

# The Impact of Cultural Differences on Foreign Cooperation of Chinese Petroleum Companies ——Take Sinopec Zhongyuan Petroleum Engineering Company Saudi Arabia Company and Saudi Aramco as Examples

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**Abstract:** Under the new situation of the increasing trend of globalization of the world economy and the accelerated development of regional economic integration, the Chinese government has taken into account the overall situation of international and domestic development and put forward the Belt and Road Initiative, which has an important strategic value in promoting economic cooperation and trade between China and countries along the route and creates a good opportunity for Chinese enterprises. With the accelerating process of economic globalization, cultural conflicts caused by cultural differences are becoming more and more common in the foreign cooperation of China's petroleum companies. To solve these problems, this paper starts from the cultural differences of China's petroleum companies, takes China and Saudi Arabia as examples, studies the cultural characteristics of the two countries, and focuses on the cultures of Zhongyuan Saudi Arabia Company and Saudi Aramco, analyzes the cultural differences between the two petroleum companies, and discovers the reasons affecting foreign cooperation according to the cultural differences, and explores how different national cultures and company cultures should better integrate with each other.

**Keywords:** petroleum company; cultural differences; international cooperation

## 1. Introduction

With the advent of the era of economic globalization, in order to adapt to the complex world market, major enterprises will look for partners on a global scale to maintain strong competitiveness in the highly competitive world market through resource sharing and complementary advantages. As a special strategic resource, oil has always been the focus of energy competition among countries. Among the countries in which China participates in international oil cooperation, the countries along the Belt and Road Routes have a huge oil export capacity and can be the main source to supplement China's oil shortage. The Middle East is an important cooperation zone for countries along the Belt and Road Initiative, where oil cooperation between Saudi Arabia and China is more concentrated. The foreign cooperation of petroleum companies is not only related to their own development but also affects the strategic energy security of the whole country[1-2].

## 2. Corporate Culture Features

Corporate Culture, or Organizational Culture, is a unique cultural image of an organization composed of its values, beliefs, ceremonies, symbols, ways of doing things, etc. Simply put, it is all aspects of the enterprise in its daily operation.

Enterprise culture is the spiritual wealth and material form with the characteristics of the enterprise created in the production, operation and management activities of the enterprise under certain conditions. It includes enterprise vision, cultural concept, value concept, enterprise spirit, moral standard, code of conduct, historical tradition, enterprise system, cultural environment, enterprise products and so on.

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conditions. It includes enterprise vision, cultural concept, value concept, enterprise spirit, moral standard, code of conduct, historical tradition, enterprise system, cultural environment, enterprise products and so on. Values are the core of corporate culture. Corporate culture is the sum of business philosophy, business purpose, business policy, values, business behavior, social responsibility and business image formed in business activities. It is the fundamental embodiment of enterprise individuation, and it is the soul of enterprise survival, competition and development[3-4].

### ***2.1 National Cultural Features***

According to the statistical table of world oil reserves, the Middle East is the most oil-rich region in the world, with oil reserves accounting for 67% of the world's total oil reserves. In 2015, the Middle East's oil production accounted for 32.4% of the world's oil reserves, while China's oil reserves only accounted for 2.3% of the world's oil reserves. (Wang Wei, 2017) By the end of 2017, including the so-called neutral zone, Saudi Arabia's oil reserves totaled 268.5 billion barrels and 325.1 trillion standard cubic feet of natural gas, ranking second in the world.

Saudi Arabia is located in the Arabian Peninsula in the southwest of Asia, bordering the Persian Gulf in the east and the Red Sea in the west. It is located at the intersection of Asia, Africa and Europe. It is the intersection of China's the Belt and Road Initiative, a world-famous oil kingdom and one of the richest countries in the world. The Middle East and China have close geographical ties, which have a long history. In the 7th century AD, Muhammad's disciples crossed the ocean from Mecca, the holy land of Saudi Arabia, to spread Islam in China. The people of the two places have had friendly exchanges since ancient times, and the exchanges between the two places have become increasingly close and the economies are complementary. In the 15th century, Zheng He sailed to the West and reached what is now Saudi Arabia through the Maritime Silk Road. Culture is the sum of all internal social and spiritual phenomena that exist, inherit, create and develop in a region. It covers the history of this region from the past to the future, is all activities based on nature, and is the inner whole of all material appearances and spirits. The cooperation and exchange between the two places must include many aspects of culture, and cultural conflicts are inevitable. On today's New Silk Road, China and Saudi Arabia are closely linked due to oil exploration and cooperation.

Due to long-term historical development, China and Saudi Arabia have formed very different national cultures in different geographical locations. Culture includes history, geography, local conditions and customs, traditional customs, lifestyles, religious beliefs, laws and regulations, ways of thinking and values, etc.

### ***2.2 The Significance of Studying Cultural Features***

Culture refers to the sum of material wealth, spiritual wealth and corresponding creative talents created in the historical practice of human society. Culture includes material culture and spiritual culture. Material culture refers to the visible and tangible part of the culture, so it is also called hard culture. Relatively speaking, spiritual culture is soft culture, and soft culture is the deep structure of culture. Different nationalities have their own special cultural psychological quality, thinking modes, value scales, moral standards and emotional interests which are different from other nationalities.

The importance of valuing cultural differences cannot be overstated. Differences arising from the collision of cultures are fundamentally caused by cultural differences. Therefore, respect for foreign cultures that are different from the local culture is the foundation of intercultural communication. The inclusion of foreign cultures is only the beginning, and misunderstandings caused by not understanding the cultural taboos of the other country can cause unnecessary problems and even serious consequences for further intercultural communication (Gao Jian, 2020). The study of cultural differences is particularly important, from diplomatic matters at the national level to foreign business negotiations and contacts with foreigners in life, all aspects of cultural differences and intercultural communication are involved.

Since 2000, domestic scholars have paid attention to the cross-cultural management of oil enterprises. The proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative provides an unprecedented development opportunity for China's oil enterprises to cooperate with foreign countries. Cultural differences have a great impact on the foreign cooperation of petroleum companies, so we should study the cultures of different countries and enterprises from various aspects, levels and angles, so as to make the cross-cultural cooperation of petroleum companies constantly revise and improve[5].

### **2.3 Saudi Cultural Characteristics**

Among the cultural differences between the two countries, the biggest difference is religion. Saudi Arabia attaches great importance to religion and regards religious belief as an important part of life. Among them, Sunni Muslims account for 85% and Shiite Muslims account for 15%. Christians must pray five times a day, and local people must go to mosques to worship during prayer. Saudi Arabia has two major religious festivals in a year, namely Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. There are seven days off for Eid al-Fitr and two weeks for Eid al-Adha. September of the Islamic calendar is Ramadan every year. During the 30 days of Ramadan, people are forbidden to drink water and eat from sunrise to sunset, except for patients, pregnant women, nursing women and those who set foot on the journey before sunrise (Alex Zou, 2013). Women must wear black robes. They rooted the belief of "recognizing the uniqueness of the Lord" in people's hearts, called on people to believe in the only master-Allah, oppose polytheism and various superstitious activities, and prohibit idolatry. In terms of diet, many agricultural products and meat are forbidden, and the provisions given to them by Allah are forbidden. They think that all the stimulation of the human senses is depravity and the beginning of the crime. Therefore, the prohibition of alcohol has become a strict law in Saudi Arabia. It is illegal to drink alcohol, buy alcohol, make wine privately or drive after drinking. In terms of clothing, Islam calls on Muslims to pay attention to the cleanliness and beauty of appearance, oppose untrimmed clothes or untidy clothes, and allow them to enjoy gorgeous clothes and beautiful decorations created by Allah. The purpose of people's clothes is to decorate their bodies and keep out the cold. Therefore, Muslims should pay attention to civilization, not being naked in public places, and even if they live alone, they should cover up their shame. Men and women should not imitate each other in speaking, behaving, walking and dressing. These cultural differences between China and Arab countries are one of the reasons leading to cultural conflicts between the two sides. In addition, religious circles especially prohibit the publication of women's photos in newspapers and periodicals, and many Saudis still oppose photography, especially women's photography[6-8].

### **2.4 Chinese Cultural Characteristics**

In China, it is not common for religious beliefs to exist in daily life. Most Chinese people are not bound by religion, so there are basically no taboos and regulations on diet or clothing except ethnic minorities. In areas where religion plays a less important role, people tend to be tolerant of religious mistakes made by foreigners, but in areas based on religion, people tend not to tolerate religious mistakes made by foreigners. Therefore, Chinese people abroad should pay special attention to the religious beliefs of the people in the host country and avoid religious conflicts as much as possible.

Compared with other countries, China has a long history, and its traditional culture has accumulated for many years, emphasizing spirit over material, collectivism over individualism, harmony over competition, righteousness over profit, agriculture over business and so on. (Hall, 2003) The Chinese people attach great importance to the Chinese spirit, because only by imprinting the Chinese spirit in the bottom of their hearts can we better shoulder the backbone of the Chinese nation. Only by respecting the spirit of China can it be turned into the strength of China. There is oil spirit in Chinese spirit. In the development process of China's petroleum and petrochemical industry, the petroleum spirit with "Daqing Spirit", "Iron Man Spirit", "Hard Work" and "The Three Honests" and "Four Stricts" ("Three Honests": be honest in thought, word and deed; "Four Stricts": set strict standards for work, organization, attitude and observance of discipline) as the core has always been the soul and foundation of the petroleum and petrochemical industry. Today, when entering a new era, General Secretary also made important instructions on vigorously promoting the spirit of petroleum. He emphasized: "The spirit of petroleum is a valuable asset to overcome difficulties and win victory, and it cannot be lost at any time!" The patriotic spirit of "sharing worries for the country and striving for the nation"; The selfless fighting spirit of "I would rather live 20 years less and win the big oil field desperately"; The spirit of hard struggle that "there are conditions to go, and there are no conditions to create conditions"; The scientific and realistic spirit of "doing work must stand the inspection of future generations" and "practicing hard work and real skills for the revolution"; The dedication of "willing to be an old ox for the party and the people all his life" has jointly created the "Iron Man Spirit" admired by the world. Whether it is "Daqing Spirit", "Iron Man Spirit" or "Tahe Spirit" in the later period, it is a spiritual benchmark passed down in the long history of petroleum. After the baptism of time and the precipitation of history, it has created a great petroleum spirit. It is precise because of this oil spirit that generations of oil people have gone on and on, worked hard and kept advancing toward the oil dream. In the long history, the spirit of oil is like a torch that keeps passing, which can be carried forward only after several generations of oil people's inheritance and precipitation.

### 3. Analysis of Cultural Characteristics of Petroleum Companies in China and Saudi Arabia

Because there are obvious cultural differences in different countries and regions, people's consumption needs, values, principles of doing things and ways of thinking are all based on the cultural background of their countries. When enterprises with different cultural backgrounds cooperate, they should contact the employees of different enterprises, hire and manage the employees from different cultural backgrounds, so there will be cultural differences, and because of the differences in the history, establishment and development process of different enterprises, different corporate cultures have also been formed. These cultural differences are obvious in the process of international operation of oil enterprises, and will also directly cause difficulties in the process of international cooperation and operation of oil enterprises. Therefore, the concept of cross-culture should be added to the foreign cooperation of oil enterprises, so as to form a correct understanding of cultural phenomena, customs and habits that are different or conflicting with their own cultures, and on this basis, accept and adapt them with an inclusive attitude, so as to solve the problem of cultural differences[9-10].

According to Geert Hofstede(1991), corporate culture is a complex of values and practices, in which values are the core, while practice includes consciousness and symbol. He first put forward a clear organizational culture hierarchy, He believes that corporate culture consists of two parts: values and practices. Values are composed of three independent dimensions (the need for safety, work-centered and authority), while practice is composed of six independent paired dimensions (process-oriented-result-oriented, employee-oriented-work-oriented, localization-specialization, openness-closure, loose control-strict control, standardization-practicality).

#### 3.1 Cultural Characteristics of Saudi Aramco

In 1933, the Saudi government signed a concession agreement with Standard Oil of California, the predecessor of Chevron Company, to start oil exploration in most parts of the kingdom. In the same year, Standard Oil of California was established. In 1938, the first commercial oil field, Dammam Oilfield, was discovered in Dharan. In 1936, Chevron sold half of its shares in Arabia to Texaco Oil Company. In 1940, Bugaige Oilfield was discovered, which is the fourth largest oilfield in Saudi Arabia. In 1944, California Arab Standard Oil Company changed its name to Arabian American Oil Co., or Aramco for short. In 1988, according to the royal decree, Saudi Arabian National Oil Company (Saudi Aramco for short) was formally established, taking over all the assets and management rights of the former Aramco, and becoming the only company engaged in oil exploration and development business in Saudi Arabia. It can be said that the history of Saudi Aramco is very tortuous. After decades of "bearing the burden of humiliation", the Saudi government has successfully used American technology and capital to develop oil exploration, development, production, refining and other technologies, and at the same time built and recaptured Saudi Aramco, a globally integrated energy company. Saudi Aramco is committed to becoming the world's leading integrated energy and chemical company operating in a safe, sustainable and reliable manner[11].

Saudi Aramco has two main characteristics: resilience and agility. Saudi Aramco believes that their resilience and agility make them a world-class integrated energy and chemical company, and constantly develops advanced energy and becomes chemical producers through resilience and agility, and promotes global trade and improves the daily life of people all over the world by continuously providing uninterrupted energy supply to the world. In order to ensure the best performance in the future, Saudi Aramco focuses on creating greater value, cultivating stronger organizational tenacity and work agility, promoting sustainable growth and developing applicable technical solutions in the future. The vision of the company puts forward: "We are all explorers. The impulse to discover the next frontier and solve the next major problem is the foundation of our determination to succeed. This aggressiveness also drives us to build the company into one of the most important energies and chemical enterprises in the world." In the next decade, Saudi Aramco will continue to invest heavily in the upstream industries of the company. It is mainly to consolidate the leading position of the company in the oil industry, maintain the maximum sustainable production capacity, promote the implementation of major exploration and production projects, and focus on discovering and developing conventional and unconventional natural gas resources. Downstream, it mainly develops Aramco's non-crude oil business, pursues closer integration of upstream and downstream industrial operations, and takes diversified product development and global integration as powerful means to strengthen the tenacity of the company's asset portfolio and broaden the company's income sources.

It is understood that the Saudi Aramco logo is composed of Arabic, English and a pattern. The

design means Energy Star, a dazzling star in the energy industry, providing uninterrupted energy supply to the world. The colors green and blue also represent green energy. Saudi Aramco plans to use the power of innovation and technology to reduce emissions, so as to make the oil and gas production and use process exceptionally clean. A variety of capital efficiency measures are used to reduce capital costs, improve productivity and support the financial soundness of the company in various operating environments. Focusing on the company's basic cost structure will help to achieve the goal of improving efficiency and cost competitiveness. At the same time, the company also adheres to the safety concept and environmental protection commitment[12].

### ***3.2 Cultural Characteristics of Sinopec Zhongyuan petroleum engineering company Saudi Arabia company***

Zhongyuan Oilfield is the last oilfield built in the form of general meeting war in China. It was discovered in 1975 and put into development in 1979. In March 1982, Zhongyuan Petroleum Exploration Bureau was established. From 1997 to 2000, the early restructuring of 74 units was completed. Zhongyuan Saudi Company was formally registered and established in November 2000, which is the first petroleum engineering technology service company registered in Saudi Arabia in China. The team of Zhongyuan Saudi Company comes from the secondary units of Zhongyuan Petroleum Engineering Company, and is managed by the project department in the initial stage. In 2001, as the first oil drilling team in China to enter the Saudi market, the "SINO-1" drilling team handed over the first highly difficult horizontal directional well in just 30 days, and quickly mastered the whole towing and relocation technology of drilling rigs. Up to 2004, the number of drilling rigs has grown to 4, which has created more than 10 new records of Aramco in the southern operation block of Aramco, laying a solid foundation for sustainable development. In 2005, Zhongyuan Saudi Company seized the rare opportunity of high international oil price, won the bid for 13 drilling rigs in succession, with a scale of 17, and jumped to become the third largest onshore drilling contractor of Aramco. In 2006, the revenue exceeded 100 million US dollars, an increase of 7.5 times over 2004, and it became the second overseas market with an output value exceeding 100 million US dollars. With the rapid expansion of business scale, in 2007, the company strengthened centralized and unified management, comprehensively promoted the standardization construction of the company, grasped management, laid the foundation, built the brand, sought long-term development, and gradually became one of the excellent contractors of Aramco. In 2010, eight shutdown teams renewed a new round of contracts, passed the financial crisis stage, and achieved sustained and effective development. After years of development, Saudi Aramco has opened all onshore drilling and workover market fields such as water wells, oil drilling and workover, exploration wells, Dabao wells and gas wells to our company. At present, the company mainly undertakes the onshore drilling construction projects of Saudi Aramco, Halliburton, Baker Hughes and Schlumberger, and has become the preferred partner of Halliburton and Baker Hughes in the Middle East and North Africa markets[13-14].

Since its establishment, Sinopec Corporation has taken refueling for a better life as its mission, put social responsibility first, strengthened the country and prospered the country, guaranteed people's livelihood, and established a responsible and responsible image of a state-owned enterprise. Sinopec's logo consists of a round of red sun, the Chinese abbreviation: Sinopec and the English abbreviation: SINOPEC. The English abbreviation also contains meanings: S is "sustainable" sustainable development; "I" means "international" internationalization; N is owned by "National"; O is "Oil" oil; P is "people" people; E is "Environment" to protect the environment; C is "Cooperation": cooperation. The English name in the logo adopts pictographic design: S is a refueling gun; IN is shaped like an oil rig; O is like a large oil tank; P is designed as an oil pipeline; E stands for informationization; C is a petrochemical product.

Zhongyuan Saudi Company has implemented the overall enterprise orientation of Sinopec Corporation, taking refueling for a better life as its mission, building an iron army for petroleum engineering as its mission, taking people-oriented, high-quality, innovation and win-win as its core values, and taking strictness, delicacy and practicality as its enterprise style, which is integrated into its daily work. The company's development strategy is marketization, internationalization, specialization, specialization and socialization. Taking market as the root, service as the soul, science and technology first and benefit as the development concept, we strive to build a leading domestic and international first-class onshore drilling and completion company.

### **3.3 Analysis of the Differences between Different Corporate Cultures**

As can be seen from the previous article, there are some similarities between the cultures of the two petroleum companies. The development of the petroleum companies has been characterized by many hardships and both are very tortuous, so the corporate culture has undergone time to settle down. As energy resource companies, both companies value management discipline, diversification of products, maintaining sustainable production capacity as much as possible, and developing international cooperation in other countries.

But there are great differences between the two oil enterprise cultures. The cultural characteristics of the Central Plains Saudi Company are battle culture, which is prominent in the spiritual level and forms an oil culture characterized by Iron Man spirit. Saudi Aramco, on the other hand, is biased towards the corporate culture of survival of the fittest, and is outstanding in the construction of the corporate system. Saudi Arabia attaches great importance to religion, and integrate religious beliefs into daily life. It is understood that although Chinese petroleum companies fully respect their religious culture. However, some religious activities have an impact on the normal working process of enterprises. Local people and Chinese employees have different attitudes toward life and work. Sometimes, participating in various religious activities leads to short working hours and low efficiency, which brings many uncertain factors to the operation of enterprises, makes it difficult for enterprises to control the progress of projects, and even affects the project quality and reputation of enterprises in serious cases. For Chinese workers in Saudi Arabia, the local climate is relatively harsh, so employees have to endure strong homesickness and accept the test of the working environment. How to balance these problems is also a big challenge for petroleum companies.

## **4. Strategies of Foreign Cooperation of Petroleum Enterprises under Cross-cultural Background**

Since 2002, Saudi Arabia has always been the largest crude oil supplier in China and the focus of China's foreign oil cooperation. Investment cooperation between China and Saudi energy enterprises has flourished. China's the Belt and Road Initiative and Saudi Arabia's "Vision 2030" plan are ambitious and aim to build a better tomorrow for future generations. China has the ability to play an important role in realizing "Saudi Vision 2030", and Saudi Arabia will also play a prominent role in promoting the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative.

### **(1) How to implement Chinese oil enterprise culture in Saudi Arabia**

Corporate culture is one of the core forces for petroleum enterprises to develop forward. Therefore, relevant petroleum enterprises should actively analyze the characteristics of corporate culture and reshape corporate culture with the concept of internationalization. First of all, we should improve the market competitiveness, promote the development of corporate culture in the international direction, and make the development of corporate culture more scientific and reasonable and keep pace with the times. Secondly, we should pay attention to deepening the connotation of corporate culture. If culture lacks connotation, it will lose its soul, and integrate the concept of inclusiveness into it, but it should not lose its most essential essence in order to integrate into other cultures. Finally, explore the common cultural characteristics of different regions. Although there are obvious cultural conflicts and differences between different regions, due to the influence of the development of human civilization and globalization, the cultures of different regions still have certain commonalities. When enterprises operate across borders, they should not only identify cultural differences, but also treat cultural differences objectively, encourage cultural identity and manage cross-cultural crises, so as to avoid or eliminate cultural conflicts caused by cultural differences to the maximum extent (Wang Jianzhong, 2017). Relevant petroleum companies should explore these common cultural characteristics and integrate them into corporate culture, so as to improve the universal effect of corporate culture, so that the culture of Chinese petroleum companies can be more easily accepted and adopted in Saudi Arabia. Corporate culture with common values should be established within enterprises (Liu Hong, 2004). Chinese petroleum enterprises can intensify the introduction and training of talents, and combine with Chinese universities to train a group of international talents with international thinking, cross-border integration ability, diversified knowledge structure, cross-culture and innovative practice ability. Petroleum enterprises should actively explore the construction of an international talent training system to provide powerful talent support for the "going out" strategy of Chinese petroleum enterprises.

### **(2) How Chinese petroleum companies can better integrate with Saudi culture**

In order to promote the international management of China's oil enterprises and strengthen the oil

cooperation between China and other countries and regions, oil enterprises should pay attention to cultural differences, pay attention to the related problems caused by cultural differences, and solve them from the perspective of coordinating cultural conflicts. If the problem of cultural differences can not be solved in time and effectively, it will lead to contradictions and differences in communication and cooperation, daily work and life among employees, which will directly affect the harmonious relationship between employees. If enterprise managers only manage employees rigidly according to the rules and regulations of the company in their region, it may make employees have a kind of cultural resistance, which will increase the difficulties of managers' management and aggravate the confusion and conflict in the management of oil enterprises. How to effectively manage and eliminate the confusion and conflict caused by cultural differences is the key and difficult point in the management of oil enterprises. To solve these problems, oil enterprises must implement cross-cultural management. First of all, facing the differences between different cultures, we must understand the differences between different cultures, and understand Saudi national characteristics, customs and life taboos. China's petroleum enterprises pay more attention to the technical training of employees, and often neglect the cross-cultural training of employees, especially managers, which is just the most effective means to solve cultural differences and integrate cultures (Li Youshu, 2010). Secondly, when contacting Saudi employees, try to understand the culture that embraces them on the basis of not violating their own beliefs and national laws. At the same time, let them get in touch with Chinese traditional culture and corporate culture. Only by taking different measures to overcome different types of cultural differences can Saudi culture be better integrated into Chinese oil enterprises.

Employees are an important force in the working process of oil enterprises. Therefore, in order to ensure the smooth development of oil enterprises, the relevant oil enterprises should improve their own management methods and pay attention to the training of employees in the process of international operation of oil enterprises. It is understood that Saudi Aramco's acceptance criteria are very strict, which cannot be compared with other overseas markets. The standards set by Saudi Aramco are detailed in content, many in terms and wide in scope. In the process of international operation and international oil cooperation, relevant oil enterprises should make risk predictions in advance, grasp the influence brought by different cultures, and establish an effective emergency early warning mechanism. Employees should translate these meticulous rules into conscious actions. Relevant oil enterprises should also formulate solutions in advance to reduce the occurrence of risks in the work process and improve the work efficiency and quality of oil enterprises.

## 5. Conclusion

Starting with the cultural conflict of petroleum enterprises in China, Taking China and Saudi Arabia as examples, This paper analyzes the cultural characteristics and differences between the two countries, This paper focuses on the cultures of Sinopec Zhongyuan petroleum engineering company Saudi Arabia company and Saudi Aramco, analyzes the cultural differences between the two companies, and finds that there are obvious differences between the two petroleum companies in terms of enterprise development mode, enterprise culture content, company system management, employees' religious beliefs, living habits and working methods. This paper puts forward some humble opinions on how to better integrate different national cultures and corporate cultures, hoping to help Chinese petroleum companies in future international cooperation.

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