic cable corridors connecting Kashgar in China's Xinjiang region to Gwadar Port in Pakistan serving as its backbone, the CPEC establishes a comprehensive economic cooperation framework encompassing infrastructure connectivity, energy cooperation, industrial park development, and trade and investment. As bilateral cooperation has evolved, the CPEC entered its "2.0" phase of high-quality development in 2025. The cooperation model shifted from government-led "hard connectivity" to a dual-driven approach involving both government and market forces, with a strengthened focus on "soft connectivity" and the continued deepening of economic and trade cooperation [1].

Existing research on the CPEC can be broadly divided into two categories: one focuses on economic and geopolitical perspectives, assessing the effectiveness, risks, and cooperation pathways of corridor projects; the other focuses on international communication and public opinion research, examining the reporting frameworks of international and Pakistani media regarding CPEC and analyzing the logic behind the emergence of negative external narratives. Existing research has noted the presence of cognitive biases and public opinion polarization in the communication surrounding CPEC, but few studies have systematically explained the disconnect between "actual project outcomes" and "media perceptions and public attitudes" by integrating the concept of "cultural discount" with Hall's encoding-decoding theory; At the same time, an integrated analysis of the differentiated decoding behaviors among different groups within Pakistan and the mechanisms underlying the negotiation of meaning remains to be conducted.

Based on this, the research objectives of this paper are as follows: First, to delineate the evolutionary stages of the CPEC public opinion ecosystem and summarize the key actors, core discourses, and contradictions in each stage; second, to construct the "cultural discount" analytical framework to identify the primary sources of meaning loss in the cross-cultural communication of CPEC; third, to utilize the encoding-decoding theory to analyze the decoding patterns of CPEC information among different social groups in Pakistan and elucidate the underlying mechanisms behind the disconnect between favorability and media trust; fourth, to discuss potential areas for optimization in CPEC's cross-cultural communication based on the research findings, while also clarifying the limitations of this study. The research

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contributions of this paper lie in: integrating the theory of cultural discount with the encoding-decoding theory to provide a reference analytical framework for cross-cultural public opinion research on "Belt and Road" cross-border cooperation projects; and presenting a realistic picture of the diverse discursive interactions within the CPEC public opinion sphere based on publicly available reports, academic literature, and media materials.

It should be noted that the operation of the Gwadar Port Free Zone, investment promotion for the Lashaqai Special Economic Zone, and the construction of the China-Pakistan Agricultural Cooperation Demonstration Zone are objective facts of development publicly reported during the CPEC 2.0 phase; however, these economic achievements do not directly and automatically translate into consistent public perception, and complex public opinion dynamics persist. This public opinion landscape involves multiple actors: Chinese state-run media, the Pakistani government, and local media; various Pakistani political parties and local elites; Indian and Western media outlets and think tanks; and Pakistani online opinion leaders and ordinary netizens. These different actors produce divergent discourses, collectively shaping the cross-border public opinion environment surrounding CPEC.

II. Research Methods

This paper employs a comprehensive approach combining literature review, theoretical deduction, and textual case analysis, generally following the analytical logic of "theoretical adaptation—phase-by-phase carding —mechanism analysis—discussion and reflection." The following sections provide specific explanations regarding the selection of research materials, the application of theoretical tools, and the approach to case analysis.

1. Literature Analysis

The sources of literature for this paper primarily fall into four categories: first, academic papers published in Chinese core journals and specialized academic journals focusing on the public opinion ecosystem surrounding the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), cross-cultural communication between China and Pakistan, and the international communication of the "Belt and Road" initiative; second, publicly released opinion poll reports from Pakistani research institutions and publicly available news reports from mainstream Pakistani newspapers; third, research reports by Chinese and international think tanks on the geopolitical impacts of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and media narrative production; and fourth, empirical research findings from published master's and doctoral dissertations concerning Pakistani media reporting frameworks and public attitudes. The selection of literature adhered to the principles of timeliness and empirical rigor, prioritizing research published between 2015 and 2025—covering the entire construction cycle of the CPEC—and giving preference to works incorporating empirical methods such as questionnaire surveys and media content analysis. Purely engineering-related project reports and short opinion pieces lacking empirical support were excluded; media commentary materials were used solely as discourse samples and not directly as evidence for factual conclusions. It should be noted that the conclusions cited in this paper regarding public attitudes, the proportion of media coverage, and respondents' perceptions are all derived from publicly available Chinese and foreign academic literature and reports from Pakistani government agencies. This paper does not conduct primary questionnaire surveys or original media text coding; all conclusions involving public opinion poll data and media statistics are annotated with corresponding references, and all inferences are based on secondary, publicly available sources.

2. Theoretical Deduction Method

Building upon Hoskins and Milus's "cultural discount" theory and Stuart Hall's "encoding-decoding" theory, this paper adapts and deduces these theories in the context of CPEC communication scenarios. First, we clarify the original theoretical concepts; second, by considering the social, media, and institutional differences between China and Pakistan, we identify three analytical dimensions of cultural discounting: language, values, and politics; subsequently, we discuss the limitations of applying Hall's coding-decoding theory to the South Asian context, complete the localization of theoretical tools, and construct an analytical logic chain of "public opinion evolution—cultural discounting—audience decoding—meaning negotiation."

3. Textual Case Analysis Method

This paper selects three historical phases of public opinion development regarding the CPEC from 2015 to 2025 as units of analysis. Case selection is based on key policy milestones and landmark events: the signing of the "Memorandum of Understanding on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor" in 2015 marked the project's entry into a substantive implementation phase; after 2018, frequent security incidents and intensified domestic political party rivalries drove public opinion toward polarization; and in 2025, CPEC's transition to the 2.0 phase of high-quality development spurred a transformation in the public opinion landscape. These three phases comprehensively cover the entire process of the project—from its implementation, through the emergence of conflicts, to its transformation and upgrading—and clearly illustrate the dynamic evolution of public discourse. The case materials are primarily drawn from publicly available media texts and summaries of media discourse from existing research; they do not involve the recoding of original texts. The specific analysis follows the following approach: Step 1: Phase delineation is based on major policy milestones, security incidents, and conclusions from existing public opinion research; Step 2: The discursive characteristics of different actors in each phase are identified one by one, distinguishing between the Chinese official narrative, the Pakistani local media narrative, the discourse of domestic opposition forces, skeptical narratives from the West and India, and grassroots discourse on social media; Step 3: Specific manifestations of meaning loss during the process from encoding to decoding are examined across three dimensions—language, values,

and politics; Step 4: Drawing on existing empirical questionnaire studies, this step distinguishes three types of decoding patterns—preferential, consultative, and confrontational—among different regions and interest groups in Pakistan; Step 5: This step integrates an analysis of the internal mechanisms through which cultural discounting influences audience meaning negotiation, explaining the contradictory phenomenon that "while the project's tangible benefits enhance favorability, trust in the media remains limited"; Step 6: This step summarizes the core research findings, clarifies the study's limitations, and proposes optimization directions for reference at the communication level.

III. Phased Characteristics of the Evolution of the Public Opinion Landscape on CPEC

1. 2015–2017: Narrative Competition During the Early Stages of Public Discourse

In April 2015, China and Pakistan signed the "Memorandum of Understanding on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor," marking the official entry of the CPEC project into a phase of substantive implementation. The public opinion landscape during this period was characterized by high expectations coupled with a scarcity of information.

From the perspective of official communication, the governments of both China and Pakistan positioned CPEC as a "milestone in the history of bilateral relations" and a "model of win-win cooperation." Chinese media largely employed narrative frameworks such as "strategic partnership," "interconnectivity," and "shared development" to construct their narratives, emphasizing the project's economic attributes and mutually beneficial nature. Pakistani media, guided by the government, generally expressed support, viewing CPEC as a "game-changer" for Pakistan's economic development. According to relevant studies, during this period, positive coverage of CPEC accounted for more than 80 percent of reports on China-Pakistan relations in Pakistan's mainstream newspapers, reflecting a "one-sided" public opinion landscape.

However, beyond official discourse, narrative competition at the unofficial level had already begun to emerge. During this period, Indian media and Western think tanks began to express doubts about the CPEC, advancing skeptical narratives such as "strategic trap" and "debt trap" in an attempt to shape negative perceptions in the international public sphere [2]. In 2016, the Brookings Institution in the United States published a report characterizing the CPEC as "China's geostrategic expansion in South Asia," and this narrative began to seep into Pakistan through international media channels.

Within Pakistan, aside from the official mainstream narrative, some opposition politicians and local elites also began to voice skepticism toward the CPEC, focusing primarily on issues such as the unequal distribution of project benefits, the burden of environmental costs, and the infringement of local interests. Although these concerns did not generate widespread public pressure, they laid the groundwork for subsequent polarization of public opinion.

2. 2018–2022: Escalating Confrontation During the Period of Public Opinion Polarization

This period marked a critical turning point in the significant shift of the CPEC public opinion landscape. As the security situation deteriorated and more problems emerged during the project's implementation, public opinion regarding CPEC in Pakistan became markedly polarized.

The core issue driving the polarization of public opinion on CPEC was security. After 2018, attacks by Baloch separatist militants targeting CPEC-related projects and Chinese personnel became frequent; the 2019 attack in the town of Ormala, which killed 11 Pakistani soldiers, sparked a strong reaction in the Pakistani public sphere, leading to a significant increase in public awareness of CPEC's security risks. During this period, discussions regarding security concerns about the CPEC in Pakistani public discourse increased significantly.

In addition, the influence of Pakistan's domestic party politics on public opinion regarding the CPEC has also grown significantly. The opposition, represented by the Pakistan People's Party, has used the CPEC as a tool to attack the ruling party, accusing the government of failing to safeguard national interests during negotiations and of unfairly distributing project benefits. Although Islamic political parties generally support Sino-Pakistani friendship, they have also questioned the central government's decisions regarding the implementation of specific projects, demanding greater local participation and improved mechanisms for benefit-sharing. Such skepticism at the party level has spread to the general public through channels such as social media, further exacerbating polarization in public opinion.

Negative narratives in international public opinion also intensified during this period. Western media discussions on "debt-trap diplomacy" shifted from theoretical debates to accusations based on specific cases, drawing parallels between the Hambantota Port project in Sri Lanka and CPEC in an attempt to foster a negative perception of China's "economic control" over Pakistan. Such narratives, relayed through local Pakistani media and disseminated via social media, resonated with certain urban elites and intellectual circles.

However, it is worth noting that despite the intensifying polarization of public opinion, the CPEC continues to enjoy a high level of support among the general public in Pakistan. Multiple opinion polls indicate that public support for the CPEC remains strong, particularly among residents in regions along the corridor, who have a more direct experience of the tangible benefits it brings—such as job opportunities and improved electricity supply—resulting in a stratified public opinion structure characterized by "skepticism among the elite and support among the public" [3].

3. 2023–2025: Narrative Reshaping During a Period of Public Opinion Transition

After 2023, with the onset of the CPEC 2.0 construction phase, the public opinion landscape began to exhibit new characteristics. On the one hand, negative narratives from Western and Indian media persisted, though their influence became more fragmented; on the other hand, Pakistani public favorability toward China showed a marked upward trend, and public opinion shifted from polarization toward a reshaping of narratives.

A research report released by the Pakistan Institute of International Relations and Media revealed that between 2015 and 2025, Pakistani public favorability toward China increased significantly. The survey indicates that tangible achievements related to CPEC are the primary factor driving this rise in favorability. Respondents emphasized that improvements in the business environment, enhanced security conditions, and increased social interaction between Chinese and Pakistani workers are the main driving factors; cultural exchanges and daily work cooperation were cited as key elements in fostering trust and making the corridor a people-centered initiative. The report's authors noted that the effectiveness of project implementation and the tangible outcomes delivered are the most decisive drivers of public opinion, while media coverage and people-to-people exchanges serve to reinforce this trend [3].

This finding reveals an important communication theory proposition: the positive image of the CPEC among the Pakistani public is not primarily shaped by media propaganda, but rather grounded in the "tangible outcomes" of the project itself. Tangible changes—such as improved road connectivity, stable power supply, and increased employment opportunities—have become the most solid foundation for the public to form positive attitudes. At the same time, the trend toward learning Chinese has shifted from "cultural curiosity" to strategic economic and educational needs within the context of the CPEC; Pakistani students and professionals increasingly view proficiency in Chinese as a tool for career development, academic mobility, and cross-border cooperation [3].

From the perspective of digital media, communication cooperation between China and Pakistan is entering a new phase. Digital media offers journalists, scholars, content creators, and ordinary citizens the opportunity to participate in shaping the understanding of bilateral relations. A more people-centered, technology-driven communication ecosystem provides greater possibilities for the two countries to strengthen cooperation and challenge Western misconceptions about their relationship. For example, Pakistani journalists who have studied in China or visited CPEC projects can share their experiences in local languages, while Chinese content creators can introduce the cultural richness and diversity of Pakistani cities and villages to their audiences. These personalized exchanges are more effective at countering misinformation than traditional statements or reports, as audiences are more inclined to trust firsthand experiences.

IV. Analysis of the Phenomenon of Multiple "Cultural Discounts" in Cross-Cultural Communication Regarding CPEC

The concept of "cultural discount" was proposed by Hoskins and Milus in 1988. It refers to the phenomenon in which a product rooted in one culture, upon entering the market of another culture, experiences reduced communication effectiveness and acceptance due to language barriers, differences in cultural backgrounds and aesthetic expectations, and conflicts in values [4].

In the communication practices surrounding the CPEC, the mechanism of cultural discount manifests as follows: Chinese communicators encode the CPEC based on their own cultural cognitive frameworks, emphasizing discourses such as the "Belt and Road," "people-to-people bonds," and "shared development"; Pakistani audiences, however, decode the information based on their own cultural backgrounds, historical memories, and interests, and their interpretations may deviate from the encoders' expectations. This asymmetry between decoding and encoding constitutes the fundamental mechanism underlying cultural discount.

From a specific theoretical perspective, the analysis of cultural discount in CPEC communication can follow these steps: first, identify the cultural elements within the communication content and their meaning construction in the Chinese context; second, analyze the acceptability and comprehensibility of these elements within the Pakistani cultural system; third, examine the audience's decoding strategies and the factors influencing them; finally, assess the actual impact of cultural discount on communication effectiveness, with the aim of maximizing the effectiveness of CPEC communication.

1. Linguistic Discount: Loss of Meaning in Translation and Translation

The linguistic differences between China and Pakistan are the most direct source of cultural discount in cross-cultural communication regarding the CPEC. Pakistan's official languages are Urdu and English, with English primarily used in government, legal affairs, higher education, and mainstream elite media, while Urdu serves as the everyday language of the broader population. China's primary languages for communication with Pakistan are English and Chinese, with the latter having undergone a shift in Pakistan from a subject of "cultural curiosity" to a "strategic economic and educational necessity."

English, as the primary intermediary language for media between China and Pakistan, inherently creates a first layer of "discount." The vast majority of CPEC-related policy documents, news reports, and academic studies are published in English, meaning that information must pass through this "intermediary" to circulate among non-English-speaking audiences in both countries. However, English is not universally spoken in Pakistan, making it difficult for the general public to access detailed information about the CPEC through English-language media. Even for an elite audience with English proficiency, English—as a non-native language—poses potential losses in semantic understanding. Certain terms that carry specific political and cultural connotations in the Chinese context (such as "community with a shared future," "hard connectivity," and "soft connectivity") often fail to accurately convey their original layers of meaning when translated into English.

A more significant issue is that a vast amount of CPEC-related information circulates only between English and Chinese, rarely reaching Urdu-speaking audiences. Although the prevalence of Chinese in Pakistan has increased, it is

still a long way from becoming an effective medium of communication. This means that CPEC communication faces a "double discount" at the linguistic level: a first discount from Chinese to English, and a second discount from English to Urdu, with each translation accompanied by a loss and distortion of meaning.

2. Value Discount: Misalignment of Narrative Logic and Cognitive Frameworks

While language discounts are relatively overt within cultural discounts, value discounts are deeper and more subtle. Value discounts stem from fundamental differences between China and Pakistan in narrative logic, rhetorical conventions, and cognitive frameworks.

Chinese media coverage of the CPEC centers on "development achievements" and "strategic cooperation," often employing macro-narratives and policy-oriented discourse. This narrative style aligns closely with the domestic communication context in China, where the discourse system of official media enjoys high credibility and acceptance, and "grand narratives" are regarded as legitimate and effective means of communication. However, when this narrative style is applied to the Pakistani context, the situation differs. Pakistan's media landscape is deeply influenced by the West, and audiences are accustomed to diverse information sources and a more critical reporting style.

Another important dimension of the values gap lies in differences in cognitive frameworks. In China's official narrative, the CPEC is positioned as the flagship project of the "Belt and Road Initiative" and a key vehicle for the "China-Pakistan Community of Shared Future," with significance carrying profound political and strategic implications. However, for ordinary Pakistanis, the significance of CPEC is more evident at the level of daily life—whether roads are passable, electricity is reliable, and employment opportunities are increasing. When Chinese media narratives overemphasize strategic significance at the macro level, the gap between these narratives and the public's micro-level experiences creates a cognitive disconnect, which in turn leads to a loss of meaning.

3. Political Discount: Institutional Differences and Misalignment in Perceptions of Power

In addition to the aforementioned linguistic and value differences, the disparities in political systems and development paths between China and Pakistan have also led to a deeper level of political discount.

From an ideological perspective, in the international public sphere, some Western media outlets, based on ideological assumptions, interpret CPEC as "Chinese expansion," "geostrategy," or a "debt trap." This biased framing has led the Pakistani public to question the CPEC. Research by Cheng Manli's team found that local Pakistani citizens are concerned about issues of benefit distribution in CPEC construction; if these issues are not properly addressed, they can easily lead to misunderstandings and mistrust. Such ideological bias has resulted in a misalignment in the two sides' understanding of the nature and significance of the CPEC [5].

From the perspective of power perceptions, Chinese communications often portray the CPEC as a cooperative achievement resulting from equal consultation and mutual respect between the two countries. However, in the perception of certain groups in Pakistan, China-Pakistan relations have long been characterized by a power asymmetry between a "great power" and a "small country." This historical memory causes some audiences to doubt the equality of the CPEC, raising concerns that the project might undermine national sovereignty or economic autonomy. This disparity in perceptions of power needs to be gradually resolved through specific institutional arrangements and efforts to enhance transparency.

Cultural discount is most prominently manifested in CPEC communication as a disconnect between the government's macro-level narrative and the audience's micro-level experiences. Chinese communication positions CPEC within the grand framework of the "Belt and Road Initiative," requiring its significance and benefits to be understood from a longer-term developmental perspective. In contrast, Pakistani audiences' experiences are often localized, with a greater focus on short-term, tangible benefits in their own regions—such as roads, electricity, and employment. When grand promises of value fail to materialize in these micro-level experiences, the effectiveness of CPEC's communication will be significantly diminished.

V. "Meaning Negotiation" Among Pakistani Audiences Regarding CPEC Issues

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory provides a powerful theoretical tool for understanding the communicative effects of CPEC in Pakistan: communication is not a one-way transmission of information, but rather an interactive process of encoding and decoding, in which audiences adopt one of three decoding stances—preferential, negotiated, or oppositional. While this theory is well-suited to explaining the diverse perceptions of Pakistani audiences, it has certain limitations: it originated in the context of Western cultural studies and requires localization when applied to South Asian societies; furthermore, Hall's classification of decoding types is somewhat static, whereas in reality, audience attitudes undergo dynamic changes in response to events and the informational environment, necessitating interpretation within specific social contexts.

Furthermore, it should be noted that when terms such as "Pakistani audience" and "Pakistani social groups" are used in the following text, it is implied that significant regional, linguistic, socioeconomic, political, and generational differences exist within Pakistan. Perceptions of the CPEC vary markedly among different groups; there is no single, homogeneous "average Pakistani." Each decoding mode corresponds to a specific group and cannot be directly generalized to represent the entire Pakistani society.

1. Pakistani Audiences Exist in an Interwoven Field of Multiple Discourses

To examine the practice of meaning negotiation among Pakistani audiences, one must first understand the information environment in which they operate. Pakistani audiences are not exposed to a single information source but exist within

an interwoven field of multiple discourses.
First, there is the "development narrative" from Chinese state-run media. Chinese media outlets such as CGTN, Xinhua News Agency, and China Daily continuously convey positive information about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) to Pakistani audiences, with economic cooperation, infrastructure development, and bilateral friendship as central themes. Chinese media has had a positive influence on Pakistani audiences, particularly in the realm of economic cooperation, where it has established an economic framework for news reporting. Set against the grand backdrop of the "Belt and Road" Initiative and the CPEC, this economic framework not only highlights economic exchanges between China and Pakistan but also provides Pakistani domestic economic organizations with detailed information on the Chinese economy [6]. However, the reach and influence of Chinese media in Pakistan remain limited, and its "official tone" causes some audiences to view its information with skepticism.
Second, reports from Pakistan's domestic media. Pakistan's mainstream media, including Dawn, The Nation, and The Express Tribune, generally take a positive stance toward CPEC in their coverage, but their reporting framework places greater emphasis on a domestic Pakistani perspective. A study on Pakistani media narratives found that these outlets maintain a cautious stance when addressing serious issues; their reporting framework generally prioritizes local perspectives, emphasizes economic and social development, and focuses on internal and regional security. Reports by Pakistani media often resonate more closely with the concerns of the Pakistani public than those of Chinese state media, thereby commanding greater appeal and credibility [6].
Third, skeptical discourse from Western and Indian media. Although the Pakistani public has limited trust in Western and Indian media, their narratives still enter Pakistan's information environment through international communication channels. In particular, skeptical reports on issues such as "debt traps," "environmental destruction," and "sovereignty issues" exert a certain influence among Pakistan's elite and on social media platforms [7].
Fourth, diverse voices on social media. Compared to traditional media, social media provides ordinary citizens with channels to express their opinions, resulting in a more diverse range of voices regarding the CPEC. Research indicates that Pakistan's English-language media generally takes a pro-CPEC stance, reinforcing the government's narrative while minimizing critical voices, whereas social media amplifies both enthusiasm and skepticism. This means that social media serves not only as an amplifier of positive CPEC messages but also as a hub for skeptical voices. This diverse and complex information environment dictates that the audience's "negotiation of meaning" inevitably involves weighing and choosing among multiple discourses.
2. Three Practical Pathways of Decoding Among Pakistani Audiences
Within the aforementioned multifaceted information environment, the practices of meaning negotiation among Pakistani audiences also exhibit the three categories of decoding pathways described by Hall.
The first is preferential decoding, which involves fully accepting the dominant meaning presented in the narratives of Chinese media or the Pakistani government. This decoding pathway is most commonly observed among groups that directly benefit from CPEC projects. An empirical study based on 600 questionnaires from Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan region found that perceived economic and social benefits had a positive impact on residents' attitudes toward CPEC, with local communities generally expressing strong support for CPEC's development [8]. Another study of 771 respondents nationwide in Pakistan further confirmed that there is a positive correlation between CPEC-related infrastructure development and perceptions of community development, overall community attitudes, and quality of life; positive overall community attitudes strongly predict increased support for the CPEC [9]. These findings indicate that groups who perceive tangible benefits from the CPEC are more inclined to adopt a preference-based decoding approach and accept the positive framing of the CPEC.
The second category is the negotiated decoding, characterized by selective acceptance and partial endorsement, which is the most prevalent form of decoding among Pakistani audiences. A typical manifestation of this approach is acknowledging the economic benefits and infrastructure achievements brought by the CPEC while maintaining a cautious stance toward China's political motives, environmental issues, or debt risks. This is highly consistent with the findings of Abbasi et al. (2025), in which 75% of respondents held a positive attitude toward Chinese investment, while 35% expressed skepticism toward the content of Chinese media reports. Negotiated decoding reflects the balance Pakistani audiences strike between "developmental interests" and "sovereignty concerns," as well as the tension between "factual judgments" and "trust in discourse" [9].
However, negotiated decoding does not imply a failure of communication; Hall points out that it is the most common form of decoding. Audiences exercise subjective agency in the process of decoding information; even if they receive international communication content, they do not necessarily interpret it according to the communicator's intentions. In other words, reception does not necessarily equate to acceptance [10]. With regard to CPEC communication, the prevalence of negotiated decoding further reminds communicators that audiences do not simply "accept" or "reject" messages; rather, they continuously assess and weigh information to construct their own meanings, understand the content, and subsequently determine their next course of action.
The third category is adversarial decoding, which involves rejecting the dominant meaning imposed by the encoder. This phenomenon is commonly observed among Pakistani elites who are heavily influenced by Western media or Indian public opinion, as well as among marginalized communities adversely affected by the construction of the corridor. In some regions of Pakistan, environmental issues and a lack of opportunities to participate in decision-making have sparked discontent among certain residents. One study noted that while respondents generally believed

the CPEC had driven economic growth and connectivity, it also revealed some negative effects, including environmental degradation, cultural loss, and a lack of participation in decision-making processes. In regions such as Gwadar, local residents also differ in their perceptions of the promised benefits of the CPEC. Reports indicate that while the government claims the CPEC has created 2,000 local jobs, it remains unclear whether "local" refers to Baloch residents or workers from other provinces. These factors have triggered adversarial decoding among certain groups.

3. The Tension Between "Favorability" and "Trust" in the Negotiation of Meaning

Pakistani audiences' "favorability" toward China and their "trust" in Chinese media are not concepts on the same level. Rising favorability stems primarily from the "visible results" and "everyday experiences" of CPEC projects—that is, factual changes such as unobstructed roads, stable power supply, and increased employment opportunities have shaped the public's positive attitudes. As pointed out in the study by Siddique and Khan (2025), the effectiveness of project implementation and the delivery of tangible results are the most decisive drivers of public opinion. In other words, the rise in favorability is the result of "facts," not the outcome of "discursive" persuasion [11].

In contrast, limited levels of trust point to tensions at the "level of meaning." Thirty-five percent of respondents expressed skepticism toward the content of Chinese media reports, indicating that a significant proportion of the Pakistani audience adopts a negotiated or even confrontational stance when decoding information disseminated by Chinese media. This skepticism does not necessarily imply rejection of China or the CPEC; rather, it reflects the audience's independent judgment of the information source—that is, while they acknowledge the tangible benefits brought by the CPEC, they do not unconditionally accept all the meanings conveyed by Chinese media.

In cross-cultural communication, there is a tension between "project effectiveness" and "communicative discourse." Even if the project itself has achieved significant positive results, the communicative discourse does not necessarily automatically gain the audience's trust. The audience's negotiation of meaning is an independent process influenced by various factors, including cultural background, the information environment, and the credibility of the information source. Whether the meaning encoded by the communicator—after undergoing the erosion of "cultural discount"—is ultimately accepted by the audience depends on how the audience compares and integrates the communicative discourse with their own factual experiences during the negotiation process.

Therefore, cross-cultural communication regarding the CPEC cannot rely solely on the "natural voice" of the project's outcomes; it also requires targeted adjustments at the level of the communicative discourse. When the communicative discourse effectively resonates with the audience's everyday experiences, the negotiation of meaning is more likely to lead to preferential decoding; conversely, when there is a disconnect between the communicative discourse and the audience's experiences, the negotiation of meaning is more likely to lead to negotiated or confrontational decoding.

VI. Reflections on Enhancing the Effectiveness of International Communication on CPEC Issues

1. Bridging the Gap Between Official Narratives and Grassroots Discourse

The primary challenge currently facing cross-cultural communication regarding the CPEC is the gap between official narratives and grassroots discourse. Chinese state media's coverage of the CPEC primarily focuses on macro-level policy narratives, emphasizing its strategic significance and the high level of bilateral cooperation; however, this narrative style is disconnected from the everyday lived experiences of ordinary Pakistani citizens. A possible path to bridging this gap is to focus on the small to achieve the big—by telling compelling stories. This involves going deep into grassroots communities and frontline settings, focusing on uncovering vivid material and interviewing key figures. By drawing on the inspiring stories emerging from CPEC project construction, we can enhance the narrative quality and readability of reports, thereby increasing their news value. For example, we could tell the story of a remote village in Sindh Province where a Chinese-funded solar streetlight project has enabled local residents to walk home without having to grope in the dark; or on the coast of Gwadar, where the blades of a Sino-Pakistani joint-venture wind farm turn in the wind, and the training and opportunities provided by Chinese companies have enabled countless talented individuals to realize their life dreams… One vivid and moving story after another is becoming the most heartwarming footnote to the Corridor. Only by truly seeing the big picture through the small details—and focusing more reporting and camera lenses on the stories of ordinary people—can the content of cross-cultural communication become more relevant and influential [12].

2. Emphasizing the Development of Cross-Cultural Communication Skills

The existence of "cultural discount" reminds us that cross-cultural communication cannot rely solely on the accuracy of language translation; it also requires cultivating communication professionals with cross-cultural understanding. On the one hand, we need to develop cross-cultural communication professionals who are familiar with both Chinese culture and the Pakistani context. Pakistani journalists who have studied in China or visited CPEC projects can share their experiences in the local language, while Chinese content creators can introduce the cultural richness and diversity of Pakistani cities and villages to Chinese audiences. Such personalized exchanges are often more effective in countering misinformation than official statements or reports, as audiences tend to trust firsthand experiences more. On the other hand, Chinese media must adapt to local conditions, formulating strategies based on the characteristics of the local media environment and the genuine needs of the local audience. In the English-language sphere, they should increase exchanges and cooperation with local Pakistani English-language media to highlight the strategic achievements resulting from high-level exchanges and cooperation between China and Pakistan; in the Urdu-language

sphere, Chinese media should give greater consideration to the popular, everyday, and lifestyle-oriented content preferred by Pakistani audiences—such as creating short videos and developing interactive content centered on tourism, art, music, and sports—thereby fostering people-to-people exchanges between the two nations and laying a deeper emotional foundation for CPEC communication [13].

3. Utilizing Digital Media to Break Down Stereotypes

As the CPEC enters its 2.0 phase, the role of digital media in cross-cultural communication warrants continued attention. Digital media offers the potential to break down stereotypes surrounding China and the CPEC, particularly those circulating in international circles. Digital media provides a technological platform, and various new media formats—such as short videos, podcasts, and interactive infographics—can compensate for the rigid narratives and lack of interactivity inherent in traditional media. Joint multimedia projects can amplify the voices of people from Gwadar, Kashgar, Gilgit, Shanghai, Lahore, Islamabad, and Beijing, allowing global audiences to witness the tangible social development that CPEC has spurred in local communities. At the same time, digital media provides a platform for disseminating "visible achievements" and "credible narratives." As mentioned above, the rise in Pakistanis' favorable views toward China stems primarily from the visible achievements of CPEC projects, rather than media propaganda. This implies that communication narratives must resonate with these tangible outcomes. By sharing authentic stories of project beneficiaries and showcasing the practical changes corridor construction has brought to ordinary people on social media platforms frequently used by Pakistani audiences—such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok—and ensuring that narratives are corroborated by facts, the credibility of the communication can be significantly enhanced.

4. Treating Meaning Negotiation as a New Pathway to "Bonds of Hearts and Minds"

Achieving "bonds of hearts and minds" cannot rely solely on one-way information dissemination; rather, it requires a deeper understanding and respect for the audience's process of meaning negotiation. First and foremost, the concept of "meaning negotiation" must be incorporated into the strategic design of "bonds of hearts and minds." Communicators must recognize that audiences are not passive receptacles of information, but active producers of meaning. The traditional "one-way output" model should be transformed into a "two-way dialogue." Traditional models of external communication tend to focus on "informing," but in cross-cultural contexts, this approach often yields limited results. More importantly, we must respect the audience's role as active participants in the negotiation of meaning and create space for diverse voices to be heard in the communication process. The existence of adversarial decoding does not necessarily signify a failure of communication; however, if communicators attempt to suppress dissenting voices, they may inadvertently reinforce the tendency toward adversarial decoding. Conversely, acknowledging differences, fostering open dialogue, and aiming for shared meaning rather than the imposition of meaning are more likely to promote understanding and trust in the long term.

Conclusion

As a flagship project of China's "Belt and Road" initiative, the evolution of public opinion surrounding the CPEC reflects the complex challenges of cross-cultural communication. This paper employs theories such as cultural discounting, encoding and decoding, and framing to examine the trajectory of public opinion development over more than a decade. The study finds that the CPEC public opinion arena is a dynamic network formed by the interaction of multiple forces. It has undergone three stages—narrative competition, public opinion polarization, and narrative reshaping—with its evolution influenced by the combined effects of geopolitical rivalry, party politics, international media narratives, and the actual outcomes of project implementation; Cross-cultural communication regarding the CPEC involves three types of cultural discount: linguistic, value-based, and political. Within Pakistani society, different groups—based on divergent interests and regional backgrounds—engage in diverse decoding practices, including preferential, negotiated, and confrontational approaches; meaning negotiation serves as the key mechanism for understanding communication outcomes.

This study constructs a framework for cross-cultural analysis of public opinion applicable to "Belt and Road" international cooperation projects, which can serve as a reference for future research on communication strategies. At the same time, this study has several limitations: First, the study relies entirely on secondary public literature and reports, without conducting primary questionnaire surveys or coding original media texts; thus, the empirical material is constrained by existing research findings. Second, the analysis is primarily grounded in a communication perspective, with limited depth in exploring domestic local politics and ethnic conflicts in Pakistan; Third, this study represents a preliminary analysis, and public opinion trends will continue to evolve as the project progresses and geopolitical events unfold. Future research could expand the use of primary empirical data, conduct multi-perspective comparative analyses, and implement long-term tracking studies.

In the era of CPEC 2.0, geopolitical dynamics and the media environment are constantly changing. While China and Pakistan advance the high-quality development of the project, they must continue to address cross-cultural cognitive differences. The implementation of the CPEC provides a practical case study for economic cooperation and mutual learning among civilizations in developing countries, and demonstrates a promising practical direction and development potential for the Global South as it explores autonomous development paths and deepens exchanges and mutual learning among diverse civilizations.

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