

# **Building the Global Image of Chinese Private University in Cross-Cultural Contexts: A Case Study of Haikou University of Economics**

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**Abstract:** With the intensification of global higher education competition, Chinese private universities are facing the dual task of expanding their influence and constructing a distinctive global brand image. This study takes Haikou University of Economics (HUE), a representative private university in China, as the research object, adopting qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews to explore its cross-cultural communication practices, barriers, feedback mechanisms, and integrated communication strategies for brand image construction. Research findings indicate that HUE's cross-cultural communication practices exhibit characteristics of instrumentalism and symbolism, with deficiencies in bilingual communication balance, message consistency, and intercultural dialogue depth. Language dependence, cultural perception differences, and fragmented feedback mechanisms are the main barriers to its cross-cultural communication. The university's integrated communication relies more on administrative coordination than on cross-channel message cohesion.

**Keywords:** Chinese Private universities; Cross-cultural Communication; Institutional Brand Image; Integrated Communication

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## **1.Introduction**

In the context of economic globalization, technological standardization and global competition for student recruitment, the internationalization of higher education has emerged as a pivotal trend and a fundamental aspect of educational advancement. American scholars Arum and Water define this internationalization as various activities related to international studies, educational exchange and technical cooperation. Since the inception of China's higher education system about eighty years ago, the country has continually fostered academic exchange and collaboration with nations globally to augment its international influence. Since entering the fast expansion phase in 1992, private universities, an important component of higher education system in China, have responded to both national and international trends. They actively seek internationalization through partnerships between universities and enterprises, innovations in educational models and the creation of unique educational brands based on their specific local features. This has thus become a crucial pathway for those private universities to expand their institutional capacity, improve educational quality, and achieve leapfrog development. However, compared with public universities, private universities in China often lack preferential policy support, possess weaker internationalization awareness and face limitations in faculty and student mobility as well as in the internationalization of curricula and research. Building global brands of universities, therefore, should not be reduced to simple "westernization", "bilingualization" or "importing foreign elements". Especially within global and cross-cultural contexts, private universities must carefully balance globalization with local distinctiveness, thereby constructing a sustainable and high-value institutional brand image<sup>[1]</sup>.

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## **2.Literature Review**

### **2.1 Cross-Cultural Brand Communication**

Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher, once noted that the contact between different civilizations is often a milestone in human progress. For educational brands seeking to enter the global market, cross-cultural communication is not just a process of information transmission but a dynamic interaction involving cultural adaptation, meaning negotiation and identity construction<sup>[2]</sup>. In cross-cultural brand communication, information crosses different cultural backgrounds, dimensions and values between senders and receivers, and the same message may be interpreted differently due to cultural differences<sup>[3]</sup>. Therefore, adopting effective cross-cultural communication strategies is essential for educational institutions to release their comprehensive potential in global exchanges and cooperation. Hofstede's cultural dimension theory points out that cultural differences in individualism-collectivism, power distance and uncertainty avoidance will affect the way of communication and cooperation, which provides an important theoretical basis for analyzing cross-cultural communication barriers in university brand building.

### **2.2 Institutional Brand Communication and Image Construction**

Unlike corporate brands, university brands have the characteristics of public welfare, professionalism and cultural inheritance, and their brand image construction involves multiple stakeholders and complex cultural contexts. Institutional brand communication of universities is a systematic process that integrates multiple channels and messages, including official websites, social media, academic activities and international cooperation projects. The core of institutional brand communication is to convey the university's core values and brand personality to the global audience, forming a consistent and positive brand perception. For Chinese private universities, the construction of a global brand image needs to combine national cultural characteristics, regional development strategies and institutional educational concepts to form a unique brand identity that is both internationally accepted and locally distinctive<sup>[4]</sup>.

### **2.3 Integrated Communication and Brand Co-Creation**

For universities, integrated communication involves coordinating the communication behaviors of different departments, integrating multiple channels (such as official websites, social media and offline activities) and delivering consistent brand messages to global audiences. Brand co-creation theory emphasizes that brand value is not created unilaterally by the institution but is jointly constructed through interaction between the institution and stakeholders. In the process of university brand internationalization, stakeholders such as international students, foreign teachers and partner institutions are not only the recipients of brand information but also important participants in brand co-creation. Therefore, universities should adopt a participatory communication model, encouraging stakeholders to participate in brand narrative and content creation, so as to enhance the authenticity and acceptability of the brand image in cross-cultural contexts.

## **3.Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, combining qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews to achieve the research objectives.

### **3.1 Research Context and Object**

Haikou University of Economics (HUE) is a private undergraduate university located in Haikou, Hainan Province, China. As a private university in Hainan Free Trade Port, HUE has actively promoted internationalization in recent years, established cooperative relations with many universities and institutions in Malaysia, Thailand and other countries, and carried out a series of international exchange activities such as student exchange programs, academic forums, and cultural weeks. HUE's internationalization practice is representative of Chinese private universities, especially those located in regional strategic hubs, making it an ideal research object for this study.

### 3.2 Data Collection

#### 3.2.1 Textual Data

The researcher adopted a purposive sampling method to manually collect textual data related to HUE’s international affairs. Considering that the COVID-19 pandemic restricted international activities in Chinese universities from 2019 to 2022, the data collection period for this study was set from January 2023 to December 2025, covering major milestones, periodic events and important international exchanges of HUE during this period. A total of 40 textual samples were collected, including 10 samples from the university’s English or bilingual official website (international exchange/cooperation section), 18 official news releases/announcements (8 English versions and 10 Chinese versions), 16 official social media posts (foreign-oriented), and 8 cooperation project materials.

#### 3.2.2 Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect in-depth information from stakeholders involved in HUE’s international exchange activities. The interview participants were selected using a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling to ensure the diversity and representativeness of the sample. The participants included 4 international office administrators, 7 foreign affairs liaison officers, 3 international students, and 2 foreign teachers, totaling 12 participants. The basic quota control was adopted in sampling, ensuring the diversity of gender, job function, and project type, and prioritizing coverage of different cooperation channels. Each interview lasted 30 to 45 minutes. All interviews were recorded with the participants’ consent and the recordings were transcribed verbatim.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis is used to analyze the textual data and interview transcript, which involves systematically coding and categorizing textual content to identify core themes and patterns. Based on the literature review and research questions, this study established a coding framework, including three primary categories: Cross-cultural Communication Practices (focusing on how members interpret or implement their practices, cultural adaptation and narrative patterns), Communication Barriers and Feedback Mechanisms (identifying its linguistic issues, cultural misinterpretation and relevant feedback), and Integrated Communication and Brand Image Construction (examining the consistency of message delivery, cooperative relationship presented in communication and how staff define their brand values). Each primary category is divided into interview subcodes and textual subcodes with clear analytical focuses.

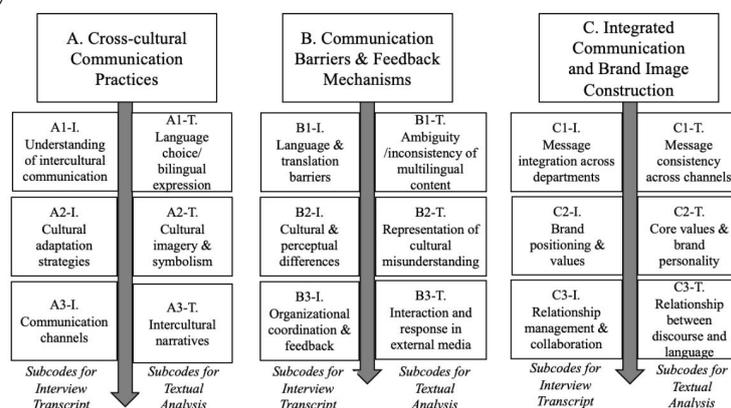


Figure 1. Coding Framework

## 4. Research Findings

### 4.1 Cross-Cultural Communication Practices of HUE

HUE’s communication practices are partially visible in its official channels and international activities, and they are limited in depth and consistency, showing the instrumentalism and symbolism. First, most Chinese news reports are not translated into English and its translation work is not regular, depending on the time and workload of the

international office staff. The translated English news is usually shorter than the original Chinese version, focusing on political or institutional topics such as the Hainan Free Trade Port initiative, while content related to cultural activities and student life is rarely translated. The bilingual communication imbalance is also reflected in the consistency of content. Although the English news basically corresponds to the Chinese news in terms of themes, there are differences in content detail and expression. For example, a Chinese news report on the ASEAN Cultural Week includes detailed descriptions of student activities and feedback, while the English version only provides a brief introduction to the event, lacking specific details and emotional expression. This imbalance makes it difficult for overseas audiences to fully understand HUE's international activities and brand values.

Second, HUE's understanding of intercultural communication is mainly event-driven and instrumental, focusing on organizing cultural activities to meet the basic needs of international students, rather than promoting mutual cultural exchange and dialogue. Most interviewees stated that the purpose of carrying out cultural experience programs is to help international students adapt to local life and feel Hainan's culture, while this pattern reflects the one-directional nature of HUE's cross-cultural communication. The university mainly disseminates Chinese and Hainan's culture to international students and partners, while lacking channels to introduce the cultures of international students' home countries and promote two-way cultural dialogue. In addition, the design of international exchange activities is closely linked to national and regional policies, with the goal of serving the development of the Hainan Free Trade Port, which makes the brand narrative overly dependent on policy discourse and lacks the diversity and authenticity of cultural expression. What's more, its official website has a more formal and institutional style, with images of leaders attending meetings, political studies, Chinese national flags, and Dragon Boat Festival zongzi, highlighting national and institutional characteristics. Social media posts are more diverse, featuring international students in traditional costumes participating in cultural activities, showing the diversity of student identities. However, the inconsistency in cultural representation across channels leads to confusion in brand perception. In addition, the use of cultural symbols is mostly symbolic, lacking in-depth interpretation and integration with the university's core values, making it difficult for overseas audiences to form a deep understanding of HUE's cultural characteristics.

#### **4.2 Barriers and Feedback Mechanisms**

Language and translation barriers are the most prominent obstacles in HUE's cross-cultural communication. Interview data show that HUE lacks professional cross-cultural communication and translation personnel, and most international activities rely on language teachers from the School of Foreign Languages. As one administrator explained, "Whenever we host foreign guests, we have to ask language teachers to translate. Even at international fairs, we mostly hand out flyers rather than engaging in real conversation". Some documents are proofread using AI translation tools, but there are risks of semantic deviation and cultural inappropriateness. Language barriers also exist between international students and local teachers and students. Most international students have limited Chinese proficiency, making it difficult for them to understand Chinese news and social media posts. Although the university provides Chinese courses, the progress is slow, and international students can only pay attention to reports of activities they participate in if they understand Chinese. This limits the scope of information acquisition and participation of international students, affecting their sense of identity with the university.

Additionally, HUE's communication feedback mechanism is fragmented, with insufficient external responsiveness. Interview data shows that internal feedback mainly relies on regular meetings to arrange work, and foreign teachers and international students can only feedback problems to the corresponding responsible persons, who then report to the leaders of the international office or the president if necessary. Although the internal feedback efficiency is acceptable, there is a lack of a unified feedback platform and follow-up mechanism. In terms of external feedback, HUE has limited interaction and response with overseas audiences in external media. Most of its social media posts and news reports do not have comment sections or interactive functions, and there is little active

collection of feedback from partner institutions and overseas students. As a result, the university cannot timely adjust its communication strategies and brand messages based on overseas audience feedback, leading to a lack of responsiveness in cross-cultural communication.

## **5.Conclusion**

This research takes HUE as the case to explore the cross-cultural communication practices, barriers, feedback mechanisms, and integrated communication strategies of Chinese private universities in the process of global brand image construction. The findings show that HUE's cross-cultural communication practices are limited in depth and consistency, with problems such as bilingual communication imbalance, instrumental conceptualization of intercultural communication and inconsistent cultural representation. Language dependence, cultural perception differences and fragmented feedback mechanisms are the main barriers to its cross-cultural communication. What's more, the university's integrated communication relies more on administrative coordination than on cross-channel message cohesion, and its brand image construction is characterized by symbolic internationalism. Regarding this situation, the university should enhance cross-departmental synergy and build a centralized communication framework. A content calendar system should be adopted to ensure the consistency and regularity of information release across different channels, avoiding message fragmentation. At the same time, the office of international exchange and cooperation should consider to strengthen multilingual construction and cross-cultural communication training. For example, they can introduce professional translation and cross-cultural communication personnel, establish a standardized translation review mechanism, and improve the quality and timeliness of bilingual content. Particularly, cross-cultural communication training should be provided for faculty and staff to enhance their awareness and capabilities of cross-cultural communication, reducing language and cultural barriers.

Currently, HUE's integrated communication strategy relies more on administrative coordination than on cross-channel message cohesion, and its brand image construction is characterized by symbolic internationalism and partnership-oriented branding. For further shift and international communication, the university should change the one-way policy-driven narrative style, encourage international students, foreign teachers, and partner institutions to participate in brand narrative and content creation, and highlight the authenticity and diversity of the brand image. In addition, for private universities in China, they should also balance the expression of national, regional and institutional characteristics, forming a unique brand identity that integrates globalization and localization.

To sum up, this study enriches the empirical research on the internationalization of Chinese private universities, providing theoretical references and practical implications for similar institutions to enhance their cross-cultural communication capabilities and global brand influence. With the deepening of the internationalization of higher education, Chinese private universities need to establish a systematic cross-cultural communication strategy, balance the tension between globalization and localization, and construct a unique and sustainable global brand image through effective integrated communication and stakeholder co-creation. Only in this way can Chinese private universities break through the bottlenecks of internationalization and gain a competitive advantage in the global higher education market.

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