

Article

# Between political legitimacy and strategic competitiveness: Overseas corporate social responsibility patterns of Chinese international contractors

Yue Lin

Centre of East Asian Studies, Autonomous University of Madrid, 28049 Madrid, Spain; [yue.lin@uam.es](mailto:yue.lin@uam.es)

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**Abstract:** This article examines the overseas corporate social responsibility (CSR) patterns of Chinese international contractors (CICs). Adopting an institutional and political economy approach, a unique dataset is constructed with country-specific contents drawn from CSR-related reports and website information of 50 top CICs. This dataset provides a foundation for systematic content analysis of CICs' overseas CSR practices, revealing that both political legitimacy-seeking and strategic competitiveness-seeking motivations drive CICs' CSR activities abroad, characterized by the prioritization of customer and community engagement. The findings highlight the coexistence of the exogenous pressures for the national image-building purpose and the endogenous awareness of CSR strategic importance for corporate internationalization. The hybridization of political and economic rationales is presented as the defining feature of CICs' current overseas CSR patterns, with the balance between them being determined by stakeholder type and internal business needs influenced by corporate internationalization experience.

**Keywords:** corporate social responsibility (CSR); Chinese international contractors (CICs); political legitimacy; strategic competitiveness; internationalization

## 1. Introduction

In 2021, of the top 250 international contractors measured by overseas turnover, 79 were mainland Chinese companies, collectively generating a substantial revenue of US\$ 112.95 billion (ENR, 2022). This marks a significant evolution from their status in 2001, positioning Chinese international contractors (CICs) as frontrunners in the global contracting market. Within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), these enterprises are touted as pivotal contributors to the social well-being of host countries. Despite this, the construction industry itself faces inherent irresponsibility, including adverse environmental impact, hazardous working conditions, and involvement in unethical practices (Xia et al., 2018). This juxtaposition prompts a crucial inquiry: To what extent have CICs embraced socially responsible practices, particularly in developing nations where such efforts are most needed?

Existing literature on this topic, though growing, remains limited and is characterized by two divergent trends. The first stream of studies has concentrated on CSR awareness and implementation of Chinese construction firms in general. These studies, based on content analysis of CSR reports and questionnaire surveys, develop CSR performance indicators (Jiang and Wong, 2016) and identify factors influencing CSR engagement, such as external institutional pressures (Li et al. 2019; Zhang et al., 2024), ownership structure (Ma and Liu, 2024; Zhang et al., 2022), firm size (Ma and Liu, 2024), internal cognitive pressures (Zhang et al., 2024), and the scale and scope of international diversification (Ma et al., 2022; Sang et al., 2022). Furthermore, some

studies also compare CICs' disclosure and communication of CSR practices with those of international counterparts, revealing that CICs are still in the nascent stage of developing robust CSR norms (Liao et al., 2018), with disclosures often characterized as limited, distorted, or incomplete (Lu et al., 2016; Liao, 2017; Wu et al., 2015). However, these studies often presume a homogeneity in CSR practices across domestic and international operations under a unified national and corporate CSR governance framework, overlooking the nuanced dynamics of China's distinct domestic and international CSR strategies.

In contrast, some scholars like Maurin and Yeophantong (2013) have contextualized China's CSR regulatory framework within the backdrop of the "going out" strategy, highlighting that China's regulation of social and environmental impacts resulting from overseas investments is influenced by the political imperative to maintain a positive national image. In a similar vein, Lin (2023) proposes a bifurcated regulatory framework that differentiates domestic CSR policies from those applied to overseas activities. This dual-track system suggests a strategic alignment of China's outward CSR policies with international norms, which are normatively more inclusive and stringent compared to domestic guidelines. This insight into the dual regulatory framework underscores a critical gap in the literature: the differential impact of home country institutions on CICs' CSR practices abroad. Consequently, our primary research aim is to assess the extent to which China's specific overseas CSR policies and regulations have affected CICs' overseas CSR practices.

Another line of inquiry has focused on CICs' CSR engagements specifically in overseas contexts, often through project and company specific case studies (Fei, 2024; Liu, 2021; Tan-Mullins et al., 2017; Zhu et al., 2019) in regions like Africa (Tan-Mullins and Mohan, 2013; Tan-Mullins, 2020; Weng and Buckley, 2016). These studies set CICs within broader institutional structures (both home country and host country institutions) and provide a granular view of how CICs navigate complex interplays with multiple external stakeholders, yet their findings can hardly be generalized into consistent responses of CICs to CSR challenges abroad, but leading to an inductive suggestion that CICs' responses to CSR challenges are ad hoc and varied. In this context, a comprehensive and systematic overview of CSR patterns among CICs in the international market warrants close investigation that can organize the myriad of variables into a manageable and meaningful framework for future theoretical advancement. Our secondary research aim is thus to examine the extent to which CICs might converge on or diverge from a prescribed overseas CSR pattern.

To answer these questions, we adopt an institutional and political economy approach to develop our hypotheses, which then would be testified by a novel dataset. One of the main reasons that has restricted comprehensive analysis of CICs' overseas CSR is the limited easily accessible structured data. To address this data limitation, we focus on 50 top CICs and draw all the information regarding their overseas CSR activities from CSR-related annual reports and information disclosed on corporate websites. The collected information meticulously coded construct a unique dataset to analyse patterns and variations in their overseas CSR engagement. This dataset not only provides a foundation for systematic analysis but also represents a significant contribution to the understanding of the evolving landscape of CICs' overseas CSR

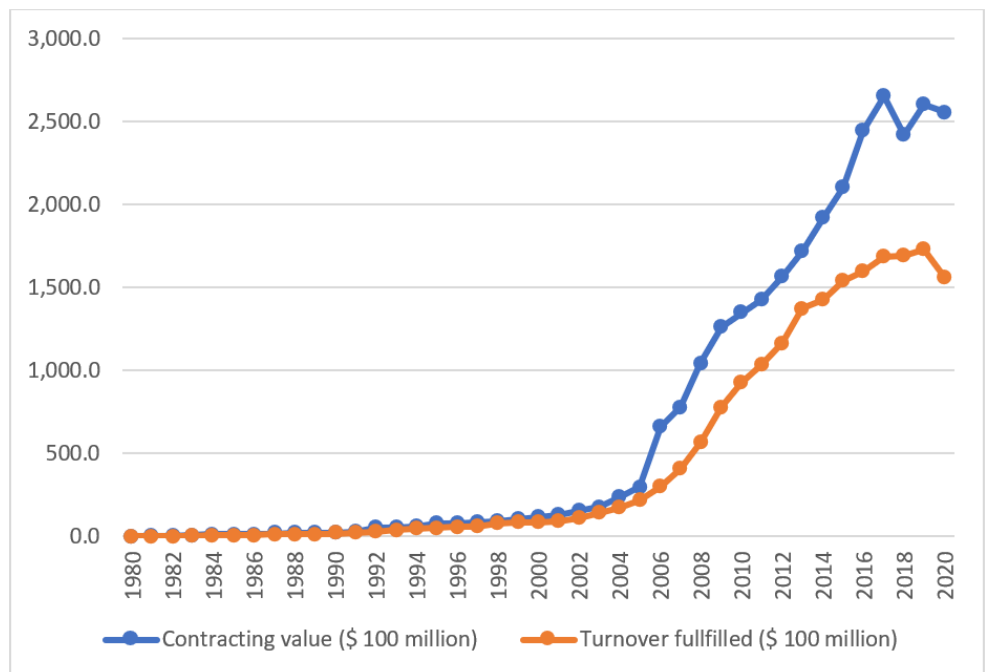
practices. Given the exploratory nature of this study, a mix-method approach is employed, combining content analysis and primary statistical tools.

Several interesting findings emerge. Firstly, a general overseas CSR pattern of CICs emphasizing customer and community engagement is identified. Secondly, coercive/persuasive pressures from the home state play a significant role in shaping CICs' CSR patterns with societal stakeholders, resulting in a high proportion of philanthropic practices. Thirdly, concerning economic stakeholders, CICs exhibit varying CSR practices but demonstrate stronger market-based approaches, influenced by their internationalization degree. Thus, neither the exogenous path nor the endogenous path alone is enough to explain the CICs' overseas CSR development in the latest years. A hybrid of political and economic rationales drives CICs' overseas CSR development, with the balance between them determined by stakeholder type and internal business needs.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. Section 2 displays the research background by tracing the development of CICs and the associated CSR challenges. Section 3 provides a detailed theoretical discussion and hypothesis development. The methodology section outlines the employed mix-method approach, and the result section discusses the main findings from our dataset analysis. Finally, the article concludes with implications for managers and policymakers, acknowledging the study's limitations and suggesting future research directions.

## 2. CIC development and associated CSR challenges

CICs have witnessed exponential growth during the last two decades (MOFCOM, 2020). As shown in **Figure 1**, this journey can be outlined through three distinct phases: exploring (1980–2000), growing (2001–2014), and maturing (2015–present), each marked by significant milestones in international expansion and operational focus.



**Figure 1.** Evolution of CICs (1980–2020).

State-owned firms led the exploring phase (1980–2000) by venturing beyond traditional aid recipients and engaging primarily in labour-intensive construction work with very limited design and consultancy services (Low and Jiang, 2003). Despite securing 23,265 contracts worth US\$ 86.7 billion in two decades, their competitive edge was minimal, evidenced by a mere 4.6% revenue share among the top international contractors by 2001 (ENR, 2001). It is during the growing phase (2001–2014) that China’s entry into WTO and the “going out” strategy significantly bolstered CICs’ visibility and market penetration. Their contract values and the average value per contract saw remarkable increases, accounting for 17.2% of the market shared by top international contractors at the end of 2014 (ENR, 2015), with Africa emerging as a competitive stronghold where CICs held 49.4% of market share, followed by Asia (20.5%) and the Middle East (19.2%). This era was also characterized by China’s mercantilist approach to promote exportation through international contracting (Zhang, 2020), the introduction of preferential buyer’s export credit to facilitate foreign expansion of CICs, and “pro-big” reforms of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to encourage Engineering-Procurement-Construction (EPC) contracting by large-scale engineering conglomerates (Li, 2016). The BRI launched in 2015 is expected to give the development of CICs another political impetus. However, the growth has lost its momentum as observed in the second phase, suggesting that the development of CICs might enter a new stage characterized by the so-called “development with high quality”. This maturing or upgrading process (2015–present) could be considered as a correction of the “blind” expansion of CICs (Zhang, 2019) with unintended consequences, notably CSR challenges.

CICs traditionally have less strategic impetus to internalize CSR in their international reach, due to the concentration of their operations in turnkey projects. According to the Department of Outward Investment and Economic Cooperation of the Ministry of Commerce (RDBC, 2013), construction contracting and general contracting (EPC) represented respectively 45%–46% and 47% of China’s all international contracting by 2013, which minimizes long-term local engagements and responsibilities. However, two actors do exert coercive pressures on them to respect their CSR. On the one hand, the host government, as project proprietor, bears legal responsibility for technical standards definition, environmental impact assessments, and resettlement processes. On the other hand, the project financier can also specify the conditions for social and environmental safeguards. It is thus worth noting that during the rapid ascension of CICs, a notable part of necessary financing was provided by Chinese financiers, who have been found imposing less stringent requirements on corruption, social and environmental concerns, and procurement of goods (Weng and Buckley, 2016). In line with the “equality” and “no strings attached” principles that define China’s official stance towards global development financing, this approach tends to externalize regulatory and supervision responsibility to project proprietor, and risks opening the door for the instrumentalization of Chinese financiers and Chinese companies by ruling elites, who would push forward pharaonic works and other projects for their own political interests, especially in countries with social tensions and weak institutions. Therefore, the rise of CICs has not been without its social and environmental repercussions. A significant number of human rights abuse allegations linked to Chinese businesses abroad, particularly in construction (BHRRC, 2021),

underscore the pressing overseas CSR challenges and call for critical political and business adjustments, which will be discussed in the next section.

### **3. Dual rationales for overseas CSR development**

#### **3.1. Political economy and the instrumentalization of overseas CSR to seek political legitimacy**

Historically, China has often been at the receiving end of norm diffusion, consistently resisting the coercive imposition of norms and standards by transnational actors (Lin and Esteban, 2023). In the realm of CSR, the diffusion of international norms has undergone a localization process, through which CSR was defined territorially and conceptualized as an “internal affair”, resulting in domestic CSR norms infused with distinctive Chinese characteristics, including an uneven emphasis on different CSR issues and selective adoption of international CSR norms (Bai et al., 2015; Coni-Zimmer, 2017; Lin, 2010; Lusteau et al., 2018).

However, the localized appropriation of certain values and ideas underpinning international CSR norms, while critical for justifying the regime’s internal legitimacy, falls short in adapting to foreign contexts with different historical, cultural, and power dynamics among stakeholders. This has triggered significant external legitimacy crises (Park, 2023), undermining China’s efforts to construct a new identity as a “responsible major country”. In response, Chinese policymakers have increasingly emphasized the diplomatic importance of overseas CSR as a means of soft power (Buhmann, 2017; Karakir, 2018). The imperative of upholding China’s positive image through the implementation of overseas CSR reached an unprecedented level following the launch of the BRI. In April 2016, President Xi Jinping urged Chinese companies to value not only the economic returns from their foreign investment projects but also their reputation as law-abiding and responsible entities (Xinhua, 2016). In August 2018, he further called on Chinese enterprises to adhere to laws, comply with regulations, prioritize environmental protection, and fulfil their social responsibilities, emphasizing their role as “image ambassadors” for the BRI (Xinhua, 2018).

Consequently, international CSR norms have been relearned, revalued, and reshaped, resulting in specific policies and regulations that exclusively govern the sustainable overseas development of Chinese companies (Fei, 2024). These policies and regulations constitute a parallel overseas CSR governance framework, separating domestic and overseas CSR governance (Lin, 2023). This dual-track CSR governance system allows the governance of domestic CSR to remain insulated from international norms or standards that could potentially jeopardize internal political and social stability, while facilitating their adoption to address overseas CSR controversies, thereby enhancing China’s international image and bolstering the legitimacy of the BRI (Lin, 2024).

In this context, it is misleading to assume that CICs, while conducting projects abroad, would face the same home country institutional pressures as for their domestic activities. Instead, China’s quest for a new identity as a “responsible major country” has created additional pressures on CICs, which are expected to adopt subtly different political-economic rationales overseas (Maurin and Yeophantong, 2013).

Nevertheless, China's stance toward international norms regarding overseas CSR is nuanced. On the one hand, China's domestic norms governing outbound practices align more closely with international CSR norms compared to those governing inbound practices. On the other hand, there exists a significant disparity across six CSR dimensions in terms of the congruence between Chinese norms on overseas CSR and prevailing international norms, with "high" congruence concerning corporate overseas environmental responsibility and "low/moderate" congruence regarding societal responsibility abroad (Lin, 2023).

The management of overseas societal commitment exemplifies the dilemma China must overcome between external and internal legitimacy crises, especially when embracing cosmopolitan values, such as human civil rights, requires reshaping domestic CSR norms in a manner that conflicts with the interests and core values of domestic actors (Lin, 2024). Therefore, while China has generally acknowledged the importance of "widely accepted rules and standards" as a principle for holding its national companies accountable abroad, the measures taken to enforce this principle remain largely elusive. In practice, China's policies toward overseas CSR overly focus on deliverable outcomes guaranteed by unilateral benevolent corporate decisions, which could be used to advance China's normative power (Fei, 2024).

The political significance of overseas CSR could exert significant persuasive/coercive pressures on SOEs, due to their political affiliation and governance features, such as the two personnel systems, known as "bidirectional entry, cross appointment" (Lin and Milhaupt, 2013). Moreover, the SOE reform under Xi Jinping's administration strengthens the Party's dominance in major issues such as production safety, employee rights, and social responsibilities (Beck and Brødsgaard, 2022). The separate "Party Work Department" oversees Party-building activities, including fostering an altruistic corporate culture and aligning CSR with Party principles, policies, laws, and regulations. This governance structure facilitates closer interaction between SOEs and higher-level Party and government organs, ensuring policy awareness and faithful execution of policies and objectives by SOE managers.

This top-down state-centric approach is expected to compensate for the weak intrinsic CSR motivation among Chinese companies (Liu, 2021), but also potentially skewing their CSR understanding and fostering a culture of "responsive social responsibility" (Zhu et al., 2019) where CSR actions and disclosures serve more as legitimacy tools than genuine commitments (Lin et al., 2016; Patten et al., 2014). Chinese central leadership consistently approaches overseas CSR through the lens of morality, contrasting it with corporate pecuniary interests. The political signal is therefore clear: what the government expects from a better overseas CSR performance pertains more to virtual reputational assets and ideational interests that go beyond tangible material interests defined by entrepreneurial actors (Lin, 2024). This official morality-centred view inadvertently induces companies to perceive CSR expenditure as a necessary cost to gain political legitimacy and to justify their pursuit of pecuniary interests. In this context, the emphasis on public image might lead to a narrow focus on philanthropic activities (Tan-Mullins, 2020; Wang and Hu, 2017), which simply receive greater media exposure and public attention than systemic approaches addressing environmental and social impacts. As long as the overarching concerns for the country's image and reputation have driven the Chinese government to put

exogenous pressures on CICs to improve their overseas CSR, CSR practices and disclosure at company level would be instrumentalized to enhance public relations and seek political legitimacy primarily at home, leading to the hypothesis (1): CICs, under the home state coercive/persuasive pressures, might predominantly engage in overseas CSR activities that align with governmental directives aimed at bolstering China's global image through targeted philanthropy and crisis management.

### **3.2. Internationalization and strategizing overseas CSR to consolidate corporate competitiveness**

The previous hypothesis stresses the inherently political nature of CSR in China (Whelan, 2012), which further suggests that corporate CSR perceptions and initiatives are largely external coercive driven and subservient to governmental commitments (Lin et al., 2016; Luo and Wang, 2021; Xu and Liu, 2020; Zhang et al., 2024). According to this view, Chinese construction SOEs are embedded in home-country institutions characterized by their dependency on the state for financial and political resources that are critical for their organizational resilience (Ma and Liu, 2024) and internationalization success (Zhang, 2020). However, such a focus on the impacts of home country institutions tends to present CICs as homogenous actors, and risks overlooking the agency power of corporate actors in interpreting and implementing national CSR policies during their overseas business activities. A contrary argument thus emphasizes the principal-agency relationship between SOEs and the state (Liou, 2014), pointing out a considerable discrepancy between policies set in Beijing and the actual practice of Chinese corporations on the ground. Under this perspective, corporate attributes, such as resources, capabilities and organizational dynamics are equally important in shaping corporate CSR perceptions and practices (Zhang et al., 2024). Therefore, Chinese corporations, even SOEs, would not respond in the same way to government directives.

Regarding CICs' overseas CSR in specific, the internationalization degree is argued to be such a corporate attribute for two reasons. In the first place, the internationalization would reduce resource dependency on the home state. During the last decade, CICs have notably secured projects in Africa and Latin America with funding from non-Chinese, multilateral agencies, indicating a strategic pivot to alternative financing sources (Brautigam and Hwang, 2019; Bersch and Koivumaeki, 2019; Zhang, 2021). This trend is partially attributed to the major reforms in China's foreign aid management initiated in 2013, aimed at enhancing risk control and project approval processes (Yang and Yang, 2019). Consequently, China's bilateral government-to-government (G2G) lending has counter-intuitively levelled off since the launch of the BRI (Kitano and Miyabayashi, 2020). Moreover, SASAC's strategy to make central enterprises "stronger and better" during the period of the 12th Five Year Plan (2011–2015) also encourages SOE managers to pursue profits rather than revenues, which incentivizes some leading CICs to move away from low profit generating aid projects (Liou, 2014).

Another way that CICs have used to explore alternative sources of financing during the internationalization is to set up finance companies themselves, thus integrating financial functions within their conglomerate structures (Zhang, 2021).

This initiative not only decreases their reliance on external banking systems but also empowers them to engage in more ambitious and risk-oriented strategies, particularly the Investment-Construction-Operation (ICO) model. This shift towards becoming “developers” from merely “builders” starts around 2014-2015, reflecting a response to the evolving demands of project proprietors and the internal drive for vertical expansion within the industry (Yang, 2019). Officially supported by the Chinese government as a viable means to advance the BRI (MOFCOM, 2019), ICO projects have witnessed a noticeable increase in both the number and financial commitment since 2015, reaching 72 ICO projects with a total corporate investment of US\$ 24.49 billion in 2018 compared with only 53 projects worth US\$ 2.93 billion between 2008–2014 (Du and Chen, 2020).

The diversification of financing sources as well as the ambition of CICs to reposition themselves in the value chain of international construction sector are expected to influence their overseas CSR perceptions and practices. On the one hand, leveraging international financial resources would require CICs to align with global technical standards and international expectations in aspects of corruption, environmental protection, and social engagement. On the other hand, under the ICO model, CICs should behave as cooperative investors rather than mere service exporters observed in traditional turnkey projects. This ongoing evolution of business model marks a transition towards long-term investment and deeper local integration, fostering the so-called “strategic social responsibility” (Zhu et al., 2019), which recognizes CSR as a strategic asset for building resilience in response to systemic crises (Ma and Liu, 2024).

In the second place, the internationalization drives a “dynamic embeddedness” process that would make home country institutions less relevant (Lattemann et al., 2017). More specifically, with higher internationalization degree, what CICs face is not a unified CSR framework, but varied national CSR governance systems that demand accountability primarily to local stakeholders. This “institutional duality” (Jamali and Neville, 2011) underlines the influence of national institutional frameworks on CICs’ “glocalized” CSR strategies (Ye et al., 2020), potentially challenging China’s enforcement of its CSR standards, especially when CSR is interpreted and governed differently in home and host countries. This amplified institution-based view suggests that CICs’ overseas CSR perceptions and practices are coproduct of home country and host country institutional pressures, with the latter’s importance being contingent on the scale and diversity of overseas projects undertaken (Sang et al., 2022).

Given the arguments presented above, the internationalization would moderate the political nature of overseas CSR, and extend CSR beyond philanthropy to encompass technical training, responsible sourcing, and community development, aligning with international CSR priorities. However, the internationalization is not expected to occur in the same pace and intensity for all CICs with different resources and strategic visions. Considering the internationalization as integral part of the firm’s business strategies that should be formulated “closely fit” for their resources and capabilities (Zahra and Covin, 1993), larger CICs are positioned advantageously to lead the strategic transformation and showcase a strategic adoption of CSR to maintain sustainable competitiveness (Ma et al., 2016; Sang et al., 2022). Therefore, hypothesis



(2) suggests that increased internationalization and prolonged overseas operations lead to a stronger emphasis on multi-stakeholder governance, indicating that the scope and intensity of a CIC's CSR practices are shaped by its level of global engagement and strategic vision.

## **4. Material and methods**

To test these two hypotheses and to answer the question which CSR rationale and pattern is more salient among CICs, the mixed-method approach like that developed in the works of Ye et al. (2019) is adopted in this article. Company reports and corporate websites were used as the main sources to understand how CICs interpret and practice CSR strategies in foreign countries, facilitated by content analyses with a manual coding approach. Overseas CSR patterns are then presented by exploring how different categories of CSR issues are practiced and valued among CICs with different levels of internationalization. The details of the mixed methods are described as follows.

### **4.1. Sample and dataset construction**

As this article examines overseas CSR of Chinese construction firms, two sources have been referenced for the sampling: the Top 250 International Contractors lists compiled by the ENR, and the Top 100 Chinese International Contractors lists by the CHINCA. The initial sample was composed of the top 50 CICs listed at least four years out of six between 2015–2020 in both lists, which accounted for 64% of total China's overseas fulfilled turnovers accumulated during the period. While this sampling technique considers both representativeness and data availability of CICs with solid foreign presence, the selection itself may introduce a bias towards larger firms with more resources and established CSR practices, potentially overlooking smaller firms with different approaches to CSR.

There are two data sources for the content analysis. Company reports, including CSR reports, ESG reports, sustainability reports, and annual reports are primary source to analyse CSR actions and intentions. For companies pertaining to larger industrial groups, the reports presented by their parent companies are also consulted. A total number of 318 reports have been retrieved from company websites and the GoldenBee Social Responsibility Report Database, covering 6 years (2015–2020). The chosen period is justified by the maturing supervision mechanism of overseas CSR in China, along with the changing business environment and strategic transformations of CICs under the BRI in recent years. Another source refers to corporate disclosures about CSR on their websites, which is increasingly used by researchers to detail CSR activities and outputs (Noronha et al., 2013; Whelan and Muthuri, 2017). The reliance on corporate reports and disclosures implies a notable risk of selective reporting, where firms may highlight positive CSR actions while omitting less favourable activities. However, it is important to note that this self-reporting itself is indicative of the understandings and interpretations of CSR at the company level, such as the relative importance and priority placed on different CSR dimensions and issues.

According to the distribution of turnover fulfilled of contracted projects provided by National Bureau of Statistics of China (2024), a list of 141 countries, where CICs

have carried out projects between 2015–2020, was used to extract country-specific information from the data sources. In doing so, instead of examining and comparing the overall CSR governance structure between CICs, this article focuses on specific actions taken by each firm to address CSR issues in individual countries. By analysing CSR practices of a same company in different localities, this article tends to provide a more reliable demonstration of a firm’s systematic efforts towards different stakeholders through multiple observations. The gathered information is then organized into a preliminary text dataset for content coding, where each item describes the operations and practices of a specific CIC in a particular country.

#### 4.2. Content analysis

An analytical framework was developed to guide the content analysis (see **Table 1**) by specifying CSR dimensions and issues. Recognizing that different industry sectors prioritize various CSR focus areas (Ali et al., 2017), both national and international norms and guidelines on CSR in the construction sector were consulted to identify widely accepted categorizations of CSR practices for construction firms. This process resulted in six CSR dimensions, each describing corporate responsibility toward a major non-shareholder stakeholder. Moreover, two broad categories emerged: “economic stakeholders”, encompassing Customer, Supplier, and Labour dimensions, and “societal stakeholders”, comprising Community, Environment, and Human Rights dimensions. This distinction, as suggested by Werther and Chandler (2014), is particularly important for the research aim of this study, as our political legitimacy-seeking hypothesis posits a disproportionate disclosure of social CSR initiatives beyond financial gains, while the strategic competitiveness-seeking hypothesis suggests a greater focus on internal and value chain stakeholders, which directly affect the financial returns and economic interests of the focal firms (Karlsson et al., 2018).

16 CSR issues are identified under these six CSR dimensions. Special efforts have been made to distinguish philanthropy and public relations actions from deeper engagement with stakeholders to test the assumed political legitimacy-seeking motivation of CICs to conduct CSR. The novelty of our analytical framework lies in its ability to distinguish initiatives towards specific stakeholders in terms of the degree of engagement. By doing so, we go beyond the conventional classification of CSR issues, deliberately separating less challenging, easily implemented “image brushing” practices from more demanding shifts towards the so-called “multi-stakeholder governance”. This nuanced approach provides a clearer understanding of how CICs engage with different stakeholders and highlights the depth and authenticity of their CSR activities.

**Table 1.** CSR dimensions, issues and sample actions of CICs’ overseas CSR communication.

Code	Dimension	Issue	Sample actions
CU	Customer	CU1: Customer communication	Maintain communication with customers during the whole process; customers’ general satisfaction.
		CU2: Project quality and safety	Type and number of quality certification, rating, and labelling schemes; employ advanced technology and machinery; initiatives to solve engineering difficulties and improve efficiency; life cycle safety management; zero-incident ratio; customer training.

**Table 1.** (Continued).

Code	Dimension	Issue	Sample actions
SU	Supplier	SU1: Local contents	Localization of procurement; supplier training and knowledge transfers.
		SU2: Supply chain management	Transparent and standardized procurement procedure; anticorruption policies and procedures; due diligence on supplier qualification; internal auditing.
LA	Labour	LA1: Local integration	Comply with national laws and regulations and are consistent with applicable international labour standards; localization of employees; observance of national or religious traditions and customs; encourage multicultural work environment.
		LA2: Training	Provide local workers with access to skills development, training and apprenticeships, and opportunities for career advancement.
		LA3: Occupational health and safety	Develop, implement, and maintain an occupational health and safety policy; provide adequate training to all personnel on all relevant matters; provide the safety equipment needed; health care scheme; risk-control programs in place to assist the workforce or their families regarding serious diseases.
CM	Community	CM1: Community relation	Donation; disaster relief; urgency assistance; charity activities (poor, orphan); sponsor cultural events.
		CM2: Community development	Skill training; building new facilities (school, clinic, church, sports arena, etc.); funds and voluntary scheme.
		CM3: Community involvement	Establish channels, and mechanisms to communicate and hear from local community members; respect rights to know; Prevention and mitigation measures implemented in operations with significant potential or actual negative impacts on local communities (respect and protect cultural heritage and customs)
EN	Environment	EN1: Green initiatives	Environment assessment; resource-saving design and plan, sustainable labelling; initiatives to provide energy-efficient or renewable energy based products and services (carbon emission); materials recycled.
		EN2: Waste management	Minimize construction dust and waste; control noise level; industrial waste treatment; constant monitoring and accountability of environmental performance.
		EN3: Biodiversity conservation	Protection of natural habitats of animals and plants; restore the ecosystem.
		En4: Environment campaign	Voluntary work; public education.
HU	Human rights	HU1: Economic, social, and cultural rights	Prohibition of child and forced labour; non-discrimination and equal opportunities to women and other vulnerable social groups.
		HU2: Civil and political rights	Recognize the importance of social dialogue institutions; respect at all times the right of workers to form or join their own organizations to advance their interests or to bargain collectively; inform representatives of the workers to jointly examine significant changes in operation to mitigate any adverse impact on employment.

Under this analytical framework, the text dataset was manually coded accordingly, which would classify each item into six dimensions with the 16 issues attached. Each CSR dimension and issue was scored on a dichotomous scale. Thus, if a CSR issue/dimension in the checklist was practiced and disclosed, it was coded as 1; otherwise, it was coded as 0. It is worth noting that a CSR issue/dimension was scored only if specific actions have been taken to address it or specific performance outputs have been displayed (see **Table 1** for sample actions). 150 items have been randomly selected to be coded simultaneously by two independent coders with the assistance of the qualitative data analysis platform NivoMiner. Inter-rater reliability assessed in terms of Cohens' kappa was 0.88, indicating an almost perfect agreement between coders. The whole dataset was then coded. After dropping 8 CICs at this stage as none of the six CSR dimensions was scored due to the poor quality of the information provided, the final coded dataset is composed of 879 items describing the CSR

practices of 42 CICs. An excerpt is shown in **Table 2**. Each line is one item, describing CSR practices in six dimensions for one CIC in one specific host country, ‘1’ represents CICs did that CSR dimension, and ‘0’ represents they did not conduct.

**Table 2.** An excerpt of the coded dataset.

ID	Company	Host Country	CU	SU	LA	CM	EN	HU
1	CCCC	Saudi Arabia	1	0	1	1	0	0
2	CCCC	Equatorial Guinea	1	0	1	1	0	0
3	CCCC	Malaysia	1	1	1	1	1	0
4	CCCC	Egypt	0	0	1	0	0	0
5	CCCC	Serbia	1	0	1	1	0	0
...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
875	JXSZ	Rwanda	1	0	0	0	0	0
876	JXSZ	Myanmar	1	0	0	0	0	0
877	JXSZ	Mozambique	1	0	0	1	0	0
878	JXSZ	Uganda	0	0	1	0	0	0
879	JXSZ	Indonesia	1	0	0	0	0	0

<sup>1</sup>. The whole dataset will also include the record of CSR practices at the issue level.

### 4.3. Measurement for CSR patterns

CICs’ overseas CSR patterns are presented by exploring how different CSR dimensions and sub-dimensional CSR issues are practiced and valued by CICs, and how the internationalization degree might shape the perceptions and practices of CSR at the company level. The frequency ratio of each CSR dimension ( $Fd$ ) is calculated to indicate CICs’ degree of engagement with different external stakeholders (see Equation (1)), while the frequency ratio of each CSR issue ( $Fi$ ) is calculated to indicate CICs’ preferences to implement specific CSR issues in host countries (see Equation (2)).

$$Fd = Nd/Nt \quad (d = 1, 2, \dots, 6) \tag{1}$$

$Nd$  represents the count of observations where a particular CSR dimension is implemented, while  $Nt$  denotes the total number of observations.

$$Fi = Ni/Nt \quad (i = 1, 2, \dots, 16) \tag{2}$$

$Ni$  represents the count of observations where a particular CSR dimension is implemented, while  $Nt$  denotes the total number of observations.

Both equations are applied to the whole dataset as well as the 42 sub-datasets regarding the CSR practices of each CIC in the sample.

To explore further how the internationalization degree would shape the understandings and the practices of CSR between sampled CICs, we will run a simple regression analysis due to the exploratory nature of this study and the limited sample size. The model can be specified as follows:

$$Fi = \beta_0 + \beta_1(Internationalization) + \varepsilon \tag{3}$$

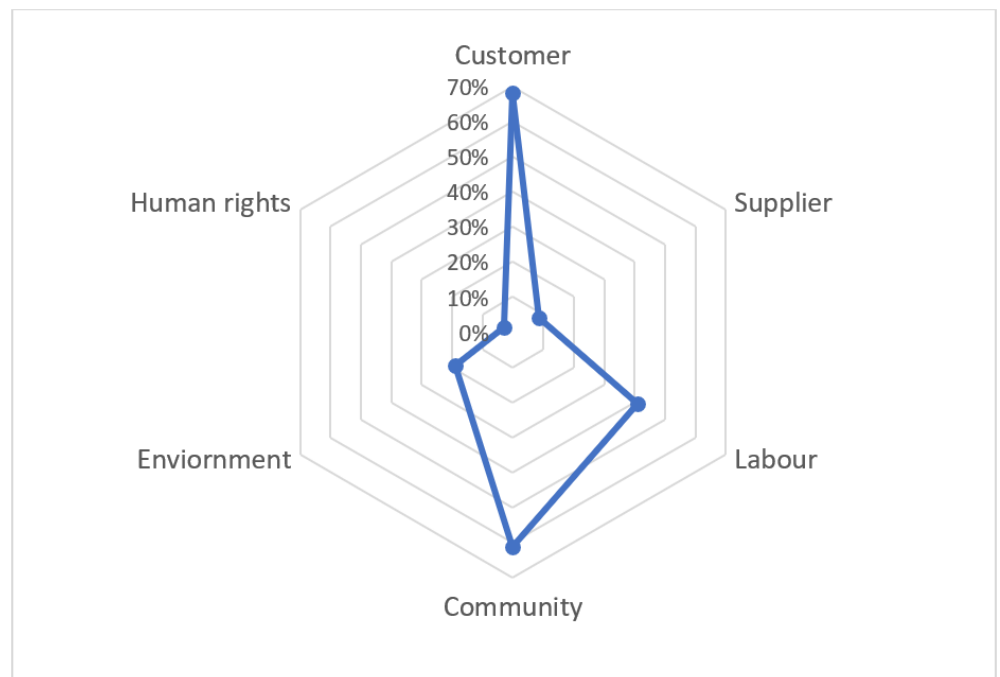
The dependent variable  $Fi$  represents the frequency ratio of each CSR issue, calculated in Equation (2). The main independent variable Internationalization is firstly proxied by Internationalization scale, which is defined as the logarithmized

value of accumulated international turnovers between 2015 and 2020. This measure captures the market position and corporate resources dedicated to construction activities in international markets, and deemed to be a better metric than the proportion of international turnovers in our case.

To further enhance the credibility of the regression results, robustness checks will be performed using an alternative measure of internationalization: Internationalization diversity. Unlike internationalization scale, which indicates the size and resource abundance of each company, internationalization diversity refers to the number of countries where each CIC has completed or is handling projects by 2020, introducing thus the complexity of host country institutional environments as a possible channel through which the internationalization might influence overseas CSR perceptions and practices. The more countries a CIC operates in, the more challenging it is to manage diverse institutional contexts, thereby increasing the likelihood of institutionalizing and systematizing overseas CSR policies to reduce transaction costs.

## 5. Results and discussion

The comparison of frequency ratios across different CSR dimensions reveals a consistent overseas CSR pattern among CICs, both at the aggregated and company levels. **Figure 2** illustrates that customer and community engagements are prominent, with CSR practices in these dimensions disclosed in 68% (customer responsibility) and 61% (community responsibility) of all observations. Labour responsibility is highlighted in 41% of cases, while the remaining three CSR dimensions demonstrate relatively lower importance. At the company level, none of the individual CICs significantly deviate from this pattern (see **Table A1** in the Appendix).



**Figure 2.** Frequency ratios of CICs' practices in six CSR dimensions.

This CSR pattern, characterized by “two long legs”, is intriguing considering CICs' prioritization of economic stakeholders over societal stakeholders for their

business development. China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), the largest Chinese international contracting company in terms of overseas turnovers, provides an example. Since 2016, CCCC’s CSR reports have utilized a two-dimensional matrix to evaluate over thirty CSR issues across eight dimensions, including an “overseas responsibility” dimension, according to their “importance to stakeholders” and their “importance for CCCC’s sustainable development”. Despite the comprehensive range of issues addressed, CCCC’s self-evaluation, summarized in **Tables 3** and **4**, consistently ranks “overseas (local) voluntary assistance” as the least relevant to its sustainable development, with other overseas CSR issues also considered of lesser importance except for “responding to national strategy”, while all issues under the “excellent project” dimension receive high rankings, with “project quality” consistently ranked at the top throughout the years.

**Table 3.** Ranking of overseas CSR issues by their importance for the sustainable development of CCCC.

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Responding to national strategy*	2	5	6	8	-
Driving local employment	24	21	13	20	32
Localizing operations (procurement)	21	22	31	32	33
Overseas (local) voluntary assistance	29	35	28	30	37
Overseas (local) environment protection	26	10	34	22	26
Total number of issues ranked	34	35	35	35	38

\*. Since 2017, it is called responding to BRI and was dropped off in 2020.

**Table 4.** Ranking of customer-related CSR issues by their importance for the sustainable development of CCCC.

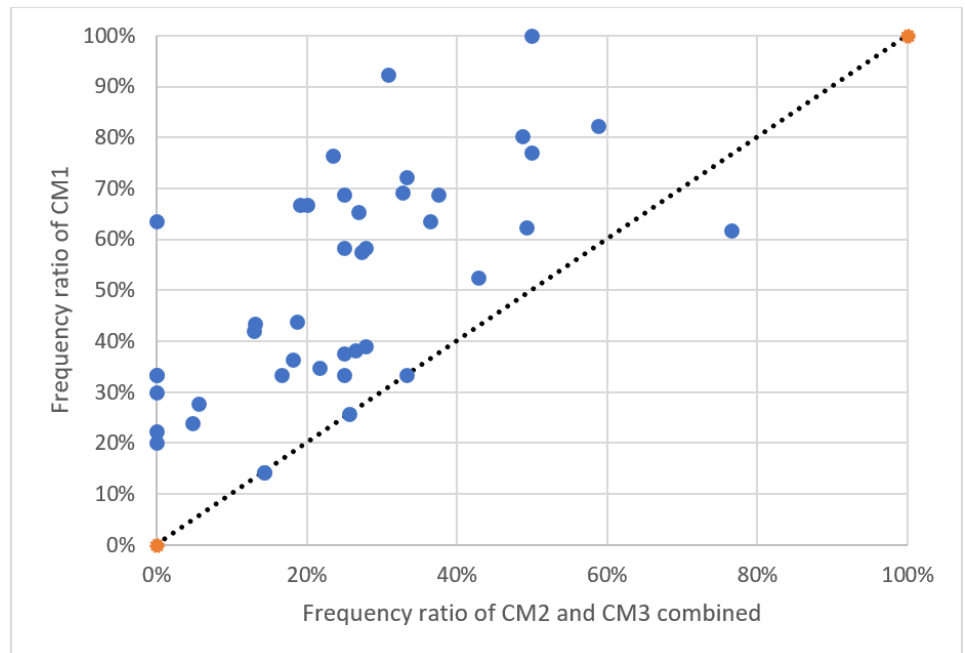
	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Project quality	1	1	1	1	1
Safe production	8	7	1	2	-
Customer satisfaction	9	11	2	3	6
Technological innovation	5	8	8	6	4
Total number of issues ranked	34	35	35	35	38

Source: Author’s compilation from annual CSR reports of CCCC.

In this context, the high proportion of CSR practices targeting customers might be attributed to an economic rationale and a competitiveness-seeking motivation, supporting hypothesis (2). In contrast, the extensive disclosure of community engagements, despite their lower ranking in strategic importance, supports hypothesis (1) by indicating a drive for political legitimacy and corporate alignment with national strategy as shown in **Table 3**. This nuanced approach to CSR showcases how CICs navigate the interplay between economic ambitions and political expectations, employing CSR as a multifaceted tool to engage with various stakeholders. Upcoming analyses will delve into CSR practices divided into categories based on the nature of stakeholder relationships, highlighting how CICs balance their commitments to both societal and economic stakeholders.

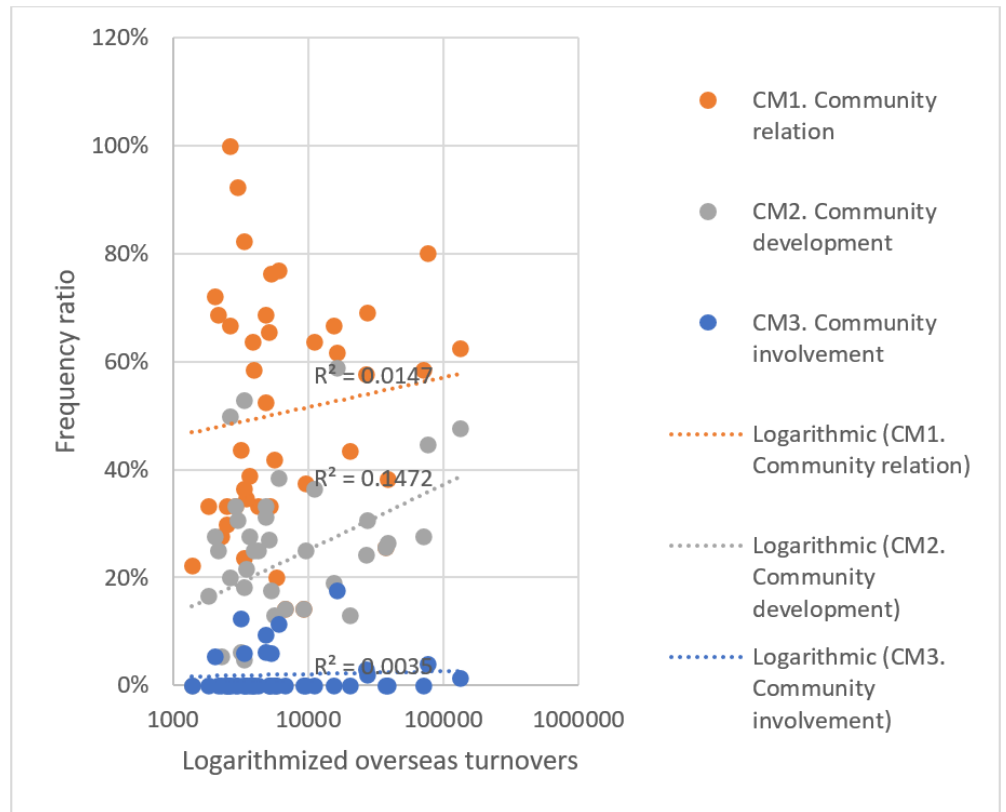
### 5.1. CSR patterns with societal stakeholders

Considering community-related CSR practices (CM), our analytical framework categorizes them into three types: Community relation (CM1) encompasses basic, often short-term philanthropic activities; Community development (CM2) entails initiatives with the aim of leaving a lasting positive impact on local social infrastructure; and Community involvement (CM3) represents a comprehensive commitment to respecting local community rights through effective communication and mitigation strategies against potential adverse impacts (see **Table 1**). According to hypothesis (1), a higher frequency ratio of CM1 is anticipated. To test this, a two-dimensional matrix is constructed, where the vertical axis measures the frequency ratio of CM1, and the horizontal axis measures the frequency ratio of combined CM2 and CM3. Interestingly, out of the 42 sampled CICs, 38 have implemented and communicated more CM1 practices compared to combined CM2 and CM3 practices (see **Figure 3**).



**Figure 3.** Two-dimensional patterns of Community practices of CICs.

However, a more complex scenario emerges where several CICs demonstrate a balanced approach between CM1 and more sustainable CM2 and CM3 practices, indicating a notable variance among CICs in terms of their efforts in implementing CM2 and CM3. This variance could be influenced by factors such as the degree of internationalization, as suggested in hypothesis (2). **Figure 4** thus incorporates the accumulated overseas turnovers of individual companies from 2015 to 2020 and provides a contextualized view of CM practices at company level, where CICs with higher overseas turnovers are observed to place a greater emphasis on CM2 activities, with the trend line suggesting an increase in such sustainable practices proportional to the company’s overseas turnovers.



**Figure 1.** Patterns of Community practices of CICs.

The observed correlation is also supported by the statistical results of the regression model using the logarithmized overseas turnovers of CICs as independent variable, presented in **Table 5**. A positive and statistically significant correlation at a 1.2% significance level between corporation internationalization and CM2 practices is found, partially supporting the hypothesis (2) that increased internationalization fosters deeper community development initiatives beyond philanthropic activities.

**Table 5.** Results of correlative estimates between Community issues and corporate internationalization.

Dependent variables	CM1	CM2	CM3	CM1	CM2	CM3
Intercept	0.296 (0.274)	-0.233 (0.177)	0.001 (0.052)	0.310 (0.209)	-0.045 (0.140)	-0.004 (0.039)
Internationalization scale	0.055 (0.071)	0.121* (0.046)	0.005 (0.013)			
Internationalization diversity				0.119 (0.125)	0.167 (0.084)	0.015 (0.024)
R-square	0.015	0.147	0.004	0.022	0.089	0.010
Adjusted R-square	-0.010	0.126	-0.021	-0.002	0.067	-0.015
Observations	42	42	42	42	42	42

Standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$  \*\* $p < 0.01$  \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Moreover, rather than positioning themselves solely as altruist philanthropic donors, CICs with higher international turnovers justify their community development initiatives as business enhancing solutions. Instances of such CSR practices include China Wuyi’s construction of water ponds to facilitate local access to water in



exchange for resources for road construction (Wuyi, 2018), Gezhouba's skill training in Ethiopia coupled with purchasing vegetables from locals to ensure the project team's food supply (Gezhouba, 2019), and Three Gorges Group's scholarship program in Pakistan aimed at building local talent reserve while addressing the social impacts of their hydropower projects (Three Gorges, 2020). In all these cases, community development is justified by enhancing the operational efficiency and sustainability of their overseas projects, thereby validating the strategic value and economic returns of their practices, which were formerly propagandized for their one-way contribution to the local community's welfare.

However, CICs collectively face challenges in fully institutionalizing genuine community involvement (CM3). Among even the most internationalized CICs, the initiatives that promote participatory decision-making are rare. Instead, they often employ a tailored approach, adapting their strategies to the specific context of each country, locality, and project, encapsulated in the policy of "one country, one policy; one place, one policy; one project, one policy". This method places significant responsibility on project managers to forge and sustain personal connections with local stakeholders (Weng and Buckley, 2016), rather than institutionalizing structured, transparent, and inclusive community engagement mechanisms. This situation challenges the assumption that the complexity of institutional environments would foster the institutionalization of CSR policies within the organization and explains why the correlation between internationalization and CM2 practices turned out to be insignificant once we substitute internationalization scale with internationalization diversity as independent variable (see **Table 5**). The statistical gap underscores the difficulty to go beyond the traditional project-based arrangement and the complexity of transitioning to a governance culture that fully embraces genuine stakeholder involvement when there is a lack of better understanding between human rights and business among CICs. In fact, human rights policy does not emerge as a focal area for CICs, irrespective of their degree of international exposure. The scarcity of human rights-related practices underscores a systemic deficiency in involving societal stakeholders directly in the formulation and execution of CSR initiatives, reflecting CICs' unilateral definition of the local communities' rights and needs.

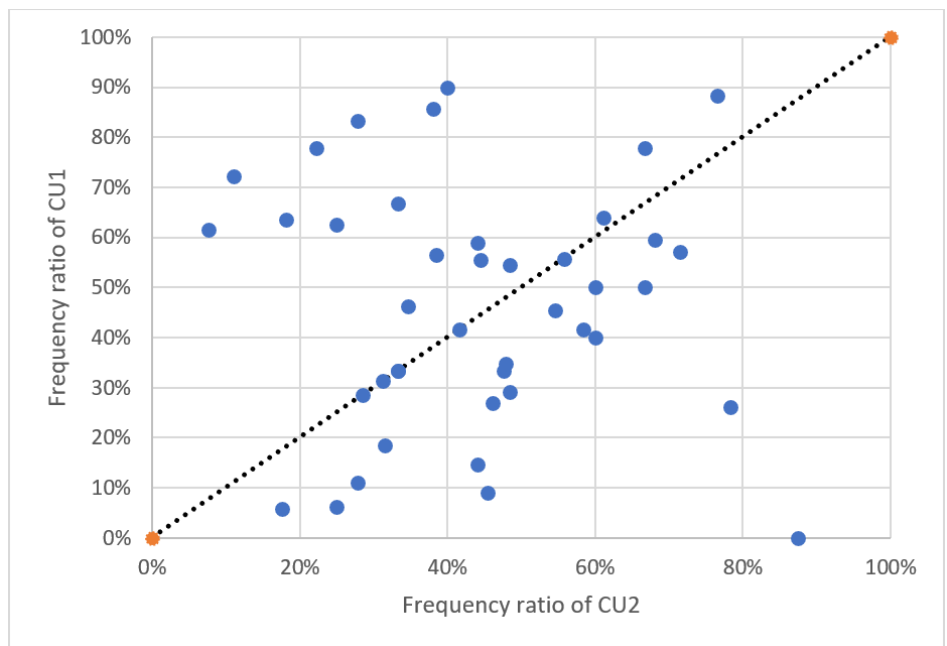
In summary, CICs' CSR patterns with societal stakeholders exhibit three key characteristics. Firstly, there is a prominent presence of coercive/persuasive pressures from the home state, leading to a high proportion of philanthropic practices that is not influenced by corporate internationalization. In other terms, independent from corporate specific attributes, all CICs actively engaging in overseas projects, under the pressures of home country policies, have considered the fulfilment of philanthropic responsibility as the bottom line and diffused publicly relevant performance records to gain domestic political legitimacy upon which their pecuniary interests would then be pursued. Secondly, internationalization serves as a contingent factor affecting the practice and disclosure of community development initiatives, with significant variation among firms. However, not all dimensions of internationalization matter equally. Specifically, our findings indicate that the scale of international operations, rather than the geographic diversity of projects, significantly influences community development initiatives. This leads to the final observation that is the internationalization effect is limited in terms of systematic efforts to facilitate

communication and participation of societal stakeholders in the decision-making process, both at aggregated and disaggregated levels. The next section will explore whether these characteristics also define CICs' CSR patterns with economic stakeholders.

### 5.2. CSR patterns with economic stakeholders

In the realm of CSR targeting economic stakeholders, particularly customers, the analysis reveals stronger economic motivations. The Customer dimension (CU) is delineated into two main issues: Customer communication (CU1) and Project quality and safety (CU2). CU1 is seen as a vehicle for maintaining customer satisfaction through regular updates and adherence to contractual obligations, yet it is often translated into a ceremonial practice aimed at bolstering media visibility and crafting a favourable public image. Conversely, CU2 involves tangible efforts to elevate project quality and safety through technological advancements and rigorous safety protocols, potentially leading to prestigious quality certifications and accolades.

The comparison between these two issues, under a two-dimensional matrix, as illustrated by **Figure 5**, demonstrates a significant dispersion of CICs within the matrix, thereby challenging the assumption that customer engagement is predominantly a public relation manoeuvre as hypothesis (1) suggests, which makes CICs systematically favour the implementation of CU1 over CU2. This diversity indicates a more complex approach to customer relations than previously assumed.



**Figure 2.** Two-dimensional patterns of Customer practices of CICs.

Support for hypothesis (2) however emerges from analysing the correlation between the emphasis on CU2 and the degree of corporate internationalization, as depicted in **Figure 6**.



**Figure 3.** Patterns of Customer practices of CICs.

Moreover, according to **Table 6**, it appears that CICs with a broader international footprint (both in terms of turnovers and geographic penetration) are more inclined to invest in and publicize initiatives related to project quality and safety as their competitive advantages. This approach is validated by the experiences shared by Yang Zhiyuan (CCCC, 2018a) and Alioune Badara SAMBE (CCCC, 2018b) considering the key of CCCC’s successes in Middle East and Senegal, which highlight the competitive edge gained by delivering exceptional project outcomes and reliability, ultimately fostering client trust and securing further contracts. For instance, CCCC’s achievements in the Palembang Light Rail project in Indonesia, which not only met but exceeded client expectations, paved the way for securing additional, more lucrative projects, despite of a bidding price higher than its competitors (CCCC, 2018c).

**Table 6.** Results of correlative estimates between Customer issues and corporate internationalization.

Dependent variables	CU1	CU2	CU1	CU2
Intercept	0.589 (0.302)	-0.039 (0.223)	0.725** (0.228)	-0.035 (0.163)
Internationalization scale	-0.033 (0.079)	0.126* (0.058)		
Internationalization diversity			-0.159 (0.137)	0.290** (0.098)
R-square	0.004	0.105	0.033	0.179
Adjusted R-square	-0.021	0.082	0.009	0.158
Observations	42	42	42	42

Standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$  \*\* $p < 0.01$  \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

The emphasis on quality, innovation, and efficient management as crucial elements for maintaining competitiveness in the global market is likely to influence the interactions between prominent CICs and other economic stakeholders, including suppliers and employees. **Tables 7** and **8** present the corresponding statistical findings of the patterns of supplier (SU) and labour (LA) practices among CICs.

In managing supplier relations, CICs are primarily driven by cost-saving motives to ramp up local procurement for their expanding overseas projects. This approach, termed “localized management”, occasionally shifts towards “regionalized management” to circumvent material shortages in specific host countries. An illustrative case is the China Railway Engineering Corporation (CREC), which set up a diversified operation centre within its Congo (Kinshasa) project department to optimize procurement from the Zambian and South African markets, thereby cutting down procurement cycles and costs while boosting profits (CREC, 2021). However, as Fessehaie and Morris (2013) contend, such strategies, while offering local suppliers opportunities, often fall short of supporting their capacity building and upgrading. Our findings, as demonstrated in **Table 7**, echo their observation, noting that although CICs increasingly embrace supply localization as they expand internationally, there’s an evident absence of structured institutional support for these efforts. Measures like standardizing procurement processes, and implementing training, auditing, and due diligence programs are underutilized, preventing the transformation of a price-driven supply link into one built on trust-based relationships.

**Table 7.** Results of correlative estimates between Supplier issues and corporate internationalization.

Dependent variables	SU1	SU2	SU1	SU2
Intercept	-0.175* (0.076)	-0.037 (0.067)	-0.130* (0.058)	-0.045 (0.050)
Internationalization scale	0.059** (0.020)	0.018 (0.017)		
Internationalization diversity			0.109** (0.035)	0.046 (0.030)
R-square	0.181	0.025	0.200	0.055
Adjusted R-square	0.160	0.001	0.180	0.031
Observations	42	42	42	42

Standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$  \*\* $p < 0.01$  \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

Regarding labour procurement and management, the frequency ratio of labour localization practices is found to be positively correlated with corporate internationalization at the 0.1% significance level (see **Table 8**). The growing emphasis on local procurement of human resources cannot be solely attributed to legal requirements in host countries but also driven by economic rationales aimed at cost reduction, operational efficiency, and overcoming visa restrictions on Chinese personnel traveling abroad. For example, despite the Turkish government allocating substantial labour quotas for Chinese workers, China Energy Engineering Corporation (CEEC) opted for significant local employment in its Hunutlu project, reflecting a broader market-driven approach to labour engagement (CEEC, 2020). Further, internationalization has catalysed advancements in other labour practices. The

statistical analysis underlines this impact, with internationalization showing a meaningful influence on labour practices (see **Table 8**). Key economic considerations, such as the necessity for skill training to enhance cost-efficiency and the need to blend local knowledge on European or American standards with Chinese managerial expertise, underscore additional labour practices to enhance the integration and involvement of local employees within the organizational frameworks of CICs. Initiatives like skill training sessions for Indonesian workers in CCCC’s MRT Line 2 project (CCCC, 2018b) and the localization of management in operations of Anhui Construction Engineering Group (ACEG) in Pakistan (ACEG, 2018) exemplify these efforts.

**Table 8.** Results of correlative estimates between Labour issues and corporate internationalization.

Dependent variables	LA1	LA2	LA3	LA1	LA2	LA3
Intercept	-0.372* (0.172)	-0.159 (0.085)	-0.203 (0.182)	-0.242 (0.131)	-0.078 (0.120)	-0.175 (0.135)
Internationalization scale	0.156*** (0.045)	0.085* (0.041)	0.105* (0.047)			
Internationalization diversity				0.283*** (0.078)	0.149* (0.072)	0.227** (0.081)
R-square	0.232	0.098	0.110	0.246	0.096	0.165
Adjusted R-square	0.213	0.076	0.088	0.227	0.074	0.144
Observations	42	42	42	42	42	42

Standard errors in parentheses. \* $p < 0.05$  \*\* $p < 0.01$  \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

These efforts signify a departure from the arms-length market relationship with local suppliers, fostering closer, more nuanced interactions with local labour forces. Leading CICs have implemented various measures and initiatives, such as the Chinese style “mentorship and apprenticeship” and cultural exchange programs, to cultivate local talent, ensure workforce stability, and embed a sense of belonging among local employees. Such measures not only facilitate the operational integration of local workers but also contribute to CICs’ sustained competitive advantage in the global market, reflecting a comprehensive approach to leveraging internationalization for improving labour relations and project outcomes.

In summary, CICs’ CSR patterns with economic stakeholders exhibit two key features. Firstly, CICs generally do not view their relationship with economic stakeholders, particularly host country governments, from a systematic public relations perspective. Secondly, when CICs engage in more overseas projects across different countries and generate greater income from overseas operations, they increasingly recognize the importance of win-win relationships with local labour and value chain partners. This responsiveness, influenced by corporate internationalization, is largely driven by economic incentives.

## 6. Conclusion

This study’s exploration into the overseas CSR activities of CICs unveils a complex landscape where motivations for political legitimacy and strategic

competitiveness intertwine, guiding the development of CSR initiatives. It echoes previous research on the “country-of-origin” effect, such as the selective focus on specific human rights issues of Chinese multinational SOEs (Whelan and Muthuri, 2017), underscoring the significant role of home state pressures in shaping CICs’ CSR focus, particularly towards philanthropy. However, contrary to a purely state-centric view, this analysis reveals that CICs, while adhering to political mandates, also adaptively pursue commercial interests, blending responsive and strategic social responsibilities based on their level of internationalization. This dual approach allows for a nuanced engagement with stakeholders, emphasizing economic rationale in relationships with customers, employees, and suppliers, alongside political considerations. This hybrid model of CSR, navigating between national expectations and global market pressures, underscores the adaptive capacities of CICs in their international operations.

However, due to the coexistence of political and economic rationales, CICs’ overseas CSR practices have not progressed as swiftly as their expansion into international markets. Currently, CICs are positioned in the transition process from Type I CSR, which focuses on altruistic corporate philanthropy—the common feature of multinationals from developing countries—(Gugler and Shi, 2009) to emerging Type II CSR, which links a company’s financial goals with its social goals – the dominant form observed in leading Western-based international contractors (Lu et al., 2016; Liao et al., 2017). In parallel, the current mode of international CSR development advocates for Type III CSR, which emphasizes associative work, where companies collaborate with other local actors to pursue jointly defined objectives. This trend is based on the recognition of the limited social benefits when corporate definitions of social actions are subordinated to economic efficiency criteria (Banerjee, 2008; Drebes, 2016; Jackson et al., 2020; Vogel, 2010). In this context, CICs not only have not yet fully consolidated Type II CSR practices in foreign markets as their western peers, but also lag behind the current trend in forming a genuine community of shared benefits with multiple stakeholders. This gap underscores the need for CICs to accelerate their CSR evolution to not only meet global standards but also to create sustainable and inclusive value in the international arena.

The implications of these findings are multifaceted. For managers, the shift towards building sustainable competitiveness from aggressively grasping international market share signals a need for CICs to align their CSR practices more closely with global standards. This convergence could foster a more strategic approach to CSR, balancing its costs and benefits more effectively and encouraging a broader stakeholder engagement model. The study also highlights and confirms the uneven benefits of current CSR initiatives, with a tendency to prioritize contractually bound stakeholders over others (Wu et al., 2015), suggesting a potential area for more inclusive CSR strategies that better address the needs of local communities and other non-contractual stakeholders. For policymakers, the exogenous home state pressures outweigh the endogenous recognition of the strategic importance of certain CSR issues, diverting CICs’ CSR efforts to the national image-building purpose. Given the political affiliation between CICs and the Chinese government, the coercive pressures from the home state will continue to be an important factor in promoting the development of CICs’ overseas CSR. In this context, the Chinese government should

further clarify its demands on SOEs, encouraging them to be fully embedded in the local society and to build open platforms for the locals to participate in the identification of key CSR issues.

Despite providing valuable insights on intricate dynamics between political and economic motivations, this study encounters specific limitations that pave the way for future research directions. The concentration of SOEs in the sample restricts the examination of corporate ownership as a factor influencing CICs' overseas CSR patterns, suggesting a valuable avenue for comparative studies between private and state-owned construction firms. Additionally, the limited company sample hinders a systematic assessment of relevant corporate intrinsic factors, other than internationalization, that might influence their overseas CSR practices. Future research could benefit from the inclusion of smaller CICs, especially with the anticipated mandatory non-financial disclosures, to allow for more robust statistical analyses. Another area ripe for exploration lies in the lack of a comparative analysis with international counterparts. This gap limits the ability to discern whether the CSR behaviours of CICs are distinctly Chinese or resonate with global patterns within the construction industry. Conducting comparative studies between CICs and their non-Chinese competitors could illuminate unique or shared CSR practices, offering deeper insights into the global landscape of CSR in the construction sector. Furthermore, the reliance on public corporate statements as the primary data source introduces potential biases, highlighting the need for qualitative research methodologies. In-depth case studies and qualitative analyses could delve into the nuanced processes behind CSR strategy formulation and execution, uncovering the realities of CSR practice beyond corporate disclosures. Such approaches would enable a closer examination of the socialization mechanisms within CICs and the perceived impacts of their CSR activities on local communities, offering a more grounded understanding of CSR's effectiveness and authenticity.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Frequency ratios of CSR practices in six dimensions at the company level.

Company	CU	SU	LA	CM	EN	HU
CCCC	81%	16%	58%	74%	35%	4%
PCCC	41%	9%	49%	87%	30%	8%
CSCE	86%	11%	64%	61%	19%	3%
CREC	79%	12%	35%	50%	15%	0%
CRCC	79%	10%	18%	38%	15%	3%
CEEC	77%	8%	52%	71%	19%	4%
SINOMACH	73%	9%	21%	64%	12%	0%
CNCEC	83%	4%	61%	48%	4%	0%
CPECC	47%	21%	65%	74%	59%	3%
MCC	67%	5%	57%	67%	19%	0%
CITIC	64%	0%	27%	73%	36%	0%
SEG	88%	13%	63%	38%	13%	0%
CNQC	86%	14%	43%	29%	29%	29%
CNOS	57%	0%	43%	14%	0%	0%
CWE	62%	8%	50%	81%	35%	8%
HEC	90%	0%	10%	20%	10%	0%
CBMI	65%	13%	48%	42%	10%	3%
CJIC	94%	12%	53%	82%	6%	0%
ZJINTER	89%	0%	22%	33%	0%	11%
GNERTEC	58%	8%	38%	69%	15%	0%
CET	62%	5%	43%	62%	14%	5%
NORINCO	75%	0%	31%	69%	13%	0%
TBEA	67%	0%	8%	50%	0%	0%
CNMC	58%	25%	67%	58%	33%	0%
SHANGHAI ELECTRIC	55%	0%	36%	64%	18%	0%
CGC	78%	6%	33%	50%	0%	0%
DEC	70%	13%	39%	43%	4%	0%
SCG	95%	0%	5%	29%	0%	0%
CJI	82%	0%	18%	55%	0%	0%
SPEZY	24%	6%	41%	94%	47%	6%
BCEG	31%	0%	25%	44%	38%	0%
CHICO	62%	15%	54%	92%	31%	0%
CGCOC	89%	0%	22%	44%	0%	0%
WUYI	50%	0%	33%	100%	33%	0%
SINOSTEEL ENTEC	67%	13%	40%	67%	13%	13%
YNCEGC	100%	0%	20%	30%	0%	0%
BUGG	75%	25%	33%	33%	0%	0%
JSCE	83%	0%	17%	28%	0%	0%
CATIC	44%	0%	19%	75%	0%	6%

**Table A1.** (Continued).

<b>Company</b>	<b>CU</b>	<b>SU</b>	<b>LA</b>	<b>CM</b>	<b>EN</b>	<b>HU</b>
COMPLANT	28%	0%	17%	83%	11%	0%
ACEG	67%	0%	83%	50%	17%	0%
JWHC	89%	0%	11%	22%	0%	0%