



China and the News of the Funan Techo Canal Project in Cambodia

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Abstract

The Funan Techo Canal is a strategic infrastructure project in Cambodia and part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The project aims to improve connectivity, strengthen economic autonomy, and reduce Cambodia's dependence on neighbouring countries. It has drawn broad support for its potential to expand market access, create jobs, and boost economic growth, yet it has also attracted criticism over its geopolitical, environmental, and security implications for Southeast Asia. This study examines the development of the Funan Techo Canal, Cambodian public responses to its construction, and China's strategy for building public support through media-based public diplomacy. The study applies a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach. Data were drawn from a literature review covering scientific journals, research reports, official documents, and Chinese and Cambodian media coverage, and analysed through Robert Entman's media framing model and Eytan Gilboa's media diplomacy framework. The findings show that Chinese and Cambodian state-aligned media promoted the project as a driver of economic growth, logistical independence, and national infrastructure development. Public response in Cambodia has been largely positive, as the canal is widely perceived to improve economic welfare, although concerns persist among directly affected farming and fishing communities. Through public diplomacy and coordinated media strategy, Chinese outlets emphasised development benefits and framed the project as a symbol of mutually beneficial cooperation while giving limited coverage to environmental, resettlement, and geopolitical concerns. This strategy has contributed to building a positive image of China and reinforcing the legitimacy of the Funan Techo Canal project among the Cambodian public and the wider international audience.

Keywords: Public Diplomacy, Media Framing, China, Cambodia, Funan Techo Canal.

INTRODUCTION

Relations between China and Cambodia date back centuries, long before the era of modern diplomacy. The partnership deepened further after President Xi Jinping launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 (McBride, Berman, & Chatzky, 2023). The BRI seeks to build a global connectivity network through large-scale investment in infrastructure and economic development, and Cambodia, as a developing country with substantial infrastructure



needs, has become one of its key strategic partners. China is now Cambodia's largest trading partner and one of its largest sources of foreign investment (Ferida, 2025b).

Among the newest and most prominent of these infrastructure projects is the Funan Techo Canal, a waterway planned to run approximately 180 kilometres from Phnom Penh to Cambodia's southern coast, connecting the Mekong River system with the Gulf of Thailand. The canal is designed to be 100 metres wide and 5.4 metres deep, able to accommodate vessels of up to 3,000 deadweight tons (Trinh, 2025). Originally estimated at USD 1.7 billion, the project's cost was revised down to approximately USD 1.17–1.2 billion following an April 2025 financing agreement signed during President Xi Jinping's state visit to Cambodia, under a public-private partnership in which Cambodian shareholders hold a 51 percent stake and China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), a Chinese state-owned enterprise, holds 49 percent through a build-operate-transfer (BOT) arrangement (Bangkok Post, 2025; CamboJA News, 2026b). The canal is intended to improve Cambodia's logistics and trade connectivity, particularly by reducing its dependence on ports in Vietnam (Pen, Em, & Huot, 2024). Through this waterway, Cambodia expects to expedite the movement of goods, strengthen its position as a regional trading hub, and encourage the development of industrial and tourism activity along the coast.

The canal's construction has drawn significant public attention in Cambodia, as many citizens view the project as strategically significant from economic, military, and political perspectives (Stanhope & Buckley, 2024), largely because of China's role as a major investor. The project is therefore widely read not only as an economic development effort but also as part of a broader geopolitical contest (Rico, 2026), with China's involvement a key factor shaping the range of reactions from regional and international actors (Ferida, 2025b).

The Mekong River basin has long been a geopolitically sensitive space, running through China, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam (Ferida, 2025b). The canal project directly affects water flow and regional connectivity, raising concern among downstream states, particularly Vietnam, over potential ecological damage, reduced water discharge, and threats to irrigation and agricultural systems (Hutt, 2024). Some parties, including the United States, have also suggested that the project could carry military implications, such as facilitating access for Chinese naval vessels to mainland Southeast Asia (Bong, 2024).

Amid this criticism, China has responded through public diplomacy, including media diplomacy. Coverage of the Funan Techo Canal in Chinese state media has tended to emphasise its benefits, presenting the project as a mutually advantageous partnership between China and Cambodia (Fangyuan, 2023). A Xinhua report published on 5 August 2024, for instance, covered the groundbreaking ceremony in Kandal province, attended by Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet, who explained that the canal would connect Phnom Penh with a coastal port in Preah Sihanouk province, facilitating trade with the world and strengthening Cambodia's logistical autonomy (Huaxia, 2024a). Foreign criticism, ecological concerns, and accusations of potential militarisation received comparatively little attention in this coverage.

China has long recognised the importance of its international image for advancing its foreign policy interests. Within the BRI, maintaining a positive public perception is essential to sustaining project legitimacy and countering critical narratives from Western media and regional actors (Aisha, 2023). The role of media in China's foreign policy has grown alongside President Xi Jinping's call to "tell China's stories well" (讲好中国故事), a directive oriented toward narratives that reflect the Chinese Communist Party's political objectives through positive framing both domestically and abroad (Liu, 2023). This vision reflects an understanding that narrative power and international public perception form an integral part of China's soft power. Rather than relying solely on military or economic strength, China uses the media to shape global public opinion of its foreign policy (Aisha, 2023). In the case of the Funan Techo Canal, media diplomacy functions as a tool for framing the project as a symbol of mutually beneficial development cooperation: Chinese outlets have produced content that highlights socio-economic benefits, modern infrastructure development, and environmental commitments, even as criticism and concern over the project persist (Yanling, 2022).

China's diplomatic messaging is reinforced through CGTN's multilingual presence, official social media accounts, and content partnerships with local media in BRI partner countries. China thus not only produces state-aligned content but also distributes it strategically to shape global public opinion (Zhang & Ong'ong'a, 2021).

While the Funan Techo Canal offers strategic and economic benefits, including improved connectivity and potential regional growth, it also raises concerns over environmental impact and the displacement of local communities (Pen, Em, & Huot, 2024). This makes it important to analyse how Chinese media frame the project, emphasising development benefits while minimising sensitive issues such as population relocation and ecosystem damage.

Maximising the project's benefits while mitigating its negative impacts requires stakeholders to adopt a proactive approach to environmental management, community engagement, and social inclusion. China's public diplomacy and media strategy play a central role in shaping perceptions of the project: through a structured communication strategy, the Chinese government uses media as a soft power instrument to influence public opinion both domestically and internationally (Fangyuan, 2023). This diplomacy targets the Cambodian public and government directly to strengthen local support, but its narrative also extends to ASEAN and the wider international community, particularly the United States and Western states that have raised concerns about China's role in upgrading Cambodia's Ream Naval Base in Sihanoukville province, a project undertaken by the China Metallurgical Group (Purba, 2025).

By emphasising economic benefits, infrastructure development, and bilateral cooperation, Chinese media actively construct an image of China as a responsible, welfare-oriented development partner that does not threaten regional stability (Yanling, 2022). This strategy illustrates how media functions as a diplomatic instrument supporting China's political and economic interests in Southeast Asia through the cultivation of positive public perception.

ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

This study draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks to examine how Chinese media coverage of the Funan Techo Canal shapes public perception: Robert Entman's (1993) concept of media framing and Eytan Gilboa's (2008) model of media diplomacy.

Entman's framing theory holds that media select and emphasise particular aspects of an issue to promote a specific interpretation, and that this selection process performs four interrelated functions: defining the problem, diagnosing its causes, making moral judgments about the actors involved, and recommending a treatment or solution. Applied to reporting on the Funan Techo Canal, this framework allows the analysis of Results and Discussion to be organised around the same four functions, tracing how Chinese and Cambodian state-aligned media construct the canal as a national development necessity while marginalising environmental, social, and geopolitical objections.

Gilboa's model of media diplomacy complements this framing analysis by situating media as an active instrument of foreign policy rather than a neutral conduit of information. In this model, states use media coverage to communicate strategic messages directly to foreign publics, shaping perceptions of legitimacy and building support for policy objectives that extend beyond formal diplomatic channels. Read together with Entman's framing functions, Gilboa's model helps explain why Chinese state media coverage of the canal consistently privileges narratives of shared benefit and downplays contested aspects of the project: the coverage operates simultaneously as news reporting and as a public diplomacy instrument aimed at cultivating Cambodian and international support for continued Chinese involvement in the project.

These two frameworks jointly inform the analytical structure applied in the Results and Discussion section, particularly the subsection on image building through media, which follows Entman's four framing functions in sequence.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach to provide an in-depth understanding of how China implements its diplomatic strategy through the media in reporting on the Funan Techo Canal project. This approach was chosen because it prioritises problem exploration through the interpretation of context, experience, and individual perspective (Ardiansyah, Risnita, & Jailani, 2023). The study draws on secondary data, including books, scientific articles, and media sources, to examine how China uses the media to guide public opinion toward acceptance of the Funan Techo Canal project. The analytical procedure follows three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing (Prabowo, Merthayasa, & Saebah, 2023). Data were classified by theme and analysed textually to identify meaning and context. Guided by Entman's (1993) framing model, described in the Analysis Framework above, the analysis then moves from a close reading of the data toward identifying the meanings that emerge from it, connecting these meanings to the research questions, and drawing conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Funan Techo Canal: China's Mega Project

The Funan Techo Canal project is one of Cambodia's largest infrastructure undertakings, backed by Chinese investment and falling under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As planned, the canal connects the Mekong River and the Bassac River near the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh, running approximately 180 kilometres to the Gulf of Thailand, with a width of 100 metres and a depth of 5.4 metres (Trinh, 2025). Its primary objective is to provide Cambodia with an alternative waterway route, reducing its dependence on shipping through Vietnamese ports for exports and imports. Despite concerns from Vietnam and other neighbouring countries about possible Chinese military access via the canal, Hun Sen, President of the Cambodian Senate and former prime minister, has firmly denied that the Chinese-backed project would facilitate the entry of Chinese warships or military forces into Cambodian territory (Tan, 2024), asserting that the canal serves purely economic and logistical purposes and that admitting foreign troops, including Chinese forces, would violate the Cambodian Constitution.

Through this canal, the government aims to improve logistics efficiency, strengthen domestic connectivity, and stimulate regional economic growth. Cambodia's access to open water is limited to a single major port, Sihanoukville, which is increasingly unable to meet the country's growing trade demand. The canal is therefore expected to function as a strategic project that boosts economic growth while strengthening Cambodia's geopolitical position and independence in regional and international trade (Ehrlich, 2024). In the context of international relations, the project reflects deepening cooperation between Cambodia and China: the involvement of Chinese state-owned enterprises, particularly China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC), signals that the canal is not merely a domestic undertaking but also part of China's broader development diplomacy strategy in Southeast Asia under the BRI (Sharma, 2025). Beyond its economic value, the canal offers Cambodia a more independent and faster logistics route to the South China Sea, an alternative to the traditionally costlier and more tightly controlled route through Vietnam.

The project has passed through several stages ahead of physical construction. Cambodia's Ministry of Public Works and Transport conducted a feasibility study, followed by a partnership between the Cambodian government and CRBC under a build-operate-transfer (BOT) scheme (Bangkok Post, 2025). Cambodian leaders initially described the project as being built without foreign loans, emphasising economic self-sufficiency even as the country continued to rely on foreign technology and expertise, particularly from China (Taing, 2025). This position shifted in the following years: Phnom Penh subsequently confirmed that Beijing would finance 49 percent of construction costs, and in July 2026 China disclosed, for the first time since the project's 2024 groundbreaking, the scale of its direct financial support — a USD 200 million loan at 1.25 percent interest over a 20-year term to build a ship lock and irrigation infrastructure, a USD 200 million grant to construct six to seven bridges, and a further USD 1 billion loan from a syndicate of Chinese lenders to the project concessionaire (CamboJA News, 2026b).

The pre-construction phase ran from 2023 to early 2024 and included technical surveys, land acquisition, and preparation of an environmental impact assessment (EIA) submitted to

the Mekong River Commission (MRC) (Trinh, 2024). This phase encountered resistance from local communities over relocation and concern about ecological effects on rivers and agricultural land. The project remains targeted for completion in 2028, though progress has been markedly uneven: the first section, roughly 26 kilometres long and beginning at Kien Svay district in Kandal province, was inaugurated at the August 2024 groundbreaking, while the second and considerably longer section, approximately 151 kilometres from Prek Ta Hing to Kep province, broke ground on 11 April 2026 (CamboJA News, 2026a). Independent reporting has noted that physical progress on the first section stalled for much of late 2025 and early 2026, with the project's official monitoring platform showing no measurable advance between November 2025 and January 2026 (Flynn, 2026).

Funding for the canal comes from a 51–49 split between Cambodian shareholders, principally the publicly listed Phnom Penh Autonomous Port and Sihanoukville Autonomous Port, and CRBC under its BOT concession (CamboJA News, 2026b). China's role in Cambodia's infrastructure development extends well beyond the canal and the Ream Naval Base upgrade: Chinese financing has also supported Phnom Penh's new international airport, road networks, and numerous other projects. Beyond geographic constraints and extreme weather, the Funan Techo Canal project faces socio-political challenges, particularly protests from farmers and fishers concerned about losing access to water and livelihoods. Civil society groups and researchers have raised concerns over land compensation, limited transparency, and restricted public participation in decision-making; a study by the NGO Forum on Cambodia estimated that the project would affect roughly 2,305 households, or about 11,525 people, including 400 households facing full displacement (CamboJA News, 2026b). Regionally, the project has unsettled Vietnam by reducing its logistical leverage over Cambodia, though this has not yet produced open diplomatic tension (Purba, 2025). On 11 April 2026, Prime Minister Hun Manet and the Chinese ambassador to Cambodia attended the groundbreaking of the canal's second section, with both sides describing the project as a source of social and economic benefit for both countries (CGTN, 2026; Freshnews Asia, 2026).

Overall, the Funan Techo Canal reflects Cambodia's ambition to achieve greater economic self-sufficiency while deepening its strategic relationship with China. The project remains at an early and uneven stage of implementation, and its ultimate success depends on steady technical progress, the government's capacity to build public trust, its willingness to ensure fair treatment of affected residents, and its ability to maintain balanced regional relations. The canal stands as a case study in how large infrastructure projects in developing countries must be managed across political, economic, social, and environmental dimensions at once.

Cambodian Society and the Issue of the Funan Techo Canal Construction

Most Cambodians support the Funan Techo Canal project, largely because they expect it to generate economic benefits, create jobs, and improve transportation infrastructure and water management (J5newsroom, 2025). As a major infrastructure project backed by substantial foreign investment, the canal raises both hope and concern, particularly among residents living along its planned route. Many see the project as an opportunity to develop local economies, create employment, and improve connectivity between regions (Freshnews Asia,

2026), and residents in Kampong Chhnang and Kampong Speu provinces expect the canal to provide more affordable water transport and expand markets for agricultural products (Flynn & Vantha, 2026). The project is thus also read by some as a sign of the government's commitment to equitable and inclusive infrastructure development.

At the same time, the project raises concern over social, economic, and environmental impacts, particularly among farmers, fishers, and landowners directly affected along the construction route, who report anxiety over losing land, livelihoods, and access to clean water (Flynn & Vantha, 2026). Construction may alter river flow patterns, trigger seasonal flooding in low-lying areas, and damage wetland ecosystems and wildlife habitats (Yang et al., 2025). Community and environmental organisations have criticised the limited public participation in project planning and the lack of transparent communication between government and residents, leaving many with the impression that decisions were made unilaterally. One Kandal resident, Dim Mech, told reporters his family still had no clarity on where they would relocate or what would happen to their land if the project proceeded (Nimol, 2026).

Community resistance has also taken the form of protests and petitions. Although not yet widespread, communities in Kampong Speu and Takeo have sought clarification on compensation, land acquisition, and their rights to water and productive land, and some have accused local authorities of providing inadequate information and downplaying China's role as the project's main partner (Nimol, 2026). Media coverage has played a role in shaping public perception here as well: outlets close to the government tend to foreground infrastructure improvements and economic growth (China Daily, 2025), while independent media and social platforms are more likely to highlight residents' concerns and unresolved problems. This divide in coverage suggests that public understanding of the project remains incomplete (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2024).

Community responses also vary with education, access to information, and prior experience with similar projects: urban residents tend to be more optimistic, while directly affected rural communities remain more cautious. Some residents do not oppose construction outright but want a stronger voice in planning and implementation (Eyler, Kwan, & Weatherby, 2024). In response to this criticism, the Cambodian government has stated publicly that land acquisition and compensation will be conducted legally and fairly (Flynn & Vantha, 2026), though this assurance has not fully allayed residents' concerns, particularly given reports that some residents voicing criticism have faced pressure or intimidation from local authorities, suggesting that space for public participation remains limited.

Public response to the Funan Techo Canal, taken as a whole, is varied and complex: the project generates genuine hope alongside significant anxiety and resistance. Sustaining its legitimacy will require the Cambodian government to increase transparency, strengthen communication with the public, and ensure that the concerns of affected communities are heard and addressed (Nimol, 2026); without such efforts, the project risks fuelling prolonged social discontent.

Image Building Through Media

China uses the media effectively to build a positive narrative that strengthens Cambodian public support for the Funan Techo Canal project. The canal symbolises economic

cooperation between the two countries, but the coverage surrounding it also reflects a deliberate Chinese diplomatic communication strategy aimed at securing local support. This strategy relies not only on economic and political engagement but also on media diplomacy as a tool for shaping public opinion in favour of the project, applying media framing so that support for the canal appears to reflect a broad and realistic consensus among the Cambodian public.

Define Problem

To build public support for the Funan Techo Canal, China relies on the media as a key instrument alongside direct investment. The Chinese government constructs a narrative around the benefits of strategic BRI projects in Cambodia through state-owned outlets such as CGTN, Xinhua, and China Daily, working in partnership with local Cambodian media such as the Phnom Penh Post, to foreground the project's economic benefits and infrastructure development.

A Xinhua report published on 6 August 2024 covered the groundbreaking ceremony in Kandal province, where Prime Minister Hun Manet explained that the canal would connect Phnom Penh with a coastal port in Preah Sihanouk province, facilitating trade and strengthening Cambodia's autonomy through greater cargo capacity on the waterway (Huaxia, 2024a). A CGTN article on the project, titled "China-Cambodia Cooperation: Second section of Funan Techo Canal project launched," similarly quoted the Cambodian prime minister describing the canal as a strategically significant infrastructure project connecting Cambodia's river system to open water and increasing the country's water transport capacity, thereby contributing to economic development and trade growth (CGTN, 2026).

Chinese media coverage frames the Funan Techo Canal as a strategic solution to Cambodia's development challenges, evident in its consistent emphasis on economic benefit, improved connectivity, and national independence. This selective emphasis indicates that the media is not merely reporting on construction but guiding audiences to understand the project as an urgent national need. Issues with greater potential to generate negative perceptions, such as environmental impact, community relocation, or concerns raised by neighbouring countries, receive comparatively little coverage. This pattern illustrates Entman's problem-defining function at work in the selection of issues, positioning the canal as a solution to Cambodia's development challenges rather than as a contested project.

China's media-based diplomatic strategy aligns with Gilboa's (2008) model of media diplomacy, which treats media as a central actor in modern diplomacy. Through this model, China seeks to communicate strategic messages directly to the public, not only to introduce the project but also to construct the perception that the canal solves Cambodia's logistical and economic challenges and reduces its dependence on neighbouring countries.

Diagnose Cause

Consistent with this problem definition, Chinese media coverage also foregrounds Cambodia's structural limitations: constrained water transport connectivity, high logistics costs, dependence on neighbouring countries' trade routes, and the need to strengthen national economic independence (Taing, 2025). These constraints are presented as obstacles to Cambodia's economic growth. Dependence on Vietnamese ports for import and export flows

raises logistics costs, lengthens distribution times, and limits Cambodia's trade independence, illustrating the barriers Cambodia faces in realising its economic potential and participating more fully in regional and international trade (Ferida, 2024). Chinese reporting emphasises that these constraints have limited Cambodia's engagement in international trade and that high costs and weak connectivity directly undermine competitiveness and supply-chain efficiency (VOV, 2025). From an Entman framing perspective, Chinese media consistently attribute the roots of Cambodia's economic difficulties to external factors — limited sea access, high logistics costs, dependence on Vietnamese trade routes — rather than to internal issues such as governance capacity, development policy, or the level of domestic investment. This selection of causes reinforces the legitimacy of the canal as a rational and necessary solution, and in doing so simultaneously justifies China's role as a development partner: by foregrounding these causes, the media constructs an argument that the Funan Techo Canal serves not only as economic infrastructure but also as a step toward strengthening Cambodia's economic autonomy and reducing its dependence on Vietnam amid ongoing regional competition (Pisei, 2026).

Criticism of the project, whether domestic or from neighbouring states such as Vietnam, which has raised concern over reduced water flow in the Mekong, disruption to river ecosystems and fisheries, and the strengthening of Chinese influence in Cambodia, is frequently framed in Chinese coverage as a misunderstanding or an attempt to obstruct Cambodia's national development. Portraying environmental and geopolitical criticism this way functions to delegitimise counter-narratives, leading audiences to interpret criticism not as input worth considering but as an obstacle to Cambodia's progress.

Make Moral Judgments

China emphasises its cultural and historical closeness to Cambodia, including long-standing ties and the personal rapport between the two countries' leaders, to bolster public trust by framing the canal as an act of brotherhood rather than domination, a narrative supported by both state and local media. Chinese outlets have sought to delegitimise criticism by asserting that the project underwent comprehensive feasibility and environmental impact studies, and by associating critics with foreign political agendas said to run counter to Cambodian interests (Käkönen, 2023). This communication strategy thus not only promotes the project but also works to close off space for counter-discourse.

China has also reinforced this positive narrative through the symbolic and political endorsement of Cambodian leaders, most notably Prime Minister Hun Manet, whose appearances in coverage of the project serve as evidence that it reflects a shared aspiration rather than a unilateral Chinese agenda (Freshnews Asia, 2026). This reporting pattern shows Chinese media constructing moral legitimacy by linking the project to values of friendship, cooperation, and shared development; Hun Manet's presence functions not only as a source of information but as a symbol that the project carries the full support of the Cambodian government, framing it as the outcome of equal cooperation rather than Chinese dominance.

A report by Kampuchea Thmey Daily titled "Cambodia launches construction of major Funan Techo canal section" illustrates this pattern (Son, 2026). The article foregrounds the project's progress and economic benefits, opening with the launch of construction on the canal's second section, framed as a strategic achievement for Cambodia. The 151-kilometre distance from Prek Po in Kandal province to Kep on the coast is presented as a major

infrastructure milestone that will connect the Mekong River system directly to the Gulf of Thailand (Son, 2026). Coverage of Hun Manet leading the inauguration ceremony alongside the Chinese ambassador reinforces the narrative that the project carries the full backing of the government and its international partners (Sothearith, 2025). Notably, this coverage contains little negative framing, emphasising phrases such as “strengthen logistics networks,” “support trade and economic growth,” and “enhance water transport capacity” without addressing environmental concerns, resident protests, or geopolitical tension with Vietnam, all of which remain contested aspects of the project (CGTN, 2026). This coverage portrays the Funan Techo Canal as a mutually beneficial partnership, positioning China as a trustworthy partner oriented toward Cambodian welfare.

The omission of environmental issues, public protest, or geopolitical implications suggests that the media consistently foregrounds content that supports the project’s positive image while limiting the visibility of issues capable of provoking public opposition. This pattern aligns with Entman’s framing concept, which emphasises particular moral values to shape favourable evaluations of a policy, and with Gilboa’s model of media diplomacy, in which such reporting functions as a foreign policy instrument constructing China’s image as a responsible, trustworthy development partner that respects Cambodia’s national interests.

Treatment Recommendation

Chinese media present the Funan Techo Canal as a solution to Cambodia’s infrastructure limitations, particularly in water transport, given that most of the country’s international trade still passes through the Mekong River and Vietnamese ports without direct access to open water (Global Times, 2024). The canal, intended to connect Phnom Penh directly to the Gulf of Thailand, is presented as a means for Cambodia to reduce its dependence on Vietnam, secure an alternative export-import route under full Cambodian control, and improve the efficiency of shipping goods from industrial and agricultural areas to domestic ports (CGTN, 2026).

The canal is also presented as a driver of economic development through job creation: Xinhua reported that construction of the second section alone has created thousands of jobs for local residents while stimulating development in neighbouring provinces (Huaxia, 2026). Chinese media thus frame the canal not merely as an alternative infrastructure project but as the most fitting solution to Cambodia’s array of economic challenges. Coverage consistently emphasises logistical efficiency, expanded trade, job creation, and strengthened economic sovereignty (CGTN, 2026), a dominant narrative that leads readers toward the conclusion that the canal represents a logical and beneficial choice.

The canal is thus presented as a strategic effort to strengthen Cambodia’s economic sovereignty, with China cast as a supportive development partner and the project framed as a remedy for national development imbalances. In this way, Chinese media cultivate a supportive public perception while dampening domestic and international criticism. Notably, the media’s proposed solutions rarely engage with alternative policy options or the project’s potential risks, suggesting that this framing is oriented more toward reinforcing the project’s legitimacy than toward presenting a balanced range of perspectives. Media coverage of the Funan Techo Canal

therefore functions as an instrument of public diplomacy that supports China's strategic interests by shaping favourable public opinion in Cambodia.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that China's public diplomacy around the Funan Techo Canal frames the project as strategic infrastructure that delivers economic benefit, strengthens connectivity, and reduces Cambodia's logistical dependence on its neighbours. Chinese and Cambodian state-aligned media coverage consistently emphasises mutually beneficial cooperation while giving limited attention to sensitive issues such as environmental impact, population relocation, and geopolitical concern, and in doing so plays a central role in cultivating a positive image of China as a responsible development partner. Two findings stand out. First, Chinese media consistently emphasise narratives of development benefit to build public support for the canal, applying Entman's four framing functions in sequence to define the project as a solution rather than a controversy. Second, Cambodian public response is mixed but generally positive: the canal is widely viewed as a symbol of economic opportunity, even as some residents, particularly those directly affected by construction, remain critical over unresolved compensation, transparency, and environmental concerns. Recent developments, including the stalled progress on the canal's first section through early 2026 and China's disclosure of concrete financing terms only in July 2026, indicate that the project's legitimacy remains a continuing communicative task rather than a settled outcome. These findings suggest that China's communication strategy is aimed not only at reinforcing the project's legitimacy but also at shaping public perception at both the local and international level, underscoring the media's role as an instrument of China's broader public diplomacy in Southeast Asia.

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