


# Using Commerce as Media: A Study on Yiwu's International City Image Communication Strategy

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| Received: 26.02.2026 | Accepted: 04.04.2026 | Published: 07.04.2026

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## Abstract

This study examines the international city image communication strategy of Yiwu through the lens of “using commerce as media”, an emerging yet underexplored approach in city branding research. Focusing on ten short videos from the 2025 Wanguo Chuangfu Chao series produced by the Yiwu Belt and Road International Communication Center, the study adopts qualitative content analysis to investigate how commercial practices, entrepreneurial narratives, and value-oriented storytelling jointly construct Yiwu's global image. The findings reveal that Yiwu's communication strategy successfully projects a multidimensional city image as (1) a hyper-efficient global trade hub, (2) a culturally inclusive and integrated cosmopolitan community, and (3) an aspirational platform for entrepreneurial success. This is achieved through three key strategies: a glocal storytelling framework that integrates personal narratives with macro-level positioning, the strategic use of foreign entrepreneurs as credible narrators, and value-forward communication linking commerce to global themes such as sustainability and inclusivity. The study contributes to the literature by addressing the gap in self-constructed city image research and advancing the conceptualization of commerce-as-media as a distinct communication paradigm. It also offers practical implications for cities seeking to enhance their international visibility through innovative and culturally resonant communication strategies.

**Keywords:** Commerce as media; city image communication; Yiwu; short video communication; international communication strategy.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

City image is the mental image residents form of a city through perceiving its material environment, which comprises identity, structure, meaning, includes both individual cognitive maps and a shared public image, and has quality measured by legibility and imageability (Lynch, 1960). With the evolving times, it also refers to the subjective perception and cognitive representation of a city formed by the public through various channels, including mass media, personal experiences, and social memory. It encompasses the city's historical heritage, technological advancement, social atmosphere, and cultural spirit. The strategic communication of a city's image aims to present an authentic, comprehensive, and multi-dimensional portrayal to enhance its international visibility and competitiveness, thereby contributing to the global construction of the national image (Gao & Sheng, 2025). In the current era, international communication is characterized by three prominent trends: the diversification of communication actors, shifting from

government-led initiatives to collaborative creation involving official bodies, civil society, and foreign key opinion leaders (Yang & Xu, 2025); the video-centric turn in media, with short videos becoming a mainstream carrier due to their fragmented, interactive, and cross-culturally adaptable nature (Liu & Zhu, 2025); and the value-oriented shift in communication philosophy, moving from “propaganda” to “value resonance”, emphasizing storytelling and emotional connection to bridge cultural divides (Gao & Sheng, 2025).

In a global context where traditional diplomacy is often constrained by geopolitical rivalries and ideological confrontations, public diplomacy has emerged as a crucial supplementary channel for maintaining international understanding. Scholars and practitioners have proposed diverse approaches such as “science diplomacy” (Deng, 2026) and “tourism diplomacy” (Liu & Zhu, 2025). Among various communication mediums, short videos have demonstrated significant efficacy. They leverage cross-cultural narration by foreign hosts, integrate multi-

dimensional content, and utilize platform algorithms for precise reach (Gao & Sheng, 2025). Regarding communication concepts, the strategy of “using objects as media” (e.g., using Chengdu’s hotpot or Suzhou’s gardens as cultural symbols) has gained attention (Gao & Sheng, 2025). However, the form of “using commerce as media”, where commercial activities, merchants, and markets themselves serve as core vehicles for communication, has not yet received systematic scholarly focus, particularly lacking empirical research on its strategies and effectiveness.

## 1.2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing research on Yiwu’s city image primarily adopts two perspectives. The first is corpus-based analysis of its image in overseas media. For instance, Lu, Chen, and Zhang (2022) conducted a corpus-driven study of overseas media reports from 2010 to 2021. Their findings indicate that Yiwu’s overseas image has evolved positively over this period, transitioning from being labeled a “Christmas factory” to a modern, globally integrated trade hub, particularly with the maturation of projects like the China-Europe Railway Express and the Yiwu Fair. However, this line of research focuses on how international media shape Yiwu’s image from an external perspective.

The second perspective examines new media communication practices (e.g., Gong & Wang, 2024; Shen & Li, 2025). For example, Bao (2022) analyzed short video communication strategies on platforms like Douyin, noting Yiwu’s prevalent tags such as “entrepreneurship” and “small commodities”, but also pointing out weaknesses in cultural image dissemination. A significant body of research investigates the international social media communication of Chinese megacities. Gao and Sheng (2025) analyzed official YouTube accounts of cities like Chongqing, Nanjing, and Chengdu, summarizing effective strategies such as employing foreign hosts and multi-dimensional content. However, their study did not include Yiwu, a unique county-level city with a distinct commercial identity.

Thus, a research gap remains. First, studies on self-constructed image are limited. Most research focuses on the image constructed by overseas media, with insufficient systematic analysis of the self-communication strategies led by Yiwu’s official channels. Second, the commerce-as-media strategy has not been adequately explored. While some studies mention Yiwu’s highlight of trade in their communication practice (Yang & Xu, 2025), they lack in-depth case studies on communication products, particularly short video series, to deconstruct its narrative framework and communication efficacy.

### 1.3 Research Rationale and Case Selection

This study selects Yiwu as the research case based on its unique urban status and the practical value of its international communication endeavors. As the

“World Capital of Small Commodities”, Yiwu is the world’s largest wholesale market for small commodities. In 2025, the transaction volume of China Yiwu International Trade Center estimatedly exceeds 320 billion yuan, with a daily average visits of 4,000 foreign merchants and 28,000 long-term resident foreign businessmen. Its international communication capability ranks among the top in Chinese counties. In 2025, Yiwu was listed in the first tier of the Top 100 in “China Cities’ International Digital Image Index”, following metropolises like Beijing and Shanghai.

The official media outlet, the Yiwu “Belt and Road” International Communication Center (YWICC), has pioneered a commerce-as-media approach. It has produced branded series like Wanguo Chuangfu Chao (Wave of International Entrepreneurship) and Chuangfu Chao on the Belt and Road, featuring stories of foreign entrepreneurs in Yiwu. These series have achieved remarkable dissemination results. For instance, the 2025 Wanguo Chuangfu Chao series garnered over 10 million overseas views. YWICC’s efforts were recognized as a national-level excellent case in external communication in 2024.

This study focuses on the 2025 Wanguo Chuangfu Chao series, a highly acclaimed compilation (recognized as an exemplary international communication brand by YWICC and praised by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs). Ten representative videos from this series were selected for analysis. The research aims to dissect the commerce-as-media communication strategies employed in these videos, including narrative frameworks, subject selection, and platform adaptation, to provide actionable insights for similar cities seeking to enhance their international image communication.

## 2. Presentation of City Images in the Videos

The ten short videos collectively construct a sophisticated and multi-layered international image for Yiwu. Moving beyond its well-known identity as the “world’s supermarket”, these narratives strategically project Yiwu as a dynamic, inclusive, and future-oriented global hub. The imagery is not merely descriptive but aspirational, designed to resonate with a global audience of entrepreneurs, investors, and cultural observers. Three dominant and interconnected imagery dimensions emerge from the corpus, each articulating a core facet of Yiwu’s contemporary urban brand.

### 2.1 The Nexus of Hyper-Efficient Globalization and Sustainable Supply Chains

This imagery redefines Yiwu from a passive commodity marketplace into an active, intelligent command center for global trade. It emphasizes systemic efficiency, digital integration, and a forward-looking shift towards value-added and sustainable commerce. The narrative moves past the sheer volume of goods to highlight the sophistication of the ecosystem that supports their global flow.

The core of this image is logistical and transactional hyper-efficiency. The videos consistently showcase a business environment where speed, reliability, and digital convenience are paramount. This is embodied in references to 24/7 customs clearance, integrated digital platforms for sourcing and payment (like Chinagoods and Yiwu Pay), and a regulatory framework that facilitates rapid business establishment. This efficiency is portrayed not as cold automation but as an enabler of human ambition, allowing entrepreneurs to execute complex, cross-border operations with remarkable agility.

Crucially, this imagery is evolving to highlight sustainable and solution-oriented trade. Yiwu is no longer just a source of inexpensive goods; it is depicted as a hub for technologies and products that address global challenges. The story of Tania, exporting solar panels and energy storage systems to Africa, is pivotal here. His business transcends simple export; it involves providing tailored, off-grid power solutions for communities, positioning Yiwu at the heart of the green energy transition and South-South cooperation. Similarly, the Yiwu Selection initiative represents a strategic upgrade from commoditized exports to curated brand ecosystems. By pooling manufacturers to open overseas stores, it demonstrates Yiwu's capacity for collective, value-driven market creation, shifting the narrative from "supplying products" to "exporting commercial models and standards".

This composite imagery appeals to the modern global entrepreneur who seeks not just a supplier, but a reliable, innovative, and ethically conscious partner in building a global business.

## 2.2 A Cosmopolitan Mosaic of Deep Integration and Cultural Synergy

This imagery powerfully counters the notion of transient expat communities by presenting Yiwu as a true melting pot where deep cultural integration and mutual transformation occur. It constructs an image of a city that is not merely tolerant of foreigners but actively enriches itself through their inclusion, fostering a unique social fabric where "foreignness" evolves into a new form of local identity.

The imagery revolves around the concept of meaningful participation and belonging. It goes beyond showing foreigners living in Yiwu to depicting them as stakeholders and contributors to the city's social and civic life. This is most vividly illustrated by Prince, the Nepalese merchant. His 23-year journey from backpacker to a respected community figure—serving on official mediation committees and volunteering as a "foreign Lei Feng"—symbolizes unprecedented access to grassroots governance. This narrative portrays Yiwu's inclusivity as institutional and empowering, offering a sense of agency and belonging rarely highlighted in stories of migrant communities.

Furthermore, the imagery emphasizes cultural hybridity and the creation of new, shared spaces. The entrepreneurs are shown not just adapting to Chinese culture but actively synthesizing it with their own to create unique value. Veli, the Turkish restaurateur, transforms his establishment into a civilian meeting room that facilitates Sino-Turkish business, creating a third space that is neither purely Turkish nor Chinese. Melanie, the French entrepreneur, finds her work-life balance in Yiwu, a phrase that merges a Western ideal with an Eastern setting. These stories craft an image of Yiwu as a platform for cultural dialogue and the organic creation of new traditions, appealing to a global audience that values authentic multicultural lived experience over superficial diversity.

## 2.3 The Archetypal Dream Factory for Aspirational Global Capitalism

This imagery taps into a powerful global narrative of upward mobility and self-made success, positioning Yiwu as the 21st-century equivalent of historical centers of opportunity. It is framed as a meritocratic platform where grit, ingenuity, and access to the right tools can transform ambition into tangible success, regardless of origin.

The core of this image is democratized access and low barriers to entry. The videos consistently highlight how Yiwu's ecosystem lowers the threshold for global entrepreneurship. This includes the physical market's vast array of products, the availability of small-batch manufacturing, the supportive policies for foreign business registration, and the dense network of logistics providers. This environment is portrayed as a great equalizer, enabling individuals like Rick, the Indian cosmetics entrepreneur, to start with minimal capital and iterate rapidly based on niche market feedback (e.g., formulating for South Asian skin tones).

The imagery further romanticizes the entrepreneurial journey itself, focusing on resilience, learning, and evolution. Stories are not just about success but about the process: Nella overcoming initial order droughts through quality persistence, Amando scaling from a single pen order to a multi-industry empire, and John strategically relocating his entire operation from Shanghai to Yiwu. These narratives emphasize strategic pivots and continuous growth, painting Yiwu as a dynamic testing ground where business models are forged and refined. Ultimately, this "Dream Factory" imagery positions Yiwu not just as a place to make money, but as a place to build a legacy and redefine one's potential on a global stage.

## 3. Effective Communication Strategies

The persuasive power of these videos stems from a sophisticated application of cross-cultural communication strategies that other cities can emulate. Three core strategies are particularly effective.

### 3.1 The Glocal Storytelling Framework: Personal Micro-Stories within a Macro Strategic Narrative

This strategy masterfully intertwines intimate, personal narratives with a grander, city-level strategic vision. At the micro level, each video focuses on a single entrepreneur's emotional journey—their doubts, struggles, adaptations, and triumphs. We see Melanie's anxiety over cash flow, Rick's excitement at a perfect product sample, and Prince's pride in his community vest. This human-scale storytelling fosters empathy and relatability, making the abstract concept of doing business in China tangible and emotionally engaging.

Simultaneously, these personal stories are deliberately framed as proof points for Yiwu's macro-level value propositions. Tania's solar business evidences Yiwu's role in green supply chains; Nella's cross-border e-commerce showcases its digital trade infrastructure; the Yiwu Selection project demonstrates institutional capacity for brand uplift. This dual-layered approach ensures the content works on two levels: as compelling human-interest stories for broad viewership, and as credible case studies for policymakers and business analysts. It allows Yiwu to communicate its strategic advantages without resorting to dry promotional language, instead letting authentic experiences serve as evidence.

### 3.2 Strategic Deployment of Credible Outsiders as Primary Narrators

The choice to feature non-Chinese entrepreneurs as the sole protagonists and narrators is a deliberate and highly effective credibility-building tactic. It employs the principle of third-party validation, where messages are perceived as more authentic when delivered by a source without an obvious vested interest in boosterism. These entrepreneurs speak from lived experience, often in accented Chinese or their native languages, which enhances authenticity.

Their narration naturally highlights aspects of Yiwu's environment that a local might take for granted but which are remarkable to a foreign audience: the speed of bureaucracy, the safety of walking at night, the density of supply chains, the trust-based business relationships. When Nella marvels at 3-day company registration or Prince explains his role in dispute mediation, it carries more weight than an official statement. This strategy effectively bypasses skepticism and propaganda filters that international audiences might apply to state-produced media, fostering a sense of peer-to-peer recommendation. It transforms the communication from "Yiwu says it is good" to "Here is why people from all over the world choose Yiwu".

### 3.3 Value-Forward Positioning: Embedding Commerce within Larger Global Narratives

Rather than focusing solely on transactional benefits (low prices, high variety), the videos strategically position Yiwu's commercial ecosystem as a

vehicle for achieving higher-order, globally resonant values. This elevates the content from simple advertising to meaningful storytelling.

Commerce is consistently linked to positive global agendas. Tania's trade is framed as empowering African development and advancing clean energy access (SDGs). The Yiwu Selection project is presented as a model of inclusive globalization and South-South cooperation. Stories of cultural integration and community building, like Veli's or Prince's, position Yiwu as a laboratory for a harmonious multicultural future. Even individual success stories are tied to themes of women's empowerment (Nella), South-South knowledge transfer (Amando), or cultural bridge-building (Rick). This value-forward approach makes the content more shareable and defensible in the global media landscape, as it aligns Yiwu's growth with progressive, universally admired goals like sustainability, inclusivity, and mutual prosperity.

## 4. Suggestions for Improvement

To further enhance the impact and reach of such city branding campaigns, three strategic refinements are recommended.

First, integrate robust data visualization and measurable impact metrics into the narrative fabric. While the personal stories are powerful, supplementing them with hard data would significantly bolster credibility for analytical audiences. This could involve on-screen graphics showing Yiwu's annual trade growth with specific regions, the number of foreign-founded enterprises over time, or logistics efficiency comparisons. For instance, when discussing Yiwu Selection's success, overlaying a map with export data to Africa or a graph showing sales growth post-launch would make the achievement more concrete. Sharing anonymized, aggregate data on how many viewers of the Wanguo Chuangfu Chao series subsequently inquired about Yiwu business visas or visited the Chinagoods platform would demonstrate tangible ROI from the campaign, appealing to stakeholders focused on measurable outcomes.

Second, develop segmented and tiered content series to cater to diverse audience personas. The current format offers a broad appeal but could be deepened. A multi-tiered strategy could include: (1) Inspirational Hero Stories (current format) for general audiences; (2) Deep-Dive Industry Reports targeting specific sectors (e.g., "Yiwu's Green Tech Exporters", "Beauty & Cosmetics Supply Chain"), featuring more technical details on compliance, sourcing, and innovation; and (3) Practical "How-To" Guides for aspiring entrepreneurs, covering topics like company registration, logistics partners, and cultural adaptation tips from the featured entrepreneurs themselves. This segmentation would allow the campaign to move beyond brand awareness to lead generation and niche community building.

Third, transition from a broadcast model to a participatory, community-driven content ecosystem. The current model is professionally produced and disseminated. To increase authenticity and engagement, a “co-creation” strategy should be fostered. This could involve launching a hashtag campaign (e.g., #MyYiwuStory) encouraging the city’s vast international merchant community to share their own short-form content, with the best featured on official channels. Hosting live Q&A sessions on social media where the featured entrepreneurs answer questions in real-time would deepen engagement. Furthermore, creating a digital “Yiwu Entrepreneur Atlas”—an interactive map or database featuring stories of foreign entrepreneurs—would turn the campaign into a living, growing resource. This approach leverages user-generated content to scale the narrative, increases authenticity through peer voices, and fosters a sense of global community around the Yiwu brand, making the city’s image not just something to be watched, but something to be actively participated in.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study examines Yiwu’s international city image communication through the lens of using commerce as media, analyzing 10 short videos from the 2025 Wanguo Chuangfu Chao series. It finds Yiwu’s communication strategy effectively builds a multidimensional city image—global trade hub, multicultural global village, entrepreneurial dream incubator—by integrating foreign entrepreneurs’ “growth + city empowerment + value resonance” narratives, commercial activities, and value-driven storytelling. It outperforms traditional methods with authenticity (via credible outsiders’ narrators) and emotional resonance (linking commerce to global values), filling gaps in self-constructed image research and commerce-as-media strategy analysis, and offering actionable insights for cities.

Notes: Data in this paper were quoted from Yiwu government’s official sources.

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