

Research on Brand Construction of Newly Established Local Undergraduate Universities from the Perspective of Cultural Soft Power: A Case Study of Chengdu Technological University

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Abstract

From the perspective of cultural soft power, this paper takes Chengdu Technological University as a case study to explore the pathways and strategies for brand building among newly established local undergraduate institutions. The research demonstrates that cultural soft power acts as a pivotal factor enabling universities to transcend homogenized competition and achieve distinctive development. Its essence lies in four key dimensions: historical and cultural heritage, regional culture, spiritual symbolism, and international communication capabilities. By systematically exploring, innovatively integrating, and strategically communicating these elements, universities can transform their cultural resources into unique brand symbols, thereby enhancing their social influence and core competitiveness. This paper proposes a brand-building framework of "value extraction, scene activation and collaborative communication," providing actionable practice guidelines for similar institutions while fostering the synergistic development of local economy and culture.

Keywords

Cultural soft power, University brand building, Local undergraduate institutions.

1. Introduction

The rapid popularization of higher education in China has led to a significant increase in the number of newly established local undergraduate Universities. These institutions face challenges such as limited resources, a lack of historical cultural heritage, and highly homogeneous competition. Currently, many universities place excessive emphasis on enhancing hardware facilities and expanding disciplines as part of their strategic planning for so-called hard power construction, while neglecting the development of cultural soft power. In fact, under the backdrop of globalization, cultural soft power has become a crucial factor enabling universities to overcome homogeneity and achieve distinctive development (Pan, 2013). For example, Chengdu Technological University, as a new type of local applied undergraduate college that integrates the characteristics of Sichuan's industrial culture, promotes the concept of serving the nation through industry, which aligns closely with the growing intelligent manufacturing sector in Chengdu. This alignment offers substantial potential for the establishment of a unique brand image. Nevertheless, the university still requires improvement in the areas of exploring, integrating, and disseminating its own cultural resources.

Most existing research focuses on the hardware facilities and discipline development of colleges and universities, with limited attention given to how cultural soft power influences university brand building. This is particularly true for newly established local undergraduate institutions, where studies on differentiated brand construction remain scarce. This study aims to propose a theoretical framework based on cultural soft power promoting brand development, offering a new perspective in university brand research. This paper aims to develop a practical and

operational framework for cultural mining, integrated innovation, and communication empowerment, specifically tailored for Chengdu Technological University and similar institutions. This approach will facilitate the deep exploration of cultural resources, foster unique brand characteristics through innovation and integration, and enhance branding capabilities via effective promotion. By addressing homogeneity constraints, this framework seeks to elevate social influence and core competitiveness. Ultimately, the research findings will provide support for the development of local economies and cultures, promoting the coordinated development of regional universities and their surrounding socioeconomic and cultural ecosystems.

2. The Connection Between Cultural Soft Power and University Branding

2.1. The Significance and Dimensions of Cultural Soft Power

Cultural soft power represents the aggregation of intangible resources that are gradually accumulated and formed during the long-term development of a university (Nye, 2012). Its essence lies in leveraging cultural influence to enhance the value of the college's brand and strengthen societal identification with the institution. Through an in-depth analysis of relevant literature, it is evident that cultural soft power can be categorized into four primary components (Ma & Xia, 2008, He, 2016, Fang, 2022). One of these is the historical culture of the institution, encompassing its legacy, spiritual symbols such as school motto and anthem, and the active contributions of alumni within these traditional frameworks (Yang, 2013). For instance, Wuhan University of Science and Technology has systematically compiled and studied its institutional history, distilling the core spirit of steel quality and successfully utilizing this historical narrative as a vital educational asset (Yang, 2013). Additionally, regional culture refers to the deep integration of a university's cultural resources with those of its locality, fostering a distinctive cultural brand (Wang, & Wang, 2016). An example is Weifang University of Science and Technology, which leverages its connection to the renowned local agricultural sage culture to establish characteristic disciplines and cultivate a unique brand image within the regional cultural context (Wang, & Wang, 2016). Furthermore, the spiritual emblem of a university revolves around symbolic expressions such as its motto and spirit, collectively forming a crucial spiritual pillar for the institution. The motto of Chengdu Technological University, "Using hand and brain, learning and doing together", encapsulates its mission of cultivating application-oriented talents and highlights its distinctive educational philosophy and spiritual outlook (Editorial Department, 2013). In terms of internationalization through cultural exchange, universities can enhance their global influence by exporting their cultural heritage and engaging in international collaborations. For instance, Shanghai has leveraged digital technology to enable the Yu Garden Lantern Festival to be showcased in Paris. This initiative aims to establish a cultural intellectual property with global influence, significantly enhancing international communication effectiveness (Dai, 2025). In these areas, four distinct yet interconnected dimensions collaborate energetically, enriching the cultural heritage of institutions of higher education while providing robust momentum for their development. By thoroughly analyzing and effectively utilizing these intangible resources, universities can not only elevate their brand value and public recognition but also demonstrate their unique cultural appeal and global influence.

2.2. The Role of Cultural Soft Power in University Branding

2.2.1. Enhance Brand Awareness and Build a Strong Reputation

In contemporary society, enhancing the brand awareness and reputation of educational institutions and cultural organizations has become increasingly significant. By developing distinctive cultural intellectual property (IP) and adopting an innovative model that integrates

culture with tourism, these entities can effectively expand their societal influence and strengthen their brand image. For instance, the Ancient Egyptian Civilization exhibition organized by the Shanghai Museum attracted a global audience due to its unique cultural allure and profound academic content (Dai, 2025). This event not only set a new record for visitor numbers at an international exhibition but also showcased Shanghai's identity as an international cultural metropolis. According to Dai (2025), the key to amplifying cultural soft power lies in the seamless integration of culture, tourism, and commercial activities. Such integration fosters public emotional resonance, promoting social media engagement, capturing public attention, and enhancing brand recognition and influence. Some universities lack innovative communication strategies, particularly in the undervaluation of digital IP development. As a result, many valuable cultural resources remain untapped, akin to hidden pearls, unable to fully realize their potential. Therefore, higher education institutions should proactively explore new digital and online communication channels to transform these cultural resources into influential cultural IP, further elevating brand awareness and reputation.

2.2.2. Enhance Cohesion and Social Identity

The historical culture and spiritual identity of a university constitute its unique and invaluable assets, playing an immeasurable role in enhancing the sense of belonging among faculty and students and strengthening internal cohesion (Yang, 2013). For instance, Wuhan University of Science and Technology has successfully integrated its college spirit into the community by establishing a college history museum and conducting steel quality educational activities. This approach ensures that all members are aligned with shared goals, significantly boosting their sense of belonging and identification (Yang, 2013). According to Yang (2013), compiling college history can transplant tradition and gather incentives, meaning it strengthens collective cohesion through historical identification. This highlights the critical role of college history culture in brand building. Brand construction focuses solely on superficial packaging while neglecting the in-depth exploration and inheritance of rich cultural connotations, the resulting brand may appear shallow, lacking deep cultural heritage and enduring appeal. Therefore, colleges and universities should carefully explore and inherit their unique cultural essence during the process of brand construction, integrating college history culture and spiritual elements into every aspect of branding to create a distinctive image and culture. By developing a unique cultural IP, facilitating the integration of the culture and tourism sectors, and thoroughly exploring and preserving the cultural and spiritual heritage of their institutional history, universities and related organizations can significantly enhance their visibility and reputation. Additionally, these efforts can strengthen cohesion among faculty and students while elevating the institution's social recognition.

2.2.3. Facilitate Differentiated Competition and Development

In the distinctive development of local colleges and universities, regional culture plays a pivotal role. It is closely intertwined with discipline construction and industry-university-research collaboration, providing abundant academic resources and practical insights for local institutions while laying a solid foundation for differentiated development (Wang, & Wang, 2016). The Weifang University of Science and Technology has deeply explored agricultural culture and indicatively established an interdisciplinary subject in facility agriculture, successfully charting a culture and industry differentiation path (Wang, & Wang, 2016). Wang & Wang (2016) emphasized that regional culture provides invaluable resources for the characteristic development of local colleges and universities, and its deep integration with discipline construction and other domains is a key factor in breaking through developmental bottlenecks. By integrating Nongsheng culture into discipline construction, the Weifang University of Science and Technology not only enriches the connotation of its disciplines but also establishes a unique cultural identity and value. The institution leverages the advantages

of regional culture to establish an interdisciplinary field in facility agriculture, demonstrating both a profound understanding of regional culture and forward-thinking, practical discipline construction. This initiative has cultivated talents equipped with agricultural scientific knowledge and practical skills, promoted the inheritance and innovation of agricultural culture, and invigorated the local economy. Similarly, Chengdu Technological University can rely on the industrial heritage of the Sichuan and Chongqing regions to build its unique emphasis on industrial culture and intelligent manufacturing, enhancing its visibility in society and contributing to the preservation and innovation of local industrial culture.

3. Analysis of Brand Building at Chengdu Technological University: Current Status and Challenges

3.1. A Brief History of the University

The history of Chengdu Technological University can be traced back to the founding of Sichuan Vocational college in 1913 (Editorial Department, 2013). Over a century of evolution and development, the institution has progressively transformed into an applied technology undergraduate college with engineering as its core discipline. Throughout its extensive educational journey, the noble concept of industry serving the country has been deeply embedded in its ethos. The college made significant contributions by investing heavily in industrial technical support and cultivating numerous technical talents for the nation (Editorial Department, 2013). Nevertheless, the systematic exploration and utilization of historical resources remain underdeveloped, and the writing of institutional history largely remains at the fragmented recording stage, failing to distill unique and prominent spiritual symbols. Furthermore, areas such as the development of thematic cultural intellectual property (IP) related to the college's history require further enhancement and refinement.

3.2. Regional Cultural Resources

The geographical location of Chengdu Technological University is strategically advantageous, situated within the Sichuan-Chongqing region, an area renowned for its robust industrial culture. This region offers a cultural resources that the institution can leverage. For instance, the college could utilize industrial heritage sites such as Chengdu's Eastern Suburb Memory to conduct in-depth research on the spirit of third-line construction and its relationship with modern industries like intelligent manufacturing. These resources provide substantial material for analysis. Furthermore, the integration of traditional crafts such as Shu embroidery, Sichuan opera face-changing with contemporary industrial skills exemplifies the unique expression of the Bashu craftsman spirit, which holds significant potential for incorporating innovative elements. Additionally, Chengdu's rapidly developing intelligent valley and the new Chengdu-Chongqing twin-city economic circle offer numerous opportunities for advancing the college's academic disciplines and distinctive features. These appealing regional cultural resources have yet to be systematically incorporated into the college's brand identity, and the development of a characteristic brand such as regional cultural processing industry education still requires further effort.

3.3. Current Brand Initiatives

Using hand and brain, learning and doing together, this college motto and its associated spiritual emblem, encapsulates a profoundly significant educational philosophy and practical wisdom (Editorial Department, 2013). Specifically, the concept of hand and brain underscores the necessity of closely integrating theory with practice. This implies that students should not only engage in critical thinking during their studies but also actively participate in hands-on activities to transform theoretical knowledge into practical skills. The notion of integration of learning and doing represents an advanced iteration of this principle, advocating for the

seamless fusion of study and practice to create a mutually reinforcing and constructive process. Such a motto distinctly highlights the pedagogical characteristics of engineering institutions and aligns with the objectives of application-oriented undergraduate colleges, which aim to cultivate talents possessing both robust theoretical foundations and strong practical capabilities (Editorial Department, 2013). In terms of cultural landscape construction, the college could establish a thematic square or sculpture titled Hand and Brain within the campus to artistically manifest the institutional spirit. An engineering instruction system incorporating tool and machinery elements could be developed to foster an industrial cultural atmosphere across the campus. Practically, a demonstration area for learning and doing together could be established as a practice base, showcasing students' hands-on achievements to inspire greater participation in extracurricular activities. Additionally, merchandise such as T-shirts and commemorative badges reflecting the college motto could be designed. The special gifts based on the college emblem could be created for exchanges with other universities and corporate partners.

3.4. The Main Challenge in Building a Brand

The exploration and utilization of cultural resources remain insufficient, resulting in a fragmented presentation of institutional history. University historical archives dispersed and stored across various locations without systematic organization, research, or thematic refinement. Consequently, the institution has failed to establish a core spiritual symbol akin to steel quality at Wuhan University of Science and Technology (Yang, 2013). The rich historical and cultural resources in Sichuan and Chongqing such as Marshal Chen Yi's hometown have not been effectively integrated into the narrative of the college brand, missing an opportunity to align party building with institutional branding (Editorial Department, 2013). Furthermore, the historical spirit of serving the country through industry within the college has yet to be distilled into a cohesive cultural symbol. This lack of unification results in teachers and students lacking a strong sense of identification with the university. This situation contradicts Yang Zhen's assertion that compiling and researching institutional history is a critical pathway for cultural inheritance, highlighting the relatively weak cultural foundation of the institution compared to the college (Yang, 2013).

The absence of integration of regional characteristics in the discipline setting is notably apparent, with a significant degree of homogenization observed. This issue is particularly conspicuous in the alignment of professional programs with local dominant industries like electronic information and intelligent manufacturing, where the matching is still not optimal. In contrast to the Weifang Institute of Science and Technology, which has implemented a distinctive development strategy focusing on agricultural culture and facility agriculture, Chengdu Technological University seems to lag behind in this aspect (Wang, & Wang, 2016). Industry-university-research collaboration seems disconnected from practical needs, with college-enterprise partnerships often limited to technology transfer rather than fostering deeper cultural and tourism integration projects. Consequently, opportunities for promoting local cultural heritage and innovation are missed. For instance, the establishment of a major such as intelligent manufacturing lacks sufficient incorporation of distinctive local cultural elements, such as certain Bashu crafts, resulting in an insufficiently unique competitive advantage. Wang, & Wang (2016) emphasized that deeply integrating regional culture into discipline construction is crucial, holding substantial significance for enhancing both the depth and breadth of academic disciplines. Chengdu Technological University has been relatively slow in this area, failing to fully leverage the appeal of regional culture to enrich its disciplinary connotation or enhance the attractiveness and influence of its programs.

Brand communication efficiency remains sub-optimal, largely attributable to the limitations of existing publicity channels. Institutions appear to overly depend on conventional methods such

as admissions brochures and offline events. Efforts in new media platforms, including short videos and virtual showrooms, have been insufficient, hindering engagement with younger audiences. Furthermore, the integration of cultural tourism and digital communication strategies proposed has not been effectively implemented, constraining the overall brand communication impact (Dai, 2025). Additionally, regarding internationalization, the institution demonstrates limited participation in the Belt and Road education cooperation platform, an essential forum for global exchange. Liu (2006) emphasis on leveraging internationalization to enhance brand reputation, indicating missed opportunities to elevate brand influence through international collaboration. Internally, the college's brand management mechanism lacks cohesion and systematic structure. Brand-building responsibilities are dispersed across various departments without a dedicated Cultural Brand Construction Committee for strategic oversight, resulting in fragmented strategies and inefficient resource allocation. Research underscores the necessity of reinforcing an effective brand management framework. The Chengdu Technological University is comparatively weaker in this area owing to the absence of a systematic and efficient brand management framework. Moreover, the long-term impact of brand-related activities has been limited, as most initiatives remain short-term in nature. For instance, events such as Industrial Culture Month are confined to annual occurrences. The ability to deeply penetrate everyday brand awareness among stakeholders is insufficient, which contradicts prior research findings that emphasize the necessity of continuous brand updating and maintenance for sustaining vitality. Therefore, there remains significant potential for enhancing the sustainability and systematization of brand development efforts.

4. Leveraging Cultural Soft Power for Brand Building Design

4.1. Using Cultural Soft Power in Brand Building Path Design

To construct a red industrial culture brand in the form of a comprehensive framework, further enhancing the development and utilization of the college's historical resources as an intellectual property (IP). Drawing inspiration from Wuhan University of Science and Technology, which has successfully leveraged the outcomes of the Hong'an Hang historical education base, Chengdu Technological University aims to transform its century-long history of national industrial revitalization and the legacy of distinguished alumnus Chen Yi into distinctive cultural symbols (Yang, 2013). Specifically, the university can design a virtual classroom such as Chen Yi's Youth Growth Journey, employing virtual reality technology to authentically reconstruct his academic and life experiences, enabling students to deeply appreciate the demeanor and spirit of their predecessors. Additionally, immersive theatrical performances, such as Steel Backbone, can be developed to vividly depict the arduous process of industrial development and significant historical achievements. These performances can be integrated with the college's history museum and metalworking internship base for on-site exhibitions and demonstrations, amplifying the impact and effectiveness of communication beyond mere textual narratives.

In regard to the symbols of industrial spirit, the college can draw inspiration from the subtle design of the Nongsheng Culture landscape at the Weifang University of Science and Technology (Wang & Wang, 2016). By meticulously crafting a thematic sculpture cluster centered on the concept of hands and brain within the campus and establishing an industrial heritage corridor, such as an old machine tool exhibition area, these initiatives not only honor the history of industry but also create a distinctive visual identity system while emphasizing the university's profound industrial culture. The development of historical and cultural resources and the integration of industry with education are equally crucial. Regarding the innovative practice of curriculum-based ideological and education, the college adopt the red steel furnace model of Wuhan University of Science and Technology, skillfully embedding historical cases of industrial

service to the nation into professional course content. For instance, a specialized course titled "History of Technology" could be incorporated into the mechanical engineering curriculum. This would enable students to explore historical contexts while drawing on technical research examples from collaborative enterprises, such as China Electrical Science and Huawei. This approach allows students to not only acquire professional knowledge but also deeply appreciate the significant role of industry in serving the nation. At the same time, it is essential to establish a virtual simulation experimental project centered on industrial culture, ensuring its integration with the teaching of intelligent manufacturing scenarios. By leveraging modern educational methodologies, this initiative can rejuvenate industrial culture, infusing it with vitality and relevance in the contemporary era.

4.2. Highlight the unique aspects of industry-education integration and digital brand communication

It is crucial to establish a discipline brand named Intelligent Manufacturing and Red Gene and to propel discipline cluster toward a more influential trajectory. Drawing inspiration from Shanghai's successful integration of cultural, tourism, commercial, and sports exhibition development, the college aim to adopt intelligent manufacturing as the core concept for integrating electronic information and other related resources, including modern service industries (Dai, 2025). This approach seeks to cultivate a series of disciplines with distinctive characteristics and competitive advantages within the Chengdu-Chongqing economic circle. Specifically, it may involve establishing a college in collaboration with Foxconn Group, focusing on the integration of education and industry. Additionally, this initiative would design a talent training model that enables students to transition smoothly into the workplace immediately upon graduation, thereby fostering a seamless connection between the educational and industrial sectors. The college will collaborate with BOE and other enterprises to organize events such as the Industrial Design competition, which effectively incorporates college history elements into product innovation and design, showcasing the appealing aspects of red culture. In the realm of digital communication, the college drew inspiration from the successful digital cultural initiatives of the Shanghai Museum (Dai, 2025). The college formally launched a platform named Digital Manufacturing. This platform has successfully introduced a virtual exhibition hall called Chen Yi Memorial Park, which integrates AI-guided tours and interactive Q&A functionalities. This allows visitors to experience a genuine sense of presence while appreciating the profound appeal of historical culture. Additionally, the college meticulously developed a series of documentaries titled Century-old Engineering Micro-documentary. These films, distributed through new media platforms such as TikTok and Bilibili, aim to promote educational narratives focused on hand-brain coordination, thereby enhancing the influence of brand. In order to achieve resource coordination and brand unity the two campuses, the college have placed significant emphasis on the systematic design of cultural identity. Drawing inspiration from the four parks in one campus layout concept of the Weifang University of Science and Technology, the college have developed a series of visual logos that integrate industrial style with historical elements for both the Pidun and Yibin campuses. These include sculptures related to the college emblem and guidance view systems, aiming to foster a robust campus cultural atmosphere. Additionally, the college have reinforced the integration and development of virtual platforms, establishing a cross-campus cloud training platform to facilitate the sharing of practical resources such as metalworking internships and enterprise perception lines. This approach effectively addresses the issue of collaborative efficiency campuses and promotes the comprehensive development of the discipline brand.

4.3. Innovative Cultural Consumption and University-Community Collaboration

Promoting the deep integration of intellectual property (IP) into the local economy is a critical task. The college is dedicated to establishing a new economic model for industrial research and development. Drawing inspiration from the successful implementation of the Cultural Tourism Business Exhibition in Xuhui District, Shanghai, the college aim to focus on developing the Chengdu Industrial Heritage Research Belt (Dai, 2025). Under the theme of Century-Old Engineering and Smart Future, and in close collaboration with the government of Pidū District, the college have meticulously planned a series of sightseeing routes. These routes connect key landmarks such as the university History Museum, university-enterprise laboratories, and the industrial heritage park, forming a distinctive industrial research route system. Furthermore, the college have actively launched a range of cultural and creative products, including 3D-printed college history models and intelligent robot teaching tools. Through strategic partnerships with enterprises, it promote and market these products, enriching the campus's cultural product offerings while accelerating the practical application and transformation of scientific and technological achievements.

In the context of college-enterprise cultural cooperation, the college have drawn inspiration from the collaboration model Wuhan University of Science and Technology and China Baowu Iron and Steel Group (Yang, 2013). Together with renowned enterprises such as Changhong and Kyushu, the college has jointly initiated the Annual White Paper on Industrial Spirit. This white paper aims to articulate key concepts and value pursuits in industrial development, enhancing the overall influence and voice of the industry. Furthermore, the college believe that attention should be given to digital public opinion management and the enhancement of social service capabilities. Establishing a big data analysis system focused on industrial culture will enable real-time monitoring and analysis of public opinions, allowing us to promptly address various societal concerns arising from expansion while ensuring brand stability and fostering positive communication. Simultaneously, the college are committed to fulfilling social responsibilities. For instance, inspired by the rural education initiative promoted by the college Weifang University of Science and Technology, the college have introduced similar programs into kindergartens and organized minor courses on machinery for primary and secondary colleges in Pidū District (Wang & Wang, 2016). These activities not only disseminate industrial knowledge but also cultivate young people's interest and enthusiasm for engineering technology, contributing to the improvement of local reputation and providing intellectual and practical support for regional economic and social development.

5. Conclusion

Through a systematic analysis and verification of multiple case studies, this research examines the pivotal role of cultural soft power in the construction of university brands and its critical significance. The findings indicate that new local undergraduate institutions relying solely on hardware upgrades or the expansion of subject offerings will struggle to effectively overcome the challenges posed by homogenization, making it even more difficult to achieve distinctive and differentiated development. Cultural soft power embodies the unique spiritual of a university and serves as an intangible asset. The deep heritage accumulated over time, the distinct charm of regional characteristics, and the continuously stimulated innovation gene collectively form the hallmark of a university brand that distinguishes it from others. For Chengdu Technological University, it is crucial to prioritize the three core strategies of cultural mining, integration and innovation, as well as communication and empowerment. By thoroughly exploring and leveraging its century-old noble traditions, such as the concept of saving the country through industry, the institution can transform the valuable cultural

resources represented by the Chen Yi spirit and military industry legacy into distinctive cultural symbols, enhancing brand recognition and fostering a stronger sense of identity.

This study proposes an integrated framework for brand building driven by cultural soft power, comprising three fundamental components: value extraction, scene activation, and collaborative communication. By thoroughly analyzing and extracting the distinctive cultural values of higher education institutions, designing culturally relevant activities and products, and leveraging diverse resources for brand promotion, a constructive force for brand development can be established. This framework offers a practical and replaceable approach for similar institutions, facilitating the advancement of university brand construction and enhancing the social influence and competitiveness of higher education organizations.

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