

Project Landscapes and Public Perceptions of Chinese Economic Engagement: A Comparative Analysis of Zimbabwe and Laos

Ning An

Guangdong Academy of Sciences

Ruipeng Wang

South China Normal University

Min Wang

wminmin@m.scnu.edu.cn

South China Normal University

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Abstract

How do host-country publics evaluate Chinese economic engagement across contrasting project landscapes? This article compares Zimbabwe and Laos, two landlocked developing countries with close political and economic ties to China but markedly different geographical forms of Chinese engagement. Zimbabwe is characterized by resource- and corporate-centered investment in mining and energy, whereas Laos is shaped more visibly by transport infrastructure, especially the China–Laos Railway. Drawing on questionnaire surveys in Zimbabwe ($n = 229$) and Laos ($n = 580$), supplemented by fieldwork materials, the study compares five dimensions of public attitudes: affective perception, sovereignty trust, institutional comparison, perceived individual well-being, and future cooperation willingness. Two-sample t-tests show that Lao respondents score significantly higher across all five dimensions, with the largest differences in sovereignty trust, institutional comparison, and future cooperation. Interpreting these differences through place-specific project contexts, the findings indicate that resource-intensive engagement is associated with lower sovereignty trust and weaker perceived household benefits, while infrastructure-led engagement corresponds with stronger institutional endorsement and future cooperation support. Yet in both settings, perceived individual benefit lags behind support for continued cooperation. The findings highlight the importance of place-sensitive policies that respond to geographically differentiated project forms, local development narratives, and lived experiences of benefit.

1 Introduction

Chinese economic engagement has become a prominent feature of development across the Global South. Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), foreign direct investment (FDI), and infrastructure financing, Chinese capital now reaches deeply into host societies via railways, mines, power plants, industrial parks, and public works. Yet a growing body of research suggests that this engagement is not simply a coherent strategy directed from Beijing, but rather a set of processes whose local meanings are shaped by implementation practices, institutional arrangements, and everyday interactions (Oliveira et al., 2020). Infrastructure studies, for instance, have shown that the political effects of Chinese projects are mediated by project-level implementation and local appropriation rather than reducible to macro-geopolitical intent (Oakes, 2021).

This complexity matters for how host-country publics evaluate Chinese economic engagement. Existing work indicates that attitudes do not improve linearly with investment scale. McCauley *et al.*'s study finds that proximity to operational Chinese FDI projects, on average, reduces support for a China model of development, while different project types generate distinct evaluations (McCauley et al., 2022). Wang et al. further show that optimistic expectations at project announcement can turn into disappointment and political blame if promised benefits fail to materialize (Wang et al., 2022). At the same time, ground-level research on Chinese-financed infrastructure shows that projects, once absorbed into local political economies, may be repurposed and have their 'Chineseness' diluted (Goodfellow and Huang, 2021). What remains less explored is how these localized dynamics translate into systematically different

public attitudes across countries. Survey-based studies have identified factors such as source-country image and project characteristics, but few have interpreted survey results back into specific patterns of project exposure and local social relations. Bulman *et al.* show that project features often outweigh the 'Chinese origin' label in shaping host-country preferences, a finding that calls for comparative work across distinct project contexts (Bulman *et al.*, 2025).

This article compares Zimbabwe and Laos. Both are landlocked developing countries with long-standing political and economic ties to China, and Chinese economic engagement is publicly visible in both contexts. However, the forms this engagement takes on the ground differ sharply. In Zimbabwe, Chinese engagement is especially visible in mining, energy and other resource-related sectors, sectors that often raise issues of land, livelihoods, labour conditions, corporate responsibility and revenue distribution (Sändig *et al.*, 2024). In Laos, Chinese economic engagement has entered public view most prominently through the China-Laos railway, a signature infrastructure project framed by the Lao state as a pathway from a landlocked to a land-linked position (Kuik and Rosli, 2023), even as such infrastructure cooperation has generated concerns over debt, labour politics and host-state agency (Chen, 2020; Sims, 2021). These contrasting project landscapes offer a useful comparative opportunity to ask: How do public attitudes toward Chinese economic engagement vary across contrasting project landscapes, and what place-specific mechanisms help explain these differences?

To answer this question, the article disaggregates public attitudes into five dimensions: affective perception of China as a partner; sovereignty trust and threat perception; institutional comparison and cultural identification; perceived individual well-being; and future cooperation willingness. The analysis draws on 229 valid surveys from Zimbabwe and 580 from Laos, using 1–5 Likert-scale items matched to each dimension. The article presents descriptive statistics and mean comparisons, then interprets cross-country differences with reference to fieldwork materials and existing studies—not to isolate a single explanatory variable, but to understand how respondents form their evaluations under different project regimes.

The results show that Laotian respondents score higher on all five dimensions, with statistically significant differences. The largest gaps appear in sovereignty trust, institutional comparison, and future cooperation willingness. Zimbabwean respondents show relatively low sovereignty trust and perceived individual benefit, suggesting reservations about whether Chinese investment respects national autonomy and materially improves household livelihoods. Laotian respondents, although showing high support in institutional comparison, future cooperation and affective perception, report comparatively lower perceived individual benefit—a reminder that high support for cooperation does not necessarily translate into widespread direct household gains.

The article makes three contributions. Theoretically, it combines the literatures on social license and localization into a five-dimensional framework for cross-national public attitude comparison. Empirically, it brings Zimbabwe and Laos into a single comparative design, addressing a gap in systematic comparisons of host-country public perceptions. Practically, it shows that social risks vary significantly

across project contexts, and that project communication and benefit-sharing mechanisms should be tailored to local experience rather than generic models.

2 Theoretical Framework: Social License, Localization and Project Landscapes

This article builds on two bodies of literature that are rarely brought into conversation. One examines the social conditions under which foreign investment gains and maintains local acceptance. The other traces how Chinese-financed projects are absorbed, repurposed, or resisted on the ground. Neither body of literature alone provides what this article needs: a comparative framework for understanding why publics in different host countries hold systematically different attitudes toward Chinese economic engagement. This article proposes a five-dimensional framework that draws from both traditions and is designed for cross-national survey comparison.

2.1 Social License and Place-Based Legitimacy

The concept of social license to operate (SLO) directs attention to dimensions of project legitimacy that legal approval may miss (Dare et al., 2014). Even with government permits, a project depends on ongoing local judgments of its credibility, fairness, and benefit distribution. Musiitwa's work on Chinese mining firms in Zambia shows that SLO is not a certificate but a relational arrangement built on community communication, transparency, cultural respect, and local economic contribution. In the Zambian Copperbelt, firms with state backing still have to negotiate with traditional authorities, residents and multiple local interests (Musiitwa, 2021). Large resource projects routinely generate disputes over land, livelihoods, compensation, pollution, labour conditions, and participation rights. Sändig *et al.*'s work finds that Chinese mining firms in Africa do make concessions when faced with sustained protest, state pressure, NGO involvement, and reputational risk, though their capacity to respond varies (Sändig et al., 2024).

This article takes from this literature a basic question: how do host populations judge the acceptability of Chinese economic involvement over time? Here, however, the analysis shifts the unit of analysis from a single firm or project to China's broader presence in a country. In the surveys analyzed here, respondents are not evaluating a particular mine or railway. They report their general impressions of China's role in construction, investment and cooperation in their country. Core elements of SLO, including trust, perceived benefit, legitimacy and continued acceptance, are therefore translated into measurable dimensions of public attitude that can be compared across countries.

2.2 Localization and Geographically Differentiated Project Landscapes

What 'China' means in any given place is not fixed. DiCarlo and DeBoom treat Global China as a contested geographical imaginary: depending on actors, scales and contexts, China may appear as a threat, an opportunity, a bridge, a status symbol or an alternative development path (DiCarlo and

DeBoom, 2025). This is more than a semantic nuance. It means that Zimbabwe and Laos do not encounter an abstract 'China.' They encounter Chinese economic engagement through specific mediums—mining, energy, and corporate employment in one case; railways, infrastructure, and development discourse in the other. These different mediums carry different political and social implications.

Geographical research on the BRI has pushed this insight further by showing that the actual effects of Chinese projects are generated not in Beijing but during implementation, operation, and local embedding. Oakes criticizes the tendency to overemphasize geopolitical intent while neglecting how projects evolve within local societies, technical systems and political cultures (Oakes, 2021). Goodfellow and Huang provide a concrete demonstration: Chinese-financed transport infrastructure in Kampala and Addis Ababa, once absorbed into local political economies, is repurposed by state elites, urban land relations, and transport governance (Goodfellow and Huang, 2021). The 'Chineseness' of such projects is diluted through localization. Huang and Pollio similarly argue that host states' own development agendas and infrastructure goals shape how Chinese capital enters; outcomes vary by capital form, state-market relations, and local context (Huang and Pollio, 2023).

Case studies from Laos and Africa reinforce one common finding: local friction and agency matter more than any unified Chinese strategy. In Laos, the China-Laos railway is celebrated by the state as a pathway out of landlockedness, yet Chen shows that its financing structure—delayed credit injections, corporate advance payments, wage arrears—generates labour politics at construction sites (Chen, 2020). Kuik and Rosli add that Lao agency is real but uneven: strong at project initiation, weak in negotiation and implementation (Kuik and Rosli, 2023). In Africa, Bhamidipati and Hansen find that development outcomes from Chinese solar projects in Kenya emerge not automatically but through friction among local communities, government, contractors, and project owners (Bhamidipati and Hansen, 2021).

Taken together, this literature provides two warnings for cross-national comparison. First, the same Chinese investor or lender can produce very different local effects depending on the sector (mining vs. infrastructure) and the host country's political economy. Second, public perception is not a simple reflection of investment volume or diplomatic ties. It is mediated by how projects are encountered, who benefits or loses, and what kind of local debate they generate.

2.3 A Five-Dimensional Framework of Public Perceptions

Existing survey-based research on attitudes toward Chinese investment has identified several drivers: country image, project characteristics, individual circumstances and exposure to negative externalities. Bulman *et al.* find that project features often outweigh the Chinese origin label in shaping host-country preferences (Bulman *et al.*, 2025). McCauley *et al.*'s work shows that residents near manufacturing projects are more likely to credit China for infrastructure improvements, while those near resource projects express greater concern about land grabs and job threats (McCauley *et al.*, 2022). Wang *et al.* propose an 'unmet expectations' mechanism: announcements raise optimism, but if promised benefits do not materialize, disappointment and political blame follow (Wang *et al.*, 2022).

These findings, however, tend to treat attitudes as responses to isolated stimuli. They do not offer a structured way to compare how attitudes are organized across different national contexts. This study proposes a five-dimensional framework that serves three purposes: (a) distinguishes conceptually distinct components of public attitude, (b) allows each to be measured with a single survey item for cross-national comparison, and (c) connects back to the SLO and localization literatures. The five dimensions are:

(1) *Affective perception*. The basic positioning of China as friendly or not. Because Global China is an imaginary charged with emotion and political judgment, this dimension captures a baseline orientation that may shape, but does not determine, other judgments.

(2) *Sovereignty trust and threat perception*. Whether Chinese investment is understood as affecting national autonomy. Highly visible projects in railways, mining, energy, ports, and industrial parks often become entangled in debates over debt, resources, land, labour, and state control. FDI tends to trigger more such concerns than trade or aid.

(3) *Institutional comparison and cultural identification*. Whether China's development experience is seen as a reference worth following. This is neither generic cultural affinity nor ideological identification. It reflects how China's model is interpreted locally—shaped by negotiation and contestation rather than simple replication.

(4) *Perceived individual well-being*. Whether projects benefit household livelihoods. This dimension links macro-level projects to daily life. The 'unmet expectations' mechanism operates here: unfulfilled promises generate disappointment and political blame.

(5) *Future cooperation and strategic support*. Whether current evaluations extend into sustained social support for continued cooperation. Chinese economic engagement can polarize public opinion, creating both beneficiaries and losers within the same society.

These five dimensions do not form a strict causal chain. They are analytical categories designed to identify the composition of public attitudes and cross-country differences. The framework thus bridges the localization literature on BRI and Global China, on one hand, and the public attitude literature on source-country effects, project characteristics, and individual experience, on the other.

Zimbabwe and Laos offer a strategic comparison. Both are landlocked developing countries with close ties to China. But Chinese economic engagement takes visibly different project forms in each. Applying the five-dimensional framework to survey data from both countries makes it possible to compare mean scores, agreement rates, and distribution patterns across dimensions. The following sections report these results and then interpret them in light of social license conditions, project localization, and benefit experience.

3 Data and methods

This article compares Zimbabwe and Laos—two landlocked developing countries with long-standing political and economic ties to China. Their similarities in development position and bilateral relationship make it possible to examine how cross-country differences in public attitudes are associated with project exposure, institutional context and lived experience. The critical difference lies in how Chinese economic engagement embeds into local society. In Zimbabwe, Chinese investment is especially visible in mining, energy and other resource-related sectors, where corporate employment, labour relations and resource distribution become salient issues. In Laos, public perception is shaped primarily by the China-Laos railway, transport infrastructure, cross-border flows, and state development narratives. These contrasting project landscapes provide a strategic ground for examining how the same source country generates different public responses.

The analysis draws on two types of data: questionnaire surveys and qualitative fieldwork. The survey data come from residents in Zimbabwe (n = 229 after cleaning) and Laos (n = 580). The questionnaire covers basic socio-economic characteristics, exposure to Chinese projects or firms, and multi-dimensional attitudes toward Chinese economic engagement. The fieldwork materials, including observations, semi-structured interviews, and secondary sources, serve to interpret the survey results within their social and project-specific contexts.

Table 1 summarizes the sample composition. Both samples are predominantly urban and young to middle-aged, but differ in gender balance, education, and employment. The Zimbabwe sample has a slightly higher share of male respondents and secondary education as the modal category. The Laos sample has more female respondents, a higher proportion of university education or above, and higher reported rates of both formal employment and flexible/self-employment. These differences provide important background for interpreting cross-country attitude patterns.

Table 1
Characteristics of questionnaire samples from Zimbabwe and Laos

Indicator	Category	Zimbabwe (n = 229)	Laos (n = 580)
Sample size	Valid sample	229	580
Gender	Male	132 (57.6%)	269 (46.4%)
	Female	96 (41.9%)	303 (52.2%)
Age	25 or below	87 (38.0%)	280 (48.3%)
	26–35	78 (34.1%)	163 (28.1%)
	36–45	36 (15.7%)	97 (16.7%)
	46 or above	25 (10.9%)	39 (6.7%)
Residence	Urban	163 (71.2%)	423 (72.9%)
	Rural	60 (26.2%)	146 (25.2%)
Education	Primary school or below	13 (5.7%)	30 (5.2%)
	Secondary school	119 (52.0%)	175 (30.2%)
	University degree or above	85 (37.1%)	327 (56.4%)
Occupation	Formal employment	176 (76.9%)	505 (87.1%)
	Flexible/self-employment	105 (45.9%)	419 (72.2%)
	No employment record	26 (11.4%)	29 (5.0%)
Note: Figures in parentheses are percentages of the valid sample in each country. Because of missing or unanswered responses, totals for gender, age, residence and education may not equal 100%. Occupation was a multiple-response item; therefore, percentages do not sum to 100%.			

The five attitude dimensions are each measured by one Likert-scale item (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), allowing direct cross-national comparison. More specifically, the *affective perception* dimension is measured by the question ‘China is a friendly country’; the *sovereignty trust and threat perception* dimension is measured by ‘China’s investment and aid have not harmed our national sovereignty’. Higher scores indicate greater sovereignty trust and lower threat perception; the *institutional comparison and cultural identification* dimension is measured by ‘China’s development model is a reference for our country’; the *perceived individual well-being* dimension is measured by ‘Chinese investment projects / BRI projects have benefited me and my family’; and the *future cooperation and strategic support* dimension is measured by ‘I support my country’s continued cooperation with China’.

Reliability and validity tests for the five attitude items are reported in Table 2. Cronbach’s α is 0.919 for Zimbabwe and 0.876 for Laos, both above 0.8. KMO values are 0.886 for Zimbabwe and 0.866 for Laos, and Bartlett’s test of sphericity is significant for both samples ($p < 0.001$). Principal component analysis

shows that the first component explains 75.7% of the variance in Zimbabwe and 66.9% in Laos, with component loadings all above 0.80. These results indicate that the five attitude items have sufficient internal consistency and construct validity for cross-country comparison.

Table 2
Internal coherence and factor structure of the five attitude indicators

Indicator	Zimbabwe questionnaire	Laos questionnaire
Number of items	5	5
Complete-response sample size	211	571
Cronbach's α	0.919	0.876
KMO	0.886	0.866
Bartlett's test χ^2	735.488	1355.568
df	10	10
p-value	< 0.001	< 0.001
Variance explained by the first principal component	75.733%	66.949%
Component loading range	0.845–0.886	0.803–0.839
Note: Reliability and validity tests are based on complete responses to the five attitude items. Missing values, responses outside the 1–5 range and non-single-choice responses were treated as invalid. Principal component analysis was conducted using the correlation matrix.		

The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and the proportion of respondents who agree or strongly agree (scores 4 or 5), are calculated for each dimension in each country. Second, two-sample t-tests are used to compare mean scores between Zimbabwe and Laos, identifying where the largest attitudinal gaps lie. Third, the quantitative differences are interpreted using fieldwork observations and existing literature, focusing on how project exposure, sovereignty judgments, and benefit experience shape public attitudes in each setting.

4 Empirical findings

Table 3
Public attitudes toward China's economic engagement in Zimbabwe and Laos

Dimension	Zimbabwe			Laos			Difference (Laos – Zimbabwe)	p- value
	Mean	SD	Agreement rate (%)	Mean	SD	Agreement rate (%)		
Affective perception	3.10	1.41	44.0%	3.78	1.06	64.7%	0.67	< 0.001
Sovereignty trust and threat perception	2.66	1.32	25.4%	3.62	1.35	54.4%	0.96	< 0.001
Institutional comparison and cultural identification	2.93	1.38	35.2%	3.87	1.01	70.3%	0.93	< 0.001
Perceived individual well-being	2.79	1.31	30.8%	3.58	1.03	50.0%	0.79	< 0.001
Future cooperation and strategic support	2.99	1.49	45.4%	3.88	1.05	67.1%	0.90	< 0.001
Five-dimension average	2.89	1.38	36.2%	3.74	1.10	61.3%	0.85	< 0.001
Note: Each dimension is measured on a 1–5 Likert scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. Agreement rate refers to the percentage of valid responses selecting 4 or 5. Difference is calculated as Laos minus Zimbabwe. p-values are from independent-samples t-tests. All items are positively coded; for sovereignty trust and threat perception, higher scores indicate stronger agreement that Chinese investment and aid have not harmed national sovereignty.								

Table 3 reports the mean scores, standard deviations, agreement rates, and t-test results for the five attitude dimensions in Zimbabwe and Laos (see also Fig. 1). Across all dimensions, Laotian respondents score higher than Zimbabwean respondents, and every difference is statistically significant at $p < 0.001$. The largest gaps appear in sovereignty trust (mean difference 0.96), institutional comparison (0.93), and future cooperation willingness (0.90). Affective perception shows the smallest gap (0.67). This pattern suggests that the cross-country divergence is not merely about general liking or disliking of China, but centers on how Chinese engagement is judged in terms of national autonomy, development model reference, and the desirability of continued partnership.

Zimbabwean attitudes are more cautious. The five-dimension average is 2.89, compared with 3.74 in Laos. Only 25.4% of Zimbabwean respondents agree or strongly agree that Chinese investment has not

harmed national sovereignty, and only 30.8% report personal benefit. Yet 45.4% still support continued cooperation, indicating that this does not amount to wholesale rejection. The Zimbabwean pattern therefore suggests a trade-off between expected gains and perceived risks. In Laos, agreement rates are high for institutional comparison (70.3%), future cooperation (67.1%) and affective perception (64.7%). However, perceived individual benefit stands at 50.0%, below the other dimensions. Widespread support therefore does not necessarily translate into universal direct household gain. Standard deviations are larger in Zimbabwe, such as 1.49 for future cooperation compared with 1.05 in Laos, indicating greater internal division. Laotian responses are generally more clustered, although sovereignty trust remains relatively more dispersed.

4.1 Affective perception

Affective perception is measured by the statement 'China is a friendly country'. Laotian respondents score higher (mean 3.78, agreement 64.7%) than Zimbabwean respondents (mean 3.10, agreement 44.0%). The difference is statistically significant but smaller than those on sovereignty trust and institutional comparison. In other words, affective orientation toward China is not where the two countries diverge most.

The Zimbabwean mean sits just above the midpoint, suggesting a mixed rather than uniformly negative affective orientation. But the high SD (1.41) points to considerable internal disagreement. Chinese investment in Zimbabwe spans mining, energy, public works, and corporate employment. These sectors bring resources and jobs, yet they also generate friction over labour conditions, environmental impact, and how revenues are shared. Whether local communities end up seeing China as friendly depends heavily on project organization, corporate responsiveness, and local agency (Sändig et al., 2024).

Laos presents a different picture. The mean is higher, and attitudes are more clustered (SD = 1.06). The China-Laos railway and associated infrastructure embed China directly into everyday mobility, cross-border flows, and local development imaginaries. In this context, China is more likely to be understood as an opportunity or a development partner rather than a threat. This is consistent with the broader observation that "China" takes on different meanings across places—what travels is not a fixed image but a set of projects and practices that are interpreted locally (DiCarlo and DeBoom, 2025).

What does this imply for the rest of the analysis? Affective perception matters, but it is only an entry point. Zimbabweans who see China as friendly do not necessarily translate that into institutional trust or sovereignty confidence; Laotians' warm feelings need to be checked against personal benefit. Affective perception alone explains little; it must be read alongside project exposure and benefit distribution.

4.2 Sovereignty trust and threat perception

This dimension shows the largest gap between the two countries. The survey item asks whether respondents agree that 'China's investment and aid have not harmed our national sovereignty'. Higher scores indicate stronger agreement that Chinese economic involvement does not undermine national

autonomy. Zimbabwe's mean is 2.66, with only 25.4% agreeing or strongly agreeing. Laos's mean is 3.62, with 54.4% agreement. Sovereignty judgment sits at the core of the cross-country divergence.

Zimbabwe's low score reflects the type of projects residents encounter. Mining, resource extraction, and corporate employment tend to pull foreign capital into local debates over resource control, labour relations, and national autonomy. Studies of Chinese mining firms in Africa show that disputes over land, livelihoods, compensation, pollution, and labour conditions are common sources of community resistance. Whether a firm responds to local demands directly affects its social license to operate (Sändig et al., 2024). Seen in this light, Zimbabweans' low agreement on the sovereignty item is not a wholesale rejection of China. It is a politically informed reservation tied to resource-based and corporate-centered forms of engagement.

Laos scores higher, but this should not be read as the absence of sovereignty concerns. The China-Laos railway is framed by the Lao state as a signature project that turns a landlocked country into a land-linked one, and the government uses infrastructure cooperation to enhance its development legitimacy (Kuik and Rosli, 2023). Yet beneath that narrative, research on the railway's financing and labour politics has documented delayed credit injections, wage arrears, and labour substitution at construction sites (Chen, 2020). The relatively high sovereignty trust among Laotian respondents reflects public acceptance at the level of everyday perception—it does not erase structural tensions. Compared to Zimbabwe, where Chinese engagement is encountered through mining and its attendant frictions, Laotians are more likely to see Chinese infrastructure cooperation as a national development opportunity rather than resource capture or external domination. Sovereignty perception, in other words, is reorganized by project visibility, state narratives, and tangible gains in mobility and connectivity.

4.3 Institutional comparison and cultural identification

This dimension is measured by the statement 'China's development model is a reference for our country'. Laotian respondents score 3.87, with 70.3% agreement, while Zimbabwean respondents score 2.93, with 35.2% agreement. This is one of the largest gaps across the five dimensions. The two country samples therefore differ substantially in whether China's development experience is viewed as a relevant reference.

Zimbabwe's mean sits near the midpoint. There is no firm endorsement, but neither is there outright rejection. Existing work on African attitudes toward China finds that proximity to Chinese FDI does not automatically boost support for the 'Chinese model'; project type matters. Residents near manufacturing projects are more likely to credit China for infrastructure improvements; those near resource projects voice greater concern about land grabs and job threats (McCauley et al., 2022). Zimbabwe's experience with mining and energy investments fits the latter pattern. Visibility of Chinese capital does not translate into model appeal.

Laos tells a different story. The high agreement suggests that China's development experience is seen as a usable reference. But this is not an abstract embrace of Chinese institutions. It is a pragmatic

reading of what Chinese projects deliver on the ground: infrastructure, connectivity, and state-led development capacity. Research on Chinese overseas industrial parks shows that the ‘Chinese model’ is reconfigured through host-state agendas, local bargaining, and social contestation (Tritto and Camba, 2022). A similar logic helps interpret the Laos result. Laotian respondents are not endorsing China’s political system; they are recognizing that China’s ability to build railways and improve transport links offers something relevant to their own country’s development. Zimbabwe’s lower score, in contrast, suggests that when Chinese engagement takes the form of resource extraction rather than visible infrastructure, its model appeal remains weak. This dimension thus links project exposure directly to how people imagine development possibilities.

4.4 Perceived individual well-being

This dimension captures whether Chinese projects translate into tangible household gains. Laos scores 3.58 (50.0% agreement); Zimbabwe scores 2.79 (30.8%). The gap is smaller than those on sovereignty trust and institutional comparison, but this dimension is critical for understanding how attitudes are structured in each country.

Zimbabwe’s low score shows that visible Chinese investment does not automatically mean stable household benefits. Research on Chinese FDI and African public attitudes finds that projects generate expectations about jobs, income, and local development. When those expectations are not met, residents develop unmet expectations—they become disappointed and politically blame the foreign partner (Wang et al., 2022). This helps explain why Zimbabwean respondents, despite still showing some willingness for future cooperation, report weak personal benefit.

Laos scores higher, but agreement stands at only 50.0%, notably below the country’s levels on institutional comparison (70.3%) and future cooperation (67.1%). This pattern suggests that Laotian support for Chinese projects rests more on infrastructure spillovers and development expectations than on direct household gain. Research on infrastructure-led development in Laos has warned that connectivity projects can generate dispossession and local costs alongside development promises (Sims, 2021). Personal benefit is thus the empirical anchor of what might be called pragmatic judgment. In both countries, respondents do not equate national-level cooperation narratives with household-level gains. Zimbabwe’s low benefit perception undermines its overall social license; Laos’s moderate benefit perception serves as a reminder that high cooperation support still needs to be consolidated through employment, market access, local industrial linkages, and tangible household improvements.

4.5 Future cooperation and strategic support

This dimension asks whether respondents support continued cooperation with China. Laotian respondents score 3.88, with 67.1% agreement, while Zimbabwean respondents score 2.99, with 45.4% agreement. The question captures not only how people evaluate past and current projects but also how they anticipate future gains and risks.

Zimbabwe's score sits near the midpoint. Even with low sovereignty trust and weak personal benefit, close to half of the respondents still favor ongoing cooperation. This is not an endorsement of what has happened so far. It suggests a more mixed picture. Research on China's trade, aid and investment in Latin America similarly finds no evidence that growing Chinese economic engagement necessarily worsens average attitudes toward China, while suggesting that such engagement may create uneven perceptions across social groups (Eichenauer et al., 2021). Zimbabwe's result can be read in light of this broader pattern.

Laos shows the highest level of future cooperation support among all five dimensions, consistent with its scores on institutional comparison and affective perception. Current acceptance is strong, and a substantial share of respondents see continued cooperation as part of their country's future. Studies of Laos's infrastructure cooperation note that the government embraces the BRI partly to address landlockedness and enhance developmental legitimacy, yet state capacity and external constraints also matter (Kuik and Rosli, 2023). Future cooperation willingness, therefore, is not a simple extension of goodwill. Zimbabwe's more cautious support reflects a trade-off between perceived risks and limited alternatives; Laos's strong support reflects an alignment between infrastructure expectations and developmentalist narratives. In both countries, the willingness to continue cooperating is a forward-looking, pragmatic calculation—shaped by what people have experienced, what they have gained or lost, and what they think is possible.

5 Discussion

The results show a structured divergence between Zimbabwe and Laos across five attitude dimensions, but the divergence is not uniform. The largest gaps appear in sovereignty trust, institutional comparison, and future cooperation willingness. Affective perception—whether China is seen as a friendly country—shows the smallest gap. This matters. It means that cross-country differences in public attitudes are not mainly about general liking or disliking of China. They run deeper, through how Chinese projects are encountered, how they shape judgments about national autonomy, and how they feed into local ideas about development and its distribution.

The most immediate source of difference is what kind of Chinese economic engagement people actually see and live with. In Zimbabwe, Chinese investment is especially visible in mining, energy and other resource-related sectors, where corporate employment and labour relations become salient issues. These are site-specific, often exclusionary, and easily entangled with disputes over land, labour conditions, compensation, and resource revenue. Fieldwork for this study suggests that these concerns go beyond friction at project sites. Several informants described Chinese investment as 'hot money' or 'quick money', referring to extraction and trading activities that arrive quickly and may leave just as quickly (Interview with Zimbabwean residents, Harare, August 2024). One resident argued that Chinese firms were more visible in extraction and trading than in building local supply chains (Interview with Zimbabwean resident, Harare, August 2024). There is little sense of lasting industrial spillover. People see limited local employment beyond basic labour, few opportunities for skill transfer, and little

improvement in household welfare. The feeling is that Chinese capital is not committed to staying and building. Against this backdrop, residents near resource projects are more likely to voice concerns about land grabs and job threats than to credit China for infrastructure improvements. This matches the finding that Zimbabwean respondents report low sovereignty trust (25.4% agreement) and weak personal benefit (30.8%). Their caution is not anti-China. It is a politically informed response to a particular mode of engagement—one that looks extractive, transient, and shallow in its local roots.

In Laos, Chinese projects enter public life primarily through the China-Laos railway. Infrastructure of this kind is highly visible, produces tangible gains in mobility and market access, and is woven into state narratives of escaping landlockedness. Field observations confirm that the railway has already stimulated certain sectors—agriculture, tourism, warehousing, and logistics. Thai visitors, for example, now cross the border to ride the high-speed train. One Lao respondent stated, ‘Many Thais come to Laos just to experience the railway’ (Interview with Lao resident, Luang Prabang, April 2025). That pride matters. It signals a shift in how Lao people see their country’s place in the region and their own developmental future. Yet the corridor effect remains limited. The railway’s full impact on local livelihoods has not yet materialized. This matches the survey finding that only half of Laotian respondents report personal benefit—far below the 70% who see China’s development model as a reference. What the railway does deliver, for many, is a sense of national infrastructural improvement and a renewed imagination of modernity. People see better connectivity, a more modern transport system, and a country that no longer feels landlocked. These symbolic and aspirational gains sustain high general support, even when direct household returns are still partial. Infrastructure can generate broad public acceptance without delivering universal immediate gain.

Sovereignty trust deserves special attention. It is the dimension where the two countries differ most. Zimbabwe’s low score reflects the politics of resource-based investment. When foreign capital enters through mines and corporate employment, questions of resource control, labour relations and national autonomy come to the fore; broader cross-national research also shows that Chinese investment can become politically contentious abroad (Gong et al., 2024). Research on Chinese mining firms in Africa has documented how disputes over land, livelihoods, and compensation become arenas of community resistance (Sändig et al., 2024). What Zimbabweans express is not a rejection of cooperation but a political reservation about autonomy in the face of extractive investment. Laos scores higher on sovereignty trust, but this should not be read as the absence of concerns. The railway is framed as a national project, and the Lao state actively uses infrastructure cooperation to enhance its legitimacy (Kuik and Rosli, 2023). Underneath that narrative, however, scholars have documented debt arrangements, wage arrears, and labour politics at construction sites (Chen, 2020). Sovereignty perception, in other words, is reorganized by project visibility and state discourse. Laotians see a development opportunity, not external domination. That does not mean the underlying tensions disappear.

The dimension of institutional comparison—whether China’s development model is worth referencing—shows a similarly large gap. Laos’s 70.3% agreement indicates that Chinese development capability is

seen as a usable reference. But this is not an abstract endorsement of Chinese political institutions. It is a pragmatic reading of what Chinese projects deliver on the ground: railways, connectivity, state-led infrastructure. In fact, many Lao respondents actively expressed willingness to see their country learn from China's development path. The infrastructure-led model has become, in their eyes, synonymous with the 'Chinese model' itself. One elderly villager near the railway stated, 'China built the railway. We did too. That means their way works for us' (Interview with Lao resident, Vientiane, July 2025). Such statements reveal how visible, tangible projects shape development imagination.

Zimbabwe tells a different story. Although Chinese investment has become more visible in Zimbabwe, this visibility does not translate into stronger appeal of China's development model among respondents. Some respondents noted that what they see on the ground does not match the grand narratives of win-win cooperation. One man put it bluntly: 'Chinese investment here is not what the speeches say. It's about taking resources, not building our future' (Interview with Zimbabwean resident, Gweru, August 2025). This mismatch between state discourse and local experience erodes the model's appeal. A Chinese state-owned enterprise manager in Zimbabwe confirmed the problem from the inside: 'We cannot control the behaviour of all Chinese investors. Many private firms ignore local laws and regulations. They ruin the market and damage China's image' (Interview with a Chinese citizen, Harare, August 2025). The result is that Chinese economic presence becomes associated with extraction, rule-bending, and shallow commitment. Only 35.2% of Zimbabwean respondents see China's development model as a reference worth considering. People do not judge the 'model' in the abstract. They judge what they see and experience—and in Zimbabwe, that experience has increasingly fed doubt rather than admiration.

This brings the analysis to the most revealing pattern. In both countries, personal benefit lags behind cooperation support. Zimbabwe's personal benefit agreement is 30.8%, while future cooperation willingness is 45.4%. Laos's personal benefit is 50.0%, while future cooperation is 67.1%. On the surface, the gap looks similar. But the logic underneath is different. For many Zimbabweans, continued cooperation with China is not an enthusiastic choice. It is a fallback. Having experienced colonial rule and then painful, often failed attempts at independent development, some see strategic alignment with a rising power as a lesser evil. One respondent put it this way: 'China may not be perfect. But who else is coming? The West left us long ago' (Interview with Zimbabwean resident, Harare, August 2025). Another said: 'We see the problems—bad labour conditions, no real technology transfer. But sitting alone is worse' (Interview with Zimbabwean resident, Harare, August 2025). This is pragmatic resignation. Chinese investment looks extractive and shallow, yet the alternative—no investment, no partner—seems even bleaker. The 45.4% support for continued cooperation reflects not satisfaction but a weighing of poor options.

Laos presents a different picture. Here, the gap between personal benefit (50.0%) and future cooperation support (67.1%) reflects confidence in an infrastructure-led development model, not resignation. Many Laotians have seen the railway change mobility, attract Thai tourists, and raise their country's regional profile. Even those who have not directly benefited often express belief that the railway will eventually

deliver broader prosperity. One villager along the line said: ‘Maybe my family hasn’t made money yet, but the train is there. More people will come. Business will grow’ (Interview with Lao resident, Vientiane, July 2025). This is not blind optimism. It is a pragmatic bet on spillover effects and long-term modernization. Unlike Zimbabwe’s grudging ‘no better alternative’, Laos’s future cooperation willingness signals trust in a visible, state-driven infrastructure trajectory. In both countries, people are being pragmatic—but one pragmatism is shaped by a lack of credible options, the other by a tangible vision of national advancement.

What ties these findings together is a shared pragmatism. Neither Zimbabwean nor Laotian respondents operate on simple pro- or anti-China scripts. They make composite judgments that weigh sovereignty risk, development reference, personal gain, and future opportunity. But the pragmatism takes different shapes. In Zimbabwe, it is a pragmatism of constrained choice. People see the problems—extractive investment, weak local spillovers, questionable labour practices. Yet they also see few alternatives. The West is largely absent. Post-independence experiments with autonomous development have mostly failed. Aligning with a rising China, even with all its flaws, feels like the least bad option. One respondent’s remark captured this well: ‘China may not be perfect. But sitting alone is worse’ (Interview with Zimbabwean resident, Harare, August 2025). The 45.4% support for future cooperation is not enthusiasm. It is a calculation made under pressure. In Laos, pragmatism looks different. Here, people have witnessed a visible, state-driven infrastructure project—the railway—that has already changed mobility patterns and attracted regional attention. Even those who report no direct household gain often express confidence that benefits will eventually arrive. A villager along the line put it this way: ‘Maybe we haven’t made money yet, but the train is there. More people will come’ (Interview with Lao resident, Luang Prabang, July 2025). This is a forward-looking bet on infrastructure spillovers. The 67.1% future cooperation support reflects not resignation but a tangible sense of national advancement. Both countries thus reject simplistic pro-China or anti-China binaries. Instead, publics in each make pragmatic judgments shaped by their specific historical and project contexts. Bulman *et al.*’s survey experiment found that project features and investment behaviour often outweigh the ‘Chinese origin’ label in shaping host-country preferences (Bulman *et al.*, 2025). This study confirms that finding cross-nationally and adds specificity: what matters is not just project type *per se*, but how that type mediates sovereignty perception, model appeal, and the gap between collective infrastructure benefits and individual household returns. In Zimbabwe, extractive engagement weakens sovereignty trust and model appeal, yet continued cooperation persists as a default. In Laos, infrastructure-led engagement builds model confidence and future support even when personal benefit lags. Pragmatism, in other words, is not a single logic. It is shaped by what people see, what they remember, and what they think is possible.

These findings extend social license theory in two ways. First, the conventional SLO literature focuses on trust between a single firm and a local community. When the investor is a state-backed Chinese entity and the host country is a developing state, public judgments also involve national autonomy and dependency. Sovereignty trust is not reducible to corporate-community relations. Second, social license operates differently across project landscapes. Resource-based engagement faces an uphill battle on sovereignty grounds; infrastructure-based engagement can generate broader acceptance but still

struggles with uneven benefit distribution. For Chinese firms and policy actors, this means that risk management cannot be generic. In Zimbabwe's mining and energy context, early investment in community communication, labour standards, environmental responsibility, and transparent benefit sharing is essential. In Laos's infrastructure context, the priority is to translate connectivity gains into local employment, market access, and household-level improvements—otherwise, current support may weaken as unmet expectations accumulate. Host governments, for their part, need to treat public perception not as post-hoc public relations but as integral to project design, implementation, and monitoring. What this comparison ultimately shows is that attitudes toward Chinese economic engagement are not about China per se. They are about how Chinese projects enter local lives, what they visibly deliver, who gains, and whether people see a future worth continuing.

6 Conclusion

This study compares host-country public perceptions of Chinese economic engagement in Zimbabwe and Laos. Rather than treating 'China' as a fixed source-country label, this article locates public attitudes within specific project landscapes, local institutions, and lived experience. The five-dimensional framework, including affective perception, sovereignty trust, institutional comparison, personal benefit, and future cooperation willingness, provides a structured way to compare what otherwise risks becoming a loose set of observations.

The empirical results show that Laotian respondents score higher on all five dimensions, with the largest gaps in sovereignty trust, institutional comparison, and future cooperation. Affective perception differs least. This means that cross-country divergence is not mainly about whether China is liked or disliked. It is about whether Chinese projects are seen as respecting national autonomy, offering a development model worth learning from, and delivering a future worth continuing.

Zimbabwean attitudes are more reserved and more internally divided. Sovereignty trust and personal benefit are particularly low. Yet close to half still support continued cooperation—a sign of pragmatic weighing rather than outright rejection. In Laos, support is consistently higher, but personal benefit lags behind institutional endorsement and future cooperation willingness. High cooperation support does not mean widespread household gain. Both countries thus display what this article calls a shared pragmatism: people make composite judgments that balance sovereignty risk, development reference, material gain, and future opportunity. The 'Chinese origin' of investment matters less than how projects are encountered, interpreted, and experienced on the ground.

Theoretically, this study extends social license thinking beyond firm-community relations to host-country public attitudes more broadly. Social license for Chinese overseas engagement involves not only trust in corporate behaviour but also judgments about national autonomy, model attractiveness, and the distribution of tangible household benefits. Empirically, the comparison of Zimbabwe and Laos fills a gap in systematic cross-national analysis of public perceptions of Chinese economic engagement. Practically, the findings point in different directions for different project contexts. Resource-intensive

engagement, as in Zimbabwe, requires early attention to labour standards, environmental responsibility, and transparent benefit sharing. Infrastructure-led engagement, as in Laos, needs to translate connectivity gains into local employment and household improvement—otherwise, current support may weaken over time.

Several limitations should be noted. The cross-sectional survey design captures attitudes at one point in time, not their dynamics as projects unfold or media narratives shift. Each dimension is measured by a single item, which constrains reliability and nuance. Future research could deepen the framework through multi-item scales, extend it to other countries and project types, or combine survey data with longitudinal fieldwork.

Overall, this study suggests that Chinese economic engagement in the Global South is neither uniformly accepted nor uniformly rejected. It is a process of local interpretation, selective endorsement, and pragmatic trade-off. The Zimbabwe-Laos comparison shows that the same source country can generate systematically different structures of public attitude depending on project type, institutional context, and how residents encounter and experience Chinese involvement. Recognizing that variation is essential for both theory and practice.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Ning An: Conceptualization, Supervision, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Writing – review and editing. Ruipeng Wang: Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft. Min Wang: Supervision, Methodology, Funding acquisition, Writing – review and editing.

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Figures

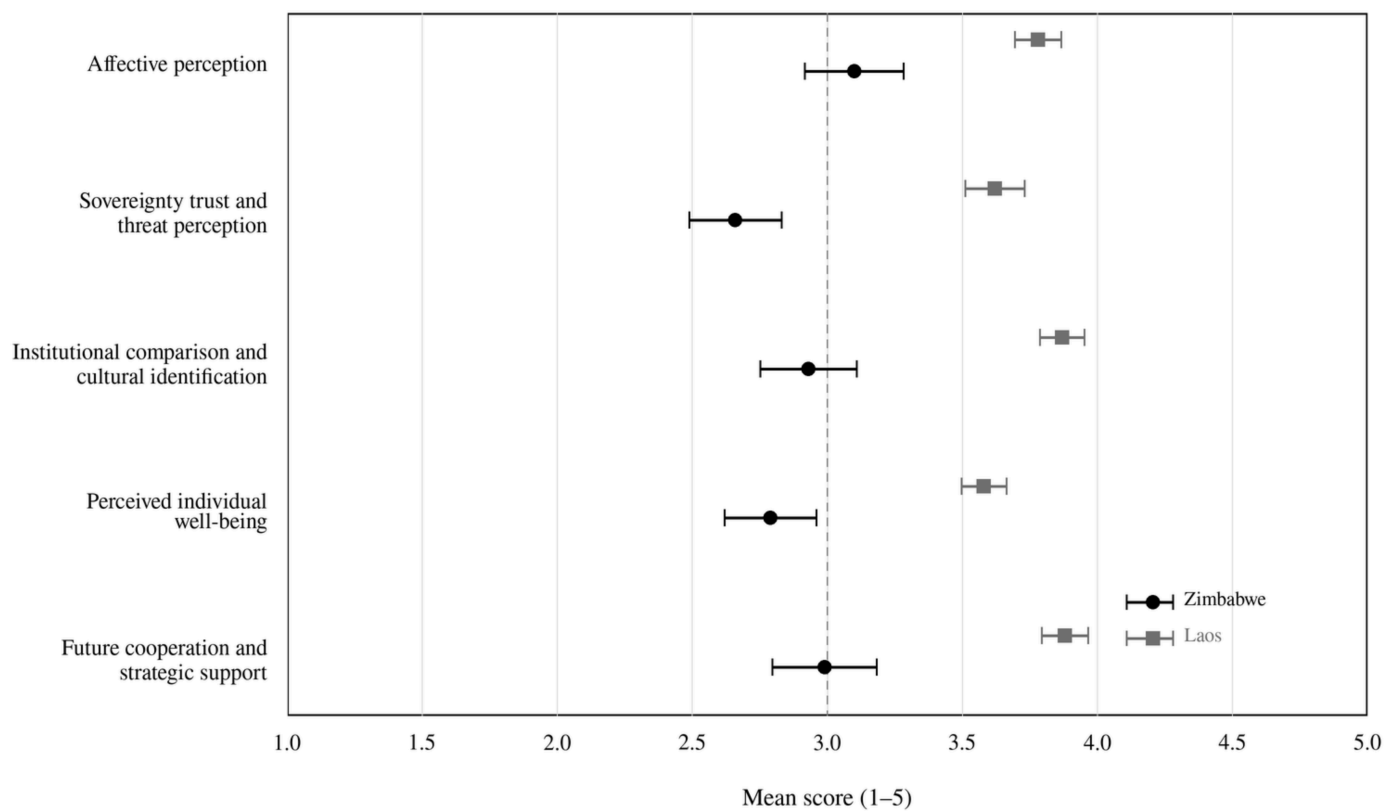


Figure 1

Mean attitude scores across five dimensions in Zimbabwe and Laos