

Analysis of the Role of Urban Communication and Theme Publishing in Shaping National Image

-- A Content Analysis based on 89 Key Theme Publications

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Abstract. In March 2023, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China called for the whole party to conduct an in-depth study of President Xi's ideological theme of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era. Up against new trends, the publishing industry is guided by the global consciousness of "focusing on and trend and serving the overall development", and its expression and forms are in constant enrichment, with theme publishing and publications integrating various fields emerging one after another. With the deepening globalization, China's opening to the outside world never stops, for which improving China's international image has been a proposition of the times. From the perspective of theme publishing, this study explores the influence of theme publishing empowered by urban communication on the national image from the perspective of the combination of theme publishing and urban communication. Through content analysis, 89 key theme publications are analyzed with following conclusions. 1. Urban communication affects national image through topic selection planning of theme publications. 2. The discourse system of theme publications intermediately influences topic selection planning related to urban communication on shaping national image.

Keywords: Theme Publications; Urban Communication; National Image; International Effect.

1. Introduction: New Ideas of Urban Communication in the Form of Theme Publishing

Theme publishing is regarded as a publishing organized around major events, major activities, major themes and major theoretical issues of the Party and the country (Zhou, 2011). In 2022, the National Press and Publication Administration issued the "Development Plan of Publishing Industry during the 14th Five-Year Plan", which discussed the "strengthening and improvement of theme publishing" as a special section for the first time, promoting theme publishing unprecedentedly. The 14th Five-Year Plan is a turning point in building a socialist modern country, a historical intersection of Two Centenary Goals, and a leap-forward period for the further development of publishing. Mass media is the most effective way to influence the audience in shaping and spreading the national image (Dong et al., 2008). Nowadays, with convenient communication, radioactive information and rapid development, urban communication, as the engine of the transformation, upgrading and high-quality development of theme publishing, has brought new opportunities for theme publishing to seek a more profound development.

Generally speaking, the quality of theme publications is manifested in both content and form, while their main advantage related to urban communication lies in the topic selection planning of content direction. A comprehensive analysis of the topics and projects for the theme publishing of local city publishing houses from 2016 to 2021 displays universal regional characteristics and advantages. For example, Guangdong People's Publishing House and Changjiang Press, which rank high in the project, have a good performance in the local narrative of theme publishing. For example, *Development History of Guangdong's Reform and Opening Up* (1978-2018) published by Guangdong People's Publishing House and other topics reflect Guangdong's regional characteristics as the frontier of reform and opening up. *Interpretation of the Yangtze River Economic Belt* and other three related projects published by Changjiang Press have been established, which harvests a desirable influence in local areas (Fan, 2022).

On the whole, it has become a general trend to tell Chinese stories well by utilizing urban resources, creating unique brands, disseminating urban stories, consolidating political awareness, enhancing cultural self-confidence, and planning high-quality themes with the spirit of the national times. In the era when urbanization, new technology and globalization are interacting with each other, the importance of urban publishing houses as an intermediary of urban communication for theme publishing becomes more prominent.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Study of the National Image

The concept of national image has been formally defined as "a complex" for the first time in the book *On National Image* co-authored by Guan Wenhui and other scholars (1999), which is the overall evaluation and definition given by the national external public and internal residents to the administrative body itself, its behaviors, activities and achievements. With later scholars revising and improving this definition on this basis, the national image is deemed as the domestic and international understanding and evaluation of the national politics (i.e. government credibility, diplomatic ability and military preparation, etc.), economy (i.e. economic strength, financial strength, product quality, national income, etc.), society (i.e. social cohesion, security and stability, national character, etc.), culture (i.e. scientific and technological strength, education, cultural heritage, customs, values, etc.) and geography (i.e. geographical environment, natural resources, population, etc.), which can be divided into the domestic image and international image (Sun, 2002).

The national image fundamentally depends on the comprehensive national strength of a country, but it cannot be equated with the actual situation of a country. Instead, it can be shaped to some extent. With the advent of nationalization and the information age, the national image has a more direct and powerful influence on a country's political, diplomatic and commercial activities than usual (Sun, 2002). Hence, the topic of how to shape the national image has attracted great attention from the government, academia, industrial and commercial circles worldwide. At present, the existing research on shaping national image can be roughly divided into two aspects. On the one hand, the dimension of national image shaping is explored vertically. For example, Sun Youzhong (2002) systematically expounded on the political function, diplomatic function and commercial function of national image; Fan Hong and He Jiayu (2023) used ChatGPT to divide the national image into five dimensions, including economic strength, political system, international relations, environmental issues and cultural diversity. On the other hand, the construction of the national image is analyzed, which includes many pre-factors affecting the shaping of the national image. For example, Li Mingxin (2019) took the international news review column "Bell" of *People's Daily* as an example, which proposed that Chinese mainstream media should speak in the international community, thus shaping a strong national image of China. In other words, the international right to speak of mainstream media affects the shaping of national image.

2.2. New Ideas of Shaping National Image Through Urban Communication

National development is intertwined with urban development, and the national image can not be separated from the shaping of many cities. The study of urban communication is also of certain significance to that of national image. The competition in the 21st century is the competition of cities (Yi, 2006). Scholar After analyzing international metropolises from the perspective of global city theory, Zhang Shujian (2021) found that some metropolises are almost as famous as their countries, and even replace some national functions. Nowadays, urban communication and national image are no longer separate individuals, but bonding concepts that integrate and promote each other.

Chicago School defines urban communication as a vital variable in urban social structure, which is used to study the activities among people, media and urban society. Although the concept of "urban communication" is still vague at present, as for Ai Luo and Tosoni (2016), the emphasized problems in urban communication have a certain universality. They pay attention to "the way that residents in

cities connect with others and their urban environment through symbolic, technical and or material ways", which is universal and related to the spatial ternary theory put forward by Lefebvre (material space, spiritual space and social space). On this basis, this research further summarizes the study of urban communication into spatial dimension, spiritual dimension and social dimension.

The versatility of cities is displayed in three dimensions, and urbanization is one of the themes of accelerating China's modernization since the 21st century. The number and size of Chinese cities are expanding rapidly, and modern elements and material civilization are increasingly prominent (Zheng, 2016). Thus, the diversified and rich national image needs to be shaped through "diverse cities". Comprehensive research shows that the shaping of national image will eventually lie in specific regions and cities, so this study applies urban communication to the shaping of national image, so as to explore how cities and countries are bonded from the perspective of communication in the time context.

2.3. How to Shape a National Image in Urban Communication in the Form of Theme Publishing

1. Theme Publishing and National Image with Urban Communication as the Content of Topic Selection Planning

According to the existing research, the role of theme publishing can be intertwined with the shaping of national image. On the one hand, theme publishing is conducive to shaping the domestic image. Excellent theme publications can strengthen the guidance of the social ideological impact, give full play to the remarkable advantages and prominent role of theme publications in building a socialist ideology with strong cohesion and leading power, and better unify thoughts and abilities for building a socialist modernized country in an all-round way (Han, Niu, Li, 2022). In addition, the value of publishing lies in promoting social progress with ideas (Zhao, 2023). Based on the *2019 Theme Publishing Development Report*, the "theme" involved in theme publishing is no longer limited to major national development events, but covers all aspects of political, economic, social and cultural development.

On the other hand, theme publishing is beneficial to enhancing the international image. It is not only a window to show China's style, but also an important channel for deep communication between China and the world. Theme publishing shoulders the great responsibility of building a discourse system with Chinese characteristics and widely publicizing China's ideas, wisdom and programs (China Publishing Journal, 2022). Theme publishing is also a way of foreign communication. Its "going out" is an indispensable way to spread China's core values and development overseas. Academic discourse endows theme publishing with academic rationality, which helps to break through the barriers of international communication of theme publications and build a Chinese narrative system (Sun, 2023).

According to the relevant theories of cities and countries, such as "promoting the national image by creating a good reputation of the urban image is an important means to shape the national image (Fan, 2013)", "Urban image is a subsystem of the national image (He, 2020)", etc., the theme publications with urban communication as the topic planning content are more likely to impact the shaping of the national image.

At the same time, this paper argues that the shaping of domestic image and international images can be measured as a whole for theme publications. Adding international effect as the second dependent variable makes the research more complete. For example, *Century Jiangcun: Trilogy of the Road to a Well-off Society*, *Why Shenzhen*, *Ties—A Journey to China-Laos Railway* and other books. The shaping of their national image can be proved to have an international communication effect. Hence, there are the following assumptions.

H1: Urban communication influences the shaping of the national image through the topic selection planning of theme publications.

H2: Urban communication influences the presentation of international effects through the topic selection planning of theme publications.

H3: The shaping of the national image affects the presentation of international effects.

2. Discourse System and Presentation Form of Theme Publications

This paper analyzes the content of books from content and form. The form mainly includes presentation and discourse systems. In other words, theme publications, as a manifestation of urban communication affecting national image, may produce different image-building effects through various discourse systems and presentations. The discourse system of ethnic work in the new era is manifested in political discourse, academic discourse and daily life discourse (Wang & Zhang, 2022). Theme publishing is the unity of politics, academics and marketability. Meanwhile, the construction of its discourse system must be complex (Han, Niu, Li, 2022). Theme publications are also presented in various forms. Apart from traditional books, pictures, short videos, live broadcasts, audio books, VR/AR, digital resource platforms and other communication forms have been applied in theme publishing (Zhou & Xiong, 2022). Hence, the following path diagram is proposed:

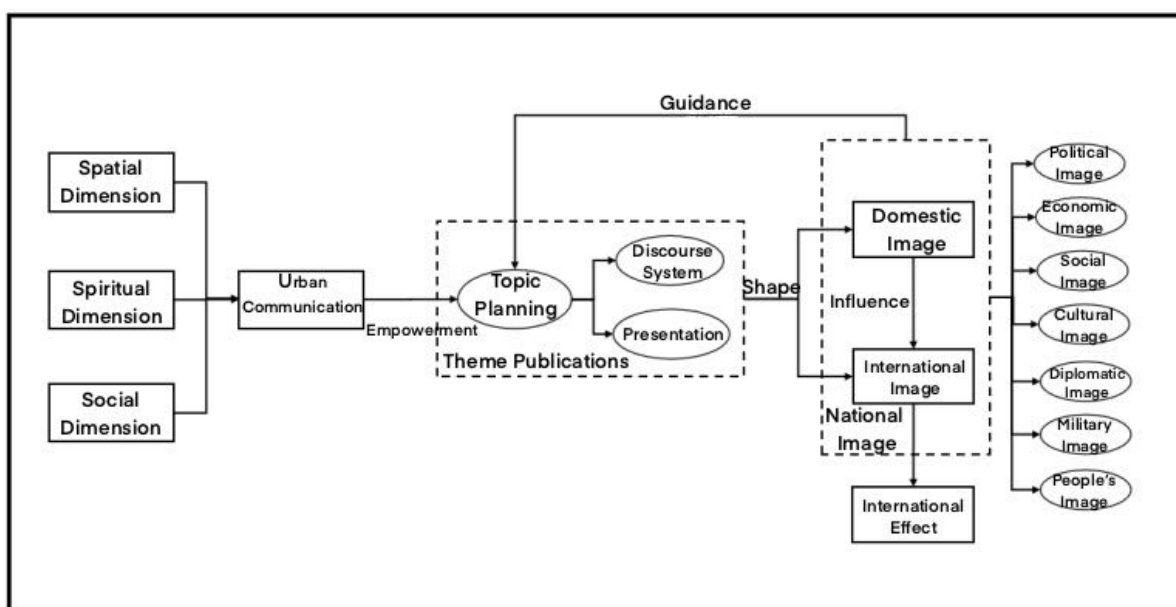


Figure 1. Influence Path of Urban Communication Empowering Theme Publishing to Shape the National Image

As shown in Figure 1, books with urban communication as the topic planning content can influence the shaping of national image. At the same time, they may impact the international image with the help of the presentation and discourse expression of theme publications, thus producing international effects. Therefore, there are the following assumptions:

H4a: The discourse system of theme publications intermediately influences topic selection planning related to urban communication on shaping national image.

H4b: The presentation of theme publications intermediately influences topic selection planning related to urban communication on shaping national image.

H5a: The discourse system of theme publications intermediately influences topic selection planning related to urban communication on international effects.

H5b: The presentation of theme publications intermediately influences the international effect of topic selection planning related to urban communication.

Based on the above assumptions, this paper summarizes the following research models.

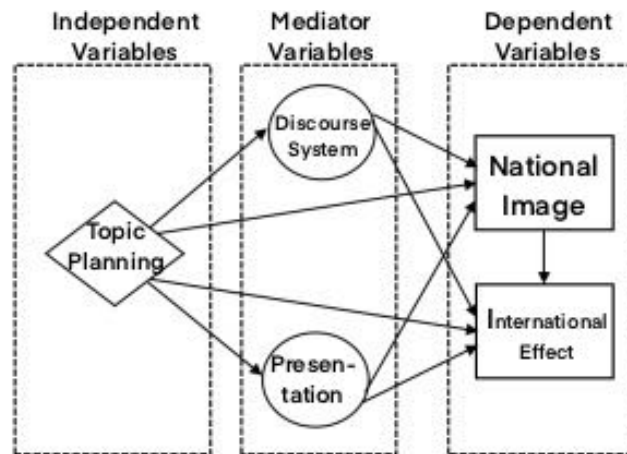


Figure 2. Variable Hypothesis Model of Urban Communication Empowering Theme Publishing to Shape National Image

According to Figure 2, taking the topic selection planning related to urban communication in theme publications as independent variables, the discourse system and presentation of theme publications as intermediary variables, and the shaping of national image and the international effect as intermediary variables, this paper will analyze the content of key theme publications.

3. Research Method

3.1. Sample and Data Collection

Based on the above assumptions, this paper selects the lists of Topics of Key Publications for Theme Publishing in 2020, Topics of Key Publications for Theme Publishing in 2021 and Topics of Key Publications for Theme Publishing in 2022 from 2020 to 2022. Meanwhile, 89 key theme publications related to urban communication are sorted out, which are coded according to the four hypothetical variables such as urban communication, theme publishing, national image and international effect, with subdivided second-class and third-class categories.

No.	Index	Index Subdivision	Coding Description
1	Urban Communication	Topic Planning	1=spatial dimension: perceptive urban space, showing urban social production and reproduction as well as urban daily life; 2=spiritual dimension: imaginary urban space, showing ideological forms of urban planners, media and ruling classes; 3=social dimension: living urban space, showing people's dominated and passive experience status in the life and living space
2	Theme Publications	Discourse System Presentation	1=political discourse; 2=academic discourse; 3=daily life discourse 1=traditional books; 2=reports; 3=pictures; 4=videos; 5=audios; 6=others (maps/comics etc.)
3	National Image	Political Image Economic Image Social Image Cultural Image Diplomatic Image Military Image People's Image	1=political image: diplomacy, human rights, legalization, socialism with Chinese characteristics; 2=economic image: resource economically, environment friendly, extensively knowledgeable, people oriented, balance of efficiency and justice, sustainable development; 3=social image: stability, freedom, civilization, progress, harmony; 4=cultural image: traditional and modern, unified and diverse, humanistic and technological, absorbing worldwide civilization for independent innovation; 5=diplomatic image: peace, cooperation, win-win, independent, inclusive and responsible 6=military image: fair-oriented, people-oriented, technology-oriented and vigour-oriented 7=people's image: benevolent, fair, polite, wise and faithful
4	International Effect	Whether Produce International Effect	1=produce international effect; 2=not produce international effect

Figure 3. Content Analysis Coding

This paper conducts coder reliability tests, mainly referring to the reliability, consistency and stability of measurement results. In other words, whether the test results reflect real characteristics of stability and consistency of the tested. Comparing results of two coders, the total number of the second-class category and that of the same categories by two coders are counted, with the reliability obtained by Holstein formula. The reliability is $87\% \geq 80\%$, thus analysis are acceptable.

4. Result Analysis

Through SPSSAU, the data of frequency and descriptive statistics are first analyzed. Then, according to hypothesis testing for correlation, regression analysis and intermediary analysis are conducted.

4.1. Descriptive and Frequency Statistics

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Minimum (M)	Maximum (X)
Urban Communication—Topic Selection Planning	1.0	3.0
Theme Publishing—Discourse Publishing	2.0	3.0
Theme Publishing—Presentation	4.0	1.0
National Image	2.0	1.0/3.0
International Effect	1.0	2.0

Table 2. Frequency Statistics of Subdivision Dimensions

	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Urban Communication—Spatial Dimension	21	23.60
Urban Communication—Spiritual Dimension	31	34.83
Urban Communication—Social Dimension	37	41.57
Theme Publishing—Discourse System—Political Discourse	22	24.72
Theme Publishing—Discourse System—Academic Discourse	11	12.36
Theme Publishing—Discourse System—Daily Life Discourse	56	62.92
Theme Publishing—Presentation—Traditional Books	63	70.79
Topic Publishing—Presentation—Report	8	8.99
Theme Publishing—Presentation—Picture	4	4.49
Theme Publishing—Presentation—Video	2	2.25
Topic Publishing—Presentation—Audio	8	8.99
Theme Publishing—Presentation—Others (Maps/Comics, etc.)	4	4.49
National Image—Political Image	20	22.47
National Image—Economic Image	13	14.61
National Image—Social Image	20	22.47
National Image—Cultural Image	16	17.98
National Image—diplomatic Image	4	4.49
National Image—Military Image	6	6.74
National Image—People Image	10	11.74
International Effect—Production	20	22.47
International Effect—Production	69	77.53

Among 89 books themed at urban communication, the sample factors tend to be expressed through daily life discourse, most of which describe the urban spatial life and the national political and social image.

Statistical analysis of descriptive and frequency is carried out on the four main variables of this study. For example, according to the data in Table 1 and Table 2, from the perspective of urban communication, the theme publications currently selected from urban communication show more social dimensions. From the perspective of theme publishing—discourse publishing, there are more theme publications selected from urban communication in daily life discourse. From the perspective of theme publishing—presentation, the theme publications that choose topics from urban communication maintain the traditional book style. From the perspective of national image, the theme publications that choose topics from urban communication at present express political image and social image in the majority. From the perspective of international effect, there are few theme publications with significant international effect.

4.2. Correlation Analysis

Further, the correlation analysis of four variables is seen in Table 3 with details.

Table 3. Correlation Analysis

	Urban Communication—Topic Selection Planning	Theme Publishing—Discourse Publishing	Theme Publishing—Presentation	National Image	International Effect
Urban Communication—Topic Selection Planning	1				
Theme Publishing—Discourse Publishing	0.449**	1			
Theme Publishing—Presentation	-0.329**	-0.131	1		
National Image	0.280**	0.348**	-0.054	1	
International Effect	-0.082	0.020	0.134	0.161	1

Note: ** at 0.01 level (double tail) has a significant correlation; * at 0.05 level (double tail) has a significant correlation.

Based on Table 3, there is a significant positive correlation for urban communication, theme publishing—discourse system, theme publishing—presentation and national image. Thus, the topic selection planning of theme publications by urban communication has a strong correlation with the discourse system, presentation and national image of theme publications. From the correlation of other variables, theme publications planned with urban communication as the topic are not significantly related to international effects produced by publications. Besides, the presentation of theme publications is not significantly related to the national image and international effects produced by publications, and the discourse system of theme publications is not significantly related to international effects produced by publications. So H2, H4b and H5 are invalid. Meanwhile, there is no significant correlation between national image and international effect, meaning that H3 is invalid.

4.3. Linear Regression Analysis

To further test H1, through linear regression analysis of independent and dependent variables, whether the topic selection planning of publications themed at urban communication significantly affects the shaping of the national image is tested.

Table 4. Linear Regression Analysis

Model	Non-normalized Coefficient		Standard Coefficient	t	Significance	VIF
	B	Standard Error	β			
(Constant)	1.832	0.583	-	3.141	.000	-
Urban Communication— Topic Selection Planning	0.685	0.252	0.280	2.724	.000	1.000
R ²				0.079		
Adjust R ²				0.068		
F				F= (1,87) = 7.421		
P				0.008		
Dependent Variable: National Image						

According to Table 4, the R²=0.079 and the VIF value of this linear regression model is less than 5. According to F=(1,87)=7.421, P=0.008, the regression equation is significant, and β =-0.280, P=0.008, which means that the urban communication has a significant impact on the national image. The regression equation between variables is that national image=1.832+0.685*urban communication. The results of the data analysis show that H1 is valid.

4.4. Mediation Analysis

Based on the above regression analysis, it is confirmed that urban communication as the independent variable has a significant and direct impact on the national image. Intermediary effect tests can be conducted to verify H4a. Model 4 (Simple Mediation Model) in the process compiled by Haye is to test the mediating role of theme publishing between urban communication and national image.

Table 5. Mediation Analysis

Variable	Effect	Standardized Estimated Value	Standard Error	P value	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Limit	Upper Limit
Urban Communication	Total Effect	-	0.785	0.008	0.192	1.179
	Direct Effect	0.168	0.289	0.158	-0.154	0.978
	Indirect Effect	0.277	0.253	0.000	0.034	0.233

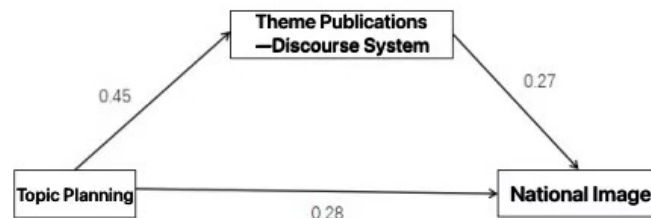


Figure 4. Standardized Variable Model

The results show that the predictive effect of urban communication on the national image is not significant (β =-, P=0.008). When the mediator variables are included, the predictive effect of urban communication on theme publishing—discourse system is significant (β =0.449, t=4.689, P=0.000). The predictive effect of theme publishing—discourse system on national image is significant (β =0.277, t=2.456, P=0.016). The predictive effect of urban communication on the national image is significant (β =0.277, t=1.425, P=0.000). The direct effect of urban communication on national image, the mediating effect of theme publishing—discourse system as well as the upper and lower limits of

bootstrap 95% confidence interval of total effect do not contain 0 with $P < 0.001$, which indicates that urban communication can influence the shaping of national image through the mediating effect of theme publishing—discourse system, indicating that H4a is valid as shown in Table 5.

To sum up, H1 and H4a are valid. The standardized model is shown in Figure 4.

5. Discussion

5.1. Theme Publications Selected from the Perspective of Urban Communication can Influence the Shaping of National Image

With its material space and technology as the base and modern people's daily communication practice as the content, the city constantly broadens the spatial boundary and extends the spatial connotation (Yang, 2023). The theme publications selected from the perspective of urban communication pay attention to different individual life practices and citizens' urban rights in urban space (Guo, 2022). The previous research results implemented content research and analysis mechanism on the famous theme publication *China's Well-off Society for Central Suzhou* by Guwuxuan Publishing House. It figured out that the successful way of theme publishing was to organically combine and complement urban characteristics and national image.

As a "medium", the city is based on the material perspective. It is considered that the city allows the real and imaginary geography to overlap with each other, which simultaneously opens up the real space and metaphorical space, and promotes their mutual transformation on the interface of their composition (Hu et al., 2021). The theme publications of topic selection planning from the perspective of the city have an impact on shaping the national image. Therefore, the ingenious integration of urban units into theme publications can be a way to shape the national image.

5.2. Intermediary Role of Discourse Expression in Theme Publishing

Media context is to use the information environment created by the media itself just like the place to help the audience decode correctly and promote the circulation of information (Zhang, 2004). According to the analysis data of intermediary role, the discourse system of theme publishing plays an intermediary role between urban communication and national image shaping, which significantly enhances the role of urban communication in shaping national image. Besides, the discourse system can further play the content of urban communication in form. However, according to the correlation analysis, the presentation of theme publishing can only be supportive in shaping the national image of urban communication empowerment, but fails to be indispensable.

Hence, this paper holds that urban communication publications need to keep close contact with urban characteristics based on theme publishing, enter the real context, and use various styles and methods from multiple perspectives to create theme publications. At present, the important challenges faced by China's cyberspace national image shaping are reflected in stigma discourse, self-shaping ability, heterogeneous culture, anti-globalization and so on, which seriously restrict the construction and reshaping of China's national image (Guo et al., 2022). Successful dissemination of national image needs to exert its strength from aspects of discourse, value, subject, thinking, science and technology, etc., and the theme publication based on the discourse system that the audience is willing to accept is correct.

5.3. International Effect cannot be Produced Directly by the Content and Expression of the Theme Publications

According to the analysis and coding of outstanding publications in the 2020-2022 theme publishing list, the topic content and expression form of theme publishing cannot have a significant impact on the international effect.

Combined with the verification inferences, this paper is first analyzed from the perspective of samples. After sorting out related samples, this paper analyzes the contents of 89 key theme publications and their audiences are mainly domestic people, aiming at leading core values and enhancing national cohesion. In addition, there are few theme publications that have been successfully published to the outside world with English translation versions, so it is difficult to prove whether the international effect is influenced by the selected content and expression form of theme publications through data analysis. At the same time, because the sample of this paper is selected from the list of key theme publications in recent three years with certain authority and typicality, it also shows that the theme publications in China have not yet completed the effective integration between local regions and the country as well as local regions and international community.

Secondly, the Chinese story "going global" is still worthy of reflection. Although China's press and publishing industry has made some achievements in the steady progress of external communication, there is still a huge gap between the current situation and the central government's requirements of "telling Chinese stories well and spreading Chinese voices well", showing a three-dimensional and comprehensive China to improve the soft power of national culture and enhance the international influence of Chinese culture (Lu, 2019). It is worth noting that books, audio recordings, videos and other publications as kinds of media have various forms, but there is a contradiction between the enrichment of external communication forms and the monotony of communication contents in China (Yang, 2020). Real international communication needs to produce effects in relevant languages, and the communication effect of Chinese stories needs to be "heard". During the sample analysis, this paper also pays attention to a few published books with successful international effects, such as *History of China-Kazakhstan Friendly Relations*, which respects history in content, and captures and focuses on the history of friendly exchanges in the history of bilateral relations. It shows the practical situation of realizing friendly cooperation under the background of the "Belt and Road Initiative" and "Bright Road". Hence, to achieve the goal of "going global", we should not only enrich the form, but also diversify the content, and root in real scenes and contexts. It may be the only way to solve this dilemma.

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