

# Shaping modern "Chang'an"—A study on the urban image construction of Xi'an in Central Asian countries

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**Abstract.** With its long historical and cultural heritage and rich cultural resources, Xi'an has become a world-renowned "ancient capital for thousands of years". As the forerunner of cooperation in jointly building the "Belt and Road" Initiative, the five Central Asian countries have had close and profound relations with Xi'an since the "Ancient Silk Road". With the implementation of the "Belt and Road" Initiative and the China-Central Asia Summit held in Xi'an, the frequency of Xi'an entering the international vision has greatly increased, which also presents new requirements for the construction of Xi'an's urban image. This paper, based on the analysis of reports on Xi'an by mainstream media in Central Asian countries and the construction of relations between China and Central Asian countries, aims to analyze the problems existing in the construction of Xi'an's urban image under specific practices, explore strategies for transforming Xi'an's urban image from "flat" to "three-dimensional", and discuss the innovative path of constructing Xi'an's urban image in Central Asian countries and the international community. The goal is to shape a "modern Chang'an."

**Keywords:** The Belt and Road Initiative, Xi'an, five Central Asian states, city image

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## 1. Introduction

From the "Ancient Silk Road" to the "Belt and Road" Initiative, the interactions between Xi'an and Central Asian countries have become increasingly profound. The Central Asian region serves as a gateway for Xi'an's international exchanges to the west, while Xi'an is an effective vehicle for the extension of the Central Asian region to the east. However, due to the limited degree of cultural exchange between the two regions, Central Asian countries lack sufficient understanding of Xi'an. Furthermore, due to the "flattened" nature of Xi'an's image construction and the one-sided nature of its communication, the reach of Xi'an's image in foreign dissemination has been low, increasing the cost of exchange, cooperation, and development between the two regions.

The study of Xi'an's urban image construction in Central Asian countries holds two significant implications. From a theoretical perspective, international cooperation is often led by nation-states, and research on regions or cities is limited. However, with the development of China's "diplomacy for all" and the implementation of the "Belt and Road" Initiative, diverse actors have increasingly become an important foundation for China's foreign exchanges. Cities, as windows for the country's international image, also present new demands for urban image construction. The topic discussed in this paper can fill this gap. From a practical perspective, with the China-Central Asia Summit held in Xi'an, the frequency with which Xi'an enters the international spotlight has greatly increased. However, the high exposure granted to Xi'an as a "trendy city" also carries a "flattened" stereotype. Given the profound historical resonance between the Central Asian region and Xi'an, using it as the launchpad for Xi'an's "three-dimensional" image construction is of significant importance for building a new image of Xi'an and expanding China's international communication circle.

In light of this, based on an overview of existing research and a clarification of key concepts, this paper will analyze the reports on Xi'an by mainstream media in Central Asian countries and the issues Xi'an faces in foreign communication. The paper aims to offer useful insights into Xi'an's future urban image construction path, clarify Xi'an's urban image positioning in Central Asian countries, and its direction for communication, thereby contributing to China's better participation in international competition and cooperation through Xi'an.

## 2. Introduction of the problem

### 2.1. Xi'an as an important node city in the "Belt and Road" Initiative

According to existing literature, "Belt and Road" node cities can be defined as cities that have relatively favorable infrastructure conditions, clear comparative advantages, and strong agglomeration and radiation effects within the countries and regions along the "Belt and Road". These cities play a crucial economic, social, cultural, and foreign economic exchange role and hold strategic positions and influence. As the starting point of the ancient Silk Road, Xi'an has played a significant role in promoting trade and cultural exchanges between China, Central Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, and Western Europe. In the new era of the "Belt and Road" construction, Xi'an serves as a key node city that connects the east and west and links the north and south. With the gradual advancement of the Greater Xi'an development, the construction of a national central city, and an international metropolis, Xi'an is increasingly playing an important role in cultural exchange, scientific and technological innovation, and economic trade between the East and West [1].

#### 2.1.1. Geographical advantages

Compared to other node cities, Xi'an is located at the geometric center of China's geographical map and at the junction of the two major economic zones in the central and western regions of China. It is an important strategic hub on the Silk Road Economic Belt, connecting Europe and Asia, bridging the east and west, and linking the north and south. Xi'an connects the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei and Yangtze River Delta urban clusters to the east, the Pearl River Delta and Chengdu-Chongqing urban clusters to the south, the New Eurasian Land Bridge to the west, and the China-Mongolia-Russia International Economic Cooperation Corridor to the north. The north-south passage in the western region and the New Eurasian Land Bridge converge here. Xi'an is also one of the important birthplaces of Chinese traditional culture, a key node city in the world's cultural landscape, the starting point of the ancient Silk Road, an important city on the New Eurasian Land Bridge and the Yellow River Basin, with convenient and developed transportation, and prominent locational advantages.

#### 2.1.2. Prominent strategic role

The "14th Five-Year Plan" proposed the deep implementation of the regional coordinated development strategy, emphasizing the further promotion of the western development strategy. Among western cities, Xi'an serves as the core hub that connects inland China in the Silk Road Economic Belt. It is also a strategic pivot point for China's opening to the west. As one of the nine national central cities that "occupy national strategic key points, shoulder national missions, lead regional development, participate in international competition, and represent national image," Xi'an carries national political goals and strategic tasks [2]. In September 2023, the National Development and Reform Commission and other departments issued the "Notice on the Layout and Construction of Modern Circulation Strategic Pivot Cities," listing 102 cities for inclusion in the layout and construction of modern circulation strategic pivot cities. Among them, Xi'an was included in the list of comprehensive circulation pivot cities, providing new opportunities for its development. Furthermore, compared to other node cities, Xi'an is also one of the three internationally recognized metropolises identified at the national level. It plays an irreplaceable role in the future development of China, highlighting its strategic support at the national level.

#### 2.1.3. Unique historical and cultural heritage

From ancient times to the present, the value of the "Silk Road" is not limited to commercial exchanges; its more significant meaning lies in promoting mutual understanding and cultural exchange. Xi'an, as the first among the four ancient capitals of world civilization<sup>1</sup>, is known as the "Immortal City." Over 2,100 years ago, Xi'an had already become an important bridge and link for international commerce, people-to-people exchanges, and cultural communication between the East and West. Compared to other historical and cultural ancient capitals of China, Xi'an boasts a civilization history of more than 7,000 years, a city-building history of over 3,100 years, and a capital city history of over 1,100 years. It has fostered the flourishing dynasties of the Zhou, Qin, Han, and Tang [3], with the most extensive and far-reaching historical influence. As the eastern starting point and origin of the Silk Road, Xi'an embodies the exchange and mutual learning of different civilizations, the co-existence and mutual benefit of different ethnic groups, and the peaceful coexistence of different religions. Xi'an, as the core area of cultural exchange between China and the world and the dissemination of Chinese culture, represents the cultural spirit of Chinese civilization—open, inclusive, innovative, and ever-lasting.

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<sup>1</sup> The four great ancient capitals of civilization refer to Rome, Athens, Cairo, and Xi'an.

#### 2.1.4. Distinctive industrial development

Xi'an has a distinct industrial system with a focus on tourism, cultural industries, strategic emerging industries, advanced manufacturing, and modern services. The development of high-tech industries, led by electronics and information technology, is rapid; the advanced manufacturing sector, particularly in new energy vehicles and aerospace manufacturing, is strong; and the scale of trade and circulation industries, focused on hub economy, gateway economy, and flow economy, continues to expand. Xi'an is one of the first national demonstration regions for service industry reform and the only city simultaneously selected for both national service industry reform pilot projects and modern service industry reform pilot projects. As the birthplace of the "hard technology" concept, Xi'an boasts significant advantages in aerospace, optoelectronic chips, new energy, new materials, intelligent manufacturing, information technology, life sciences, and artificial intelligence. The city is developing strongly and is using its cultural resources to create a "cultural-tourism integration" landscape, providing a "Xi'an brand" for the promotion of Chinese culture and the strengthening of cultural confidence.

#### 2.1.5. Emerging talent with unlimited potential

Xi'an is the only mega-city in the Northwest region of China. With the implementation of strategies such as the "Guanzhong Plain Urban Agglomeration Development Plan," "Xi'an's 14th Five-Year Industrial Development Plan," and the "Xi'an National Central City Construction Implementation Plan," Xi'an's leadership and radiating influence on inland areas have been further strengthened. Moreover, the implementation of the "Belt and Road" Initiative has extended Xi'an's radiating power to Central Asian countries, accelerating the progress of Xi'an's development as an international metropolis. With the increase in the volume, heavy-load rate, and cargo throughput of the China-Europe Railway Express "Chang'an", the Xi'an International Port Area—currently the only inland port in China with both international and domestic codes—plays an even greater role in Belt and Road trade exchanges. Additionally, with the construction of the "Aerial Freight Corridor" in the Xi'an Airport New City, Xi'an is establishing an international air transport platform and a major trade logistics corridor that offers wide reach, high efficiency, low costs, and excellent service. As of September 2023, Xi'an became the first and only city in China to directly connect to all five Central Asian countries, accelerating the creation of a flight network linking the Silk Road, Europe and America, and all five continents.

### 2.2. The necessity of shaping Xi'an's urban image in Central Asian countries

#### 2.2.1. The sound of camel bells: Xi'an's historical connection with Central Asia

Historically, Xi'an has played a pivotal role as the "hub" for China's exchanges with Central Asia and the bridge for the interaction between Eastern and Western civilizations. Xi'an has experienced and witnessed the mutual understanding, integration, and communication between China and Central Asia. The spirit of the Silk Road, which promotes peace, cooperation, openness, inclusiveness, mutual learning, and mutual benefit, has been passed down through Xi'an, becoming a testament to and a bond for the friendly exchanges between China and the Central Asian countries. Over 2,100 years ago, Zhang Qian departed from Chang'an, opening the ancient Silk Road that lasted for a millennium, promoting friendly exchanges between China and the world, especially with Central Asia.

The ancient Silk Road was a trade and cultural exchange route connecting the East and West, breaking down the barriers between East Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia. Through both land and sea routes, it transported precious Chinese goods such as silk, porcelain, and tea to Central Asia, West Asia, and Europe, while also bringing items like silk, spices, gemstones, and horses from Central Asia and West Asia back to China. Meanwhile, Xi'an, as a major trade hub between East and West, also attracted merchants and travelers from Central Asia, West Asia, and Europe. This ancient trade route not only promoted economic exchanges between Central Asia, West Asia, and China but also facilitated cultural, scientific, and religious exchanges, profoundly influencing the social development and civilization progress of all the countries involved. In addition to trade and cultural exchanges, the interactions between China and the Central Asian region also involved political and diplomatic matters. Throughout history, frequent diplomatic exchanges took place between China and the Central Asian countries, resulting in a series of friendly treaties and trade agreements. These political and diplomatic interactions strengthened the connections between China and Central Asian countries, promoting a peaceful and stable regional framework.

As the starting point of the ancient Silk Road and the birthplace of China's exchanges with Central Asia, Xi'an carries a rich historical and cultural legacy. It has witnessed the prosperity and flourishing of ancient trade, as well as the exchange and integration of Eastern and Western civilizations. To this day, Xi'an remains an important partner for Central Asian countries, jointly advancing the development of economic, cultural, and humanitarian exchanges.

#### 2.2.2. The sound of whistles: Close interactions between Xi'an and Central Asia

In recent years, China and the five Central Asian countries have continuously deepened mutually beneficial cooperation, engaging in a series of exchanges in areas such as economic trade, culture, education, and tourism. The bonds of friendship between the

people have become increasingly stronger. Shaanxi Province and Xi'an, in particular, have carried out cooperation and exchanges with the five Central Asian countries in multiple fields. Xi'an can be considered one of the Chinese cities with the deepest historical ties to Central Asia.

From an economic and trade perspective, Xi'an has been constructing a Central Asian trade and logistics center in the International Port Area, facilitating smooth trade exchanges, investment facilitation, and energy security. In recent years, the volume of the China-Europe freight trains "Chang'an" heading to Central Asia has been steadily increasing. As of the end of April 2023, a total of 4,294 trains had been dispatched, with Xi'an's imports and exports to countries along the "Belt and Road" increasing significantly, accounting for 31% of the city's total import and export value. The five Central Asian countries are key nodes in the "Belt and Road" Initiative. From a transportation perspective, Xi'an has achieved full connectivity with the five Central Asian countries and six cities, and it is the only city in China to have launched direct flights to all five Central Asian countries, showcasing its unique advantages in facilitating exchanges and cooperation with Central Asia.

In terms of cultural exchanges, Shaanxi Province currently has over 100 international sister cities, with full coverage in Central Asia, establishing a bridge for mutual understanding. Xi'an has established sister city relations with Shymkent in Kazakhstan, Samarkand in Uzbekistan, Mary in Turkmenistan, and Osh in Kyrgyzstan. Xi'an has also formed sister city relations with Akmolinsk Oblast and Astana in Kazakhstan. Additionally, there are currently more than 1,000 Central Asian students studying in Xi'an, and several universities in Xi'an have established research institutions focused on Central Asian regions and countries, laying a solid foundation for exchanges with Central Asia.

From a diplomatic perspective, on September 14, 2022, relevant departments from China and Kazakhstan signed multiple bilateral cooperation documents in areas such as trade, connectivity, finance, water resources, and media. The two sides decided to establish consulates in Xi'an and Aktobe. On September 27 of the same year, guests from China and the five Central Asian countries attended the "China-Central Asia People's Friendship Forum" in Xi'an. The forum released the "Xi'an Declaration," which proposed enriching the friendly relations between China and the five Central Asian countries through the construction of sister cities. From May 18 to 19, 2023, the China-Central Asia Summit was held in Xi'an, where leaders from six countries signed the "Xi'an Declaration of the China-Central Asia Summit" and approved the "List of Achievements of the China-Central Asia Summit." During this summit, the Consulate General of Kazakhstan in Xi'an officially opened, becoming the third consulate of this "largest Central Asian country" in China after those in Shanghai and Hong Kong. On March 30, 2024, the inauguration ceremony for the China-Central Asia Mechanism Secretariat will take place in Xi'an, Shaanxi Province.

In summary, whether through the ancient "Silk Road" more than 2,000 years ago or today's "Belt and Road" Initiative, Xi'an has positioned itself at the forefront of opening up to the outside world. Central Asia, as the window region for Xi'an's western opening and exchanges, plays a vital role in shaping a positive image of Xi'an in the region. At the same time, with the growing closeness of Xi'an's exchanges with Central Asia, the export of Xi'an's image has become the foundation of cooperation and a key "business card" for China's international cooperation to the West. However, according to relevant data and literature, factors such as geographical constraints, the absence of a common language, and cultural background differences create challenges for Xi'an in fostering mutual understanding with Central Asia. Overcoming communication barriers and building a positive image of Xi'an in Central Asia has therefore become an urgent task.

### 3. Theoretical analysis framework and conceptual definitions

#### 3.1. Urban image and urban image construction

The sociologist Lewis Mumford pointed out that an urban image is the subjective impression people have of a city, formed through the joint influence of interpersonal communication, mass media, social environment, and other factors [4]. An urban image reflects the comprehensive strength of a city and is an important component of a nation's image. Shaping a good urban image is crucial for enhancing internal cohesion and pride within the city, as well as for improving external competitiveness, international visibility, and the establishment of a positive national image [5]. In the process of urban development today, a strong urban image not only drives the high-quality development of the city's economy and society but also helps increase citizens' sense of belonging and pride. From the perspective of external communication, the construction and dissemination of the urban image is a key point in a city's development and serves as an important window for the world to understand the image of China.

Urban image mainly refers to the public impression of a city, encompassing people's overall views and evaluations of various aspects of a city, including politics, economy, culture, society, and ecology [6]. The urban image is an important resource element of a city's core competitiveness, and a good urban image complements and strengthens the city's core competitiveness. The importance of urban image to a city is akin to the importance of brand building for an enterprise. For a city, the urban brand is the trump card in market competition [7]. Contemporary China is in the early stages of urban societal development, with intensified economic development competition between regions and the reorganization of urban status across the country. The modernization of cities, the construction of urban images, and the building of core city strengths are shared tasks for all cities in China. With the deepening of market economic relations, new competition among cities is beginning, and building the core competitiveness of a city and creating a unique urban brand are key to achieving sustainable urban development.

In summary, an urban image is a comprehensive reflection of a city's internal historical heritage and external characteristics, reflecting the city's overall traits and style. It is an objective social existence, an intuitive reflection of a city's inner qualities and cultural connotations in its external form. Therefore, creating a "Xi'an brand" and establishing the "Xi'an image" are the foundations for Xi'an's opening up and exchanges. These efforts are critical for enhancing Xi'an's urban competitiveness and promoting the city's sustainable development.

### 3.2. Basic characteristics of urban image

#### 3.2.1. *Holistic nature*

An urban image serves as a strategic resource for cities to participate in market competition and represents an intangible asset for rapid urban development. A strong urban image reflects the unity of material and spiritual civilization, acting as an organic carrier that effectively integrates a city's intrinsic qualities with its external appearance. The scope of an urban image encompasses various factors influencing urban development, including politics, economy, cultural ecology, and technology. By focusing on specific elements, a city can form distinct "micro-images." These micro-images interact and influence each other, collectively shaping the city's overall image and achieving an organic unity between its parts and the whole, thus maintaining a balanced urban image. On this basis, the elements that constitute each micro-image can be further refined. For instance, a city's cultural image may be subdivided into local dialects, tourist attractions, folk customs, and historical heritage. Therefore, research on urban image must adhere to the principle of integrating the whole with its parts, ensuring accurate predictions of urban development trends and providing well-founded guidance for a city's progress.

#### 3.2.2. *Subjectivity*

The American urban planner Kevin Lynch introduced the concept of urban image in his 1960 book *The Image of the City*. He argued that every city carries a public impression, which is a composite of multiple individual perceptions. He emphasized that an urban image is a subjective experience, shaped by people's perceptual understanding of the city's physical form. From this perspective, an urban image is not merely a presentation of its objective physical form but also a subjective conclusion drawn by individuals based on that form. Differences in upbringing, lifestyle, cultural background, interests, and professional education shape how people perceive and interpret urban environments, resulting in a high degree of subjectivity in urban images. This subjectivity plays a crucial catalytic role in urban development. A positive subjective perception enhances interactions between people and the city, improving their overall experience. Conversely, a negative urban impression can deteriorate people's relationship with the city, and in extreme cases, may even lead to resistance or aversion. Urban managers can benefit from gathering and analyzing negative urban impressions during the process of urban image promotion. Such research can help break away from rigid, outdated perceptions, foster innovation in urban governance, and enhance management efficiency.

#### 3.2.3. *Differentiation*

Although large cities in China share certain commonalities—such as similar commercial districts, the promotion of similar local delicacies, and branding themselves as livable, historically rich, or central cities—these similarities do not diminish the distinct characteristics of urban images. Key factors such as dietary habits, geographical location, climate variations, administrative status, and functional positioning serve as important indicators for identifying the uniqueness of a city's image. The process of highlighting a city's unique image is essentially the process of building a distinctive urban brand, which is an effective means of enhancing a city's core competitiveness. In the current era of increasing urban homogeneity, emphasizing urban image differentiation enhances a city's recognition and facilitates its communication and development.

## 4. "Openness and inclusiveness"—the image positioning of Xi'an in Central Asian countries

Urban image positioning refers to the process of enhancing a city's core competitiveness and pursuing a distinctive urban image. City administrators leverage historical urban resources while integrating current urban development strategies, conducting a comprehensive analysis of all factors influencing the city's progress to identify its development advantages [8]. As previously discussed, Xi'an maintains close exchanges with Central Asia, serving as a key gateway for China's westward international engagement, while Central Asia acts as an effective conduit for Xi'an's eastern expansion. Therefore, effectively telling the story of Xi'an in Central Asia is of great significance for deepening exchanges between Xi'an and Central Asian countries. This paper will elaborate on five key aspects of Xi'an's urban image positioning, aiming to present a compelling narrative about Xi'an and foster a better understanding of the city among Central Asian countries and the broader international community.

#### 4.1. The capital of history—Chang'an

A city's historical and cultural identity is a vital component of its overall image. As public economic strength grows, the demand for cultural enrichment and spiritual development rises, providing an opportunity for the advancement of urban historical and cultural industries. Amidst the rapid urbanization and globalization of economies, cultural soft power serves as the stabilizing force of a city's identity. Over 2,100 years ago, Xi'an established its first connections with Central Asia through the ancient Silk Road. The city's official flower, the pomegranate blossom, originates from Central Asia. Both Xi'an and Central Asia have historically been melting pots of diverse cultures, ethnicities, and religions, laying the groundwork for their continued exchanges. Today, products and art from Central Asia that once flowed into China via the ancient Silk Road are being revitalized through the "Belt and Road" Initiative. For example, a signing ceremony between Samarkand, one of the oldest cities in Central Asia, and Shaanxi Tourism Group for a digital national treasure exhibition was held at Xi'an Silk Road Paradise [9]. Additionally, China's first national-level permanent international art festival under the "Belt and Road" Initiative—the Silk Road International Arts Festival—has been permanently established in Shaanxi [10]. Numerous artists from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have been invited to participate, making the festival a key platform for cultural exchanges between Shaanxi and the five Central Asian countries. As a "City of 13 Dynasties," Xi'an's historical image is deeply rooted in its rich cultural heritage. At the same time, its embrace of Central Asia's diverse cultural legacy forms a unique historical identity for Xi'an in the region. By integrating a sense of historical depth with modern trends, and balancing the preservation of tradition with the incorporation of external influences, Xi'an is revitalizing its historical and cultural image, allowing the "City of 13 Dynasties" to shine with renewed vitality.

#### 4.2. The capital of culture and humanity

As "public diplomacy" continues to evolve, the significance of cultural and human exchanges in international relations has become increasingly apparent. Cultural exchange serves as an effective means of fostering mutual understanding, encompassing personnel exchanges, intellectual exchanges, and cultural interactions, with the goal of enhancing mutual recognition and understanding among different populations. This, in turn, fosters regional cultural and value-based identity, strengthening political legitimacy and cooperation. As early as the Han Dynasty, humanistic exchanges between Xi'an and Central Asia had already emerged. Notable figures such as Zhang Qian, Ban Chao, and Wei Qing played key roles in defending the empire and resisting the Xiongnu, opening the door for the Central Plains dynasty to engage with the Western world, with Central Asia serving as a critical passageway. Today, among the 62 pairs of sister provinces and cities between China and Central Asia, Shaanxi Province alone accounts for 7, further cementing regional ties. Additionally, over 1,000 Central Asian students are currently studying in Xi'an, laying a solid foundation for continued people-to-people exchanges. Shaanxi's culinary heritage also plays a crucial role in shaping Xi'an's image as a "Capital of Culture and Humanity." Shaanxi cuisine is a shining jewel in China's culinary heritage, enriched by the ancient Silk Road, which introduced a variety of historical traditions and flavors. During the Tang Dynasty, Shaanxi cuisine absorbed cooking techniques and ingredients from Central and West Asia, making it even more diverse. Foods such as grilled meats and lamb pilaf were influenced by Western culinary traditions, while Shaanxi's noodle dishes were introduced into Central Asia. These shared dietary habits further enhance the cooperation and cultural integration between the two regions. Xi'an's deep-rooted historical and cultural background provides a solid foundation for humanistic exchanges, fostering a dynamic cultural landscape where diverse traditions intersect. The city's vibrant cultural identity—shaped by interactive exchanges and mutual influences—both preserves its unique local customs and reinforces its image as an "open and inclusive" city.

#### 4.3. Xi'an as the city of education and technological innovation

The advancement of the "Belt and Road" Science and Technology Innovation Initiative has profoundly influenced the depth and breadth of technological cooperation between Xi'an and countries along the Belt and Road, providing clear direction for collaborative innovation. As a national central city rich in technological resources and boasting strong "hard technology" innovation capabilities, Xi'an ranks among China's top cities in scientific and educational strength. The city is home to over 60 higher education institutions, with approximately 1.2 million enrolled university students, and more than 3,000 research and development institutions. Additionally, Xi'an has over 60 academicians from the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the Chinese Academy of Engineering [11], forming a robust science and technology innovation platform system. This system is composed of 164 provincial-level and above key laboratories, 154 engineering and technology research centers, and 237 enterprise technology centers [12]. The scientific and technological exchanges between Xi'an and Central Asia date back to the ancient Silk Road, and today, these ties have been reinforced through the establishment of multiple science and technology cooperation industrial parks with Belt and Road countries. In 2015, the Xi'an High-tech Zone established the Central Asia Silk Road Industrial Park, serving as a platform for high-tech enterprises to expand their business into Central Asian markets. Furthermore, Xi'an has contributed to the development of various industrial parks in Central Asia, including the China-Kyrgyzstan Petroleum Refining Industrial Park, the China-Kazakhstan Textile Industrial Park, and the China-Kazakhstan Agricultural Cooperation Park, making Xi'an a key hub for China-Central Asia technology collaboration. Xi'an's image as a "City of Hard Technology" and "Venture Capital Hub" is

being solidified through its independent innovation, strong market potential, and broad development prospects, positioning the city as a leading education and technology innovation hub in its cooperation with Central Asia.

#### 4.4. The western transportation hub

Geographically, Xi'an is located at the heart of China, serving as the nation's geographical center and functioning as the "core" of the country. As the starting point of the ancient Silk Road and the origin of the Belt in the Belt and Road Initiative, Xi'an plays an increasingly important role in China's westward expansion and international exchanges. Similarly, Central Asia, situated in the heart of Eurasia, has historically acted as a crucial corridor for East-West and North-South trade, making it a vital gateway for China's international cooperation and an indispensable partner in Xi'an's development. As the largest metropolis in Western China, Xi'an boasts world-class transportation infrastructure, including: Xi'an Xianyang International Airport, China's second-largest aviation hub in the northern region. Xi'an Railway Hub, one of the six major national railway hubs. Xi'an North Railway Station, the largest train station in Asia (featuring 18 platforms and 34 tracks). Xi'an Highway Hub, one of China's six key national highway hubs. The city has developed a "grid-shaped" high-speed rail network and a "one-ring, twelve-radiating" highway framework, ensuring seamless connectivity. Additionally, Xi'an is the only city in China to have direct flights to all five Central Asian countries, establishing itself as a fully integrated transportation hub with comprehensive infrastructure and a well-connected transit network. This solid foundation paves the way for further cooperation between Xi'an and Central Asia.

#### 4.5. The ecological city

Guided by the principle that "Lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets", Xi'an is committed to balancing economic prosperity with environmental sustainability. High-quality ecological development has become a core objective for the city's long-term strategy. In recent years, Xi'an has prioritized environmental protection as one of its top eight governance areas, leading comprehensive efforts to improve air, water, and soil quality. The city has taken a whole-region, whole-process, and all-dimensional approach to strengthening ecological civilization, working to ensure greener landscapes, cleaner water, and bluer skies [13]. By 2023, Xi'an achieved: 96.9% urban sewage treatment rate. 91.5% county-level sewage treatment rate. Construction of 60 centralized charging and battery-swapping stations for new energy vehicles (NEVs). Installation of 3,000 charging piles to support green transportation. Xi'an is also advancing green energy cooperation with Central Asian countries through partnerships with enterprises such as LONGi Green Energy Technology Co., Ltd. and Shaanxi Automobile Holding Group Co., Ltd.. During the China-Central Asia Summit, Xi'an issued the "Xi'an Declaration of the China-Central Asia Summit" and the "List of Outcomes of the China-Central Asia Summit", which included the proposal to launch the China-Central Asia Green Low-Carbon Development Initiative. This initiative seeks to deepen collaboration on green development and climate change response, further strengthening Xi'an's role in promoting sustainable development. By prioritizing environmental sustainability alongside its economic and technological advancements, Xi'an is actively addressing global climate challenges while shaping its identity as a "Green and Sustainable Ecological City" in Central Asia.

### 5. Analysis of the current status of Xi'an's image construction in Central Asian countries

#### 5.1. Xi'an's urban image in the mainstream media of Central Asian countries

Media serves as the primary window for external communication in a country or region and reflects the local public opinion landscape. Mainstream media, as a key carrier of official values, provides an entry point for analyzing the dominant ideology of a region. This study analyzes the portrayal of China and Xi'an in the mainstream media of the five Central Asian countries, examining report frequency, time distribution, thematic characteristics, and sentiment trends to provide data support for subsequent research.

For data collection, keyword searches for "Сянь" (Xi'an) were conducted on relevant search engine platforms, yielding numerous news articles. However, some results merely contained repetitive keyword mentions or simple references to Xi'an, without substantial content. To ensure relevance, 158 usable news reports from the five Central Asian countries were selected, excluding reports on unrelated topics such as "Xi'an cycling races" or "Xi'an-Almaty flight routes."

##### 5.1.1. Kazakhstan: Kazakhstan International News Agency

##### 5.1.1.1. Report frequency and time distribution

Report frequency refers to the number of news reports mentioning Xi'an. The longer and more frequently an issue is covered, the greater its perceived importance. Analyzing report frequency allows for a deeper understanding of key concerns and pain points in Xi'an's image construction. For this study, Kazakhstan International News Agency (Kazinform, 哈通社) was selected as a representative mainstream media outlet with significant influence. Using the Russian keyword "Сянь" (Xi'an), reports from

September 2011 to November 2023 were analyzed, yielding 17 usable reports on Xi'an. The content of these reports was categorized into four themes: politics, economy, culture, and social life, producing the following results: A total of 18 reports on Xi'an were identified.

Most reports were concentrated between 2015 and 2023.

- 2015: 3 reports
- 2016: 4 reports
- 2022: 2 reports
- 2023: 2 reports

Reports from 2011 to 2013 were negligible in number.

The results indicate that after the launch of the "Belt and Road" Initiative in November 2013, Xi'an, as the starting point of the overland Silk Road, significantly increased its engagement with Central Asian countries. This relationship was further strengthened by the 2023 China-Central Asia Summit, which accelerated exchanges between Xi'an and Central Asia, filling the previous gap in Xi'an's image within the region.

#### 5.1.1.2. Report themes and characteristics

Among the 17 reports that included the keyword "Xi'an":

- Political reports: 2 articles (11.7%)
- Cultural reports: 5 articles (29%)
- Economic reports: 10 articles (58%)
- Social reports: 1 article (5.8%)

The results show that economic news dominates the coverage of Xi'an in Kazakhstan's mainstream media, indicating a strong focus on economic-related content. This thematic imbalance suggests that Kazakh media primarily portrays Xi'an through an economic lens, with trade and finance-related news appearing far more frequently than cultural or social reports. This trend aligns with Kazakhstan's national strategy of expanding economic, financial, and investment cooperation with Belt and Road countries, particularly through the establishment of joint investment platforms [14]. It is evident that Xi'an is actively implementing national policy directives and expanding economic cooperation with Kazakhstan. This emphasis on economic partnerships reflects Xi'an's practical development needs and its role in advancing China-Kazakhstan trade relations.

#### 5.1.1.3. Sentiment analysis

To gain deeper insights into how the people of Kazakhstan perceive Xi'an, a high-frequency word analysis was conducted on the 17 news reports using Python-based text analysis.



**Figure 1.** High-frequency words in Kazakhstan's major state media regarding Xi'an

Through a word cloud visualization, key terms with high occurrences were identified (see Figure 1). In political reports, high-frequency words included:

- уважение (respect)
- Алматы (Almaty)
- развивать (develop)

These terms indicate that Xi'an and Kazakhstan primarily engage through a framework of mutual respect and equal diplomatic exchanges, with relations continuing to strengthen over time.

In economic reports, frequently appearing words included:



- первый (first/leading)
- новый (new)
- большой (huge)

These words suggest that economic discussions surrounding Xi'an in Kazakhstan's media tend to be framed in positive and optimistic language. The emphasis on "new" and "huge" highlights the growing economic potential and expansive cooperation between Xi'an and Kazakhstan.

### 5.1.2. Uzbekistan: Uzbekistan National News Agency

#### 5.1.2.1. Report frequency and categories

For this study, the Uzbekistan National News Agency was selected as the representative mainstream media outlet. Using the Russian keyword "Сиань" (Xi'an), reports from September 2011 to November 2023 were analyzed, yielding 49 reports mentioning Xi'an. The content of these reports was categorized into four themes: politics, economy, culture, and social life, producing the following results:

A total of 49 reports on Xi'an were identified.

Most reports were concentrated between 2019 and 2023:

- 2019: 10 reports
- 2020: 5 reports
- 2023: 20 reports

Notably, 12 out of the 20 reports in 2023 focused on the China-Central Asia Summit.

#### 5.1.2.2. Report themes and characteristics

Among the 49 reports that included the keyword "Xi'an":

- Political reports: 31 articles (63.2%)
- Cultural reports: 7 articles (14.2%)
- Economic reports: 16 articles (32.6%)
- Social reports: 1 article (2%)

The results show that political news dominates the coverage of Xi'an in Uzbekistan's mainstream media. This indicates that Uzbekistan's national news agency prioritizes political content when reporting on Xi'an. Furthermore, the imbalanced distribution of report themes suggests that Uzbekistan and Xi'an engage in frequent political exchanges, highlighting Xi'an's efforts to strengthen diplomatic relations with the five Central Asian countries in accordance with the Silk Road spirit. These engagements have steadily progressed to new levels in recent years.

#### 5.1.2.3. Sentiment analysis

To gain deeper insights into how the people of Uzbekistan perceive Xi'an, a high-frequency word analysis was conducted on the 49 news reports using Python-based text analysis.



**Figure 2.** High-frequency words in Uzbekistan's major state media regarding Xi'an

Through a word cloud visualization (see Figure 2), key terms with high occurrences were identified. In political reports, frequently appearing words included:

- сотрудничество (cooperation)



political news dominates, particularly in 2023. Tajikistan faces long-term debt accumulation and budget deficits and has frequently relied on non-concessional loans. In 2017, Tajikistan issued \$500 million in Eurobonds, significantly increasing its debt risk level. Consequently, economic development remains a critical national priority [16]. However, despite these economic concerns, reports on Xi'an in Tajikistan's media focus mostly on events held in Xi'an, such as exhibitions and discussion platforms, with relatively few reports on substantial economic cooperation. Nevertheless, the overall sentiment of these reports remains positive, indicating that Tajikistan's portrayal of Xi'an tends to be favorable, even if economic collaboration is underreported.

#### 5.1.4. Kyrgyzstan: 24.kg News Agency

#### 5.1.4.1. Report frequency and categories

For this study, 24.kg News Agency was selected as the primary research subject. Using the Russian keyword "Сиань" (Xi'an), reports from September 2007 to November 2023 were analyzed, yielding 28 relevant news articles. The content of these reports was categorized into four themes: politics, economy, culture, and social life, producing the following results:

A total of 28 reports on Xi'an were identified.

Most reports were concentrated between 2019 and 2023:

- 2019: 3 reports
- 2020: 2 reports
- 2023: 11 reports

Reports from 2007 to 2017 were negligible in number.

The data indicates that the China-Central Asia Summit significantly accelerated exchanges between Xi'an and Kyrgyzstan, leading to a surge in media coverage.

#### 5.1.4.2. Report themes and characteristics

Among the 28 reports that included the keyword "Xi'an":

- Political reports: 7 articles (25%)
- Cultural reports: 2 articles (7.1%)
- Economic reports: 15 articles (53.5%)
- Social reports: 4 articles (14.2%)

The results show that economic news dominates the coverage of Xi'an in Kyrgyzstan's mainstream media, indicating a strong focus on trade, investment, and business cooperation. Furthermore, the thematic distribution of reports is consistent with Kazakhstan's media coverage, highlighting an imbalanced representation of Xi'an, primarily centered on economic affairs. However, political engagements between Xi'an and Kyrgyzstan are relatively frequent, especially following the China-Central Asia Summit. Most political reports portray Xi'an as a key intermediary facilitating diplomatic activities and ensuring the success of high-level political engagements.

#### 5.1.4.3. Sentiment analysis

To gain deeper insights into how the people of Kyrgyzstan perceive Xi'an, a high-frequency word analysis was conducted on the 28 news reports using Python-based text analysis.



**Figure 4.** High-frequency words in Kyrgyzstan's major state media regarding Xi'an

Through word cloud visualization (see Figure 4), key terms with high occurrences were identified.



- шёлковый путь (Silk Road)

indicates that Xi'an's technological advantages and economic-cultural significance have also received some recognition in Turkmenistan's media.

#### 5.1.5.3. *Sentiment analysis*

An analysis of report types, yearly publication trends, and the word cloud results reveals that mentions of Xi'an in Turkmenistan's media are overwhelmingly linked to the China-Central Asia Summit and its subsequent outcomes. A particularly striking feature of this relatively young news website is that all coverage of Xi'an is concentrated exclusively in 2023, with no reports from previous years. Despite this, the word cloud analysis indicates a strong presence of positive sentiment words, highlighting the friendly relations between China and Turkmenistan and Xi'an's positive image in the country.

### 5.2. Challenges in Xi'an's urban image construction in Central Asian countries

#### 5.2.1. *Low media reach*

This study selected one representative mainstream media outlet from each of the five Central Asian countries for analysis. The findings indicate that the most prominent characteristic across all five countries is the extremely low number of reports on Xi'an, with very few usable news articles. Based on the text analysis methods used in this study, the number of usable reports on Xi'an found in each country's mainstream media from 2011 to 2023 is as follows:

- Kazakhstan's Kazinform (Khabar Agency): 17 articles
- Kyrgyzstan's News Agency: 28 articles (from 2007 to 2023)
- Uzbekistan's National News Agency: 49 articles
- Tajikistan's Khovar National News Agency: 46 articles
- Turkmenistan's Orient.tm: 18 articles

Moreover, among these already limited reports, the majority are factual news stories, treating Xi'an merely as the host city of major international conferences or events. There is a significant lack of reports that present Xi'an as an independent city with its own urban identity, and few official evaluations of the city are available. Overall, the level of media coverage of Xi'an in Central Asia remains low, and a comprehensive multi-media communication network has yet to be established [17]. This weakens Xi'an's international visibility and underscores the necessity of building a stronger urban image in Central Asian countries.

#### 5.2.2. *Low enthusiasm for reporting*

Text analysis further reveals that not only is the volume of media coverage on Xi'an low, but the frequency of reports is also sporadic. As the starting point of the Belt and Road Initiative and a key hub connecting China with Central Asia, Xi'an's urban influence should, in theory, be significant. However, the reality falls short of expectations, as Xi'an's image construction in Central Asia has not kept pace with its strategic role. While Central Asian media has maintained some level of attention on Xi'an, the intensity of coverage fluctuates based on the state of bilateral relations between China and individual Central Asian nations. In recent years, with the deepening of political, economic, and cultural cooperation between China and Central Asia, media interest in Xi'an has shown signs of increasing. However, most reports remain neutral in tone, rather than providing strong endorsements or in-depth portrayals of Xi'an's urban characteristics [18]. Several factors may contribute to this limited coverage: Limited Urban Scale and Influence: Although Xi'an is the starting point of the Belt and Road, it is still classified as a "new first-tier city", meaning its overall urban scale and international influence remain relatively moderate. As a result, Central Asian media does not consider Xi'an a priority for coverage. Even when Xi'an is reported on, there is little in-depth discussion of its urban identity. Language Barriers: The official languages of the five Central Asian countries are their respective national languages and Russian, while the dominant language in Xi'an is Chinese. Despite Xi'an's growing internationalization, its overall global engagement level is moderate compared to China's top-tier cities. Consequently, the number of professionals fluent in Russian or English remains low in Xi'an. This language gap makes it difficult for Central Asian journalists to access information about Xi'an, leading to a lack of reporting and awareness about the city.

#### 5.2.3. *Limited coverage of cultural exchanges*

As the eastern starting point and origin of the Silk Road, Xi'an embodies the exchange and mutual learning of civilizations, the coexistence and mutual benefit of diverse ethnic groups, and the harmonious integration of different religions. Since ancient times, Xi'an has maintained extensive cultural exchanges and connections with Central Asian countries. Today, under the Belt and Road Initiative, China and Central Asian countries continue to promote people-to-people connectivity and cultural exchanges, with Xi'an leveraging its historical and cultural heritage as a capital of culture and history to further deepen cross-regional interactions. However, an analysis of major media outlets in the five Central Asian countries reveals that cultural exchange reports related to

Xi'an are extremely scarce. For example: In Kazakhstan's Kazinform (Khabar Agency), only two reports on Xi'an are related to cultural exchanges between China and Kazakhstan. In Uzbekistan's National News Agency, only one article focuses on cultural exchanges involving Xi'an. Cultural exchanges are a crucial pillar of people-to-people connectivity. As the "City of 13 Dynasties," Xi'an's historical and cultural identity is one of its most defining characteristics in shaping its external image. Moreover, Xi'an shares profound cultural resonance with Central Asian countries, making it uniquely positioned to strengthen ties between the Chinese and Central Asian people. However, based on current media coverage, Central Asian mainstream media primarily focuses on Xi'an's economic impact, such as direct flights between Central Asia and Xi'an, while cultural and humanitarian exchanges receive significantly less attention. This narrow focus overlooks a critical reality—deepening people-to-people ties is the key to ensuring sustainable economic growth. Without mutual cultural understanding and affinity, economic cooperation alone cannot achieve long-term success.

#### 5.2.4. Limited coverage of higher education cooperation

Xi'an is home to numerous higher education institutions and possesses strong technological and educational capabilities, leading to multiple collaborations with universities in Central Asian countries. For instance: Xi'an International Studies University partnered with Eurasian National University in Kazakhstan to establish a Confucius Institute. Xi'an Jiaotong University and Samarkand State University in Uzbekistan established a "China Center" in Uzbekistan. Northwest A&F University signed a joint master's degree agreement in Food Science and Engineering with Seifullin Kazakh Agrotechnical University in Kazakhstan. Xi'an Siyuan University signed an educational cooperation agreement with Osh State University in Kyrgyzstan. However, such collaborations receive little media attention in Central Asian countries. Even when reported, media coverage is often event-focused, providing minimal background information on the partner universities or the broader significance of the cooperation. Higher education cooperation is not just about academic partnerships—it facilitates knowledge sharing, fosters cross-cultural exchanges, and provides platforms for international collaboration among young scholars and students. Media coverage of these initiatives would help Central Asian audiences better understand the nature, purpose, and benefits of such collaborations, as well as the academic strengths and values of Xi'an's universities. As one of China's leading cities in science and education, Xi'an has abundant educational resources, and university partnerships can serve as an effective vehicle for broader exchanges. However, due to the lack of reporting, many Central Asian citizens—especially young people—remain unaware of these collaborations and thus miss opportunities to engage in them.

## 6. From “flat” to “three-dimensional”: An exploratory path for Xi'an's future urban image construction

### 6.1. The current status and challenges of Xi'an's external image communication

In the context of globalization, the issue of external communication of regional images has received increasing attention. As Xi'an advances its development as an "international metropolis" and a "dual-center core area," both internal transformation and external openness have become essential for the city's image-building efforts. However, based on existing data analysis, Xi'an faces challenges in organizational leadership, image positioning, content integration, channel optimization, and audience targeting in both domestic and international publicity. These factors have resulted in a subjective and undifferentiated approach to shaping the "Xi'an brand," ultimately leading to suboptimal communication outcomes in Central Asia and the global arena and the persistence of informational barriers.

A well-crafted urban image strengthens the emotional bond between residents and their city, enhances a city's competitiveness, international visibility, and national branding, and attracts outsiders to settle and integrate. A well-established social environment fosters a sense of ownership among residents, reinforcing psychological belonging to the city. However, in practice, Xi'an's internal and external communication strategies face several limitations [19]. Currently, Xi'an's image communication is managed collaboratively by multiple government departments, including the Municipal Bureau of Culture and Tourism, the Urban Management and Comprehensive Law Enforcement Bureau, the Department of Ecological Environment, and the Bureau of Cultural Heritage. However, due to differing administrative functions, resource allocation constraints, and varying levels of expertise, most departments passively follow directives without proactively contributing to Xi'an's brand value creation. This fragmented organizational structure urgently requires improvement. In the international communication landscape, Western media outlets such as The New York Times and CNN dominate global discourse, while China's international communication efforts—including those at regional levels—face low outreach, ideological barriers, media construction limitations, and cultural differences. As a result, China's regional image communication on global digital platforms remains underdeveloped, with insufficient overseas media infrastructure. This presents a significant challenge for Xi'an in constructing its global image, emphasizing the need for enhanced international outreach strategies. Additionally, as a "City of 13 Dynasties," Xi'an possesses an unparalleled wealth of historical and cultural resources. It is also a national central city that integrates multiple advantages:

- An international metropolis
- A key hub in the Belt and Road Initiative



- A leading center for technological innovation and education
- A major transportation hub in Western China

However, in practical communication efforts, there is an overemphasis on Xi'an's historical and cultural tourism resources, while its other urban identities remain largely overlooked. This has led to a one-dimensional, tourism-centric portrayal of Xi'an, gradually flattening its regional image.

Moreover, in today's digital and participatory media era, a vast number of new media users actively contribute to Xi'an's image dissemination through videos, texts, and photos. While this creates opportunities for organic promotion, it also leads to inconsistencies and disorder in Xi'an's image communication, making it harder for audiences to perceive an authentic and cohesive urban identity. The rise of "viral Xi'an" marketing campaigns has further shaped public perceptions of Xi'an through a limited lens. Many outsiders associate Xi'an with viral cultural symbols such as:

- The "Unfalling Lady" (the performer in traditional dress balancing on a rotating pedestal)
- "Bowl-Smashing Liquor" (a popular tourism experience where visitors throw ceramic bowls after drinking)
- "Calligraphy Pastry" (a novelty dessert shaped like a calligraphy brush)

While these elements boost engagement, they also oversimplify and commercialize Xi'an's deep-rooted cultural heritage, reducing its historical and cultural significance to entertainment-driven spectacles [20]. Finally, government-led communication efforts remain outdated and fail to resonate with modern audiences, resulting in a decline in domestic engagement. The use of single-channel and traditional media formats makes it difficult to create a multidimensional, immersive urban image, ultimately hindering internal identity formation and external recognition.

## 6.2. Communication strategies for constructing Xi'an's urban image

As the "City of 13 Dynasties," Xi'an possesses a unique urban charm due to its rich historical and cultural heritage, economic development potential, ecological civilization initiatives, and historical landmarks. However, in terms of external communication practices, Xi'an faces several "flattened" image-related challenges, including:

- A one-dimensional urban identity
- Over-commercialization of traditional culture
- Limited outreach and media penetration
- Lack of diversity in communication channels
- Restricted international visibility

An analysis of Xi'an's portrayal in Central Asian mainstream media reveals that despite close relations and extensive cooperation between Xi'an and Central Asian countries, public awareness of Xi'an in the region remains limited.

The key reasons behind this gap include:

Challenges in Xi'an's external image-building efforts, which hinder its communication reach.

Insufficient people-to-people and cultural exchanges between Xi'an and Central Asian countries, leading to a lack of emotional and cultural resonance.

Given these challenges, establishing a strong urban identity for Xi'an in Central Asia and the broader international community has become a crucial step in advancing its development as an international metropolis and achieving a higher level of openness. The value of transitioning from a "flat" to a "three-dimensional" urban image is becoming increasingly evident.

### 6.2.1. Implementing high-level openness and establishing Xi'an as an inland reform and opening-up hub

The 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China first introduced the concept of "promoting high-level openness," which entails:

- Deepening structural reforms
- Driving high-quality development
- Fostering a new development paradigm
- Enhancing global cooperation for mutual benefit
- Ensuring balanced development and security

As China's geographical center and a strategic hub connecting the eastern and western economic zones, Xi'an enjoys exceptional geographical advantages. The city has set "establishing an inland reform and opening-up hub" as a key objective. To achieve this, Xi'an is focusing on:

- Optimizing transportation corridors
- Enhancing trade platforms
- Expanding its role as an international logistics and economic center

Xi'an aims to build a higher-level open economic system, positioning itself as a global gateway city integrating domestic and international markets. To promote comprehensive openness, Xi'an should leverage its locational, ecological, industrial, and institutional advantages to further expand its outreach and deepen international engagement. Key initiatives include:

- Strengthening trade and investment channels
- Enhancing open economic platforms

- Developing an integrated global transportation hub
- Creating a world-class business environment

Xi'an must accelerate its transformation into a national central city and an international metropolis, ensuring efficient global connectivity and integration.

Additionally, Xi'an should:

- Deepen both international and domestic cooperation, expanding its global outreach through enhanced international exchange mechanisms.
- Strengthen interregional partnerships within China to align with national strategies for regional economic integration and global connectivity.
- Pursue institutional openness, aligning with new trends in global economic governance and trade regulations, actively shaping and leading emerging global trade frameworks.

Furthermore, Xi'an should strengthen its role in the New Western Land-Sea Corridor, fully utilizing its status as a central hub for China-Europe freight trains. This will allow Xi'an to:

- Serve as a major gateway for trade with Central Asia, South Asia, and West Asia.
- Enhance its role in facilitating domestic and international trade flows.

Finally, Xi'an must foster a world-class market-driven, law-based, and internationalized business environment to attract high-quality foreign investment and enhance its global economic influence.

#### 6.2.2. *Creating distinctive cultural symbols and leveraging cultural memetics for communication*

In recent years, Xi'an's cultural and creative tourism industry has experienced rapid growth, solidifying its position as a driving force in China's cultural sector and a leading cultural hub in Northwest China. With its vast and high-quality cultural heritage resources, Xi'an has successfully established a strong identity as a "tourism city" both domestically and internationally. The city has transformed its abundant cultural assets into recognizable symbols, making them more three-dimensional and commercially viable [21], setting a benchmark for China's cultural and creative tourism industry. Beyond cultural tourism, Xi'an has also made significant strides in emerging industries such as high-tech, modern services, and cultural innovation. The city is actively fostering strategic emerging industries like information technology, aerospace, and new energy. However, due to a lack of comprehensive media representation and precise image analysis, Xi'an's urban identity has long been stereotyped as simply a "city of ancient history" or a "thousand-year-old capital." This one-dimensional perception has led to cognitive limitations in how the city is understood.

Culture encompasses all tangible and intangible, spiritual and material intellectual treasures of humanity. It represents a nation's unique identity and serves as a city's stabilizing force and long-term source of strength. Xi'an enjoys exceptional cultural resources, with 73 nationally protected cultural heritage sites, 109 provincially protected sites, and 8 UNESCO World Heritage sites [22]. Given this rich cultural foundation, traditional customs and folk heritage with strong regional characteristics have the potential to evolve into unique cultural memes in cross-cultural communication. However, in Xi'an's current branding and communication strategies, its cultural symbolism remains underdeveloped, with much of its cultural appeal being shaped after the fact through trendy social media-driven attractions rather than authentic historical narratives. A notable example of cultural innovation occurred during the 2024 CCTV Spring Festival Gala—Xi'an Subvenue, where the "Poetic Chang'an" program creatively blended poetry and visual storytelling. The segment used the animated character of "Li Bai" from the hit movie *Chang'an 30,000 Miles* as a narrative thread, seamlessly bridging past and present to showcase Xi'an's openness and historical prosperity. This creative approach has provided new inspiration for Xi'an's cross-cultural communication efforts.

As Xi'an seeks to enhance its global image, particularly in Central Asia and beyond, the city must focus on deepening its cultural resources, carefully crafting cultural symbols, and developing new cultural memes to enhance its international appeal. Key steps include:

Avoiding excessive commercialization and entertainment-driven narratives [23]:

Cultural content should balance social and economic benefits, shifting from purely entertainment-based experiences to the creation of high-quality cultural products. A more thoughtful and rational approach should be adopted to ensure that Xi'an's cultural identity is preserved while also being effectively modernized [24].

Leveraging new media platforms to amplify cultural memes:

The rise of new media provides an optimal environment for cultural memetics to flourish.

Short-form videos, with their long-lasting impact, high production output, and replicability, can accelerate cross-cultural dissemination of Xi'an's urban identity.

By adapting viral video strategies—borrowing from successful formats and trending narratives—Xi'an can enhance its visibility and appeal in international markets.

#### 6.2.3. *Establishing a "Multilingual + N" communication platform to bridge cultural gaps*

Language serves as a bridge for communication and a medium for cross-national exchange. In Xi'an's external communication efforts, language plays an increasingly vital role. However, apart from English, which is widely used as a global lingua franca,



most other foreign languages are difficult for the majority of Chinese people to learn and master. This makes language professionals a key resource in breaking barriers to Chinese cultural dissemination. Thus, Xi'an must accelerate the cultivation of high-quality international communication talent. With the establishment of the "Shaanxi International Communication Center" in Xi'an, the city now has a solid foundation for effectively telling the stories of Xi'an, Shaanxi, and the Silk Road. The center leverages new media as its core communication tool and cross-regional cooperation as its primary strategy, relying on experts from various disciplines to shape Xi'an's international image through:

- Building an overseas media network
- Developing high-quality international communication projects

Additionally, four universities—Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an Jiaotong University, Shaanxi Normal University, and Northwest University—have been designated as the first group of academic partners, providing a steady flow of young talent to support these efforts. Among them, Xi'an International Studies University, as the only comprehensive foreign language university in Northwest China, naturally plays a leading role in Xi'an's external communication efforts. The city can leverage the expertise of foreign language institutions to establish dedicated international communication platforms targeting Central Asia and other global regions. This includes:

- Creating official WeChat public accounts
- Managing international social media platforms such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok
- Implementing a "Multilingual + N" strategy for storytelling about Xi'an

Furthermore, Xi'an can collaborate with local print media and new media outlets to establish foreign-language columns in Russian, Kazakh, and other Central Asian languages. By regularly contributing articles and publishing features, Xi'an can share its contemporary narrative while maximizing its unique geographical, cultural, and intellectual advantages. This will reduce cultural barriers and deepen Xi'an's engagement with Central Asian countries and the global community.

- Leveraging Language as a Tool for City Image Building and Communication

Language plays a critical role in shaping and disseminating a city's image. Bilingual and multilingual professionals act as cultural intermediaries, transforming linguistic symbols that once created barriers into bridges for communication and sources of cultural appeal. By overcoming linguistic and interpretative obstacles, they can directly engage with fundamental human emotions that transcend national boundaries, ultimately fostering mutual understanding and recognition [25]. "Empathetic communication" plays a crucial role in bridging divides across politics, ideology, history, and culture by tapping into universal human emotions. Shared emotions such as friendship, love, and familial bonds serve as powerful connections between domestic and international audiences [26]. To enhance its global appeal, Xi'an can explore its rich historical and cultural resources and extract narrative elements that align with themes of "universal love" and "peace." By using language as a vehicle to convey these shared human experiences, Xi'an can foster emotional resonance, bridge cultural differences, and deepen its international influence.

#### *6.2.4. Leveraging diverse communication channels to shape a positive external image of Xi'an*

In today's city branding efforts, Xi'an should move beyond a superficial focus on landmarks and cuisine. In an era of mass communication and participatory media, the responsibility of shaping a city's image should no longer rest solely on government agencies or official media narratives. Instead, it should be driven by the millions of Xi'an's citizens, who can play a vital role in counteracting international misinterpretations of the city. If the municipal government, local citizens, and media outlets can adopt a "city ownership" mentality, each contributing their unique perspectives and roles in the city's daily operations, Xi'an's international outreach will accelerate. One crucial aspect is to enhance people-to-people communication, structuring narratives from the perspective of ordinary citizens. As the saying goes, "The foundation of strong intergovernmental relations lies in close people-to-people ties, and such ties are built upon mutual understanding." Only through emotional connection and sincere engagement can long-term goodwill be established, shaping a positive external image of Xi'an through a process of external perception, or "passive image construction." This "passive image construction" (他塑) refers to how foreign media report on Xi'an and how their audiences perceive the city. To enhance this external narrative, Xi'an can leverage: The "Foreigners in Xi'an" video series, where international residents and visitors share first-person accounts of their experiences in Xi'an. Encouraging these individuals to share their content on their social media platforms, providing global audiences with authentic insights into life in Xi'an. By integrating these efforts, Xi'an can actively contribute to global storytelling about Chinese culture, reinforcing its role as a significant player in China's international communication efforts. This forms a closed-loop system in external urban branding, where both local and foreign perspectives help build Xi'an's global reputation. Additionally, Xi'an should invest in cultivating multilingual talent familiar with Central Asian and other global cultures. These individuals can engage in soft, lifestyle-oriented content creation on international media platforms, ensuring that Xi'an's international communication becomes more professional and standardized. This approach would allow effective and cost-efficient city branding, making Xi'an's global narrative more sustainable and impactful.

### 6.2.5. Embracing global trends to establish Xi'an as a "window to the world"

As China's urbanization accelerates, many Chinese cities have become global venues for diplomacy and international engagement. Xi'an, as a historical and cultural capital, has leveraged its rich heritage to accelerate its modernization. The city has increasingly hosted high-profile international conferences and large-scale sporting events, injecting new vitality into this ancient metropolis.

The successful hosting of international summits and major sporting events has enhanced both the external and internal dimensions of Xi'an's urban branding:

Externally, these events serve as powerful media-driven branding tools, elevating Xi'an's global visibility [27]. Internally, they contribute to infrastructure development, city planning, and civic engagement, helping enhance Xi'an's overall urban image. Such events play a pivotal role in enhancing both the "hard power" (infrastructure and economy) and "soft power" (culture, reputation, and international engagement) of the city [28]. Furthermore, as a new first-tier city, Xi'an's evolving identity must be built upon emerging technologies and innovation-driven industries. The city should focus on:

- "New technology" and "hard technology"
- Advanced manufacturing sectors
- A talent-driven business ecosystem

By fostering a pro-business, investment-friendly environment, Xi'an can further solidify its reputation as a hub for industrial and technological advancement.

To support this transformation, the government must proactively leverage new media and digital technologies to craft an effective public relations and city branding strategy. Key initiatives include:

- Strategic agenda-setting for media engagement
- Encouraging participation from both traditional media and independent content creators
- Facilitating discussions on key topics through public discourse

By actively shaping its own narrative, Xi'an can foster a well-rounded international image, positioning itself as a global city at the intersection of history, culture, and innovation.

### 6.2.6. Enhancing public opinion monitoring to convey the "human touch" of the city

With the rapid development of the internet, the spread of online public opinion has evolved beyond simple linear transmission into a more interconnected and sequential pattern, making it easier for public sentiment to accumulate and escalate [29]. When similar incidents repeatedly occur in a city, public sentiment tends to compound, reinforcing negative associations between the issue and the city itself. For example, in 2023, a blogger exposed the "Xi'an Airport Passenger Solicitation Incident", raising concerns about:

- Suspicious practices surrounding the "free transit accommodation" policy
- Allegations of misleading tactics being used
- Criticism of the airport's "performative rectification"

The blogger conducted multiple investigations before the issue was finally addressed. However, the controversy rapidly gained traction online, resulting in a major public relations crisis for Xi'an Xianyang International Airport and even the overall image of Xi'an. This incident underscores the critical role of public opinion monitoring in shaping and safeguarding a city's image. Effectively managing and responding to online discourse is essential for mitigating potential damage.

**Proactive Public Opinion Management: Turning Risks into Opportunities**

First and foremost, the internet is a double-edged sword, and the risks associated with public sentiment must be precisely managed. As a new first-tier city, Xi'an attracts significant public attention, making it more susceptible to the impact of negative publicity. In such cases, government authorities must not evade or suppress public concerns. Instead, they should:

Take responsibility and proactively address issues to prevent online discourse from escalating.

Work closely with relevant departments to resolve problems effectively.

Respond swiftly and transparently, fostering public trust and minimizing reputational damage.

It is essential to recognize public opinion as an opportunity rather than a threat. Instead of viewing online controversies as unmanageable crises, city officials should use them as opportunities to demonstrate Xi'an's accountability and responsiveness. Proactive engagement and timely responses can turn crises into moments that showcase Xi'an's commitment to problem-solving and citizen welfare [30].

To achieve this, Xi'an must adopt a dual-pronged strategy:

- Implement robust risk management to prevent crises.
- Develop an efficient response mechanism to address issues as they arise.
- Given the complexity and technical nature of crisis management, city officials should consider:
- Hiring professional crisis communication experts.
- Establishing a dedicated crisis management team.
- Forming long-term partnerships with public relations firms to ensure effective image management and damage control.

By doing so, Xi'an can safeguard its reputation and uphold its city branding efforts against unforeseen challenges.

**Conclusion: A Multi-Faceted Approach to Xi'an's City Branding**

In constructing Xi'an's urban identity, a multi-dimensional approach must be adopted:

- "Collaborative Governance": Shift from a government-led model to a multi-stakeholder participation framework, empowering the public to contribute to city branding.
- "Cultural Identity and Storytelling": Highlight Xi'an's unique historical and cultural heritage, shaping a one-of-a-kind urban brand.
- "Harnessing the Benefits of the Era": Leverage modern advancements and global trends to enhance Xi'an's international standing.
- "Language as a Bridge": Utilize local universities' linguistic expertise, implementing the "Multilingual + N" communication strategy to effectively tell Xi'an's story worldwide.
- "Strategic Public Opinion Monitoring": Establish a professional media monitoring institution to serve as Xi'an's "gatekeeper" for city image management and crisis response.

By integrating these strategies, Xi'an can transition from a city defined by its historical past to a dynamic, forward-looking global metropolis with a resilient and adaptable international image.

## 7. Conclusion

With the successful hosting of the China-Central Asia Summit in Xi'an, the city—a major hub in Northwest China and the historical starting point of the Silk Road—has found itself at the forefront of city image promotion efforts targeting Central Asia. The challenge now is how to effectively leverage Xi'an's deep-rooted historical and cultural identity while simultaneously capitalizing on emerging advantages such as technological innovation and green development to build a modern "Xi'an brand" and global "Xi'an identity." The transition of Xi'an's urban image from "flat" to "three-dimensional" has become an important research topic in shaping the city's future identity.

Through research, discussion, and analysis, this study concludes that Xi'an's unique cultural identity serves as the fundamental cornerstone of its city branding efforts. Whether through viral internet culture or emerging innovative cultural trends, Xi'an's distinctive, warm, and open cultural character is one of the most crucial factors in shaping a dynamic and multidimensional city image. At the same time, breaking down barriers to communication is equally essential, with language obstacles being one of the most pressing challenges that must be addressed. As such, building robust communication platforms to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers is of paramount importance. However, once communication methods and channels are established, the question remains—who should be responsible for communication? While official media channels play a key role in promoting Xi'an, other participants—including ordinary citizens, influential media personalities, and digital content creators—can also contribute to sharing Xi'an's stories across Central Asia and beyond. Furthermore, leveraging major domestic and international events provides a strategic opportunity to present a multidimensional and comprehensive image of Xi'an. This requires a precise approach to public opinion management, the ability to turn crises into opportunities, and a concerted effort to highlight the city's warmth and human-centered character—all essential components of Xi'an's branding strategy.

Today, as China's diplomatic landscape continues to evolve, an increasing number of Chinese cities are becoming global venues for international diplomacy, making Xi'an's position both an opportunity and a challenge. As Xi'an's city image construction enters a new phase, it must build upon its existing advantages while embracing innovation, strategically refining its promotional efforts, and creating a distinctive and recognizable city identity. Looking ahead, this long-term effort will not only solidify Xi'an's presence in Central Asia but also propel the city onto the global stage, reshaping its image as a truly international metropolis. Ultimately, these efforts will enhance Xi'an's role in international cooperation, strengthen its participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, and position it as a key driver of global cultural and economic exchange.

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## Author's contribution

Yue Zhang, Yinghui Wang and Kexin Ding contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors.

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