

# The Legality Acquisition Mechanism for Grain and Oil Enterprises “Going Out” within the Scope of the Belt and Road Initiative: A Case Study of Xi’an Aiju Group

Shuitao Wang

Xi’an International Studies University, Business School, Xi’an, Shaanxi, China

1980724419@qq.com

**Abstract.** The “Belt and Road” initiative has afforded Chinese grain and oil enterprises significant opportunities for global expansion. However, these enterprises encounter considerable challenges in securing organizational legitimacy within host countries. This paper utilizes a three-level coding method grounded in theory, employing Xi’an Aiju Group as a case study. The research refines an “institutional-social-operational-sustainable four-dimensional synergistic legitimacy dynamic model”, unveiling the evolutionary trajectory of legitimacy from “compliance entry” to “symbiotic integration”. The findings suggest that attaining organizational legitimacy is a dynamic process that balances institutional breakthroughs, social symbiosis, capability demonstrations, and strategic bindings. This perspective contributes to a novel theoretical understanding of the mechanisms by which Chinese enterprises secure legitimacy during their global expansion. Furthermore, it provides valuable insights into other enterprises’ international practices in countries along the “Belt and Road” route.

**Keywords:** The Belt and Road; Grain and Oil Enterprises; Organizational Legitimacy; Aiju Group.

## 1. Introduction

The “Belt and Road” Initiative is an important strategic framework for China to promote globalization and economic cooperation. It provides systematic support for infrastructure connectivity and synergistic industrial development in countries along the route. In the context of the “Belt and Road”, Chinese grain and oil enterprises have accelerated their international expansion. With the help of policy preferences and market demand, they ease the pressure of domestic food shortage and safeguard national food security by establishing overseas grain source bases and optimizing supply chain networks. However, Chinese grain and oil enterprises are also facing many challenges as they go out. Resource sensitivity, livelihood relevance and geopolitical characteristics make them face great challenges of organizational legitimacy in the process of international expansion. Host country regulations on agricultural land protection, food sovereignty and local industrial competition may lead to market access restrictions and compliance risks for foreign firms. In addition, cultural differences, conflicting distribution of benefits and poor fulfillment of social responsibilities may lead to rejection and suspicion by local stakeholders. Therefore, systematically acquiring and maintaining organizational legitimacy has become a core issue for food and oil enterprises seeking sustainable operations along the “Belt and Road”.

Currently, studies on legitimacy acquisition in multinational enterprises mainly focus on single dimensions such as institutional compliance or cultural adaptation. However, these studies tend to ignore the dynamic interplay of multidimensional synergistic mechanisms. Moreover, considering the uniqueness of the food and oil industry—namely, its policy sensitivity, extensive industrial chain, and apparent resource dependence—existing theories fail to adequately address the nuanced pathways of legitimacy acquisition. To remedy these shortcomings, this study adopts a three-level coding approach of grounded theory using Xi’an Aiju Group as a case study. This approach is able to comprehensively analyze the legitimacy-seeking mechanisms of enterprises under the Belt and Road framework. The purpose of this study is not only to enrich the academic discourse, but also to provide illuminating insights for other enterprises undertaking similar international endeavors.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Conceptual Evolution of Organizational Legitimacy**

Organizational legitimacy theory has undergone a paradigm shift from institutional compliance to strategic constructs. Early studies of organizational legitimacy emphasized the constraints of the institutional environment. Weber viewed legitimacy as the fundamental mechanism for organizations to gain recognition through compliance with social norms. He set the tone for the study of institutional compliance [1]. On this basis, Scott proposed the triple institutional pillar framework of regulation, norms, and perceptions, which provided a systematic analytical tool for legitimacy research [2]. However, Suchman breaks through the institutional determinism and redefines legitimacy as “the collective cognition of social groups on the acceptability of organizational behavior”, which opens up a strategic perspective of legitimacy research [3]. In recent years, scholars have further deepened the connotation of legitimacy. G. George, L. Dahlander, S. D. Graffin, and S. Sim emphasized that legitimacy is the acceptability judgment of organizational behavior by social subjects based on cultural norms, highlighting their cognitive complexity [4]. X. Yu, X. Meng, Y. Chen, Y. Chen, and B. Nguyen proposed that legitimacy needs to be embedded in the contextual analysis of the stakeholder network, which provides a new way of thinking about legitimacy research in transnational business [5].

### **2.2 Organizational Legitimacy Dimension Classification**

The research on the division of organizational legitimacy dimensions shows diverse characteristics. It can be mainly categorized into dichotomous, trichotomous, and other multidimensional delineation methods. The dichotomous approach divides the sources of legitimacy from internal and external perspectives. J. V. Singh, D. J. Tucker, and R. J. House proposed that the degree of adaptation of emerging organizations to external legitimacy determines their development trends [6]. Aldrich and Fiol further divided legitimacy into social political legitimacy [7]. It focuses on the stakeholders' understanding of the firm's business behaviors, and cognitive legitimacy, which emphasizes the outsider's recognition [8]. The three-dimensional approach is widely recognized in academia, with Scott proposing a three-dimensional division of regulatory, normative, and cognitive legitimacy from an institutional perspective. They reflect the degree of organizational adaptation to policies and regulations, social culture, and value consensus, respectively. Suchman, on the other hand, proposes a classification of ethical, pragmatic, and cognitive legitimacy based on the source of evaluation. They emphasize normative evaluation, stakeholder evaluation, and cultural consistency. In recent years, the multidimensional division approach has further expanded the theoretical boundaries of legitimacy dimensions. Vergne proposes a four-dimensional division of environmental, competitive, accountability, and transactional legitimacy from the perspective of corporate behavioral compliance [9]. M. T. Dacin, C. Oliver, and J.-P. Roy, on the other hand, propose a five-dimensional model of market, relational, social, investment, and alliance legitimacy based on the characteristics of the corporate environment. This model provides a more focused analytical tool for context-specific legitimacy research [10]. These divisions provide important theoretical support for understanding the complexity and diversity of organizational legitimacy. However, in the special context of “going global” of grain and oil enterprises under the background of “Belt and Road”, it is still necessary to further explore the legitimacy dimensions and its dynamic evolution mechanism in cross-cultural and cross-institutional environments.

### **2.3 Organizational Legitimacy Acquisition Mechanism**

The study of organizational legitimacy acquisition mechanisms has been carried out in three aspects: the organization's own characteristics, behavioral characteristics, and the external environment. In terms of the organization's own characteristics, Filatotchev and Nakajima point out that incentives in corporate governance enhance legitimacy by increasing transparency and effectiveness [11]. Herlin emphasizes that core values and identity may pose a challenge to legitimacy

in cross-cultural contexts, and that external recognition needs to be reconfigured through cultural adaptation [12]. In terms of organizational behavioral characteristics, Colleoni found that fulfilling social responsibility significantly enhances ethical legitimacy, especially in environmentally sensitive industries [13]. Shah showed that strategic alliances can restore and enhance legitimacy by targeting stakeholder needs [14]. With regard to the external environment, Byrd and Landry argue that firms need to meet external environmental expectations through strategic adaptation [15]. Y. Y. Yu and Q. Mei further reveal that political and business relationships embedded in industrial clusters can significantly enhance entrepreneurial legitimacy [16]. In recent years, digital transformation has become a research hotspot. Platform capabilities enhance legitimacy by reconfiguring business model innovation paths [17]. While dual narrative strategy shapes competitive advantage by enhancing institutional identity [18].

## **2.4 Research Review**

Existing studies have made significant progress in exploring the mechanism of obtaining organizational legitimacy, but the following deficiencies still exist. First, most studies focus on high-tech enterprises or manufacturing industries. There is a lack of research on the legitimacy acquisition mechanism of grain and oil enterprises in the process of “going out”, especially the unique institutional pressure and cultural conflicts they face in the countries along the “Belt and Road”. Secondly, the existing literature pays insufficient attention to the dynamic evolution mechanism of legitimacy in cross-cultural and cross-institutional environments. It fails to fully reveal how grain and oil enterprises can realize the synergistic acquisition of multiple legitimacy through resource integration and stakeholder management. Finally, research has mostly focused on strategic choice and resource orchestration, neglecting the synergistic effect of internal capacity building and external network embedding in the organization. Taking Xi’an Aiju Group as an example, this paper explores the legitimacy acquisition mechanism of grain and oil enterprises going abroad under the background of “Belt and Road”. It aims to fill the theoretical gap in the study of legitimacy of enterprises in traditional industries and provide reference for practice.

## **3. Research Design**

### **3.1 Research Methodology**

The case study method, which effectively constructs indigenous management theories and reveals their internal logic, has gained significant traction in Chinese management theory research over the years [19]. This study employs the rooted theory methodology to analyze Xi’an Aiju Cereals and Oils Industrial Group as a case study. Rooted theory, a qualitative research method proposed by Glaser & Strauss, derives theories from actual data through three steps: Open coding, Axial coding, and Selective coding of textual data [20]. It is particularly suitable for exploratory research and the construction of new theoretical frameworks. This paper adopts rooted theory for two primary reasons: Firstly, while existing research has explored the factors influencing corporate legitimacy, there is a dearth of studies on the internal mechanism and transmission path of legitimacy construction in multinational organizations, particularly within the unique grain and oil industry. The current theoretical frameworks lack saturation and fail to adequately explain how these enterprises construct legitimacy. Secondly, rooted theory is renowned for its scientific and rigorous operational steps, which ensure the objectivity and empirical basis of research data, thereby enhancing the reliability of research conclusions. Moreover, the conclusions drawn from rooted theory research exhibit higher relevance and analytical robustness as they are closely tied to the actual situation.

### **3.2 Case Selection**

This study employs the principle of theoretical sampling, seeking cases that yield maximal information and achieve theoretical saturation [21]. Xi’an Aiju Cereals and Oils Industry Group Co., Ltd. was selected for this case study due to three primary reasons: Firstly, Aiju, a prominent entity in

China’s cereals and oils sector, exemplifies the “going out” strategy. It has established a comprehensive industrial chain spanning from cultivation and primary processing to the sale of agricultural products. Such a setup offers invaluable insights into how organizations secure and sustain legitimacy during internationalization. Secondly, Aiju’s internationalization trajectory spans several decades, marked by its strategic adaptations to shifts in the global market and political climate. This extensive timeframe and strategic evolution offer a distinct lens through which to examine the gradual establishment and preservation of organizational legitimacy. Lastly, preliminary communications revealed Aiju’s willingness to support this research, including providing pertinent internal data and facilitating interviews. This collaboration ensured the acquisition of first-hand data, enhancing the study’s depth and scope.

### 3.3 Data Collection

The crux of the rooted theory study lies in data collection, a process that adheres to the principle of iteration. This means that the direction and focus of data collection are constantly refined based on preliminary analysis. To ensure the relative objectivity and completeness of the data, this paper employs various channels for data collection and triangulation, thereby maximizing the study’s credibility and validating the conclusions drawn. The specific sources of data include: firstly, primary data comprising approximately 43,000 words, obtained through two on-site interviews conducted by the author. This information, gleaned directly from Aiju’s managers, encompasses the core aspects of the company’s internationalization, such as motivation, strategy, challenges, and coping strategies. These in-depth interview transcripts provide valuable primary information for the study, primarily serving to construct the theoretical model. Secondly, 50 pieces of information were gathered from Aiju’s official website and its subsidiaries’ websites. This information, which includes news releases, project introductions, and market dynamics, is primarily used to corroborate the information points in the first-hand interview data, thereby ensuring the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the study. Thirdly, 13 pieces of information were collected through network reports and interview records, mainly sourced from Baidu News and other online media. Public reports involving Aiju were also utilized to verify the information in the study and enhance its reliability. Lastly, by reviewing corporate books related to Aiju and searching published literature on China Knowledge Network, these documents provide the study with theoretical backgrounds and perspectives from previous studies, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of Aiju’s internationalization process. The sources of information are detailed in Table 1:

**Table 1.** sources of information

Source of Information	Data Collection Channel	Quantity
Primary data obtained through interviews	Data collected by the author through on-site interviews	Approximately 43,000 words
Official websites of the case company	Official websites of AiJu and its subsidiaries	50 pieces of information
Online reports and interview records	Baidu News	13 pieces of information
Company books and China National Knowledge Infrastructure	Reading books related to the company; searching for published literature on CNKI	One book and 16 papers

Source: Organized by this article

## 4. Data Analysis

In accordance with the analytical tenets of rootedness theory, this study initiated the coding process during the data collection phase, ensuring a seamless integration between data gathering and preliminary analysis. The data were meticulously analyzed following the three-tiered approach of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

#### 4.1 Open Coding

In the initial phase of rooted theory analysis, open coding involves assigning concepts to discrete events based on the original analyzed data. Subsequently, these concepts are merged and generalized if they are connotatively or phenomenologically related, and then labeled. This study has identified 118 distinct concepts and 11 primary categories through open coding. These categories encompass the legitimacy practices of enterprises throughout various stages, including trade, base construction, and industrial chain synergy. They are: legal compliance, policy synergy, policy-adaptive innovation, interest synergy, cultural adaptation, community embeddedness, supply chain optimization, industrial deepening, resource elasticity utilization, strategic coupling, and sustainable development. An illustrative example of open coding is provided in Table 2 below.

**Table 2.** Example of open coding

Materials texts	Conceptualization	Categorization
Compliance with local trade rules, customs clearance processing	Compliance with trade rules	legal compliance
Environmental compliance, design compliance	Environmental Design Compliance	
Relying on the China-European liner to build a logistics and food material processing base.	Relying on the China-European liner	Policy synergy
...	...	...
Participation in public service activities and promotion of local employment	Social Value Output	Community Embedding

Source: Organized by this article

#### 4.2 Axial Coding

**Table 3.** Examples of Axial coding

Main Category	Initial Category	Category Connotation
Institutional Legitimacy	Legal Compliance	Comply with local laws for formal legitimacy.
	Policy Coordination	Align with national strategies and use policy benefits for political legitimacy.
	Policy Adaptive Innovation	Innovate to avoid policy limits for institutional flexibility legitimacy.
Social Legitimacy	Interest Coordination	Bind multiple parties' interests for shared legitimacy.
	Cultural Adaptation	Respect local culture and communicate for cultural identity legitimacy.
	Community Embedment	Fulfill social responsibilities for moral legitimacy.
Operational Legitimacy	Supply Chain Optimization	Optimize logistics network for operational stability.
	Industrial Deepening	Extend value chain for market competitiveness.
	Resource Elastic Utilization	Use resources flexibly to improve risk resistance.
Sustainable Legitimacy	Strategic Coupling	Integrate into national strategy for long-term legitimacy.
	Sustainable Development	Promote local agriculture and green processing for moral and ecological legitimacy.

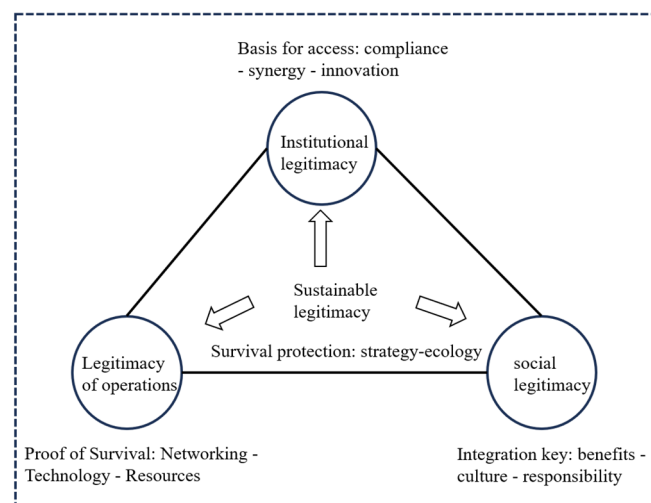
Source: Organized by this article

Within the purview of rootedness theory, axial coding is an essential phase that follows open coding. It necessitates the researcher to meticulously organize and categorize the concepts identified initially, while further investigating the inherent links among these concepts. The principal task of axial coding involves consolidating the numerous concepts identified during the open coding phase into broader categories via comparison, integration, and generalization. This process not only entails the reorganization of concepts but also requires the researcher to discern and formulate the logic and relationships between these categories.

Based on the logical relationship between the categories formed by open coding, this paper summarizes four main categories, which are institutional legitimacy, social legitimacy, operational legitimacy, and sustainable legitimacy, and each main category and its corresponding open coding category are shown in Table 3.

### 4.3 Selective Coding

The selective coding stage constitutes the heart of the rooted theory approach, striving to incorporate abstract categories, formulated through axial coding, into a holistic theoretical framework. During this phase, the researcher’s emphasis shifts to the integration of various categories into a unified model that comprehensively elucidates the mechanism underlying organizational legitimacy acquisition during Aiju’s “going out” process. Consequently, this paper introduces and refines a novel theoretical framework for legitimacy acquisition, termed the “four-dimensional synergy-driven model of dynamic legitimacy acquisition mechanism,” depicted in Figure 1.



**Fig 1.** A four-dimensional synergistically driven model of a dynamic legitimacy acquisition mechanism

### 4.4 Theoretical Saturation Test

Theory saturation test is an important way to ensure the credibility of the study, the main procedure is to further analyze and sort out the remaining information of the case until no new categories can be generate new categories. In this paper, through coding and analyzing the reserved validation data, no new categories and generic relationships were found, indicating that the theoretical model constructed above is saturated. The theoretical model constructed above is saturated.

## 5. Modeling and Research Findings

The “four-dimensional synergistic legitimacy dynamic model” constructed in this study reveals the composite mechanism of obtaining organizational legitimacy of grain and oil enterprises in the context of the “Belt and Road”. The model takes institutional legitimacy, social legitimacy and operational legitimacy as the three-dimensional core and sustainable legitimacy as the support,

emphasizing the synergistic evolution and dynamic leap of multi-dimensional capabilities. Its theoretical connotation and practical logic can be explained from the following four aspects:

### **5.1 Institutional Legitimacy Acquisition**

Institutional legitimacy is the “passport to entry” for multinational enterprises, and its construction relies on in-depth adaptation to the host country’s policy environment and strategic innovation. Aiju Group’s practice shows that institutional legitimacy is not a static result of passive compliance, but a progressive process of “compliance - synergy - innovation”. In the trade stage, enterprises meet the rigid legal requirements through basic compliance (e.g. completing customs certification in Kazakhstan and complying with environmental protection standards) to obtain the initial access qualification; in the stage of base construction, they further make use of macro policies (e.g. support for the logistics of China-European liner train and tax incentives for bonded zones) to realize synergy of resources and reduce the systematic transaction costs; in the stage of industrial chain improvement, they break the policy restriction through model innovation (e.g. order agriculture, multinational At the stage of industrial chain improvement, the policy restrictions are broken through model innovation (e.g. order agriculture, cross-border park construction), and the compliance requirements are transformed into strategic opportunities. For example, in the face of Kazakhstan’s policy barrier prohibiting foreign investors from leasing agricultural land, Aiju did not stop at passive compliance, but creatively put forward the model of “order farming + technology empowerment”, which not only avoids disputes over land ownership, but also binds the interests of farmers through pre-paid capital, seed supply and planting guidance. This “adaptive compliance” strategy is essentially a systematic innovation to transform constraints into cooperative ties, realizing the legitimacy upgrade from “policy adaptation” to “policy co-creation”. The strategy of “adaptive compliance” is essentially to transform constraints into cooperative bonds through institutional innovation, realizing the legitimacy upgrade from “policy adaptation” to “policy co-creation”.

### **5.2 Social Legitimacy Construction**

Social legitimacy is the “emotional glue” for enterprises to integrate into the host society, the core of which lies in resolving conflicts of interest and cultural barriers, and constructing a symbiotic relationship of “interest-culture-responsibility”. The case of Aiju shows that the construction of social legitimacy needs to go through the deepening process of “economic incentives→cultural recognition→value resonance”. At the initial stage, the enterprise mitigates the conflict of interest with farmers and community members through economic means such as pre-payment of funds for contract farming and hiring local laborers; with the deepening of the operation, it further dissolves the exclusion triggered by the differences in religions and customs through cultural respect (e.g., setting up halal canteens and banning pork consumption) and two-way exchanges (inviting employees from Kazakhstan for training in China); and ultimately, the company’s social legitimacy is built through technology empowerment (e.g., joint cultivation training with universities) and public welfare participation. Finally, through technical empowerment (e.g., joint planting training with universities), public welfare participation (e.g., donating to schools, drought relief) and other social responsibility practices, short-term benefit exchange is sublimated into long-term value sharing. This gradual embedding of “economy-culture-ethics” has gradually transformed the company from a “foreign competitor” to a “local co-constructor”. For example, when a drought struck a certain region in Kazakhstan, Aiju took the initiative to donate irrigation equipment and assisted in the construction of water conservancy facilities, which not only won awards from the local government, but was also regarded by the local people as a symbol of a “community of destiny”, greatly enhancing the company’s moral legitimacy.

### **5.3 Proof of Operational Legitimacy**

Operational legitimacy is a “declaration of competence” for an enterprise to gain a foothold in the international market, the essence of which is to prove its own efficiency through specialized

capabilities and supply chain resilience, and to respond to the host country's implicit questioning of the "inefficiency of outsiders". Aiju's experience shows that the construction of operational legitimacy needs to focus on the three pillars of "network resilience, resource elasticity and technological expertise". In terms of logistics network, the enterprise has opened up cross-border grain logistics channels through the layout of the trinity nodes of "Kazakhstan planting base - Xinjiang Alashankou Free Trade Zone - Xi'an Deep Processing Park", and transformed the transportation advantage of China-European liner train into the power of supply chain control; in terms of resource utilization, the enterprise has innovated the strategy of hierarchical processing (high-quality wheat to make flour and low-quality wheat to make feed) and innovated the strategy of "high-quality wheat to make feed". In terms of resource utilization, Aiju innovates graded processing strategies (high-quality wheat for flour and low-quality wheat for feed) to realize the whole life cycle management of raw materials, which not only improves resource efficiency but also meets the host country's environmental protection demands. In terms of technical capability, Aiju relies on domestic R&D strengths to promote the transformation of deep processing (e.g., high-gluten flour and functional oils and fats) and breaks the stereotypical perception of being a low-end raw material supplier by upgrading its products. For example, the 100,000-ton flour milling plant built by Aiju in Kazakhstan adopts intelligent milling equipment independently developed by China, and its product precision and energy consumption indexes are better than those of local enterprises, which not only wins the market share, but is also listed as a "demonstration project of technological upgrading" by the Ministry of Industry of Kazakhstan as a proof of the legitimacy of its "non-predatory" investment. This proves the legitimacy of its "non-predatory" investment.

#### **5.4 Sustainable Legitimacy Maintenance**

Sustainable legitimacy is the "future contract" for the survival of an enterprise, the key to which lies in binding short-term business goals to national strategies and global sustainable development agendas in depth, and constructing a legitimacy narrative that is "political, economic and ecological" in a trinity. Aiju realizes this goal through a dual path: on the one hand, it takes the initiative to respond to China's "food security" and "Belt and Road" initiatives by incorporating the layout of its overseas grain sources into the national strategic framework, for example, by building a national grain logistics hub in the Alashankou Free Trade Zone, which guarantees domestic supply security and access to policy resources. On the other hand, the company is practicing the concept of green development, turning environmental compliance into a competitive advantage through water-saving irrigation technology, promotion of organic planting, and recycling of processing wastewater, etc. This strategic bonding has not only won the support of China and Kazakhstan, but also the support of the Chinese government. This strategic binding not only gains political endorsement from the governments of China and Kazakhstan, but also builds a responsible corporate image in the international community by reinventing its role as a "contributor to food security" and "disseminator of green technology".

#### **5.5 Law of Stage Evolution**

Legitimacy acquisition presents a significant stage-by-stage dynamic evolutionary feature. In the initial trade stage, institutional legitimacy is the core breakthrough, and enterprises have established a preliminary trust foundation by strictly complying with the host country's trade rules and taking advantage of the policy dividends of the China-European Union Banlian Train (CEBT). For example, in the first batch of grain and oil trade in Kazakhstan, Aiju insisted on completing a full set of legal processes to prove its sincerity in compliance to the local government, despite facing logistics costs and time losses. In the subsequent stage of base construction, the focus of legitimacy shifted to the synergistic construction of social legitimacy and operational legitimacy. The company employs local staff, shortens the radius of the supply chain by building a logistics center in North Hazard, and donates community clinics and schools to resolve cultural conflicts and competition for resources. At the stage of industrial chain improvement, sustainable legitimacy has become the dominant driving

force, pushing the first three levels of legitimacy to spiral upward. The construction of deep-processing parks not only responds to Kazakhstan's "localization of manufacturing" policy, but also strengthens social embeddedness through the creation of local jobs, and binds to the national food security strategy and global sustainable development goals in both directions. The study shows that Aiju's contract farming model continues to iterate through three stages: avoiding land policy restrictions in the early stages, binding benefits and cultural identity in the middle stages, and enhancing resource resilience through graded processing and green technology in the later stages, ultimately forming a legitimacy-enhancing circuit of four-dimensional linkages: policy, benefits, capacity, and strategy.

## 6. Conclusion

This study systematically reveals the dynamic synergistic mechanism of obtaining organizational legitimacy for food and oil enterprises in the context of the "Belt and Road". The findings show that Aiju Group has realized the legitimacy leap from compliance access to symbiotic integration through the three-dimensional synergistic strategy of "institutional-social-operational" and the binding of sustainable strategies. Institutional legitimacy breaks through the host country's regulatory rigidity through policy adaptation innovation; social legitimacy reconstructs local identity through benefit sharing and cultural embedding; operational legitimacy proves market efficiency through supply chain resilience and value chain upgrading; and sustainable legitimacy ensures long-term survival through strategic coupling and green development. The four form a dynamic and interactive enhancement loop, for example, policy synergy drives benefit binding, cultural adaptation reduces operational friction, and strategic coupling promotes institutional innovation in the opposite direction. This mechanism breaks through the static focus of traditional legitimacy theory on a single dimension, and proposes two theoretical contributions: "dynamic institutional adaptation" and "systemic value reconstruction".

The limitations of the study are mainly reflected in the limitations of the generalizability of the single-case study method and the insufficient time span of the data. Future research could develop quantitative assessment tools, explore the impact of digital technology on legitimacy management, and pay attention to the shock effects of geopolitical fluctuations. On the practical level, it is recommended that Belt and Road enterprises establish a legitimacy audit framework, regularly assess the effectiveness of the four dimensions of synergy, and incorporate community empowerment (e.g., equity incentives for local employees) into their strategic planning to achieve a deeper systemic-social legitimacy embeddedness.

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