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Cultivating harmony across borders: Chinese cultural values and corporate communication in global contexts

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Introduction: Amid China's rising global economic presence, the role of cultural dynamics in corporate communication is increasingly crucial, particularly in cross-cultural contexts. This study examines how Chinese cultural values are embedded within corporate communication practices of Chinese enterprises operating internationally, specifically within African markets.

Methods: This study employed a qualitative, cross-sectional research design, analyzing corporate communications at a single point in time to capture a contemporary snapshot of discursive practices. The study utilized content analysis and discourse analysis of textual data collected from the official English-language websites of 200 Chinese corporations operating across diverse sectors in Africa. This primary dataset was complemented by illustrative corporate social responsibility (CSR) cases drawn from the *Sino-Africa Cooperation: Corporate Social Responsibility Guide* (2021) to provide in-depth, practical examples.

Results: The analysis identified three prominent and interwoven cultural values guiding the corporate communications of Chinese corporations: embracing harmony through collectivism, pursuing excellence through continuous improvement, and practicing integrity with responsibility. These values are consistently articulated in corporate philosophy statements and CSR narratives and are exemplified through case studies of major firms such as Huawei, China Communications Construction Company, and the TEDA Suez Eco-Industrial Park, which emphasize mutual benefit, sustainability, and deep community integration.

Discussion: The findings demonstrate that these culturally informed communication practices both reflect China's broader socio-economic initiatives, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, and actively reproduce alternative, non-Western development paradigms. The study further illuminates the strategic navigation by Chinese firms between presenting their core values as universal business principles and framing them as unique expressions of Chinese cultural identity to build legitimacy with diverse international stakeholders.

Contribution: This research provides an empirically grounded, non-Western perspective on how cultural values are strategically deployed in corporate discourse. It also offers timely, practical insights for international business leaders, policymakers, and other stakeholders on engaging with Chinese companies, underscoring the central role that cultural values play in shaping contemporary global business interactions.

KEYWORDS

Chinese overseas corporations, corporate communication, cross-cultural communication, cultural values, harmony

1 Introduction

Globalization has fundamentally transformed the international business landscape, creating unprecedented opportunities and challenges for companies operating across national boundaries. As economic integration intensified through trade liberalization, technological advancements, and reduced communication costs, corporations increasingly expanded beyond domestic markets (Dicken, 2015). Within this context, effective corporate communication becomes critical for operational success, particularly in culturally diverse contexts.

Within this evolving global landscape, China has emerged as a transformative force, transitioning from a relatively isolated economy to the world's second-largest economy and largest trading nation. Since the initiation of economic reforms in 1978, and particularly following its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, China's integration into the global economy has accelerated dramatically (Branstetter and Lardy, 2008). Chinese corporations have become significant global players through substantial exports and increasing overseas direct investment, amplified by the initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to enhance connectivity across Asia, Europe, and Africa through infrastructure development and increased trade (Wang, 2016). The impact of these initiatives is profound; by 2024, China had been Africa's largest trading partner for over a decade (Xinhua News Agency, 2025), with thousands of Chinese firms operating across the continent in sectors ranging from infrastructure and telecommunications to manufacturing and agriculture.

Despite substantial achievements, Chinese corporations face significant challenges in global markets. They often introduce distinctive Chinese cultural values, management approaches, and communication styles to their international operations (Chen and Miller, 2010), potentially creating communication barriers and misunderstandings with international stakeholders (Wu and Zhao, 2018). Western media frequently portrays Chinese companies through frames of suspicion regarding their motives, governance standards, and relationship with the Chinese government (Cheah, 2016). Increasing expectations for corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability create additional demands for Chinese corporations operating abroad (Bian and Liu, 2022), particularly in developing regions where their activities attract heightened scrutiny.

Existing literature has extensively documented the economic and strategic dimensions of China's internationalization. Multiple researchers have analyzed the geopolitical drivers of the BRI, the mechanisms of Chinese overseas investment, and the competitive advantages of Chinese firms in emerging markets (Bhuiyan, 2011; Ganchev, 2024; Gao et al., 2022). Frameworks such as Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimensions have provided valuable macro-level insights into cross-cultural differences in business contexts. However, a significant gap remains in the empirical, discourse-focused analysis of how specific Chinese cultural values are articulated and operationalized in the corporate communication practices of these firms on the ground. While it is understood that culture matters, there is limited research that systematically identifies the core cultural themes present in Chinese corporate discourse abroad and analyzes how these themes are strategically deployed to manage reputation and build relationships in specific cross-cultural settings.

This study aims to address this gap by providing a systematic analysis of the cultural values embedded in the corporate communication of Chinese firms in Africa. By focusing on Africa – a region experiencing a substantial and dynamic growth in Chinese business presence – this research offers a timely and contextually rich investigation. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What core Chinese cultural values are reflected in the development philosophy statements (mission, vision, core values) of Chinese corporations operating in Africa?
- (2) How are these cultural values communicated and put into practice by Chinese corporations within their host African contexts?
- (3) How do these communication practices reflect broader socio-cultural and political dynamics and contribute to the reproduction of distinct, non-Western paradigms in international business discourse?

In addressing these questions, this research makes contributions to both theoretical understanding and practical application in the field of cross-cultural communication. Theoretically, it moves beyond abstract cultural dimensions to provide empirical evidence of how these values are concretely manifested in corporate discourse, thereby enriching non-Western perspectives in communication studies. For practitioners – including managers of Chinese, African, and other international firms – this study offers critical insights into the cultural drivers of Chinese corporate behavior, facilitating more effective engagement, mitigating misunderstandings, and fostering stronger cross-cultural partnerships. Ultimately, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how Chinese cultural frameworks are shaping corporate communication in the contemporary global business environment.

2 Literature review

2.1 Discourse and corporate reputation

Corporate reputation, a critical intangible asset, significantly influences organizational success within competitive environments. Dowling (2004) proposed that corporate reputation “is composed of a set of beliefs about it and the industry in which it operates” (p. 20), regarding it as a cognitive construct formed through stakeholders' accumulated impressions rather than as a static organizational asset. Communication plays a fundamental role in shaping organizational identity and, consequently, reputation through various modes, including speech, text, and other interactive means (Cornelissen, 2020). These discursive elements influence stakeholders' perceptions regarding an organization's character, ability, and behavior – elements central to Dowling's (2004) corporate reputation.

Discourse could not only reflect social reality, but also construct it (Fairclough, 1989, 1992). Through strategic corporate discourse, organizations position themselves within their institutional landscapes, often by consistently expressing core differentiating values that link their mission to their identity and desired reputation (Whetten and Mackey, 2002). This is particularly crucial for multinational corporations operating in diverse cultural settings,

where establishing legitimacy is paramount. According to [Castelló and Lozano \(2011\)](#), corporations may employ different types of rhetoric – strategic, institutional, and dialectic – to build and maintain this legitimacy. Similarly, [Balmer and Soenen's \(1999\)](#) “ACID test” framework clarifies corporate identity dimensions – actual, communicated, ideal, and desired – highlighting potential alignment gaps within cross-cultural contexts.

In an increasingly digitized world, the channels through which this discursive construction occurs have multiplied, amplifying both opportunities and risks for corporate reputation management. Digital platforms have democratized information access, transforming how corporate discourse shapes reputation ([Aula, 2010](#)). The proliferation of social media demands greater transparency and responsiveness in corporate communications, given the rapid dissemination of information, as information, both positive and negative, can spread rapidly and influence public perception ([Fieseler et al., 2010](#)). Consequently, investigating how culturally rooted discourse specifically affects stakeholder perceptions through these digital channels is crucial for comprehensively understanding corporate reputation management in global contexts, particularly for culturally distinctive corporations such as Chinese enterprises.

2.2 Cross-cultural corporate communication

Cross-cultural communication, the exchange of information across cultural boundaries, encompasses both verbal and non-verbal interactions shaped by cultural norms, values, and worldviews. A foundational concept in this field is [Hall's \(1976\)](#) distinction between high-context cultures, which rely heavily on implicit cues and shared understanding, and low-context cultures, which favor explicit and direct communication. Such cultural differences significantly impact corporate interactions with a wide range of stakeholders, influencing everything from external communications like marketing and public relations to internal communications such as management practices and employee relations ([Varner and Beamer, 2011](#); [Welch and Jackson, 2007](#)).

While these dimensions provide a valuable macro-level framework, other scholarship highlights the micro-level communicative practices and competencies required to navigate these cultural differences effectively. Cross-cultural corporate communication must overcome numerous challenges, including language barriers, divergent value systems, differing communication styles, and varied expectations of appropriate business conduct ([Harzing and Pudelko, 2013](#); [Hofstede et al., 2010](#)). For instance, recent studies have demonstrated the necessity of understanding linguistic and cultural nuances in CSR reporting to ensure messages are received as intended ([Gai et al., 2024](#)), and have highlighted how cultural orientations influence the multimodal design of corporate websites, thereby affecting how firms present themselves to international audiences ([Xu and Shi, 2023](#)). Other research illustrates how cultural differences, analyzed through frameworks like Hofstede's dimensions, can directly shape business negotiation outcomes ([Tong, 2021](#)), and underscores that cross-cultural competence and emotional intelligence are critical for effective leadership communication in global contexts ([Mishra, 2022](#)). Collectively, these studies emphasize that effective cross-cultural

corporate communication is not merely about translation, but about a deep, strategic sensitivity to culturally specific nuances and norms. This sensitivity is crucial for building strong stakeholder relationships and enhancing organizational legitimacy in global markets.

Given China's growing global prominence and its unique cultural traditions, this reinforces the urgent need for empirical investigation into the specific communication strategies employed by Chinese corporations.

2.3 Chinese corporations in international markets

Chinese corporations have emerged as significant contributors to the global economy, transforming international markets through substantial trade, investment, and infrastructure development. Following China's WTO accession in 2001 and the launch of the BRI in 2013, Chinese overseas investments expanded rapidly across Asia, Africa, Europe, and beyond, highlighting their distinctive engagement model emphasizing infrastructure development, technology transfer, and pragmatic partnerships ([Wang, 2016](#); [The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2021](#)).

Reputation plays a critical strategic role for Chinese corporations, influencing international collaborations ([Duysters et al., 2007](#)). [Chen and Miller \(2010\)](#) note the integration of traditional Chinese philosophical principles with modern management practices in Chinese corporate identities, emphasizing relationship cultivation, long-term orientation, adaptability, and pragmatism. In the context of China's international engagement, the country's state-centric approach toward promoting CSR is a strategic effort to bolster its global image ([Liu, 2021](#)). Having a strong and favorable corporate image is long seen as the strategic requisite ([Fombrun, 1996](#); [Gray and Balmer, 1998](#)), and image perceptions significantly influence Chinese corporations' acceptance abroad, as illustrated by [Kreppel and Holtbrügge \(2013\)](#).

However, Chinese multinationals often confront significant trust deficits and challenges related to their “foreignness.” For example, [Edelman \(2025\)](#) indicates that companies headquartered in China are trusted by a smaller percentage of global respondents compared to their Western counterparts, highlighting these reputational hurdles. Critiques from organizations like Human Rights Watch concerning labor practices in some Chinese-run projects in Africa further underscore the difficulties Chinese companies face in managing their international reputation ([Yan and Sautman, 2013](#)).

While existing literature has outlined the economic and strategic aspects of China's internationalization, there remains a limited exploration of the specific cultural communication strategies that Chinese corporations employ to navigate these challenges. It is plausible that Chinese companies communicate in ways that reflect distinct cultural values, potentially shaping their reputational narratives differently from their Western counterparts. However, this has not been empirically explored in depth. This study addresses that gap by investigating how distinct Chinese cultural values shape corporate discourse, influence international stakeholder perceptions, and impact the reputational management of Chinese firms in cross-cultural environments.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study employed a qualitative, cross-sectional research design to analyze the corporate communications of Chinese companies operating in Africa. A cross-sectional approach was deemed appropriate for this research as it allows for the examination of data from a diverse population of companies at a single point in time, providing a contemporary snapshot of prevailing corporate communication practices and discursive patterns. This design is particularly effective for identifying common themes and variations across a wide range of industry sectors and ownership types within a specific geographic context. The qualitative nature of the study was chosen to facilitate an in-depth, interpretive analysis of the nuanced ways in which cultural values are embedded in language, symbols, and narratives – a level of detail that quantitative methods would be unable to capture. By focusing on the richness of the textual data, this design enables a deeper understanding of the meaning-making processes behind corporate communication.

3.2 Data collection

The study utilizes two primary data sources. The first dataset comprises textual data collected from the official English websites of 200 Chinese corporations operating across diverse industries in Africa, including infrastructure, telecommunications, mining, agriculture, and manufacturing sectors. These websites, specifically the “About Us” sections, provided corporate profiles, mission and vision statements, and narratives of CSR. Corporations were selected through purposive sampling to ensure comprehensive representation of various ownership types (state-owned and private) and industry sectors. The data was collected systematically during the year 2022, ensuring up-to-date and accessible corporate communication materials.

The second dataset is *Sino-Africa Cooperation: Corporate Social Responsibility Guide*, published by the China-Africa Business Council (CABC) in late 2021. This guide documents exemplary CSR cases of Chinese corporations operating in Africa, including notable companies such as Huawei, China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), and TEDA Suez Eco-Industrial Park. The cases selected from this guide were chosen deliberately for their sectoral diversity and ownership structures, providing representative illustrations of how Chinese corporations embed cultural values within their CSR practices. Given the curated nature of the CABC guide, this source primarily served as illustrative examples to complement and deepen insights derived from the broader content analysis.

3.3 Data analysis

A multi-step qualitative analysis was implemented, combining content analysis and discourse analysis techniques to ensure a comprehensive and robust interpretation of the data. Initially, qualitative content analysis was conducted, employing both deductive and inductive coding strategies. An initial coding scheme

based on Confucian philosophical concepts, established intercultural communication frameworks, and contemporary Chinese business values guided the coding process, identifying explicit mentions of cultural values (e.g., harmony, win-win, innovation, integrity, and responsibility). The coding process involved iterative rounds to ensure accuracy and reliability, with two analysts independently coding subsets of the data to establish intercoder reliability. Explicit value references were directly identified, whereas implicit values were captured through interpretive reading and thematic analysis. The results were quantified qualitatively to highlight the prevalence and patterns of cultural themes across the sampled corporations.

Following content analysis, illustrative case analyses from the CSR guide provided detailed contextual manifestations of the identified cultural values. These cases, including Huawei, CCCC, and TEDA, allowed for deeper interpretive insights, revealing how abstract cultural concepts translate into tangible corporate practices.

Finally, discourse analysis was conducted following established frameworks, notably Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992), to interpret the broader socio-cultural and political implications embedded in corporate communications. The discourse analysis particularly examined how corporate texts aligned with China’s national policy rhetoric and international diplomatic narratives (e.g., the BRI, “win-win cooperation”), identifying how corporate discourse both reflects and contributes to broader ideological frameworks.

Triangulation across multiple data sources (corporate websites and CSR guide) ensured robustness of findings. Negative cases or deviations from core identified patterns were explicitly sought, though largely absent, indicating consistency across communication practices. Ethical considerations involved exclusive use of publicly accessible data, ensuring no ethical violations related to human subjects or confidential information.

4 Findings

This section presents the descriptive findings of the study. It first outlines the three principal categories of Chinese cultural values identified in the corporate communications of the 200 companies analyzed. It then provides illustrative case studies of Huawei, CCCC, and TEDA to demonstrate how these values are put into practice in the African context.

4.1 Chinese cultural values in overseas corporations’ development philosophies

Based on our analysis of 200 Chinese companies operating in Africa, three distinct categories of Chinese cultural values emerge prominently in their corporate communications: embracing harmony through collectivism, pursuing excellence through improvement, and practicing integrity with responsibility. These values deeply influence how Chinese corporations articulate their vision, mission, and operational philosophy in international contexts. It is worth mentioning that these values usually do not occur separately: virtually every company’s profile reflected all three values, though some emphasized one more than others.

4.1.1 Embracing harmony through collectivism (和谐共生, 集体主义)

The concept of *he* (和, harmony) represents one of the most fundamental and enduring values in Chinese culture, appearing prominently in Chinese corporations' communications through terms such as "harmony," "people-oriented," "mutual benefit," "win-win cooperation," "common development," and "sharing," among others. This multifaceted concept extends beyond mere conflict avoidance to encompass positive relationship cultivation, collective well-being, and balanced development among diverse stakeholders. Rooted in Confucian philosophy, *he* emphasizes the interdependence of individuals within social contexts and the pursuit of cooperative relationships that benefit all parties.

The principle of harmony manifests in Chinese corporations' emphasis on people-centered development approaches. AVIC International, a major state-owned global shareholding enterprise whose business involves aviation business and service and trade, explicitly articulates this by describing itself as a "people-oriented" enterprise whose employees are "chosen on the basis of its values." Their corporate philosophy positions human resources as central to organizational success: "the major task for the Human Resources Department is to help the company accomplish its strategic goals and the employees fulfill their own roles through staff selection, employment, training and stimulation." This approach reflects the distinctive Chinese management principle that views organizational harmony as beginning with proper attention to human relationships.

The collectivist aspect of harmony could also be depicted in the corporate's internal practices. For example, Herocean Group, a private Chinese enterprise specializing in international supply chain services and industrial development in Africa, conveys on their website that "The company has achieved some achievements and has been adhering to the efforts of Herocean, who has shared every effort. Until this year, we have already owned dozens of employee shareholders except the founder and obtained corresponding corporate dividends every year." This concrete manifestation of shared prosperity through employee ownership reflects the Chinese cultural emphasis on tangible expressions of collective success rather than merely rhetorical commitments to shared values.

Harmony in Chinese corporate philosophy extends beyond internal stakeholders to encompass relationships with broader communities and the natural environment. Wangkang Holding Group, a major private ceramics manufacturer with multiple production bases across Africa, demonstrates this through their explicit commitment to "harmonious coexistence with nature while enterprise development" and their statement that "we value the sustainable development of the people in Africa." This integration of social and environmental harmony reflects the traditional Chinese concept of *Tianren Heyi* (天人合一, unity between humans and nature), which positions harmonious ecological relationships as inseparable from harmonious human relationships (Hansen et al., 2018), reflecting a cultural ethos that economic activities should not come at the expense of community well-being or ecological harmony.

The collectivist dimension of harmony is particularly evident in Chinese corporations' emphasis on shared success and mutual benefit. Yewhing Group, a Chinese trade and investment company with a significant presence in Angola, explicitly states in its core principles "always putting our clients first, we strive to be complementary to our clients by sharing resources and information

and bring benefits to both sides." They further elaborate that "we value the harmony of teams and advocate teamwork spirit. Mutual help and support, collaboration and information sharing can all be conducive to group cohesion and help achieve our goals and realize win-win results." This statement reflects the distinctive Chinese perspective that views collective success as both morally superior to and practically more sustainable than individual achievement in isolation.

CGCOC Group, a state-owned construction and engineering conglomerate with extensive projects in Africa, similarly incorporates this collective dimension of harmony directly into their business philosophy: "creating wealth through cooperation" and "we collaborate on the principle of equality, mutual benefits, sincere cooperation and common development." Their emphasis on mutuality and shared development demonstrates how Chinese corporations position collaboration as both a means to success and a measure of success itself, reflecting a distinctively Chinese approach to business relationships that emphasizes long-term mutual benefit over short-term transactional advantage (Lee and Dawes, 2005).

4.1.2 Pursuing excellence through improvement (自强不息, 追求卓越)

Terms like "innovation," "professionalism," "continuous improvement," and "quality," among others, frequently appear in Chinese companies' corporate communications, reflecting a deeply embedded cultural value that emphasizes persistent self-improvement and the pursuit of excellence. This value has roots in Confucian philosophy, which emphasizes continuous learning and self-cultivation. This reflects China's high long-term orientation (Hofstede, 2011) and a cultural emphasis on education and innovation, but here we see it uniquely combined with collectivist framing: improvement is for collective prosperity, not just individual gain.

The commitment to excellence and quality is a foundational value explicitly stated in the corporate philosophies of Chinese enterprises. China State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC), a global investment and construction group, explicitly articulates this value in their "Ten Codes of Conduct" which begins with "Reaching the Best Quality." Their organizational behavior statements emphasize that "we attach great importance to process and the details, the result and efficiency. We establish our brand name with good quality." This focus on quality and continuous improvement reflects the Chinese cultural emphasis on striving for excellence through persistent effort rather than through innate ability alone.

Innovation and continuous advancement are central pillars in Chinese companies' pursuit of organizational and technological leadership. Honghua, a land drilling equipment manufacturer, demonstrates this value through their emphasis on technological innovation and continuous advancement: "In the future, Honghua will deeply engage in advanced energy equipment manufacturing and oil & gas field services and achieve synergy in R&D, project execution and market expansion, to become an international leading combining equipment manufacturing provider in oil and gas industry." This forward-looking commitment to excellence through innovation reflects the Chinese cultural tradition of seeking continuous improvement rather than being satisfied with current achievements.

Many Chinese corporations explicitly link innovation with national progress and sustainable enterprise development. CGCOC Group similarly expresses this value by emphasizing their commitment

to innovation: “Innovation is the soul of a nation’s progress; innovation is also the inexhaustible source for a corporation to survive and thrive.” Their operational philosophy further states: “We seek constant improvement; adjust strategies to adapt to the new demands, harnessing innovation for the sustainable development of our enterprise.” This articulation connects both individual and organizational improvement with broader national progress, reflecting not only the country’s spirit that innovation is the primary driving force for development, but also the cultural tendency to link personal and organizational excellence with collective advancement.

The emphasis on personal growth and continuous learning further illustrates how individual excellence contributes to organizational success in Chinese companies. Rebecca, a hair product making company, demonstrates this pursuit of excellence through specific guidelines for employees: “Study hard, improving quality and proficient in business” and “positive enterprising, brave in exploitation and innovation contribution.” This explicit connection between individual improvement and organizational excellence reflects the Chinese cultural emphasis on continuous learning as a path to excellence at both the personal and organizational levels.

4.1.3 Practicing integrity with responsibility (诚信为本, 责任担当)

Terms like “sincerity,” “honesty,” “responsibility,” “accountability,” and “trustworthiness,” among others, are consistently emphasized in Chinese corporations’ value statements, reflecting a cultural value that positions integrity as foundational to business practice and emphasizes responsibility toward multiple stakeholders. This value system is deeply rooted in Confucian ethics, which emphasizes moral rectitude and responsibility toward others.

Upholding integrity as the foundation of business operations is a principle explicitly practiced by leading Chinese enterprises in international contexts. CCECC Nigeria, a subsidiary of China Civil Engineering Construction Corporation headquartered in Abuja focusing on transportation infrastructure, demonstrates this principle through its foundational commitment to ethical business practices across its four decades of operations in Nigeria. The company explicitly states that “acting with honesty and being consistent is the foundation of our business,” while maintaining its mission of “providing Nigeria with quality infrastructure and services.” This integrity-centered approach extends beyond contractual obligations to encompass comprehensive stakeholder engagement and community development initiatives. By anchoring its business model in honesty and consistency, the corporate transforms corporate responsibility from a compliance requirement into an operational philosophy.

Fostering sincerity and authentic engagement is central to the corporate cultures of many Chinese companies. Jereh Group, a corporation specializing in high-end oil and gas engineering and technical services, positions itself to “Create an Oasis of Sincerity,” recognizing that “sincerity is fundamental to Jereh’s core values,” hence integrating authentic relationships into their operational philosophy. Their commitment to creating an environment “where people are willing to share their true thoughts” demonstrates how sincerity translates into practical organizational behaviors that foster transparency and trust. By systematically building their corporate culture around sincere engagement and positioning sincerity as the foundation for all other values, Jereh exemplifies the Chinese

understanding that genuine responsibility requires authentic intention and honest communication (Rogacz, 2022).

Corporate responsibility in Chinese enterprises often extends beyond business contracts to encompass social and public welfare. China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) explicitly establishes “credibility-oriented, fulfilling social responsibility; quality first, delivering satisfactory service” as its corporate core values, the foundational principles that guide all business activities. Its commitment transcends contractual obligations, positioning the company as “a responsibility partaker of socio-economic development and in-depth participant of coordinated development of regional economy and a premium provider of public service for governments.” This comprehensive approach to responsibility manifests through their dedication to “full cooperation, active service, reciprocating society,” demonstrated through active engagement in social public welfare and charity activities.

Integrity and responsibility are also embodied in Chinese companies’ commitment to development and cooperation in host countries. China State Farms Agribusiness in Tanzania illustrates this value through their commitment to “take full advantages of talents, technology, equipment and management to promote agricultural cooperation and development between China and Africa and realize the complementary advantages and mutual benefit.” This statement emphasizes responsible use of resources to fulfill commitments to both home and host countries, reflecting the Chinese cultural concept of integrity as manifested through concrete actions rather than merely stated intentions (Koehn, 2001).

Chinese corporations frequently connect their sense of responsibility to broader national interests and strategic priorities. Jiangsu Overseas Group (JOC), devoted to overseas investment and financing services, articulates this value by explicitly positioning itself to shoulder “the responsibility of state-owned enterprises in ensuring the security of national and provincial energy, resources, food and other strategic materials supply chain.” This framing connects corporate responsibility to broader national interests, reflecting the Chinese cultural tendency to view business activities within a larger social and national context rather than as purely profit-seeking endeavors.

In summary, these three cultural values – embracing harmony through collectivism, pursuing excellence through improvement, and practicing integrity with responsibility – form the foundation of Chinese corporations’ development philosophies in their international operations. These values shape not only how these companies articulate their missions and visions but also influence their operational strategies, stakeholder engagement approaches, and measures of success in African markets. The prominence of these values in corporate communications reflects the enduring influence of traditional Chinese cultural principles in contemporary business practices, even as Chinese corporations adapt to diverse international contexts.

4.2 Cultural values in practice: case studies of Chinese corporations in Africa

To illustrate how the cultural values identified in the previous section are practiced on the ground, this section presents case studies of three Chinese corporations operating in Africa: Huawei, China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), and TEDA Suez Eco-Industrial Park. These cases, drawn from the *Sino-Africa Cooperation: Corporate Social Responsibility Guide*, were selected for

their sectoral diversity (spanning telecommunications, infrastructure, and industrial zone development) and their ownership type (state-owned vs. private). Together, they provide a representative sample for examining how Chinese cultural values are embedded and adapted in varied international business contexts, shaping each company's communication and engagement with local stakeholders.

4.2.1 Huawei: Digital Inclusion through Harmony and Excellence

Huawei Technologies, a leading global provider of information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure and smart devices, exemplifies how Chinese cultural values manifest in corporate practices across African markets. Founded in 1987, Huawei has expanded its operations to over 40 African countries, establishing itself as a significant contributor to the continent's telecommunications infrastructure.

The value of “embracing harmony through collectivism” is evident in Huawei's emphasis on digital inclusion as a means of social advancement. Under its TECH4ALL initiative, Huawei launched the DigiTruck program to deliver digital skills training in remote Kenyan counties, benefiting nearly 800 people and addressing imbalances in digital access (China-Africa Business Council, 2021). While the DigiTruck program is part of Huawei's global initiative and also operates in developed countries like France, the narrative in Africa emphasizes a development partnership aimed at bridging a fundamental digital divide in remote communities, often framed with collectivist language of shared progress and invoking African proverbs like “We go fast alone, but we go further together” (Huawei, 2019, “Digital Skills: A New Journey for the People of Kenya,” Para. 2) to align with the “community with a shared future” rhetoric prominent in Sino-African diplomacy.

Huawei's partnerships with local institutions also reflect its collectivist orientation. The establishment of the first Huawei ICT Academy in Southern Africa in 2015, in collaboration with Tshwane University of Technology, supports local ICT industry development, professional training, and employment (China-Africa Business Council, 2021). Similarly, its e-government initiative in Togo – connecting hospitals, universities, and government agencies through fiber-optic networks – demonstrates a cooperative development model grounded in mutual benefit and interdependence (China-Africa Business Council, 2021).

The cultural value of “pursuing excellence through improvement” is central to Huawei's CSR activities. The company's vision to create a “fully connected, intelligent world” (China-Africa Business Council, 2021, p. 31) translates into substantial investments in digital infrastructure and skill development across Africa. Programs such as the Seeds for the Future initiative provide advanced ICT training in technologies like 5G and AI, empowering youth across the continent. Huawei also leads telemedicine initiatives in countries like Zambia and Morocco, offering both medical services and technical training to improve healthcare delivery (China-Africa Business Council, 2021). These actions reflect a long-term, adaptive mindset rooted in the Chinese ethos of continuous self-betterment.

Huawei further demonstrates integrity with responsibility through community engagement and environmental action. The company sponsors local marathons in Kenya, directing proceeds toward wildlife protection and education for students in remote areas (China-Africa Business Council, 2021). It has donated computer equipment to girls'

schools and utilized media tools during the Ebola outbreak to provide free education, showcasing a strong sense of duty to vulnerable populations. Environmentally, Huawei participated in the Global e-Sustainability Initiative (GeSI) and deployed its PowerStar energy-saving solution across thousands of sites, including many in Africa, reducing electricity consumption without compromising performance.

4.2.2 China Communications Construction Company: collective responsibility in infrastructure development

China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) is a state-owned enterprise specializing in transportation infrastructure construction. With extensive operations across the continent, CCCC has established itself as a major contributor to Africa's infrastructure development, particularly in railways, highways, and ports.

CCCC's extensive social responsibility initiatives reflect Chinese cultural values through comprehensive community engagement practices. During the construction of the Nairobi–Mombasa Standard Gauge Railway (also known as the Mombasa–Nairobi Railway), CCCC implemented over 80 special CSR measures, including “improving water conservancy facilities, medical consultations, building schools, and participating in emergency rescue and disaster relief” (China-Africa Business Council, 2021, p. 35). These initiatives embody the Chinese cultural emphasis on collective well-being by addressing community needs beyond the immediate scope of infrastructure projects. This collectivist value orientation is further demonstrated in CCCC's approach to localization. The guide documents that the construction of the Thies–Touba Highway in Senegal created 7,000 to 8,000 jobs for local citizens (China-Africa Business Council, 2021).

CCCC's communication consistently articulates its commitment to “share development results with the community” and “use the advantages of the company to serve community residents” (China-Africa Business Council, 2021, p. 35). This framing directly expresses the collectivist orientation of Chinese business culture, which positions corporate success as inseparable from community well-being rather than as an independent objective. This communication approach reflects the traditional Chinese understanding of business as embedded within social relationships rather than as an autonomous economic activity.

The cultural value of “practicing integrity with responsibility” is evident in CCCC's infrastructure projects that extend beyond contractual obligations to address community needs. The guide highlights that during the construction of the Mombasa–Nairobi Railway in Kenya, the company drilled more than 100 deep-water wells for local communities, addressing a critical resource need in areas along the railway route (China-Africa Business Council, 2021). Similarly, when building a port terminal in Equatorial Guinea, China Harbor Engineering Company (a CCCC subsidiary) constructed a desalination plant at no additional cost to the local community, providing essential water infrastructure not included in the original project scope.

The cultural value of “pursuing excellence through improvement” also manifests in CCCC's continuous refinement of environmental management practices. The guide documents that during the railway construction, CCCC built 14 dedicated wildlife passages to preserve migration routes, adjusting designs based on ongoing wildlife monitoring data (China-Africa Business Council, 2021). This adaptive approach reflects the Chinese cultural tradition of excellence through

persistent refinement, rather than static compliance with predetermined standards.

4.2.3 TEDA Suez Eco-Industrial Park: harmonious development through integrated sustainability and community engagement

The TEDA Suez Eco-Industrial Park in Egypt, developed by Tianjin Economic-Technological Development Area (TEDA), illustrates how Chinese cultural values shape corporate approaches to sustainable development. Established as a cornerstone project within the BRI, this industrial park represents an innovative approach to international cooperation that integrates economic, social, and environmental objectives.

TEDA's communication explicitly highlights its vision of a "green and ecological industrial park," aiming to achieve "harmonious coexistence between people and nature" (China-Africa Business Council, 2021, p. 72). This aligns with the Confucian principle of *he*, which emphasizes balance among economic, social, and ecological dimensions. TEDA's ecological orientation is operationalized through services such as greening and environmental maintenance for enterprises within the park. These efforts reflect not only environmental consciousness but also the traditional Chinese concept of *Tianren Heyi*, the unity between humans and nature.

The collectivist aspect of harmony is further reflected in TEDA's support services for employees. The park provides comprehensive facilities, including apartments, restaurants, gyms, staff clubs, libraries, and amusement parks (China-Africa Business Council, 2021), which create a socially integrated and culturally vibrant living environment. These efforts demonstrate how TEDA fosters a cohesive community that supports both work and well-being, aligning with the Chinese value of collective prosperity.

TEDA also practices the value of "practicing integrity with responsibility" through its community-oriented initiatives. The company collaborates with the Chinese Embassy in Egypt and local NGOs to conduct charity events, such as donations to Egyptian orphans. This engagement extends the idea of responsibility beyond economic contribution to encompass moral and social obligations, a hallmark of Confucian ethical practice. Additionally, TEDA has organized training programs for Egyptian managers in China, exemplifying a commitment to long-term capacity building rather than short-term transactional exchange.

Finally, TEDA's contribution to local employment underscores the value of "pursuing excellence through improvement." With over 4,000 direct jobs and an estimated 36,000 indirect employment opportunities created, the park plays a significant role in local economic development. Training and upskilling programs for Egyptian employees further demonstrate TEDA's commitment to continuous improvement and stakeholder development, reinforcing the Chinese cultural emphasis on self-betterment and shared advancement.

These three case studies illustrate how Chinese cultural values – embracing harmony through collectivism, pursuing excellence through improvement, and practicing integrity with responsibility – shape the communication practices and CSR initiatives of Chinese corporations operating in Africa. Each company adapts these cultural values to its specific industry and operational context, demonstrating that cultural values serve not as rigid formulas but as flexible resources that companies deploy strategically in their international engagements.

5 Discussions

Having identified the key Chinese cultural values present in corporate communications and illustrated them in practice, we now turn to discuss how these communication patterns both reflect existing socio-political dynamics and reproduce certain paradigms and expectations in international business. We also consider how Chinese firms navigate the tension between proposing their values as "universal" versus highlighting their distinct cultural origin. Finally, we delineate the theoretical and managerial implications of our findings.

5.1 Reflecting China's national development strategies and identities

The communication of Chinese corporations in Africa primarily reflects China's evolving national development strategies and diplomatic priorities. The emphasis on harmony, collective benefit, and sustainable development in corporate communications directly mirrors the rhetoric of major Chinese foreign policy initiatives, particularly the BRI and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) (Benabdallah, 2019). Corporate communications thus serve as localized articulations of broader national narratives that emphasize "win-win cooperation" and "mutual development" as alternatives to Western development models. This aligns with China's Global Development Initiative, proposed by President XI Jinping at the general debate of the 76th session of the United Nations General Assembly, emphasizing shared prosperity and cultural understanding, and it reflects China's strategic communication approach to enhance international engagement through corporate channels.

This alignment is particularly evident in how corporations like TEDA frame their environmental initiatives through the concept of "ecological civilization," a term that has become central to China's national development discourse (Hansen et al., 2018). Similarly, CCCC's emphasis on infrastructure development as a foundation for broader economic growth reflects China's own development experience and its approach of promoting infrastructure development abroad, which has been key to building China's influence. Chinese corporations thus function as "unofficial ambassadors" whose communication practices extend and localize national diplomatic narratives.

Chinese corporate communications also reflect China's historical experiences and self-identity as a developing nation. The frequent emphasis on "South-South cooperation" and "developing country solidarity" in corporate communications draws on China's self-positioning as a developing nation that shares common challenges with African countries. By reflecting this stance, corporate narratives align with China's diplomatic approach of emphasizing common struggles and mutual learning between China and African nations. For example, when Huawei highlights digital inclusion, it resonates with China's narrative of technology as a means for common upliftment, not just profit. When CCCC emphasizes capacity building and localization, it mirrors China's claim of helping Africa develop by sharing the expertise China gained through its own development process. This framing reflects China's diplomatic approach of sharing its own development experience, which positions Chinese development practices as particularly relevant to other developing countries because they emerge from recent, comparable development challenges.

5.2 Reproducing alternative development paradigms

Beyond simply reflecting existing dynamics, the cultural communication of Chinese corporations actively reproduces alternative development paradigms, more than an economic partner, in some African countries (Zheng, 2010). By consistently emphasizing collectivist values, long-term relationships, and principles of mutual benefit and non-interference, Chinese companies help normalize a model of corporate behavior and purpose that differs from the shareholder-centric or purely profit-driven models more common in Western corporate discourse, which is a new, different template.

One paradigm being reproduced is the concept of the corporation as a direct development agent. In our cases, companies like Huawei frame their initiatives not as charity adjuncts but as an integral part of their business mission – for example, positioning digital inclusion not primarily as market expansion but as a contribution to collective technological advancement. Such framing reproduces what Lee (2018) identifies as a “developmental state” approach to technological change that emphasizes coordinated advancement rather than competitive disruption. Similarly, CCCC’s communication about infrastructure projects emphasizes how physical infrastructure creates foundations for broader development rather than focusing narrowly on project profitability or contractual benchmarks. This reproduces a Chinese-style developmental ethos, where the line between business and national development blurs. Over time, such messaging may shift norms in host countries, leading local governments and communities to increasingly expect all multinational corporations, not just Chinese ones, to contribute tangibly to public benefits and capacity building.

Another paradigm being reinforced is a more collectivist approach to labor and community relations. When companies like Herocean Group communicate their internal practices of employee shareholding, or when TEDA highlights its comprehensive welfare provisions for workers, they showcase a model where employees and the community are treated as core stakeholders in a broad, familial sense. African employees under Chinese management may experience a different corporate culture – perhaps more paternalistic yet also providing long-term job security and community integration (as some Chinese firms do housing or schooling for employees’ families). As these practices are communicated and experienced, they can begin to reproduce an alternative employer-employee relationship norm in the region, one that values group cohesion and loyalty. This introduces a narrative of mutual obligation that, if backed by action, can alter the expectations that employees and communities have of their corporate partners.

5.3 Navigating between universalism and particularism

Chinese corporations’ cultural communication in Africa navigates a central tension: presenting core values as universally resonant while affirming their distinctively Chinese origins. This dual move reflects China’s broader international positioning – seeking to articulate approaches that are globally relevant yet rooted in Chinese civilizational traditions.

On the universalist side, companies frame values such as harmony, responsibility, and continuous improvement as broadly applicable ethical and managerial principles. This framing signals increasing confidence in

proposing alternative universalisms, positioning Chinese practices as potential global standards rather than locally bounded norms. In doing so, corporate communication participates in efforts to universalize aspects of China’s development experience and managerial philosophy.

Concurrently, firms underscore particularism by explicitly linking practices to Chinese philosophical concepts like *he* and *de* (德, responsible virtue/leadership), and by situating corporate conduct within narratives aligned with China’s policy discourse (e.g., ecological civilization, South–South cooperation). This framing reflects China’s policy of emphasizing its unique cultural traditions (Matondo, 2012), highlighting a distinctive moral vocabulary and developmental ethos rather than their assimilation into Western norms. The result is a deliberate tension: values are presented as both universally meaningful and identifiably Chinese, mirroring China’s broader international self-positioning.

This negotiation is most visible in responses to external critique. When confronted with Western-framed standards – transparency, civil society engagement – Chinese corporations often reframe evaluation around outcomes such as tangible community benefits, poverty alleviation, and capacity building. Initiatives like Huawei’s DigiTruck and TEDA’s community-oriented programs exemplify a communicative strategy that privileges practical results and shared development gains, thereby advancing an alternative evaluative framework rather than accepting the universality of Western standards.

Balancing adaptation and authenticity complements this universalism-particularism dynamic. Firms emphasize adaptation by tailoring strategies to local conditions – aligning programs with host-country educational systems, labor markets, and policy priorities. For example, Huawei’s CSR discourse underscores the tailoring of digital skills programs to local educational systems and economic priorities, presenting the company as “a local player” responsive to African needs (Tang and Li, 2011, p. 103). This adaptive framing reflects China’s diplomatic principle of non-interference and respect for local conditions (Seriki, 2020). Adaptation here functions not as cultural dilution but as contextualization that facilitates relevance and legitimacy.

At the same time, companies preserve cultural authenticity by consistently referencing core Chinese values and development philosophies. This sustained anchoring differentiates Chinese engagement from Western models and legitimizes a distinct pathway to modernization and cooperation. Rather than wholesale assimilation or rigid exportation, firms enact a hybrid model: they retain a Chinese value spine while flexibly adapting implementation to local environments. Repeated across sectors and countries, this approach helps institutionalize an alternative template for cross-cultural engagement – outcome-oriented, collectivist in tone, and long-term in orientation.

5.4 Contributions of the study

5.4.1 Theoretical contributions

This study advances cross-cultural communication theory by showing how non-Western cultural frameworks – specifically Confucian-inflected Chinese values – are operationalized in contemporary corporate discourse. While canonical models such as Hofstede’s (2011) identify macro-level dimensions like collectivism, our evidence traces how this dimension is enacted through concrete narratives and rhetorical strategies. By linking high-level cultural indices to observable communicative practices, the study demonstrates

the utility of discourse analysis as a methodological bridge between abstract cultural theory and situated corporate messaging.

Second, the research contributes to reputation and stakeholder theory by illustrating how firms build legitimacy abroad through culturally familiar tropes. Extending Dowling's (2004) view of reputation as a belief set, we show how Chinese companies intentionally shape those beliefs via values from their own moral repertoire. The centrality of harmony as a communicated value – uncommon in Western-centric reputation frameworks – suggests that prevailing models of corporate identity and reputation may insufficiently capture the priorities of firms grounded in alternative civilizational traditions.

Third, the study illuminates “corporate diplomacy” by documenting the systematic mirroring of national diplomatic rhetoric within corporate communications. The intertwining of state and firm narratives provides a mechanism by which public diplomacy and corporate image become mutually reinforcing. This contributes to international business theory by specifying how value-laden state discourses diffuse into corporate messaging, shaping global audience perceptions and expectations.

5.4.2 Managerial implications

For Chinese managers, the findings support incorporating home-grown values into branding and stakeholder engagement – on the condition that localization and practice authenticity are prioritized. Sincerity is pivotal: rhetoric without commensurate behavior erodes trust. Investment in capability building for communication teams should focus on translating core philosophy into messages that are culturally resonant yet universally intelligible.

For African and other international business and governmental stakeholders, recognizing that “win-win,” “community,” and “harmony” reflect Chinese corporate ethos, not mere slogans, can enhance collaboration. When frictions arise, invoking shared development and relationship-preserving conflict resolution may improve negotiation outcomes by aligning with Chinese preferences for harmony and long-term reciprocity.

6 Limitations and future research

While this study provides in-depth insights into the cultural dimensions of Chinese corporate communication in Africa, it is subject to several limitations that open avenues for future research.

First, the research is cross-sectional, examining corporate communications at a single point in time (primarily 2022). This design provides a valuable snapshot but does not capture the dynamic nature of communication. It cannot show how companies' messaging or values might evolve over time in response to specific events, crises, or growing experience in the host market. Longitudinal studies, tracking changes in corporate websites or CSR reports over several years, would be valuable to understand the evolution of these communication strategies.

Second, our data rely on companies' official self-presentations (websites and published CSR guides), which inherently portray an idealized narrative. There is a potential gap between this corporate rhetoric and the reality of on-the-ground practices. Our analysis is rooted more in what companies say than in what they do. This suggests a need for future research that investigates stakeholder perceptions. How do local employees, community members, government officials, and business partners in Africa perceive and react to the cultural messages communicated by Chinese companies?

Do they find them credible? Field-based research using interviews, surveys, and ethnographic methods could complement our discourse analysis to provide a more holistic and balanced assessment.

Third, the study's focus on the African context may limit the generalizability of its findings to other regions. Africa's unique historical, political, and developmental landscape likely influences how Chinese companies tailor their communications. For instance, the emphasis on South–South cooperation and shared development may be a specific strategy to distinguish themselves from former colonial powers. Chinese firms might emphasize different values or adopt different communication styles in other regions like Europe or Southeast Asia. Future comparative research could replicate our methodology in different continents to explore these potential variations.

Finally, our analysis, while broad, may not capture all the nuances of industry-specific cultural expressions. A sector-by-sector deep dive could yield a finer-grained understanding of how cultural values intersect with specific industry contexts. Additionally, because our analysis was based on official English-language sources, we may have missed subtleties present only in Chinese-language communications or internal corporate documents. Future research incorporating bilingual content analysis could provide a more complete picture of the values being conveyed to different audiences.

7 Conclusion

This study has examined the manifestation and operationalization of Chinese cultural values within the corporate communications of Chinese overseas corporations, focusing explicitly on the African context. By systematically analyzing the corporate discourse from official websites and CSR practices, the research identified three core Chinese cultural values prominently reflected across communication practices: embracing harmony through collectivism, pursuing excellence through continuous improvement, and practicing integrity with responsibility. These interwoven values prominently shape how the firms present themselves and engage with international stakeholders.

The findings highlight a dual function of this culturally informed communication. On one hand, it reflects China's broader socio-cultural and political themes; the corporate narratives of mutual benefit, collective development, and shared prosperity closely mirror national initiatives like the BRI. On the other hand, these communications actively reproduce alternative paradigms of globalization and corporate behavior. By consistently articulating collectivist and long-term oriented values, Chinese firms are helping to normalize a business approach centered on partnership, patience, and direct socio-economic contribution, which stands in contrast to some prevailing Western business norms. In doing so, Chinese corporations strategically balance presenting their values as universally beneficial with framing them as uniquely Chinese, effectively navigating the tension between global integration and cultural distinction.

These insights extend our theoretical understanding of cross-cultural corporate communication by providing a non-Western perspective and demonstrating how cultural heritage can be a strategic asset in global business messaging. Practically, the study offers critical insights for international stakeholders and Chinese corporations engaging in global markets, highlighting the importance of culturally informed communication strategies for international legitimacy and operational success, which is not merely a background factor but a central driver shaping global business interactions.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/[Supplementary material](#), further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

Author contributions

SX: Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. WL: Project administration, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fcomm.2025.1650733/full#supplementary-material>

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