Construction and Communication of National Image of China in the Cross-Cultural Context

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Abstract

To construct and communicate the national image of China in a cross-cultural context, emphasis should be laid on the establishment of overall strategies, researches on cross-cultural difference, cross-cultural communication through multiple channels, construction of unique discourse system, improvement of overall quality of the populace, the creating of comprehensive communication brands and the like based on recognition of current international and national reality. In addition, for better construction and communication of national image of China in the cross-cultural context, great efforts should be made to avoid virtualizing image, formalized communication, traditionalized cognitive framework, ideology-oriented overseas propaganda, puppet-like wording, and impatience in image creating.

Key words: National image; Cross-cultural; Construction; Communication

1. CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION OF NATIONAL IMAGE

Generally speaking, national image is the presentation, "in an abstract manner, of the whole world's general perception and impression on a certain country". It "shows what a sovereign country or nation looks like at the world stage or how it is responded by public opinions". Also "it represents the international community's general viewpoints of the relative stability in that country". In addition to its own experience, the formation of national image depends more on communication, including domestic and overseas communication. As to the communication of national image, the latter plays a more significant role. Basically speaking, image communication refers to the process in which the information of a country is spread via a specific channel, then processed and finally the national image takes shape. In other words, overseas communication of national image means the publicity of national image of a certain country among overseas countries. In this process, many countries and languages are involved. Therefore, it is also known as cross-cultural communication of national image. Generally speaking, cross-cultural communication of national image will meet the following challenges:

(a) Due to historical or existing conflicts, sometimes national-image communication of one country will run into bad situation in another country. If there are historical or existing disputes over some major issues or potential conflicts on strategic development between two countries, the report on one country made by the other one will be somewhat deviated from the truth. There will be more negative reports on that country than positive ones.

(b) The difference in national conditions, political system and overall national strength will result in deviated comprehension of the national image. As the development pattern, development path, national strength and national conditions vary greatly among different countries, there still remains a long way to a more wonderful future. We can't rely on it that every country will be equally treated by the people of a certain country.

(c) The ideological difference and conflicts often serve as unnecessary obstacles to the communication of national image. Today's world is still disturbed by such turbulent factors as hegemonism from time to time, the competition

between socialism and capitalism, the squabble on the right to survival and the right to development between the developing countries and developed ones which have not yet ceased. And meanwhile, some countries have become so wild about hegemonism, ranging from politics to military, culture, technology, voice, etc. With this abnormal international system going on, it is impossible that one country will be reported, impartially and honestly, in another country.

(d) The difference in language and culture makes it hard to comprehend the national image without deviation. Although the world has already seen the advent of an Age of Globalization and the distance of the globe has been increasingly shortened, there still remains a big difference in language, culture, religious belief and custom among different countries. What is popular in one country might be treated as a laughingstock in another country, while what appears to be a shame in one country might be enthusiastically followed by the people in another country. In view of this, comprehensive considerations must be given to the communication of national image prior to any simple actions. To ensure the effective communication of national image and make sure the recognition and popularity of the image of a country in the international community, the only alternative is to highly value the cross-cultural communication. Only in this way can be the goal for national image construction be clearly defined and the image successfully elevated.

2. STATUS THAT MUST BE RECOGNIZED DURING THE CONSTRUCTION AND COMMUNICATION OF NATIONAL IMAGE OF CHINA UNDER THE CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Currently the following challenges arise during the construction and communication of national image of China under the cross-cultural context:

(a) the gap between the established national image of China and the actual demands in practices. At present, the national-image construction work fails to keep pace with the rapid economic development of China and the continuously-enhanced overall national strength. In addition, the communication of national image of China is far from enough to fully demonstrate, in the international community, the current real side of China and serve the next development strategies of China in accordance with its existing development status. In this connection, the situation in those countries, with which China has long-established friendship, is more satisfactory than in other countries, and more satisfactory in developing countries than in developed ones.

(b) As to the construction and communication of national image, China lags behind of Western developed countries in both theoretic construction and practical operation. Since a long time ago, the Western countries had become aware of the importance of national image, and had attached much importance to the researches and communication of their own images. However, deeply influenced by traditional Chinese culture, the Chinese people hold the firm belief that good wine needs no bush. Western countries not only lay stress on actions, but more on propaganda before and after the actions.

(c) The poor cross-cultural awareness among the whole nation. Multinational country as China is, there still remains great room for improvement in cross-cultural communication. For a long time, other ethnic cultures in China have been under the influence and nourishing of the Han civilization, so there is small cultural gap. Cross-cultural communication of the image of China meets with fewer challenges in the subculture circles in China than in overseas culture circles.

(d) Most Western countries share a common history of exotic-culture immigration, and have accumulated extensive cross-cultural experience. However, the immigration into China from foreign territories is rare and the majorities of populace are still poor or inadequate in cross-cultural awareness and capability.

(e) The difficulties and potential problems arising out of the development process of China, including environmental problems, food safety, intellectual property protection, corruption, income disparity and the like, also come as obstacles to the construction and communication of the image of China in the international community. These problems are likely to remain existing during the construction and communication of the new image of China.

3. MAJOR MEASURES FOR THE CONSTRUCTION AND COMMUNICATION OF THE IMAGE OF CHINA IN THE CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT

This century has witnessed the rise of China, the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the crucial role China has played in safeguarding world peace and prospering world economy. Despite the grave difficulties ahead, we have no other alternatives but to go forward with the cross-cultural construction and communication of Chinese image abroad, which is of great significance to the development and construction of today's China. On the whole, we should focus on the following measures during this process:

(a) Study the difference between Chinese cultures and foreign cultures. As culture greatly varies with the difference in country and ethnic group, great efforts should be made to study foreign cultures, especially cultures in different countries, regions and ethnic groups. At present, it is hard for us to use only English to

communicate with the rest of the world where thousands of languages are being used. If we view the complicated world based only on knowledge of British and American cultures, a real understanding of other cultures will be impossible. With languages and cultures diversified in the world, it is necessary for us to cultivate more talents fluent in foreign languages and to foster more experts with a good knowledge of cultures in specific foreign countries. For a long time, much importance has been attached to British and American languages and European cultures. However, for future communication with the countries and people from the rest of the world, it is also necessary for us to cultivate experts in African cultures, Northeast Asian cultures, Southeast Asian cultures, cultures of Central Asia, South American cultures, etc.. In this connection, learned scholars adept at communication in local languages and cultures are highly expected.

(b) Expand channels for cross-cultural communication. Not only should the state and governments at various levels strive to construct and promote the image of China, also non-official organizations and individual citizens should be encouraged to contribute a part of the Chinese image through cross-cultural activities. For example, the overseas business of state-owned or privately-owned enterprises, overseas travelling of individual citizens and the image of various personnel working abroad are usually seen as the incarnation of national image of the country. With the widespread use of Internet, cross-cultural communication has gone beyond the border. On the one hand, the role of traditional media, in particular newspaper, TV and film, should be highly valued; on the other hand, more attention should be focused on the challenges of new media on the construction and communication of national image. To be simple, every netizen of a certain country serves as a spokesperson for national image of his/her country, and any careless online behaviors will trigger heated public opinions over national image of the country. A typical story is about the Texas correspondent Danny Hall Vada who described Chinese preserved egg in the reader reporter video in July 2011 to be "Devil Cooked Egg". As a result of his personal comments, the preserved egg was opted in "CNN GO" "the world's most disgusting food" theme. In no time, Danny came under criticism of Chinese netizens who in turn condemned the American counterparts. In the end, Danny had to make apology to Chinese people in the newspaper. This is evidence that we should be careful not to tarnish any national image by voicing rash online views; otherwise, it will easily incur the troubles in the cross-cultural context.

(c) Establish unique discourse system. For better communication of the national image of China in the cross-cultural context, the establishment of unique discourse system is important. Intangible as national image is, the formation of national image has a lot to do with tangible things. In respect to the construction

and communication of national image of China, efforts should be made, based on the characteristics of China, to motivate the participation of both Chinese and foreigners with universally attractive stories and acceptable narrative mode, heated topics across the globe and languages familiar to the rest of the world. Besides, based on characteristics of different cultures and languages, specific communication contents, discourse framework and wording should be mapped out. What's more, more efforts should be made on researches on discourse progression mode of major media throughout the world and key discourse words. It should be noted that there is distinct difference in way of thinking, culture and discourse expression between the Eastern and the Western world. After a long-time deposit, these differences will be mainly reflected in cognitive difference on many things among people from different cultural contexts. In addition, as people in different cultural backgrounds might be different in concerns and both sides might not know well about each other, even misunderstanding, it is well worth studying which discourse to be used, what contents to be communicated, and when and where to be communicated (to). We have tried launching the advertising film features themed at the image of China in Times Square, the made-in-China advertisements throughout the USA and the recent cartoons of state leaders, unexceptionally with desired results. Trials of such kind have prepared experience for the communication of national image of China abroad.

(d) Improve overall quality of the populace. As we know, national image is directly linked to quality of the populace. There is no doubt that a country with poor populace quality will appear in the world stage with a lusterless image. The construction and communication of national image go smoothly only in countries with good populace quality. As to overall quality of populace, it covers a wide range. For example, etiquette, righteousness, benevolence, wisdom and honesty, which are advocated by the Confucianism, are elements with direct effect on image of the populace and also the core components of populace image. In addition, other basic personal factors, for example caring about hygiene, willingness to help others, compliance with laws and regulations, being punctual, being tolerant, being thrifty and plain, being pragmatic and practical, being loyal to work duties, being patriotic, etc., also constitute important components of populace quality of a country. Although existence of these factors in individual citizens will not play a quite significant role in improving image of the populace, absence of one or several of them will have a great impact on populace image of that country. The modern society has much more and even higher requirements on basic populace qualities of a country, for example, good educational background, strong competency, good communication skill, creative awareness and capability, rational thinking, capabilities in analysis and criticism

of reality, and awareness and spirit in pursuit of science. With internationalization and globalization going on today's world, outstanding cross-cultural awareness and capability, in particular open awareness, international view, inclusiveness to exotic cultures, willingness to embrace excellent overseas cultures, and competence in cross-cultural communication, will greatly contribute to enhancing the populace image of a country. So far it has been over 30 years since the initiation of China's reform and opening up and over 10 years since China's entry into the WTO, so the overall quality of Chinese people has been constantly on the rise. Exposure to the edification of "five attentions, four beauties and three loves" and to the education of "Eight Dos and Don'ts" has greatly improved the overall quality of the Chinese populace. With the influence of the vigorously-advocated socialist core values and traditional cultures at present, the new century has witnessed a greater improvement in overall quality of Chinese populace. Gone are the days when the Chinese were isolated from the outside world prior to the reform and opening up. Nowadays the Chinese are standing at the world stage with a completely-new image specific to modernized countries. Of course there still remains improvement in quality and awareness of Chinese people, especially in cross-cultural awareness and capability, innovation awareness and spirit. The improvement in these aspects will play a significant role in creating a better national image for China.

4. MEASURES FOR THE CONSTRUCTION AND COMMUNICATION OF NATIONAL IMAGE OF CHINA

During the construction and communication of national image, we can't be too careful to avoid following the wrong way, especially consequences coming after our superficial understanding. a) Unrealistic overall positioning. The current national image of China should be not only definite and specific, but practical. On the one hand, we should be confident, self-dependent and self-improvement; on the other hand, we should be down-to-earth and pragmatic. Any practices of being impractical, excessive beautifying of China and even reveling in self-deceiving dreams will end up in hoisting with your own petard. We should constantly remind ourselves to stay away from conceit or rashness and be neither overbearing nor servile. Although China has made a dramatic change in the overall economy within such a short time, it still lags far behind Western developed countries in terms of per capita GNP. Egotistic cognition will finally prove to be impractical with time passing by. b) Formalized image communications. The construction of a national image should be based on the actual situation of the country. As a matter of fact, communication of national image relies fundamentally on the country itself, that is, the actual situation of the country. It is impossible for a country with a turbulent political scene, poor national strength, poverty-stricken livelihood, little access to the outside world and severe pollution to enjoy a good image in the international community. However, in this globalized age where the internet and new media have been popular, never will be any interesting things and places in an authentically beautiful country miss the eyes and ears of the public.

4.1 Traditionalized Cognitive Framework

As to the construction of current national image of China, it is unwise to simply define it to be the China under the influence of traditional culture, or simply make it an oriental iconic country long exposed to the Confucianism. Nor is it wrong to simply endow it with the status of the Descendants of Dragon. These will only present the receivers with the old history of China. The Chinese, who have suffered a lot since the Opium War, finally freed from the colonial rule and became owner of the nation. After the reform and opening up, the Chinese are active in the world in the new century with brand-new status and role. If the image construction based only on traditional history, the receivers' knowledge of China will be limited. This is not good for the construction and communication of the new image. However, we should try our utmost efforts to explore and forge, among the nations of the world, new status and role specific to the Chinese nation. For example, we should try to forge the Chinese image of "being aggressive, hardworking, open and inclusive, responsible, innovative, enthusiasm about peace". And meanwhile, we should also strive to impress the international community with the image of "peaceful development, joint development, win-win development and Chinese contribution".

4.2 Ideology-Oriented Foreign Communication

It is inevitable that overseas publicity of national image is somewhat influenced by ideology; however, the image communication should not center on ideology communication as the ultimate goal nor regard the ideology communication as the only and entire content. The wise strategy is to weaken the ideology. What is needed is not to integrate the two, but dissociate them as possible as we can. The communication of ideology-oriented national image will end up in either antipathy from the target regions or distortion of the national image to some extent, which will finally do harm to the communication of national image. Still hot and complicated as ideology conflict between various nations is, gone are the days when a certain kind of ideology was propagandized in a big way.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, we should have a clear idea of the new situations for the cross-cultural construction and

communication of the image of China. During the image construction and communication in the cross-cultural context, we should do a good job in top-level design, practically position the national image of China, and try every means to advance the researches into regional culture. Besides, we should spare no efforts to intensify the construction of cross-cultural communication media through multiple channels, establish the discourse system with Chinese characteristics, improve overall quality of the populace, and strive to create a cultural brand. What's more, we should be realistic, refuse to care only about form instead of content, do not aim merely at image communication, weaken ideological propaganda, refuse to be the puppet of others in establishing our own image, and do not get impetuous and impatient.

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