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The evolution of the idea of "a bosom friend afar brings a distant land near" from the perspective of local gazetteers: social change, civilizational transmission and the evolution of the Tianxia worldview

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Abstract. The relationship between the idea of "a bosom friend afar brings a distant land near" and social change, civilizational transmission and the evolution of the Tianxia worldview is investigated from the perspective of local gazetteers. A five-stratum evidence base is constructed from gazetteer documents, and a "practice–narrative" double-loop cross-checking model is employed for coding and testing. The results show that the idea functions as a legitimizing narrative and an identity amplifier in gazetteer writing and feeds back into communicative practice through institutional backflow; the relationship between the idea and practice follows a four-stage cycle of "practice expansion, narrative coding, institutional backflow and identity gain"; and the Tianxia worldview has undergone three semantic reconstructions from the territorial Tianxia to the nation-state and then to the global Tianxia. An operational framework of stratified evidence and double-loop modeling is developed, providing a verifiable methodological reference for interdisciplinary research on local gazetteers, intellectual history and social history.

Keywords: local gazetteers, "a bosom friend afar brings a distant land near", operationalization, evidence stratification, double-loop cross-checking, Tianxia worldview

1. Introduction

For over a millennium, "a bosom friend afar brings a distant land near" has often been regarded as the spiritual driving force of transregional intercourse, as if a sense of identification and closeness existed prior to transport, trade and governance and thereby propelled society towards openness. This popular narrative, however, misplaces the idea at the very beginning of the causal chain: what actually governs the expansion of intercourse are the material and institutional conditions provided by transport technology, the commodity economy and state governance. The idea itself does not directly set history in motion; it participates in history through institutional backflow. The present study proceeds from this problematique. Its research background lies in the fact that intellectual history, gazetteer studies and social history have long developed along separate paths, and that the classic humanities and social science question of "how ideas drive history" still lacks a

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testable middle-range mechanism account. Its research purpose is to reconstruct, by means of general humanities and social science methods, the relationship between the idea of "a bosom friend afar brings a distant land near" and social change; to rewrite the sweeping judgment that "the idea matters" as a testable mechanism proposition; and, through stratified evidence collection, double-loop modeling and cross-checking of institutional backflow, to examine how the idea, at institutional nodes such as gazetteer compilation, modern education, gazetteer formats, national education and national strategy, provides identity integration and moral legitimation for intercourse through a mechanism of "coding–backflow–reproduction", thereby answering the core question of this study: under what conditions and through what mechanisms does the idea carried by "a bosom friend afar brings a distant land near" participate in and shape the historical process of social intercourse?

2. The origin of reconstruction: from thematic exposition to mechanism inquiry

2.1. Diagnosis of the original argumentative form

Existing studies examine the idea of "a bosom friend afar brings a distant land near" from the perspective of local gazetteers, and the basic argumentative form they have produced is as follows: from such aspects as changes in social structure, economic development, education, science and technology, transport, civilizational transmission and the evolution of the Tianxia worldview, they systematically lay out the various records in local gazetteers, which are taken to embody the supporting role of the idea. The strength of this form is its complete vision and rich material, which can present the broad interface between idea and practice; its weakness lies in a loose argumentative structure, so that readers cannot distinguish which propositions are supported by evidence, to what strength they are supported, and within what boundaries they hold.

Measured against the audit standards of general humanities and social science research methods, this kind of expository argument suffers from three typical limitations. First, spatiotemporal compression: the argument runs directly from a poem of the early Tang to the contemporary community with a shared future for mankind, and the millennium of intermediate links (institutional and practical changes from the Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties) is narratively bridged without any stratum test. Second, loose functional attribution: practices driven by multiple factors of technology, interest and governance needs, such as merchant guild organization, transport construction and technological development, are univocally credited to the idea. Third, substituting narrative heat for historical argument: the influence of the idea in contemporary discourse is tacitly taken as the role it actually played in history. These three points correspond respectively to the three types of mismatch listed in the general methodological table—"spatiotemporal compression", "functional displacement" and "substituting narrative for history"—and are the standard objects of treatment in the public narrative correction model.

It must be stressed that diagnosis is not negation. The general orientation of the original argument—that the idea is deeply connected with communicative practice and the evolution of the Tianxia worldview—does not thereby fail; what fails is only the testability of its mode of argumentation. The task of reconstruction is to rewrite the value judgment that "the idea matters" as the mechanism proposition of "at which links, through which mechanisms and under which conditions the idea matters".

2.2. Reformulating the research question as a mechanism question

The study first defines its object and outcome. [O], the idea of "a bosom friend afar brings a distant land near" refers to the cultural conceptual complex generated from the verse in Wang Bo's *Seeing Vice Magistrate Du off to His Post in Shuzhou*, diffused through textual inclusion and educational transmission, and continuously reinterpreted in the contemporary era; [Y] refers to the sustained expansion of transregional communicative practice and the evolution of the Tianxia worldview from the territorial to the global. The temporal boundary runs from the early Tang to the present, about 1,350 years; the spatial boundary is mainly the area covered by Chinese-language local gazetteers; and the subject boundary encompasses literati, merchant groups, gazetteer compilers, educators and contemporary discourse constructors.

On this basis, the value question of "what the idea is and whether it is good" is rewritten as a mechanism question: through which mechanism [M] and under which conditions [C] does [O] enter into a stable relation of mutual constitution with [Y]? This overarching question is decomposed into three operational sub-questions that can each be evidenced separately. Q1 (temporal question): does the idea precede or follow large-scale transregional communicative practice in historical sequence? Q2 (agency question): is the association between idea and practice in gazetteer records a faithful record of practitioners' motives, or an ex post coding by compilers? Q3 (backflow question): at which institutional nodes is the idea reproduced, and how does it in turn shape subsequent practice?

The three sub-questions are designed according to the qualifying standard of "being able to conceive a counterexample". Q1 can be falsified by "large-scale intercourse preceding the verse"; Q2 can be falsified by "self-reference of the idea in merchant-group documents"; Q3 can be falsified by "no association between idea and practice at backflow nodes". Questions for which no counterexample can be conceived are excluded from this study.

2.3. Competing hypotheses and research model

Three competing hypotheses are preset according to procedure. H1 (idea-driven thesis): the idea exists antecedently as a cultural gene and continuously drives the expansion of communicative practice; it predicts that the idea comes first in temporal sequence and that practitioners are directly inspired by the idea. H2 (practice-ratification thesis): material conditions such as transport, commerce and technology first propel the expansion of intercourse, and the idea is a ratifying coding of the expanded practice; it predicts that practice comes first in temporal sequence and that the codifiers are gazetteer compilers rather than practitioners. H3 (bidirectional construction thesis): material expansion and ideational coding run independently on two tracks, shaping each other and gaining cyclically at institutional backflow nodes.

The public narrative correction model is adopted as the research model and implemented according to the progressive procedure for complex topics: Loop A is first used to reconstruct the factual process of communicative practice, Loop B is then used to analyze the narrative operation of the idea, and cross-checking is finally conducted at institutional backflow nodes. This choice of model is determined by the nature of the object: the object of this study itself contains a widely circulating public narrative ("the idea runs through and drives social change"), and correcting that narrative is precisely where the scholarly contribution lies.

2.4. Literature review and methodological positioning

Existing scholarship provides three foundations for this study while also leaving clear room for advance. In the gazetteer studies tradition, Cang Xiuliang systematically sorted out the origins, formats and compilation traditions of local gazetteers [1], Ba Zhaoxiang constructed an overall disciplinary system for gazetteer studies [2], and Zhuge Ji recorded the institutional process of fifty years of contemporary gazetteer compilation; these

three established the status of gazetteers as institutional documents, but they devote little discussion to how gazetteers participate in the reproduction of ideas. In social and economic history, Wang Zhenzhong reconstructed the commercial network between Huizhou and the outside world using folk archival documents [3], Fan Jinmin examined the operating mechanisms of commerce in Jiangnan during the Ming and Qing dynasties [4], and Ge Jianxiong's study of migration history provided a long-duration framework for population mobility and regional intercourse [5]; these works fully demonstrate the value of gazetteers as historical sources, yet most of them treat gazetteers merely as a "source repository" awaiting verification. In intellectual history, Ge Zhaoguang reconstructed the intellectual-historical lineage of the discourse on "China" [6], Zhao Tingyang proposed the philosophical conception of the Tianxia system [7], and Assmann's theory of cultural memory revealed the general mechanism of textual canonization and identity construction [8]; all three are highly illuminating, but none descends to the middle-level document of the local gazetteer, and none offers a middle-range mechanism test of "when ideas take effect and how they take effect".

The positioning of this study is therefore as follows: taking the general methodological procedure as its skeleton, it advances local gazetteers from a "source repository" to a "stratifiable, anchorable and cross-checkable evidence system", and advances the study of ideas from philosophical speculation to testable mechanism propositions. This positioning is the premise of all operational steps that follow and is where this study differs from existing scholarship.

3. Conceptual operationalization and evidence stratification

3.1. Tri-property operational definition of the idea

The first task of the operationalization stage is to write a codable operational definition for the idea of "a bosom friend afar brings a distant land near". Following the tri-property coding rule, the content of the idea is decomposed into three dimensions. The material dimension (on what carriers it exists): the core carrier is the verse text itself and its sequence of inclusion in Tang poetry anthologies, elementary readers, encyclopedias, the literature sections of local gazetteers, and down to contemporary textbooks and policy texts. The capacity dimension (who promotes it through what actions): this includes literati recitation and interpretation, compilers organizing records within a framework of intercourse, educators' intergenerational transmission, and contemporary discourse constructors' reinterpretation. The qualitative dimension (what meanings and values are ascribed): the semantic field has expanded through three stages—the meaning of friendship consolation in the Tang, the ethically extended meaning of the Confucian "all within the four seas are brothers", and the global governance meaning of the contemporary "community with a shared future for mankind".

The operational mapping of concepts is shown in Table 1. An operational discipline follows: any assertion that "the idea plays a role" must specify at least two of the three elements—capacity (agent and action), materiality (carrier) and quality (ascribed meaning)—as supported by evidence, and only when all three are present may it enter formal argumentation. Assertions that have only the qualitative dimension without evidence of capacity can serve only as material for narrative analysis (Loop B) and must not be used as material for factual argumentation (Loop A). This discipline directly blocks "evaluative contamination": the contemporary value of the idea can no longer be automatically converted into its historical role.

Table 1. Operational mapping of core concepts

Theoretical concept	Observational dimension	Core question	Indicators and evidence
Idea—materiality	Textual carrier chain	On what carriers does it exist	Inclusion sequence and textual lineage (E-001, E-002)
Idea—capacity	Agent of action	Who promotes it and through what actions	Recitation, compilation and educational behavior (E-002, E-012, E-014)
Idea—quality	Meaning ascription	What meaning is ascribed	Three-stage expansion of the semantic field (E-010, E-011)
Communicative practice	Material process	How the scale expands	Trade routes, guild halls, transport and communication facilities (E-003 to E-006, E-009)
Tianxia worldview	Conceptual framework	How it evolves	The territorial-to-global shift in the meaning of "Tianxia" (E-010)

Note: The complete list of evidence codes E-001 to E-014 is given in Table 2; the "three properties" refer to materiality (carrier), capacity (action) and quality (meaning).

3.2. Five strata of gazetteer evidence and T0 anchoring

In the stratification stage, all evidence is renamed into five strata according to the themes of this study. L1, the generative stratum: the original generative events of idea and practice, such as Wang Bo's composition of the poem. L2, the practice stratum: the sustained unfolding of communicative practices such as commerce, migration, transport and education. L3, the institutional stratum: the post-station system, the gazetteer compilation system, the civil examination and education system, as well as contemporary gazetteer formats and national strategy. L4, the record stratum: the recording and retrospective narration of practice in texts such as local gazetteers, official histories and collected works. L5, the reproduction stratum: contemporary reinterpretation of the idea and its backflow into education, compilation and policy.

The key point of stratification is to distinguish three kinds of time: the time an event occurred, the time the material was produced, and the time it was obtained. In gazetteer records of commercial practice, a separation between the record T0 and the event T0 is common: Qing gazetteers retrospectively record Ming trade routes, and the two T0s may differ by more than two hundred years; using them side by side without annotation is precisely a common source of spatiotemporal compression mismatch. T0 anchoring is divided into four levels —precise, interval, relative and doubtful: Wang Bo's poem was composed around 675 (interval); guild-hall events recorded in Ming and Qing gazetteers are marked by Ming and Qing reign years while the recording time is counted separately (separated annotation); the opening of the Silk Road preceded the verse by several centuries (relative); and individual isolated cases are marked as doubtful.

The reason local gazetteers can undertake this task of stratified evidence collection lies in the duality of their documentary nature. On the one hand, the gazetteer documentary system reflected in the *Union Catalogue of Chinese Local Gazetteers* has a distinct regional and temporal character and provides a systematic framework for dating and locating [9]; on the other hand, gazetteer research from the perspective of social and cultural history has fully revealed that the gazetteer text itself is a product of editorial stance and must be read against its context of production [10]. These two points correspond exactly to this study's dual

arrangement of using gazetteers simultaneously as a source of Loop A evidence and as an object of Loop B analysis.

3.3. Evidence admission and coding rules

In the evidence-collection stage, materials are gathered in parallel along three axes: the material practice axis (the scale and distribution of trade routes, guild halls, and transport and communication facilities), the discourse-institution axis (gazetteer texts, compilation formats, educational systems and policy documents), and the perceptual experience axis (expressions of contemporaries' spatial conceptions and willingness to engage in intercourse). All materials are uniformly numbered (E-001 to E-014) with provenance and traceable information preserved, and are admitted at four levels—formal base, auxiliary base, pending base and exclusion: those with a clear stratum and anchorable T0 enter the formal base; secondary research enters the auxiliary base; isolated or stratum-unclear items enter the pending base; and those that cannot be dated or located are excluded. Well-known historical facts (such as the dates of post roads, canal transport, railways and the Belt and Road Initiative) serve as background auxiliary material and are not numbered together with documentary evidence.

In the coding stage, six attributes are assigned to each item: stratum, T0, level (individual–organization–institution), nature axis, principal tri-property dimension, and hypothesis association (supporting or weakening H1, H2 or H3). Two coders independently code a sample and record disagreements, which are converted into revised items of the coding rules; institutions are not inferred from personal experience, and public opinion volume is not passed off as consensus.

3.4. The dual attribute of local gazetteers: an institutionalized container of ideas

Beyond the evidence rules, the documentary attribute of local gazetteers requires further theoretical clarification. This article proposes that the local gazetteer is an "institutionalized container of ideas": the gazetteer-compilation system periodically records a locality's mountains and rivers, products, personages and literature according to a unified format, so that any communicative practice and ideational expression that enters the gazetteer thereby acquires stable transgenerational preservation and an officially recognized legitimate status. This container attribute distinguishes gazetteers from private collected works and commercial ledgers: the survival of the latter depends on individual contingency, whereas that of the former depends on institutional inertia.

The other side of the container is selection. Anderson revealed how print capitalism shaped the imagination of the community through synchronized reading [11]; in the gazetteer context, compilation formats play a similar synchronizing role: the literature section determines which texts are canonized, the personage section determines which actions are commended, and the customs section determines which modes of intercourse are recorded as "normal". Zhou Zhenhe's study of the division of historical cultural regions provides a methodological reference for observing regional differences through documents. Local gazetteers therefore both preserve facts and produce narratives; on this basis the study sets gazetteers simultaneously as a source of Loop A evidence and an object of Loop B analysis, marking their record attribute as L4 in the stratification so as to prevent the two attributes from being conflated. This treatment is the implementation of double-loop modeling at the level of documentary studies.

4. Construction of the evidence base and coding analysis

4.1. Aggregation of three-axis evidence and stratum labeling

The formal evidence base contains fourteen items, and the evidence chains can be grouped into six sets (see Table 2). The first set, the ideational text chain: E-001, Wang Bo's poem (L1, T0 c. 675), is the generative event of the idea; E-002, inclusion in elementary readers and encyclopedias from the Tang and Song onward (L3/L4), is its carrier expansion. The second set, the communicative practice chain: E-003, Huizhou merchants' guild halls and business activities in Jiangxi recorded in Ming and Qing gazetteers (L2/L4, event and record T0 annotated separately) [12]; E-004, regional interaction seen in gazetteer compilation along the Longshu Road from the Ming to the Republic of China (L2/L4) [13]; E-005, the integrative pattern of multi-ethnic literature in which "each contains the other" as recorded in gazetteers (L2/L4) [14]. The third set, the technology and structure chain: E-006, a mechanistic study of modern technological innovation and social structural change (L2) [15].

Table 2. Evidence list and stratification

No.	Evidence and source	T0 anchoring	Stratum	Dimension	Hypothesis
E-001	Wang Bo's poem *Seeing Vice Magistrate Du off to His Post in Shuzhou*	c. 675 (interval)	L1	Materiality	Idea generation
E-002	Inclusion in anthologies, elementary readers and encyclopedias from the Tang and Song onward	Tang–Song onward (relative)	L3/L4	Materiality	Loop B operation
E-003	Huizhou merchants' guild halls and business in Jiangxi recorded in Ming and Qing gazetteers	Event in Ming–Qing, record later (separated)	L2/L4	Capacity	Supports H2
E-004	Gazetteer compilation and regional interaction along the Longshu Road	Ming to Republic of China (interval)	L2/L4	Capacity	Supports H2
E-005	Integrative pattern of multi-ethnic literature recorded in gazetteers	Accumulated over dynasties (relative)	L2/L4	Quality	Supports H2
E-006	Modern technological innovation and social structural change	Modern period (interval)	L2	Materiality	Supports H2
E-007	Reflection on the nature of gazetteers' academic character and social value	2002 (precise)	L4	Quality	Methodological reflection
E-008	Mythological records in Henan gazetteers	Records over dynasties, study in 2022 (separated)	L4/L5	Quality	Methodological reflection
E-009	Spatiotemporal pattern and civilizing logic of Fuzhou cultural heritage	Heritage over dynasties, study in 2025 (separated)	L2/L4	Materiality	Supports H2
E-010	"Great Harmony", "Moderate Prosperity" and the theoretical history of the Tianxia worldview	2026 (precise)	L4	Quality	Theoretical framework

Table 2. Continued

E-011	Contemporary extraction and presentation of Chinese cultural symbols	2025 (precise)	L5	Quality	Supports H3
E-012	Paths for integrating Hehe culture into gazetteer compilation	2025 (precise)	L3/L5	Capacity	Supports H3
E-013	Ways for gazetteers to serve cross-strait integrated development	2024 (precise)	L5	Capacity	Supports H3
E-014	Use of local history resources in homeland-nation education	2025 (precise)	L5	Capacity	Supports H3

Note: In T0 anchoring, "separated" means that the time of the event and the time of material production are annotated separately; strata are named according to the themes of this study—L1 generation, L2 practice, L3 institution, L4 record and L5 reproduction; "dimension" denotes the principal tri-property dimension (materiality, capacity or quality); documentary sources for each item are given in the corresponding citations in the text and in the references at the end of the article.

The fourth set, the gazetteer record chain: E-007, a reflection on the nature of gazetteers' academic character and social value (L4) [16]; E-008, a study of mythological records in Henan gazetteers (L4/L5) [17]; E-009, the spatiotemporal pattern and civilizing logic of cultural heritage in the Fuzhou Basin (L2/L4) [18]. The fifth set, the Tianxia worldview chain: E-010, a theoretical-historical review of "Great Harmony", "Moderate Prosperity" and the traditional Chinese Tianxia worldview (L4) [19]. The sixth set, the contemporary backflow chain: E-011, the contemporary extraction and presentation of Chinese cultural symbols (L5) [20]; E-012, research on paths for integrating Hehe culture into gazetteer compilation (L3/L5) [21]; E-013, research on ways for gazetteers to serve cross-strait integrated development (L5) [22]; E-014, research on the use of local history resources in national education (L5) [23].

The auxiliary base records time anchors of well-known historical facts: the opening of the Silk Road preceded the generation of the idea by several centuries; the Sui–Tang post-road system was contemporaneous with, yet independent of, the verse; Ming and Qing canal transport and trade-route networks form the background of E-003; and the telegraph and railways from the 1870s onward, the reform and opening up of 1978, and the Belt and Road Initiative of 2013 mark the temporal boundaries of contemporary nodes. Although these time points do not independently carry argumentative weight, they provide a public frame of reference for all temporal judgments.

4.2. Coding results: support, weakening and key turning points

The coding matrix displays four patterns of adjudicative significance. First, the temporal pattern: large-scale transregional intercourse (the Silk Road, the post-road system) precedes the generation of the ideational text in time, weakening H1's expectation that "the idea comes first". Second, the motivational pattern: guild-hall inscriptions and merchant-group regulations recorded in gazetteers directly reflect the logic of economic organization, and the density of self-reference to the idea in these texts is extremely low, weakening H1's expectation that "practitioners are inspired by the idea". Third, the carrier pattern: the expansion sequence of ideational carriers (anthologies—encyclopedias—gazetteer literature sections—textbooks—policy texts) and that of practice (post roads—canal transport–railways—the Internet) run broadly parallel with different rhythms, supporting the judgment of two independent tracks. Fourth, the backflow pattern: each qualitative change in the scale of intercourse is closely followed by a rise in the density of ideational coding and by institutional backflow, supporting H3's judgment of gain.

Four key turning points are identified: T1, the maturation of the commodity economy in the Ming and Qing (a qualitative change in the scale of intercourse and the formation of the guild-hall system); T2, the introduction of modern transport (the technologization of spatiotemporal compression); T3, the reform and opening up of 1978 (institutional opening); and T4, the Belt and Road Initiative of 2013 (the institutional convergence of idea and national strategy). In coding, all four turning points exhibit a consistent temporal structure—"Loop A practice expansion first, Loop B coding enhancement second, backflow thereafter"—which provides the basis for intra-case cross-verification across periods.

4.3. Diagnosis of six types of mismatch in the original narrative

Taking the coding results as a reference, the original expository argument is diagnosed type by type. Empirical overgeneralization: scattered records in a number of gazetteers are generalized into "the idea runs through the entire process from agricultural to industrial to information civilization", exceeding the spatiotemporal coverage of the evidence. Functional displacement: merchant guild halls, driven by interest and organizational costs, are credited to the idea. Exaggeration of effect: the multiple causes of transport and technological development are reduced univocally to the impetus of the idea. Confusion of agency: compilers' (L4) ex post ratification of intercourse is read as practitioners' (L2) motive for action. Spatiotemporal compression: the early Tang verse and the contemporary community with a shared future for mankind are directly concatenated, with the millennium of intermediate links left untested. Evaluative contamination: the contemporary value judgment of the idea (that it ought to be promoted) is mixed into the factual judgment of its historical role (that it did indeed drive).

The common root of these six types of mismatch is the lack of stratum awareness and double-loop discipline, whereby narrative facts of Loop B (the idea is widely recited) are taken directly as historical facts of Loop A (the idea drove practice). The diagnostic conclusion is therefore: the original narrative does not alter the directional judgment that "the idea matters", but it deprives its historical argument of testability; reconstruction is precisely intended to restore that testability.

4.4. External validity test: corroboration with specialized studies

The fourteen items in the formal evidence base all take Chinese-language local gazetteers as their core source, and their external validity must be checked against specialized studies. The comparison falls into three directions. First, the direction of business history and social organization: Fan Jinmin's research on merchant-group networks in the Ming and Qing shows that the primary function of guild halls was mutual aid among fellow natives and the organization of commercial credit [4]; Chang Jianhua's research on ancestral halls, ancestral worship and clan rules in the Ming likewise reveals the operation of grassroots social organization on the basis of organizational institutions; this is consistent with the motivational pattern found in coding, namely that "guild-hall inscriptions are dominated by the logic of economic organization and the density of self-reference to the idea is extremely low". Second, the direction of migration history: the population movements revealed by Ge Jianxiong were driven mainly by famine, war and government coercion [5], likewise independent of idea-based mobilization of the "a bosom friend afar" kind, supporting the temporal pattern. Third, the direction of historical geography: Chen Zhengxiang's survey of Chinese cultural geography, Han Maoli's systematic analysis of historical geography and population distribution, and Zou Yilin's account of changes in transport waterways all show that the rise and fall of communication corridors depended on natural conditions and the political-economic configuration, with ideas playing only an auxiliary role.

The high consistency between the corroboration in these three directions and the coding matrix indicates that the stratification and coding rules of this study introduce no systematic bias, and that the conclusions of

the evidence base are supported beyond gazetteer documents themselves.

5. Double-loop modeling: separate operation of factual reconstruction and narrative analysis

5.1. Loop A: the material process of communicative practice

Loop A operates independently in six steps: object identification—source tracing—stratum location—multi-source corroboration—mechanism explanation—counterexample testing. The object is transregional communicative practice; sources are corroborated between gazetteer records and specialized studies, with the case study of Huizhou merchants' activities in Jiangxi [12], regional interaction seen in gazetteers along the Longshu Road [13] and the integrative pattern of multi-ethnic literature [14] covering the commercial, transport and cultural dimensions of practice respectively; the stratum is located at L2; and the mechanistic study of technological innovation [15] provides a structural explanation for the modern period.

The conclusion of the mechanism explanation is that the drivers of expanding intercourse are hierarchically ordered: transport and communication technology (lowering the cost of intercourse) and the commodity economy (providing the benefit of intercourse) constitute the first-level bundle of necessary conditions; the needs of state governance (institutional arrangements for post roads, canal transport and contemporary infrastructure) constitute the second-level condition; and cultural ideas (the cluster of ideas that includes "a bosom friend afar brings a distant land near") constitute the third-level enhancing condition. Counterexample testing supports this ordering: the Silk Road was opened before the idea was generated, proving that the idea is not a necessary condition for intercourse; during the Ming and Qing maritime prohibitions the stock of ideational texts remained while the scale of intercourse contracted, proving that the idea is not a sufficient condition. Conclusion of Loop A: the dominant mechanisms of expanding communicative practice are material and institutional, and the idea does not perform the function of an engine.

5.2. Loop B: canonicalization and recoding of the idea

Loop B operates independently in six steps: meaning selection—media coding—dissemination and circulation—audience reception—action feedback—institutional backflow. Meaning selection: the meaning of friendship consolation in the early Tang farewell poem was selected and amplified in transmission into a universal symbol of "transcending geographical barriers". Media coding: Tang poetry anthologies and elementary readers brought it into the literati's required sequence, and its citation in encyclopedias and gazetteer literature sections gave it a stable position within the documentary system. Dissemination and circulation: the civil examination and education system ensured the intergenerational reproduction of the text, making it shared knowledge of the literati class. Audience reception: the experience of being away from home in official travel and trade was given meaning through the rhetorical frame of "a bosom friend within the four seas". Action feedback: compilers organized local records within a framework of intercourse, and the sensitivity of the customs, products and literature sections to extralocal elements is precisely a manifestation of the internalization of that frame.

Conclusion of Loop B: the idea possesses a textual lifeline independent of the scale of communicative practice, and the density of its carriers is positively correlated with the strength of the educational system; the deliberate extraction of contemporary Chinese cultural symbols [20] is precisely the extension of this lifeline in the new era. The direct object on which the idea acts is not communicative behavior itself but the meaning

system of intercourse: it provides an interpretive frame and a moral grammar for intercourse that has already occurred and is yet to occur.

5.3. Cross-checking at institutional backflow nodes

The adjudicative evidence for the operation of the double loop lies in institutional backflow (see Table 3). Four types of backflow nodes appear in sequence. First, Ming and Qing gazetteer compilation: the practice of merchant-group expansion (Loop A) was coded in a moral discourse of "fostering native fellowship and valuing righteousness over profit" (Loop B), and the idea for the first time provided economic behavior with a grammar of trust for transregional cooperation. Second, modern education and new-style gazetteers: the spatiotemporal compression brought by railways and the telegraph (Loop A) converged with the discourse of "opening up the people's intelligence" (Loop B), and technological narrative and ideational narrative began to intertextualize. Third, new gazetteer formats: alongside the practice of regional cooperation after reform and opening up (Loop A), explorations of integrating Hehe culture into gazetteer compilation [21] and institutional explorations of gazetteers serving cross-strait integrated development [22] (Loop B) elevated the idea from an object of record to an organizing principle of compilation. Fourth, national education and national strategy: participation in globalization and the Belt and Road Initiative (Loop A) converged with textbook discourse and homeland-nation education through local history resources [23] (Loop B); the idea completed a stratum leap from L1 literary image to L5 national narrative and acquired the capacity to project back onto practice.

Table 3. Cross-checking of institutional backflow nodes

Backflow node	Loop A fact	Loop B narrative	Cross-checking conclusion
Ming and Qing gazetteer compilation	Expansion of merchant guild halls (E-003)	Moral coding of "fostering native fellowship"	The idea supplies a grammar of trust for cross-regional cooperation
Modern education and new-style gazetteers	Spatiotemporal compression by railways and telegraph (E-006)	Discourse of "opening up the people's intelligence"	Convergence of technological and ideational narratives
New gazetteer formats	Regional cooperation after reform and opening up	Chapters on civilizational exchange and symbol extraction (E-011, E-012, E-013)	The idea is elevated to an organizing principle of compilation
National education and national strategy	Globalization and the Belt and Road Initiative	Textbook discourse and homeland-nation education (E-014)	The idea completes its leap from L1 to L5 and projects back onto practice

Note: Cross-checking follows double-loop discipline—Loop A does not use the heat of Loop B to prove facts, and Loop B does not substitute for Loop A's textual criticism; the two loops intersect only at the backflow nodes shown in the table.

What the cross-checking results show is precisely the bidirectional construction of H3: practice expansion provides material and context for ideational coding, and ideational backflow provides identity integration and moral legitimation for the deepening of practice. If either loop is deleted, the other can still be read independently: the history of intercourse in Loop A holds without the idea, and the textual history in Loop B holds without the history of intercourse. Yet it is the intersection of the two at backflow nodes that constitutes the entire evidential basis for the judgment that "idea and social change mutually constitute each other".

5.4. Three semantic reconstructions in the evolution of the Tianxia worldview: the intermediate scale provided by local gazetteers

The qualitative dimension of the idea (its Tianxia worldview content) is not static but has undergone three semantic reconstructions, and local gazetteers provide, at each stage, intermediate-scale evidence between national narrative and individual experience.

The first stage is the "territorial Tianxia" (pre-Qin to Ming and Qing). The Tianxia conception took the differential structure of royal domain—four quarters—wild zones as its skeleton, and the traditional Chinese world order revealed in the volume edited by Fairbank was built precisely on this differential imagination [24]. At this stage gazetteers recorded the locality's position within the Tianxia structure through categories such as "astrological field", "topographic vantage" and "mountain passes"; "the far end of the world" was a geographical description of the edge of civilization, and the meaning of the idea remained the emotional consolation of the literati farewell context.

The second stage is the "sovereign transition" (late Qing to the Republic of China). The Tianxia order disintegrated under the impact of the treaty system, and "Tianxia" gave way to "the state"; Ge Zhaoguang has systematically reconstructed the intellectual-historical lineage of this conceptual transformation [6]. Gazetteers newly compiled in this period added categories such as foreign trade, self-strengthening affairs and railways, corroborating the modern turning point of Chinese culture described by Hsu Cho-yun [25]; the "as if next door" sense of the idea began to be juxtaposed with technological spatiotemporal compression, foreshadowing its modern transformation.

The third stage is the "global Tianxia" (from reform and opening up to the present). The discourse of a community with a shared future for mankind has given "Tianxia" a global reference again, and Zhao Tingyang's conception of the Tianxia system provides its philosophical expression [7]; "a bosom friend afar brings a distant land near" has been elevated from a literary image to a diplomatic and communicative discourse, and the institutional backflow of this stage has already been presented at the fourth node in Table 3. The key point of the three reconstructions is that each semantic transformation of the Tianxia worldview presupposes the institutionalized expansion of communicative practice and is marked by the recoding of carriers such as local gazetteers—once again confirming H3's bidirectional construction rather than unidirectional drive.

6. Hypothesis testing and mechanism extraction

6.1. Final adjudication of competing hypotheses

Through the triple test of intra-evidence corroboration, inter-loop (A/B) corroboration and intra-case multi-period corroboration, the final adjudication is as follows (see Table 4). H1 (idea-driven thesis): its strong form predicts that the idea comes first in temporal sequence and that practitioners are directly inspired by the idea; neither prediction is supported—in temporal sequence intercourse precedes the idea, and in motivation there is no direct document of self-reference to the idea. The Silk Road preceding the verse, the coexistence of a stock of ideational texts with contracting intercourse during the maritime prohibitions, and the more parsimonious economic explanation of merchant-group behavior all point consistently to the verdict "weakened"; the strong form is refuted, and its weak form (that the idea has a role) is merged into H3. H2 (practice-ratification thesis): the temporal evidence and the lag pattern of coding density are entirely consistent, and it receives partial support; but it cannot explain the acceleration of practice by the idea after backflow—the guidance of new gazetteer chapter arrangements toward local awareness of exchange and the shaping of willingness to engage

in intercourse by education both show that the idea is no longer merely a mirror of practice but an organizing principle of practice—so H2 describes only the first half of the cycle. H3 (bidirectional construction thesis): the evidence from all four types of backflow nodes and the coding patterns are entirely consistent, with no key counterexample so far, and it is retained as the best explanation.

Table 4. Final adjudication of competing hypotheses

Hypothesis	Expected evidence	Support obtained	Conflicts and counterexamples	Verdict
H1 Idea-driven	The idea comes first in sequence; direct documents of practitioners inspired by the idea	Neither prediction supported	The Silk Road precedes the verse; a stock of ideational texts coexists with contracting intercourse during maritime prohibitions	Weakened (strong form refuted)
H2 Practice ratification	Practice comes first; coding lags	Temporal and coding-density patterns entirely consistent	Cannot explain the acceleration of practice by the idea after backflow	Partially supported (first half of the cycle)
H3 Bidirectional construction	Two independent tracks; backflow gain	Evidence from four types of backflow nodes consistent	No key counterexample so far	Retained as a mechanism proposition

Note: Final adjudication employs triple corroboration—intra-evidence corroboration (gazetteer records and specialized studies), inter-loop A/B corroboration (cross-checking at backflow nodes), and intra-case corroboration (parallel testing of the four turning points).

It must be made clear that the strength level of H3 is limited to a mechanism proposition rather than a law: a mechanism finding obtained within a single case (a single idea cluster, a single documentary tradition) may not, under the naming discipline, be directly given the name of a law, and its upgrade requires cross-case testing.

6.2. Counterexample audit and boundary conditions

A counterexample list is preset. First, if subsequent research finds a high density of self-reference to the idea in merchant-group documents from the Tang to the Ming and Qing (for example, commercial precepts or guild-hall inscriptions citing the poem extensively to express aspiration), H1 should be revived and the verdict of this study revised. Second, if a contrasting case is found in which the ideational coding system is absent while communicative practice markedly contracts, the idea should be upgraded from an enhancing condition to a necessary condition. Third, if the association between idea and practice at backflow nodes is systematically falsified, the backflow mechanism of H3 should be abandoned.

Statement of boundary conditions. The evidence of this study consists mainly of Chinese-language gazetteers, and multilingual documents are not systematically covered; the operational definition of "the idea" is limited to the textual cluster of "a bosom friend afar brings a distant land near" and is not extended to all conceptions of intercourse; the mechanism proposition applies to the period from the early Tang to the present, while the pre-Qin period of "great unity" and "great harmony" conceptions remains untested and bears no burden of proof for this conclusion. Failure condition: should robust evidence of a unidirectional causal relation between idea and practice emerge, the bidirectional construction proposition would cease to hold.

6.3. Mechanism proposition and conditional propositions

Mechanism proposition M1: under the conditions (C) of continuous improvement in transport and communication technology and the expansion of the commodity economy, transregional communicative practice (O), through the coding–backflow–reproduction mechanism (M) applied to the text of "a bosom friend afar brings a distant land near" by gazetteer compilation, national education and state discourse, produces a bidirectional gain (Y) in the expansion of communicative practice and the globalization of the Tianxia worldview.

Conditional proposition C1: when transport and communication technology stagnates or institutional closure occurs (absence of C1), ideational coding maintains the stock of texts but the scale of intercourse does not expand accordingly—the Ming and Qing maritime prohibitions are an example. Conditional proposition C2: when the ideational coding system is absent (absence of C2), communicative practice can still expand spontaneously, but lacks the added integration of cultural identity and moral legitimation—the early Silk Road is an example.

Law candidate (upgrade only after cross-case testing): the relation between idea and practice follows a four-stage cycle of "practice expansion—narrative coding—institutional backflow—identity gain"; the historical role of an idea is systematically amplified as its narrative stratum rises, so that any assertion that "ideas drive history" may be accepted only after A/B loop cross-checking. This candidate is compatible with the theoretical expectations of existing cultural memory research, but this study does not overstep the evidential strength of a single case to make higher-level claims.

6.4. Concentrated statement of core viewpoints

For ease of testing and discussion, the viewpoints obtained in this study are stated in their simplest form as follows.

Viewpoint 1 (functional relocation): the idea of "a bosom friend afar brings a distant land near" is not the engine of China's transregional communicative practice but a legitimizing narrative and identity amplifier that follows the expansion of practice. This judgment rests on the four coding patterns of temporality, motivation, carrier and backflow, and is bounded by two counterexamples: the Silk Road preceding the verse, and the coexistence of a stock of ideational texts with contracting intercourse during the maritime prohibitions.

Viewpoint 2 (methodology): any assertion that "ideas drive history" must pass three tests—evidence stratification, temporal anchoring and double-loop cross-checking; an untested narrative of ideas has rhetorical value only, not argumentative value.

Viewpoint 3 (mechanism theory): the relation between idea and practice follows a four-stage cycle of "practice expansion—narrative coding—institutional backflow—identity gain"; the pivot of the cycle is the institutional backflow node, not the intrinsic appeal of the idea.

Viewpoint 4 (gazetteer theory): the local gazetteer is an institutionalized container of ideas, and the act of compilation is itself an institutional site of ideational backflow; the way forward for gazetteer studies lies in reading it simultaneously as historical source and as narrative device.

Viewpoint 5 (Tianxia worldview theory): the Tianxia worldview has undergone three semantic reconstructions—"territorial Tianxia—sovereign state—global Tianxia"—and gazetteers provide the intermediate scale between national narrative and individual experience; the historical depth of the contemporary discourse of a community with a shared future for mankind should be located within this lineage of three reconstructions.

Among the five viewpoints, 1, 3 and 5 are substantive propositions and must undergo counterexample audit (see 5.2); 2 and 4 are methodological and documentary propositions that can be directly transferred to other

cases. The logic of hierarchical mutual constitution revealed by Fei Xiaotong's "pluralistic and unified pattern of the Chinese nation" [26] is consonant in theoretical temperament with the bidirectional construction proposition of this study; this study, however, transfers that logic from the field of ethnic relations to the field of idea–practice and provides an operational testing procedure, which is where the scholarly contribution lies.

7. Conclusion: theoretical value and practical significance after reconstruction

In reconstructing, by general humanities and social science methods, the argument about the relation between the idea of "a bosom friend afar brings a distant land near" and social change, this study yields two overall results that may be summarized as one correction and one establishment. The idea is not the engine of communicative practice; the dominant mechanisms of expanding intercourse are the material and institutional conditions of transport technology, the commodity economy and state governance. The idea is the gearbox and amplifier of communicative practice: at four types of institutional backflow nodes (gazetteer compilation, modern education, gazetteer formats, and national education and national strategy) it provides identity integration and moral legitimation for intercourse through the coding–backflow–reproduction mechanism, and with its stratum leap it acquires the capacity to shape practice in reverse.

Its theoretical value lies in the fact that "the idea matters" has been rewritten as a testable mechanism proposition, so that the strength of the argument is for the first time aligned with its evidential basis. For the classic humanities and social science question of "how ideas drive history", it provides a stratified and dual-track operational answer: ideas do not directly drive history; they participate in history through institutional backflow. At the same time, it corrects the popular narrative of unidirectional drive while preserving the entire argumentative space for the contemporary value of traditional ideas, placing that argument on a firmer foundation.

The study also has implications for gazetteer research: the gazetteer is not only a source of Loop A historical material, but its very act of compilation is an institutional site of Loop B ideational backflow. The conceptual evolution revealed by Tianxia worldview research [19] must be empirically grounded through careful differentiation of gazetteer strata. Newly compiled gazetteers should consciously distinguish the stratum of historical fact recording from that of contemporary value interpretation, avoiding the substitution of ratification for historical fact; explorations of integrating Hehe culture into compilation [21] and gazetteer services for cross-strait integrated development [22] precisely demonstrate the direction in which backflow awareness becomes conscious.

Its significance for contemporary discourse construction lies in the fact that the historical efficacy of the discourse on mutual learning among civilizations and on a community with a shared future for mankind resides precisely in the coded inheritance and institutional backflow of the millennia-old cluster of ideas of "Tianxia worldview—one family within the four seas" [19, 20]. The focus of discourse construction is not the density of ideational proclamation but the openness and institutionalization of three backflow channels: education, compilation and policy; the educational use of local history resources [23] has already shown the feasibility of this direction.

This study is itself bound by six red lines, and doubtful points have been truthfully annotated (such as the T0 separation in retrospective gazetteer records); it has not used low-level evidence to prove high-level claims (the contemporary value of the L5 stratum has not been used to prove historical role); it has not substituted narrative for history (the heat of Loop B has not been converted into Loop A facts); key arguments are provided with dual channels (gazetteer records corroborated with specialized studies); and conclusions remain revisable (a counterexample list and failure conditions have been preset). All evidence, coding rules and audit

tables are available for third-party review along the chain of "text proposition—evidence code—stratum card—primary material". Subsequent research may test the four-stage cycle proposition across multiple idea clusters ("harmony without uniformity", "one family within the four seas", "great harmony under heaven") and multiple documentary traditions (multilingual gazetteers, Chinese texts abroad); only if it proves robust across cases may the four-stage cycle of "practice expansion—narrative coding—institutional backflow—identity gain" be upgraded to a law.

The conclusions of this study can also be positioned within a broader scholarly genealogy. Fei Xiaotong's pluralistic and unified pattern reveals the hierarchical mutual constitution in the formation of the Chinese nation [26], and Hsu Cho-yun's Eternal River demonstrates the self-renewal of Chinese culture within an ever-expanding network of intercourse [25]; the four-stage cycle proposition of this study may serve as a middle-range mechanism footnote to these two macroscopic pictures: macroscopic civilizational expansion is precisely the accumulation of countless local cycles of "practice expansion—narrative coding—institutional backflow". Contemporary gazetteer compilation continues a thousand-year tradition while endowing it with a new function of national narrative; if gazetteer scholars can consciously distinguish the factual stratum from the value stratum in compilation practice, this ancient institutionalized container will play a more precise role in the discourse construction of mutual learning among civilizations.

Three limitations of this study and the corresponding directions for advance. First, the limitation of evidential scope: the formal evidence of this article consists mainly of Chinese-language gazetteers, and Chinese texts abroad, multilingual archives and folk documents are not systematically included; subsequent research may place the textual cluster of "a bosom friend afar brings a distant land near" in the broader documentary field of the East Asian Sinographic sphere and examine whether the coding density of the idea in foreign gazetteers and diplomatic travel records exhibits the same stratigraphic rhythm as in China. Second, the limitation of case scope: this study is an intra-case study of a single idea cluster, and cross-case testing of the four-stage cycle proposition remains to be carried out in parallel on clusters such as "harmony without uniformity", "one family within the four seas" and "great harmony under heaven"; only when multiple idea clusters exhibit a consistent backflow structure may the mechanism proposition be upgraded to a law. Third, the limitation of method: double-loop cross-checking depends on coders' judgments of stratum and tri-property dimensions; although two coders coded independently and recorded disagreements, subjectivity cannot be entirely eliminated; subsequent research may introduce larger-scale inter-coder reliability testing and digitize statistics on the carrier density of gazetteer texts, supplementing manual coding with corpus methods—none of which, however, would undermine the core conclusion of this article, namely that the idea participates in history through institutional backflow, but all of which would delineate a clear working surface for subsequent research.

The transferability of the method is the ultimate aspiration of this article. Stratified evidence collection, double-loop modeling and cross-checking of institutional backflow do not depend on the particular idea of "a bosom friend afar brings a distant land near"; any topic that takes the "idea–practice" relation as its object—whether the philosophy of conduct of "harmony without uniformity", the ideal of order of "great harmony under heaven", or the ethics of intercourse of "one family within the four seas"—can be reconstructed and tested by the same working procedure. If the operational framework of this study can provide a common methodological foundation for interdisciplinary research on gazetteer studies, intellectual history and social history, so that every appearance of an ideational narrative can withstand the audit of strata and counterexamples, then the purpose of reconstruction has been achieved. Of course, the operational framework itself should also continue to be audited in application: if the stratification encounters forms of evidence that

cannot be classified within other documentary traditions, the taxonomy should be revised; the vitality of a method lies not in an immutable procedure but precisely in this revisability and openness.

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