

Evaluative Language in Economic Reports of the Belt and Road Initiative: A Corpus-Based Analysis of Xinhua

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of evaluative language in English-language economic reports on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) published by Xinhua News Agency between 2015 and 2024. Drawing on a 95,000-word corpus of 120 articles, the research applies Appraisal Theory to identify patterns in how state-sponsored discourse constructs China's global economic identity. The analysis reveals a systematic deployment of positive appraisal across Judgment and Appreciation categories, often intensified through Graduation and supplemented by externally validated voices. These patterns strategically position China as a visionary, trustworthy development leader while framing partner countries as aligned and grateful participants. Evaluation, in this context, is not merely descriptive but functions as a rhetorical device for legitimizing China's global role, projecting ideological coherence, and naturalizing asymmetrical development relations. The findings call for a critical reassessment of how linguistic repetition, lexical regularity, and discursive framing in state media contribute to the construction of geopolitical narratives in economic journalism.

Keywords: evaluative language, Belt and Road Initiative, Appraisal Theory, Xinhua News Agency, economic discourse, corpus linguistics

1. Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), since its launch in 2013, has developed not only as a physical infrastructure and investment project but also as a sustained communicative endeavor, driven by language that frames China's economic presence as constructive, inclusive, and visionary. The public discourse surrounding the BRI—especially as articulated through state-sponsored outlets such as Xinhua News Agency—functions as a strategic semantic system that embeds China's political-economic

philosophy in a globally palatable narrative. It represents a discursive reconfiguration of globalization through Chinese developmental logic.

Within this discourse, economic reporting does not merely reflect material activity but constructs legitimacy. This is particularly visible in the lexico-semantic features of Xinhua's BRI coverage, where terms like *"high-quality development,"* *"win-win cooperation,"* and *"mutual benefit"* recur with marked frequency. Preliminary corpus scans indicate that phrases

such as *“shared prosperity”* (n=22) and *“sustainable growth”* (n=17) are deployed consistently across texts to establish an evaluative baseline that presents China’s role in a positive light. These lexical bundles are not only evaluative—they are strategic: they encode a relational economic stance, where China’s agency is aligned with global common good, not unilateral expansion.

This strategic framing often draws on what Fairclough (2003) terms “imaginaries”—representations of possible futures that legitimize present action. In the context of the BRI, economic discourse is saturated with imaginaries of connectivity, modernization, and regional stability. These are realized textually through progressive aspect structures (*“is building,” “has been advancing”*), intensification adverbs (*“significantly improved,” “deeply integrated”*), and relational processes (*“is positioned as a hub,” “has become a key partner”*). Such constructions subtly signal China’s developmental authority without overtly declaring it.

Additionally, the BRI’s economic discourse frequently blends technical economic terms (*“logistics corridors,” “digital infrastructure,” “capacity cooperation”*) with moralizing or human-centered modifiers (*“people-centered,” “inclusive,” “harmonious”*). This linguistic coupling generates a hybrid register in which state-led economic policy appears socially accountable and globally inclusive. For example, in one report from 2021, Xinhua described a railway project in East Africa as *“bringing tangible development to local livelihoods while embodying China’s commitment to South-South cooperation.”* Here, infrastructural output is fused with ideological investment.

Therefore, economic discourse in the BRI context must be understood not merely as the transmission of economic facts, but as the production of a narrative ecosystem, where evaluation, intention, and identity converge. The deployment of positive attitudinal lexis, moralized growth rhetoric, and metaphors of mutuality allows China to position itself as a global economic partner of trust and vision. This foregrounds the need for a corpus-based appraisal of how such evaluative framing operates linguistically—and ideologically—through systematic media reportage.

2. Media Authority and National Projection Through Economic Narratives

In the discursive machinery of the Belt and Road Initiative, Xinhua News Agency serves not merely as a journalistic institution, but as a strategic actor embedded in the state’s apparatus of international projection. Its economic reports function as curated texts—where the selection of topics, evaluative framing, and thematic coherence align with the national imperative to craft China’s global identity as a responsible economic leader and development partner. In this sense, Xinhua operates as a rhetorical platform for soft power transmission, underpinned by the authority of institutional voice.

The linguistic authority of Xinhua is grounded in its capacity to blend semantic neutrality with ideological alignment. On the surface, BRI-related economic reports present as informational and fact-driven; however, corpus evidence reveals a patterned reliance on positive, future-oriented evaluative language that subtly affirms the legitimacy of China’s actions. Terms such as *“reliable partner,” “trusted cooperation,” “inclusive growth,”* and *“shared destiny”* recur across multiple texts, functioning as strategic stance markers—positioning China within a global framework of mutual development, not unilateral ambition.

Quantitative corpus profiling indicates that over 70% of the headlines in the BRI economy subcorpus include positively loaded appraisal lexis. Examples include:

- *“China, Kenya deepen pragmatic BRI cooperation for shared future”*
- *“BRI fosters sustainable development and inclusive economic resilience”*
- *“China’s high-speed rail expertise benefits Southeast Asia’s connectivity goals”*

These headlines construct a narrative arc in which China is framed as both initiator and enabler of global economic betterment. The authority here is not declarative, but discursively constructed through recurrent positivity, consistency of tone, and thematically disciplined messaging.

Moreover, the use of the English language is central to this process of projection. By producing these narratives in English, Xinhua extends its evaluative discourse beyond domestic legitimacy toward transnational

symbolic influence. The stylized English used in BRI economic reports—characterized by formal register, abstract nouns (e.g., *connectivity*, *synergy*, *transformation*), and nominalizations—mirrors global policy rhetoric, allowing China’s developmental discourse to blend into existing neoliberal development grammars while embedding alternative Chinese priorities.

This mode of discursive projection also draws upon strategic silences and lexical foregrounding. For instance, references to debt risks, labor controversies, or ecological concerns are typically marginalized, while success stories—port completion, job creation, and export increase—are foregrounded. This selective visibility is a rhetorical resource that consolidates Xinhua’s institutional ethos while ensuring alignment with broader state narratives of peaceful rise, stability, and mutual benefit.

In sum, the authority of Xinhua in Belt and Road economic reporting lies not in overt persuasion but in semantic orchestration. Through consistency of tone, frequency of positive evaluation, and alignment with development imaginaries, Xinhua constructs an authoritative narrative space where China’s economic engagement is naturalized as beneficial, strategic, and unproblematic. This narrative space forms the rhetorical ground on which the evaluation of China’s global economic role is continually performed and reaffirmed.

3. Corpus Design and Textual Scope of Economic Reporting

To investigate the evaluative discourse embedded in Xinhua’s economic coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a purpose-built corpus was compiled, drawing exclusively from English-language reports published by Xinhua News Agency between January 2015 and March 2024. The design of this corpus reflects both thematic precision and representational breadth, aligning with the study’s aim to explore how economic narratives are semantically constructed in support of China’s global strategy.

A total of 120 articles were selected from Xinhua’s official international-facing website (www.news.cn), filtered by the keywords “*Belt and Road*” and “*economy*,” in combination with terms such as “*infrastructure*,” “*cooperation*,” “*development*,” and “*investment*.” All articles fall within either the “*Economy*,” “*BRI*,” or

“*Business*” sections and focus primarily on economic cooperation, infrastructure outcomes, or financial agreements tied to the BRI framework.

The corpus contains approximately 95,000 words, with individual articles ranging from 500 to 1,200 words. The data was cleaned, formatted into plain text, and annotated with metadata including:

- Date of publication
- Partner country/region featured
- Economic domain (e.g., transport, digital infrastructure, energy, trade)
- Presence of official voices (e.g., Chinese government, foreign officials, enterprises)

Geographically, the texts cover 17 countries, with recurrent representation from:

- Pakistan (n=16)
- Kenya (n=11)
- Serbia (n=8)
- Egypt (n=7)
- Indonesia (n=7)

This distribution reflects the prioritization of strategic economic corridors and regional anchor states in BRI discourse. Chronologically, the corpus captures key phases in the BRI’s development:

- 2015–2017: Emphasis on “early harvest” projects, such as railway launches and port upgrades.
- 2018–2020: Shift toward “high-quality development” and sustainability discourse.
- 2021–2024: Post-pandemic economic recovery narratives and digital Silk Road expansion.

Preliminary text profiling using AntConc and UAM CorpusTool revealed high frequency of positive lexical clusters associated with appraisal. The most prominent evaluative phrases are shown below:

Table 1. Frequency of Recurrent Evaluative Phrases in the Corpus

| Evaluative Phrase | Frequency (n) |
|---------------------|---------------|
| win-win cooperation | 41 |
| shared future | 33 |

| | |
|-------------------------|----|
| sustainable development | 28 |
| people-centered growth | 24 |
| pragmatic partnership | 17 |

These clusters signal the presence of a regularized evaluative lexicon in which development is framed through affectively and morally charged economic descriptors. In preparation for appraisal analysis, clause-level segmentation and keyword-in-context (KWIC) concordance were performed to isolate evaluative units, particularly those involving *Judgment*, *Appreciation*, and *Graduation* systems as theorized in the Appraisal framework.

Importantly, the English-language nature of the corpus allows for observation of how China's domestic economic discourse is translated and recalibrated for global audiences. This linguistic layer—not merely a translation of facts, but a semantic adaptation—provides a valuable site for analyzing the interplay between evaluation, media authority, and discursive strategy in state-sponsored economic communication.

4. Analytical Lens: Appraisal Theory and Evaluation Taxonomy

To decode the evaluative mechanisms underlying Xinhua's economic reporting on the Belt and Road Initiative, this study adopts Appraisal Theory as its principal analytical lens. Situated within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Appraisal Theory offers a structured means of identifying how language encodes stance, alignment, and value positioning—all essential in the study of state-mediated economic discourse.

Appraisal is composed of three interrelated systems:

Attitude: the expression of feelings, judgments of behavior, and valuations of phenomena; subdivided into:

- *Affect* (emotions)
- *Judgment* (ethics and behavior)
- *Appreciation* (aesthetic or value-based assessment)

Engagement: the negotiation of dialogic space through monoglossic (assertive) or heteroglossic (acknowledging alternative voices) positioning.

Graduation: the scaling of intensity or degree—either by force (e.g., *significantly*, *rapidly*) or focus (e.g., *true*, *real*), to amplify or downplay

evaluative meanings.

In the economic corpus under study, evaluative statements tend to cluster heavily in *Judgment* and *Appreciation*. For instance, recurrent phrases such as “*reliable partner*,” “*trusted cooperation*,” and “*high-standard delivery*” align with positive *Judgment* (tenacity, propriety), whereas “*landmark project*,” “*sustainable model*,” or “*modern logistics corridor*” reflect positive *Appreciation* of outcomes and processes.

Additionally, *Graduation* plays a critical role in strengthening these appraisals. Phrases such as “*deeply integrated*,” “*greatly improved*,” “*highly beneficial*” suggest a consistent intensification of China's contribution, while comparative markers like “*more resilient*,” “*most efficient*,” “*leading role*” introduce hierarchy into partnership narratives.

The presence of *Engagement* is more subtle but equally strategic. While the texts are largely monoglossic, using assertive language without acknowledging counterpoints, occasional references to foreign official voices (“*local officials praised the project*”) or institutions (“*the World Bank recognized...*”) serve to externalize validation, thereby strengthening the credibility of China's actions without internalizing dialogic challenge.

To operationalize these concepts in analysis, this study annotated clauses at the micro-level, focusing on three main patterns:

- 1) Predicative structures (e.g., *X is a trusted partner*) – signaling *Judgment*
- 2) Nominalized appraisals (e.g., *a model of cooperation*) – contributing *Appreciation*
- 3) Modifier structures (e.g., *a highly successful corridor*) – revealing *Graduation*

For example, in the sentence:

“*The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway stands as a model of efficiency and mutual trust,*”

the appraisal analysis identifies:

- “*model of efficiency*” → *Appreciation: Valuation*
- “*mutual trust*” → *Judgment: Social Esteem*
- “*stands as*” → relational process reinforcing status claim

These patterned linguistic realizations allow us to trace how semantic evaluation becomes ideological alignment, guiding readers toward

perceiving China's economic role as not only functional but normatively superior.

In the following section, we apply this taxonomy to a selection of corpus excerpts, examining how evaluative strategies are deployed consistently across time, region, and economic subdomain.

5. Evaluative Patterns and Strategic Alignments in Xinhua's Reporting

The corpus analysis reveals a systematic deployment of evaluative language in Xinhua's economic coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative. These evaluations function not only to describe material developments but to strategically align China's economic activity with global ideals such as reliability, sustainability, inclusivity, and shared growth. The patterns follow consistent discursive logics that serve state-oriented legitimation goals.

Attitude Patterns: Favorable Judgment and Appreciation

A dominant evaluative mode in the corpus is Judgment, especially in the form of social esteem (e.g., tenacity, capacity, propriety) assigned to Chinese institutions or bilateral partnerships. For instance:

"China has remained a reliable partner throughout construction, despite the pandemic."

"The Chinese-financed project reflects high levels of transparency and efficiency."

Here, the values of resilience, reliability, and efficiency are repeatedly foregrounded, positioning China as a morally upright and technically competent actor. Similarly, Appreciation is used to construct positive assessments of infrastructure output:

"The port has become a landmark for modern logistics and regional transformation."

"A model of green development, the railway project meets international environmental standards."

Such statements embed not only aesthetic or functional value but align economic activity with sustainability and modernization discourses, crucial for China's self-representation as a 21st-century economic leader.

Graduation and Lexical Intensification

These positive judgments and appreciations are often scaled through Graduation, which amplifies the force or precision of the evaluation. Intensifiers like *"highly," "deeply," "strongly,"*

"most important," "remarkable" appear frequently, raising the salience of the appraisal:

"The initiative has greatly accelerated local industrialization."

"This project serves as a key pillar in regional connectivity."

Such use of force not only emphasizes success but suppresses potential ambiguity or neutrality, nudging readers toward a singular interpretation of economic benefit.

Strategic Repetition and Collocational Regularity

Corpus-wide observation confirms that certain evaluative phrases recur with notable frequency, creating a discursive rhythm of positive reinforcement. These include:

- *"win-win cooperation"* (n=41)
- *"shared prosperity"* (n=22)
- *"mutual trust"* (n=18)
- *"green and sustainable"* (n=16)
- *"high-quality development"* (n=15)

The repetition of these tightly packed, ideologically loaded collocations ensures that evaluation is not isolated but habitual, woven into the reporting texture.

Voice and Engagement: Authoritative but Externally Validated

Though primarily monoglossic in tone, Xinhua's texts occasionally include external voices, particularly from foreign officials or multilateral bodies, to reinforce China's projected image:

"According to Kenya's Ministry of Transport, the rail project sets a new benchmark for African infrastructure."

"The World Bank praised the transparency of the financing model."

Such moves strategically outsource legitimacy, enhancing the credibility of China's economic narrative without undermining authorial control.

Evaluative Clusters and Semantic Framing

Finally, evaluative meanings are often clustered, forming semantic bundles that merge affective, ethical, and practical values. For example:

"A resilient, inclusive, and innovation-driven corridor that deepens cooperation and inspires regional transformation."

This multi-dimensionality of

appraisal—combining Judgment, Appreciation, and Graduation—allows economic discourse to do more than persuade; it narrates an economic vision rooted in harmony, leadership, and global benefit.

Taken together, these patterns confirm that evaluative language in Xinhua's BRI economic reporting is not incidental, but integral to strategic alignment—aligning domestic objectives with global discursive norms, and framing China's role as both economically transformative and morally commendable.

6. Discursive Positioning of China and Its Economic Allies

In Xinhua's economic coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative, the evaluative discourse extends beyond describing infrastructure or investment activity—it actively participates in constructing the discursive identities of both China and its partner nations. These identities are not symmetrical. China is consistently framed as a visionary, enabling force, while recipient countries are positioned as grateful beneficiaries or strategic collaborators. This asymmetry is linguistically maintained through differentiated patterns of appraisal, agency attribution, and role assignment.

China as Architect, Enabler, and Standard-Setter

The most frequent positioning of China in the corpus is that of a proactive and benevolent economic architect. China is almost always the agent of positive action, using verbs such as *launch*, *provide*, *construct*, *promote*, and *support* in subject position:

"China launched the program in response to regional development needs."

"Chinese companies have provided financing, technical expertise, and training."

This positioning is further reinforced through evaluative modifiers like *"visionary," "trusted," "high-quality,"* and *"long-term."* Even when actions are bilateral, China's role is discursively dominant—portrayed as the initiator, guide, or leader in shared development.

The repetition of phrases such as *"setting global benchmarks," "sharing development wisdom,"* and *"building a new model of cooperation"* indicates China's discursive elevation to a global normative standard-setter. This establishes it not merely as a powerful participant, but as a model for emulation, a subtle projection of soft

leadership.

Partner Countries as Receptive, Beneficiary, or Aspiring Actors

In contrast, partner countries are typically framed through appreciative and affective appraisals, often highlighting gratitude, benefit, or aspiration:

"The local government expressed appreciation for China's long-term support."

"The rail project has brought tangible improvements to people's lives."

"Pakistan sees the corridor as a catalyst for national renewal."

These nations are rarely presented as agents of initiative; instead, their identities are constructed relationally—as states that benefit from or align with China's plans. Their agency is often embedded within relational clauses or expressed through embedded quotations, such as:

"Kenya believes this partnership will open new doors for trade."

Even when host countries act, their actions are linguistically subordinated or framed within China's initiative—conveying a vertical logic of development assistance rather than horizontal partnership.

Alignment Through Shared Evaluation and Vocabulary

Despite asymmetry, there is a shared semantic space created through evaluation convergence. Partner countries are described using the same value-laden lexicon attributed to China—*"resilient," "future-oriented," "sustainable," "mutually beneficial."* This convergence produces a discursive coalition, one that linguistically aligns participants within the same developmental vision.

For instance:

"Egypt and China are working together to build a people-centered smart city."

"Indonesia has embraced China's concept of high-quality Belt and Road growth."

Such sentences suggest harmonization of developmental logics, whereby participation in the BRI entails linguistic—and by extension, ideological—alignment.

Ultimately, Xinhua's reports discursively position China as global benefactor, developmental guide, and ideological innovator,

while constructing its economic allies as eager, aligned, and grateful participants. This discursive structuring is not accidental—it reflects the strategic function of evaluation in naturalizing geopolitical asymmetry within a rhetorical frame of cooperation and shared destiny.

7. Toward a Critical Understanding of Evaluation in State Economic Media

The analysis of Xinhua's economic reporting on the Belt and Road Initiative reveals that evaluative language plays a central strategic function in the discursive consolidation of China's international economic identity. Rather than serving a merely descriptive purpose, evaluation in this context operates as a rhetorical resource for nation-branding, geopolitical alignment, and narrative control. It allows the Chinese state—through its media apparatus—to position itself and its global partnerships within a consistent semantic field of cooperation, sustainability, and visionary leadership.

This study has demonstrated that state media evaluation is neither incidental nor random. Through a careful corpus design and application of Appraisal Theory, we observed how Xinhua constructs a regularized evaluative grammar, where certain lexical patterns—*win-win*, *high-quality*, *people-centered*, *shared prosperity*—function as ideological shorthand. These repeated tokens neutralize contestation by naturalizing China's actions as both ethically grounded and globally beneficial. Simultaneously, partner countries are discursively shaped as aspirational and aligned, reinforcing a one-directional logic of development that is masked under the language of mutuality.

Crucially, this evaluation operates across levels: from clause-level intensification to macro-discursive identity positioning, from lexicon to collocation, from tone to voice. It highlights how economic discourse is never ideologically empty, particularly when issued by state institutions in a context of global ambition and soft power expansion.

This prompts broader questions about how language in state-aligned international communication functions:

- How is credibility established when evaluation is systematically positive?
- Where do silences—about risks,

criticisms, or local dissent—fit into the rhetorical ecology of development discourse?

- What are the implications when evaluation becomes routinized to the point of narrative saturation, where certain phrases substitute for actual argument?

Such questions open avenues for comparative research across state media systems (e.g., Russia Today, Voice of America), across domains (e.g., health, technology, climate), and across languages (how domestic Chinese discourse differs in tone or intensity from English-language projection).

In sum, this study argues that evaluative language in economic media is not an embellishment but a core instrument of strategic communication. In the case of Xinhua and the BRI, it reveals how ideology is enacted through appraisal, how cooperation is narrated through alignment, and how economic ambition is rendered palatable through positivity. A critical engagement with these mechanisms is necessary—not only to understand China's media discourse—but to grasp how contemporary economic narratives are linguistically engineered in the service of state power.

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