

• Article •

Product Attributes and International Rules: China's Image Differentiation among International Development Cooperation Fields?

Yongqing Zhang^{1,*}

¹School of International Relations, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, China

* Corresponding Authors: Yongqing Zhang, Email: 18160121@bfsu.edu.cn

Received: 8 November 2024 Accepted: 25 November 2024 Published: 31 December 2024

Abstract: China's image in different international development cooperation fields shows four types: Highly Recognized, Comparatively Recognized, Lowly Recognized and Not Recognized. In terms of the image differentiation, this paper points that the product attributes of the aid field and the international rules at the time of China's entry into the field jointly affect the construction of China's state image as a latecomer. The former determines the construction efficiency of China's country image in its natural state through the degree of visibility and benefit, while the latter generates unnatural resistance through gravitational and clutter effects. Under the same rule resistance, a high degree of visibility and benefit in the hard domain is more conducive to China breaking through the blockade of established international rules and building a positive national image in the target country. The case study results show that the theoretical framework does have some explanatory power, as the low visibility and profitability of national governance policy concepts, coupled with the strong exclusion of China from Western-style democratic governance, makes overseas countries disapprove China in governance. The "strong visibility" and "strong benefits" of infrastructure projects, coupled with freedom from the pernicious interference of closed international rules, have led to strong recognition of China's cooperative behaviour in this area.

Keywords: China's Image; International Development Cooperation; Image Differentiation; Product Attributes; International Rules

1. Introduction

As the world's largest developing country, China has provided extensive foreign aid to other developing countries since the founding of the People's Republic of China, particularly the Belt and Road Initiative was introduced. Especially since the new era, China has shifted foreign aid to international development cooperation.

At the beginning of the year, Custer, S. et al. (2024) released a report on China's overseas development perceptions in 129 low- and middle-income countries (the Global South), covering different groups in government, private and social sectors (hereinafter referred to as the "report"), which showed that China is more recognised by all countries in the infrastructure construction field, less recognised in ecological environment and the social sector, and worst in national governance field, which is much lower than that of the U.S., U.K., and France in the report.

Even taking into account the variability of China's overseas investment in different fields, for example, China's aid funds from 2013-2018 mainly flowed to the areas of infrastructure and social sectors, China's country image abroad still shows unequal proportions of significant differences. In recent years, China has gradually increased its participation in the field of governance, but the results show that it has not been recognised or even criticised by the target countries. It can be seen that the overseas image of China's international development cooperation has encountered a development bottleneck, and there is a real problem of image differentiation in different fields.

In this context, it is necessary to systematically analyse the reasons for China's image differentiation in different fields of development cooperation, and to sort out the role mechanisms that impede the expansion of China's overseas image in fields such as national governance. The same is China's participation in overseas international development cooperation, why is there a significant difference in China's image in different fields? This paper argues that the product attributes of the cooperation areas and international rules together affect China's overseas country image in different areas. In the empirical analysis part, this paper selects four cases of China in the areas of national governance, social sector, infrastructure and economy, and tries to empirically test this theoretical framework.

2. Literature Review

As the scope and scale of China's international development cooperation continues to expand, there have been rich discussions on China's image. Academics have been concerned about China's national image for a long time. Since Joseph S. (1990) put forward the concept of soft power in the early 1990s, the discussion on China's reliance on soft power to achieve the peaceful rise of China has been triggered, and China's national image has begun to come into the important political and academic issues, becoming an significant element of China's "national interests". After entering the 21st century, China began to be active in various international affairs, and academics started a richer and more diversified discussion on China's national image, mostly focusing on the effect and transmission mechanism of the diversified and multi-dimensional diplomatic behaviours in shaping China's national image. With the proposal of "One Belt, One Road" and the three global initiatives, the overseas communication of Chinese discourse has become a key direction of interdisciplinary research, covering cross-disciplinary disciplines such as communication and psychology, in an attempt to put forward a path to optimise the communication of Chinese discourse.

Research on the relationship between international development cooperation and China's national image has also been much discussed, and existing studies can be attributed to two paths. The first is logical deduction, which analyses the theoretical path of international cooperation in shaping China's national image in the target countries and argues that the economic and livelihood benefits released by aid projects are important factors in improving local people's perception of China. The second is empirical investigation, using data and geographic information technology to actually verify the role of international cooperation in improving China's country image, and finds that the mediating effects such as economic and social development will significantly enhance a country's positive evaluation of China, and this improvement has a lagging effect, with the effect gradually showing up some time after the completion of the aid projects, and then weakening gradually after that.

On the whole, although the above studies have provided some explanations for the construction of China's national image, most of them are from the perspective of domestic discourse behaviour spreading outwards, with insufficient attention paid to the objective and external environments of image construction. With regard to international development cooperation, the existing logical deduction gives a theoretical explanation of the path to construct image, but fails to explain the problem of image differentiation; the empirical analyses have examined the correlation between aid behaviours and China's image, and the temporal and spatial characteristics of the improvement of the China's image, but there is no specific analysis of the differences among fields.

In view of this, this paper, starting from the problem of China's image differentiation among international development cooperation fields exposed by the "report", focuses on the mechanism of constructing China's image as an object in the image construction, instead of the subjective discourse dissemination method favoured by the traditional research, and proposes that the product attributes and international rules of the field may limit the construction of China's image overseas. It should be noted that although this paper, as a qualitative study, cannot strictly control the total amount of China's overseas investment in different fields and the way of injecting funds, it can provide a new and important theoretical perspective for understanding China's image construction overseas.

3. Analytical Framework

The existing researches hold that international development cooperation and China's image are inevitably linked, and then there are factors at play behind the image divergence among the fields. The question addressed in this paper is, in addition to factors such as the scale of funding and the volume of projects, why China has been able to gain high recognition in the economic and infrastructure sectors rapidly in decades, but a lukewarm response in social and governance where China has been ploughing for decades as well. The core hypothesis of this paper is that China's poor image in the field of international development cooperation lies in the fact that soft products have a weak sense of benefit, inherently more difficult to disseminate image, and that China's entry into the field is further hampered by the established closed international rules, hindering China's participation and the dissemination of its influence. Closed international rules are not impregnable, but will gradually disintegrate with

international interactions and technological iterations, which opens up the possibility for China to reshape international rules in the future. In the following section, the research hypotheses of this paper will be explained in the light of the product attributes and international rules in the field of international development cooperation.

3.1 China's Image in International Development Cooperation

The concept of state image can be traced back to ancient Greek times, when abstract concepts such as “national prestige” and “prestige” were already discussed in the city-state of Athens. In the 1950s, K. E. Bouding (1959) first explicitly defined state image as “self-perception and its perception by other actors in the international system”. During the Cold War, American scholar Joseph Nye first proposed the term “soft power” and elaborated the issue of national image, after which “national image” was linked by scholars to the country’s foreign policy and its soft power, and theories were developed and incorporated. Joshua Remer argues that one of China’s greatest “strategic threats” lies in its “national image”, and that how China sees itself, and how other countries see it, “will in a sense determine the future and fate of China’s reforms”. While Chinese scholars’ definition of “national image” focuses more on how China is perceived by the outside world, Li Anshan further defines the term “national image” as a country’s image in the international arena, which means the overall impression and perception by other countries, mainly consisting of three dimensions: government views, scholarly commentary, and the impression of civil society (including NGOs). To explore China’s image in low- and middle-income countries, this paper covers the overall impression of China at different levels of the public, private, and social spheres corresponding to the “report”.

How to measure and operationalise China’s image? Currently, academics mainly adopt textual analyses of China-related policies and public opinion in the outside world, or judge China’s image by processing public opinion survey data to measure emotional orientation. In terms of the image of China in international development cooperation, the combination of affinity and effectiveness of cooperation constitutes the overall perception of China by overseas countries, and part of the data on these two dimensions is covered in the “report”. The “report” also contains statistics on the proportion of respondents who answered questions on their willingness to cooperate with China in different fields (see **Table 1**). Considering that the data in the economic field may be missing in the “report”, this paper combines the text and data to make a basic judgement on the positive and effective feedbacks, and then uses cooperation willingness to verify overseas perceptions of China’s in different fields, and divides the image of China’s international development cooperation into four categories: Highly Recognized, comparatively recognized, Lowly Recognized and Not Recognized.

Table 1: Respondents’ Data on “Willingness to Cooperate with the Country” in Different Fields

Nations	Infrastructure/%	Ecological environment/%	National governance/%	Social sector/%
China	47.17756	5.239282	1.355819	9.173775

France	14.69107	18.63118	16.94674	24.25491
Russia	6.440741	2.056558	1.161984	9.698071
U.K.	4.138743	15.74727	25.60338	23.73051
U.S.	8.838778	17.85885	32.56165	22.82073

Source: AidData at William & Mary, available at: <https://www.aiddata.org/data/2023-perceptions-of-chinese-overseas-development-survey-data-aggregates-version-1-0> (accessed 18 August 2024).

Specifically, if foreign country regards China as highly active and gains much more improvement than deterioration in a certain area, showing a priority cooperation willingness, China is Highly Approved; if China is perceived as inactive and the cooperation effect has deteriorated more than improved in a certain area, showing unwillingness to cooperate, China is Not Approved. Among them, the Approved, and Lowly Approved forms are the intermediate forms of China's image, which can effectively avoid the oversimplification caused by the dichotomy, better restoring the real state of China's image (see **Table 2**). The difference between Highly Recognized, Comparatively Recognized and Lowly Recognized is the relative priority of the willingness to cooperate with China compared with the United States and other countries: giving priority to the United States and other countries is Lowly Recognized of China, giving equal importance to China and the United States is Comparatively Recognized of China, and giving priority to China is Highly Recognized of China.

Table 2: China's Image Measuring Dimensions

Image	Involvement	Effect	Willingness
Highly Recognized	Active	Notable improvement	Priority
Comparatively Recognized	Comparatively active	Improvement	Equal
Lowly Recognized	Not active	Deterioration	Low
Not Recognized	Indifferent	Notable deterioration	Unwillingness

Why is there an image differentiation of China among international development cooperation fields? By supplementing and revising the theoretical explanations of China's image construction at the field level, this paper argues that the product attributes of the international development cooperation field and the shape of international rules at the time of China's entry into the field together influence China's image construction.

3.2 Product attributes of international development cooperation field

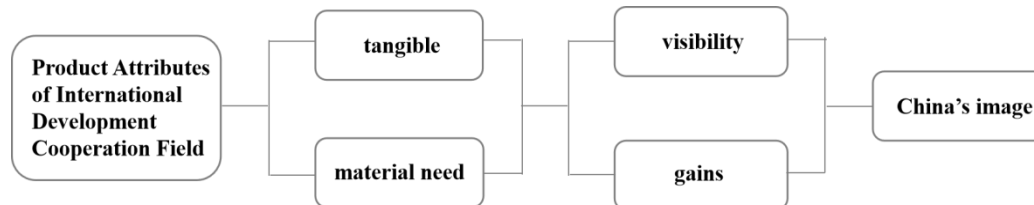
China's image is closely related to the product attributes of international development cooperation field. Product attributes are borrowed from the concept of public goods, given that although international development cooperation does not have the typical non-competitive and non-exclusive characteristics of public goods, its beneficiaries and cost-bearers do not completely overlap, and thus it has the characteristics of a quasi-global public good. On this basis, this paper uses the method of classifying types of public goods to judge the product attributes of international development cooperation. About "what is a public good", academics have made different types of public goods based on the attributes of public goods, the spatial scope of consumption, the attributes of consumption demand and physical characteristics as the classification criteria. In order to explore the relationship between the cooperation field and China's image, it is needed to consider the visibility and benefits, and this paper classifies the product attributes of the national development cooperation field into hard and soft by combining the physical characteristics and consumption demand attributes as the criteria. Hard fields are tangible and used to satisfy people's material consumption needs; on the contrary, soft fields are intangible and used to satisfy people's spiritual consumption needs.

On the basis of the characteristics of hard and soft products mentioned above, this paper proposes two dimensions for judging the attributes of cooperation field: first is whether the field is tangible or not, which means whether the material changes can be judged by observation; and second is the attribute of product consumption demand, which means whether the benefits satisfy the material demand or the spiritual demand. In other words, if the cooperation area is tangible and satisfies material needs, it is a hard area. Hard areas include energy, transport infrastructure construction and economic trade, which are mainly physical in nature, and the material results have a direct effect on the quality of life of the people in the recipient countries. In this case, the spatial and temporal effects on the improvement of China's image are more significant. Soft areas include national governance, ecological environment, and social sectors, and are centred on concepts and technical cooperation, with the output of results having higher requirements on time and scale, making it difficult to visually demonstrate the value of the project to the local population. It should be noted here that the attribute division of fields in this paper is operated from the macro-conceptual level and does not involve specific practices at the meso-micro level. For example, the material field undeniably contains soft products, and soft field practices also need to be supported by material as a carrier.

The transformation effect of international development cooperation overseas is closely related to the product attributes of the field, which directly affects the target country's perception of China, which means the degree of difficulty in transforming the projects into real benefits of different attribute fields determines the process of China's image construction. How do product attributes actually affect China's image abroad? This paper explores this question from two aspects: the degree of visibility and benefit. Here, the degree of visibility refers to the visual perception of the target country's people, which means the more the target country's people can be captured in vision, the more conducive it is to the

enhancement of the real impression of China's participation in the cooperation. The degree of benefit refers to the benefits that the target country's population obtains from the cooperation, which means the more the basic needs of life are solved, the stronger the perceived impact of the local population's benefits, and the better the evaluation of the benefits of China's cooperation.

Figure 1: Mechanisms of the Product Attributes



When the field of cooperation belongs to the hard area, the degree of visibility and the degree of benefit are both high, and the local people's perception of China tends to be strong, then the efficiency in this cooperation field to build China's image is high. On the other hand, when the cooperation area belongs to the soft area, the degree of visibility and the degree of benefit are both low, and the local people's perception of China's impression tends to be loose, then the efficiency to build China's image is lower (**Figure 1**). However, it should be noted that the "efficiency" of the image here is not the same as positive or negative, but the speed and depth of impression formation, and whether the emotional orientation is positive or negative further depends on the performance of China's development cooperation. Generally speaking, if China's participation in international development cooperation brings funds and technology to the target country, the country's image should be positive or neutral, while the emergence of a negative image is bound to have another level of reasons.

The own attributes of the international development cooperation field serve as the objective basis for the temporal and spatial dissemination of China's image, and have a significant impact on the shaping of China's image in different fields. At the same time, international rules in the field, as an important external conditioning factor, also play a role in building China's image abroad.

3.3 International Rules of the International Development Cooperation Field

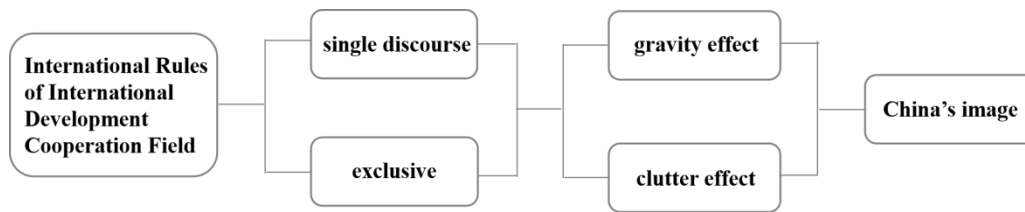
The product attributes of the international development cooperation field, as a basic element, determine the natural efficiency of China's image construction overseas. On this basis, this paper introduces the new variable of international rules as a conditional factor in order to explore the image differentiation problem in the field of the same natural attributes. International rules refer to the rules of international behaviour and corresponding guarantee mechanisms formed on the basis of a certain world pattern, usually including international agreements, international practices and international organisations, etc., which are mostly the experience of the advanced countries and tools to maintain the advantageous position of them in development. On the one hand, as a result of development, international rules do have a certain degree of advancement, guiding international development

cooperation, and have the necessity of existence in the era of interdependence; On the other hand, as the ruling tool of international cooperation order, the interest attribute of the international rules leads to its substantive asymmetry, and the rule maker relies on the rule's "non-neutral" to gain benefits. Especially in the context of the increasingly fierce competition between China and the United States, the international rules led by the United States limit China's development cooperation and image construction abroad.

It is important to emphasise that in this paper international rules refer to whether the core norms of a certain field are open or closed when China enters the field, so that it is possible to observe how easy or difficult for China, as a latecomer, to enter the field and to build a national image. Any international development cooperation field, once developed, will be in two stages, rule-making and rule-made. In the emerging field of digital trade, China, the United States, Europe and other major economies are still trying to promote the development of a set of rules covering all aspects of digital trade, but at present, there are no widely recognised multilateral digital trade rules under the framework of the WTO. In other traditional areas international rules have already existed, specifically can be divided into two types: closed rules and open rules.

This paper proposes two dimensions for judging international rules: first, whether the dominant discourse in the field of cooperation is single; second, whether the strong norms in the field exclude difference. If there is a single dominant discourse in the field and strong internal norms reject external differences, there are closed rules in the field; conversely, if there is not one dominant discourse in the field and internal norms accept external differences, there are open rules in the field. How exactly do the rules of closure and openness affect China's image in international development cooperation fields? This paper explores this issue from the perspective of both the gravity effect and clutter effect. The gravity effect is a concept borrowed from "geo-gravity", where the size of the gravitational force depends mainly on the strength of the rules. In this paper, it refers to the fact that the strong norms in the field are so powerful that the countries concerned can hardly resist approaching and accepting the single centre, rejecting the Chinese way and discourse, and hindering the construction of China's image. The clutter effect refers to the fact that the single standard of discourse and value in this field makes it difficult to objectively evaluate or even intentionally distort the assessment of the effectiveness of the Chinese way, diluting and devaluing the benefits and results of China's co-operation in this field, and uglifying China's image.

When there are closed rules in the aid field, due to the gravity effect and clutter effect, it tends to close the channels for China's way and discourse to enter the field, in which case China's participation in the field is hindered in every way, and the construction of its image is countered. On the contrary, when there are open rules in the aid field, the gravitational effect and discourse dilution are low, and China tends to keep the channels for Chinese ways and discourses to enter the field, in which China can make great efforts based on its own advantages, and there is room for the growth of the construction of the image (**Figure 2**).

Figure 2: Mechanisms of the International Rules

3.4 Theoretical Scenario

This paper constructs a theoretical analysis framework with the product attributes and international rules of international development cooperation fields as independent variables, and China's overseas image in the field as the dependent variable. Open or closed international rules represent whether the international environment in which China operates in the field is relaxed and friendly, while the product attributes of the field determine the strength of the public's perception of China in the target country, which means the "strong visibility" and "strong benefits" of cooperation in the hard field are conducive to China's image building and self-explanation in the face of smearing and exclusion (see **Figure 3**). Different combinations of product attributes and international rules result in a 2*2 distribution of four scenarios (see **Table 3**).

Based on the above theoretical framework, this paper proposes four theoretical hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Overseas countries are more likely to not recognize China in international development cooperation when the field is soft product with closed rules.

Hypothesis 2: Overseas countries are more likely to comparatively recognize China in international development cooperation when the field is hard product with closed rules.

Hypothesis 3: Overseas countries are more likely to lowly recognize China in international development cooperation when the field is soft product with open rules.

Hypothesis 4: Overseas countries are more likely to highly recognize China in international development cooperation when the field is hard product with open rules.

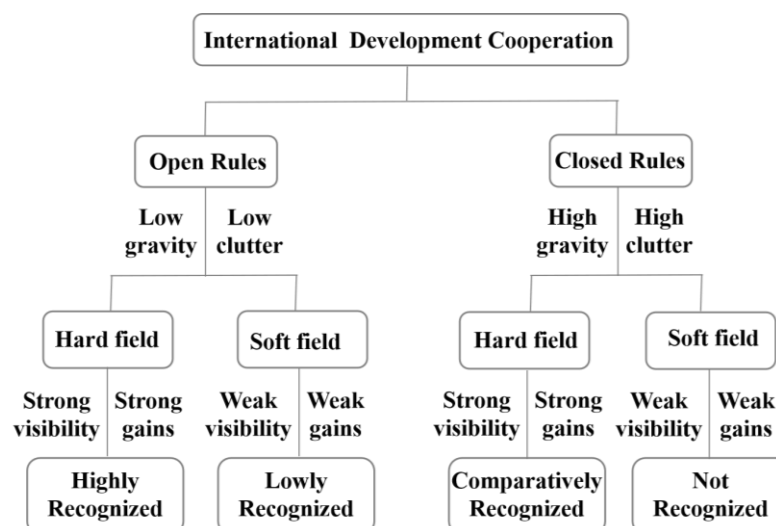
Figure 3: Analytical Framework

Table 3: Morphological Distribution of China's Image in International Development Cooperation

International Rules		Product Attributes	
		Soft	Hard
	Closed	Not Recognized	Comparatively Recognized
	Open	Lowly Recognized	Highly Recognized

It should be noted that there is no correlation between the independent variables of product attributes and international rules. Product attributes focus on the characteristics of the co-operation field itself, which is an endogenous factor, while international rules emphasise the external development conditions, which is an exogenous factor. The above two independent variables start from different dimensions and jointly affect the image construction of China's international development cooperation.

In the empirical testing part, this paper tests the above theoretical hypotheses through four cases of China's image construction in the areas of national governance, social sector, infrastructure and economy respectively. The case tests are conducted by fields as a whole, rather than selecting specific projects in each field, which can largely avoid the interference of other factors on China's image during the project implementation process and highlight how the field factors affect the construction of China's image abroad.

4. Case Testing

4.1 Non-recognition in National Governance

During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union pursued the ideal concept of universalism and competed for ideological dominance over the outside world. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant the collapse of the bipolar system and the emergence of a world dominated by the Western ideology of democracy and freedom. For a while, the international community generally bemoaned the failure of the Soviet model of communism, and at one point even argued that it was the end of history and that it could only follow the Western path. Against this background, China, as an important country in the communist world at that time, faced unprecedented international political pressure. Since then, China has been able to bring the socialist path back to life with its strong reform drive and institutional integration.

As the world's largest developing country, China has actively fulfilled its responsibilities as a great power and exchanged its governance experience with other countries in the world, especially developing countries. As a "single system and a mega-state", China's model of national governance has shown strong resilience in the face of a huge "governance load", which can provide important lessons for most countries in the world that are facing governance disorder. In this regard, China has, on the one hand, demonstrated its governance achievements and learnt from its experience by organising training courses for overseas officials coming to China, and, on the other hand, has introduced complementary management models and governance experience in its cooperation in other fields. A significant portion

of China's annual assistance to African countries from 2003 to 2013 was used to improve government efficiency.

However, overseas countries do not recognise China's cooperation in national governance, with only 1 per cent of respondents indicating willingness to cooperate with China, and as many as 30 per cent choosing the United States as their ideal partner. Firstly, in terms of engagement, there is a lack of awareness of China's involvement in governance or public sector management. According to the report, most respondents believe that China has supported them mainly in the areas of energy, communication and transport infrastructure, and education and exchange, while only 5 per cent believe that China has made significant inputs in the area of governance. Second, there are more negative perceptions in terms of feedback on effectiveness. Respondents report that Chinese-supported development projects have not only failed to improve but also had a negative impact on many elements of governance, including freedom and stability in their countries, and in particular 51 per cent believe that they have exacerbated the problem of corruption. Why is it that China is still not recognised in the area of governance, despite the importance it attaches to it and its active exchanges and cooperation, and is even perceived as undermining freedom and stability at home?

The area of national governance is a soft product, which is reflected in the fact that it has no physical form and is not used to satisfy material needs. In terms of visibility, cooperation in national governance does not have a visual impact on the people of the target countries, and is easily overlooked and forgotten, which also leads to a lack of awareness of the strength of China's cooperation in the field of governance. In terms of the degree of benefit, national governance does not belong to the category of material needs, and the people do not perceive enough benefit from it. National governance is the cooperative management of public affairs by multiple actors, including owners, administrators and stakeholders, within a country, with the aim of promoting public interests and maintaining public order. The improvement of order itself is not an easy task, coupled with the fact that people are slow to perceive order. As a result, the soft attributes of China's overseas cooperation in the field of governance are basically in a state of "no real sense", and the people of the target countries tend to have a blank perception of both the strength and the effectiveness of the cooperation in governance, which makes the weak effect of the field of governance even weaker.

The existence of closed rules in national governance is reflected in the dominance of Western democratic discourse and the extreme exclusion of ideologies of difference. Although there are internal differences in Western ideologies on the subject of national governance, they are essentially the same type of national governance model based on the development of capitalism, which emphasises individual rights and promotes democracy and freedom, and through its colonial legacy has expanded Western-style democratic politics to most countries in the world, dominating the mainstream discourse in the international community. Based on the ideal of extreme universalism, the Western world pursues a zero-sum game mentality, rejecting the different path of political development represented by China, and is wary of the spillover of China's governance experience abroad.

Closed international rules subject China's cooperation with overseas countries in the field of governance to both gravitational and clutter effects. With regard to the gravitational effect, the dominance of Western discourse has made target countries biased in favour of recognising Western-style democratic governance models and alienating Chinese governance concepts. Since the third wave of democratisation, democracy has become a universal consensus, and liberal democracy, represented by competitive elections, has become the meat and potatoes of everyone's pursuit, as if democracy is only in the form of competitive elections. Although the decline of democracy has caused people to reflect on Western-style democracy, it is still more difficult to get out of the gravitational range of democratic values due to the influence of institutional path dependence. In terms of the clutter effect, in order to suppress China's influence on national governance, the West has intentionally made use of the existing discourse system that is favourable to it to release negative information about China, which has successfully interfered with the target countries' perceptions of China. The U.S. uses analogous narratives such as the "Thucydides Trap" and the "New Cold War" to reinforce the "China threat theory" (Yuan, Z. et al., 2020) and contrasting narratives exacerbating the identity dichotomy between China and the U.S. in terms of ideology, political system and cultural traditions to blame China for causing uncertainty.

In general, the soft attributes and closed rules of the field make the target countries not recognise China's image in national governance. It takes time for China to break through the limitations of the Western rule discourse and to be truly recognised. The Hypothesis 1 (Overseas countries are more likely to not recognize China in international development cooperation when the field is soft product with closed rules.) is consistent with the empirical facts.

4.2 Comparative Recognition in Economic and Trade

After reform and opening up, China accelerated the adaptation of its domestic political economy in order to better participate in international economic affairs. At this time, the world has formed a set of WTO-led international economic system led by the United States, and China has to negotiate with the international market under the framework of the WTO rules for market access, to integrate into the world economic cycle. After accession to the WTO, China's economy has gained the status of a player in the process of globalisation, and China's reform and opening up has entered a new period of historical development. Over the past 40 years, China has actively practiced the concept of free trade, pursued the basic state policy of opening up to the outside world, and achieved monumental results in international economic cooperation. After the "Belt and Road" initiative was put forward, China has started institutionalised economic cooperation with the vast majority of countries in the world, and China has actively helped the relevant countries to improve their trading conditions and trade development capacity through trade assistance, laying a solid foundation for the smooth flow of trade among the countries that have jointly built the "Belt and Road".

Developing countries recognize China's performance in the economic cooperation, focusing on engagement with both the United States and China without departing from the United States economic

and trade track. In terms of engagement, the global South has recognised China's active role in international economic affairs, and their economic ties with China have become increasingly close. As of 2023, 152 countries and 32 international organisations have signed more than 200 cooperation documents with China to jointly build the Belt and Road, and China's is deeply participating and even reshaping the global economic landscape. In terms of feedback, overseas countries believe that China has partly improved their domestic economic development, with 49 per cent of respondents saying that job opportunities have improved. However, to a certain extent, they are also influenced by the "economic aggression theory" of the US and the West, and are sceptical about the trade imbalance between China and Africa.

The economic sphere is characterised by the property of hard goods, and economic flows can be measured and used to satisfy material needs. In terms of visibility, the volume of China's bilateral trade with target countries can be calculated in real time, and the transaction gains from economic exchanges are tangible. For example, China has been Africa's top trading partner for 14 consecutive years and the second largest destination for African agricultural exports. As of 2023, China has granted zero-tariff treatment to 98 per cent of the tariff lines of products from 21 African least developed countries. In terms of benefits, economic cooperation raises people's incomes and effectively improves material living conditions. "The Belt and Road" fits in with the development strategies of countries in the global South, significantly raising the economic and social development level of the co-constructed countries with GDP per capita as a proxy variable, further enhances the identity of developing countries with China (Xie, T. et al., 2013). China's image in the economic sphere is constructed at a faster pace. Hard attributes make the target country's public strongly sense China's overseas economic cooperation, which makes the international rules of the economic field can not directly damage China's image, but the pressure limits the target country's degree of recognition of China.

Although the international economic sphere pursues open markets and free trade, its essence is still a closed order dominated by the Western discourse. On the one hand, the dominant discourse is unitary. After the end of the Second World War, the United States replaced the United Kingdom as the hegemon of the global economy. The developed countries led by the United States formulate intellectual property protection rules (such as TRIPS), investment liberalization rules (such as TRIMS), labour provisions, etc., whose purpose is to maintain the existing system of international division of labour, "locking" the different types of countries in the existing chain of the international division of labour, to create a "centre-periphery" world economic pattern, and structural poverty in the less developed countries. In addition, the hegemonic countries can transfer the burden of domestic economic imbalance to the rest of the world, after the Second World War, whether it is the era of the Bretton Woods system or the post-Bretton Woods system era, the United States has gained huge benefits from the hegemony of the dollar. On the other hand, the market is at the centre of international economic rules, which excludes the economic models of developmental countries such as China. In the early days, the U.S. and the West tried to continue to use the international economic system to greedily extract the value of China as an

upstream industrial country, and to keep China in the so-called dualistic structure of the “periphery” position. However, China has successfully transcended this “dependence” with its strong rise in economic power, and this government-led mixed-ownership economic model is an “anomaly” for the West. Especially since the new era, China has become more and more important in the production and supply chain of the international economy, relying on the “Belt and Road” and ASEAN and other important multilateral economic platforms, and once shifted the trade dependence of East Asia from the United States to itself. China has become the biggest threat in the eyes of the West from the economic “dependent” countries. Several rounds of trade war with China is on the surface of the U.S. government for its own enterprises accused China of dumping the issue of sanctions against China. In fact, the U.S. is trying to public opinion and sanctions to force China to recognise the market as the main body of the international economic competition, to compression of China’s government public ownership as the main economic model.

The closed rules in the economic sphere make the construction of China’s image subject to the gravity effect and the clutter effect, limiting the target countries’ recognition of China in this sphere. With regard to the gravitational effect, it is difficult for target countries to break away from the asymmetrical international economic rules promoted by the United States and the West. Under the existing rules framework, if a country goes against the will of the United States, the latter will achieve the purpose of sanctioning the former through “legitimate” means, so most of the target countries contact with China under the strong closed rules. Take Africa as an example, once against the will of the United States, the United States will use the preferential treatment provided by AGOA as a bargaining chip to wield the trade stick against African countries. In terms of the clutter effect, the West has made great efforts to hype up negative public opinion on China’s economy to hinder China’s overseas economic cooperation, and to dissolve the authority, legitimacy and credibility of the economic framework initiated by China, such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the Asian Investment Bank (Lawrence Broz, J. et al., 2020). The United States has launched a trade war against China, strongly criticising China for dumping low-priced production capacity overseas and accusing China of seizing industrial markets and domestic jobs. The Trump administration has even used the term “economic aggression” to refer to China’s economic and trade behaviour towards the US, declaring that it will no longer “tolerate economic aggression and unfair trade practices”. In contrast, overseas respondents believe that China has made important contributions in providing domestic employment opportunities. Although the West’s highly inflammatory rhetoric has had some impact on China’s overseas economic cooperation, because China’s actions in the economic sphere are tangible to the target countries, rhetoric alone is not enough to influence China’s image abroad.

In short, hard attribute and closed rules prompts the target countries to show certain recognition of China’s cooperation in the international economic field. The key lies in the fact that China’s excellent performance in international economic cooperation has resisted the strong pressure of the closed rules and won the space for survival. The Hypothesis 2 (Overseas countries are more likely to comparatively

recognize China in international development cooperation when the field is hard product with closed rules) is consistent with the empirical facts.

4.3 Low Recognition in Social Sectors

International cooperation in the social sector, including health, education and social security, does not only refer to the construction of buildings such as schools and hospitals, but also emphasises the core values of social policy, which means the relevant concepts, technologies and institutional models. Since 2013, China's management of public health events and cooperation with medical institutions has been in full swing, while local Chinese medicine has begun to make great strides in going beyond the country's borders. In addition, China's exchange and cooperation programmes with overseas schools have been expanded, and funding has been provided for the establishment of primary schools, vocational training schools, and cultural and educational institutions such as Confucius Institutes, which are important for promoting equality of access to education in the local context.

Overseas countries show weak recognition of China in social sector, reflected in the fact that countries are not as willing to cooperate with China in this area compared to, for example, the United States. More than 20 per cent of respondents are willing to cooperate with the US, UK and France on the social sector, respectively, but only 9 per cent are willing to cooperate with China in this area. In terms of engagement, the target countries believe that China has a certain level of involvement in the social sector. According to the Report, 44 per cent of respondents report that China has invested in education and health. In terms of feedback on effectiveness, countries rate China's cooperation in education and the fight against epidemics as outstanding, but consider that China's overall performance in the social sector was not outstanding. 49 percent of respondents said that China's access to education had been improved. China's mask aid to other countries has temporarily improved the tone towards China. Respondents from all countries also generally expressed a more positive view of China as a partner in the aftermath of the epidemic in terms of the Chinese government's performance in responding to the epidemic.

Social sector is soft product, where cooperation outcomes are difficult to measure but have a distinct physical vehicle for meeting non-material needs. In terms of visibility, hard facilities such as schools and hospitals are easy to measure as vehicles for education and healthcare, but the kernel of benefits in the social sector are hard to measure, such as the level of education and healthcare, let alone trying to measure the results of cooperation in individual projects. However, building schools and hospitals in the form of hardware makes the target country's population think that China has some involvement in the social sector, which explains the respondents' perception of China's stronger involvement in education projects. In terms of the degree of benefit, the social product itself is used to satisfy a higher level of non-material needs, and the benefits are less efficiently realised, not conducive to China's rapid development of image. China has been sending medical teams to Africa since 1963 to help Africa achieve "self-governance" through the introduction of medicines and the teaching of therapeutic methods, which has been effective for more than 60 years. The large and wide-ranging utility

of social sector and the long timeframe for translating the benefits into action make target countries show weak recognition of China. Therefore, the soft attributes of China's cooperation in the social sector are "weakly perceived" and "weakly benefited", and the people of the target countries have a certain blind spot in their perception of the strength and effectiveness of social cooperation, while the relatively open rules of international cooperation in the social sector have created a structural basis for China's image in this field to grow slowly.

The international rules of social sector are open, where the United States is not the absolute dominant player, and the field does not exclude differences in social models. On the one hand, the United States and Europe are representing the diverse social models. While the United States remains dominant globally overall, the United Kingdom and France are more recognised than the United States in the social sphere in sub-Saharan Africa, while in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region France reigns supreme. The European "welfare state" has also been a model that China and other countries have tried to emulate, and the welfare system is one of the greatest achievements of modern Europe. The European social model goes beyond social security (pensions, health care) to include benefits, social dialogue, lifelong learning. Any reference to the European social model is intended to emphasise the differences between European and American social policy. As can be seen, there is a multipolar coexistence in education and health, which is not uniformly dominated by one model. On the other hand, the social sector does not exclude differences and chooses to incorporate external forces even in favour of reinforcing established authority and legitimacy within a framework of rules. In the medical field, for example, since the 18th Party Congress, China has promoted the establishment of the International Organisation for Standardisation's Technical Committee on Traditional Chinese Medicine (ISO/TC249), which has formulated and promulgated 89 international standards for TCM, and has successfully entered and participated in rule-making.

The open rules in the social sector mean that the target countries' perception about China is less influenced by gravity and clutter effects, which is favourable to China's entry into the field and the construction of a positive overseas image. In terms of gravity effect, the international multipolar discourse of the social sector has a weaker central gravitational pull on target countries than the unipolar discourse, and target countries have some room for independent choice and development. In terms of the clutter effect, the exclusivity of the social sector field is lower, and the motivation to send out defamatory and disruptive discourse against China's cooperative behaviour in this field is weaker. China's vaccines have been recognised by the international community, including the World Health Organisation (WHO), and China's contribution to the provision of vaccine public goods has been positively received by the West as a whole, although the United States has also criticised China's overseas medical cooperation during the outbreak.

In sum, the soft nature and the open rules make the target countries show low recognition of China in the social sector. The Hypothesis 3 (Overseas countries are more likely to lowly recognize China in

international development cooperation when the field is soft product with open rules) is consistent with the empirical facts.

4.4 High Recognition in Infrastructure

Infrastructure refers to the physical engineering facilities that provide public services for social production and the lives of residents, mainly including energy, transport and digital-related utilities, etc., and is the basis for the development of all national economic endeavours. In modern society, a sound infrastructure plays an enormous role in accelerating social and economic activities and promoting the evolution of their spatial distribution patterns. All the early industrialised countries have carried out large-scale infrastructure construction, even though they are now facing the problem of serious aging of facilities. The United Kingdom has a world-class transport network, whether between British cities, within the city, or with the European continent and the rest of the world have a variety of rapid transport links by air, land and sea, convenient and fast. One of the important policies of “Roosevelt’s New Deal” was the government-led large-scale infrastructure development, which laid a solid foundation for the later development of the US economy. However, the establishment of a sound infrastructure often requires a long period of time and huge investment, which is difficult for most developing countries to afford, and is therefore an important area for international development cooperation.

After the financial crisis in 2008, in order to cope with the downside risks of the economy, China implemented a proactive fiscal policy and put forward a package of programmes to accelerate the construction of livelihood projects and infrastructure, rapidly entering the era of big infrastructure. At the same time, China attaches importance to infrastructure experience out of the country. Following the “Belt and Road” and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, China launched the Global Infrastructure Connectivity Alliance initiative to increase financial investment and intellectual support in infrastructure projects, accelerating the process of global infrastructure connectivity, which is a world-class project for the benefit of the people.

Overseas countries highly recognize China’s cooperation in infrastructure, as evidenced by 47.2 per cent of respondents indicating that China is the most desirable partner in infrastructure, a much higher level of endorsement than the second-ranked France at 14.7 per cent and the United States at 8.8 per cent. In terms of engagement, the Global South considers infrastructure construction projects to be the mainstay of China’s engagement in development cooperation. 77.2 per cent of respondents say that China typically supports transport infrastructure projects, well ahead of other options such as governance and debt relief. In terms of feedback on effects, the infrastructure that China has helped build has significantly improved the ease of life for local residents, with 58 per cent of respondents saying that daily travel and the flow of goods have become more convenient.

Infrastructure belongs to hard product attribute, built on a tangible scale to meet the needs of everyday physical life. In terms of visibility, physical infrastructures are mainly constructed with steel, cement, masonry and other industrial materials, such as traditional roads, bridges, electric power facilities, water conservancy facilities, harbours and ports, which have a strong visual impact on the

local people and give them a deeper impression of China. In terms of the degree of benefit, it can meet the basic needs of the people in the target countries, such as water, electricity, travelling, etc., solve their practical living problems and reduce their economic inequality. In this context, the perception of benefit is quickly and strongly transformed. As the largest infrastructure project in Kenya, the completion of the Monnet Railway has greatly eased the transport pressure, halved the travelling time between the two places, and greatly improved the efficiency of cargo transportation and pedestrian travel. Therefore, the hard attributes of China's infrastructure cooperation are in the state of "strong sense of reality", and the people of the target countries' perception of the strength and effect of the infrastructure cooperation is relatively real and rich, while there are no existing closed rules when China enters into the field of infrastructure, which makes the construction of China's image in infrastructure relatively smooth and has no upper limit.

The international rules in infrastructure are open, as evidenced by the fact that infrastructure standards are not monolithic and do not completely exclude external norms. International organisations such as the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) and the International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC) as a whole have the task of developing globally agreed international standards. The Union Internationale des Chemins de fer (UIC), for example, is for a long time a European (Western European-dominated) non-governmental railway organisation, but it also incorporates the norms of other railway organisations in order to maintain the advancement of its standards, whose standards have a great deal of influence in the international arena. As the first European order of China's high-speed railway, the construction of the Hungarian-Serbian Railway has adopted European railway standards to align Chinese railway technology and equipment with EU railway connectivity specifications. In addition, the International Standards Organisation (ISO) has not used the rules to suppress China, but has instead absorbed external forces to further strengthen the authority and legitimacy of its dominant discourse within the framework of the rules. With the rapid development of China's infrastructure, the State Railway Administration (SRA) has actively promoted the participation of relevant units in the railway industry in the UIC standardisation work, and by 2022 China will have presided over the formulation of a cumulative total of 31 UIC standards (of which 14 have already been published and implemented), and participated in the formulation of a cumulative total of 30 UIC standards.

Open rules in infrastructure imply that target countries are less impeded by gravitational and clutter effects, which is favourable to China's entry into the sector and the construction of a positive overseas image. In terms of gravitational effects, target countries are less subject to the irresistible gravitational pull of established infrastructure rules, and the integration costs of accepting China's infrastructure entry are lower. Nigeria's Akka Railway is the first time that a modern railway of Chinese standards has landed in Africa. Prior to this, Africa was affected by its colonial history, whose railway design and construction had adopted different railway gauge standards. Although the replacement of the standard will cause concepts and products, etc., not adaptable, but the advantages of Chinese standards eventually help the Nigerian out of the track of the EU standards to make independent choice of railway

construction programme. In terms of the clutter effect, the rules in the field of infrastructure are competitive but within certain limits, with less extreme confrontational discourse. As mentioned above, the EU has even chosen to recognise China's performance in the infrastructure sector in a timely manner, trying to integrate China into the former's system of rules. It is important to emphasise that, as great power competition becomes more intense, the suppression of China's discourse in open rule areas such as infrastructure is intensifying, as evidenced by western countries' increasingly strong signals of solicitation to target countries. Among them, the "Global Infrastructure Partnership" proposed by the U.S. and the European Union's "Global Gateway Programme" are typical examples, putting forward four trillion investment plans to try to check China's influence in this field. Fortunately, the strong real benefits of China's infrastructure resist the impact of the United States and the West's alternative programmes, but China still need to be vigilant to prevent the loss of the only field of discourse advantage.

In sum, the hard attributes and open rules make the target countries show high recognition of China's in infrastructure field. The Hypothesis 4 (Overseas countries are more likely to highly recognize China in international development cooperation when the field is hard product with open rules) is consistent with the empirical facts.

5. Conclusions and Insights

By constructing the theoretical framework of "product attributes + international rules of the field", this paper discusses the characteristics of China's overseas image in terms of field differentiation and the reasons for its formation. The paper suggests that the product attributes and international rules of international development cooperation fields jointly affect China's overseas image. Specifically, when international development cooperation field is soft product with closed rules, overseas countries are more unlikely to recognize China's cooperation behaviours in the field; when the field is hard product with closed rules, overseas countries are more likely to recognize China in the field in a limited way; when the field belongs to soft product with open rules, overseas countries are more likely to approve of China's; when the field belongs to hard product with open rules, overseas countries are more likely to highly recognize China's cooperation in this field. The empirical analysis shows that the soft attributes and closed rules of national governance make China unrecognized. The hard attributes and closed rules of the economic make China comparatively recognized. The soft attributes and open rules of the social sector make China lowly recognized. The hard attributes and open rules in infrastructure bring high recognition of China.

From a doctrinal point of view, this paper further complements and improves the theory of China's image construction. Based on the improvement effect of China's international development cooperation on image, this paper introduces two new variables, namely, the product attributes and international rules of the field, emphasizing the influence of endogenous and exogenous factors in the construction of China's image in international development cooperation. At the same time, this paper also provides some new ideas for academics to study the issue of country image. While existing studies have paid

more attention to the overall national image and the communication effects of different discourse modes, they have paid less attention to the problem of China's image differentiation and its causes at the field level.

At the policy level, this paper sheds some light on how China, as a late-developing country, can construct a positive national image in international development cooperation in all aspects, especially seeing that the paths of image construction in different fields are different. This paper argues that when China is based on hard attributes and faces open rules, it can construct its national image in the field faster and better, even if the rules are closed, the people of the target country's sense of benefit is conducive to China's breaking out of the encirclement of Western discourse, and winning the comparative recognition of the target country under the pressure of the high position. When facing soft fields and open rules, the Chinese model is allowed to enter and become an option, and the lagged sense of benefit of the target country's people accumulates over time, which can form a weak recognition of China and turn into a strong one after a longer period of time. However, when facing soft fields and closed rules, the target country's short-term perception of China is in the blind spot of "no sense of reality", and the negative impact on China's image from the strong Western rules discourse is the greatest.

Against the backdrop of increasingly fierce competition between China and the United States, the United States and the West will maximise the repressive function of closed rules against China. Therefore, when China engages in international development cooperation in soft areas, it should assess the path of transformation of benefits and image, and accelerate the construction of its own discourse system while ensuring the continuity of cooperation. In addition, China should actively participate in rule-making in emerging areas such as digitalisation and other soft areas, so as to prevent the US and the West from monopolising the right to speak in rules and regulations again and causing systemic suppression of China.

Acknowledgement

None.

Funding Statement

None.

Author Contributions

Yongqing Zhang: The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data on which the study is based were accessed from a repository and are available for downloading through the following link. <https://www.aiddata.org/data/2023-perceptions-of-chinese-overseas-development-survey-data-aggregates-version-1-0>.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to report regarding the present study.

References

- [1]. Custer, S., Horigoshi, A., & Marshall, K. (2024). *BRI from the Ground Up: Leaders from 129 countries evaluate a decade of Beijing's signature initiative*. Williamsburg, VA: AidData at William & Mary.
- [2]. Joseph, N. (1990). *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*.
- [3]. Robert, K., & Joseph, N. (2001). *Power and Interdependence*.
- [4]. Bouding, K. (1959). National Image and International System, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*.
- [5]. Douglass, N. (1981). *Structure and Change in Economic History*.
- [6]. Douglass, N. (1990). *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*.
- [7]. Yuan, Z., & Fu, Q. (2020). Narrative Framing and the United States' Threat Construction of Rivals. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 13(3), 33-34.
- [8]. Xie, T., & Benjamin, I. (2013). What Affects China's National image? A Cross-National Study of Public Opinion. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 22(83), 850-867.
- [9]. Lawrence, J., Zhang, Z., & Wang, G. (2020). Explaining Foreign Support for China's Global Economic Leadership. *International Organization*, 74(3), 417-452.
- [10]. Stefan, M., Samuel, B., & Alexander, D. (2021). Discourse Wars and Mask Diplomacy: China's Global Image Management in Times of Crisis. *Political Research Exchange*, 6, 1.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MOSP and/or the editor(s). MOSP and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.