

Original Paper

China's Strategic Narratives in Global Governance

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Abstract

Discussions of global governance increasingly turn on a question that is not captured by the idea of simply “having a voice”: who is able to define the terms in which international problems are understood? This article approaches that question through strategic narrative. It argues that China's concern with discursive power is connected both to changes in its material position and to dissatisfaction with a governance discourse historically shaped by Western experience. Three reasons make this issue consequential for China: safeguarding expanding interests, seeking changes in an international order in which developing countries remain under-represented, and contributing to the provision of public goods. The article then examines strategic narrative as a mechanism rather than as a collection of slogans. Narratives locate China within particular identities, make complex international issues intelligible through selected frames, and attach political meaning to time, space, and norms. The final section turns from mechanism to practice. It considers how experience formed in China may become useful beyond the Chinese context, how domestic standards may acquire wider legitimacy through negotiation, and how broad visions may generate limited but workable areas of agreement. The central claim is that discursive power is produced through an interaction among narrative, institutional practice, and audience recognition; none of the three is sufficient on its own.

Keywords

Strategic narrative, Discursive power, Global governance, China, Soft power, Global South

1. Competition for Discursive Power in Global Governance

1.1. Discursive Power in Global Governance

Within international relations and the study of global governance, discursive power cannot be reduced to the simple “right to speak.” The term denotes the broader capacity of a state or other actor to frame issues, determine agendas, contribute to norm formation, and affect the perceptions and behavior of others through ideas, values, narrative systems, and rule-making capacity. (Liu & Lin,) Such influence

partly rests on “hard power” in politics and economics. More fundamentally, it is rooted in the attraction and diffusion of culture, ideas, and institutions as forms of “soft power.”

Holding discursive power gives an actor greater scope to turn one’s own interests and preferences into rules and standards that are widely accepted, or even treated as universal. By means of this process, an actor may influence the direction and priorities of global governance, gain legitimacy, and maintain greater initiative in international action. Competition over discursive power is, in this sense, a deeper competition over who writes the rules of the future world order and which values guide those rules.

1.2 China’s Rise and the Challenge to Western Discursive Hegemony

From the modern period onward, global governance has largely developed within Western discursive hegemony. This hegemony has drawn on Western-centric historical narratives, liberal economic and political models, and values defined as universal. It has been reinforced and disseminated through international institutions, multinational corporations, mainstream media, and academic systems. Consequently, Western experiences and interests have often been treated as global standards.

During the twenty-first century, and especially after the 2008 global financial crisis, the limitations of Western-led governance models have become increasingly apparent. Meanwhile, China’s rapid rise has created a fundamental challenge to this discursive order. China has not confined itself to seeking a higher position within the existing Western discourse. Instead, it has articulated its own set of concepts and narratives, including a community with a shared future for humanity, a new type of international relations, the common values of humanity, and the Global Development Initiative. Through practical platforms such as the Belt and Road Initiative, China has also put forward alternative approaches and discursive frameworks for global governance. (Qiu, 2026)

The significance of this development is not simply that another national voice has entered the debate. Chinese development experience is being used to question assumptions that previously appeared universal and to propose additional ways of describing development and governance. The likely result is not the disappearance of Western discourse but a more contested field in which several frameworks coexist, compete, and sometimes borrow from one another.

1.3 Why Greater Discursive Power in Global Governance Matters to China

Against a background of deepening globalization and rapid change in the international order, active participation in the reform of global governance has acquired major strategic importance for China. Strengthening China’s discursive power does more than a response to external challenges. It also responds to the needs of China’s current stage of development. It is important for protecting sovereignty, security, and development interests, promoting greater fairness in the international system, and advancing both national rejuvenation and common human progress. Its significance can be examined from three connected dimensions: national interests, reform of the international order, and the provision of global public goods.

At the most fundamental level of national survival and development, discursive power in global governance serves as a protective mechanism for China’s core interests and against systemic risks.

Global governance coordinates transnational issues through rules, institutions, and norms. Such rules are never entirely value-neutral. Over a prolonged period, a small number of developed countries and their interest groups have held strong influence over their formulation and interpretation. Their values, political preferences, and economic interests are therefore deeply embedded in many global rules. (Yao, 2026)

In historical practice, Western-led systems in trade and investment, financial regulation, and internet governance have sometimes served to protect existing advantages, shift costs, or constrain late-developing countries. For many years, China was mainly a “rule taker.” Although China benefited from an open international system, but it also faced institutional ceilings and barriers. When rules were unfavorable, China often had limited means to respond within the existing framework.

China has since become the world’s second-largest economy, a major trading country, and a major source of outward investment. Its national interests extend across the world. Energy-route security, the protection of overseas assets and citizens, international market access, technical-standard compatibility, and cross-border data flows are all directly affected by global governance rules. If China has limited influence on the making and revision of these rules, China’s core development interests remain exposed to frameworks designed by others and subject to possible change.

Climate governance illustrates this point. Rules on the allocation of emissions-reduction responsibilities, financial and technological support, and carbon border adjustment directly affect China’s industrial space and transition costs. In the digital economy, international rules on data sovereignty, platform responsibility, and digital taxation affect both the competitiveness and the security boundaries of China’s large digital economy. Competition over discursive power is, in this sense, also a competition over the ability to define “fairness,” “security,” and “development.” It can expand China’s strategic space and reduce external rule-based risks.

A second issue is reform of the international order. Strengthening discursive power is part of China’s stated responsibility to promote a fairer and more reasonable international system. The current global governance architecture emerged after the Second World War. Despite subsequent reforms, its deeper structure still reflects the power distribution and Western-centric thinking of that period. Deficits in governance, trust, peace, and development have become increasingly visible. Many developing and emerging economies still have insufficient representation in global economic decision-making, financial resource allocation, and major security affairs. Their concerns are often not fully addressed. This imbalance contributes to unequal development and conflict, and it weakens collective responses to crises such as public-health emergencies, financial instability, and climate change. (Zhao & Song, 2025)

As the largest developing country and a major emerging power, China’s participation may influence the direction and quality of changes in the international order. The stated objective is not to dismantle the existing system and replace it with a completely new one. Instead, China advocates gradual and inclusive reform. This includes stronger representation for emerging and developing countries in issues

such as International Monetary Fund quota reform, reform of the World Trade Organization dispute-settlement mechanism, and reform of the United Nations Security Council.

China has also supported new multilateral platforms, including the Belt and Road Initiative, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, and BRICS cooperation. Within these platforms, it advocates consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits, together with openness, inclusion, mutual benefit, and win-win cooperation. These practices provide new discursive and institutional options. China may also internationalize and theorize its experience in poverty reduction, infrastructure development, industrialization, and the coordination of development and security. By means of this process, it can contribute approaches that differ from traditional Western models. The longer-term objective is to move international order away from hegemonic stability based mainly on power and toward more plural governance based on rules and consensus.

The third dimension concerns the provision of global public goods. Effective use of discursive power can help China provide public goods and advance the building of a community with a shared future for humanity. (Hu, 2020) Contemporary global governance must address many transnational challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, terrorism, cybersecurity threats, and major infectious diseases. These challenges cannot be managed effectively by any single state. Yet the supply of global public goods remains inadequate, and free-rider problems are serious. Some traditional leading states have shown less willingness or capacity to provide such goods, while unilateralism and protectionism have also re-emerged.

Under these conditions, the international community has complex expectations of China. If China does not play a more active role in agenda-setting and norm formation, gaps in global governance leadership may grow. Global problems may then become harder to control and may also harm China. Discursive power may therefore support China in taking responsibilities that correspond to its national strength and international position. It can help China place issues concerning humanity's common future on the international agenda and build frameworks for collective action through initiatives on development, security, and civilization.

This role also implies a shift for China: it needs to move from being mainly a participant and beneficiary of global public goods toward being an advocate, coordinator, and, in some fields, a leading provider. In the global green transition, for instance, China has made its own carbon-peaking and carbon-neutrality commitments. It may also use its industrial and technological strengths in renewable energy and electric vehicles to contribute to international technical standards and industrial rules. This may help global climate governance combine emissions constraints with opportunities for green development. In global public health, China can share experience in public-health system building, support the central role of the World Health Organization, and promote fairer systems for vaccine distribution, disease surveillance, and joint research and development. (Gong & Fan, 2022)

Taken together, strengthening discursive power in global governance is both defensive and constructive for China. It is a practical requirement for protecting expanding overseas interests and national

development security. It also functions as connected to reforming the international order, improving the position of developing countries, and promoting international fairness. More fundamentally, it supports China's effort to assume international responsibilities, respond to global challenges, and contribute ideas and resources to a shared human future. The process inevitably involves competition over ideas, interests, and discourse. It therefore requires strategic clarity, theoretical capacity, international coordination, and the continued provision of high-quality global public goods.

A further point follows from the expansion of China's interests. The distinction between domestic development and external governance has become increasingly difficult to maintain. A rule negotiated in a distant multilateral forum may affect firms, local industries, technological choices, or regulatory costs inside China. Conversely, a domestic policy adopted in China may have consequences for international markets because of the scale of the Chinese economy. Discursive power therefore matters at the point where domestic and international governance meet. The issue is not simply whether China can make its position heard. It is whether Chinese actors can participate early enough in the definition of a problem to prevent policy choices from being narrowed before formal bargaining even begins. Agenda-setting is important precisely because many later decisions are shaped by the concepts accepted at this earlier stage.

This helps explain why technical fields have acquired political significance. Standards for carbon accounting, data circulation, digital platforms, infrastructure finance, or emerging technologies may appear specialized, yet each standard contains assumptions about responsibility and acceptable risk. Once a particular definition is embedded in international practice, changing it can be costly. China consequently has an incentive to combine technical expertise with an ability to explain the principles behind its preferred rules. Without that discursive dimension, participation may remain reactive: Chinese representatives can negotiate details while the basic vocabulary of the debate has already been determined elsewhere. Greater discursive capacity is intended to move participation from this reactive position toward earlier involvement in problem definition and rule formation.

There is also a representational dimension. China frequently presents its own demands together with the concerns of developing countries, especially on development finance, technology access, climate responsibility, and institutional representation. This claim should not be treated as automatically accepted by other developing states; their interests are diverse and sometimes conflict with China's. Nevertheless, it gives Chinese global-governance discourse a wider audience than a narrowly national argument would have. To sustain that position, China must show that the rules it advocates can accommodate differences among developing economies rather than merely reproduce Chinese preferences. Discursive power is therefore linked to credibility: the stronger the claim to speak for greater fairness, the greater the need for practices that allow other participants to see their own interests reflected in the proposed framework.

2. Strategic Narratives as a Key Force for Strengthening Discursive Power

Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle use “strategic narrative” to describe the stories through which political actors make sense of the international system, their own place within it, and particular policy questions. (Wang, 2025) This definition is useful here because it directs attention away from isolated expressions and toward the relations among them. A phrase acquires political weight when it is repeatedly connected with a larger account of what has happened, what the present situation means, and what future should be pursued.

The relevance to discursive power follows from this interpretive function. International actors do not encounter policies as neutral pieces of information. They encounter competing explanations of why an issue matters, who bears responsibility, and which response is legitimate. A successful narrative can make one such explanation familiar enough to become a point of reference in later debate. Its effect is therefore neither identical with persuasion in a single speech nor reducible to material pressure. It lies in making certain connections appear plausible and others less so. For China, this is particularly important because many of its international initiatives enter arenas in which established concepts and evaluative standards already exist. Strategic narrative offers a means of positioning those initiatives within, alongside, or against those inherited frames.

2.1 Narratives Construct Identity

Identity in international politics is not a fixed label that a government can simply declare. It is relational. A state describes itself, other actors respond to that description, and subsequent conduct either strengthens or weakens the claim. This is why terms used in Chinese foreign-policy discourse—“developing country,” “responsible major country,” or a participant in the reform of global governance—are better treated as identity claims than as neutral classifications.

Several narrative resources are used to support these claims. One is historical continuity. Ideas associated with harmony, peaceful coexistence, and exchange are connected with contemporary formulations such as peaceful development and win-win cooperation. Another is developmental experience. China's transformation from a low-income society into a major economy is invoked not simply as a national achievement but as evidence that modernization can take more than one route. A third resource is participation in existing institutions. WTO membership, UN peacekeeping, and climate commitments allow China to present itself as an actor operating inside major international arrangements while also arguing that some of those arrangements require reform. The discourse of a “community with a shared future for humanity” brings these strands together by placing national development within a wider claim about interdependence.

Such self-presentation gains definition through contrast. Campbell's observation that identity is partly constituted through difference is relevant here. (Hou, 2025) China's self-positioning as a developing country, for example, matters because it affects how questions of historical responsibility, climate finance, and technology transfer are narrated. Likewise, support for multilateral consultation is often

articulated against unilateralism, exclusive blocs, and zero-sum competition. In civilizational discourse, exchange and mutual learning are contrasted with hierarchy and with the proposition that conflict between civilizations is unavoidable. (Zhao & Liu, 2021) These oppositions do not merely describe an external “other”; they specify the values through which the Chinese “self” is presented.

There is, however, an important limit to identity narratives: repetition does not guarantee recognition. International responses can force a narrative to change. The evolution of Belt and Road discourse is a useful case. Criticism concerning debt, environmental effects, transparency, and project quality was followed by greater emphasis on green development, integrity, sustainability, and high-quality cooperation. Climate discourse has also changed. Common but differentiated responsibilities remain important, yet they are now voiced alongside China’s own carbon-peaking and carbon-neutrality commitments and a stronger emphasis on green cooperation. (Li, 2025) In both cases, external reception became part of the narrative’s development.

The identity function of strategic narrative is therefore best seen as recursive. China proposes a self-description; that description is tested in international interaction; and the narrative is subsequently maintained, qualified, or revised. Discursive power grows not from self-definition alone, but from the extent to which the proposed identity becomes usable and recognizable to audiences beyond the state that produced it.

The distinction between identity claim and identity recognition is especially useful for understanding apparent tensions in China’s international position. China can be described simultaneously as the world’s second-largest economy, a major technological and trading power, and a developing country. These descriptions need not be mutually exclusive, but they highlight different relationships. The first emphasizes material capacity; the second emphasizes changing capabilities; the third foregrounds development gaps, historical experience, and solidarity with the Global South. Strategic narrative connects these positions and explains why different identities are activated in different policy settings. Climate negotiations, development cooperation, and reform of international financial institutions, for example, do not place the same demands on identity. Narrative gives policymakers a way to maintain continuity while shifting emphasis.

This flexibility also creates a risk. If identity claims change too abruptly from one setting to another, international audiences may read them as instrumental rather than principled. Narrative consistency therefore matters, but consistency does not require identical wording. What matters is whether different formulations can be related to a stable account of China’s role. The recurring emphasis on development, sovereignty, multilateral participation, and common interests performs this connective function. It provides a relatively durable vocabulary through which more specific roles can be explained. In this sense, strategic narrative does not freeze identity. It manages the tension between continuity and adjustment.

Audience diversity further complicates identity construction. A formulation that resonates with governments in developing countries may be received differently by Western media, international

organizations, business communities, or foreign publics. There is consequently no single external audience whose recognition can settle China's identity. The same narrative enters several interpretive environments at once. This makes translation important in a broader sense than language translation. Historical references, political concepts, and policy achievements have to be connected with concerns that are intelligible to different audiences. When that connection fails, a narrative may remain meaningful domestically while producing little recognition abroad. Identity construction in global governance is therefore inseparable from audience analysis.

2.2 Narratives Shape Perceptions

A second mechanism concerns perception. Global governance is crowded with technical information and competing interpretations. Climate policy, digital rules, development finance, and security disputes cannot be understood simply by accumulating facts; actors also need a story about how those facts fit together. Strategic narratives perform this ordering work. They foreground some causal relations, background others, and suggest what kind of response follows from a particular diagnosis. (Yang & Deng, 2025)

Consider economic globalization. Chinese calls for an open world economy are normally presented together with common development and mutual benefit. The effect is to frame protectionism not only as a trade-policy choice but as a problem for a wider project of shared growth. Security discourse makes a comparable move. The formulation of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security gathers practices such as mediation and peacekeeping into an account that questions security built exclusively on rival alliances. Whether other actors accept that account is an empirical matter; analytically, the important point is that the narrative supplies a coherent reading of otherwise separate policies.

Historical memory gives these readings additional depth. References to the Silk Road place contemporary connectivity within a much longer history of movement and exchange.[12] This does not mean that the historical Silk Road and the Belt and Road Initiative are equivalent. Rather, the remembered past provides a vocabulary through which present infrastructure can be represented as renewed connection instead of an entirely new geopolitical project. China's modern history is mobilized differently. Experiences of foreign pressure, poverty, and subsequent development support a narrative of affinity with the developing world and a claim that modernization need not reproduce a single Western sequence. For some audiences, especially those with their own histories of colonialism or late development, that comparison may be politically meaningful.

Narratives also work affectively. International arguments are rarely evaluated through calculation alone. Fairness, humiliation, insecurity, dignity, and hope can influence how a policy is received. Chinese arguments about reforming international institutions often draw on the language of unequal representation and distributive justice. The "community with a shared future for humanity" activates a different emotional register: vulnerability is shared, but so is the possibility of a desirable future. (Zeng

& Hu, 2023) These affective cues can make an interpretation more resonant, although they cannot compensate indefinitely for a gap between narrative and practice.

The perceptual effect of strategic narrative is thus selective rather than total. It does not determine what international audiences must think. It provides a patterned way of seeing an issue—one that links causes, memories, values, and possible responses. Discursive influence becomes stronger when that pattern travels beyond official Chinese discourse and begins to structure discussion among other actors. Framing is particularly important when the same event can support several interpretations. Infrastructure investment may be described as development cooperation, commercial expansion, strategic influence, or some combination of the three. A digital-governance proposal may be interpreted through the language of sovereignty, security, innovation, or openness. Strategic narrative does not remove this ambiguity; it competes within it. The Chinese account gains discursive influence when it can connect a policy with an interpretation that audiences find sufficiently plausible to use in their own discussion. This is a higher threshold than simply repeating an official formulation, because the narrative has to travel beyond its original institutional source.

The problem of credibility is therefore central. Perception cannot be managed indefinitely through linguistic framing if observable practice repeatedly points in another direction. Narratives about mutual benefit, for example, become more persuasive when participating communities can identify concrete gains, and less persuasive when costs are seen as concentrated locally while benefits appear remote. The same relationship applies to environmental claims, development assistance, or security cooperation. Practice does not speak for itself, because it too requires interpretation, but it supplies the evidence from which competing interpretations are built. Strategic narrative is strongest when discourse and experience reinforce one another.

This also explains why negative narratives deserve attention. International perception is shaped not only by the story an actor tells about itself but by counter-narratives produced by competitors, media organizations, civil society groups, and affected communities. Terms such as “debt trap,” “decoupling,” “de-risking,” or “rules-based order” are not neutral descriptions; each organizes a field of political meaning. China’s strategic narrative therefore operates in a crowded discursive environment. Its task is partly constructive—offering its own account—and partly responsive—addressing interpretations that have already gained circulation. The effectiveness of the response depends on more than rebuttal. It requires an alternative explanation that can account for the same evidence in a way audiences consider coherent.

2.3 Narratives Produce Power

The connection between narrative and power becomes clearer once power is understood as partly productive. To shape the meaning of a situation is also to influence which actions can be defended as appropriate, necessary, or legitimate. (Yuan & Li, 2024) This does not make material resources irrelevant. It means that resources are politically interpreted before they are used. In China’s

global-governance narratives, this productive dimension can be observed particularly clearly in representations of time, space, and norms.

Temporal narratives place present policy inside a longer sequence. The story of national rejuvenation, for instance, brings together memories of the ancient Silk Road, the experience of modern national humiliation, and the achievements of reform and development. (Su, 2020) The resulting chronology gives contemporary policy a direction: present action becomes one episode in a movement from weakness toward rejuvenation. The expression “changes unseen in a century” performs a related function by characterizing the current period as historically exceptional. If the present is a moment of structural transition, proposals for institutional reform can be represented as adaptation to historical change rather than disruption for its own sake. Future-oriented concepts matter as well. A “community with a shared future for humanity” supplies an imagined destination from which current cooperation can be retrospectively justified.

Spatial narratives alter the map in a different way. Belt and Road discourse frequently describes corridors, ports, railways, digital infrastructure, and logistics networks rather than treating geography as a collection of bounded territories. (Zhang & Lü, 2026) A place described as peripheral under one spatial logic may be narrated as a junction under another. The change is discursive, but it can have material consequences because expectations about connectivity influence judgments of economic and strategic value. At the same time, the routes and standards embedded in new networks become objects of political contestation. Narrative helps define what those networks are for and whose interests they are understood to serve.

The language of common risk stretches this relational geography further. Carbon emissions, infectious disease, and cybersecurity do not remain within national borders. When they are narrated as shared vulnerabilities, the political unit of concern expands beyond an individual state. China can then present climate commitments, public-health cooperation, or peacekeeping not only as foreign policy but as contributions to problems in which several societies are implicated. This framing does not erase conflicting interests; it recasts the relationship among them.

Normative power concerns a different question: by what criteria should conduct and institutions be judged? Narratives matter because norms need reasons as well as rules. Chinese human-rights discourse, for example, gives prominent status to subsistence and development and uses poverty reduction as evidence of their practical significance. (Tan, 2022) This ordering differs from approaches that give priority to civil and political rights. The point is not that one formulation automatically displaces the other, but that narrative establishes a competing hierarchy of normative concerns.

The principle of “consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits” works similarly. Each term answers a different governance question: who is heard, who participates in producing an outcome, and who benefits from it. Institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank offer arenas in which such principles may be translated into procedures. Debates over “good governance” reveal the same contest over evaluative criteria. Where many Western

formulations stress institutional design and procedural checks, Chinese discourse more often foregrounds implementation capacity, development outcomes, and improvements in living standards. (Ma & Gong, 2023) The disagreement is therefore also a disagreement about what counts as evidence of legitimate governance.

Time, space, and norms should not be collapsed into a single type of narrative power. Temporal stories organize historical direction; spatial stories reorganize relations and centers; normative stories establish standards of judgment. Their common feature is that they make political reality intelligible in ways that can favor some choices over others. This is the sense in which narrative may become power: not because language replaces material capability, but because political capability is exercised within fields of meaning.

The three dimensions discussed above also interact. A temporal story can change the meaning of space, while a spatial project can provide evidence for a normative claim. The Belt and Road Initiative illustrates this overlap. Its historical references connect present connectivity with earlier exchange; its infrastructure reorganizes practical relations among places; and its language of consultation and shared benefits supplies criteria by which those relations are to be judged. Treating time, space, and norms separately is analytically useful, but political narratives usually combine them. Their power often comes from this combination, because a proposal appears more persuasive when it has a history, a map, and a moral vocabulary at the same time.

Power produced through narrative is nevertheless contingent. An actor may successfully place a concept on the international agenda without controlling its later meaning. Other participants can appropriate the term, redefine it, or attach conditions to it. This is common in multilateral governance, where concepts acquire a life beyond the state that first promoted them. From the perspective of discursive power, such loss of exclusive control is not necessarily failure. If a concept becomes widely used, it may influence debate even after its meaning has been negotiated. The more important question is whether the resulting interpretation still preserves enough of the original normative or political purpose to affect governance practice.

This point prevents an overly deterministic understanding of narrative power. Language cannot manufacture authority independently of institutions, resources, and outcomes. Nor do audiences passively receive a narrative. They compare claims with experience, with competing accounts, and with their own interests. Strategic narrative should therefore be understood as one component in a wider process of power production. It can open political possibilities, stabilize a preferred interpretation, or make cooperation easier to justify. It cannot guarantee any of these outcomes. Its effect remains dependent on reception and on the institutional settings in which meaning is converted into decisions.

3. Practical Paths for Empowering Global Governance through Strategic Narratives

If strategic narrative contributes to discursive power through identity, perception, and the production of meaning, a further issue follows: under what conditions can such narratives have effects beyond official

discourse? The answer cannot be communication alone. International influence requires a connection between what is said, what is done, and what other actors are willing to recognize. The three paths discussed below—experience, standards, and vision—should therefore be understood as processes of translation rather than as one-way export.

3.1 From Chinese Experience to Global Solutions

China's development experience is often treated as a potential source of ideas for other developing countries. (Yan, 2023) Yet experience is always produced under particular historical and institutional conditions. A policy that worked in one province or during one phase of China's development cannot become a "global solution" merely by being renamed. What can travel more readily are problem definitions, policy principles, techniques, and lessons whose conditions of application are made explicit.

This distinction changes the role of narrative. Instead of presenting Chinese practice as a finished model, narrative can explain the problem to which a practice responded, the trade-offs involved, and the reasons it may or may not be adaptable elsewhere. Poverty reduction is an obvious example. Its international relevance lies less in reproducing every Chinese administrative arrangement than in asking which combinations of infrastructure, local capacity, targeted support, and long-term investment may be useful under different circumstances.

The formula "consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits" offers a procedural language for such adaptation. (Yang, 2019) Consultation leaves room for local priorities to enter the design of cooperation; joint contribution avoids depicting one side as the sole provider of knowledge or resources; shared benefits makes distribution part of the evaluation of success. These principles do not eliminate asymmetries between partners, but they provide criteria by which cooperation can be discussed and criticized.

Seen from this perspective, the movement from Chinese experience to a wider solution is not completed when a policy is introduced abroad. It occurs through repeated adjustment. Local actors reinterpret the proposal, implementation exposes unanticipated constraints, and the original experience is modified in response. A contribution to global governance is therefore more credible when it enlarges the repertoire of possible responses without claiming that one national trajectory is universally reproducible.

The problem of context is particularly important here. China's development occurred under conditions that cannot simply be reproduced elsewhere: a very large domestic market, distinctive central-local relations, particular patterns of state capacity, and a specific sequence of industrialization and integration into the world economy. A credible international narrative should acknowledge these conditions rather than treating them as irrelevant. Doing so does not reduce the value of Chinese experience. It makes comparison more precise. Other countries can ask which elements depend on uniquely Chinese institutions and which address problems that appear in many development settings.

Such comparison can also work in the opposite direction. International use of Chinese experience may reveal limitations that were less visible in the domestic context. A policy principle adapted abroad can generate feedback about financing, environmental safeguards, local participation, or administrative capacity. If this feedback returns to Chinese institutions, international cooperation becomes a source of learning rather than a one-way transfer of expertise. The phrase “global solution” is most defensible in this iterative sense: a proposal begins from Chinese practice but is revised through encounters with other settings until its relevance is no longer tied exclusively to its place of origin.

3.2 From Chinese Standards to Global Norms

Standards pose a harder problem because technical effectiveness and normative legitimacy are not the same thing. A specification may function well in the Chinese market and still encounter resistance internationally. For it to acquire broader authority, other actors usually need opportunities to compare it with alternatives, negotiate its content, and participate in the institutions that maintain it. (Feng, 2025)

This is one reason Belt and Road discourse has increasingly paired technical cooperation with terms such as high-quality, green, sustainable, and people-centered. These adjectives are not merely decorative. They connect engineering and investment decisions with internationally recognizable concerns about environmental protection, debt sustainability, local employment, transparency, and social benefit. The credibility of the narrative, however, depends on whether project practice supplies evidence for those claims.

Multilateralization can further change the status of a standard. Once a proposal is discussed within an institution containing members with different interests, it is no longer exclusively a national product. Bargaining may alter both its wording and its operation. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank illustrates this dynamic. Its “lean, clean, and green” formulation draws on concerns that are intelligible across different political contexts: organizational efficiency, institutional integrity, and environmental responsibility. The more such principles are incorporated into jointly governed procedures, the less their authority depends on their Chinese origin.

For this reason, international norm formation should not be imagined as a simple replacement of Western standards by Chinese ones. Norms are more often layered, hybridized, and revised. China can add concepts and practices to that process, but their durability will depend on performance, compatibility, and negotiated acceptance. Narrative helps a standard acquire meaning; institutional practice determines whether that meaning is credible.

The distinction between a standard and a norm also deserves emphasis. Standards often specify how something should be measured, built, financed, or operated. Norms address the legitimacy of conduct and the expectations attached to it. The two can reinforce one another, but they do not automatically converge. A technically efficient standard may be rejected because the process through which it was developed is viewed as closed. Conversely, a norm may attract broad rhetorical support while remaining too vague to guide implementation. Strategic narrative can connect the two by explaining how a technical choice serves a publicly defensible purpose.

International standard-setting is consequently a site of both expertise and politics. Engineers, regulators, firms, governments, and international organizations may enter the same debate with different priorities. Chinese participation becomes more influential when technical proposals are accompanied by transparent reasoning about cost, safety, interoperability, environmental effects, and distributional consequences. This type of explanation is less dramatic than a broad geopolitical narrative, but it may be more consequential for long-term rule formation. Normative influence is often accumulated through repeated technical decisions rather than through a single declaration.

There is a further implication for institutional design. If Chinese standards are to acquire legitimacy beyond China, mechanisms for consultation and revision become part of the substantive argument, not merely procedural additions. Other actors are more likely to regard a rule as shared when they have meaningful opportunities to question evidence, propose modifications, and participate in oversight. In this respect, the path from standard to norm requires a partial surrender of unilateral authorship. Wider ownership is gained precisely because the final rule is no longer identical with the initial national proposal.

3.3 From Chinese Vision to Global Consensus

The distance between a national vision and international consensus is greater still. A phrase such as a “community with a shared future for humanity” is intentionally capacious. (Ding & Jiang, 2019) That breadth is useful because it can encompass development, security, climate, and civilizational exchange. It is also a weakness if the concept remains too general for other actors to connect it with their own interests.

Concrete cooperation can narrow this distance. Railways, ports, logistics networks, and industrial projects under the Belt and Road Initiative give material form to claims about connectivity. The Global Development Initiative, Global Security Initiative, and Global Civilization Initiative do something similar at the level of agendas by linking broad principles to poverty reduction, food security, security cooperation, and cultural exchange. (Li, 2017) Such projects create sites in which a vision can be evaluated through participation and outcomes rather than through official language alone.

The consensus produced in these settings is unlikely to be comprehensive. States that cooperate on infrastructure may disagree on security; states that share climate objectives may hold very different views of political institutions. A more realistic objective is overlapping agreement around particular problems. In this sense, consensus is practical and issue-specific. Consultation allows interests to be voiced, joint contribution gives participants a role in implementation, and shared benefits provides a basis for judging whether cooperation remains worthwhile.

Nor can a strategic vision remain static. New domains—including artificial-intelligence governance and polar affairs—generate interests and risks that earlier formulations may not have anticipated.[24] A narrative that cannot absorb such changes will gradually lose explanatory value. The movement from Chinese vision to broader consensus must therefore remain open-ended: concepts are tested against

new problems, cooperation reveals points of convergence and disagreement, and the vision is adjusted without abandoning its central emphasis on interdependence.

The broader implication is that consensus should not be equated with universal ideological agreement. In a plural international system, discursive power may be more effectively built through durable areas of cooperation among actors who continue to disagree elsewhere. Strategic narrative contributes when it gives those areas a language, a rationale, and a future orientation that participants can recognize as partly their own.

The idea of overlapping consensus is useful because it sets a realistic standard for success. Global governance does not require states to share a complete philosophy of political order before they can cooperate. Agreement can begin with narrower judgments: a transport corridor is useful, emissions should be reduced, a disease-surveillance mechanism is needed, or a financing gap should be addressed. Strategic narrative can connect these limited agreements to a broader vision without pretending that deeper differences have disappeared. This makes consensus cumulative. Cooperation in one field may create habits, expectations, or institutional relationships that make later cooperation easier, although such spillover is never automatic.

At the same time, disagreement should not always be interpreted as narrative failure. A concept that enters international debate may clarify differences that were previously hidden. Negotiation over “shared benefits,” for instance, can expose competing views about who bears costs and how benefits should be measured. Such disputes can improve a governance proposal if they force vague principles to become more specific. A durable consensus is therefore likely to contain argument within it. What matters is whether participants retain procedures for continuing cooperation while revising the terms on which that cooperation rests.

For China, this places a premium on narrative openness. A vision that is presented as complete and non-negotiable leaves little room for other actors to see themselves as co-authors. By contrast, a vision expressed through general principles can acquire additional meanings through practice. This involves a trade-off: greater openness may reduce China’s control over interpretation, yet it can also broaden participation and legitimacy. The transition from national vision to international consensus is therefore not simply a matter of communicating Chinese ideas more effectively. It requires institutional arrangements in which those ideas can be discussed, adapted, and partially transformed.

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