From "Soft Communication" to "New Narratives": A Review of Wang Jingxuan and Liu Qi's *International Discourse System of "the Belt and Road" Initiative*

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Abstract: *International Discourse System* of *"the Belt and Road" Initiative (*Wang Jingxuan & Liu Qi, Eds., Social Sciences Academic Press, 2024) constructs a theoretically rigorous and pragmatically significant framework for discourse analysis. Employing data-driven and interdisciplinary research methodologies, this seminal work provides systematic guidance for enhancing China's international discourse power, emerging as a pivotal academic contribution to the study of diplomatic communication in the context of China's major-country diplomacy with distinctive characteristics in the new era. Based on the research, this review proposes a tripartite analytical framework— "Breakthrough-Reconstruction-Deep Cultivation" — to deconstruct the Belt and Road external communication discourse system. It argues for centering the "A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind" as the core narrative paradigm, thereby advancing an inclusive meta-narrative framework for global governance. Such an approach seeks to (a) promote development in a more fair and just direction of global governance systems, (b) foster understanding, and (c) foster transnational cooperation through discursive synergy.

Keywords: the Belt and Road; External communication discourse system; Soft communication; Cultural narrative

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标题：从"软传播"到"新叙事"——评王璟璇、刘琦的《"一带一路"对外传播话语体系建设》

摘要：《"一带一路"对外传播话语体系建设》（王璟璇、刘琦主编，社会科学文献出版社 2024 年）深入构建了一套兼具理论深度与实践价值的话语体系框架，运用数据驱动和多学科融合的研究方法，为讲好中国故事、提升国际话语权提供了科学的方法论指导，是新时代中国特色大国外交传播领域的重要学术成果。基于此著作，本文构建"破局-重构-深耕"的三维分析框架，对"一带一路"对外传播话语体系展开深入解构，提出应以"人类命运共同体"理念为叙事核心，旨在为全球治理提供一个更具包容性的元叙事框架，以此推动全球治理体系朝着更加公平、公正的方向发展，促进不同国家和地区之间的理解与合作。

关键词："一带一路"；对外传播话语体系；软传播；文化叙事

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Introduction

Against the backdrop of profound changes in the global governance system and the restructuring of the international communication landscape, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), proposed in 2013, has become one of the world's largest international cooperation platforms over the past decade, receiving positive responses and extensive support from countries along the route. However, despite the continuous enhancement of China's comprehensive national strength and international influence, the global discourse system remains unbalanced. The external communication of the BRI has not yet formed an international discourse advantage matching its development advantages, still facing practical dilemmas such as gaps between China's narrative intentions and overseas reception effects, suppression by Western discourse media, as well as external negative public opinions. International discourse system of the BRI (Social Sciences Academic Press, 2024), co-authored by Wang Jingxuan, associate researcher of the Big Data Development Department of the International Information Center, and Liu Qi, assistant researcher, is a response to this practical predicament.

The book comprises nine chapters. The first three chapters elaborate on the current status and practical challenges of the BRI as an international public good and cooperation platform, sort out the theoretical foundation of the external communication discourse system, and construct the overall framework of BRI's external communication discourse system. Chapters 4 to 8 specifically elaborate on the five core elements-discourse power, discourse essence, communication media, communication methods, and discourse influence, addressing "who speaks", "what to say", "how to say", "through which channels to say", and "what the effect is" respectively, thus forming a complete communication chain of "subject-content-method-medium-effect". In the final chapter, the authors transform the theoretical framework of the previous eight chapters into operable action paths, propose the general principles of external discourse communication, and provide specific operational guidelines for the practical application of the external communication discourse system of the BRI.

As a systematic academic work focusing on the external communication discourse system of the BRI, this book conducts a comprehensive and in-depth analysis from theoretical basis, framework design, core content to application guidance. It helps readers fully understand the BRI, enhance international understanding, and provides research paradigms, ideas, and practical guidance for scholars and researchers in related fields.

1. Breaking the Dilemma of "West Strong, East Weak": The Historical Inevitability of Constructing a Discourse System

Since the Industrial Revolution, Western countries have achieved a leading position in economic, technological, military and other fields, laying a material foundation for the global spread of their discourse systems. During the colonial expansion period, Western countries imposed their values on colonial countries through military conquest and cultural export. After the end of the Cold War, Western countries led by the United States have further promoted their discourse systems globally with the wave of globalization. In the process of promoting the external publicity of the BRI, Western countries have firmly grasped the dominance of international communication by virtue of their long-accumulated political, economic and technological advantages. "Western Media Hegemony", derived from the critical perspective of Political Economy of International Communication (PEIC), refers to the fact that Western developed countries (especially the United States) maintain control over international public opinion through the global dominant position of media institutions, information infrastructure and cultural industries (Schiller, 1976; McChesney, 2016).

In external communication, China faces negative narratives such as the "debt trap theory" and the "environmental damage theory", and is trapped in the dilemma of "having reason but being unable to articulate it, failing to spread after speaking, and failing to make an impact even after spreading". The "China threat theory" was once rampant, a phenomenon largely manipulated by mainstream Western media that monopolize international communication discourse power (Shi & Huang, 2025, p.156). In this context, constructing an external communication discourse system for the BRI has become a key measure to break this landscape and enhance China's international discourse power, with profound historical inevitability. Zhang (2024, p.12) points out that under the world discourse landscape of "West Strong, East Weak", China is now facing with the reality of image dislocation and discourse marginalization, and urgently needs to make in-depth breakthroughs through multi-dimensional paths to expand the effectiveness of "Chinese-style" discourse in external communication. To promote the development of the global governance system in a more fair and impartial direction, it is necessary to break the Western discourse monopoly and ensure that the voices of developing countries are fully heared. As the largest developing country, China has the responsibility and capability to play a leading role in this regard.

With the in-depth development of world multi-polarization, economic globalization and social informatization, the international landscape is undergoing unprecedented restructuring. With the collective rise of emerging market countries and developing countries, constructing an external communication discourse system for the BRI has become an objective need for the reform of the global governance system. The BRI brings Chinese wisdom and solutions to the world stage, aiming to enhance China's discourse power and influence in global governance, break the international communication landscape of "West Strong, East

Weak", promote fairness, justice and common development in the international community, and advance the building of a community with a shared future for mankind.

2. Reconstructing "Soft Communication": A Strategic Choice to Enhance International Discourse Power

2.1 The Discourse Power Logic of Soft Communication Reconstruction

In contemporary society where globalization and digitalization are deeply integrated, the communication system has become a key field of national soft power competition. Communication is not only a carrier of information flow, but also a medium for transmitting values, cultural identity and ideology. Zhao and Zhu (2023, p.25) argue that "soft communication" emphasizes emotional resonance, value sharing and interactive participation in the communication process to achieve more profound and extensive influence. The discourse subject is the initiator and leader of communication activities, and its composition and characteristics directly affect the authority/professionalism and affinity/appeal of communication. To maximize the practical influence of discourse, it is necessary to select appropriate discourse speakers according to the characteristics of different communication backgrounds and purposes, as well as the existing image of the discourse speaker in the minds of the audience (Wang & Liu, 2024, p.43). In the practice of external communication of the BRI, the discourse subjects present a diversified features. Governments, political parties, media, think tanks, enterprises, public figures and ordinary people all play unique roles in it.

First, governments, which occupy the core position in the external communication of the BRI, including the Chinese government and the governments of co-building countries, transmit authoritative information through high-level mutual visits, diplomatic conference promotion, document release and signing. Xiao (2008, p.6) advocates promoting government image communication with the new concepts of "soft communication". Second, political parties are participating subjects in the external communication of the BRI. Communication and exchanges between political parties help to gain understanding and support from more parties. Shi (2019) notes that some foreign political parties actively disseminate knowledge about the BRI to create a favorable public opinion environment for China. Third, media, as physical organizations with discourse communication capabilities, include Chinese media, media of co-building countries and media of third countries. Positive interactions and argumentative interactions between media can to a certain extent enhance the discourse power of Chinese media and attract international attention (Wang & Liu, 2024, p.54). Fourth, think tanks and experts provide intellectual support for the communication of the BRI with their professional knowledge and research capabilities. Overseas think tanks are more "credible" and have greater discourse influence among the public in their host countries, and the influence of "external brains" and "external pens" cannot be underestimated. Fifth, enterprises. "Going global" enterprises are direct participants in projects. They speak positively for the BRI by cooperating with local media and building their own new media platforms. Zhao and Zhu (2023, p.26) point out that the external communication of enterprises and civil forces includes both the dissemination of film and television works and the spread of various corporate cultures abroad. Sixth, public figures/opinion leaders, who can influence the attitudes of others in teams or among certain groups, such as Li Ziqi's popularity at home and abroad. In addition, Darren Watkins Jr., a video blogger known as "Speed" with over 37 million

followers on YouTube, launched a trip to China in March 2025. Guancha.cn (2025) reports that the Chinese Embassy in the United States commented that he "is bridging cultural divides through digital means and creating new channels for foreign audiences to understand China". Chinanews.com (2025) notes that the Taiwan Affairs Office of the State Council stated that he showed a real, friendly and three-dimensional China to the world through live broadcast cameras. Seventh, the public. The folk participate in communication through social media and cultural exchange activities. In the case of "Speed" mentioned above, Chinanews.com (2025) reports that on April 4, "Speed" broadcast live for more than 9 hours, with the number of simultaneous online viewers exceeding 160,000 at one point, and the total number of views of related videos exceeding 7.48 million, triggering heated discussions among foreign netizens on China's development and narrowing the distance between people of different countries.

The subjects of China's external communication of the BRI have formed a multi-dimensional collaborative model, which not only ensures the authority of communication, but also enhances its affinity. It is worth noting that the power structure of discourse subjects is under restructuring. The popularization of algorithm recommendation technology has enabled social media platforms to obtain unprecedented agenda-setting power. Individual users have also gained partial discourse power through content production and dissemination, bringing opportunities for communication democratization as well as challenges of information disorder.

2.2 The Flexible Expression Strategy of Chinese Narrative

The theory of soft power provides an analytical perspective for the flexible expression strategy of BRI external communication. This theory emphasizes the construction of cultural attractiveness, political values and the legitimacy of foreign policies (Nye, 2004). Traditional Chinese culture embodies the profound wisdom and values, such as the concepts of "harmony in diversity" and "great harmony under heaven", which are valuable spiritual assets for China to communicate with the world. The theory of soft power includes cultural attractiveness, political values and the legitimacy of foreign policies. In international communication, the flexible expression of Chinese narrative mainly encompasses three dimensions: communication content, communication methods and communication channels. In the practice of external communication of the BRI:

First, the communication content strategy. The essence of communication discourse serves as the cornerstone of the communication system, and its quality directly determines the communication effect. It needs to be grounded in an accurate knowledge system and scientific issue-framing methods. Liu (2018, p.52) points out that the BRI condenses and embodies important ideas put forward around 2013, such as the "Chinese Dream", "community with a shared future", "mutual learning among civilizations" and "view of righteousness and interests", and has an international perspective for the external communication of Chinese stories. The selection of "soft communication" content should not only reflect Chinese culture, but also align with the common aspirations of people around the world. Targeted and appealing themes should be chosen based on diverse communication contexts. When facing audiences in the economic field, we can focus on the achievements of the BRI in promoting trade growth, attracting investment and driving industrial upgrading. For audiences in the cultural field, themes such as cultural exchange and mutual learning among civilizations

can be explored, so that the communication content is more in line with the interests and concerns of the audience. The issue-setting of "soft communication" needs to balance "grand narrative" and "small yet compelling" stories. Wang and Liu (2024, p.114) argue that only when communicators have clear themes, proficient skills and innovative approaches, conducting research on, responding to and interacting with, can they set issues with real "communication power". Packaging themes through storytelling techniques, transforming the people and events in the construction of the BRI into vivid stories, which can enhance the appeal and attractiveness of the communication content and making it more accessible and understandable to international audiences. It is curcial to maintain the influence of communication themes, and the popularity and attention of themes through continuous follow-up reports, in-depth interpretation and interactive communication, so as avoiding the "flash-in-the-pan" effect of communication content. For issues that have attracted international attention, such as the green development achievements of the BRI, further exploration of relevant content, invite experts and scholars to interpret them, organize online and offline interactive activities, guide international audiences to conduct in-depth discussions, and continuously expand the communication influence.

Second, the communication method strategy. Chinese narrative has gradually shifted from one-way dissemination to multi-dimensional interaction, emphasizing two-way communication with international audiences. Traditional external communication is often a one-way output of information, lacking the capture and response to audience feedback, making it difficult to truly resonate with the cognition and emotions of international audiences. The flexible expression of communication methods is the key to breaking this deadlock. By leveraging the international exchange and cooperation platforms, Chinese stories can be told as BRI themed documentaries, cultural programs and other media works, as well as stories of overseas public welfare activities of enterprises, in a gentler and more nuanced manner, shape China's external communication image, and make Chinese narrative more approachable and appealing.

In the field of cultural exchange, the focus has shifted from unilaterally displaying local culture, but turns to actively building channels for mutual learning between Chinese and foreign cultures. By holding international academic seminars, cultural and artistic exchanges and other activities, foreign experts and scholars are invited to jointly discuss global issues together, share different cultural perspectives and experiences, and encourage mutual exchange and learning between Chinese and foreign cultures.

In the era of social media, China's official media and civilian self-media have become windows for external display. They actively respond to the concerns and questions of the international community regarding China's development, and effectively improve the transparency and credibility of information communication through real-time interaction and in-depth communication, successfully transforming international audiences from passive information receivers into active participants in Chinese narrative. It has broadened the communication path of Chinese voices, enhanced the understanding and trust of the international community in China, truly broken the shackles of one-way communication, and allowed the world to perceive China from a more three-dimensional and real perspective.

Third, the communication channel strategy. The high-tech communication means in the era of globalization provide favorable opportunities for China to do a good job in external communication. In terms of traditional media, promoting the development of international channels and foreign-language newspapers and periodicals to improve the content quality and communication effect. CCTV's CGTN (China Global Television Network) transmits Chinese news and cultural programs to global audiences through multi-language channels, playing an important role in the international public opinion landscape. In the field of new media, the new generation mechanism of soft power in the digital age lies in algorithm-enabled cultural communication. International social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and TikTok are utilized to expand overseas influence. For example, spokespersons of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs have built up accounts on overseas social media to respond to international hot issues in vivid and humorous language, showing the affinity and wisdom of Chinese diplomacy. Through cooperative reporting and content sharing with international media, use the communication channels and influence of international media to expand the reach of Chinese narrative. Zhang (2024, p.20) argues that the multi-modal communication -composed of symbolic resources such as words, language, images, expressions and music enhances the sense of reality and three-dimensionality of the narrative through the integration of diverse technologies, and fully engages the audience through sensory channels such as sound, touch and color, enhancing the interactive experience.

The flexible expression strategy of Chinese narrative is a long-term and systematic project. It requires collaborative advancement from multiple aspects including cultural excavation, platform utilization and issue selection, so as to spread Chinese voices in a more gentle and effective way, enhance China's discursive power and influence on the international stage, and promote understanding and cooperation among different countries and regions.

3. Deepening "New Narratives" The Discourse Practice of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind

In the current era of deeply integrated globalization yet facing many challenges, as a meta-narrative, "a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind" is a universal, holistic and authoritative narrative model or discourse system. It aims to provide a comprehensive and overall interpretation framework for social, cultural, historical and other aspects, and point out the direction for global development (Lyotard, 1984). Deepening the "new narratives" related to it and carrying out discourse practice is a transformation from "modernist single narrative" to "pluralistic coexistence narrative", which has become the key to enhancing international understanding and building global consensus. It breaks through the traditional narrative model centered on national interests in international relations theory, emphasizes the consistency of the humanity's collective interests, and constructs a global governance discourse system of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits. However, it should be noted that there are deep-seated contradictions in the cultural

translation of "new narratives". As a political term with Chinese characteristics represented by "a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind", the official translation is "a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind", but it is often simplified to "global community" in the English context, resulting in the loss of its inherent philosophical connotation. There is a fundamental tension between China's emphasis on "substantive justice" (such as the achievements of infrastructure construction) and the West's focus on "procedural justice" (such as the transparency of environmental impact assessments).

The global dissemination of the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind is essentially a profound change in the discursive power of the international order. The innovation of this narrative does not lie in simply putting forward alternative concepts, but in reconstructing the cognitive framework of international relations—transforming the zero-sum game "power politics" logic into a symbiotic developmental "relational governance" model. At the theoretical level, it dispels the individual-centered narrative of Western-centrism through "relational ontology", and understands the interaction between countries as an interconnected network of existence rather than a mechanical combination of isolated actors. This transformation process is essentially an advanced practice of the "encoding/decoding" theory—establishing a "third space of cultural translation" (Bhabha, 2012) to complete form reconstruction while retaining the core of the discourse. The strategic narrative theory proposed by Miskimmon et al. (2017, pp.45-48) provides a remediation path. Its three-dimensional model shows that China has achieved institutional discourse transformation through the Environmental and Social Framework (ESF) of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), transforming the principle of "extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits" from a formative narrative into a projected narrative with rule-binding force. Wang and Fan (2024, p.112) point out that the use of indirect expression in diplomacy can not only be used for clear statements, but also for vague evasion, leaving room for both parties while refuting and counterattacking, and realizing the narrative ecology of "local determinism" at the technical level. This theoretical integration shows that the innovation of "a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind" as a post-modern meta-narrative lies in its ability to accommodate the conflicting representations of the Mombasa-Nairobi Railway by Kenyan media (both the positive framework of "economic hope" and the negative evaluation of "ecological damage"), thus breaking the binary discourse hegemony in traditional international communication. The real power of this new narrative does not lie in replacing the existing Western discourse system, but in providing a more inclusive meta-narrative framework for global governance.

Conclusion

International discourse system of *the BRI* is both an academic monograph and an action guide. Theoretically, it provides researchers with a framework for "how to build a discourse system"; practically, it delineates the path for policymakers, media practitioners and business professionals to "achieve communication effects". It is worth noting that the book focuses on practical existing issues, repeatedly emphasizes the necessity of communicating the principle of "extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits", and points out that the BRI is not a geopolitical tool but an open and inclusive cooperation platform, providing theoretical

underpinnings for countering discordant narratives such as the "debt trap theory" and the "environmental damage theory". The book extensively employs data and cases to enhance its persuasiveness, reflecting the distinct feature of "data-driven communication". At the same time, its discussion on emerging fields such as overseas social media communication and the Digital Silk Road reflects academic foresight, providing new ideas for China to tackle communication challenges in the era of globalization 4.0.

However, although the book proposes the five core elements of the external communication discourse system, it does not further cultivate the interactive dynamics between each element, and lacks in-depth analysis of the conflicts between the unique political discourse of the BRI Initiative and the Western communication systems. While it monitors communication effects through big data, but does not clarify the application scenarios of specific technical tools and the standardized data collection process, and lacks discussion on data elements (Wang, Zhu & Wu, 2025). Data elements have become a strategic production factor leading the new round of scientific and technological revolution and technological transformation (Yang, Li & Huang, 2022, p.113).

In general, at the new stage where the BRI Initiative moving towards high-quality development, the publication of this book is timely—it points out that forging international discourse power is by no means an overnight task, and requires integrating resources through systematic thinking, bridging cultural barriers with innovative narratives, and accumulating trust with practical actions. As stated in the book: discourse influence is the goal pursued by the external communication of the BRI, and the book itself is an important intellectual contribution to facilitating consensus-building. Standing at the historical juncture of global transformations, the significance of this book goes beyond the boudaries of a single communication study. It is not only a theoretical declaration of China's participation in global governance, but also a practical epitome of mutual learning among civilizations. With the continuous expansion of the BRI circle of partners, the communication concepts and methods advocated in this book will surely continue to resonate in international exchanges, helping to build a more equitable and reasonable new international discourse order.

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