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REVIEW

Fundamental Logic and Prospect of High-End Strategic Transformation in Chinese Enterprises*

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Abstract

Chinese enterprises are ushering in a new era of high-end strategic transformation, which is driven not only by China's high-quality development strategy and consumption upgrading but also by the need for the game between major countries and the restructuring of the global value chain. In the process of high-end strategic transformation, Chinese enterprises face the dual challenges from both internal weakness and external constraints, thus undertaking the dual task of reshaping market cognition externally and realizing the internal transition of organizational strength, which highlights the high risk and difficulty of high-end strategic transformation. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze the special context of high-end strategic transformation in Chinese enterprises, clarify its connotation, opportunities, and challenges, reveal the practical logic of high-end strategic transformation from a holistic perspective, and advocate the practice-oriented research paradigm and case study method to develop the theory of high-end strategic transformation of Chinese enterprises. This paper aims to clarify the particularity, research boundaries, paradigms, and methods of high-end strategic transformation in businesses and future research directions in this field.

Keywords high-end strategic transformation; change context; opportunity for change; practice logic; research paradigm

1 Introduction

As China transitions from rapid economic growth to high-quality development, the high-quality development strategy has emerged as one of the country's key guiding principles. At the macro-industry-enterprise hierarchy, enterprises are the backbone of this strategy and the fundamental units for achieving progressive high-quality development from enterprise-level transformation to industry-wide evolution and ultimately to macro-level policy implementation. Leading enterprises are eager to pursue high-end strategic transformation, undertaking comprehensive upgrades in response to high-end market demands across areas such as product development, R&D, brand positioning, resource allocation, and business domains (Dong et al., 2019; Giarratana et al., 2021; Yang & Li, 2010). This transformation aims to fundamentally alter the long-standing predicament of domestic firms confined to the market's mid- and low-end segments. Moreover, the intensifying global trade tensions

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have further accelerated the urgency for outstanding Chinese enterprises to enhance their international competitiveness through high-end strategic transformation. This move is crucial for seizing strategic advantages, strengthening the national image, and gaining the upper hand in global competition among major countries. Consequently, high-end strategic transformation has become a critical pathway for outstanding Chinese enterprises to achieve breakthroughs and implement the national high-quality development strategy. For industry-leading enterprises, leveraging high-end strategic transformation to achieve leapfrog development is essential for transforming and upgrading entire industrial chains.

In practice, more and more enterprises are entering high-end market competition (Dong et al., 2019). For instance, companies like Huawei and Wanxiang Group have established high-end brands to claim strategic dominance in global markets; Yadea has risen to leadership in the sector, providing two-wheel or three-wheel electric vehicles through its "more premium" strategy; and Zhuyeqing Tea has disrupted the tea industry's long-standing dilemma of "commoditized categories without distinct brands" through its premium Emei green tea positioning. Nevertheless, while many firms attempt transformation, few succeed. Chinese enterprises face dual challenges of external pressures and internal weaknesses. Externally, international brands dominate the high-end market, and Chinese consumers' perceptions are deeply influenced—even blindly—by their powerful brand images. Internally, most domestic firms remain trapped in the mid- and low-end market segments, with limited access to high-quality resources and insufficient capability to meet high-end market demands. Therefore, high-end strategic transformation of Chinese enterprises is a complex and systematic undertaking that simultaneously seeks to reshape consumer perception externally and upgrade capabilities internally. It represents a critical strategic issue shaped by the particular stage and context of Chinese enterprise development.

Although numerous studies have explored the strategic transformation of Chinese enterprises from perspectives such as resource dependence theory, the resource-based view, and dynamic capabilities (Lan, 2014), high-end strategic transformation differs significantly from conventional strategic transformation. It is a systemic transformation aligned with the demands of the national high-quality development strategy, carrying the dual mission of reshaping consumer perception and upgrading organizational strength. This dual responsibility entails higher levels of risk and greater systemic complexity and difficulty. Some scholars have examined the particularities of high-end transformation in Chinese enterprises by focusing on specific aspects to generalize from localized insights. These include studies on brand upgrading (Humphrey & Schmitz, 2010), product and service upgrading (Hu & Wang, 2016), capability enhancement (Jiao et al., 2021), and resource reallocation (Wang et al., 2016). While these efforts have offered valuable entry points and perspectives for practice, they fall short of addressing high-end strategic transformation of Chinese enterprises from a holistic strategic perspective and fail to uncover their underlying practical logic. Moreover, in the field of management research in China, the introduction and adaptation of Western management theories have preserved the mechanistic and procedural natures of their original research paradigms. However, high-end strategic transformation is a uniquely Chinese management phenomenon that calls for an indigenous, practice-oriented research paradigm to build a theoretical framework that reflects the realities of Chinese enterprises.

As a crucial issue at present, high-end strategic transformation in Chinese enterprises entails a unique context and distinctive connotation while facing unprecedented opportunities and challenges. It thus demands theoretical guidance grounded in China's specific institutional and market environments. Accordingly, this study begins with the change context of high-end strategic transformation in Chinese enterprises. It aims to clarify its meaning and connotation, identify key opportunities and challenges, and extract the practice logic underpinning this transformation. It analyzes appropriate research paradigms and methodologies for theory construction in this field and outlines future research directions. Ultimately, this study seeks to articulate the fundamental concepts and logical framework of high-end strategic transformation in Chinese enterprises and contribute to the theoretical foundation of this emerging area.

2 The National Context of High-Quality Development and High-End Strategic Transformation of Enterprises

2.1 The National Context of High-Quality Development

High-end strategic transformation is a distinct issue that domestic enterprises face in the Chinese context. The national high-quality development strategy provides the institutional foundation for this transformation. In 2021, high-quality development was formally elevated to a national strategic level. Its critical strategic status, multi-level objectives, systemic complexity, and depth-oriented characteristics together form the overarching tone for high-end strategic transformation of enterprises. The systemic complexity of this strategy is reflected across three levels—macroeconomy, industry, and enterprise—as well as across multiple dimensions, including material, political, spiritual, social, and ecological domains. Its depth is evident in a series of fundamental shifts from quantity-driven growth to quality-driven growth, from scale expansion to structural upgrading, from factor-driven to innovation-driven development, from imbalanced distribution to common prosperity, and from high-carbon growth to green development (Wang, 2020).

There are two main logics in the practice of high-quality development: horizontal domain logic and vertical level logic. The horizontal domain logic emphasizes breakthroughs across various sectors to achieve all-around development. For instance, in the financial sector, high-quality development involves optimizing financial structures and aligning them more effectively with industrial priorities to ensure coordinated progress (Huang & Jiang, 2019). In the manufacturing industry, it calls for parallel advancement across product, firm, industry, and regional base levels, thereby enhancing supply system quality and technological innovation capacity to drive improvements in quality, efficiency, and dynamism (Jiang et al., 2019). In consumer goods production, the focus lies in shifting industrial policies from selective to functional, strengthening indigenous innovation, coordinating real and virtual economies, enhancing human capital, and expanding capacity cooperation with the Belt and Road countries (Guo, 2019). In the service sector, enterprises are expected to effectively adapt to, create, and lead market demand while upholding the principles of innovation, coordination, openness, and shared development (Jiang, 2019).

The vertical level logic is reflected in the coordinated advancement across three levels:

national policy, industrial upgrading, and enterprise transformation. At the national policy level, the goal is to establish a new pattern of development, "dual circulation," focused on the domestic economy and featuring positive interplay between domestic and international economic flows. This approach integrates the strategy of expanding domestic demand with deepening supply-side structural reform, thereby fostering a dynamic equilibrium in which demand drives innovation in supply, and supply, in turn, shapes and enhances demand (Wang, 2020). At the industrial upgrading level, the focus is on promoting industrial transformation and upgrading, enhancing the position of Chinese industries within global value chains (GVCs), and moving from the relatively low end toward high-end segments characterized by high technology and high added value (Ouyang & Zhao, 2009). At the enterprise transformation level, the emphasis is on creating high-level, high-quality, and high-efficiency economic and social value, as well as cultivating the core capabilities for sustained value creation. For instance, state-owned enterprises are implementing reforms through a progressive approach that transitions from the micro to the meso and ultimately to the macro level. This involves simultaneous transformation at the enterprise level and coevolution with broader social ecosystems, institutional arrangements, foundational conditions, and mutual interactions among state-owned enterprises, thereby enabling high-quality development (Huang et al., 2018).

Whether from the perspective of horizontal domain logic or vertical level logic, enterprises are the primary agents responsible for implementing high-quality development. To do so, they must stimulate internal vitality and enhance operational efficiency, laying a robust micro-level foundation for high-quality development. High-end strategic transformation offers an effective path toward this goal (Liu & Wen, 2018), as it fundamentally reshapes the long-standing pattern of firms operating in mid- and low-end market segments. For leading enterprises, in particular, it serves as a critical approach for achieving comprehensive, multidimensional, and systemic transformation and upgrading.

2.2 The Significance and Connotation of High-End Strategic Transformation in Chinese Enterprises under the Context of High-Quality Development

The high-end strategic transformation of enterprises is fully aligned with the goals and requirements of China's high-quality development strategy and serves as a fundamental pathway to its realization. Since reform and opening up, a large number of international brands have entered the Chinese market. Relying on their strong capabilities in brand building, supply chain management, marketing, and R&D, these brands have long dominated China's high-end market, forcing domestic enterprises to retreat into the mid- and low-end segments. Meanwhile, the rapid pace of consumption upgrading in China has outpaced consumers' ability to form clear and distinct high-end preferences, leading to the misconception that high-end demand is synonymous with international brands. Today, high-end strategic transformation has become a powerful tool for domestic enterprises to reclaim the high-end market and respond to domestic high-end consumption needs on their own terms. It focuses directly on the demand for high-quality products and services in high-end markets. By continually enhancing comprehensive capabilities, positively reshaping

consumer perception, and cultivating domestic market demand, domestic enterprises can expand into and capture high-end market segments, thereby meeting the population's growing desire for a higher-quality life. Moreover, high-end strategic transformation enhances corporate competitiveness, expands international market presence, and reshapes the competitive landscape. It enables domestic enterprises to seize strategic high grounds, elevate China's global image, and play a leading role in the competition among major countries. Furthermore, it drives industrial transformation and upgrading, effectively propelling China's industries toward higher value-added segments and elevating their position in the GVC.

Despite the growing recognition of its importance, the connotation of high-end strategic transformation remains unclear. Related concepts in strategic management include strategic upgrading, brand upgrading, and strategic innovation. As shown in Table 1, these concepts overlap with high-end strategic transformation and differ in meaningful ways. All share a common emphasis on organizational innovation and change in response to environmental shifts and development needs. Strategic upgrading and strategic innovation share similarities with high-end strategic transformation in their comprehensive and systematic nature. However, their point of departure lies primarily in internal development needs and is more internally oriented. In contrast, high-end strategic transformation is driven by the demands of high-end markets, involving a comprehensive and systematic reconfiguration of internal modules based on external high-end market requirements. It emphasizes the integration of both external and internal perspectives and constitutes a complex system tasked with both reshaping high-end market cognition externally and realizing organizational advancement internally. Brand upgrading, by comparison, is a core component within the broader framework of high-end strategic transformation. While also aimed at satisfying emerging consumer preferences, it focuses solely on brand-related dimensions.

Table 1 Comparison of Related Concepts

Concept	Definition	Characteristics	Representative scholars
Strategic upgrading	It refers to the process by which enterprises advance from a lower to a higher level: both the elevation of the enterprise's position in the industrial and value chains and the behaviors of innovation or transformation.	Comprehensive and systematic organizational improvement; Upgrades driven by enterprise development needs	Dong et al. (2019); Humphrey & Schmitz (2010)
Brand upgrading	It refers to the progressive process of upgrading brand value by satisfying evolving consumer preferences and enhancing user experience, moving from weak to strong to international brands.	Not a comprehensive upgrade but focused solely on branding in high-end positioning	Humphrey & Schmitz (2010)

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Concept	Definition	Characteristics	Representative scholars
Strategic innovation	A radical, spontaneous, inside-out process of self-renewal. To avoid extreme risks, enterprises often collaborate with others to build mutually beneficial innovation ecosystems.	Spontaneous, inside-out, comprehensive change; Upgrades driven by enterprise development needs	Birkinshaw et al. (2008); Hamel & Prahalad (1993)
High-end strategic transformation	Based on the demand of high-end markets, it involves the comprehensive and systematic reconfiguration of internal modules. It undertakes the dual task of reshaping market cognition externally and upgrading organizational strength internally.	Comprehensive and systematic organizational improvement; Transformation driven by high-end market demand	—

Currently, studies on high-end transformation mainly focus on the industrial and enterprise levels. At the industrial level, studies have examined the conceptual framework, functional modules, implementation processes, and structural changes in the industrial value chain to deconstruct the mechanisms underlying industrial upgrading (Ouyang & Zhao, 2009; Wu & Liu, 2012). These studies argue that industrial high-end transformation involves restructuring the industrial composition, shifting the mode of economic growth, and enhancing competitiveness—ultimately promoting industries from a lower to a higher level, characterized by advanced technologies, intensive production, or high value-added products (Wang, 2013). At the enterprise level, research defines high-end transformation as the process by which firms transition from relatively low-value to high-value positions, evolving into dominant players in their sectors with strong customer value leadership, competitiveness, and industry control (Hu & Wang, 2016; Hu & Wu, 2016; Jin, 2011; Lee et al., 2001; Liu & Fan, 2022). Most studies approach this from a single perspective to explore partial mechanisms in enterprise transformation. The brand upgrading perspective focuses on enhancing brand value through resonance between core brand values and customer values (Liu & Fan, 2022). The product and service perspective emphasizes shifting from low-value processing activities to higher-value-added offerings (Hu & Wang, 2016). The core capability perspective explores how firms strengthen technological and market expansion capabilities to upgrade their positions in GVCs (Jiao et al., 2021; Lan, 2014). The resource-based perspective highlights how enterprises reconfigure resources to autonomously acquire and allocate strategic assets nationally or globally, thereby enhancing market control and integration capabilities (Jin, 2011). In addition, some studies investigate how enterprises achieve high-end transformation in the international arena through mergers and acquisitions, resource reconfiguration, and opportunity building in overseas markets (Hu & Wu, 2016; Wei et al., 2020).

Existing research has often focused on a specific aspect or segment of high-end strategic transformation in Chinese enterprises, conducting in-depth studies and advocating for a point-to-surface approach to transformation. However, in practice, these approaches have not effectively enabled enterprises to achieve successful high-end strategic transformation.

At the core of this issue, there are two main problems. First, current studies have not fully taken into account the unique change context of Chinese enterprises and the dual challenges they face—namely, external constraints imposed by dominant international brands and internal weakness in capabilities. Second, these studies fall short of adopting a systematic perspective to understand the overall logic and theoretical construction of high-end strategic transformation. As a result, they have failed to offer effective solutions to critical questions such as how Chinese enterprises can enhance their internal strength while reshaping market perception externally or how they might break through the constraints of international brands. Consequently, enterprise practices in this area remain largely exploratory and uncertain. Therefore, only by grounding research in the specific context of Chinese enterprise development and fully considering the dual challenges and dual responsibilities inherent in high-end strategic transformation can scholars begin to develop theoretical frameworks applicable to the Chinese context and provide meaningful guidance for enterprise practice.

3 Opportunities and Challenges in High-End Strategic Transformation of Chinese Enterprises

3.1 Opportunities in High-End Strategic Transformation of Chinese Enterprises

In addition to the institutional support provided by the national high-quality development strategy, Chinese enterprises are now facing unprecedented opportunities for high-end strategic transformation.

From an external perspective, several major trends—such as consumption upgrading, market development, and advancements in social services like financial technology (FinTech)—are critical external drivers for high-end strategic transformation. With the continued growth of the economy and rising national income levels, consumption upgrading has become a dominant trend in the Chinese market, characterized by improved consumption standards and structural upgrading (Shi et al., 2019). Meanwhile, China's enhanced national confidence, elevated international status, and improved diplomatic image have helped domestic consumers—particularly the younger generation—begin to rebuild or regain trust in Chinese manufacturing, brands, and enterprises. High-quality consumption and favorable market conditions promote the high-end transformation of enterprise supply, enabling comprehensive optimization and innovation in quantity, quality, structure, and development models. In fact, enterprises' high-end transformation can also, in turn, stimulate further consumption upgrading and market growth, creating a virtuous cycle of mutual reinforcement. Moreover, the development of social services provides crucial support for enterprises' high-end transformation. China's social service sector is increasingly moving toward high-end development, with the proportion of high-end services rising rapidly and growth efficiency continuously improving (Nan & Yuan, 2021). In particular, FinTech plays a pivotal role: It not only helps alleviate financial pressures during practicing high-end transformation strategies but also promotes technological development and the commercialization of innovation outcomes (Liu & Liu, 2022).

From the perspective of internal enterprise development, many Chinese enterprises—having undergone years of accumulation and growth—have strengthened their capabilities,

providing essential internal momentum for high-end strategic transformation. Studies show that although the majority of Chinese enterprises still occupy low value-added positions in GVCs and remain overly reliant on low-cost advantages—facing issues such as low productivity, weak innovation capabilities, thin profit margins, and dependence on foreign markets for core technologies and critical equipment (Lu et al., 2021; Meng et al., 2019; Wu & Liu, 2012)—a number of leading firms have made significant progress in areas such as upgrading motivation, awareness of high R&D investment, technological development, and managerial quality, thereby becoming increasingly prepared for high-end transformation.

First, the willingness to upgrade serves as a critical internal driver. In a global environment characterized by competitive allocation of production factors, Chinese enterprises have long been suppressed by multinational corporations. As a result, many Chinese enterprises have developed a strong aspiration to enter high-end markets, which has become a vital source of motivation for undertaking high-end strategic transformation (Liang et al., 2014). Second, a strong awareness of R&D investment is fundamental. Technology- and knowledge-intensive enterprises tend to allocate substantial resources to R&D, enabling them to strengthen their innovation capabilities and achieve comprehensive improvements in both technological level and operational efficiency (Jin et al., 2022). Third, technological advancement acts as a catalyst. While gaps still exist between Chinese enterprises and global leaders in key core technologies and critical component manufacturing, continuous breakthroughs in fields such as electronic information technologies, as well as significant progress in aerospace, nuclear power, and high-speed rail equipment manufacturing, have endowed some Chinese enterprises with notable international competitiveness. Meanwhile, the rapid development of the digital economy has allowed firms to leverage digital technologies to innovate management models, optimize managerial methods, and enhance overall managerial effectiveness (Yang & Lei, 2021). Fourth, the quality of management personnel serves as a safeguard. In recent years, Chinese enterprise managers have made notable strides in educational background, management experience, and global vision. This progress has enabled them to re-evaluate their external environment, foster innovation, overcome developmental bottlenecks, and pursue transformation and growth (Liu & Zong, 2021). In addition, cross-border mergers and acquisitions have become an important means of accessing scarce strategic resources such as advanced technologies, high-end business models, global brands, and overseas distribution channels. These acquisitions are also a key pathway for helping Chinese enterprises move toward the high end of the industrial value chain (Hu & Wu, 2016).

3.2 Challenges in High-End Strategic Transformation of Chinese Enterprises

Even though many enterprises have already initiated high-end strategic transformation, most remain in the exploratory or slogan-driven stage. Some are still stuck in hesitant, struggling phases of change and have yet to achieve their intended transformation goals. The root causes can be summarized as follows: first, a failure to grasp the essence of high-end transformation, resulting in misjudged strategic direction; second, a neglect of the transformation's systemic nature, leading to fragmented, superficial implementation; and third, a disregard for the depth and complexity of transformation, causing efforts to become merely formalistic.

(1) Most enterprises have failed to recognize that the essence of high-end strategic transformation in Chinese enterprises lies in reshaping consumer cognition regarding high-end demand, and thus have not properly identified the right direction for transformation. High-end transformation is not simply about high quality or high price; it must be grounded in consumers' increasingly high standards of demand. However, Chinese enterprises have long operated in mid- and low-end markets and remain trapped in a situation where they are unable to break through the dominance of international brands or occupy a significant place in consumer consciousness. As a result, how to reshape consumer perception and guide high-end demand has become a key to overcoming this impasse. In recent years, China's high-end market has been rapidly expanding, with a dramatic rise in consumption levels. However, consumer perceptions of high-end demand remain vague and underdeveloped. International brands, leveraging their strong brand equity, robust supply chains, and abundant market resources, continue to shape consumer preferences—resulting in a widespread tendency to equate high-end demand with international brands, while pursuing brand prestige at the expense of genuine product or service needs. Under such circumstances, Chinese enterprises—most of which are still situated in the mid- and low-end market segments, lack critical resources, have weak brand momentum, and face gaps in product quality—will inevitably fail to penetrate the high-end market unless they start by reshaping and guiding high-end demand. Enterprises that are unable to help consumers form clear, high-end preferences will also be unable to "overtake on curves" or secure a dominant position in consumer cognition. Therefore, Chinese enterprises must accurately identify strategic opportunities and directions by integrating the market context with their internal capabilities. The starting point should be proactively guiding consumers to form clear, high-end demand, thereby reshaping the rules of industry competition and leading the sector toward healthy development—rather than merely pursuing superficial high-end packaging to earn inflated profits.

(2) The systemic nature of high-end strategic transformation is often overlooked, with some enterprises expecting to achieve transformation by upgrading a single module. As a result, they encounter persistent difficulties and repeated setbacks and may even find themselves in an awkward dilemma with no clear path forward. High-end strategic transformation is inherently a high-risk and complex systemic project. It requires a comprehensive overhaul and upgrade of the entire organization, supported by robust resources and capabilities. This process necessitates the systematic transformation of internal modules, including products, services, supply chains, marketing, and distribution channels. Given these overarching requirements, enterprises must build a strong foundation in R&D and product capabilities to support related efforts in reshaping consumer demand through marketing and channel strategies. However, upgrading product quality and executing effective marketing strategies involve deeper challenges, such as full value chain management, redefinition of business domains, supply chain upgrading, and team development. Some enterprises, lacking a systematic plan and underestimating the risks of transformation, focus only on isolated aspects such as branding, technology, or services. Others make only limited progress before being constrained by insufficient resources or capabilities. This often leads to stagnation, diminished employee motivation, and failure to achieve the intended results. Therefore,

it is essential to approach high-end strategic transformation from a systemic perspective, identifying and refining a complete logic of transformation practices that can guide implementation effectively and sustainably.

(3) The depth of high-end strategic transformation is often neglected, resulting in superficial or symbolic implementation. In practice, the lack of transformation depth manifests in two main ways: failure to build broad strategic consensus and failure to reconfigure cognitive frameworks and regenerate organizational "genes." Only a subset of organizational members may recognize or support high-end strategic transformation—for instance, while senior executives may reach a consensus on the need for high-end transformation, middle and frontline employees may lack strategic understanding and participate passively. Middle managers, as key intermediaries in the communication of strategy, play a decisive role in how much of the top-level strategic intent is accurately conveyed downward. Frontline employees, who are directly engaged with markets and consumers, are critical in seizing market opportunities and reshaping consumer demand. Whether they align with top-level consensus directly impacts the effectiveness of strategy execution. Thus, achieving deep strategic consensus across all organizational levels is a key challenge in the process of high-end transformation for Chinese enterprises. Moreover, the essence of high-end strategic transformation lies in cognitive reconfiguration and organizational "gene" regeneration. However, some enterprises focus heavily on visible or symbolic transformation while remaining cognitively anchored in old paradigms, adhering to outdated rules. Cognition is often embedded in organizational actions, making it difficult to observe or identify. Moreover, the high risks, uncertainty, and systemic complexity associated with high-end strategic transformation make it even more challenging to form and evolve shared strategic understanding within the organization.

In summary, the process of high-end strategic transformation in Chinese enterprises is marked by both opportunities and risks. The key to effective implementation lies in genuinely grasping the essence of high-end transformation as a process of reshaping demand cognition and executing a comprehensive, systemic transformation that addresses both internal and external dimensions.

4 The Practice Logic of High-End Strategic Transformation in Chinese Enterprises

Under the context of China's high-quality development, the practical logic of Chinese enterprises' high-end strategic transformation should primarily encompass four aspects: the foundation of change, resource reconfiguration, tacit consensus, and explicit action. Specifically, the transformation process anchors in demand landscape reshaping, builds on resource reconfiguration, and executes transformation through coordinated explicit actions and tacit cognitive changes.

4.1 Transformation Foundation: Reshaping the Demand Landscape

Previous research has introduced the concept of a demand landscape to describe consumers' perceptions of specific needs and the corresponding market offerings, and assess the fit

between product attributes and consumer demand (Vinokurova, 2019). Many Chinese enterprises have attempted to enhance brand positioning and occupy consumer mindshare through marketing strategies, technological upgrades, and corporate acquisitions. However, these high-end practices are often based on the implicit assumption that high-end consumer demand is clearly defined and understood (Dong et al., 2019; Hu & Wu, 2016). This leads to a passive view of demand matching—where enterprises attempt to align with a fixed demand landscape through product innovation or marketing. In reality, the rapid pace of consumption upgrading in China, combined with the dominant influence of international brands, has resulted in a high-end market characterized by consumer confusion and blind adherence to international brand norms. Most consumers are unsure what constitutes high-end demand or how to evaluate it. Moreover, it is difficult for Chinese enterprises to directly compete with international brands if they continue to conform entirely to the competitive rules and market order established by those brands. In this context, the fundamental task of high-end strategic transformation is to reshape the high-end demand landscape—actively guiding consumer preferences toward psychological positions that closely align with the firm's offerings. This involves dismantling consumer misconceptions about high-end demand and challenging blind loyalty to international brands, shifting from a passive demand adaptation to a proactive stance of demand creation and preference reshaping (Vinokurova, 2019). Reshaping the demand landscape requires both a strong connection to consumers and a direct push for internal organizational upgrading. Therefore, high-end strategic transformation is not merely about upgrading an individual enterprise but redefining and clarifying high-end demand across the entire industry. In essence, it signals a shift in the rules of the game (Su & Lin, 2021).

4.2 Foundational Logic: Resource Reconfiguration

Resources are the fundamental support for any enterprise's strategic transformation. In the process of reshaping the demand landscape and achieving a leap in organizational capability, high-end strategic transformation often faces two key challenges: a lack of high-quality resources and the fragmentation of existing resource allocations. These challenges place greater demands on enterprises to acquire and deploy resources (Lu et al., 2021). In essence, achieving high-end transformation is a process of resource reconfiguration. Enterprises must both acquire new external resources and redeploy internal ones. These two pathways complement each other, enabling the accumulation of resource advantages necessary for driving high-end transformation.

On the one hand, external resource acquisition can effectively compensate for internal resource deficiencies. The scarcity of key resources has, to a certain extent, hindered technological advancement in Chinese enterprises and sometimes even undermined their ability to operate sustainably. In contrast, leading enterprises that occupy high-end positions in the value chain are often able to autonomously access and allocate resources on a national and global scale, resulting in stronger market control and integration capabilities. These advantages provide ongoing foundational support for implementing high-end strategic transformation (Jin, 2011). Enterprises acquire external resources through various means, such as channel management, operational control, and strategic alliances. The strengthening

of market resource capabilities directly reflects increased organizational strength, which in turn contributes to enhanced brand recognition, richer distribution channels, and more optimized operations—all of which are concrete manifestations of strategic high-end transformation (Hu & Wu, 2016).

On the other hand, internal resource redeployment can significantly improve resource utilization efficiency and better support the resource demands of high-end transformation. According to resource dependence theory, enterprises can break free from path dependence and low-value market positions through redeployment, integration, and reconfiguration of resources—thus achieving upgrading and gaining sustainable competitive advantages (Jiao et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2016). Resource redeployment emphasizes the rational allocation of production factors, whereby enterprises channel their resources into product lines that contribute most to organizational performance (Sakhartov & Folta, 2014). Enterprise resources can be broadly categorized into scale-free resources and non-scale-free resources. Scale-free resources—such as brand and reputation—can influence all products and services across the enterprise (Diestre & Santaló, 2019). In contrast, non-scale-free resources are specific to particular products or services, including managerial attention (Wu, 2013), distribution channels, or shelf space (Brahm et al., 2017). Many studies suggest that the lack of scalable resource advantages is a major obstacle for Chinese enterprises and recommend enhancing brand influence to build such advantages. However, simultaneous expansion into multiple business lines or brand portfolios can create pressures related to funding, personnel, and managerial attention. Moreover, internal competition for consumer attention among multiple brands often leads to inefficiency and resource cannibalization. The absence of key non-scale-free resources is a fundamental barrier to high-end strategic transformation. Therefore, reconfiguring non-scale-free resources is essential for solving the resource bottleneck. Under the logic of resource redeployment, enterprises should leverage their unique substitution advantages by flexibly allocating non-scale-free resources to high-value-creation business areas (Diestre & Santaló, 2019; Helfat & Esenhardt, 2004). At the same time, they should reconfigure both internal and external non-scale-free resources to enhance their scalable resource base—ultimately addressing the threefold challenge of resource scarcity, low utilization efficiency, and weak brand momentum (Giarratana et al., 2021; Wu, 2013).

In conclusion, Chinese enterprises must not rely solely on either external resource acquisition or internal redeployment in isolation. Instead, they should adopt a comprehensive resource reconfiguration logic that emphasizes both the introduction and redeployment of non-scale free resources. This means alleviating resource shortages through external acquisition while improving resource efficiency and strengthening scalable resource advantages by focusing internal resources on high-end brand building—thus enabling effective high-end transformation.

4.3 Explicit Transformation: Module Upgrading

Upgrading internal organizational modules constitutes the explicit execution layer of the strategic anchor of demand landscape reshaping. Its goal is to redefine the connotation of

consumer demand and to deliver high-quality products and services that meet or exceed customer expectations. This process primarily focuses on upgrading three core modules—product, marketing, and channels—and, where appropriate, may also include upgrading information systems and digital technologies.

Product and service upgrading is the most direct embodiment of high-end strategic transformation. On the product side, enterprises achieve high-end upgrading by engaging in value-added activities—moving from simple products to more complex and higher-value activities such as assembly, design, and advanced manufacturing (Lee et al., 2001). On the service side, firms enhance their offerings by providing more precise, convenient, and responsive services. A representative case is the servitization strategy in manufacturing, where enterprises shift their focus from pure production to service provision in order to restructure their competitive advantage in response to changing consumer demands (Hu & Wang, 2016). High-quality products and services serve as the tangible foundation and critical support for reshaping the demand landscape. In contrast, low-quality offerings, though they may attract short-term attention through aggressive marketing, often result in rapid loss of consumer trust due to a mismatch between promise and reality. Inversely, products and services that meet and even guide consumer demand influence how consumers evaluate competing offerings. This can indirectly redefine competition rules within the same product category, enabling firms to capture greater market share in the high-end segment and drive transformation in overall industry competition dynamics.

Marketing and channel upgrading serve as critical bridges in implementing high-end strategic transformation. Together with product, marketing, and channels, they form a strategic "iron triangle" that receives significant attention in practice. For Chinese enterprises, high-end strategic transformation must go beyond building premium brand images; it must also rectify market distortions in the high-end segment and help consumers establish clear and rational perceptions of high-end demand. In this context, marketing and channels should act as bridges linking products with consumers. Enterprises need to integrate diverse marketing approaches and leverage multi-channel strategies to guide consumers in accepting redefined needs, shape a credible high-end brand image, and engage in coordinated development with partners. This ensures that product and brand information reaches consumers consistently and accurately.

In addition, enterprises can pursue information system and digital module upgrades to support high-end transformation. For example, in manufacturing—which is often characterized by complex organizational structures, product chains, and low operational efficiency due to traditional production methods—the deep integration of digital technologies has become a powerful engine for uncovering new value creation opportunities and advancing toward the high end of the GVC (Zhang & Yu, 2020). This offers firms in high-end equipment manufacturing a chance to seize strategic advantage and achieve curve overtaking (Meng et al., 2019). Similarly, in the agricultural sector, enterprises combine digital technologies with existing mechanized and automated farming practices to push key nodes in the agricultural value chain toward high-end development incorporating advanced science and intelligent systems (Zhuang & Chen, 2017).

4.4 Implicit Transformation: Consensus Building and Cognitive Reconfiguration

High-end strategic transformation is a complex, system-wide endeavor that involves a fundamental shift in the organizational "genetic code." Strategic consensus—defined as a shared understanding of an organization's strategic priorities—forms the basis for effective strategy implementation (Kellermanns et al., 2005; Porck et al., 2018), while the cognitive evolution and reconfiguration of organizational members is a direct determinant of strategic success. However, because consensus and cognition are often implicit and difficult to observe or quantify, they are frequently overlooked in practice. During the decision-making and communication phases of transformation, strategic consensus often weakens as it is transmitted from top leadership to lower-level employees and external stakeholders, ultimately impairing execution and reducing strategic performance (Xue et al., 2005). Moreover, during the implementation and institutionalization phases, transformation may remain at the surface level of action, without achieving deeper cognitive shifts or structural change at the organizational "genetic" level.

In current research, the focus of strategic consensus has largely been limited to middle and senior management, emphasizing either the alignment of strategic perceptions among top management team (TMT) members or the role of middle managers in promoting consensus through strategic participation (Ates et al., 2020; Rosado-Feger, 2014). Frontline employees, who are responsible for the execution of day-to-day operations, are often treated as passive implementers and are seldom included in strategic consensus frameworks. However, beyond TMT alignment, the effective implementation of strategy also relies on the accurate understanding and shared commitment of middle- and lower-level employees. The higher the degree of consensus, the more consistent the understanding of strategic priorities, the stronger the collaboration across teams and hierarchies, and the more successful the strategy execution (Porck et al., 2018; Walter et al., 2012). Without broad-based consensus and clear communication, top-down directives are unlikely to foster unified action, leading to strategic "disconnection between knowing and doing" or "a perception of elitism alienates employees" (Kellermanns et al., 2005; Porck et al., 2018). This is especially critical in the context of high-end strategic transformation, where enterprises must undertake the challenging and high-risk task of reshaping consumer perceptions of high-end demand. In such cases, frontline employees' recognition of and commitment to the strategy, along with positive consumer feedback, are essential to successfully reshaping the demand landscape. Therefore, it is imperative to include frontline employees and consumers as key actors in the strategic consensus-building process. Only by fostering a broader and deeper level of strategic alignment—both within and beyond the organization—can Chinese enterprises build the cognitive foundation necessary for successful high-end transformation.

Traditional research on strategic transformation has primarily emphasized explicit strategic actions and their influencing factors. As scholarship has advanced, there has been a gradual shift beyond the central role of individual managers, executive teams, or strategic departments in strategy formulation and execution. Scholars have increasingly extended their focus to include factors such as organizational institutions, organizational learning, dynamic capabilities, and organizational culture, repositioning transformation as a systemic endeavor involving the entire organization (Birkinshaw et al., 2008). However, most studies remain

focused on identifying patterns in transformation actions and fail to address the core essence of change. In reality, strategic transformation is not only about modifying business types, development directions, organizational rules, or formal systems—it is more fundamentally about altering the organization's cognitive foundation, including deep-seated behavioral patterns such as organizational routines that are often tacit, stable, and difficult to observe (Feldman & Pentland, 2003; Pentland & Feldman, 2005). Therefore, true transformation involves a fundamental reconfiguration of an organization's "genetic code" or habitual logic. In practice, transformation failure often stems from the lack of cognitive-level change, which leads to superficial or incomplete transformation (Lin & Wang, 2017). This is particularly true in the case of high-end strategic transformation. From reshaping consumers' perceptions of high-end demand to upgrading internal systems, the success of transformation hinges on whether members at all organizational levels can break free from existing cognitive constraints and form a new cognitive system aligned with the tasks and context of high-end strategic transformation—in other words, achieve cognitive reconfiguration. Thus, it is not enough to build strategic consensus during the decision-making and communication phases. During the implementation and institutionalization phases, it is equally essential to bring about a deep shift in organizational cognition, creating a renewed strategic mindset across the entire organization.

4.5 A Practice Logic Model of High-End Strategic Transformation

To summarize, the practice logic of high-end strategic transformation in Chinese enterprises can be described as follows. Under the national context of high-quality development, Chinese enterprises face dual challenges: Externally, consumers lack clear cognition of high-end demand; and internally, firms often suffer from resource scarcity and limited organizational capabilities. In response, enterprises use demand landscape reshaping as the foundation and resource reconfiguration as the foundational logic, while simultaneously advancing systemic organizational transformation through both explicit actions and implicit cognitive processes, as illustrated in Figure 1. In this model, reshaping the high-end demand landscape for Chinese consumers serves as the root of strategic transformation, setting its direction. The foundational logic of transformation—resource reconfiguration—addresses the dual challenges of scarce premium resources and fragmented allocation. Enterprises must both acquire external resources and redeploy internal resources to build resource advantages through a two-pronged approach. On the implicit level, enterprises seek to build multi-level strategic consensus within the organization, under the guidance of demand landscape reshaping, and emphasize cognitive reconfiguration throughout the transformation process. On the explicit level, reshaped demand landscapes directly inform internal module upgrades—with product and service enhancement providing the tangible foundation for consumer perception reshaping, and marketing and channel upgrades serving as bridges between offerings and consumers, guiding acceptance of the newly constructed high-end value propositions.

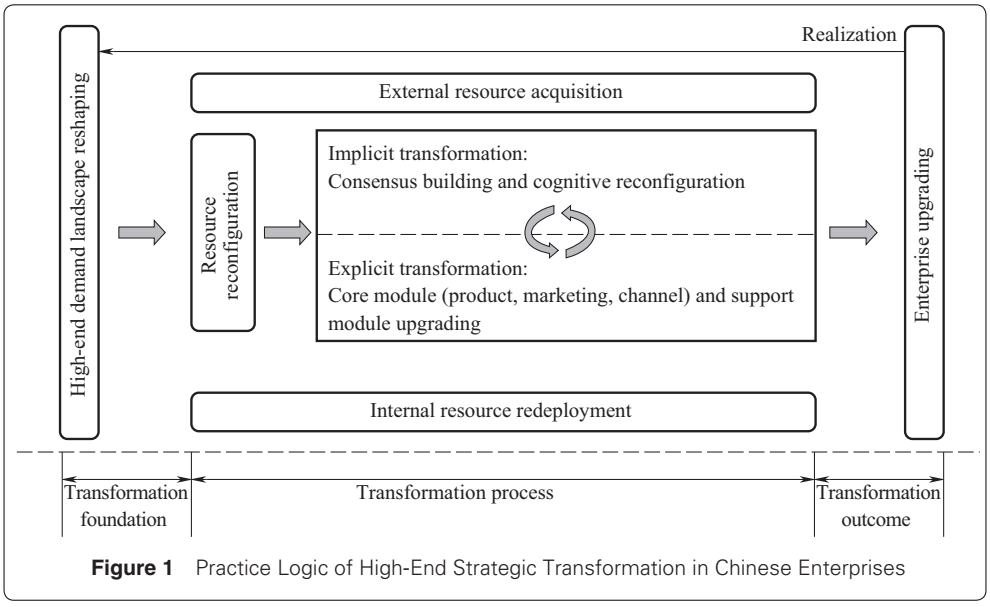

Figure 1 Practice Logic of High-End Strategic Transformation in Chinese Enterprises

5 Research Paradigm for High-End Strategic Transformation in Chinese Enterprises

5.1 The Top-Down & Bottom-Up Integrated Paradigm

With the rapid growth of the Chinese economy and the strong momentum behind the high-end transformation of Chinese enterprises, the practical orientation of management research has become increasingly prominent (Su et al., 2022). A review of management scholarship in China reveals that while scholars have introduced, interpreted, and absorbed Western management theories, they have also inherited a mechanistic and procedural research paradigm that overly emphasizes mathematical modeling and numerical abstraction. This approach still lacks localized theoretical foundations grounded in Chinese realities, directly addressing Chinese problems and informing practical management actions. In this context, a research paradigm that directly engages with Chinese management practice—referred to as the top-down & bottom-up integrated paradigm (known as *dingtian-lidi* 顶天立地 in Chinese)—has become a necessity. It offers a fundamental path for constructing management theories related to high-end strategic transformation in Chinese enterprises. This paradigm is characterized by two essential elements: humanistic concern and the unity of knowledge and action.

First, humanistic concern emphasizes that theoretical research on high-end strategic transformation in China must be integrated with the unique political, cultural, and social context of Chinese practice. The national strategy of high-quality development is itself rooted in China's specific realities and national circumstances, and Chinese enterprises have long operated in a distinctive institutional, economic, and cultural environment. As a result, the practice of high-end strategic transformation in China often displays management phenomena and elements that differ significantly from those of Western firms, making it a uniquely Chinese management issue. Applying Western management

theories and analytical frameworks to this context may result in a mismatch or contextual misfit. Therefore, theoretical research on high-end strategic transformation in China must be rooted in the Chinese context, utilizing Chinese management philosophy to support theoretical development. The aim is to conduct theory-building that carries distinct Chinese characteristics.

Second, the principle of unity of knowledge and action requires that theoretical research on high-end strategic transformation in China must achieve alignment between management theory (knowledge) and practice (action). At its core, management is a practice-oriented discipline; thus, theories on high-end strategic transformation of Chinese enterprises must originate from real-world practice and, in turn, contribute back to it. Sound theory and practical phenomena are organically unified and mutually reinforcing—scholars and entrepreneurs alike must strive to develop theory grounded in practice and practice informed by theory (Li et al., 2018). Therefore, theoretical research on high-end strategic transformation in China should not be constrained by existing theoretical frameworks. It must be rooted in management practices embedded in Chinese societal contexts, while also striving to abstract theoretical problems from practice, proposing theoretical insights and solutions based on observed realities. Through iterative analysis, validation, refinement, and dialogue with mainstream theories, these insights may be elevated to the level of generalizable management principles or theories, ultimately contributing to a management science system that is both contextually distinctive and broadly applicable (Jing et al., 2020; Su et al., 2018).

At present, high-end strategic transformation is an urgent and essential endeavor for Chinese enterprises. However, existing strategic transformation theories often fail to offer practical guidance because they either overlook the unique nature of high-end transformation or lack contextualization within China. Therefore, this paper calls for theoretical development that is deeply grounded in the specific contexts of Chinese high-end enterprises and industries, such as national policy, technological advancement, social service evolution, and consumption upgrading. Future research should be rooted in practical transformation at the enterprise level and real-world industrial development, seeking to uncover effective Chinese management approaches and insights. The goal is to build a localized theory of high-end strategic transformation in Chinese enterprises that both explains and informs enterprise-level transformation and more extensive industrial upgrading.

5.2 Practice-Oriented Research Method: Case Study

Case study is a practice-oriented methodology that enables scholars to uncover generalizable patterns from complex real-world phenomena and to construct new theories. It has gained rapid traction in the field of Chinese management studies. In the broader landscape of management research paradigms, quantitative and qualitative approaches represent the two fundamental methodological traditions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Among them, quantitative research has long dominated the Western mainstream academia. Although Chinese management scholars have made significant progress in the rigor and scientific standards of their research—resulting in a growing presence in top-tier international management journals—quantitative methods still prevail in China. Most of this work,

however, merely tests existing Western theories in Chinese contexts, where China is often treated only as a data source or empirical backdrop, rather than as a subject for original theoretical exploration (Jing et al., 2020). Quantitative methods have two main limitations. First, the so-called scientific emphasis on quantification in Western management research can, to some extent, result in cognitive rigidity. Chinese scholars often apply these methods in a mechanical and uncritical manner, which prevents them from capturing the dynamic, context-specific nature of Chinese management practices. Second, while quantitative methods are powerful in theory testing, they are weak in uncovering tacit knowledge—a crucial dimension in management research. Moreover, given that successful cases of high-end strategic transformation among Chinese enterprises and industries remain relatively limited, it is important to acknowledge the technical constraints of conducting large-sample empirical studies under current data conditions. In this context, qualitative research methods, especially case studies, serve as a powerful complement. They provide valuable tools for theory development and conceptual innovation grounded in local practice, and are particularly well suited for the top-down & bottom-up integrated paradigm of high-end strategic transformation research in China (Su et al., 2022).

The applicability of case study research in the context of high-end strategic transformation in Chinese enterprises is reflected in the following three aspects: First, research on high-end strategic transformation in China must be grounded in the real-world development and transformation practices of Chinese enterprises. Case studies allow for rich, detailed descriptions of a phenomenon (the case) and systematic analysis of why it occurs. Through this process, researchers can uncover general patterns or identify specificities, and thereby derive research conclusions or develop new theoretical propositions. Second, high-end strategic transformation in Chinese enterprises is a complex and abstract issue, embedded not only in firm-level practices and organizational contexts, but also in the broader industrial and national development contexts of China. When a research problem is highly complex and requires a holistic understanding of its essence, quantitative methods often fall short. In contrast, case studies can penetrate enterprise realities and engage deeply with managers and employees, thereby transforming abstract concepts into concrete understanding (Lin & Su, 2010). Third, high-end transformation represents a new strategic frontier for Chinese enterprises entering a new development phase. Existing theories are often inadequate in explaining practices shaped by distinct Chinese contextual characteristics. Furthermore, a wide range of emerging issues that transcend traditional frameworks of strategic transformation remain underexplored or poorly defined. When research questions suffer from severe theoretical gaps or lie in the early stages of theoretical development—where existing literature cannot sufficiently explain or address them—qualitative, exploratory research approaches become the most effective strategy. These approaches enable the derivation of conceptual models and theoretical frameworks directly from practice. Therefore, the case study method can fully meet the fundamental demands of theoretical research on high-end strategic transformation in Chinese enterprises. With increasing policy support at the national level, more outstanding enterprises are expected to enter the high-end—both in China and globally. By analyzing diverse and context-specific transformation experiences, researchers can extract generalizable insights and recurring patterns, laying a solid foundation for theory

development (Chen & Hu, 2022), and enhancing the practical relevance and impact of academic research.

6 Future Research Directions

Integrating China's current context of high-quality development, the logic of high-end strategic transformation in Chinese enterprises, and the limitations of existing studies, this paper proposes several urgent directions for future research:

(1) *Clarifying the connotation and direction of high-end strategic transformation in the Chinese context*. The conceptual boundaries of high-end transformation remain somewhat ambiguous. Bridging the gap between observable high-end transformation phenomena in managerial practice and academic research requires the development of a clear and rigorous conceptual framework. Existing literature tends to approach this issue from a general perspective, exploring enterprise upgrading or innovation through concepts such as strategic upgrading, brand premiumization, or strategic innovation, which fail to capture the uniqueness of high-end strategic transformation. Therefore, it is essential to adopt a systematic perspective to delve into the distinctive connotations and development trajectories of high-end strategic transformation in the Chinese context, thereby enriching academic discourse and advancing theoretical development.

(2) *Exploring how Chinese enterprises realize high-end strategic transformation in practice*. As a process involving comprehensive, multi-dimensional, and systemic organizational transformation and reconfiguration, the key challenge for enterprises lies in implementing the transformation in an orderly, focused, and tiered manner. Future research should adopt a systems thinking approach to examine how enterprises can practically implement high-end strategic transformation, systematically addressing foundational strategies, core modules, interlinking mechanisms, and the restructuring of resources and capabilities. Meanwhile, researchers must not neglect the latent cognitive dynamics within organizations. It is necessary to explore the micro-level and deep-seated changes in organizational cognition, uncover how consensus is formed among organizational members, how such consensus is disseminated internally, how cognitive reconfiguration takes place in practice, and how new organizational routines are constructed. These inquiries will help reveal the hidden forces and essential logic of high-end strategic transformation in Chinese enterprises.

(3) *Unveiling the mechanism through which high-end strategic transformation in Chinese enterprises contributes to broader industrial upgrading*. Industrial upgrading represents another core challenge for China's economic development. As the key agent for implementing the national high-quality development strategy, enterprises play a crucial role in driving transformation. Their high-end strategic transformation efforts generate positive spillover effects at the industry level. Accordingly, clarifying how enterprise-level high-end transformation stimulates industrial upgrading can help answer questions regarding the outcomes and broader impact of such transformation, while also offering fresh perspectives for the advancement of China's core industries. Future research should aim to link the enterprise and industry levels, exploring the cross-level leveraging mechanisms that enable transformation from enterprise to industry. Specifically, this may involve identifying the

critical nodes where enterprise-level high-end transformation catalyzes industrial upgrading, investigating how localized high-end initiatives propagate to sector-wide evolution, and comparing the differences and applicability of various leveraging pathways across industries. This enables the formulation of targeted upgrading pathways and policy recommendations tailored to diverse industries' specific characteristics, operable across enterprise, industrial, and national levels.

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