

THE COMPOSITE NATIONAL IMAGE OF CHINA IN AWARD-WINNING INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION: A GROUNDED THEORY ANALYSIS OF CHINA NEWS AWARDS (2016–2025)*

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Abstract

This study examines the national image of China, as portrayed in award-winning international communication works, which have been recognized by the China News Awards (International Communication Category) from 2016 to 2025 (26th to 35th sessions). Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, this research takes a comprehensive dataset of 396 award-winning pieces and inductively gets the core narrative structure. The analysis shows a "four-in-one" composite image, where the central category is identified by selective coding, which depicts China as a Civilizational Country, an Eastern Major Country, a Responsible Major Country, and a Socialist Major Country. These four dimensions constitute an integrated narrative framework. This study expands international communication scholarship by showing empirically how a states strategic

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national image is built through long-term agenda integration, cross-cutting frame stabilization, and multi-layered narrative consolidation. The findings challenge the existing models by showing a deeply integrated and internally consistent logic that supports China's official external communication strategy.

Keywords: National Image, China, International Communication, Grounded Theory

Introduction

In a time when geopolitical rivalry is more intense and global media is disordered, states are focusing on building and spreading national image to strengthen their soft power and discursive influence (Nye, 2004; Shambaugh, 2013). Mass media is the main medium for this process, it shapes the perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations of nations from international audiences (Thussu, 2018).

Over the past decade, China has invested a lot in multilingual platforms and digital initiatives, which is guided by the strategic goal of "telling China's story well" (Zhao, 2018). This directive has evolved over the study period, which shows a growing need to match internal narrative goals with the external reception complexities. A key platform for recognizing excellence in this endeavor is the China News Award (CNA), which is China's most respected journalistic honor. Its International Communication category, established to reward works that effectively convey China's narrative to the world, Liu (2018) provides a unique textual corpus for analysis. These award-winning works, made by major state media organizations such as Xinhua News Agency and China Media Group, are chosen according to international appeal, innovation, and professional quality. We recognize that this state-sanctioned corpus represents a national image that is not the whole of China's media landscape, but its analysis essential. It provides the most comprehensive understanding of the

officially recognized and strategically valued narratives designed for global audiences. Therefore, this study does not just examine tactical strategies, but focuses on the important content of the national image that arises from these long-term, institutionally recognized communication practices. Here is a key tension: China's internally coherent narrative goals are translated and adapted for a global information environment that is often skeptical or contested.

Objectives

This study seeks to resolve the fundamental question: What is the national image of China that has been built through its award-winning international communication works? To address this, the research has three specific objectives.

1. To determine the main thematic dimensions and key components of China's national image, as outlined in the selected corpus.
2. To analyze the internal logic and relational framework that link these dimensions into a cohesive narrative.
3. To interpret this constructed image from theoretical perspective of agenda-setting, framing, and strategic narrative, so that we can understand the mechanisms of its construction and stabilization over time.

Literature Review

This study is in the intersection of national image studies, China's international communication, and qualitative media analysis.

National Image as a Strategic Construct

The concept of national image is vital international relations and communication studies, usually defined as the cognitive and affective perceptions of a country that foreign publics hold (Boulding, 1956). Contemporary scholarship, which is heavily influenced by Nye's (2004) work on

soft power, sees national image not as a passive reflection, but as a strategic asset actively built and projected via public diplomacy and media efforts. But research usually shows a "credibility gap" between a state's intended message and its reception, especially for non-Western powers challenging established global narratives (Anholt, 2007).

China's Quest for International Discursive Power

China has made efforts to improve its international image, which has drawn a lot of scholarly attention. Studies have documented its transition from reactive propaganda to a more advanced, multi-platform international communication strategy (Brady, 2015; Zhao, 2018). Recent scholarship emphasizes the "platformization" of external communication and the application of digital diplomacy (Knoerich, 2023). While a lot of research has been focused on specific campaigns (like the Belt and Road Initiative) or the effectiveness of individual media outlets, a comprehensive understanding of the core, underlying image that China consistently seeks to project is a key area for further research investigation.

Methodological Approaches: From Content Analysis to Grounded Theory

From Content Analysis to Grounded Theory Methodologically, studies of national image have often relied on quantitative content analysis to identify thematic frequencies or on critical discourse analysis to deconstruct power relations. This study adopts a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), which is less common but exceptionally well-suited for inductively generating a theory about a social process — in this case, the process of image construction. It allows for the discovery of a coherent narrative system from the data itself, rather than imposing preconceived categories.

Theoretical Framework

To interpret the patterns emerging from the grounded theory analysis, this study employs a multi-level conceptual model integrating three complementary communication theories. This approach allows for a holistic understanding of image construction, from micro-level textual choices to macro-level temporal dynamics.

Agenda-Setting Theory

Proposed by McCombs and Shaw (1972), agenda-setting theory posits that the media, through persistent and prominent coverage, can influence which issues audiences consider important. In this study, it helps explain how the consistent emphasis on a limited set of dimensions in the award-winning works aims to establish a stable cognitive hierarchy of "what to think about" when thinking about China.

Framing Theory

Framing theory (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974) goes a step further, examining how issues are presented. Frames select, emphasize, and exclude aspects of reality to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation. This theory is vital for analyzing the specific, positive value judgments that each dimension of China's image carries, such as cultural legitimacy and developmental rationality.

Strategic Narrative Theory

Strategic narrative theory provides a macro-level analysis, examining how states develop and project coherent narratives about their identity and role to influence the international environment (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013). Its identity narratives, system narratives, and issue narratives are tripartite, which offers a better perspective for analyzing national image as a dynamic, multi-layered construct. It enables the explanation of how various dimensions of the image are combined into a cohesive and persuasive whole.

Collectively, these theories offer a comprehensive analytical framework. Grounded theory first reveals the "what" (the image itself), and this framework explains the "how": agenda-setting creates salience, framing gives interpretive meaning, and strategic narrative theory organizes these elements into a coherent, long-term story.

Methodology

Research Design and Data Source

This study uses a constructivist grounded theory framework (Charmaz, 2006, 2014). This approach is very suitable because it allows us to directly derive a conceptual model of China's national image from empirical evidence, ensuring that the final theory is grounded in the actual texts.

The dataset contains all 396 award-winning entries. International Communication Category of the China NewsAwards from the 26th edition (2016) to the 35th edition (2025). The time frame was selected to encompass a substantial period of China's global communication strategy development. The list of award-winning works was obtained from the official All-China Journalists Association (ACJA) website, and the full texts and multimedia content were obtained from the archives of the state media organizations.

Analytical Procedure

The analysis followed Charmaz's (2006) three-stage coding process:

Open Coding is the first stage, which involves line-by-line analysis of themes, topics, and rhetorical strategies in 396 works. This process resulted in 29 unique reporting themes, which were subsequently abstracted into 25 initial concepts.

Axial Coding: This part was about finding relationships between the initial concepts, grouping them into more abstract and robust categories. For example, concepts such as "Belt and Road cooperation" and "providing global public

goods" were categorized under the subcategory "Advocate for Global Connectivity". This process combined the 25 concepts into 12 subcategories, which were then categorized under four core dimensions.

Selective Coding: The final step is to integrate the four core dimensions to find a single central or core category that summarizes the overall narrative logic. Through the constant comparison, the core category of a "four-in-one" composite national image was determined, which reflects the central phenomenon in the data.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

To guarantee the study is rigorous in methodological aspects, the study used a number of strategies. Triangulation was accomplished by comparing findings across various years, media platforms (like print, TV, digital), and narrative forms. An audit trail, which includes a lot of memo writing, was kept to record the coding process and analytical decisions. According to the constructivist approach, reflexivity was practiced, and the lead researcher, who recognizes their position as an observer of state communication, continuously reflects on their own understanding and perspective, aiming to remain faithful to the meanings in the data. In this context, theoretical sampling was not about collecting new data, but rather purposefully returning to specific texts in the 396—work corpus to saturate, refine, and validate the properties of emerging categories. The primary researcher ensured consistency by conducting repeated coding cycles.

Findings

China's award-winning international communication works has a highly integrated and internally consistent national image, which is composed of four core dimensions. These dimensions are not just thematic clusters, but are deeply connected, creating a "four-in-one" composite narrative system.

Table 1 Axial Coding: Subcategories integrated into Four Core Dimensions

Core Dimension	Integrated Subcategories	Connotative Elaboration
Civilizational Country	Inheritor of Civilization and Builder of Identity; Builder of a Harmonious Society	This dimension presents China as a civilization-state that transcends the conventional concept of a nation-state, deriving power and legitimacy from profound cultural resources and powerful internal integration.
Eastern Major Country	Efficient and Pragmatic Governance; Engine of Sustainable Development; Practitioner of Ecological Civilization; Pursuer of Innovation and Excellence	This dimension highlights the subjectivity, success, and reference value of China's development path, conveying that China's rise represents a new, effective path based on its own civilizational traditions.
Responsible Major Country	Advocate for Global Connectivity; Responsible Major Country; Contributor to International Development; Participant and Reformer in the Global Governance System	This dimension constructs a predictable and constructive image of a global partner, positing that China's growing national strength translates into positive contributions to the international community.
Socialist Major Country	Resolute Defender of Sovereignty and Security	This dimension accentuates the fundamental political attribute and institutional foundation of China's national image, declaring that all achievements and actions are rooted in socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Dimension One: Civilizational Country

This dimension helps China's contemporary identity to be rooted in its deep historical and cultural continuity. Here, the narratives often depict the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, the philosophical depth of Confucianism and Taoism, and the coexistence of 56 ethnic groups. For example, a feature story about the restoration of ancient texts is not just about preservation, but also about safeguarding the "DNA of a civilization". This dimension offers a narrative of immense legitimacy, indicating that China's path is not a random decision but a natural progression of a great civilization.

Dimension Two: Eastern Major Country

This dimension emphasizes the effectiveness and rationality of China's governance and development model. It is not conceptually the same as the "Responsible" dimension, since it is mainly inward-looking, and it shows domestic success a model. Reports on the successful removal of absolute poverty, the swift development of high-speed rail, and the leadership in renewable energy technology are standard. A typical example is a news package titled "The 'Chinese Prescription': A Cure for Urban Congestion" which covers smart city solutions. The meta-narrative suggests that "Eastern wisdom" and effective governance have created a new, successful path for modernization, which provides lessons for the world, especially the Global South.

Dimension Three: Responsible Major Country

This dimension is more outward-looking, focusing on China's role and behavior in the international system, which is different from the previous one. It directly tackles global concerns by presenting China as a constructive force. Here are the narratives, which are mainly driven by the Belt and Road Initiative, presented through stories of mutual benefit, China's contributions to UN peacekeeping, and its role in promoting global public goods such as vaccines. The main point is that China's rise is a chance, not a threat, for the world.

Dimension Four: Socialist Major Country

This dimension is the political and ideological foundation of the entire image system. While international-facing content is often more subtle, it is the essential "source code". It presents "socialism with Chinese characteristics" as the institutional framework that supports the nation's success. Narratives defending China's sovereignty over Taiwan or its policies in Xinjiang and Hong Kong are listed here, considered necessary measures to safeguard national unity and security. More importantly, this dimension is the reason behind China's achievements described in the other dimensions — it provides the political stability for long-term planning (Civilizational revival), the mobilization capacity for rapid development (Eastern power), and the state-led will to contribute globally (Responsible power).

The Core Category: The "Four-in-One" Internal Logic

Selective coding showed that these four dimensions are not just standalone, but they operate in a mutual constitutive, generative relationship. The core storyline is that China's identity as a "Socialist Major Country" offers the institutional power and ideological coherence to creatively revive and modernize its heritage as a "Civilizational Country". This combination of political system and cultural depth creates a unique development path, which is an "Eastern Major Country". The material strength and confidence achieved through this successful development, enable China to act globally as a "Responsible Major Country". This forms a closed, self-reinforcing narrative loop, where each dimension logically supports and legitimizes the next.

Discussion

This study's results give a lot of theoretical and practical insights. The "four-in-one" composite image is a highly advanced and institutionalized strategic plan.

Theoretical Interpretation

From the angle of agenda-setting, the consistent emphasis on these four dimensions over a decade of award-winning works shows a planned, long-term strategy for salience management. The agenda is not a dynamic set of topics, but a fixed structure of identity.

From a framing standpoint, each dimension is consistently associated with a dominant positive value frame: cultural legitimacy (Civilizational), developmental rationality (Eastern), moral responsibility (Responsible), and institutional effectiveness (Socialist). These macro-frames guarantee that a variety of stories consistently contribute to the same, positive interpretation of China.

From a strategic perspective, the composite image serves a multi-layered system. The Civilizational Country is the core identity narrative. The Eastern Major Country serves as the framework for the system narrative, proposing a new development model. The Responsible Major Country is the main issue narrative (defining China's role on global issues). The Socialist Major Country offers a comprehensive ideological framework that unifies the perspectives across all levels.

The Internal Generative Logic: A Model of Narrative Construction

The discussion presents a clear causal and logical sequence, which can be modeled as a generative process:

"Socialist System" provides institutional foundation for "Civilizational Revival", which creates a unique path for "Eastern Development Model", and so on. This internal logic is the most significant finding, as it indicates that China's strategic narrative is not just a collection of positive stories, but a deeply integrated system designed to maximize coherence and resilience.

The "So What?" Factor: The Gap Between Construction and Reception

Nevertheless, an important consideration remains: to what extent does this highly coherent, internally generated narrative resonate in the global arena? This narrative is very strong, its internal consistency is strong, and it might present a potential challenge. From an external viewpoint, especially in the Global North, there might be a tightly integrated communication framework that times seems highly unified, which might unintentionally prevent the intended message from reaching a wide range of international audiences. In short, there might be a gap or divergence between the narrative's internal logic and its reception abroad. The narrative does well in creating coherence at home, but this achievement might be lost in the foreign context, which may be seen as a loss of credibility and resonance.

Conclusion

This study did a grounded theory analysis of 396 award-winning works from China News Awards (2016-2025), found a cohesive, "four-in-one" composite national image of China. This image depicts China as a Civilizational Country, an Eastern Major Country, a Responsible Major Country, and a Socialist Major Country. The research found that these dimensions are bound by an internal generative logic, which forms a powerful and self-reinforcing narrative system. This study provides valuable insights into the international communication scholarship by analyzing the architectural framework of a major state's strategic narrative, illustrating the interplay between agenda integration, frame stabilization, and narrative layering.

Recommendation

Limitations and Future Research

The study's primary limitation is its focus on state-sanctioned, award-winning works, which represent the "supply side" of communication. It does not analyze the audience reception. So, the future research needs to urgently tackle this gap. A key next step is to design empirical studies to test the reception of this "four-in-one" model among different international audiences (like Global South and Global North) to assess its actual effectiveness and persuasive power. Comparing the national image construction of other major powers would provide valuable insights.

Practical Implications

For international communication practitioners, this study indicates that internal coherence is crucial, but over-optimization might result in reduced credibility. Acknowledging complexity and internal contradictions might result in more resonant and trustworthy communication in a fragmented global media environment.

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