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Research on the Construction Effects of China's National Image through International Weak Communication from the Perspective of Articulation Theory

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Abstract:
At present, China's external communication is centered on the grand narrative led by the official government. Although it can accurately convey political signals, it ignores multiple dimensions such as economy, culture and society, which leads to the cognitive bias and discourse resistance of foreign people to China. The visa-free policy promotes people-to-people exchanges, brings the trend of "China tourism", and produces a large number of "weak communication" phenomena based on personal experience, which has become a new way for foreign people to perceive China.Under the framework of joint theory, this study explores how international weak communication influences the construction of China's national image through cross-cultural interaction. Qualitative research methods were adopted, focusing on South Korean tourists to China and overseas users who turned to XiaoHongshu after TikTok Ban, and high interaction volume bloggers and comment users were screened through platforms such as Instagram and Xiaohongshu. Combined with online interview and content analysis, this paper extracts the "joint" feature of weak communication and analyzes its influence mechanism on Chinese image cognition. This study finds that the folk authenticity of weak communication behavior can easily stimulate people's emotional resonance and identification with China's national image, which can effectively make up for the limitations of official communication.The innovation is to explore the mechanism of international weak communication, the process of connecting with local culture, and the breakthrough effect on the pattern of traditional media publicity from the perspective of engagement theory.

Keywords:
joint theory, Weak propagation, National image, Cross-cultural communication, Social media

1 Research Background and Significance

Amid accelerating globalization and the rapid advancement of new media technologies, the construction and dissemination of national image has become a critical strategic endeavor for countries to shape their international influence. China's current external communication predominantly relies on official narratives, emphasizing grand discourses of national development through institutionalized rhetoric. In terms of content,

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the focus remains on positive macro-narratives such as modernization and economic achievements, while the perspectives are largely framed by interpretations from experts and think tank scholars. Although this narrative model, governed by mechanisms like the triple-review and triple-proofreading system and leadership censorship, ensures precise articulation of official stances and effectively transmits political signals for international political communication, it reveals inherent limitations.National image construction is a systematic process encompassing multiple dimensions, including politics, economy, culture, society, and civil livelihood. Overreliance on official discourse risks creating "perception voids" among foreign publics regarding China's economic, cultural, and social realities, potentially fostering resistance to its political narratives. This issue is particularly pronounced in cross-cultural communication contexts.

The 2024 China International Communication Keywords Ranking lists "China Tourism" among its top ten entries. To date, China has established comprehensive mutual visa exemption agreements with 26 countries, implemented unilateral visa-free policies for 38 nations, introduced transit visa exemptions for 54 countries, and signed various visa facilitation agreements with 157 countries and regions. Taking South Korea as a case study, the recent visa-free policy for Korean citizens has triggered a surge in civilian exchanges.These grassroots interactions have generated rich "weak communication" phenomena through interpersonal channels, offering critical access points for Korean and global publics to holistically understand China's economic, political, cultural, and social landscapes. Such exchanges have successfully disrupted South Korea's geographically constrained mainstream media narratives, yielding diversified communication effects. Concurrently, the widespread adoption of local social media platforms in both countries has amplified the diffusion of weak communication messages, exerting multi-dimensional impacts on Korean perceptions of China's national image.

Against the backdrop, this study holds significant theoretical and practical value. Practically, it deepens the understanding of how international weak communication shapes foreign publics' evolving perceptions and attitudes toward China's national image, thereby informing the development of targeted and effective communication strategies. Theoretically, by dissecting the "articulation" process between weak communication and foreign local cultures-alongside its complex effects-the research enriches national image communication theories. The findings provide actionable insights for addressing similar challenges in global communication practices, contributing to the enhancement of China's international communication efficacy and the cultivation of a more positive and proactive national image. These implications hold substantial theoretical and practical significance for advancing China's soft power and global influence.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Conjugation theory

The concept of Articulation, which has its roots in the Latin articlare, meaning "joint", and in the field of cultural studies, the articulation of different cultural elements, was first articulated and systematically elaborated by the post-Marxist theorist Ernesto Laclau. In the 1980s, Stuart Hall further expanded on this basis and formed the "junction theory". Hall regards bonding as a way to link two or more heterogeneous elements in a specific context. This bonding practice builds identity in differences, and is a field in which multiple social

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structures and power groups interweave and interact under a specific historical and realistic background, in which there is no clear boundary between ruling and being ruled. Thus, the engagement strategy becomes a means for multiple stakeholders to seek common recognition of discourse through negotiation.

Since then, the theory has attracted wide attention in the international academic circles and produced rich academic achievements. Roger Silverstone and David Morley supplemented it from the dimension of media culture. Through their research on television and audience consumption behaviors, they pointed out that television is the result of the "double coupling" of "marketing and application" on the physical level and "cultural significance" on the cultural level, and television media is transformed into a tool of information dissemination through this "double coupling". On the basis of "double engagement", Maren Hartman introduced the engagement between media, audience and media text content, forming the concept of "triple engagement", emphasizing that this engagement is not only a ceremony and participation, but also covers the audience's personalized re-creation of text content, such as the generation of personalized communication cases, programs, websites and text information.

Domestic scholars have explored and supplemented the theory of engagement from the perspective of cultural construction. Professor Jinping Gao of Beijing Foreign Studies University used the diversity, variability and contextualization of Hall junction theory to provide a feasible analytical framework for the internationalization of Chinese network literature in her article The Cultural Path of Chinese Network Literature going to Sea. She believes that the successful going to sea of Chinese network literature is essentially a joint practice of Chinese mass cultural products and global aesthetic tastes.

However, these studies did not study the interpersonal communication phenomenon I am concerned about from its perspective, nor did they focus on the background of the current era of further opening up of the visa-free policy and more frequent international exchanges, so they did not answer the question of whether weak communication can successfully build China's national image.

2.2 Weak Communication Phenomena

The concept of "weak communication" was first proposed by Professor Zhendong Zou of Xiamen University in his book Weak Communication: The Philosophy of the Public Opinion Sphere. Professor Zou argues that the public opinion environment is inherently dominated by weak communication, where "survival of the weakest" prevails. In this context, real-world power structures often lose dominance in the court of public opinion, while effective communication requires both leveraging "weak actors" as disseminators and resonating with "weak audiences" through empathy and shared emotional experiences.

Existing research on national image construction and communication is extensive. Traditional studies have predominantly focused on state-led "strong communication" methods, such as official media campaigns and diplomatic activities. However, the advent of the new media era has prompted scholars to explore the unique role of weak communication in shaping national image. For instance, scholars have examined "empathy-driven communication" to analyze how content created by Chinese video bloggers on overseas platforms harnesses emotional elements to enhance international communication efficacy. Professor Long Zhang of the Communication University of China, in his article International Dissemination of Chinese Intangible Cultural Heritage Videos from the Perspective of Empathy, further emphasizes that emotional and audiovisual elements serve

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as bridges for cross-cultural exchange, mitigating issues like cultural discount and high-low context barriers, thereby fostering international audiences' resonance with cultural content.

Other scholars have delved into the intrinsic logic underlying successful weak communication practices. Professor Zhenhu Sun of the Communication University of China, in Ideological Resonance and Cultural Exchange: New Approaches to the International Dissemination of the Beijing Winter Olympics, highlights that China's successful international communication cases often stem from breaking traditional discourse frameworks and proactively setting human-centric narratives. He advocates shifting from grand political narratives to nuanced cultural themes, such as showcasing the innovative evolution of traditional culture and the Chinese people's aspirations for a better life.

Finally, researchers have synthesized effective strategies for China's cultural dissemination under the weak communication framework. These include connecting with vulnerable groups, leveraging emotional narratives, innovating communication formats, and capitalizing on serendipitous opportunities to "tell China's stories and amplify China's voice" in the digital age. Such approaches aim to subtly convey Chinese cultural values and enhance their global appeal.

However, existing studies have yet to sufficiently address the critical role of ordinary individuals' firsthand experiences in international weak communication. For example, China's visa-free policies have led to a surge in foreign visitors, creating rich opportunities for studying weak communication dynamics. Foreign nationals' lived experiences in China-such as daily life encounters, travel observations, and interpersonal interactions-constitute a unique form of interpersonal weak communication. Compared to internet-based dissemination or cultural campaigns, these firsthand narratives inherently possess greater authenticity, interactivity, and emotional resonance. Nevertheless, academia has not systematically explored the effects of such experiences on international weak communication, nor the interaction mechanisms between these narratives, foreign local cultures, and mainstream media discourses. Addressing this gap will enable a more comprehensive understanding of weak communication's role in national image construction.

I identify video creators on mainstream social media platforms (e.g., YouTube, Twitter, Instagram) in South Korea, Japan, and the United States by searching for keywords like "China travel" or "China experience." High-engagement videos (e.g., those with significant views or interactions) are selected, and creators who have visited China are contacted via private messages for interview invitations. Additionally, commenters expressing strong emotional attitudes (e.g., admiration, criticism, curiosity) are recruited for interviews.

Initially, approximately 40 video creators and 40 commenters are contacted. After one week, recruitment efforts are adjusted based on response rates. Given the geographic dispersion of participants, interviews are conducted online via platforms like WeChat, Zoom, or Google Meet. With participants' consent, interviews are audio-recorded using digital recorders or built-in platform recording tools.

Interview recordings are transcribed verbatim and analyzed through content analysis. The coding process involves identifying recurring themes, emotional tones, and narrative patterns. Key categories may include "cultural perception shifts," "media vs. lived experience contrasts," and "emotional triggers in cross-cultural communication." This analysis aims to extract insights into how weak communication via firsthand experiences interacts with foreign cultural frameworks and shapes national image perceptions.

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3 Weak Communication Effects of Foreign Visitors in China

Research indicates that as globalization accelerates, the construction and dissemination of national image have become indispensable to international relations. As the world's second-largest economy, China's national image-building efforts hold significant implications for its global influence and international cooperation. Preliminary studies reveal that China's visa-free policies have greatly facilitated foreign citizens' travel to China, fostering deeper grassroots exchanges and catalyzing rich interpersonal "weak communication" between Chinese and foreign civilians. In the new media era, amplified by foreign local social media platforms, this weak communication has successfully disrupted geographically confined mainstream media narratives in foreign countries, exerting diversified effects on China's national image construction.

3.1 The rise of interpersonal weak communication and attitudinal shifts among foreign visitors

The implementation of visa-free policies has lowered barriers for foreign citizens to visit China, driving large-scale cross-border mobility. Surveys of South Korean visitors reveal generally positive attitudes toward China, significantly improving perceptions of its national image. South Korean tourists express strong interest in and admiration for traditional Chinese culture-such as cuisine, tea ceremonies, and architecture-and highly praise the modernity of cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. Additionally, the warm hospitality experienced during their visits has enhanced their overall perception of China.

These firsthand experiences are documented and shared via personal social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) through photos, videos, and narratives, forming interpersonal weak communication rooted in personal experiences and emotional exchanges. While lacking the broad reach or coercive impact of mass media, this form of communication resonates more deeply due to its authenticity and relatability, constructing a national image grounded in individual perspectives.

3.2 The amplification effect of social media: transnational emotional resonance and cognitive sharing

In the digital age, social media has become a critical channel for information dissemination, particularly among younger demographics. Foreign visitors' social media posts about China quickly attract attention from domestic users. Even without firsthand experience, these users indirectly engage with primary information about China through weak communication within their social networks-including likes, comments, and shares from primary groups (e.g., family, friends) and secondary groups (e.g., online followers). This chain-reaction diffusion enables positive narratives about China to transcend physical boundaries rapidly, fostering emotional resonance and cognitive alignment. Consequently, many South Koreans develop more favorable perceptions of China's national image, challenging the dominance of traditional media in shaping public opinion.

3.3 Interaction between weak communication and local cultures: complexity in national image construction and strategic articulation adjustments

The transformative effects of weak communication on national image are neither linear nor monolithic. Foreign local cultures and mainstream media persistently interact with incoming narratives, complicating au-

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dience perceptions. Findings from surveys of South Korean publics highlight.

First, South Korean visitors to China are often part of elite groups with higher cultural literacy and broader perspectives, making them more receptive to Chinese culture and achievements. In contrast, the general public primarily relies on indirect media exposure, which risks biased or fragmented perceptions of China.

Second, entrenched stereotypes remain a significant barrier. Historical, cultural, and political factors have ingrained certain prejudices about China among South Koreans. These biases, reinforced by occasional negative media coverage, counteract the positive effects of weak communication.

China's national image-building strategies must engage in "articulation" with South Korean local culture, acknowledging cultural differences and audience receptivity. This study focuses on how South Korean tourists' social media narratives about China intertwine with local cultural frameworks, generating a uniquely South Korean interpretation of China's image. This articulation manifests in content curation (e.g., highlighting Chinese elements aligned with South Korean aesthetics) and communication tactics (e.g., using locally familiar platforms and idioms). By examining these mechanisms, the research explores how travel experiences "take root" in foreign cultural contexts, shaping broader public perceptions and offering refined paradigms for China's national image construction.

4 Weak Communication Among Overseas Netizens Post-TikTok Ban

Additionally, this study selects overseas users who newly registered on Xiaohongshu after the TikTok ban as research subjects, examining the communicative effects of their social and interactive activities on the platform regarding the construction of China's national image. With the continuous innovation and development of digital media technologies, ordinary individuals are granted more opportunities for self-expression and social participation through these new technologies. Leveraging these platforms, individuals not only share daily life experiences but also achieve self-exposure and economic benefits through platform-driven incentives. Xiaohongshu, as a typical social platform, primarily facilitates users in recording and showcasing various aspects of life through short videos, images, and text-based content, offering inspiration and recommendations, particularly in fields such as beauty, fashion, travel, and lifestyle. Through its "grassroots recommendation" mechanism, the platform transforms consumers from passive recipients into active participants, collaborating with businesses and stakeholders to co-create value and form a closed-loop value realization system.

Xiaohongshu shares significant similarities with TikTok in terms of platform attributes, user demographics, and recommendation algorithms. Both are algorithm-driven intelligent media platforms that feature simple and intuitive interface designs, displaying high-quality visual content that appeals to a global youth-oriented user base. In terms of accessibility, Xiaohongshu's registration and download processes are highly streamlined: users can directly download the app from the U.S. App Store and complete registration using globally recognized phone numbers. This user-friendly accessibility has positioned Xiaohongshu as a primary migration destination for overseas users post-TikTok ban. Furthermore, as a platform emblematic of civilian identity, Xiaohongshu hosts diverse and in-depth content across multiple domains. Notably, it allows users to freely change nicknames and features a large number of anonymous accounts (e.g., "momo" accounts). These characteristics reinforce Xiaohongshu's "grassroots" identity, enabling it to better reflect the "authentic civil-

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ian realities of China" that foreign netizens seek. Unlike traditional platforms that emphasize social status or professional identity, Xiaohongshu showcases more ordinary and diversified identities, fostering a generalized user profile that helps dismantle Western audiences' stereotypes of China and reduce cultural barriers.

Research findings indicate that foreign netizens not only gain insights into China's authentic image through lifestyle, fashion, and travel content on Xiaohongshu but also deepen their understanding of China's warmth, hospitality, and inclusivity through interactions with Chinese users in comment sections. Through such content creation and emotional mobilization, the platform establishes emotional bonds with its audience, ultimately connecting dissemination content with audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds and ideologies via cross-cultural emotional resonance. This co-constructed "emotional community" reflects humanity's shared aspirations for coexistence, production, and livelihood.

Xiaohongshu's grassroots identity also embodies the characteristics of "weak communication," where individual narratives cannot serve as definitive references for foreign content creators. Instead, a comprehensive image of China is "pieced together" through the aggregation of numerous comments. In this study, weak communication is argued to operate through four key mechanisms: weak channels, weak content, weak context, and weak guidance. Unlike traditional authoritative media or top-down narratives, weak communication relies on spontaneous sharing and interaction among ordinary individuals. Through this approach, China's image is not transmitted via a singular perspective but emerges through diversified exchanges and discussions, revealing multifaceted layers of China. Specifically, weak communication encompasses the dimensions.

First, weak channels refer to the diversification and decentralization of information dissemination channels. In traditional media environments, information dissemination is typically controlled by governments or large news organizations, characterized by authoritative dominance and broad coverage. On Xiaohongshu, however, information spreads through spontaneous sharing and social interactions among ordinary users. This decentralized communication model allows freer and more diversified information flows. Each user and content creator can voice their perspectives within their own social circles, enabling foreign netizens to access information directly from the viewpoints of ordinary Chinese citizens rather than through official media frameworks. The diversity and independence of such information better reflect the "authentic grassroots realities of China," helping foreign audiences understand the country from multiple angles.

Secondly, weak content refers to the fragmentation and personalization of content dissemination. Each user's or creator's content is rooted in personal experiences, emotions, and perceptions, prioritizing individuality over authoritative consistency. Content often focuses on micro-level details, such as local cuisine, cultural customs, or lifestyle practices, rather than systematic or authoritative reporting. The fragmented nature of weak content fosters rich diversity in information dissemination, allowing users to selectively propagate topics or viewpoints based on their interests and interpretations. While such fragmented content cannot provide a comprehensive knowledge system, its personalized and granular nature makes China's image more relatable and engaging. Foreign audiences gradually assemble a richer, multidimensional understanding of China through these everyday snippets.

Finally, weak context refers to the informal, everyday communication context in which information is transmitted. Xiaohongshu's social nature emphasizes user interaction and exchange rather than formal knowl-

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edge transmission or political propaganda. On the platform, information dissemination occurs in informal settings - comment sections, private messages, or livestreams - where foreign users engage directly with Chinese creators, sharing perspectives and life experiences. The informal context facilitates intimate and interactive information flows, free from the constraints of professional jargon or official stances. Foreign audiences encounter Chinese information in a natural, relaxed manner, reducing cultural and linguistic barriers while enhancing mutual understanding. This casual communication allows more Chinese stories to reach foreign audiences, diminishing the "high wall" effect of traditional media and making information more accessible and acceptable. Through such interactions, China's image is no longer a product of one-way dissemination but a process of multi-party participation and co-construction.

5 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Western audiences exhibit minimal resistance to narratives from Chinese social media users. National image-building through civilian perspectives—such as sharing traditional customs and daily life-garner high acceptance. As digital technologies evolve, foreign influencers increasingly showcase China's authentic realities. Enthusiastic interactions between Chinese and international netizens, from sharing pets and hobbies to mutual language-learning pledges, reflect a global craving for genuine connection. These grassroots exchanges, amplified by weak communication, have significantly enhanced China's global image, proving that decentralized, civilian-led narratives are pivotal in modern international communication.

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