

The Mechanism of Overseas Image Communication of State-Owned Enterprises in Shaping National Image: A Grounded Theory Analysis Based on Sinopec

Xinyang Li*

Communication University of China, Beijing, China

*Corresponding Author

Abstract: In the context of evolving global communication, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) have become important actors in shaping national image. Taking Sinopec as a case, this study adopts a grounded theory approach based on 62 overseas operation reports to explore the mechanism through which SOEs' communication contributes to national image construction. The findings reveal a dynamic process consisting of top-level design, discourse construction and communication expansion. SOEs function as a practical intermediary by translating abstract national values into tangible experiences. This study provides a mechanism-based explanation for the relationship between corporate communication and national image.

Keywords: State-Owned Enterprises; National Image; International Communication; Grounded Theory; Mechanism

1. Introductions

In recent years, the global communication landscape has undergone significant transformation, accompanied by intensified competition over national image. As cross-border interactions deepen, national image is no longer constructed solely by governments, but increasingly shaped through the participation of multiple actors. Among these, enterprises—especially state-owned enterprises (SOEs)—have emerged as key intermediaries linking national narratives and international perceptions.

With the expansion of Chinese enterprises in global markets, their activities in infrastructure development, energy cooperation, and social responsibility have generated substantial influence. These practices not only carry economic implications but also contribute to

shaping how foreign publics perceive China. However, in a complex international communication environment, national image construction continues to face challenges such as cognitive bias and asymmetrical discourse structures.

Existing studies on national image primarily focus on macro-level communication strategies or media narratives, while the role of enterprises—particularly SOEs—has received relatively limited attention. Given their unique institutional background and extensive overseas engagement, SOEs possess distinctive advantages in participating in national image construction. Therefore, it is necessary to explore how SOEs influence national image through their communication practices.

This study takes Sinopec as a case and employs grounded theory to analyze its overseas communication texts. By examining micro-level practices, the study aims to uncover the underlying mechanism through which SOEs' overseas image communication contributes to national image construction.

2. Literature Review

2.1 National Image Construction

Research on national image originated in the fields of international relations and public diplomacy, where it is generally conceptualized as the overall perception and evaluation of a country within the international community. Western scholarship has extensively examined national image from the perspective of nation branding, focusing on its components and communication pathways.

Simon Anholt proposes the well-known “nation brand hexagon,” which conceptualizes national image across multiple dimensions[1,2], including governance, culture, people, exports, tourism, and investment. From this perspective, national image is understood as a

multidimensional cognitive construct shaped by diverse factors.

From the standpoint of communication and cultural studies, Stuart Hall's theory of representation provides a crucial theoretical foundation. Hall argues that meaning is constructed through discourse and symbolic systems[3] implying that national image is not an objective entity but a dynamic outcome continuously produced and reproduced through communicative interaction. Building on this perspective, Fan conceptualizes nation branding as a process of symbolization, emphasizing encoding and decoding mechanisms[4], while Dinnie highlights the strategic management of national image from a branding perspective[5]. In recent years, research in international communication has shifted from a state-centered paradigm to a multi-actor framework. Pamment argues that national image construction increasingly involves the participation of governments, corporations, and social organizations[6]. At the same time, as enterprises become more deeply embedded in global networks, their transnational activities have emerged as an important component of national image formation.

Within the Chinese academic context, research has primarily focused on national soft power and international communication capacity. Scholars have examined the strategic significance of cultural influence as well as the transformation of communication practices from simple information dissemination to perception-oriented engagement[7,8]. These studies highlight the growing complexity of national image construction but remain largely focused on macro-level analysis.

2.2 Corporate Communication and National Image

The relationship between corporate image and national image has become an important topic in interdisciplinary research. Wally Olins argues that, in the context of globalization, corporate brands and national brands are highly interconnected, with corporations capable of shaping how a nation is perceived[9]. Similarly, Kotler and colleagues emphasize that products and services serve as tangible carriers of national image[10].

Empirical studies further support this relationship. Research on the country-of-origin effect suggests that consumer evaluations of

products are influenced by perceptions of the producing country, while corporate performance can, in turn, reshape national image[11]. Fetscherin proposes a symbiotic relationship between corporate brands and national brands, highlighting their mutual influence and dynamic interaction[12].

With the deepening of globalization, corporations are increasingly regarded as informal diplomatic actors. Through investment, employment, and corporate social responsibility activities, multinational enterprises generate embedded influence within host societies, thereby contributing to national image construction[13]. In this context, the concept of corporate diplomacy has emerged, emphasizing the role of enterprises in cross-cultural communication and coordination.

Domestic research has largely focused on the overseas expansion of Chinese enterprises and their role in image communication. Existing studies examine corporate diplomacy practices, the role of social responsibility, and the importance of narrative strategies in shaping national image. For instance, Tian analyzes corporate diplomacy practices in overseas contexts[14], while He highlights the limitations of relying solely on social responsibility activities[15]. Deng emphasizes the importance of storytelling and narrative construction in shaping national image[16], and Jiang et al. examine the role of new media in enhancing corporate image communication[17].

2.3 Overseas Communication of SOEs

With the advancement of large-scale international cooperation initiatives, the overseas communication of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Existing studies generally agree that SOEs possess both economic and institutional attributes, and their overseas activities carry dual implications—economic engagement and representational significance.

Some studies focus on practical pathways, suggesting that infrastructure development and social responsibility initiatives contribute to improving national reputation. For example, Liao argues that infrastructure construction and social engagement enhance national reputation[18] while Yu demonstrates that political environments and institutional perceptions significantly influence how SOEs are perceived abroad[19]. Qin, from a social

media perspective, analyzes the communication challenges faced by SOEs[20].

At the same time, scholars have begun to explore the role of culture and narrative in shaping communication outcomes. Zhu points out that corporate communication in the digital era has become increasingly interactive and diversified[21]. Related studies further emphasize that incorporating external perspectives and cross-cultural engagement can enhance audience identification and acceptance.

2.4 Research Gap and Contribution

In summary, although existing literature has examined national image, corporate communication, and international communication from multiple perspectives, several limitations remain. First, national image studies tend to focus on macro-level narratives while overlooking micro-level actors and practices. Second, research on corporate communication primarily emphasizes branding and market logic, with insufficient attention to the institutional characteristics and representational roles of SOEs. Third, most studies rely on descriptive analysis and lack mechanism-based theoretical explanations.

To address these gaps, this study takes Sinopec as a case and adopts a grounded theory approach

to analyze corporate communication texts. By constructing a mechanism model consisting of top-level design, discourse construction, communication expansion, and image feedback, the study aims to provide a systematic explanation of how SOEs' overseas communication contributes to national image construction. In doing so, it offers a new theoretical perspective for understanding multi-actor participation in national image formation.

3. Research Design

3.1 Methodology

This study adopts grounded theory as its primary research method. Grounded theory emphasizes generating theory from empirical data and is particularly suitable for exploring complex social processes where existing theoretical frameworks are insufficient.

Compared with quantitative methods that rely on hypothesis testing, grounded theory focuses on uncovering hidden patterns and mechanisms through systematic coding. Given that this study aims to explain how SOEs influence national image, grounded theory provides an appropriate methodological approach. The grounded theory analysis process is illustrated in Figure 1.

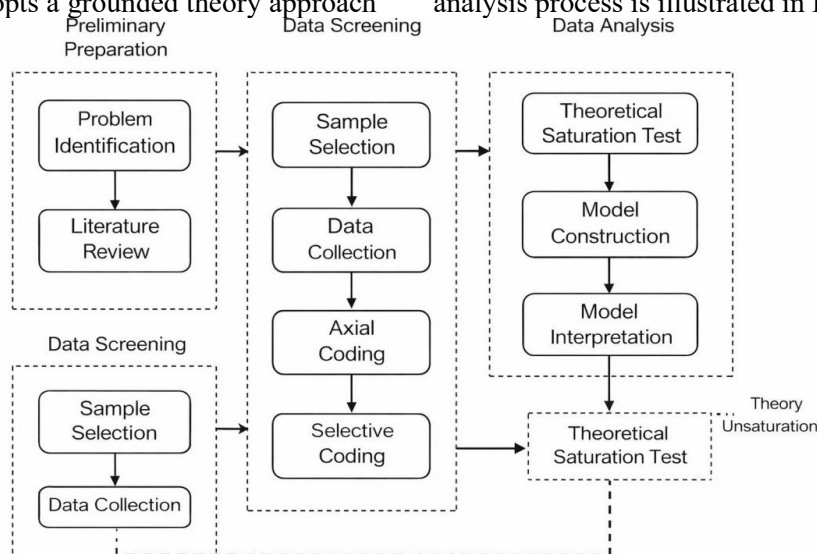


Figure 1. Grounded Theory Analysis Framework

3.2 Data Collection

The study selects Sinopec as the research case due to its extensive global operations and representative nature among Chinese SOEs. A total of 62 overseas operation reports published on the company's official website are collected as research data.

These texts cover multiple regions, including the Middle East, Africa, and Southeast Asia, and involve various aspects such as project construction, corporate social responsibility, and cultural exchange. Compared with third-party reports, official texts better reflect the company's intended communication strategy.

3.3 Coding Process

The coding process follows three stages:

1. Open Coding: Extracting initial concepts from raw data
2. Axial Coding: Establishing relationships among categories
3. Selective Coding: Integrating categories into a theoretical framework

Through continuous comparison, the study

identifies key categories and constructs a mechanism model.

4. Model Construction and Analytical Framework

4.1 From Empirical Coding to Conceptual Abstraction

Table 1. Open Coding Results

Raw Data (Excerpt)	Concept	Initial Category
“Your service demonstrates impressive Chinese speed and quality...”	Chinese quality	Characteristics and Advantages
“The team completed 78 well operations... continuously setting ‘Chinese speed’ records”	Chinese speed	Characteristics and Advantages
Cooperation with Saudi Aramco to establish a petroleum training institute	Advanced productivity	Characteristics and Advantages
Safety training and emergency response plans implemented in offshore projects	Well-established emergency system	Characteristics and Advantages
Recognition for preventing potential safety accidents	Risk prevention	Characteristics and Advantages
Learning from international management practices while overcoming communication barriers	Selective learning and adaptation	Characteristics and Advantages
Activities showcasing corporate image to international audiences	Telling China’s stories well	Discourse System
Training programs for local employees to enhance skills	Promoting Chinese spirit	Discourse System
Cultural dialogue between China and Saudi Arabia	Communicating China’s voice	Discourse System
Cultural exchange activities (e.g., food sharing, festivals)	“Other-oriented” discourse	Discourse System
Projects promoting oil production and international cooperation	Promoting international cooperation	International Strategy
Joint refinery projects as flagship overseas investments	“Going global” strategy	International Strategy
Media coverage and international communication campaigns	Belt and Road communication	International Strategy
Infrastructure projects improving local livelihoods (e.g., water systems)	Employment creation	Major Country Responsibility
High-quality project construction and safety management	High-quality development	Major Country Responsibility
Cultural exchange and mutual learning initiatives	Civilizational exchange	Cultural Soft Power
Cultural integration activities (calligraphy, food, etc.)	Cultural identity	Cultural Soft Power
Technological innovation and engineering achievements	Innovation capability	Position and Goals
Contributions to local economic development	Economic development	Position and Goals
Employee welfare and team cohesion initiatives	People-oriented approach	Value Orientation
Hard work and perseverance in project execution	Work ethic	Value Orientation
Refined and regionalized management strategies	Management methods	Management System
Differentiated marketing strategies	Strategic management	Management System
Volunteer activities and community engagement	Social responsibility	Management System
Industry benchmarking and leadership	Industry benchmark	Industry Position
Talent development and training systems	Talent development mechanism	Team Building
Cross-cultural teamwork and employee care	Humanistic care	Team Building
Environmental protection practices	Environmental sustainability	Ecological Development
Green initiatives and sustainability projects	Sustainable development	Ecological Development
Brand promotion in international markets	Brand image	Brand Building
Long-term safety records and reputation	Market reputation	Brand Building

Building upon the grounded theory methodology, this study systematically transforms raw empirical materials into analytically meaningful categories. Through iterative open coding, a large number of fragmented concepts are extracted from textual data. These concepts are then grouped through axial coding into higher-order categories based on their internal logic and semantic proximity.

Unlike purely descriptive categorization, this process reflects a transition from empirical observation to conceptual abstraction. The categories identified—top-level design, discourse construction, and communication expansion—are not merely thematic clusters but represent distinct analytical dimensions that correspond to different layers of national image construction.

More specifically, these dimensions can be understood as forming a multi-level analytical structure:

Institutional level → top-level design

Symbolic level → discourse construction

Practical level → communication expansion

This layered structure enables a more systematic understanding of how national image is constructed across different domains. The open coding results are summarized in Table 1, which presents representative excerpts, corresponding concepts, and initial categories derived from the data.

4.2 Relational Dynamics and Process Logic

At the stage of selective coding, the core concern shifts from categorization to relationship-building. The study identifies a central process through which SOEs mediate between national narratives and international

perceptions.

This mediation process is characterized by sequential transformation:

1. Institutional frameworks provide normative guidance

2. Discursive practices translate abstract values into communicable narratives

3. Organizational actions embed these narratives into real-world practices

4. Audience perceptions are formed and fed back into the system

Importantly, this process is not linear but recursive. Feedback loops enable continuous adjustment, making national image construction a dynamic and adaptive system. As shown in Table 2, the initial categories are further integrated into higher-order dimensions, including top-level design, discourse construction, and communication expansion.

Table 2. Axial Coding and Category Integration

Core Category	Initial Category	Description
Top-Level Design	Cultural Soft Power	Refers to cultural influence, value appeal, and international attractiveness
	Value Orientation	Reflects core values and ideological positioning in communication
	Management System	Institutional arrangements and governance mechanisms shaping image construction
	Position and Goals	Strategic objectives and positioning in international communication
Discourse Construction	Characteristics and Advantages	Demonstration of strengths such as efficiency, quality, and technology
	International Strategy	Global engagement and strategic communication practices
	Discourse System	Narrative construction combining self-representation and external perspectives
	Major Country Responsibility	Representation of responsibility in global governance and development
Communication Expansion	Industry Position	Establishing leadership through technological and industrial performance
	Team Building	Cross-cultural workforce integration and organizational cohesion
	Ecological Development	Environmental protection and sustainable development practices
	Brand Building	Enhancing corporate and national image through branding strategies

4.3 Explanation of Open Coding Results

Table 1 presents the results of the open coding process, in which raw textual materials were systematically analyzed and conceptualized. Through line-by-line examination, a large number of initial concepts were extracted and subsequently grouped into preliminary

categories based on their semantic similarity and functional relevance.

The results indicate that the identified concepts mainly cluster into several thematic areas. First, a significant portion of the data reflects the operational strengths and performance characteristics of SOEs, such as efficiency, technological capability, and safety management.

These elements highlight the role of organizational competence in shaping external perceptions.

Second, a number of concepts relate to discursive practices, including narrative strategies, cultural communication, and the incorporation of external voices. These findings suggest that SOEs actively construct meaning through both self-representation and the inclusion of “other-oriented” perspectives, thereby enhancing credibility and resonance.

Third, the data reveal a strong emphasis on international engagement and responsibility, as reflected in concepts such as cooperation, employment generation, and infrastructure development. These elements indicate that overseas practices are closely linked to broader perceptions of responsibility and contribution.

In addition, concepts related to organizational values and management practices, such as people-oriented approaches, teamwork, and refined management, further demonstrate how internal organizational logic is translated into externally visible actions.

Overall, the open coding results suggest that SOEs’ overseas communication is not limited to symbolic expression but is deeply embedded in practical activities, providing a foundation for subsequent theoretical abstraction.

4.4 Explanation of Axial Coding and Category Integration

Table 2 presents the results of axial coding, where initial categories are further integrated into higher-order conceptual dimensions. By examining the relationships among categories, three core dimensions are identified: top-level design, discourse construction, and communication expansion.

The first dimension, top-level design, encompasses categories such as cultural soft power, value orientation, management systems, and strategic positioning. These elements represent the institutional and normative foundation of national image construction. They provide the overarching framework within which communication practices are organized and implemented.

The second dimension, discourse construction, includes categories related to strengths and advantages, international strategies, discourse systems, and responsibility narratives. This dimension highlights the process of meaning production, in which organizational practices are

framed and communicated through structured narratives. It reflects how abstract values are translated into communicable forms.

The third dimension, communication expansion, consists of categories such as industry positioning, team building, ecological development, and brand construction. This dimension captures the practical aspect of communication, emphasizing how meaning is embedded in concrete actions and interactions. It demonstrates that communication extends beyond textual representation to include experiential and practice-based elements.

Together, these three dimensions form an integrated analytical framework that explains how SOEs’ overseas activities contribute to national image construction. The transition from initial categories to core dimensions also reflects the movement from descriptive analysis to theoretical abstraction, laying the foundation for the development of the mechanism model in the subsequent section.

4.5 A Process-Based Mechanism Model

The proposed model consists of four interrelated stages:

1. Top-Level Design
2. Discourse Construction
3. Communication Expansion
4. Image Feedback

Rather than representing discrete steps, these stages form a continuous cycle of interaction. The model emphasizes that national image is not simply transmitted but co-produced through interaction between actors and audiences. Based on the coding results, a mechanism model of national image construction in the context of SOEs’ overseas communication is developed, as shown in Figure 2.

5. Mechanism Explanation

5.1 Top-Level Design: Institutional Input in National Image Construction

Top-level design in SOEs’ image communication encompasses multiple dimensions, including cultural influence at the cognitive level, value orientation at the content level, management systems at the procedural level, and strategic positioning at the goal-oriented level. Together, these elements form a comprehensive framework that guides the construction of national image.

Traditionally, national image construction has

often relied on self-centered narratives that emphasize internal representation. However, in international communication contexts, such approaches risk becoming self-referential and limited in their effectiveness. To overcome this limitation, SOEs need to integrate a global perspective by incorporating both self-awareness and external viewpoints. This involves engaging with the discursive frameworks of international audiences and acknowledging how external observers perceive and interpret their activities. By incorporating external perspectives, SOEs can move beyond unilateral self-presentation and achieve a more balanced and credible representation. This approach not only reflects a responsible engagement with global audiences but also helps establish a more objective and multidimensional cognitive foundation for communication.

At the content level, SOEs convey diverse values and principles through their communication practices, with the broader goal of fostering a national image that is credible, relatable, and respectable. For example, initiatives that address practical challenges faced by overseas employees—such as providing

support services for families—demonstrate values such as cooperation, mutual support, and social responsibility. These practices translate abstract values into concrete actions, making them more accessible and meaningful to international audiences.

At the procedural level, SOEs adopt localized and refined management approaches in their overseas operations. By adapting organizational practices to local contexts, they demonstrate flexibility, responsibility, and professionalism. Such practices not only enhance operational effectiveness but also contribute to shaping perceptions of reliability and trustworthiness.

Finally, at the goal-oriented level, SOEs emphasize contributions such as economic development, technological innovation, and professional expertise. These objectives provide direction for national image construction by aligning communication practices with broader developmental outcomes.

Overall, top-level design provides a structured and coherent foundation for national image construction, enabling SOEs to present a more nuanced, multidimensional, and credible image in the international arena.

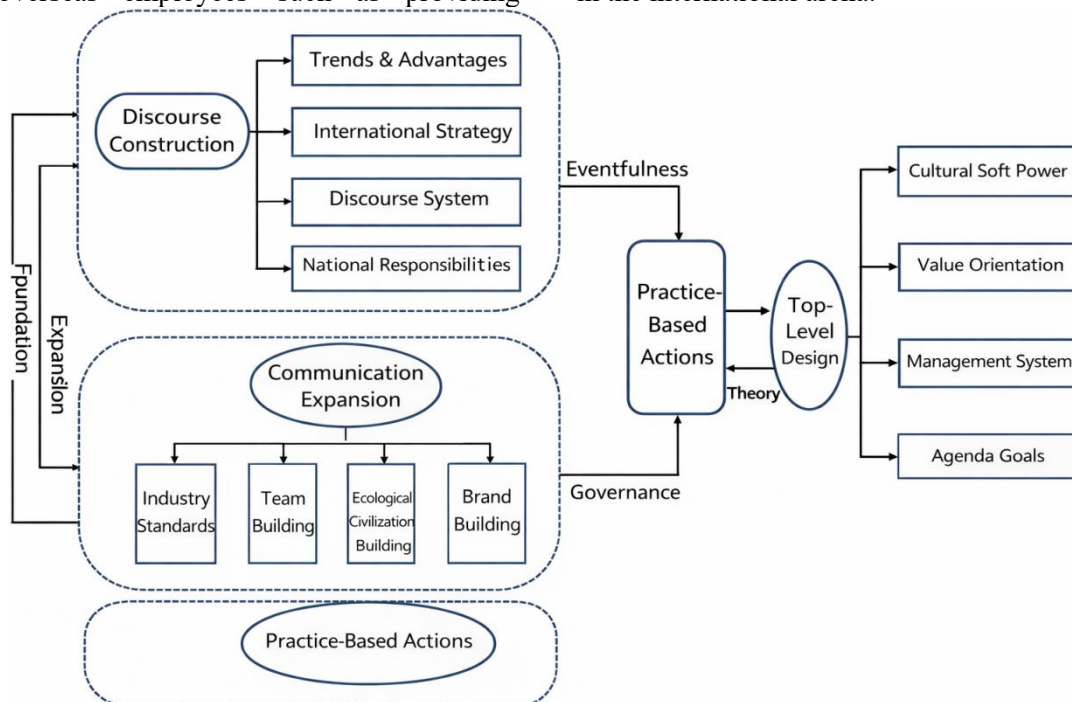


Figure 2. Mechanism Model of National Image Construction in the Overseas Image Communication of State-Owned Enterprises

5.2 Discourse Expression: Meaning Construction and Narrative Mediation
 Discourse expression constitutes the core

process through which national image is communicated. It involves the transmission of information, perspectives, and emotional elements through various media channels. In the

context of overseas communication, discourse expression not only conveys corporate identity but also plays a central role in representing national values and cultural characteristics.

First, discourse expression is grounded in the demonstration of organizational capabilities. For instance, in overseas projects, SOEs often highlight attributes such as efficiency, quality, and technological expertise. These narratives function as forms of self-representation, emphasizing tangible strengths and establishing credibility.

Second, discourse expression embodies a value-oriented dimension. Beyond presenting products and services, SOEs use communication to convey broader values and cultural principles. By integrating these values into narratives, communication becomes a means of expressing cultural identity and enhancing international understanding.

Importantly, effective discourse expression requires a combination of self-narratives and external perspectives. Incorporating voices from local stakeholders—such as employees, partners, and communities—enhances authenticity and reduces the perception of unilateral messaging. This dual narrative structure strengthens both credibility and resonance.

Furthermore, discourse expression is closely linked to international engagement strategies. Through communication initiatives that emphasize cooperation, shared development, and mutual benefit, SOEs position themselves within broader global interactions. By highlighting contributions such as employment opportunities and collaborative projects, communication extends beyond representation to demonstrate responsibility and commitment.

In this sense, discourse expression serves as a bridge between organizational practice and audience perception, translating abstract values into meaningful narratives that can be understood across cultural contexts.

5.3 Communication Expansion: Practice-Based Extension of National Image

Communication expansion represents the extension of discourse into practical domains. It reflects a shift from symbolic representation to practice-based communication, where meaning is conveyed through concrete actions and experiences.

At the industry level, SOEs demonstrate their leadership through technological innovation and

operational excellence. By showcasing advanced technologies and project achievements, they contribute to perceptions of capability and competitiveness. The combination of internal narratives and external recognition creates a multidimensional representation that reinforces credibility.

In terms of team development, SOEs emphasize the cultivation of internationally oriented, professionally competent, and culturally adaptable personnel. Through internal training and cross-cultural interaction, employees become effective communicators who embody organizational and national values. This contributes to a more approachable and inclusive image.

In the domain of environmental sustainability, SOEs actively implement environmentally responsible practices. Through initiatives such as ecological protection, green technologies, and sustainable development projects, they contribute to global environmental efforts. These practices enhance perceptions of responsibility and reinforce positive associations.

Brand construction further extends communication by promoting corporate identity on a global scale. Through storytelling, historical narratives, and value-based messaging, SOEs build recognizable and trustworthy brands. Media engagement, public relations activities, and digital platforms amplify this process, increasing visibility and influence.

Crucially, these dimensions are not isolated. Their integration generates a synergistic effect, where multiple forms of communication reinforce each other. By constructing an image that is professional, responsible, and approachable, SOEs enhance both their own competitiveness and the broader perception of national image.

6. Practical Implications

6.1 Strengthening Top-Level Design: Building a Value-Oriented and Institutionally Embedded Communication Foundation

From a mechanism perspective, top-level design determines the direction and boundaries of national image construction. Therefore, SOEs should integrate development-oriented values with their operational logic, achieving alignment between value orientation and institutional arrangements.

On the one hand, guiding principles such as

high-quality development, green transformation, and mutual benefit should be translated into concrete and actionable practices. This enables national image to move beyond abstract narratives and become embedded in organizational behavior. On the other hand, communication should be institutionalized within the enterprise's global operations, for example through cross-departmental coordination mechanisms and standardized communication procedures, thereby enhancing consistency and stability.

Through this process, national image construction shifts from external expression to an internally embedded mechanism, improving its sustainability and structural coherence.

6.2 Optimizing Discourse Construction: Enhancing Meaning Translation in Cross-Cultural Contexts

At the level of discourse construction, the key lies in improving the intelligibility and acceptability of national narratives. Existing research suggests that a single, self-referential narrative is insufficient to generate effective identification in complex international environments, making diversified narrative strategies necessary.

First, greater emphasis should be placed on incorporating "other-oriented narratives," drawing on the perspectives of local employees, partners, and communities to enhance authenticity and persuasiveness. Second, communication should be adapted to cross-cultural contexts by translating abstract values into universally relatable narratives. For instance, emphasis can shift from national achievements to shared development experiences, thereby reducing barriers to understanding.

In addition, reliance on grand narratives should be avoided. Instead, concrete cases and everyday practices should be used to construct "micro-narrative units," allowing national image to be conveyed through specific and relatable details. This transition from macro-level discourse to micro-level narratives contributes to enhancing both the accessibility and interpretability of national image.

6.3 Deepening Communication Expansion: Promoting Experiential Expression through Practical Embedding

The core of communication expansion lies in

translating national image into practice through concrete actions. Compared with purely informational communication, practice-based embedding exerts a deeper influence on audience perception.

Specifically, SOEs should utilize project implementation, social responsibility initiatives, and cultural interaction as key carriers of communication. High-standard project execution and technological innovation can strengthen perceptions of capability, while employment generation and community development contribute to positive moral evaluations. Meanwhile, everyday cultural interaction fosters emotional resonance and identification.

More importantly, these practices should be systematically integrated with communication strategies so that actions themselves become communicative expressions. This shift—from "communicating practices" to "practice as communication"—helps overcome the limitations of traditional communication models and enhances the credibility and tangibility of national image

7. Conclusion

This study explores the mechanism through which SOEs' overseas communication contributes to national image construction using grounded theory. The findings indicate that SOEs function as practical intermediaries, linking national narratives with international perceptions.

The proposed mechanism model—top-level design, discourse construction, and communication expansion—demonstrates that national image is constructed through a dynamic process involving narrative, practice, and cognition.

The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of national image construction by integrating micro-level practices into existing frameworks. It also provides practical insights for enhancing international communication capacity.

However, the study has limitations, such as reliance on a single case and official texts. Future research may incorporate multiple cases and diverse data sources to enhance generalizability.

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