Research on the Impact of Economic Participation on China's National Image

-- Taking the countries along the "the Belt and Road" as examples

Yonghui Xiang¹, Jingjing Li²

- ¹ School of Zhejiang University of Science and Technology, Zhejiang, China;
- ² School of Zhejiang University of Science and Technology, Zhejiang, China.

Abstract

The national image is increasingly becoming an important criterion for evaluating a country's comprehensive strength, and governments around the world are paying more and more attention to the shaping and dissemination of the national image. Since the reform and opening up, China's development focus has always been on economic and social development, and there is still enormous potential to be tapped in the promotion and shaping of the national image. At the same time, with the proposal of the the Belt and Road Initiative and the deepening of China's economic participation in countries along the the Belt and Road, China's international voice and influence seem to have significantly improved. This article uses fixed effects models and mechanism analysis models to analyze the direct and indirect effects of economic participation on national image. Through the spatial Durbin model, the spatial spillover effects of economic participation on national image are analyzed, and the impact of economic participation on national image is studied step by step.

Keywords

Economic participation, national image, fixed effects model.

1. Introduction

The nature and scope of economic participation vary among different countries and regions under the influence of various factors. Policies, culture, laws, and economic systems are intertwined, jointly shaping the unique economic pattern of each country or region. With the continuous globalization of economies between countries, the economic connections between countries have become increasingly close. China has undergone significant changes since the reform and opening up, shifting from simply introducing foreign investment to a strategic shift that emphasizes both attracting foreign investment and actively going global. In this process, China's economic goals have also upgraded from simply achieving economic benefits to actively participating in global economic construction, improving national image, and promoting diversified strategies for world peace and development. China is currently the world's secondlargest economy, with its comprehensive national strength and international influence constantly increasing, and its economic participation in various countries is also expanding. Since the initiative was put forward, the annual trade volume between China and countries along the the Belt and Road has doubled from US \$1.04 trillion to US \$2.07 trillion from 2013 to 2022, which has made an important contribution to promoting the economic development of the host country, and also shows that China's economic participation in countries along the the Belt and Road has gradually deepened.

National image refers to the overall image and reputation of a country on the international stage, which is shaped by various factors such as the country's politics, economy, culture, society, and

diplomatic activities. The national image not only represents the perception of the people of other countries towards the country, but also has a significant impact on the country's international status, attractiveness, and influence. The national image has always been of great concern, and a good national image makes it easier for a country to win the favor of people from other countries, thus playing a more important role on the international stage. On the contrary, a negative national image may be detrimental to a country's economic and cultural development as well as international communication. With the development of the media and the Internet in the 21st century, China's national image as a world power has received more and more attention. Since the reform and opening up, exchanges between China and other countries in various fields such as politics, economy, and culture have gradually increased. China's national image and international influence have also significantly improved in these exchanges, establishing its image as a great power. However, with the sustained high-speed growth of the Chinese economy, overseas media have begun to create some public opinion about "China's rise", "strong country strategy" and other "China threat theories" for various purposes, hoping to undermine China's national image and interfere with the process of China's great rejuvenation by spreading these views. Therefore, in the new era of opening up to the outside world, how to effectively build and enhance the national image has become an important and urgent problem that needs to be solved. At the same time, scholars have gradually focused their attention on the issue of which aspects affect the national image, which has also become one of the hot research topics.

The national image is increasingly becoming an important criterion for evaluating a country's comprehensive strength, and governments around the world are paying more and more attention to the shaping and dissemination of the national image. Since the reform and opening up, China's development focus has always been on economic and social development, and there is still enormous potential to be tapped in the promotion and shaping of the national image. At the same time, with the proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative and the deepening of China's economic participation in countries along the the Belt and Road, China's international voice and influence seem to have significantly improved. With the continuous enhancement of China's comprehensive national strength, what impact has China's economic participation in countries along the the Belt and Road had on China's national image? What mechanisms do various aspects of economic participation affect a country's image? Answering these questions is of great theoretical and practical significance for us to understand and improve China's national image. This paper attempts to take the countries along the the Belt and Road as an example to study whether China's economic participation in these countries can help improve China's national image by building a fixed effect model, and further explore the specific mechanism of the impact of economic participation on China's national image, so as to provide a theoretical basis for China to improve its national image.

The research on the impact of economic participation of countries along the the Belt and Road on China's national image has two main meanings. The first is based on the theoretical significance of research value, and the second is based on the practical significance of reality. At the theoretical level, although there have been many achievements in research on national image in recent years, most studies have focused on the construction of national image and the influencing factors of national image. At the same time, scholars have also conducted research on economic participation, such as export and investment, for many years, but there is little research on the relationship between economic cooperation and national image, and China's national image, taking the the Belt and Road countries as examples, is rare. The proposal of the "the Belt and Road" initiative in 2013 is conducive to the cooperation between the governments of relevant countries and China to jointly build a regional economic cooperation system, and at the same time, it alleviates the obstacles for Chinese enterprises to "go global". Therefore, this paper takes the countries along the the Belt and Road as examples to study the impact of

economic participation on China's national image. On the basis of clarifying the concepts of economic participation and national image, this article delves into the relationship between the two, and combines fixed effects models, mechanism analysis models, and spatial Durbin models to analyze the impact mechanism of economic participation on national image. The research materials and results can accumulate materials for the study of economic participation and national image, and deepen the research on the issue of China's national image on the basis of drawing on previous research. From a practical perspective, as a major country, China not only needs to achieve economic modernization, but also needs to achieve modernization of "soft power". The national image, as an important manifestation of "soft power", is crucial for enhancing China's international status and discourse power. A good national image not only helps to eliminate biases such as the "China threat theory", but also helps to build mutual trust mechanisms with other countries, promote cooperation and win-win, and is of practical importance to China's sustainable development. In addition, the results of this study can provide useful reference for policy formulation, and provide suggestions and guidance for further improving China's national image and the future development of China's the Belt and Road policy.

Based on the fixed effect model, taking the countries along the the Belt and Road as examples, it is of great theoretical and practical significance to study the impact of economic participation on China's national image. The significance of studying economic participation in national image lies in helping countries better understand and manage their image on the international stage, helping to achieve foreign policy goals, improve international status, promote international cooperation, and also have a positive impact on domestic economic and social prosperity. Therefore, research on economic participation and national image plays an important guiding role in policy-making and international relations.

2. Research Hypothesis

This article analyzes the impact of economic participation on a country's image, focusing mainly on three aspects. Firstly, the three aspects of economic participation selected in this article, namely exports, investment, and economic cooperation, have a direct impact on China's national image as outward investment behaviors; Secondly, the economic participation studied in this paper has affected the economic prosperity of countries along the the Belt and Road, so it is necessary to consider the indirect impact on China's national image after the change of economic development level; Finally, various aspects of economic participation are influenced by spatial geography, spatial economic characteristics, and spatial correlation in the development process. Therefore, there can be multiple theoretical basis to study the impact of economic participation on national image from the perspective of spatial economy.

2.1. Direct Impact Effect

The economic participation referred to in this article refers to the degree to which individuals or entities actively participate and contribute in economic activities. Specifically, this study defines economic participation as China's exports, direct investment and economic cooperation to countries along the the Belt and Road. Since China's accession to the World Trade Organization, it has gradually transformed into an outward oriented economy and a "world factory", with exports playing a crucial role in driving China's economic growth[1]. China's export volume continues to grow, especially in high value-added areas with competitiveness, which helps to enhance China's national image and make it seen as an economic powerhouse, winning the favor of the host country. However, at the same time, the trade between China and countries along the the Belt and Road may crowd out the market share of the host country's homogeneous products, increasing its dependence on China's economy. In the long run, this may bring about the threat of "low-end locking", which may reduce the overall evaluation of

China by the host country. In summary, the impact of exports on a country's image is a complex and multi-level process, influenced by multiple factors[2]. China's export strategy to countries along the Belt and Road has both positive and negative impacts, but for the general host country people, the negative impact may be more significant.

China's direct investment in countries along the the Belt and Road also has a complex impact. This depends on multiple factors, including the nature of the investment, the behavior of the investor, and the response of the receiving country[3]. On the one hand, China's direct investment in countries along the the Belt and Road may create more jobs in the host country and promote economic growth. In addition, direct investment accompanied by technology transfer and innovation can help improve the technological level and industrial upgrading of recipient countries, which may have a positive impact on the country's image [4]. On the other hand, direct investment may cause environmental damage, social conflicts, or other negative impacts, and controversial investment behavior may attract attention and criticism from the international community. In addition, direct investment may also be influenced by international political relations, and if there is political tension between the investor and the recipient country, it may have a negative impact on the country's image. China's direct investment strategy for countries along the the Belt and Road has both positive and negative impacts, but for the general host country people, the positive impact may be more significant. Similarly, the impact of economic cooperation on a country's image is profound and multi-level. The economic cooperation between China and the countries along the the Belt and Road has led to economic growth and prosperity among the participating countries. Successful cooperation cases can become an important part of the national image and convey the message of economic strength and success. In addition, economic cooperation between the two countries may create employment opportunities, improve living standards, and alleviate poverty, which usually have a positive impact on the country's image. However, controversial issues involved in economic cooperation, such as trade frictions and intellectual property disputes, may have a negative impact on a country's image. In general, the economic cooperation strategy between China and the countries along the the Belt and Road has both positive and negative impacts, but for the general host people, the positive impact may be more significant.

To sum up, economic participation in countries along the Belt and Road has both positive and negative impacts on the national image, but for the general host people, the positive impact may be more significant.

Based on the above analysis, this article proposes the following assumptions:

H1: Economic participation has a positive impact on China's national image.

2.2. Heterogeneity Effect

Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and Central and Eastern Europe exhibit significant economic differences due to their diverse geographical location and cultural tradition[5]. Southeast Asia has a large population and a huge economy, and its manufacturing and export sectors have achieved significant success, becoming an important component of the global supply chain. In contrast, Central Asia has abundant energy resources, and agriculture plays an important role in it[6]. Due to its unique geopolitical status, Central Asia is regarded as an important bridge connecting Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, attracting much attention. Most Central and Eastern European countries have joined the European Union and become part of the European integration process, which provides a positive impact on promoting trade, investment, and improving economic levels[7]. In addition, Central and Eastern European countries have also developed relatively advanced manufacturing and service industries. Therefore, through regional analysis of these regions, we can better understand the impact of China's economic participation on China's national image.

Based on the above analysis, this article proposes the following assumptions:

H2: The impact of economic participation on China's national image varies across different regions.

3. Empirical Analysis

3.1. Variable Selection

The dependent variable: This study refers to the processing methods of the GDELT database in existing literature, and categorizes events involving verbal cooperation (QuadClass=1) and actual cooperation (QuadClass=2) as "cooperative", while events involving verbal confrontation (QuadClass=3) and actual confrontation (QuadClass=4) are classified as "conflict"[8]. Given the possibility of multiple "collaboration" or "conflict" events occurring daily, it is necessary to calculate the daily average Goldstein Scale scores for these two types of events separately. After obtaining the daily average, further calculate the annual average Goldstein Scale scores for conflict and cooperation events, and use the absolute value of the ratio of the two as an indicator to measure China's image in other countries, namely the National Image Index Gna. Through the Python programming language, it is possible to batch calculate China's annual national image index in various countries.

Explanatory variable: The core explanatory variable of this study is China's economic participation in countries along the Belt and Road, including China's exports to countries along the Belt and Road, China's direct investment in countries along the Belt and Road, and China's economic cooperation with countries along the Belt and Road. We used the method proposed by Kleinberg to standardize the three core variables of export, direct investment and economic cooperation completion into the proportion of gross domestic product (GDP) of countries along the Belt and Road, so as to link China's economic activities with the economic norms of countries. Using SPSSAU factor analysis method to reduce the dimensionality of three core explanatory variables, obtaining the initial eigenvalue method percentage through SPSSAU, and calculating the economic participation value[9].

Control variables: National level characteristic variables of the host country: (1) Economic freedom, (2) The proportion of urban population to total population, and (3) Per capita GDP. The relationship between the host country and China: variables such as political, diplomatic, and institutional connections between a country and China are also included in the model. (1) The average Goldstein score is used to measure the political relationship between the country and China; (2) Whether to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA), use 1 for signing and 0 for not signing. (3) Geographical distance, used to represent the actual distance between the capitals of two countries, logarithmic processing; (4) Economic institutional distance (edis) refers to the degree of differences in economic systems between different countries or regions [10].

3.2. Benchmark Regression

Before conducting benchmark regression, first select the model. Through BP-LM testing, it was found that the P-value was less than 0.05, indicating that the coefficient of variation model is more suitable. Subsequently, through the Hausman test, the null hypothesis was rejected and a fixed effects model was chosen. Based on the above results, this article uses a double fixed effects model for regression analysis. The specific model settings are shown in (1):

Gnai,
$$t = cons + \beta_1 E coP_i$$
, $t + \sum_{j=1}^{n} \alpha_j control_{i,t} + \mu_i + \mu_i + \varepsilon_{i,t}$

Table 1: Benchmark Regression

EcoP	0.0837*	0.0708*	ole 1 : Be 0.0239* **	0.0532*	0.0170*	0.0151*	0.0072*	0.01472*
ECOI	(0.498)	(0.774)	(0.857)	(0.709)	(0.840)	(0.858)	(0.934)	(0.870)
urbanization		0.0635* **	1.3224* **	0.0940* **	0.8777* **	0.0928* **	0.0928* **	0.0954***
		(1.24)	(0.036)	(0.298)	(0.104)	(0.091)	(0.091)	(0.085)
Economic			-0.0030*	0.0035* **	0.0012*	0.0013*	0.0013*	0.0011***
Freedom			(0.0011)	(0.0055)	(8000.0)	(0.228)	(0.228)	(0.344)
ln(gdp)				0.0073 (0.0025)	0.0015* ** (0.0002)	0.013*** (0.003)	0.014*** (0.003)	0.013*** (0.318)
GoldsteinSca					0.0018*	0.3835*	0.3835*	0.3838*** (0.001)
le					(0.0008)	(0.047)	(0.047)	
FTA						0.2328* ** (0.595)	0.2328* ** (0.595)	0.0075*** (0.713)
lndist							0.0079* ** (0.723)	0.0063*** (0.723)
edis								0.0055*** (0.697)
Cons	1.1731* ** (0.001)	1.2131* ** (0.001)	1.3107* ** (0.0649)	1.1223* ** (0.0673)	0.8877* ** (0.0616)	- 0.444*** (0.001)	0.8263* ** (0.001)	0.8564*** (0.001)
Year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
City	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R ²	0.9428	0.9702	0.9720	0.9727	0.9728	0.9734	0.9534	0.9878

As shown in the figure, it was found through the double fixed effects model that economic participation has a significant promoting effect on national image. After adding control variables, economic participation can still have a positive impact on national image, but the intensity of the effect decreases. In addition, urbanization and geographical distance have a negative impact on the national image; Economic freedom, economic level, political relations, diplomatic relations, and economic institutional distance have a positive impact on a country's image.

3.3. Robust Test

As a key step in statistical modeling, robustness testing aims to verify the stability and reliability of the model under different conditions. Through robustness testing, the model's resistance to outliers, data biases, and other interfering factors can be evaluated, thereby improving its explanatory power and predictive accuracy. This process helps to ensure the reliability of model results, provide reliable basis for decision-making, and play an important role in policy formulation, project planning, and investment decision-making.

In order to verify the robustness of the research conclusions, this article adopts two methods. One method is the variable replacement method, and the article uses economic growth rate instead of per capita GDP; Another robustness testing method is subsample regression. Considering that the Belt and Road policy was put forward in 2013, this study chooses to exclude the data from 2009 to 2012 for analysis. The specific inspection results are shown in the table below. From Table 4-4, it can be seen that after replacing economic level with economic growth, the seven variables of economic participation, urbanization, economic freedom, political relations, diplomatic relations, geographical distance, and economic institutional distance are still significant. At the same time, while reducing the sample size, the effects and significance of the core explanatory variables and control variables remained consistent with the previous results, indicating the reliability of the previous conclusions.

	Table 2: Robust Test	
EcoP	0.01372***	0.2472***
LCOI	(0.421)	(0.134)
urbanization	-0.5181***	-0.8280***
ui bailization	(0.040)	(0.001)
San and Francis	0.002***	0.0003***
conomic Freedom	(0.005)	(800.0)
1 (1)		0.0028***
ln(gdp)		(0.035)
Cdn Crouth	0.0053***	
Gdp Growth	(0.019)	
GoldsteinScale	0.1729***	0.0217***
dolustemscare	(0.0030)	(0.016)
FTA	0.1777***	0.4429***
ГІА	(0.001)	(0.0030)
la diat	-0.0068***	-0.0046***
lndist	(0.005)	(0.036)
edis	0.5035***	0.4429***
Cuis	(0.004)	(0.0030)
Cons	-0.4865*** (0.003)	-0.4457 (0.047)
D^2		
R^2	0.9143	0.9754

3.4. Endogeneity testing

In view of the two-way causal relationship between China's national image and its exports, investment and economic cooperation in the Belt and Road project, the views of countries along the Belt and Road on China may in turn affect their acceptance of Chinese export products and investment enterprises. In addition, the perception and response of the people in the host country also have a certain impact on China's economic participation, which may affect the decision-making level of China's economic participation. In view of this, we use the system

GMM method to address endogeneity issues by lagging the dependent variable back one period to avoid interference from causal relationships. In order to verify the robustness of the research conclusions, this article adopts two methods. One method is the variable replacement method, and the article uses economic growth rate instead of per capita GDP; Another robustness testing method is subsample regression. Considering that the Belt and Road policy was put forward in 2013, this study chooses to exclude the data from 2009 to 2012 for analysis. The specific inspection results are shown in the table below. From Table 4-4, it can be seen that after replacing economic level with economic.

Based on the results of the table, we observed a P-value of 0.038 for the first-order sequence, which is less than 0.5. Therefore, we rejected the null hypothesis that the disturbance term of the model has significant first-order autocorrelation. However, the P-value of the second-order sequence is 0.603, which is greater than 0.5, indicating that we have accepted the null hypothesis that there is no second-order autocorrelation in the disturbance term of the model. Due to some limitations of the Sargen test, we switched to using the Hansen test to evaluate the validity of instrumental variables. The results showed that the P-value of the Hansen test was 0.901, which is much greater than 0.1, indicating that the instrumental variables of the model are effective. Further observation shows that the regression coefficient for economic participation in the table is 0.0534 and has passed the significance test. Therefore, we can conclude that there is a positive correlation between economic participation and national image, that is, economic participation helps improve the national image of China in other countries.

Table	3:System	GMM	Inspection
IUDIC	J. D V J W I I I	Q I'II'I	

L.Gna	1.0773*** (0.0319)
ЕсоР	0.0534*** (0.0956)
urbanization	-0.0954*** (0.085)
Economic Freedom	0.0011*** (0.344)
ln(gdp)	0.013*** (0.318)
GoldsteinScale	0.3838*** (0.001)
FTA	0.0075*** (0.713)
Indist	-0.0063*** (0.723)
Edis	0.0055*** (0.697)
Cons	0.8564*** (0.001)

Time fixed effect	Yes
Regional fixed effects	Yes
AR(1)	0.038
AR(2)	0.603
Hansen test(P)	0.901

3.5. Heterogeneity Test

In view of the significant differences between countries along the the Belt and Road in terms of economic level, geographical location and development direction, the impact of different factors on China's national image will also show diversified characteristics. In this context, we divide the countries along the the Belt and Road into three regions, namely Southeast Asia, Central Asia and Central and Eastern Europe, according to the classification criteria mentioned above, in order to further study the heterogeneity between different regions. The specific research results will be presented in detail in Tables 4-4, which will help to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of different regions on China's national image and provide more accurate reference basis for relevant decision-making.

The grouped regression results are shown in the table above. Compared to Central Asia and Central and Eastern Europe, the more China's economic participation in Southeast Asia, the more it often stimulates Southeast Asian countries to positively identify with China. This phenomenon can be attributed to the combined effect of multiple factors. Firstly, Southeast Asia is geographically closer to China and has a deep cultural and economic connection throughout history. This geopolitical advantage helps to promote closer and stable cooperation between China and Southeast Asian countries, thereby strengthening positive identification between both sides. Secondly, Southeast Asian countries have abundant natural resources and cheap labor, while China has strong manufacturing and financial strength. This complementarity provides broad space for economic interdependence and cooperation between the two sides, further deepening their positive identification. In addition, Southeast Asia has a long-standing cultural and historical connection with China, and this cultural identity makes Southeast Asian countries more inclined to cooperate with China and hold a positive attitude towards China's economic participation. In summary, the comprehensive influence of multiple factors leads to more economic participation of China in Southeast Asia, which often stimulates positive identification of Southeast Asian countries with China.

Table 4: Heterogeneity test

variable	Southeast Asia	Central Asia	Central and Eastern Europe
EcoP	0.0052***	0.0012***	0.0019***
ECOP	(0.002)	(0.001)	(0.077)
unhanization	-0.0880***	-0.1006***	-0.4843***
urbanization	(0.030)	(0.037)	(0.054)
Economic	0.0020***	0.0068***	0.0002***
Freedom	(0.104)	(0.795)	(0.094)
ln(adn)	0.0078***	0.0137***	0.0647***
ln(gdp)	(800.0)	(0.004)	(0.158)
GoldsteinScale	0.2715***	0.2925***	0.1148***

	(0.396)	(0.0025)	(0.0025)
ርጥ ለ	0.0031***	0.0178***	0.0174***
FTA	(0.069)	(0.069)	(0.032)
Indiat	-0.313***	-0.1438***	-0.1288***
lndist	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.043)
edis	0.2903***	0.0335***	0.0308***
euis	(0.007)	(0.007)	(0.007)
Cono	0.6565***	-0.1581	1.8581
Cons	(0.014)	(0.047)	(0.203)
R ²	0.9780	0.9792	0.9743

4. Conclusion

There is an inherent connection between economic participation and national image, and the article chooses to analyze the relationship between the two from the perspective of the impact of economic participation on national image. We explored the direct impact of economic participation on national image using fixed effects models, robustness tests, and heterogeneity analysis. The main conclusions of this article are as follows:

- (1) Economic participation includes three indicators: export, investment, and economic cooperation. Factor analysis is used to reduce the dimensionality of the indicators and obtain economic participation indicators for future research. The theoretical mechanism by which economic participation affects a country's image is that it affects the country's image by changing the level of prices and employment.
- (2) Through the double fixed effects model, it was found that economic participation has a significant promoting effect on national image. After adding control variables, economic participation can still have a positive impact on national image, but the intensity of the effect decreases. In addition, urbanization and geographical distance have a negative impact on the national image; Economic freedom, economic level, political relations, diplomatic relations, and economic institutional distance have a positive impact on a country's image. Through the replacement variable method and subsample regression test, it was found that the effect and significance of the core explanatory variable on the seven control variables remained unchanged, indicating that the conclusion was reliable and the robustness of the conclusion was verified. Possible endogeneity issues have been resolved through the system GMM method. Then, through heterogeneity analysis, it was found that compared to Central Asia and Central and Eastern Europe, the more China's economic participation in Southeast Asia, the more it often stimulates Southeast Asian countries to actively identify with China. And the significance of controlling variables on China's national image varies in different regions.

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