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**Geopolitical Standing and Soft Power Tools:
China in South America Case Study**

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A mi querida familia, por su amor incondicional y constante apoyo durante este proceso.

A mi enamorado César, quien ha estado a mi lado brindándome apoyo y motivación constante. Tu amor y paciencia han sido fundamentales para mí.

A mi tutor, Enrique Manglano, por su constante ánimo y por despertar mi interés en el campo de la geopolítica.

Gracias infinitas.

Abstract and Keywords

Over the past years the soft power term has been pivotal and widely employed in the international arena. Mainly related to the United States of America, nowadays, The People's Republic of China has also endorsed their soft power initiatives around the globe, reaching Latin America. In the last two decades, China has reaffirmed its presence in Latin America, arguing a paradigm shift in the region's international relations.

This heightened interest stems primarily from China's expanding global influence and its quest for resources, markets, and strategic partnerships. Apart from routine bilateral interactions within the region, the PRC has maintained political ties with Latin America through the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) and almost all other regional multilateral institutions, such as the Inter-American system, where it has actively participated as an observer in the Organization of American States (OAS) since 2004.

Nonetheless, the thesis investigation will take a closer look at the softer side of the equation. Cultural and informational aspects of PRC soft power influence include selective regional distribution of state-sponsored propaganda and PRC media; the creation of 44 regional Confucius Institutes to teach Chinese language and culture; various forms of "people-to-people" engagement, such as state-sponsored scholarships that facilitate studies in China and strategic "expert" exchanges; the encouragement of travel to China by Latin American academics, journalists, politicians and other professionals; and other forms of strategic engagement. Focusing on cultural diplomacy, media influence, and educational exchange, the research will explore the strategies China employs to increase its geopolitical standing in the region, focusing merely on South America.

Essentially, the central inquiry revolves around the extent to which these soft power initiatives support China's influence and standing in the region and the varied responses obtained from South American countries.

Keywords: Soft Power, China, Cultural Diplomacy, Media Influence, Educational Exchange, Confucius Institutes, Geopolitical Influence, People-to-People Engagement, South America.

Abbreviations

<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CIs	Confucius Institutes
CELAC	Community of Latin American and Caribbean States
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
EPA	Economic Partnership Agreement
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
GDI	Gross Domestic Income
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PRC	People's Republic of China
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
US	United States
VI BRICS Africa)	Sixth BRICS Summit (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South
WTO	World Trade Organization

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Historically, the dynamics of Latin America & the Caribbean (LAC) foreign affairs has been shaped by its strong relations with the United States of America, and often from a geopolitical perspective regarded as their “backyard” (Chen, 2021). However, since the late 1970s, the People's Republic of China (PRC) presence on the global stage has experienced a remarkable evolution, largely propelled by its economic success due to the deep-rooted reforms done by Deng Xiaoping's that gave birth to the “policy of openness”. This transformation has fundamentally reshaped the dynamics of global politics and economics, positioning China as a major global player. Nowadays, while China's influence spans across the globe, its significant presence in the LAC region emerges as an exceptional case study for understanding its rise and influence.

The relationship has not only rapidly evolved but has also consistently progressed, the collaboration between these two regions has expanded across various fields, fostering cooperation and a growing convergence of interests. In this starting point of the relation, the figure of Jiang Zemin ¹ stands out, focusing on a relation of cooperation, Jiang reached to approach a broad range of dimensions like economic, cultural, political, and military with Latin America. Thus, when he visited Latin America in April 2001 he stated:

“(...) the 21st century will be a century in which China and Latin America will cooperate hand in hand in all areas, and it will also be a century in which the people of China and Latin America will build a better tomorrow”(Fernandez, 2023)

Subsequently, by the 2000s the relationship between China and LAC started strengthening and increasing even more, through different strategic initiatives and action plans. Over the past 20 years, according to a report by the European Parliament, China trade inversion on LAC grew from USD 12 billion to USD 310 billion (Hannes et al., n.d.), becoming the major provider of FDI and financial support

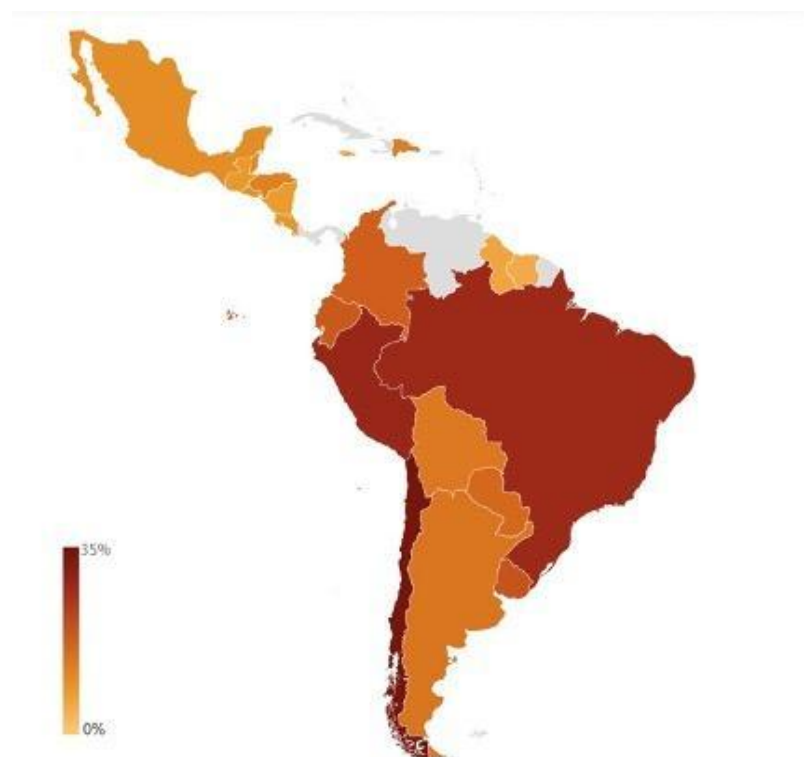
¹ Jiang Zemin was a prominent Chinese politician who served as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China from 1989 to 2002 and as President of China from 1993 to 2003. He played a significant role in shaping China's domestic and foreign policies during his tenure. (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2024, February 27))

in the LAC region. China's ascent as a major investor in LAC has reshaped economic dynamics in the region. Many Latin American governments and businesses have welcomed China's growing FDI as an alternative source of capital to fuel economic expansion and finance critical infrastructure and resource development projects. This does not only reflect the strengthening economic ties between China and LAC but also underscores the increasing importance of South-South cooperation in driving global economic growth and development (*“Dialogue of the Century” on South-South Cooperation*, n.d.)

Hence, for this study, our focus will be specifically on South America, notwithstanding China's increasing presence across the broader LAC region. This decision is influenced by the fact that South American nations tend to engage in more extensive trade with China compared to Central American countries (refer to Figure 1). In total, approximately 69.9 percent of trade between LAC and China revolves around key commodities, including soybeans & other oilseeds, crude petroleum oil, copper ores and concentrates, iron ores and concentrates, and refined copper, are primarily sourced from four South American Countries (Ray et al., n.d.).

Figure 1. LAC region, China as an important Trade Partner

Goods trade with China, 2020



Note: Data shown in color are the countries with more trade with PRC, meaning that 35% is the largest percentage share of total trade of goods of each country. Ex. Chile's trade with China makes up 34% of the country's total trade.

Source: Roy, D (2023) Council on Foreign Relations

Moreover, the General Administration of Customs (GAC) revealed that overall trade volume between China and Latin America, including the BRI, increased to USD 450 billion in 2021, striking a new record of USD 485.8 billion in 2022. Bilateral commerce between China and Brazil, South America's largest economy, was USD 171.49 billion that year, exceeding the combined value of Chinese trade with other European countries ². This enormous trade volume demonstrates the importance of South America in China's economic interaction with the area. Besides, China's ambitious BRI has reinforced its connections with South America by improving connectivity and commercial links between the two areas, underscoring the rising relevance of South-South cooperation in driving global economic integration and development.

It's important to mention all this economic data, as it is an indicator of China's growing interests in the region. Beyond mere economic and commercial ties, China's investment portrays a desire for broader engagement: building relationships and influence. Therefore, the interest can also be seen as they have extended into

² CDR Essential Intelligence - Belt & Road Initiative | BRI investment in Latin America continues to g, n.d.

investing into realms such as cultural diplomacy, media influence, and educational exchange, which can only be result of a well employed approach: soft power, which is not only changing trade dynamics; it's reshaping the region's geopolitical landscape, challenging traditional power structures, and prompting new alliances. When we are talking about soft power, as some scholars mention its effectiveness is hard to measure (Dem, n.d.), yet several studies have sought to measure China's global perception and the efficacy of its soft power initiatives. In a 2014 survey conducted by the BBC World Service, different regions' sentiments towards China were analyzed, revealing Africa and Latin America as regions where China's influence was perceived most positively (*Negative views of Russia on the Rise: Global Poll*, 2014). Accordingly, the aim of this study is to evaluate to what extent China's utilization of soft power tools influences its geopolitical standing in South America and to analyze the responses of South American countries to these initiatives.

1.2 Research Objectives

On that premise, the primary objective of the study is motivated by several interconnected goals aimed at understanding the complexity of China's soft power in South America by its overall initiatives. In this specific case, it entails thorough research into China's cultural diplomacy projects, media influence strategies, and educational exchange programs in the different regions of research, considering an exploration of the dynamics of cultural exchanges which give us an insight on the deepening cooperation between both countries.

Furthermore, the study seeks to highlight the various effects of China's soft power initiative spanning cultural, economic, political worlds, and economic dependencies. Economic dependencies are worth considering as the investigation of investment patterns, trade relations and infrastructures projects, provides us insights into the unique characteristics and effectiveness of China's approach. Altogether, these sectors of study allow us to have an emphasis on geopolitical consequences, and how it helps PRC in fulfilling their national interests, being of great importance for the development of the investigation.

Lastly, the long-term objective is to contribute not only to an improved understanding of Sino-Latin America ties, but also to provide advantageous understanding into the regional and global consequences of China's commitment to SDGs. So, considering the previous factors, this study gives a ground of the relations between China and South America in hemispheric dynamics and in the new global distribution of power.

1.3 Methodology

The methodology employed in this study aims to examine the multifaceted realm of China's soft power initiatives in South America and their implications on regional geopolitics. Given the complexity of the subject matter and the limitations encountered, the research primarily relies on qualitative data gathered from a diverse range of secondary sources. That's why to ensure accuracy, this research relies on resources that range from articles and books from international relations experts, government publications, international organizations and representatives from Chinese and Latin American cultural and educational organizations to obtain primary data. Secondary data is gathered from scholarly journals, policy documents, news articles, and statistical reports.

The study constitutes a systematic bibliographic review of the main approaches and trends in the analysis of the topic. Meaning, the process entails a meticulous examination and analysis of existing data pertaining to China's cultural diplomacy projects, media influence strategies, and educational exchange programs in South America. By scrutinizing economic figures, cultural exchanges, and political dynamics, the study aims to identify underlying motives and patterns driving China's soft power endeavors in the region.

Moreover, certain aspects typically addressed in International Relations studies, such as military security, are deliberately omitted from this project due to the distinct focus on soft power dynamics. While China's establishment of overseas military bases garners attention, this study emphasizes understanding the broader context and motives behind China's engagements in South America, beyond military considerations.

1.4 The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Numerous important geopolitical, social, and economic concerns are covered in this thesis. In terms of economics, it looks at how China's soft power instruments—like media sway, cultural diplomacy, and educational exchange—affect South America's economic dynamics. This entails examining the effects on regional industries, labor markets, and general economic growth of Chinese investments, trade alliances, and cultural exchanges. The thesis investigates how state-sponsored scholarships and Confucius Institutes promote cultural and educational exchanges and how these programs impact societal attitudes and integration. The study also examines the geopolitical implications of China's growing influence in South America, evaluating the ways in which these soft power tactics impact the political climate and stability within the area. Therefore, this research topic is relevant for the SDGs because of its focus on:

Goal 1: No poverty

The thesis examines how Chinese investments and economic partnerships potentially contribute to poverty alleviation in South America by creating jobs and fostering economic growth. This is explored in the context of economic impacts and specific case studies.

Goal 4: Quality Education

Through the analysis of educational exchanges and the establishment of Confucius Institutes, the thesis addresses how China's soft power initiatives promote access to quality education and cultural exchange, enhancing educational opportunities in South America.

Goal 9: Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure

By examining Chinese investments and the promotion of development in South America in different areas, the thesis aligns with the objectives of fostering innovation and improving infrastructure in the region.

Goal 10: Reduced Inequalities

Chinese soft power initiatives in South America help to reduce social and economic inequalities within South American countries by providing opportunities for marginalized communities and fostering inclusive growth.

Goal 17: Partnerships for the Goals

The thesis highlights the importance of international cooperation and partnerships, specifically between China and South American countries, in achieving sustainable development goals through strategic economic, cultural, and educational collaborations.

The SDG are very important when we talk about the relations between China and South America, they have been part of how their relationship has begun to develop since the beginning, therefore, we have also dedicated a section to it where we delve deeper into this relationship and its relevance (reference in section 2.3.2- *United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and China's Role in South America*).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Clarifying the concept of Soft Power

Power is the capacity to influence others in order to achieve desired outcomes, which can be achieved through coercion, financial incentives, or the appeal of attraction and persuasion (Nye, 2017). Over the past years, there is a term that has been pivotal and widely employed in the international arena: “*soft power*”. Developed by Joseph Nye Jr. a recognized American political scientist, throughout the course of the 1980s, this concept is defined as a country's ability to influence others without using a coercive force, commonly known as “*hard power*”. This approach encompasses countries projecting their beliefs, ideals, and cultures beyond borders with the aim of nurturing positive perceptions, improving relationships and diplomatic ties. It's said that soft power serves as a tool to win hearts and minds by nations showcasing what makes them unique and compelling, emphasizing the persuasive power (*What Is Soft Power? | World101*, n.d.).

Throughout the Cold War era, both the United States and the Soviet Union acknowledged the pivotal role of soft power in shaping global perceptions. So, to promote their respective ideologies and expand their influence abroad, they made significant investments in cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, international aid programs and even religion. These efforts aimed to not only showcase their values and beliefs but also to establish lasting connections and sway opinions on the world stage.

Still, the role of soft power in geopolitics nowadays cannot be dismissed. While states explore through a world marked by interconnectivity and interdependence, the capacity of demonstrating influence through channels other than traditional power dynamics is critical to effectively promote their interests and have a meaningful impact on international affairs. Soft power develops as a subtle but effective weapon for molding international relations, encouraging collaboration, and attaining strategic goals, making it an essential for contemporary diplomacy. For the development of this study is important to acknowledge the key components that englobe soft power initiatives in modern diplomacy, including the following:

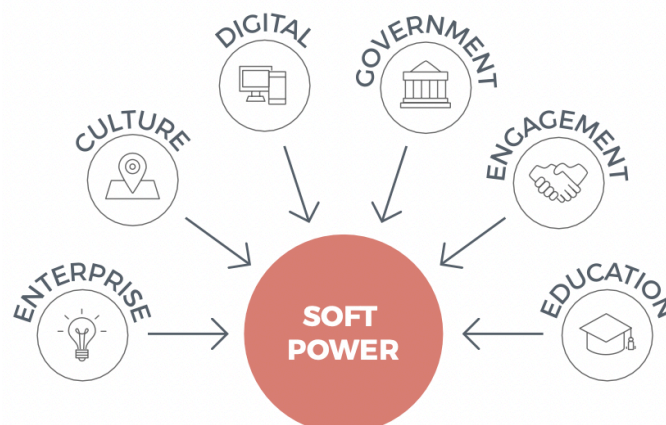
- Cultural diplomacy which stands out as a pivotal element of soft power, leveraging a country's cultural assets and ideas to shape perceptions abroad. This practice rooted in history, involves exchanging ideas, values, and traditions to strengthen relationships and promote national interests. Applied cultural diplomacy includes initiatives like cultural exchanges, sports competitions, promotion of language learning and cultural centers. Further, in our interconnected world, cultural diplomacy is crucial for peace and stability, promoting respect for diversity, justice, and global cooperation towards peace (ICD, n.d)
- Also, public diplomacy which involves the use of communication and engagement strategies by a government or organization to influence foreign public opinion, promote its national interests, and build relationships with people in other countries, here we see activities such as public speeches, press conferences, social media engagement, and educational programs aimed at shaping perceptions of a country abroad (Hunt, 2015). The success of public diplomacy in reaching foreign policy goals has been associated with

elements like how receptive the audience is, the content of the message, and the trustworthiness of the sender.

- Lastly, economic diplomacy involves government actions to advance national economic interests internationally. It includes facilitating market access for domestic businesses, attracting foreign investment, shaping global regulations, and the provision of foreign aid. Making it crucial in a globalized world, with institutions providing the framework for negotiations and cooperation (Markovà, n.d)

Further, in the initial development of this concept, Joseph Nye stated that there are three sources on which soft power relies. These three pillars are: culture, political values, and foreign policies. However, even within these three of his categories, the individual sources of soft power are diverse and varied. To have “the clearest picture of soft power to date”, the Soft Power 30 report by the UCS Center in Public Diplomacy, stated that exists six different subcategories for soft power, them being digital, culture, enterprise, education, engagement and government (Mcclory, 2019). Figure 2 below will illustrate the six different subcategories that constitute the term soft power.

Figure 2: Sub- categories of soft power



Source: The Soft Power 30

In this case, for this study we will be focusing mostly on education, culture and digital. Cultural soft power involves a country's ability to influence other nations through its cultural assets, such as music, movies, and literature. However, some argue that this form of soft power may have limitations in deeply shaping values and beliefs, potentially attracting only superficial interest. Yet, when a nation's cultural offerings resonate with universal values, it naturally enhances its appeal to others. The impact and international reach of cultural productions are vital for building soft power, with metrics such as international tourist arrivals, music industry exports, and sporting achievements serving as indicators of cultural influence (Saaida,2023). Additionally, Educational soft power revolves around a nation's capacity to influence others through its educational endeavors. It's like showcasing the strength of a country's education system to the world. This can include things like attracting international students, offering scholarships, or even collaborating on research and academic programs (MasterClass, 2022). Essentially, it's about using education as a tool to build bridges, foster understanding, and establish positive relationships with other countries. And lastly, the digital soft power is the one that is increasing over the years. This kind of soft power includes a nation's adeptness in leveraging technology and online platforms to enhance its global influence. This can be through social media platforms and having a strong online presence.

With, through all these different initiatives countries can project their beliefs, ideals, and cultures to foster positive perceptions and strengthen diplomatic ties. Moreover, in an interconnected world marked by interdependence, soft power plays a pivotal role in promoting peace, stability, and cooperation on the global stage, making it a powerful tool that could make a difference in the international arena and its affairs. Notwithstanding, as nations navigate complex geopolitical landscapes, harnessing soft power becomes increasingly essential for achieving strategic goals.

2.1.1. Soft Power in International Relations

Soft power as mentioned before acts as a subtle yet potent force, making it possible for nations to be persuasive and shape perceptions on the global arena. Thus, in today's complex landscape of international relations, the successful utilization of soft power resources emerges as an increasingly important tool for nations seeking to overcome geopolitical challenges, establish strategic alliances, and foster

cooperation on pressing global issues (Nye, 2004). Consequently, the discussion surrounding soft power is the understanding of how global governance operates within an alternative paradigm of power dynamics.

This is because, traditionally, power dynamics in international relations have been defined by the utilization of military force, economic sanctions, and other coercive measures to achieve national objectives. Nonetheless, the inherent limitations and adverse consequences associated with such approaches have become increasingly evident over time. Military deployments often result in prolonged and costly conflicts, on the other hand, financial penalties risk exacerbating the suffering of affected populations. The failure of hard power-centric policies, exemplified by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, underscores the necessity of a nuanced approach that considers soft power elements such as legitimacy and global public support (Wagner,2014). Furthermore, the emergence of non-state actors, including multinational business, NGOs, and social movements, has weakened the effectiveness of traditional power structures, emphasizing the need for new methods. As a result, the term soft power has become more relevant as nations seek alternative methods to exert influence and achieve their objectives in the evolving landscape of international relations.

The proliferation of digital communication technologies, social media platforms, and various online interactions has significantly amplified the influence and reach of soft power in the realm of international relations. This expansion enables nations to disseminate their values and ideologies globally, shaping discussions on significant global issues. Soft power has consequently evolved into a vital tool for countries to mold public opinion and cultivate enduring diplomatic connections with other nations. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that while soft power offers numerous advantages, it cannot entirely replace hard power. There are scenarios where hard power may be indispensable for achieving foreign policy goals, especially in situations involving direct conflicts of interest or threats to national security. Additionally, measuring and quantifying the impact of soft power can be challenging, and its outcomes may not manifest immediately (Saaida, 2023). Nonetheless, unlike traditional hard power strategies reliant on force and intimidation, soft power allows nations to build relationships and garner support through mutual respect, shared

values, and diplomatic engagement, in a more harmonious and secure global order. We have seen results of these soft power initiatives in countries like; India, The European Union, United Kingdom, Germany, Brazil, South Africa, and China (Newsroom, 2024).

For instance, to follow the line of our study and considering these developments, the transition towards soft power-oriented foreign policies is evident in the PRC. This is because soft power doesn't involve only cultural export, but diplomacy, alliances, and the ability to shape global agenda, which are different forms of power that The PCR is consistently pursuing for gaining force and influence globally. That's why, this strategic approach underscores the PRC's recognition of the multifaceted nature of power in contemporary international relations and its efforts to wield influence through non-coercive means. By emphasizing diplomacy and alliances over force and intimidation, the PRC is on the top three countries³ in cultivating relationships, garnering support, and establishing itself as a significant player on the actual global order by improving in the areas that are key drivers of Soft Power initiatives, like: Business & Trade, and Education & Science (Global Soft Power Index, 2024).

2.2 China's Soft Power Approach

Throughout history, global actors have asserted their prominence on the international platform through the strategic exercise of power. This power comes in two ways, hard power and soft power (for a more in-depth look at **section 2.1**). Since soft power is the ability of a country to influence events through persuasion and attraction, and not through military and economic coercion, then, according to Joseph Nye, a country has greater soft power if its culture, values, and institutions awaken admiration and respect in other latitudes. Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew argues that "soft power is achieved when other nations admire and want to emulate aspects of another civilization-nation" (Ortmann & Thompson 2016). Indeed, Zheng Bijian, President of the China Reform Forum and one of the architects of the "China Peaceful Rise" launched by President Hu Jintao's team, in this regard

³ China is in the 3rd position on the Global Soft Power Index having a score of 71.2 /100, having achieved an improvement of +6.2 in the Soft Power overall score this year. (Global Soft Power Index, 2024)

maintains that: “The deepest meaning of the “China Peaceful Rise” is the great revitalization of Chinese civilization, which interacts with other contemporary civilizations.”

Mentioning the “China Peaceful Rise” is important as its main objective was to convince the global community that the PRC’s increasing political, economic, and military influence did not pose a threat to international peace and security. In 2004, the machinery of Chinese soft power started to emerge, by this China wanted to portray itself to the international community as a responsible emerging world leader, a country which is going to avoid unnecessary international confrontations and that was only going to focus on soft power.

Under the leadership of Hu Jintao and with the support of the CCP, the country gradually experimented with the development of this soft power strategy⁴ based on influence and attraction factors to achieve the proposed objectives. For example, the 2008 Beijing Olympics and the resilience of the Chinese economy in the face of the economic crisis of that same year represented a high point in China’s international reputation (Hunter 2009). More recently, in 2020 with the emergence of SARS-CoV-2, the production and distribution of vaccines against the new coronavirus, and the country’s economic growth in the face of the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic will also have influenced its external image and strengthened their ties with more than one country or regions like LAC. Furthermore, according to The World Bank China’s GDP per capita increased from US\$947 in 2000 to US\$10,004 in 2019, thus growing 956.39% in 19 years, values that improved the country’s reputation in the economic sphere and reinforced the legitimacy of its internal development model.

Since 2013, the new attitude that Chinese positioning has acquired under Xi Jinping’s mandate also correlates with how the power manages and applies its soft power. Since the beginning of his administration, the Secretary-General has paid special attention to the need to develop a narrative that allows Chinese history to be adequately told. Consequently, as the article named “China’s Big Bet on Soft Power” published by the Council of Foreign Affairs explained, PRC soft power tools are mainly centered on six pillars: development, aid programs, promoting Chinese

⁴ In 2007, President Hu Jintao expressed at the 17th Congress of the Communist Party that China needed to increase its soft power (Gomez, n.d)

language, educational exchanges, media expansion, and political values, which under the leadership of Xi Jinping have been well employed.

Going into more detail, one of the key components of Xi's soft power strategy has been the promotion of Chinese language and culture worldwide. The Confucius Institute program, for instance, has seen remarkable growth during his tenure. As of 2023, there were over 550 Confucius Institutes and 1,200 Confucius Classrooms in more than 160 countries, serving millions of students globally (British Council, 2020). This expansion has not only facilitated language learning but has also helped promote a positive image of China and its cultural heritage.

Moreover, Xi Jinping has prioritized the development of Chinese media outlets with global reach. State-owned media organizations like Xinhua News Agency, China Central Television (CCTV), and China Radio International (CRI) have expanded their international presence, reaching billions of people across the globe. This concerted effort to amplify China's voice in the global media landscape has enabled the country to better shape international perceptions and narratives.

In addition to traditional media, Xi's administration has embraced digital platforms to enhance China's soft power. Chinese social media platforms like WeChat and TikTok (known as Douyin domestically) have experienced explosive growth both domestically and internationally. By leveraging these platforms, China has been able to reach younger audiences worldwide, influencing perceptions through viral content and targeted messaging.

Certainly, with the understanding that Chinese analysts view soft power as a defensive tool aimed at cultivating a positive image of China and countering external influences, it becomes imperative for China to continually adapt its soft power strategy to remain relevant and influential in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape.

Firstly, China must remain vigilant against attempts by foreign actors, particularly Western powers, to shape negative narratives about the country. By actively promoting its cultural heritage, values, and achievements through soft power

initiatives, China can counter misinformation and misconceptions, thus safeguarding its reputation and interests on the global stage.

Secondly, as the world undergoes profound geopolitical shifts, China must proactively engage with emerging trends and dynamics to ensure its soft power strategy remains effective. This may involve identifying new areas of opportunity for cultural exchange, economic cooperation, and diplomatic outreach, as well as leveraging digital platforms and technology to reach diverse audiences worldwide.

Additionally, China should prioritize strategic partnerships and alliances with like-minded countries and international organizations to amplify its soft power influence and enhance its capacity to shape global narratives and agendas. By fostering mutual understanding, cooperation, and trust, China can strengthen its position as a global influencer and contribute to a more stable and prosperous international order.

2.3 China-South American Relations

During the 20th century, interactions between Asia and Latin America were limited due to various factors such as geographical distance, cultural barriers, the influence of the Cold War, and foreign policies oriented towards the United States and Europe. However, with the end of the war, by the beginning of the 21st century, the international panorama underwent significant changes, with China becoming the world's second-largest economic power (Carolina Urrego, Ramón Pacheco, 2022). Furthermore, according to iContainers (logistics operator) in its blog published in 2024, 40% of the world's most important ports are located in China. On the other hand, China's cultural expansion in the world has not been the exception. Just by way of illustration, according to the World Tourism Organization, China received more than 62 million international visitors in 2018. Also, in the film and television industry, there has been significant growth that can be exemplified in films such as "The Wandering Earth," which ranked as the second-highest-grossing film in the history of Chinese cinema and was acclaimed for its impressive focus on science fiction. In addition, Chinese TV series such as "The Story of Minglan" have gained increasing popularity globally thanks to streaming platforms such as Netflix.

As can be seen, China has been a stellar player in the 21st century globally and it is clear that, with an investment of over \$340 billion in more than 2,570 projects spread across 152 countries, it will continue to seek to strengthen its presence in the world (World Bank, 2024).

One of the most dramatic changes in the 21st century can be seen reflected in the connection between China and South America seeing its volume of trade transactions multiply more than 20 times compared to the 20th century (B. Stallings, C. Sanborn, 2024). But the question of this growth is why China became so interested in South American countries. This can be explained by the global financial crisis in 2008 since trade and finance are two closely related issues. It was this crisis that prompted Chinese companies and banks to provide resources to South American countries to extract and transport raw materials (B. Stallings, C. Sanborn, 2024). In fact, according to Dussel Peters (2022), Chinese FDI in South America represents at least 10% of the total FDI received by this same region.

Likewise, at present, in the Latin American and Caribbean region, we see a great market dominance by South American countries where the list is headed by Brazil, Chile as well as Peru (Figure 3).

Figure 3. China Trade interactions with South America

Lista de los mercados importadores para América Latina y el Caribe para un producto exportado por China

Producto: TOTAL Todos los productos

Unidad : miles Dólar Americano

Tabla Gráfico Mapa Empresas Licitaciones públicas Datos IED Normas voluntarias

Descargar : Período (número de columnas) : 5 por página líneas por página : Por defecto (25 por página) 1 2

Importadores	Valor exportado en 2019	Valor exportado en 2020	Valor exportado en 2021	Valor exportado en 2022	Valor exportado en 2023
Mundo	2.498.334.248	2.588.402.392	3.361.814.264	3.593.601.450	3.388.716.312
América Latina y el Caribe Agregación	151.153.861	149.780.672	227.756.130	251.700.622	244.013.736
México	46.382.165	44.827.693	67.440.744	77.534.944	81.500.781
Brasil	35.539.064	34.953.228	53.612.224	61.969.971	59.138.019
Chile	14.711.839	15.336.290	26.292.797	22.520.039	19.525.974
Colombia	9.234.150	9.320.163	14.354.661	15.600.099	12.388.930
Perú	8.513.082	8.865.726	13.302.116	13.532.299	12.134.840
Panamá	7.944.501	8.793.631	10.179.466	12.646.743	11.328.114
Argentina	6.884.154	7.083.805	10.689.781	12.769.007	10.752.953
Ecuador	3.628.574	3.252.314	5.483.432	6.288.136	5.866.097
Guatemala	2.399.670	2.472.503	3.904.451	4.366.063	4.602.525
República Dominicana	2.390.428	2.493.940	4.002.492	4.318.823	4.349.227
Venezuela, República Bolivariana de	1.540.075	1.518.839	2.185.885	3.008.994	3.468.486
Uruguay	1.948.991	1.703.048	2.858.028	2.983.077	2.972.405
Costa Rica	1.521.332	1.535.659	2.255.326	2.368.609	2.783.576
Paraguay	1.432.117	1.216.925	1.780.723	1.895.119	2.209.127
Honduras	940.460	922.864	1.584.844	1.560.053	1.832.836
El Salvador	1.001.251	938.236	1.511.199	1.658.943	1.635.382
Jamaica	670.704	630.460	809.863	1.039.452	1.284.272
Bolivia, Estado Plurinacional de	854.148	687.776	992.391	1.067.413	1.134.815
Nicaragua	502.072	486.434	794.259	723.535	826.003
Guyana	272.914	265.470	390.255	577.270	798.571
Trinidad y Tobago	363.502	341.200	424.604	543.557	563.546
Haití	560.835	709.271	795.420	634.783	527.183
Cuba	790.926	483.293	575.873	414.204	502.348

Figure 4. Main trade partners for China

Lista de los mercados proveedores para América Latina y el Caribe para un producto importado por China ⓘ
Producto: TOTAL Todos los productos

Unidad : miles Dólar Americano

Tabla Gráfico Mapa Empresas Licitaciones públicas Datos IED Normas voluntarias

Descargar : Período (número de columnas) : 5 por página líneas por página : Por defecto (25 por página)

Exportadores	Valor importado en 2019	Valor importado en 2020	Valor importado en 2021	Valor importado en 2022	Valor Importado en 2023
Mundo	2.066.513.429	2.057.021.048	2.675.680.064	2.715.998.754	2.559.319.988
América Latina y el Caribe Agregación	164.743.595	168.321.009	220.742.276	231.501.733	243.050.610
Brasil	79.962.547	85.517.209	109.877.876	109.522.043	122.450.862
Chile	26.229.201	29.932.012	39.458.634	44.486.040	43.173.570
Perú	15.195.599	14.735.456	24.184.656	24.111.029	25.721.746
México	14.334.538	16.217.413	19.142.586	17.429.580	18.793.886
Ecuador	3.642.230	4.320.756	5.459.574	6.800.248	7.792.091
Argentina	7.390.979	6.814.457	7.132.137	8.593.470	6.679.639
Colombia	6.408.278	4.336.016	5.614.109	7.042.164	6.372.694
Costa Rica	722.559	668.609	815.491	2.008.903	2.919.054
Uruguay	2.967.714	2.367.323	3.623.471	4.457.471	2.348.088
Panamá	452.028	469.415	1.167.182	1.244.390	1.635.000
Bolivia, Estado Plurinacional de	322.151	291.211	647.690	870.845	1.470.726
Trinidad y Tobago	669.167	334.830	635.536	762.864	782.372
Venezuela, República Bolivariana de	4.860.335	534.238	997.793	833.464	724.171
República Dominicana	454.333	299.304	347.500	519.257	636.490
Guyana	45.987	308.865	319.908	1.302.762	438.587
Cuba	492.711	470.010	446.931	457.959	360.085
Guatemala	198.056	267.097	448.726	573.962	325.193
El Salvador	113.313	171.781	218.853	233.421	168.837
Honduras	31.787	45.953	34.131	29.239	81.308
Suriname	53.513	61.103	41.860	45.813	54.557
Paraguay	16.347	13.912	54.332	84.613	51.163
Nicaragua	45.554	18.958	25.064	36.026	28.753
Jamaica	29.584	31.931	6.126	14.662	13.186

Source: TradeMap

As can be seen, trade and economic relations between China and South America have become increasingly closer throughout the 21st century. However, in a 2006 paper by author Gonzalo Paz, it is questioned whether China would have an additional intention to gain hegemony over the United States in South America. Years later, it can be seen that the greater the Chinese political and cultural penetration of South America, the lesser the U.S. presence (Udiñez, 2016).

While it is true that the trade between China and South America had its highest growth point by the 21st century, the culture has had older origins. This is evidenced by the famous "Chinatowns" that date back to the 19th century, the first one being in Lima, the capital of Peru. Since the establishment of this Chinatown in Peru, the Chinese influence has been noticeable, as in the case of "Chifa", an iconic Peruvian dish, which is based on a fusion of Chinese and Peruvian food. In addition, its name comes from the transliteration "Chi Fan" which means eating rice or eating food (Rodriguez, 2004).

2.3.1 Geopolitical Interests of China's in the region

By the end of the 20th century, China seemed to have overcome the political and economic difficulties resulting from the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Deng Xiaoping's opening-up policy, focused on international trade, foreign investment and collaboration in science and technology, represented a new global perspective (Carol Wise 2022). From then on, China began to expand rapidly in the South American market, participating in joint ventures such as sawmills and iron ore extraction in Brazil, fisheries in Argentina, copper exploitation in Chile and even the opening of Chinese restaurants in the rest of the region (Li, 1991).

However, the question for many at that time was why be interested in a region like South America. It should be clarified that by the time of 1980 some countries in the region were in difficult times, such as the violent insurgency of the Shining Path in Peru between 1980 and 1993, and a failed coup attempt in Argentina in 1987 (Munck and Luna 2022). For China, however, political determination and economic momentum in the Latin American and Caribbean region was its mirror image: politically fragmented, economically beset by external debt and macroeconomic imbalances, and without a clear development strategy. Thus, bilateral agreements with China continued to flourish, where they were characterized by two clear aspects: first, they began to focus more specifically on development projects and exchanges; and second, despite the lack of capital that characterized both China and South America at the time, significant sums were exchanged in the form of trade credits and loans. The commercial credits covered a wide range of projects, such as the 1988 Argentine contract to build a model farm in China, the Brazil-China collaboration to build and launch two satellites in 1988, and the provision of mini-hydropower plants to Peru beginning in 1981. In addition, the Chinese Communist Party also adopted a new political discourse with respect to Latin America, highlighting its support for Argentina's claim to the Falkland Islands (Malvinas).

In the 1990s, China surprised the world with its increasingly competitive manufactured exports (Dorn and Hanson in 2016). However, the turn of the century brought a second shock, albeit a positive one: the explosion of commodity prices.

Driven mainly by increased demand from China (Thorp, 1998). For Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Peru, the gains during this decade were remarkable. Whether in terms of average growth rates, very favorable terms of trade or increasing FDI inflows from China, these four countries experienced significant gains to varying degrees during this period (Carol Wise, 2022). In fact, interest and high-level visits by delegations from South America to China began to increase markedly. This increase included visits led by leaders such as Chilean President Patricio Aylwin in 1992, Brazilian President Itamar Franco in 1993, Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori in 1995, Argentine President Carlos Saul Menem in 1995, Chilean President Eduardo Frei in 1995, and Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso in 1995 (Mora, 1999).

China faces significant natural resource constraints. Since gaining market access to all World Trade Organization members in 2001, the demand for raw materials needed to build modern infrastructure and shift its manufacturing strategy from export-based to more sophisticated and higher value-added products have increased significantly. China has therefore been forced to internationalize its development strategy, although Latin America is only one of several resource-rich developing regions on which China has focused. However, only a few countries have managed to take advantage of this situation, as evidenced during the global financial crisis (GFC). Latin American and Caribbean countries in Central and North America were struggling to survive, as Chinese manufacturing and consumer goods exports had saturated their markets, but they had little to offer in return. On the other hand, trade surpluses were building up in South America, which helped explain why these countries were able to cope with the GFC more easily. After the commodity price bonanza subsided, Brazil, Peru and Argentina were the main beneficiaries in terms of FDI inflows from China (Carol Wise, 2022).

2.3.2 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals and China's Role in South America

Since 2015, the People's Republic of China has increasingly demonstrated commitment to the SDGs, recognizing their significance in fostering global sustainable development (Lewis, D.J., Yang, X., Moise, D., 2021). China has become powerful in global governance by combining support for international agreements aligned with its goals. That is why, the adoption of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) serves as a pivotal lens through which to comprehend China's motivations and actions on the international stage.

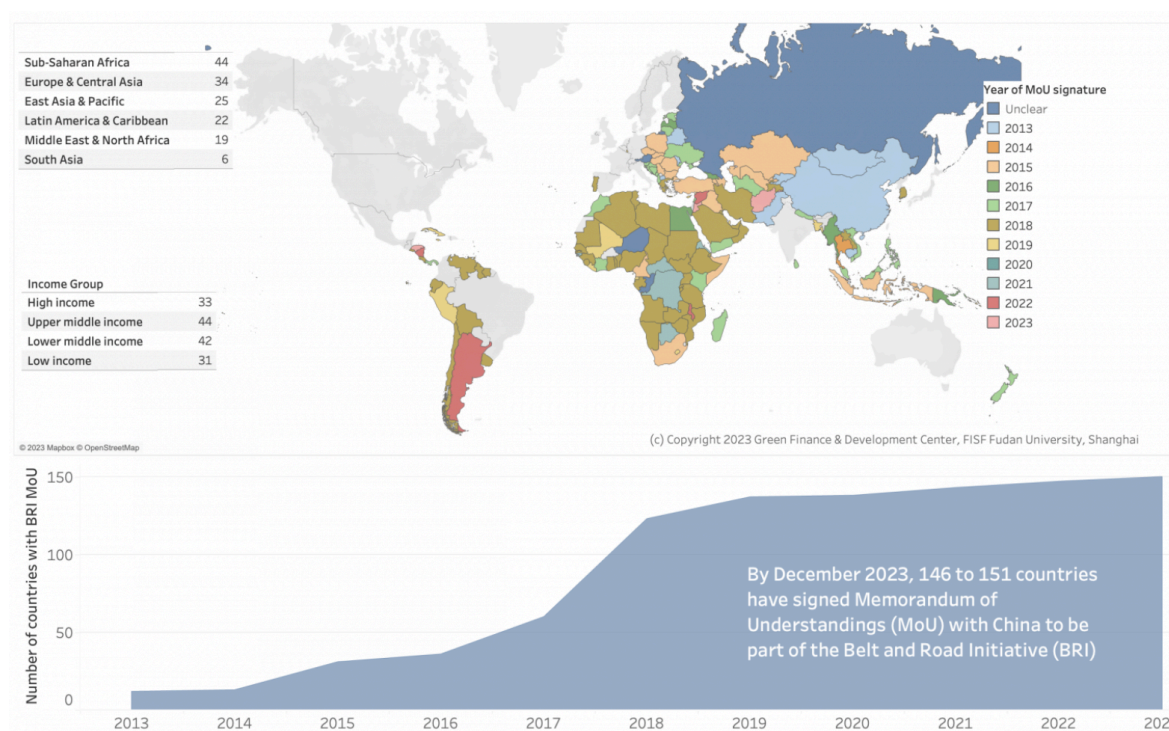
In 2023, China's integration into the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) forum marked a significant step. During the VII Summit of Heads of State and Government of CELAC, President Xi Jinping mentioned Pekins dedication to fostering unity among developing nations and promoting South-South cooperation. His remarks underscored the importance of CELAC within the framework of SDGs, emphasizing the potential for collaborative efforts to advance sustainable development in the region (Agencia EFE, 2023). Nonetheless, it's since 2012 that China's strong political and economic relationship with South American countries has been evident. This period marked the establishment of the Comprehensive Strategic Alliance with Brazil (2012), Peru (2013), Argentina (2014), Venezuela (2014), Ecuador (2016), and Chile (2016) (Bertellotti, 2014), which signified a deepening cooperation and alignment of interests between the two regions, encompassing various facets of political, economic, and strategic collaboration. By this partnership China-South America affirmed their shared commitment to advancing common objectives on the global stage. This includes promoting multipolarity, multiculturalism, and peace, as well as reforming the global economy to prioritize production and equitable wealth distribution among all nations, mentioned by Xi Jinping in his visit to Buenos Aires in 2014. These goals are closely aligned with the principles and objectives of the SDGs, which aim to address global challenges and achieve sustainable development worldwide.

Likewise, it is key to mention the Belt and Road Initiative, after two years of the adoption of the 2030 agenda, in 2013 Xi Jinping's strategic initiative which comprises

a massive worldwide infrastructure and economic development where is estimated by the Green Finance & Development Center that over 100 countries and international organizations (see figure 4 for reference) have signed agreements with China related to the BRI (Nedopil, Christoph, 2023). Its goal is to improve connection and collaboration among nations along its planned routes, revitalize old trade routes, and promote economic growth and development. Under the BRI, China intends to invest in infrastructure projects such as roads, trains, ports, and energy facilities. The program has two major components: the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, which together comprise a network of land and marine linkages (Busilli, 2020).

The BRI is Xi Jinping's most important strategic initiative. Initiative, because it is a proposal open to all countries that wish to participate. Strategic, because it is aimed at realizing Beijing's strategic interests, through trade, investments and finance within the framework of the BRI. In turn, it connects with the doctrine of the “Chinese dream”, by articulating the axes of Xi Jinping's foreign policy to achieve the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation (Arnosi, 2021), also, it holds significant relevance to China's role in achieving the SDGs due to its focus on fostering economic development, infrastructure connectivity, and international cooperation. By promoting trade, investments, and finance, the BRI contributes to the economic growth and poverty alleviation objectives outlined in the SDGs. Additionally, the BRI's emphasis on infrastructure development aligns with SDG 9, which aims to build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization, and foster innovation.

Figure 5. Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative



Source: Nedopil, Christoph (2023): "Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative"; Shanghai, Green Finance & Development Center, FISF Fudan University, www.greenfdc.org

Furthermore, in January 2018, the Second Ministerial Meeting of the China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (China-CELAC Forum) took place in Santiago, Chile. This event coincided with the third year of implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which comprises 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) since January 1, 2016. China and the Latin American and Caribbean region have gained valuable insights from implementing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly in eradicating extreme poverty and hunger (MDG1), achieving universal primary education (MDG2), and reducing infant mortality (MDG4) (United Nations, 2015).

Also, The Agenda 2030 presents historic opportunities for Latin America and the Caribbean, addressing crucial regional issues such as poverty reduction, social justice, economic development, ecological preservation, and climate change. The establishment of the Forum of the Countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on

Sustainable Development serves as a regional mechanism for monitoring and reviewing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda by the ECLAC in 2016. In that sense, the Document on China's Policy Towards Latin America and the Caribbean, published in November 2016, highlights that China is ready to work with Latin American and Caribbean countries in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and provide support and assistance within their capabilities (Somos Iberoamérica, 2018).

Additionally, China's leadership proposed the Global Development Initiative (GDI) in 2021, aiming to consolidate global consensus and accelerate the implementation of the SDGs worldwide. With a focus on poverty reduction, food security, pandemic response, development financing, climate change mitigation, digitalization, and green development, the GDI has garnered support from over 100 governments and international organizations. China has announced 32 follow-up detailed measures to promote the implementation of the GDI and the SDGs in a well-coordinated manner (Sheng,2023).

By aligning with global environmental goals, China not only displays its commitment to promoting global peace and prosperity, but also its strategic intentions in South America. Here it is important to recognize geopolitics dynamics which have a considerable impact on China's approach to the area, as it attempts to strengthen its influence and ensure access to critical resources. As China strengthens its economic and political links with South American countries through programs such as the Belt and Road Initiative and strategic collaborations, its efforts to achieve the SDGs help to solidify its geopolitical position and create long-term cooperation.

3. Chinese soft power tools in South America

The PRC's obsession with soft power as an operational tool for foreign policy developed under Presidents Hu Jintao and later Xi Jinping. Between 2006 and 2022, the CCP, PRC and PLA published dozens of prominent books and essays on the subject. While they often include Confucius institutes, people-to-people interactions, media outreach, high-level public diplomacy, and PRC business activities in general, policies that clearly demonstrate PRC soft power in Latin America are probably still

in their early stages. These are in line with Xi Jinping's (2022) directives to “strengthen and improve international communication work.”

3.1 Cultural Diplomacy

By promoting a country's culture, values, language and heritage, cultural diplomacy works to forge and strengthen ties with other nations and peoples. By building bridges between countries, it effectively fosters understanding between them and can also be used as a tool to boost a state's soft power. This is why it is used by many countries.

No wonder Beijing has recognized the value of cultural diplomacy in promoting its soft power and expanding its influence around the world. As such, China has been actively engaged in cultural diplomacy efforts in Latin America in recent years. The region is rich in cultural diversity and historical significance, but it is also becoming more susceptible to extra-regional influence as a result of trade liberalization, increased tourism, and greater ease of access to and from the region as a result of globalization. (Rouvinski, 2023, p.59).

3.1.1 Confucius Institutes

Beijing prioritizes cultural diplomacy when it comes to specific government initiatives because it is an essential part of China's soft power strategy in Latin America. This initiative centers on the Confucius Institutes, which have spread throughout the region. Specifically, The spread of the Confucius Institute throughout the world must be understood in light of the cultural and public diplomacy of the Chinese government, and as a foundational part of its diplomatic relations with countries in the global south.

For the officially sanctioned study of Chinese language and culture, China has established 43 Confucius Institutes in the whole LAC region, along with 18 linked Confucius Classrooms (Ellis, 2021a); these institutions were renamed “Language Teaching Cooperation Centers” in June 2021. The concentration of these institutes predominantly in South America underscores the region's strategic importance in China's cultural outreach efforts and educational diplomacy initiatives.

Figure 6. Table of all CIs in the LAC region

Country	University Name	Est. Year	President / Prime Minister
Argentina	CI @ Univ. of Buenos Aires	2009	Cristina Fernández
Argentina	CI @ Nat. Univ. of La Plata	2009	Cristina Fernández
Argentina	CI @ Nat. Univ. of Cordoba	Oct-20	Cristina Fernández
Bahamas	CI @ Univ. of Bahamas	2009	Hubert Ingraham
Barbados	CI @ Univ. of West Indies, West Hill Campus	2015	Freundel Stuart
Bolivia	CI @ Univ. of San Simon	2011	Evo Morales
Brazil	CI @ Sao Paulo State Univ.	2008	Lula da Silva
Brazil	Business CI @ FAAP	?	
Brazil	CI @ Fed Univ. of Minas Gerais	2013	Dilma Rousseff
Brazil	CI @ Univ. of Pernambuco	?	
Brazil	CI @ Fed Univ. of Rio Grand Do Sul	?	
Brazil	CI @ Univ. of Brasilia	2010	Lula da Silva
Brazil	CI @ Pontifical Catholic Univ. of Rio de Janeiro	2011	Lula da Silva
Brazil	CI @ State Univ. of Campinas	2015	Dilma Rousseff
Brazil	CI @ State Univ. of Pará	?	
Brazil	CI @ Fed. Univ. of Ceará	2019	Jair Bolsonaro
Brazil	Confuc. Inst. Of Chinese Medicine at Fed Univ. of Goias	?	
Chile	CI @ Univ. of St. Thomas	2008	Michelle Bachelet
Chile	CI @ Catholic Univ.	2009	Michelle Bachelet
Chile	CI @ Univ. of La Frontera	2020	Sebastion Piñera
Colombia	CI in Medellin	2010	Juan Manuel Santos
Colombia	CI @ Univ. of Los Andes	2007	Alvaro Uribe
Colombia	CI @ Jorge Tadeo Lozano Univ.	2013	Juan Manuel Santos
Costa Rica	CI @ Univ. of Costa Rica	2008	Oscar Arias
Cuba	CI @ Univ. of Havana	2009	Raul Castro
Ecuador	CI @ San Fran Univ. of Quito	2010	Rafael Correa
El Salvador	CI @ Univ. of El Salv	2019	Salvador Cerén
Guyana	CI @ Univ. of Guyana	2014	Donald Ramotar
Jamaica	CI @ Univ. of West Indies, Mona Campus	2010	Bruce Golding
Mexico	CI in at Mexico City Huaxia	?	
Mexico	CI @ Autonomous Univ. of New Leon	2006	Felipe Calderon
Mexico	CI @ Autonomous Univ. of Yucatan	2008	Felipe Calderon
Mexico	CI @ Nat. Auton. Univ. of MX	2006	Felipe Calderon
Mexico	CI @ Autonomous Univ. of Chihuahua	?	
Panama	CI @ Univ. of Panama	2017	Juan Carlos Varela
Peru	CI @ Catholic Univ. of Santa Maria	2008 / 2009	Alan García
Peru	CI @ Univ. of Piura	2009	Alan García
Peru	CI @ Cath Univ. of Peru	2009	Alan García
Peru	CI @ Ricardo Palma Univ.	2010	Alan García
Suriname	CI @ Anton de Kom Univ. of Suriname	2017	Desi Bouterse
Trinidad & Tobago	CI @ Univ. of West Indies, St. Augustine Campus	2013	Richards or Carmona, unclear
Uruguay	CI @ Univ. de la Repub, Uruguay	2018	Tabaré Vázquez
Venezuela	CI @ Univ. Bolivariana de Venez	2016	Nicolás Maduro

Note: 28 CIs out of 43 are located in the southern part of the region

Source: Gilstrap, J. Chinese Confucius Institutes in Latin America: Tools of Soft Power (2021)

Confucius Institutes have a reputation as centers of government espionage and propaganda in the United States, but in Latin America, where there are few opportunities to study Chinese, the institutes play a more crucial strategic role as a gateway into the Chinese government system for students who have the drive, aptitude, and self-control to learn the demanding Mandarin language and Chinese character set.

The Confucius Institutes' relationship with the Hanban (Office of Chinese Language Council International) Cultural Promotion Organization has been restructured in the wake of the controversy surrounding them (Pinghui, 2020). However, the institutes continue to refer interested, capable, and disciplined students to Hanban scholarships offered by the PRC government for undergraduate, graduate, and other academic opportunities in China, where they can receive not only a positive orientation to the PRC, but also be evaluated and participate in the PRC intelligence recruitment process.

China offered to grant 6,000 such scholarships for the area in the China-CELAC Plan 2019-2021. (In Roa, 2019) More 5,000 scholarships, 3,000 “training places” and the “1,000 talents” program were committed in the 2022-2024 plan. Many of the few China-focused diplomats and businessmen from Latin America and the Caribbean who represent their countries' and companies' interests to the PRC enter the field thanks to these scholarships to study in the PRC, and many of them are employed by the Chinese government because of their experience and financial qualifications.

3.1.2 Chinese Cultural Events

China uses culture and media to expand its cultural influence. Chinese music, television programs and films have become better known in South America markets, helping to promote China's favorable image. Interactions between Chinese and Latin American filmmakers have been favored by co-productions.

In addition, Chinese art exhibitions and museum partnerships have become better known throughout Latin America. These exhibitions promote a greater understanding of Chinese history and artistic traditions, while showcasing Chinese art and acting as a vehicle for cultural diplomacy. However, because of the way

these events are structured, there is no opportunity to have a conversation about recent developments and how China's autocratic tendencies are growing.

Nevertheless, Chinese ambassadors and other officials often attend the exhibition openings and use the occasion to praise the country for its current economic triumphs, which they attribute to the 1949 political system. Thus, China has more room for maneuver in Latin America than, for example, in Europe or the United States, where people are much more aware of the character of Beijing's political system. During the year 2024 we have seen big Chinese cultural events located in different South American countries. The 10th of february Chinese New Year was celebrated in Lima, Peru in their ChinaTown and Historic Center, the event was organized by the Economic Development Management of the Metropolitan Municipality of Lima (MML) in conjunction with the Central Chinese Charity Society. Also, On the 25th of May China celebrated The Day of the Mandarin Language. They held an event at the headquarters of the Chinese Cultural Association of Rio de Janeiro, which was attended by government representatives, business institutions, intellectuals from Brazil and China, and the Chinese community in Rio. In Buenos Aires, Argentina we have also seen events like the Moon Festival, an event that's held once a year to learn about Chinese culture. This year, the festival fell on Saturday, September 30 and Sunday, October 1 and in the traditional Chinatown in Buenos Aires where it was possible to experience everything about this Chinese event.

3.2 Media Influence

3.2.1 Chinese Content in South American Media

By making significant investments and providing favorable financing, China has recently expanded its influence in Latin America and other Western regions. China has emerged as a significant player in the region, growing in power over the past 20 years and even taking the lead in investments in certain Latin American countries, according to Carola Ramon, director of CARI's Committee for the Study of Latin American Affairs. Mexico's former ambassador to China, Sergio Ley, points out that the main objective of China's reconciliation has been investment, which Latin American governments have welcomed to support China's foundation in the region.

However, as part of its strategy to present itself to the West as a great power, the Chinese Communist Party-led government has recently sought to increase its influence in the media, according to researcher and journalist Igor Patrick of the Kissinger Institute on China and the United States. Patrick notes that the origins of this strategy date back to 2008, when there was a protest against Chinese policies during the Olympic torch relay race in Paris. The realization that the West would not quickly accept China as a global superpower prompted the Chinese authorities to take action.

Igor Patrick stresses that China intentionally uses content as a way to influence the media, especially in Latin America. His study is described in depth in the book “Hearts and Minds, Votes and Contracts: Chinese State Media in Latin America”. This strategy involves forming official partnerships with different media organizations and providing paid or free content, such as China Daily pages or CGTV programs. Patrick says that both sides gain from this relationship: China's media dominance grows, while the media receive funding and content.

However, because of the media's dependence on funding, this approach can result in biased coverage of China. The study claims that the Chinese government invests a lot of money in social media tactics. With the intention of making them regional influencers, these initiatives are mostly aimed at creating profiles for journalists covering China. While most of the programming is gastronomic or cultural, they occasionally touch on controversial topics to poke fun at the West. Human rights issues are viewed from a Chinese perspective and, in an effort to convince the public that China is also a democracy, the concept of “democracy with Chinese characteristics” has recently been advocated.

3.3 Educational Exchange

3.3.1 Scholarships and Student Exchanges

Educational exchanges are another tool used by the CCP to further its soft power strategy. According to Lo and Pan, government representatives have asked universities to support the party's diplomatic strategies. Overseas students, whom Xi Jinping has recognized as global ambassadors of the Chinese narrative, exporters of national values and the culture of non-confrontation, mutual respect and cooperation, are a crucial instrument in this regard. (Brito and Tagle, 2023, p.118)

More and more international students are attending Chinese universities at the same time, attracted by their desire to learn the language or enjoy the “Chinese experience”. The concept in question is highly appreciated by the authorities because of its unique ability to foster connections between ordinary people through exchange and study programs. This is especially noteworthy given that one of the limitations of Chinese soft power is its almost universally top-down approach (Lo and Pan, 2020, p.119).

Paid trips to China by politicians, civil society leaders, scientists, journalists, and business people are another example of “people-to-people diplomacy.” This practice can help these individuals establish direct connections with their counterparts and improve their home countries' perception of China. Travel to and from the nation is a useful tool for this type of interpersonal interaction, even though the pandemic, China's zero Covid policy, and the high levels of infection recorded at the end of 2022 will interfere with it. In any case, the pandemic provided China with a new opportunity to use soft power by delivering medical supplies, including masks and vaccines, to other nations. (Brito and Tagle, 2023, p.119)

3.3.2 Chinese Language Learning

In the passing of the years more Latin Americans are learning Mandarin thanks to the growth of Confucius Institutes and Chinese language programs. This is specified on the official website of the Office of the International Council of the Chinese Language, also known as Hanban, where it is emphasized that due to the development of the Chinese economy and the intensification of its international exchanges, in all countries the Interest in learning Chinese has increased. For this reason, they seek to promote the entry of the Chinese language and culture onto the international stage, so that they have greater influence.

However, there are still not enough people who speak Mandarin well enough to use it as a linguistic bridge to improve communication and strengthen ties between the two areas. Similarly, although ideas and creativity flows both ways as a result of cultural exchanges, and Latin American music, dance and cuisine have infiltrated China, improving the cultural landscape of both countries, these developments have had little effect on the overall level of ties between the two regions. (Rouvinski, 2023, p.63).

4. Influence of China's Soft Power in South America

Having examined the specific tools of China's soft power strategy in South America, we now turn to their broader impacts and consequences. In this section, we will explore how these tools: cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, and media have influenced South American countries, with a focus on the significant examples of Brazil and Peru. These case studies will illustrate the tangible outcomes of China's soft power efforts and highlight the economic, cultural, and political changes they have brought about in the region.

4.1 Cultural Impact

The stated goal of the Chinese government and its leaders is to establish its own narrative about China and refute notions that portray it as an aggressive or threatening force. The Confucius Institutes (CIs), an important tool of Chinese soft power in Latin America, pursue the same goal. As Xi Jinping declared before the Peruvian Congress in 2016, China seeks to have a strong cultural presence in Latin America to promote its culture and "traditional Chinese virtues." The opening of at least 43 Confucius Institutes across the region is indicative of this commitment (Ellis et al., 2022).

Confucius Institutes engage in a wide range of activities, such as teaching Mandarin Chinese, hosting cultural events, and offering courses on Chinese history and philosophy. These institutes aim to establish lasting relationships by fostering a deeper understanding of Chinese culture among Latin American students and professionals. This cultural exchange not only enhances mutual respect and reduces cultural barriers but also helps to counteract negative stereotypes about China. According to Hanban, the organization overseeing Confucius Institutes, there were over 50,000 students enrolled in various programs across Latin America by 2019, demonstrating significant local engagement.

By promoting Chinese language and culture, the Confucius Institutes play a crucial role in shaping public opinion and garnering support for China's foreign policy positions. For example, through these cultural engagements, CIs help to build a sympathetic audience that might be more inclined to support Beijing's stance on contentious issues like the Taiwan conflict. This cultural diplomacy is further reinforced by scholarships and exchange programs that bring Latin American students to China, where they experience Chinese society firsthand and often return with a more positive view of the country. From 2005 to 2015, over 6,000 Latin American students received Chinese government scholarships, highlighting the scale of educational exchanges (Solorzano & Portador, 2019).

Furthermore, the presence of Confucius Institutes in Latin America symbolizes China's commitment to long-term engagement with the region. By investing in cultural infrastructure, China is not only promoting its soft power but also creating a foundation for stronger economic and political ties. The cultural understanding and personal connections forged through these institutes contribute to a more favorable environment for bilateral cooperation in various sectors, including trade, investment, and technology.

4.2 Economic Impact

After China opened its economy in 1978, there were more exchanges. Premier Zhao Ziyang stressed the importance of relations between the South and countries classified as Third World during his 1985 trip to Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina. It was the first high-level Chinese visit to the region. Five years later, Chairman Yang Shangkun paid a visit to the region with the intention of promoting reconciliation based on the principles of non-interference that Mao Zedong had established in the 1950s. China made the first major investment of that magnitude in Latin America when it acquired Hierro Peru two years later. Contacts intensified under the leadership of Jiang Zemin, the first CCP General Secretary to visit Latin America.

The strategies followed by China towards Latin America, in addition to official visits as part of the protocol of formal diplomacy, the discourse of peaceful

south-south development has been a pillar of its current soft power, under this guideline China sets its relationship with Latin America, taking commercial advantages. Also, Latin American countries have seen in the Asian country the possibility of expanding their commercial relations and attracting companies, as it has a solid economy that has resisted global economic crises.

Jiang carried out the “Exit” plan in 1999 and succeeded in getting the PRC into the WTO in 2001. These events were significant turning points in China's increased engagement with Latin America and its global integration. Over time, trade between the two nations grew, reaching approximately \$1 billion in 1979 and \$15 billion in 2001. By 2014 it had surpassed \$260 billion.⁷⁸ By 2021 it will rise to \$451 billion, demonstrating a sustained surplus for the PRC (Ellis et al., 2022).

Hu Jintao deepened the progress made by his predecessor and gave additional impetus to the process through a series of high-level initiatives and visits. Free trade agreements signed with Chile in 2006, along with strategic partnerships with Brazil and Mexico, were followed by agreements of a similar nature with Peru (2009) and Costa Rica (2011). Hu signed numerous trade and business agreements with Latin American countries, while lending money to nations with difficulties in obtaining international credit, such as Venezuela, Cuba and Argentina.

China joined the Inter-American Development Bank in 2008 and became a permanent observer of the Organization of American States in 2004, enabling it to finance infrastructure projects. To “build a harmonious world,” the Chinese government established the framework for relations with the region in the “Policy on Latin America” document drafted that same year.

According to Leiva, there have been three distinct and growing phases in China-Latin America ties in the 21st century. They would have gone through an expansive period of trade between 2001 and 2008 and a soft power stage between 2008 and 2013. A third stage - the comprehensive phase - would have begun with the election of Xi Jinping as general secretary of the CCP in 2012. During this stage, ties expanded in various areas, such as politics, trade (including new industries such as satellites or armaments), investment (especially in infrastructure) and cooperation in fields such as nuclear energy or aeronautics. Interests, contacts and topics of exchange were also broadened.

According to Vadell, numerous “modes of interdependence” are now emerging in sectors such as trade, loans, direct investment, financial expansion, special economic zones, and economic subsidies and aid that promote South-North cooperation. (Ellis et al., 2022)

A shared action plan and Xi Jinping's 1+3+6 initiative - consisting of one plan, three drivers - trade, investment and financial cooperation - and six priority areas - energy and resources, infrastructure development, manufacturing, scientific and technological innovation and information technology - were the forms that cooperation took. In 2016, an updated version of China's 2008 document on relations with Latin America was published, with additional aspects and areas of interest included under the umbrella of the “harmonious coexistence of different civilizations.”

The Belt and Road Initiative designated Latin America as an investment destination in 2018, as part of Xi Jinping's efforts to expand points of interaction. This created space for new projects, some of which had already been announced, such as the construction of a bioceanic train between Brazil and Peru or a canal connecting the Caribbean to the Pacific through Nicaragua, both of which never materialized.

In reference to soft power, the good relationship with China has its benefits. China in particular has its enclave in terms of Development Aid through South-South Cooperation and its purpose is to obtain raw materials in exchange for investment in infrastructure, stadiums, airports, among others, which in turn, it aims to secure or gain diplomatic recognition of One China vis-à-vis Taiwan. For example, Confucius Institutes and educational scholarships have strengthened its economic ties with Latin America. These institutes, with over 40 branches across the region, provide crucial opportunities for students to learn Mandarin and understand Chinese culture. Educational exchanges are important for this Asian country because they allow foreign students to experience what studying in China entails, setting an incentive to attract young people who are the future of any country and who will soon occupy relevant positions in China, their own nations and constitute an important consumer niche, facilitating bilateral trade and investment by creating a network of leaders who understand and support Sino-Latin American commerce.

China established its political-economic strategy under the name go abroad, in which the State encourages Chinese corporations to seek commercial opportunities outside its borders to promote Chinese and international economic development.

In this regard, Muñoz (2008) proposes that China's growing interest in the continent responds to the search for political and economic influence, and investment in infrastructure. Meaning that these initiatives encourage South American countries to open up to China by leveraging mutual benefits and shared interests, contributing to regional integration and economic prosperity in the process.

China bases its approach to Latin America on the internal needs defined by the CCP. According to Creutzfeldt, the People's Republic of China (PRC) is not indifferent to Latin America but is motivated by the understanding that its own growth depends on the advancement of other nations in the South. Beijing wants to impart its expertise and, at the same time, use trade and investment to transfer some of its excess financial and industrial capacity to the area. A significant facet of this endeavor is soft power (Ellis et al., 2022).

4.3 Political Influence

China's soft power approach in Latin America encompasses regional and bilateral political back-and-forth. China works to improve its diplomatic ties with Latin American governments by organizing high-level visits, among other diplomatic initiatives. China specifically encourages diplomatic ties with individual nations as well as regional groups such as the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). China seeks to present itself as a responsible global actor whose policies are based on values different from those promoted by the West but “suitable,” according to Beijing, for building “mutually beneficial relations.” These partnerships often include discussions on global issues such as climate change and international governance (Song et al., 2023).

Figure 7. Less participation is positive participation: Latin American attitudes on China's political influence



Figure 6 shows Latin Americans' perceptions of the positive or negative impact of Chinese influence on local politics on a scale of 1 to 4. Overall, it suggests that countries where people perceive Chinese political influence as less pervasive than those where people perceive it as more pervasive are more likely to have positive views of Chinese political influence. This is an intriguing finding, raising the possibility that there is a “sweet point” of Chinese political influence that, when reached, elevates relations with China while reducing investment returns.

4.4 Geopolitical Implications

China's policy toward the Americas focuses on expanding consensus based on mutual respect and trust, which are its main objectives. China pledges to treat Latin American and Caribbean nations with equality and mutual respect, in accordance with the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.” To enhance mutual political trust and strategic agreement, it also declares that it will intensify talks and communication. In this regard, China would like Latin American and Caribbean

countries to raise their key concerns or, to put it more clearly, the issues of human rights and the One China principle and continue to offer mutual understanding and support on these issues.

Strengthen collaboration in the context of win-win and mutual benefit. China looks forward to working with Latin American and Caribbean nations on trade and economic cooperation based on the principle of mutual benefit, with the goal of advancing the mutual development of both regions. - Promote communication for the sake of shared progress and mutual learning. China affirms that it will actively participate in human and cultural exchanges with Latin American and Caribbean nations to share knowledge and advance human civilization by learning from each other's experiences.

China's policy rationale for establishing and expanding its relations with Latin American and Caribbean nations and regional organizations is the one-China principle. Most nations in the region have adhered to the one-China policy, and the Chinese government appreciates that they have refrained from establishing formal connections or relations with Taiwan in favor of the important goal of China's reunification. China is open to forging and strengthening relations with Latin American and Caribbean nations based on the one-China principle.

4.5 Specific Instances of China's Soft Power Initiatives

4.5.1 Case Study 1: Brazil

Since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1974-and especially after they created a strategic partnership in 1993-more attention has been paid to China-Brazil political relations. The successful 2004 summit between the state leaders of the two nations marked a turning point in the development of the relationship and provided a major impetus for bilateral strategic cooperation. During her official visit to China in 2011, Brazil's newly elected President Dilma Rousseff signed 22 cooperation agreements. The "China-Brazil Joint Communiqué" was one of them, strongly advocating the combined efforts of both nations to carry out cooperative initiatives that would strengthen their strategic partnership and benefit both nations (Jing, 2012).

China and Brazil have entered a new era of rapid political, economic and trade cooperation. Bilateral relations between emerging countries today follow the model

of China-Brazil relations. The following are the main ways in which China's soft power has progressed in Brazil:

1° The establishment of diplomatic consultations and dialogue mechanisms.

In 1985, the Brazilian and Chinese Ministries of Foreign Affairs established a system of frequent talks between senior officials. By 2007, they had held fourteen rounds of bilateral consultations, having held their first session of political talks in 1986. In addition, on April 29, 2007, in Beijing, the parties held the first round of strategic talks after agreeing to create a framework for them in April 2007. In addition to exchanging information on their respective foreign policies and development strategies, the two sides held frank and in-depth discussions on significant regional and global issues that both nations considered to be of shared importance. As a result, there was greater consensus on these issues between the two countries (Jing, 2012).

2° The frequency of cultural and educational exchanges.

Since the signing of the “Cultural and Educational Cooperation Agreement” in 1985, China and Brazil have launched three initiatives to carry out cultural exchanges. The two governments also collaboratively established a “Joint Committee on Cultural Cooperation”, which has held four meetings to date. In addition, in the 2009 “Joint Communiqué on Strengthening China-Brazil Strategic Relationship”, the 2010 “Joint Action Plan of the Governments of China and Brazil from 2010 to 2014” and the 2011 “China-Brazil Joint Communiqué”, they pledged to enhance cultural exchanges and collaboration between the two governments, as well as to encourage and promote community participation in bilateral exchanges. They also pledged to expand the field of communication to enhance the level of cooperation.(Jing, 2012).

3° Strengthening exchanges in environmental protection, bioenergy and other non-traditional areas.

China and Brazil are examples of developing countries that desperately need to boost their economies and improve the quality of life of their populations. Both cause serious environmental problems and emit greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Therefore, there is a need to investigate strategies to promote

sustainable growth that benefits the environment and the economy. China and Brazil are strengthening their relations by collaborating in various sectors, such as environmental protection and bioenergy (Jing, 2012).

During Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff's official visit to China in 2011, the "China-Brazil Joint Communiqué" was made public. It stated that bilateral cooperation would be "deepened in environmental issues and green economy projects, as well as in the field of new energy, oil trade and financing, oil and gas exploration development, energy and power equipment, and peaceful use of nuclear energy, including biofuels."

Brazil is currently the world's leading producer of renewable energy. In Brazil, this form of energy accounts for 45.3% of the total energy supply, although it accounts for only 6% of the supply in poor countries and 13% in developed countries. Of these, 17.9% of Brazil's total renewable energy supply is generated by sugarcane ethanol. China and Brazil are working closely together and reaching broad agreement on how to address the global problem of climate change. For example, at the Copenhagen Climate Change Conference, China, Brazil and India showed their support for the fundamental principle of the Kyoto Protocol: "common but differentiated responsibilities". This role helped the General Assembly to take a favorable decision.

4° Enhancing China's national image

By expanding its cooperation with Brazil through frequent exchanges in such fields as diplomacy and culture, among others, China demonstrates to Brazil that its foreign policy is responsible and harmonious. In doing so, it expands its area of influence beyond Brazil to include all of Latin America. Recent surveys have shown that the degree of information that people in Latin American countries have about China is approximately the same as that of people living in developed nations such as the United States, Japan, France, Spain and others (Jing, 2012).

4.5.2 Case Study 2: Perú

Peru 's large Chinese population has contributed to a great knowledge of Chinese history, culture and cuisine, giving them a soft power. These ideas are supported by the existence of numerous Confucius Institutes. There are four Confucius Institutes in Peru. There are two in Lima, the Peruvian capital: one at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru (PUCP), founded in June 2009, and another at

the Ricardo Palma University. One is located in the north of the country, at the Universidad de Piura, and the other in the south, at the Universidad Católica Santa María de Arequipa, all of which are private universities (Aquino, 2016). We can also see 2 main schools located in Lima, Peru called “Juan XXIII” and “Diez de Octubre”, where students at these educational institutions are taught the Chinese language as a mandatory course from a young age until they finish high school, many of the children that study in this institutions belong to the “Tusan” community. Tusán is an absolutely Peruvian term that defines the descendants of Chinese in Peru. Only in Peru, a tusán is a Peruvian descendant of a Chinese family, of any generation, with or without a Chinese surname (Mendez, 2019). It is estimated that currently there are between one million and three million Peruvians with Chinese ancestors (between 3% and 9% of the Peruvian population), who are known as tusán (from the Chinese tusheng, “born on the land ") (Obando, 2017). By this, we can see that China has a significant cultural influence in Peru, which is a clear demonstration of its soft power and also, its advantage by having a large Chinese population.

Given that China is the largest trading partner and investor in the mining and energy sectors, and everything points to this presence increasing in the future, the interest in China and its culture and language is actually mainly the result of the growing Chinese presence in Peru. A clear example of China's soft power initiatives in Peru is the presence of propaganda at the Jorge Chávez International Airport in Lima. In June 2023, a promotional poster written in Chinese was observed, underscoring China's effort to strengthen its cultural and economic ties with Peru (see Figure 8)

Figure 8. Chinese propaganda at the Jorge Chávez International Airport in Lima, Peru.



Photograph taken by the author, June 2024

As for Chinese political ideals and how they are perceived in Peru, the media and intellectual circles have criticized China's authoritarian, one-party rule in various media outlets, while praising China's amazing economic success over the past 35 years. As mentioned above, diplomatic relations between Peru and the People's Republic of China were established in 1971 in connection with China's foreign policy. Peru, Chile and Cuba were the pioneers in Latin America in this regard. In 2010, it managed to become the third country in the area, after Chile and Costa Rica, to sign a FTA with the Eastern power. With the signing of both agreements in 2013, Peru is the only country with a FTA and a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSA) with China. (Aquino, 2016).

Ollanta Humala, Peru's head of state, made his last two state visits to China in April 2013, the same month that the EPA was created. Ollanta Humala made the last one in response to the APEC meeting hosted by Beijing in November 2014. On the other hand, in July 2014, during the penultimate visit of a Chinese dignitary to Latin America to participate in the VI BRICS Summit in Brazil, Xi Jinping had the opportunity to meet with several leaders of the area, including President Humala. The last official state visit by a Chinese dignitary to Peru took place in May 2015, when Premier Li Keqiang arrived in Lima as part of his tour of several Latin American countries.

In September 2016, Peruvian President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski made his first official visit to China, highlighting the importance of China as Peru's main economic and investment partner. He also indicated his interest in China's support for increasing the value of raw materials, which account for the majority of Chinese exports, as well as China's involvement in infrastructure initiatives such as railroad construction. The issue of Chinese foreign policy in Peru demonstrates how well the two administrations get along at the highest level.

However, the discord in the economic relationship with China may be due to several factors, some of them related to a poor opinion of China. First, several industry sectors have expressed dissatisfaction with China's intense trade rivalry, citing what they sometimes consider disloyalty. As evidence of this, five of Peru's eight anti-dumping levies (imposed as of December 31, 2015) targeted Chinese goods (for selling at prices below what it costs to manufacture or sell in their country). Generally, the sectors affected are textiles, footwear and, more recently, steel (as evidenced by Aceros Arequipa, which stated in July 2016 that production at one of its two facilities had been halted due to Chinese "unfair competition").

Secondly, several Chinese mining companies have had problems with the local population or trade unions over environmental issues. The latter claim that the Chinese pay them poorly and try to exploit them by forcing them to work in dangerous situations. They are demanding wage increases. The most famous example is that of the mining company Shougang, which first invested in Peru in 1992. Despite the 24-year history of the union in Peru, it goes on strike once a year to demand better wages and working conditions (Aquino, 2016).

Third, the structure of Peru's trade and investment connections with China suggests that trade between the two countries is unequal, as Peru sells to China more than 95% of its total raw material exports, while it buys most of the goods produced by China. It is also mentioned that most Chinese investment is focused on anchoveta fishing for the production of fishmeal and the extraction of natural resources, such as minerals, gas and oil. It should be noted, however, that in response to these criticisms - which are also directed against China in many Latin American nations due to China's asymmetrical trade relations with the region - the Chinese government established three funds, the US\$20 billion China-Latin America Investment Fund for Industrial Cooperation, during Premier Li Keqiang's visit to the region in 2015.

It must be recognized that, in general, Peruvians have a positive attitude towards China. There are no comprehensive studies to be precise, but one published by the Pew Research Center and accessible on its website indicates that, in 2007, 56% of Peruvians had a positive opinion of China, and that figure rose to 60% in 2012.

5. Responses of South American Countries

5.1 Public Opinion and Perceptions

Although China's growing influence in South America is widely known, little is known about the success of its efforts to elevate China's soft power in popular perception. Data from the 2014 and 2021 waves of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) provide some initial insights into this problem. In particular, these statistics provide insight into how Latin Americans, both separately and over time, evaluated China's leadership and its political and economic influence in the region in 2014 and 2021. Some of the most important findings on the expansion of China's soft power in Latin America are illustrated and explained graphically here.

Figure 9: Latin American Public Confidence in China's Government 2014 and 2021

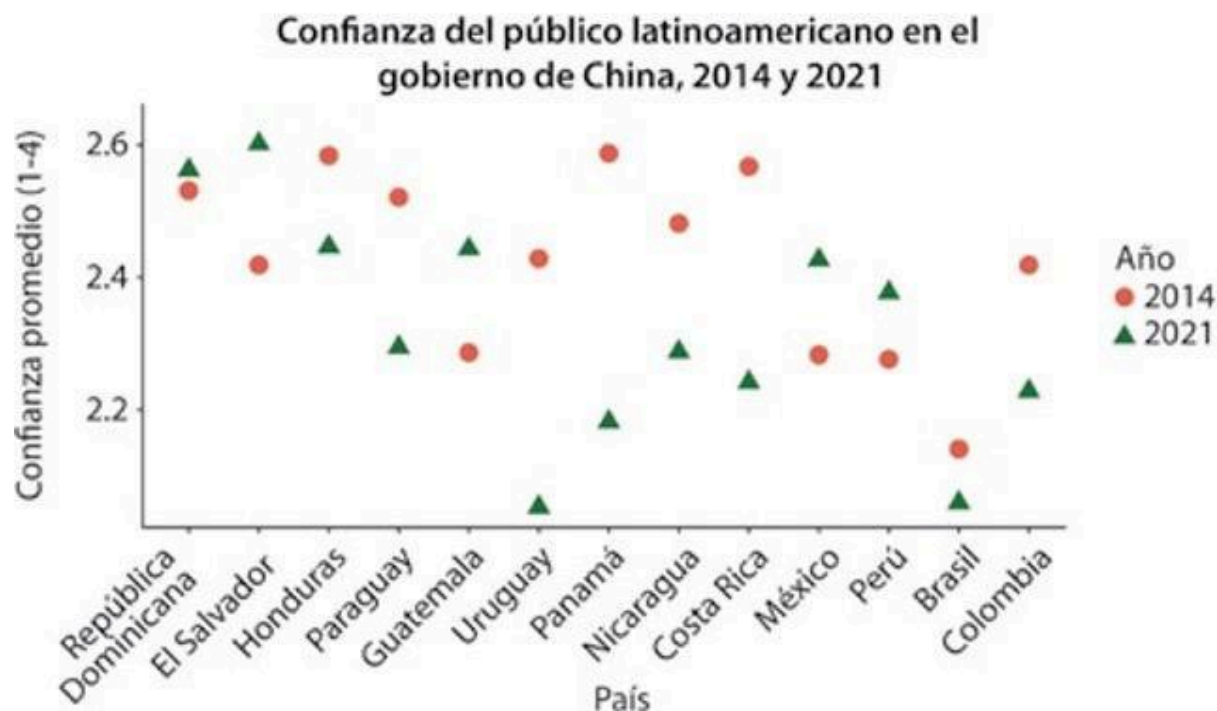


Figure 6 shows Latin American public confidence in China's government and Latin American assessments of China's political, economic and overall influence in the region, respectively.

Both indicate a significant deterioration in Latin American perceptions of China between 2014 and 2021, with regional differences, according to the Vanderbilt University study mentioned above. Regarding the Latin American public's trust in China's government, Figure 6 reveals that respondents in the Dominican Republic and Brazil have the highest and lowest levels of trust, respectively, with little change in attitudes over the seven-year period. The other eleven nations in which this question appeared, seven (Honduras, Paraguay, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, Colombia and Peru) experienced an increase in trust between 2014 and 2021.

On average, regional confidence in China has decreased from 2.42 to 2.32 (a difference of 0.10) on a scale of 1 to 4 over the seven years. This means that, over time, regional confidence in China's government has marginally deteriorated. We interpret this to mean that Chinese initiatives to include engagement with the region's multilateral institutions and travel by political and party figures through the CPC's have fallen short of their soft power objectives, especially among more developed countries ideologically close to the US.

Overall, this examination of public opinion data reveals several important findings. First, popular perceptions of China in Latin America tend to be increasingly unfavorable, even with all the economic and soft power tools China has recently employed in the region. This indicates, at the very least, that Hu's and, more recently, Xi's stated goals of improving China's reputation abroad are not being met. Second, sentiments regarding Chinese influence in the region do not appear to be improving despite the perception of greater Chinese political and economic power. Greater influence, at best, has minimal impact on ratings of that influence, whether favorable or unfavorable. At worst, greater influence generates more distrust of China. Third, Latin Americans believe that China's political and economic influence is stabilizing after years of expanding and strengthening its presence in the region.

Nonetheless, these general patterns should not be confused with the PRC's cautious strategy. China has just reorganized its priorities in the fall of 2021, but its quest for global influence is still in its early stages. Moreover, further studies may be needed to confirm whether the PRC can achieve its regional strategic goals without the support of the public. It is likely that the views of elites (legislators, powerful businessmen, etc.) are the primary means of achieving the PRC's objectives. Finally, further study may improve the relationship between favorable public perception and PRC influence. It is possible that the PRC prioritizes conformity over popular opinion, which would be consistent with the CCP's stance on China's national governance. However, it is useful to know that Latin American public opinion does not seem to have become favorable to the PRC because of its regional influence. On the contrary, the PRC's involvement in the region could play against China in the eyes of the population. Democracy may be able to oppose, shape or sufficiently limit the PRC's regional influence for the better if this fact becomes a counterweight of political action through regular democratic processes.

5.2 Policy Responses

Latin America and the Caribbean do not play a major role in China's cooperation policies, but neither do they play a minor role, as the above illustrates. Again, it is clear that Latin America and the Caribbean will struggle to achieve collaboration due to the differences in the types of cooperation and the various regions expected to receive it (Villamizar, 2012). (Villamizar, 2012).

Regarding cooperation as a tool of power, it is important to remember that while China has a policy of cooperation towards the region, the region does not have a bloc policy towards China in this or any other area (Rodriguez, 2011). On the contrary, most relations are managed bilaterally, which means that there are many little Davids in the relationship and one big Goliath.

Given this regional fragmentation, China finds it easier to impose its interests. It can also benefit from the lack of a unified bloc to balance it and maximize the benefits of a cooperation based on the national interests of each of the states involved and not on the interests of China as a whole. (Villamizar, 2012).

5.3 Country-specific case studies

5.3.1 Perú

The media consistently promote a positive image of China, and it is now typical to read articles alluding to “the death throes of democracy” and the fall of the U.S. government.

There are very few notable exceptions to this general pattern. One is Peru's national human rights coordinator, which openly expressed its displeasure in a statement about Xi's appointment by the Peruvian Congress as “the highest authority in one of the most questioned countries in the world for gross and systematic human rights violations.” One of the few political groups that has declined offers to visit China, criticized Xi's award and questioned Kuczynski for “negotiating with a dictatorship” is the relatively small political alliance known as Frente Amplio.

Its congressman issues a warning about the “risk of Chinese neocolonialism” and its attempt to “subjugate Peru's economy, politics and culture.” The Chinese ambassador came to see him because he also expressed his concern about China's political system. The ambassador “told me not to interfere in the internal process of China's affairs, just as they do not interfere in ours,” the congressman said, going far beyond the usual rhetoric of friendship. He also added that China is in Peru to invest at a difficult time for the Peruvian economy, and that we are not properly valuing the importance of Chinese investments. The congressman described the meeting as “excessive by protocol”.

5.3.2 Brazil

Brazil is a curious example, despite not being part of the Pacific Alliance. Not only has China displaced the United States as its main trading partner since 2010, but it also has a positive trade balance with the Asian nation. Fierro (2019) This state of affairs is most likely the result of the modest economic symmetry of the two nations operating within a context of competition rather than dependence. Brazil's membership in the BRICS grouping gives it direct political coordination with China, unlike other Latin American nations that have benefited from trade ties with the PRC (Brazil, India, China, and South Africa).

But in contrast to the right-wing administration of Jair Bolsonaro, the leftist governments of Lula dan Silva (2003-2011) and Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) took a different course. Busilli claimed that the two Workers' Party leaders had cultivated a "relationship of convenience" with China, in which both countries gained international recognition and influence at no cost and an implicit understanding that their relationship would be based solely on economic and not political considerations.

Since Bolsonaro's arrival, Brazil's foreign policy has focused on economic coexistence, but has also been geared toward ideological competition with the CCP. Fierro cautions that, given concerns that Bolsonaro's position is more than just an economic partnership and also aims at ideological penetration, Bolsonaro's approach prioritizes the containment of Chinese strength in the Latin American region over the adoption of a policy aligned with Washington.

Beyond the shifts in strategy between left and right administrations, the United States continues to play a pivotal role in Sino-Brazilian ties. The situation related to the involvement of the Chinese company Huawei in the deployment of the 5G network in Brazil - which led to the failure of the agreement due to cybersecurity issues - was possibly the most concrete. The case is further evidence that the PRC's advancement in the region has failed to counteract the continued far-reaching political meddling of the United States in Latin America (Kahhat, 2022).

6. Challenges and Criticisms

6.1 Challenges Faced by China

China is using various strategies to enhance mutual understanding, strengthen cultural ties and increase its influence in the region through its soft power programs in Latin America. The positive results of these initiatives can be attributed, in part, to effective cultural diplomacy, diaspora engagement, favorable media coverage and strategic communication, as well as political and economic collaboration. However, China's soft power faces several difficulties.

Foremost, China must strike a balance between advancing its political and cultural ideals throughout the area and respecting the political openness and commitment to human rights of Latin American cultures as it intensifies its strategic communication and cultural diplomacy efforts in the region. So far, Beijing has managed to avoid generating widespread public debate about the advantages and disadvantages of doing business with China. In this way, China is establishing lasting cooperative ties with its Latin American counterparts and promoting a more resilient mode of operation that can adapt to unknown future circumstances in which it expects to have significant influence.

Lastly, it could be argued that China is using soft power initiatives in South America to offset the impact of the United States and other Western countries in the area. China threatens not only the Democratic Charter of the Americas, but also regional security by offering political ideals other than liberal democracy as a viable substitute for political organization. This is because the existence of like-minded democracies is essential to the stability of the Western Hemisphere, as democracies do not wage war against each other. China's competition with the West has thus taken on a new dimension because of the extension of China's soft power in Latin America. As tensions increase, it is important for both domestic and international actors to understand the effects of China's soft power in this region of the world (Rouvinski, 2023, p. 65).

6.2 Criticisms of China's Soft Power Efforts

It can be argued that China's soft power initiatives in South America are an attempt to offset the dominance of the United States and other Western countries in the area. China threatens not only the Democratic Charter of the Americas, but also regional

security by offering political ideals other than liberal democracy as a viable substitute for political organization. The existence of like-minded democracies is essential to the stability of the Western Hemisphere, as democracies do not wage war against each other. China's competition with the West has thus taken on a new dimension because of the extension of Chinese soft power in this region. Conscientious parties both inside and outside South America are urged to gain a deeper understanding of how China's soft power is affecting this region of the world as tensions rise. (Rouvinski, 2023)

Reviewing and assessing China's deployment in the Western Hemisphere is imperative given the PRC's unusual presence in an area where U.S. hegemony has long prevailed. This assessment should consider China's objectives, methods and results in its quest for influence in Latin America, as well as the interests and reactions of the region's neighbors to its intentions and actions.

The objectives, tools and scope of soft power, as well as its use by the PRC, seem to diverge from those put forward by Joseph Nye and Western countries. The one-party dictatorship and rapid socio-economic change that China is experiencing dictates its relationship with the rest of the world, as it means that the CCP's goal of maintaining power dictates its foreign policy. This uniqueness is a key distinction when discussing the use of Chinese soft power; while for Western countries it is a mere foreign policy tool, for China it serves as a primary driver of social cohesion and national pride, supporting the Communist Party's goal of maintaining its undisputed political hegemony. Thus, the interpretation and application of soft power in China have fluctuated depending on the goals set by the Communist Party and its leadership.

China finally opened to the world during the end of Jiang Zemin's presidency and throughout Hu Jintao's decade. Its rapidly expanding economy allowed China to explode as a significant global force. Hu emphasized a "harmonious" and conflict-free world that would allow the PRC to expand and prosper in accordance with that reality. The fundamental principles remain, but under Xi Jinping, who maintains a more assertive foreign policy, tightens domestic controls, and considers the promotion of the model and the pursuit of the "Chinese dream" the cornerstones of his strategy, the tone and attitude have changed.

As a result, the actual application of Chinese soft power has also changed. While Hu placed more emphasis on traditional public and cultural diplomacy, Xi Jinping has

been more assertive and has undertaken major economic investments and geopolitical expansion projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, which are in line with his vision of China as a superpower challenging the United States for global leadership, including in regions such as Latin America that have traditionally been under U.S. influence.

Connections between China and this region have deepened and taken on new dimensions, such as bilateral and multilateral collaboration, as well as cultural elements. Despite this, the focus remains on economics, which China sees as a matter of both soft and hard power, especially in terms of aid, availability of loans and even investment in important social and infrastructure projects. For the PRC, soft power encompasses areas it considers hard power, as well as those delineated by Nye and the United States. One of the key distinctions we mentioned above is this, which is a unique feature of how China views and exercises its soft power and influence in the area.

6.3 Regional and Global Implications

South America's cultural diversity and its remarkable commercial and economic advances have contributed to the region's soft power. However, there are still significant hurdles to overcome to establish a strong position in the powerful soft power domains. The upcoming presidential elections in several countries in the region will have a major influence on Latin American soft power. The world will be watching the political agenda of the current or the next president, as well as any possible democratic advances, considering the elections in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia and Mexico.

In political terms, the region is going through a somewhat better period despite internal problems. Unlike in the West, populist and nationalist politicians have declined significantly in South America, in what Shannon O'Neil of the Council on Foreign Relations called a "striking role reversal". The countries of the region will have the opportunity to improve their international standing if the trend continues. However, this will require strengthening democracy and openness, funding public diplomacy initiatives, producing more digital diplomacy and increasing their influence in the global community. Hopefully, in the future, Latin American governments will

recognize this new reality. Governmental politics controls this obstacle, which presents an opportunity to advance South American soft power. (McClory, 2017)

7. Conclusion

China's strategic use of soft power tools in South America has significantly influenced its geopolitical standing. Despite encountering varied and complex responses from the region, including challenges such as surveillance and geopolitical considerations by local governments, China has adeptly navigated these dynamics. Cultural diplomacy, media engagement, and educational exchanges have been pivotal in establishing enduring relationships with South American countries, demonstrating the transformative potential of soft power in shaping global perceptions and foreign policy tactics without resorting to military or economic coercion.

As China develops significance on the international geopolitical scene, it has increased its emphasis on using *soft power* to obtain and maintain worldwide influence. This includes proactive engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean, even though the region is outside its traditional sphere of influence. Chinese rhetoric emphasizes a vision of global harmony and stability, recognizing the necessity of maintaining a balanced global order to achieve its strategic objectives.

It's important to mention that the importance of South America to China's geopolitical strategy today can not be underestimated. First of all, it is geopolitically strategic in the process of commercial expansion of the Asian dragon. In the first instance, it is recognized that this is a region that produces raw materials, rich in natural resources and represents a source of supply of food and natural resources. Secondly, it is an area with potential consumers of the surplus of merchandise produced by the Asian country. Thirdly, it is a region where they can invest without so many legal restrictions, although political instability in some countries represents uncertainty for Chinese investment. Fourthly, Beijing seeks to gain approval from the greatest number of countries, even emerging ones, in addition to representing an ideal place where China can put its "altruism" into practice and reinforce with actions its rhetoric

as a cooperative and pacifist country. In addition to showing these nations that the economic development model and the “Chinese dream” is possible and viable. It is then about winning hearts and minds. To strengthen a discourse aimed at legitimizing that the only possible dream in the world is the Chinese development model, harmonious with the planet and with other nations.

Consequently, in examining the impact of China's soft power in South America, it becomes clear that cultural diplomacy plays a pivotal role. The PRC has employed its cultural diplomacy well by exploiting the expressions and manifestations of traditional culture and language, as a symbolic capital that has given it extensive benefits in economic, commercial and political matters, on a global level. China invests heavily in bringing from the region a wide range of other programs to court, influence and possibly recruit partners, in addition to the scholarships for Latin American and Caribbean students mentioned above. These include trips conducted by the CCP's International Liaison Division (ILD) for political and party figures. In addition, PRC officials have shifted their rhetoric to challenge adversaries such as the United States as champions of democracy and models of the democratic system. Indeed, the PRC may be more prone to unintentionally broadcast messages that some groups in the region find offensive, given its relative inexperience with open media and its growing self-confidence. However, as China's influence grows throughout South America, Beijing is certain that this growth must be accompanied by a positive public perception of the nation among elites. China can project itself as a cultural and intellectual power, not just an economic one, through cultural diplomacy and diaspora outreach. This increases China's attractiveness to these Southern countries and lessens the weight of fact-based Western condemnation of human rights abuses and the absence of fundamental freedoms, accountability and transparency on the part of the Chinese authorities. Nonetheless, surveys reveal that a large proportion of South Americans harbor distrust of Chinese companies and the PRC government. But, despite this distrust, these countries continue to see opportunities in the PRC and its companies. China's strategic investments in infrastructure, technology, and development projects have also presented opportunities for modernization and economic diversification in the region. These investments are seen not only as economic ventures but as part of a broader effort

to build goodwill and deepen influence through a blend of cultural engagement and economic cooperation.

In short, *soft power* has been fundamental for China in South America by allowing it to expand its influence sustainably and build a positive image as a cooperative partner and benefactor. By prioritizing economic development and cultural cooperation over direct resource exploitation, China has managed to consolidate its geopolitical position in South America in a way that differs significantly from its approach in other regions such as Africa.

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