

# China's Documentary Diplomacy in Latin America: a win-win approach?

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## Abstract

Documentary diplomacy constitutes a unique tool for China to engage with practitioners in foreign countries and advance public diplomacy goals. This paper explores China's strategy of documentary co-productions by focusing on the case of Latin America. Adopting a comparative approach including discourse analysis and in-depth interviews, we scrutinise China's Documentary Diplomacy in Latin America, the main discourses reflected by documentary co-production projects and the significance of these experiences for those involved. We examine professional co-production projects in Argentina and Brazil, as well as the academic exchange programme Looking China. The findings show that these projects not only aid China in reshaping its own image but are also beneficial to Latin American countries and their own PD efforts in China. Furthermore, participants recognise the value of these experiences for the development of their own careers.

**Keywords:** public diplomacy, documentary, co-productions, China, Latin America

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## Introduction

China's public diplomacy (PD) efforts have been the focus of much scholarly attention for over a decade (Chang & Lin, 2014; D'Hooghe, 2015; Hartig, 2016; Kurlantzik, 2007; G. D. Rawnsley, 2009; Wang, J., 2011). As one of the main instruments of PD (Cull, 2019), transnational media have been at the centre of Beijing's PD strategy. China's media going-out strategy has been the subject of many studies (de Burgh, 2017; IFJ, 2020; Kurlantzik, 2023; Sparks, 2015; Sun, 2015; Thussu et al., 2018), with some focusing either on Asia (Kurlantzik, 2023; Mosher & Farah, 2010) or Africa (Gagliardone, 2013; H. Li, 2023; Umejei, 2018; Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018; Xiang, 2018; Xiang & Zhang, 2020). Gradually, scholars are starting to pay attention to China's media expansion in Latin America (Madrid-Morales, 2015; Morales, 2022a, 2022b; Morales & Menechelli, 2023; Mosher & Farah, 2010; Patrick, 2024). Long considered by Washington as its own backyard, Latin America constitutes the furthest frontier for Beijing's geopolitical ambitions. In fact, in 2017 Xi Jinping referred to Latin America as the "natural extension" to the Belt and Road Initiative (Xinhua, 2017).

Documentary film co-production initiatives can be regarded as part of what some scholars call Documentary Diplomacy (DD), i.e., the use of documentaries as a medium in cultural exchange activities that are part of diplomatic efforts (Han, 2023). In the case of China and Latin America, collaborations have been increasing gradually. In Argentina, China Central Television (CCTV) has engaged in co-productions with private companies such as Integra Cultural Industries as well as state-owned media such as Televisión Pública Argentina (TPA). In the case of Brazil, co-production initiatives have been articulated somewhat differently. For example, filmmakers from the BRICS countries have been invited to participate in multi-national co-production projects. Apart from professional practitioners, DD seems to also be behind academic exchange programmes such as *Looking China* (LC), a youth film project sponsored by the Huilin Culture Foundation, based at Beijing Normal University (BNU). This paper argues that documentary co-productions constitute a space to engage with Latin American film creators with the goal of bringing China closer to their reality and reshaping their impressions about the country. These interactions foster a dialogue that is conducive to creating a better understanding of China and improving its image, thus advancing PD goals.

To explore China's DD in Latin America, we adopt a comparative approach including discourse analysis and in-depth interviews to examine a range of cases across the region. This paper shows how China engages not only with professionals in documentary production both in television and cinema but also with young creators in their formative years. We present examples of professional co-production projects in Argentina and Brazil, as well as the academic exchange programme LC. The findings show how the documentary co-productions have enabled parties to create a relationship that goes further than the initial project. We show how these projects do not exclusively serve China's PD but are also beneficial for Latin American partners in their own PD efforts in China.

## **China's PD strategy: state-centred yet relational**

At its most basic level, PD is a type of strategic communication that states utilize to advance foreign policy goals by engaging directly with populations in foreign countries (Cull, 2008). Melissen (2005, p. 13) distinguishes between old and new PD, whereby the latter “moves away from [...] peddling information to foreigners and keeping the foreign press at bay, towards engaging with foreign audiences”. Our understanding of PD has shifted to include more relational, networked, and collaborative practices that are not performed exclusively by the state. The role of non-state actors whose actions may align with a state's PD goals became the focus of interest of theoretical discussions among scholars of PD (Lee & Ayhan, 2015).

Despite being profoundly state-centred, PD in China also mobilizes non-state actors to act on common goals. According to D'Hooghe (2015), it is possible to identify three features in China's PD: First, it is not only a defensive but also an offensive instrument to enhance its power; second, despite the involvement of non-state actors, it is highly state-centred; third, it uses a holistic approach that considers foreign and domestic dimensions as complementary and inseparable. Hartig (2016, p. 674), in turn, argues that China's approach to defining PD—in a more functional and idealistic way that stresses the importance of mutual understanding and engagement to advance national interests—goes “beyond normative notions of new public diplomacy into realist calculations in which world politics is driven by competitive self-interest”. The uniqueness of China's approach to PD lies in the seemingly paradoxical features of its model, i.e., it is highly state-centred but at the same time focuses on relations and the mutuality of these relations, as well as domestic outreach, which are more typical of relational or network-based models of PD (D'Hooghe, 2015). While institutions like the media and universities are often considered non-state actors in many countries, in China this is not necessarily the case. The media in China are considered a mouthpiece for the Chinese Communist Party. For example, even before the establishment of the People's Republic, China's international media such as Xinhua's news agency radio broadcaster saw itself as a propaganda mouthpiece of the party (Chen, 1957). Little has changed since then. In fact, in 2016, China's President Xi Jinping pointed out that “government and party-sponsored media must have the Party as their surname” (Xi, 2016 as cited by B. Li & Huo, 2016). Some even go further and claim that there is a unity between the spirit of the party and that of the people (R. Li, 2016). Therefore, when a few years earlier Xi said that “[one] must attach importance to public diplomacy, spread the Chinese voice well, tell China's story well, and show the world an authentic, three-dimensional, and comprehensive China” (Xi, 2014, as cited in K. Wang, 2014, p. 6), he was referring not only to the media but also to society at large. Therefore, the role of non-state actors in China's PD efforts needs closer scrutiny. Similar considerations apply to state-sponsored partners in Latin America and their own relationship with government (e.g., TPA).

## **The mass media as a key instrument for China's PD in Latin America**

The mass media constitute one of the key pillars of China's PD in Latin America. Since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, China has expanded its international media services to include Spanish and Portuguese-language content. Being the fourth and eighth most spoken languages in the world respectively (Eberhard et al., 2024), Spanish and Portuguese are also the two main official languages across Latin America. For this reason, they are included in China's multiple foreign-language media outlets such as Xinhua news agency, the newspaper People's Daily, the magazine China Today, China Radio International (CRI), and CCTV –rebranded in 2016 as China Global Television Network (CGTN) for its international operations.

As external actors, the impact and influence of China's global media has been minimal (Morales, 2018). Consequently, Beijing has strengthened its PD approach by diversifying its international communication strategy, from collaborating in the financing and launching of communication satellites to subsidising journalists for trips to China to attend media conferences, opening Confucius Institutes throughout the region, and organizing visits by senior Chinese officials seeking to strengthen media cooperation (Mosher & Farah, 2010). In the case of Latin America, the Plan for Cooperation between China and Latin American and Caribbean Countries (2015-2019) sets a framework to support cooperation between news media, by encouraging both sides to send reporters and correspondents, conduct joint interviews, and urging powerful and influential online media in both Latin America and China to strengthen their cooperation in portal development and new media capacity building (Gao et al., 2018). While some recent studies explore China's media engagement with Latin American partners (Morales, 2022c, 2022a; Morales & Menechelli, 2023; Patrick, 2024), documentary film co-productions are still uncharted territory.

## **The role of co-productions in DD**

PD is understood by Chinese authorities as a tool to ensure that Chinese perspectives prevail as the main source of international news about China (G. D. Rawnsley, 2015, p. 278). As a factual genre, documentaries have become another area where China is eager to collaborate. Just like news, documentary films are tasked to shed light on facts that take place in the real world. Kuhn and Westwell (2020) define it as a “practice of filmmaking that deals with actual and factual (and usually contemporary) issues, institutions, and people; whose purpose is to educate, inform, communicate, persuade, raise consciousness, or satisfy curiosity [...]” (para. 1). As such documentaries can be instrumental to shaping narratives about the construction of reality, including the image of countries.

Using films in diplomatic exchanges is not new; previous studies have examined how the USA engaged in film diplomacy during the Cold War era, particularly with the Soviet Union (Kozovoi, 2016), Iran (Gharabaghi, 2021), and Turkey (Etem, 2021). As a subset of film

diplomacy, DD can be defined as “a means of diplomatic discourse to promote binational friendship and goodwill” (Gharabaghi, 2021, p. 10). In China, DD is seen as part of both media and cultural diplomacy (Han, 2023). Han Fei (2023, p. 6) recognises three main ways in which DD can be articulated:

The first is that documentary diplomacy serves government diplomacy and appears as a supporting product for government diplomatic activities; the second is that, on the basis of diplomatic relations and friendship, the media and other organizations of two or more countries cooperate to produce or disseminate documentaries to promote exchanges and mutual trust between people in countries or regions; the third type is to serve organisations of intergovernmental cooperation, top-level diplomatic mechanism frameworks, or international initiatives.

The utility of documentaries in engaging with foreign publics has long been recognised by Chinese PD efforts. For over a decade, CCTV has increased its co-productions with international partners. Examining the development of international co-production of Chinese documentaries, Rawnsley et al. (2021) identify three distinct periods: from 1979 to the 1990s; from 2001 until 2010; and from 2011 to the present. While earlier collaborations saw foreign partners come to China, it was only from 2011 onwards that Chinese media started to expand internationally and engage in co-productions with media organisations such as BBC, Discovery, France Télévisions, RTL, and others, which allowed CCTV to position itself as a reputable documentary producer (G. Rawnsley et al., 2021). Aware of its own know-how gap to produce high-quality audio-visual products, engaging in co-productions became for China a way to attract not only capital but also foreign talent (Colapinto, 2010). David Bandurski (2018, p. 64) argues that this “co-production model allows China’s state propaganda apparatus to piggyback on the trust and credibility that domestic or regional broadcasters [...] have already established with their audiences”. For foreign partners, the need for governmental approval means that co-productions are often the key to gaining access to locations in China (Tong, 2018).

One of the agencies that has facilitated many international co-productions is the China Intercontinental Communication Centre. Since 2011, it has co-produced TV documentary programmes in 12 languages, which have been broadcast all around the globe (Video China, 2018). Assessing co-productions with anglophone countries such as Australia (Peng, 2016a) the US (Peng, 2016b) and Canada (Tong, 2018), previous research highlights some of the unique challenges in collaborating with China, such as “strict censorship, government intervention, unclear regulations and underdeveloped industry mechanisms” (Peng & Keane, 2019, p. 10). Here, topics seem to be “deliberately chosen to avoid politically sensitive issues and target global and Chinese audiences” (Tong, 2018, p. 248).

This paper examines the articulation of China's PD strategy in Latin America through documentary film co-productions. The purpose of our study is to examine how film co-productions serve as a PD initiative that is devised to increase the exposure to Chinese audio-visual content and reshape China's image in Latin American countries. To explore this phenomenon, we pose the following research questions:

*RQ1: How does China conduct DD in Latin America?*

*RQ2: What are the main discourses emerging from the audio-visual productions and what does it tell us about China's PD strategy?*

*RQ3: How do participants assess the experience of participating in these programmes?*

## **Methods**

To answer our research questions, we adopt a comparative approach. To understand China's DD approach in Latin America (RQ1), we first identified cases of documentary film co-productions between China and Latin American countries. Following an initial analysis, we detected two categories: first, industry cases (i.e., among professionals); and second, education cases (i.e., among students in their capacity as aspiring professionals). At a second level, Argentina and Brazil were identified as the two countries most proactive in their participation in professional co-productions with Chinese partners. In the case of educational co-productions, these were organised by the Huilin Foundation based in China in partnership with numerous institutions around the world. Latin American participants mostly came from Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, and Mexico (see below). We then conducted desk research on existing documentation regarding the circumstances in which these co-productions took place.

To identify the main discourses emerging from these co-productions (RQ2), we conducted discourse analysis on audio-visual material. Sampling was determined according to each co-production and the number of episodes available for each. Table 1 contains details of the videos sampled. In the case of the educational programme LC, we analysed 9 short documentaries (equal to ca. 10% of the total of 89 videos produced by Latin American participants between 2015 and 2023). For this subsample, we purposefully selected one documentary per year, and at least one per country (Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, and Mexico), except for Argentina and Brazil with two documentaries. The coding schedule was inspired by Fairclough's (1993) three dimensions (i.e., textual, discursive, and societal) approach to discourse analysis, with the following adaptations. For the textual dimension, we examined both what was happening on screen as well as what was being said (when applicable). For the discursive aspect, we focused on intertextuality and identified whose voices, as well as what sounds (including music) were included to construct the main narrative. Finally, for the societal dimension we identified the main discourses reflected in the documentaries, particularly in relation to China's ideological framework, such as the "Chinese dream," "core socialist values," and "community of common destiny for mankind," among

other (Gow, 2017; Miao, 2020). Coding was conducted by two researchers who are native and/or fluent speakers of Spanish and Portuguese.

**Table 1.** Sample

Category	Country	Documentary	Episode	Year	Run time (mm:ss)
Industry	Argentina	Cerca y Lejos	1	2017	29:51
			2	2019	29:59
			3	2019	30:00
			4	2022	30:00
			5	2022	29:57
		Meili Agenting	1	2018	24:40
			2	2018	24:40
			3	2018	24:47
			4	2018	24:39
		Sorprendente China	1	2018	55:34
			2	2018	46:22
Education	Brazil	Kids and Glory	1	2019	52:59
	Ecuador	Story of Aunt Wu, Spirit of China	1	2015	12:16
	Argentina	Love	1	2016	11:20
	Brazil	To Chopsticks	1	2017	11:09
	Chile	Du Xiaozhou's Harvest	1	2018	09:49
	Cuba	The Hunter	1	2019	11:23
	Brazil	Blessed Peaches	1	2020	06:46
	Argentina	Home	1	2021	10:00
	Mexico	Flavour of Chengdu	1	2022	09:51
	Bolivia	Make acquaintance by tea	1	2023	09:47

Finally, to understand how participants assessed their experience (RQ3), we conducted 12 in-depth interviews with participants involved in the main projects included in this paper. Following standard ethical practice, interviewees were informed about the aims of the study and were asked to express their consent. As reported by other researchers (for example, Harlan, 2023) conducting field work in China is increasingly difficult. Even online interviews with participants in China or interacting with Chinese partners pose several challenges. First, participants are likely to refuse participation if the topic is deemed as politically sensitive. Second, participants tend to cooperate when they are ensured anonymity. Third, avoiding traceability also becomes imperative. Therefore, to protect the identities of both Chinese and non-Chinese interviewees, the data has been anonymised, paraphrased, and integrated into a single narrative that incorporates the common prevailing opinions of the participants regarding their participation in each of these projects. Additionally, direct quotes have been kept to a minimum to avoid the traceability of interviewees. These are appropriately

referenced as “anonymous interview”. All interviews were transcribed using specialised software and analysed in the original language by researchers fluent in these languages.

## Findings

### *Category 1: industry cases*

#### *Argentina*

In Argentina, CGTN has co-produced documentaries with both private and public broadcasters. “Cerca y Lejos” (CyL), Near and Far –also known in Chinese as *kuayue* (leap)– was the first documentary television series co-produced between Chinese and Argentinian partners (Integra Cultural Industries, n.d.). It is the product of a collaboration between CGTN en Español and Integra Cultural Industries, a production company created by Integra Capital (Integra Capital, n.d.), a financial and investments company that is the majority shareholder of Grupo América, the second-largest media conglomeration in the country (Media Ownership Monitor Argentina, 2018). The first episode of CyL was broadcast in 2017 to commemorate the 46<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Argentina (CGTN, 2018). It was soon followed by an additional two in 2019, and in 2022, two more episodes were produced to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary (CGTN, 2022). Each episode lasts approximately 30 minutes and, unlike the early episodes, the last two featured presenters from both CGTN and América TV, one of the TV channels owned by Grupo América. CyL was broadcast in Spanish in Argentina on América TV and in China on CGTN en Español. Additionally, it also aired on CCTV’s Documentary (CCTV9) and International (CCTV4) channels.

As the Chinese name reveals, the series focuses on the theme of overcoming geographic and cultural distances through people-to-people interactions. Each episode features the stories of both Argentine and Chinese citizens and their experiences in each other’s countries, from an Argentinian who explores his Chinese heritage in Guangdong province, and the founder of an Argentinian restaurant in Shanghai, to a Chinese Wushu teacher who opens her own dojo in Buenos Aires, or even the years-long friendship between a Chinese translator and her favourite Argentinian author. Even though CyL highlights the role of culture in uniting people, from literature (Borges, Piglia, Mo Yan) and music (tango) to martial arts (wushu) and dance (tango), China’s high-tech sector and its worldwide investments through the Belt and Road Initiative also feature prominently. From the biggest solar panel park in South America to hydropower plants in Patagonia, and even modern trains in Buenos Aires, all are possible thanks to Chinese investment in Argentina.

Throughout the years, all episodes have placed their focus on people-to-people diplomacy. In fact, CGTN considers “cultural exchange, as a relevant vehicle of popular diplomacy, [that] has contributed to the development and consolidation of friendship between the two nations



and promoted the continuous deepening of their bilateral ties” (CGTN, 2019). Nevertheless, official voices also play an essential role. Diplomats and politicians from both countries are among the most frequent interviewees throughout the series, including ambassadors, ministers and even Argentina’s former Presidents Mauricio Macri (2015-2019) and Alberto Fernández (2019-2023). While not interviewed for this programme, the voice of the Chinese President Xi Jinping is also a leitmotiv that stresses the importance of international collaboration to build a “community with a shared future for humankind”.

CCTV also collaborated with Argentina’s public broadcaster TPA. During an initial meeting between TPA and CCTV leaders in Beijing in 2017, both broadcasters agreed to co-produce two series of documentaries with mixed production teams: “Meili Argentin” (MA), to be led by CCTV, supported by TPA and filmed in Argentina; and “Sorprendente China” (SC), to be led by TPA, supported by CCTV and filmed in China. The production was carried out in 2018 and finalized to align with President Xi Jinping’s state visit to Argentina ahead of the G20 Summit in Buenos Aires. In parallel to the production of these documentaries, Pablo Coppari, in charge of digital content at TPA, produced “China en una mano”, China on one hand, a series of short documentary clips featuring himself travelling around China. The success of these co-productions led to a second project, Sorprendente ArgenChina (SAC), a series of documentaries about cooperation projects between both countries and presented by Coppari himself.

After six months of pre-production, the team from CCTV9 documentary channel travelled to Argentina to start filming *MA* and spent five weeks between August and early September 2018 shooting in different locations in the south (Tierra del Fuego, Santa Cruz and Chubut provinces), centre (San Juan and Buenos Aires provinces) and north (Jujuy and Misiones provinces) of the country. During the tour, CCTV’s team was supported by producers from TPA as well as local teams from TV Pública Fueguina and government agencies from provinces and municipalities where the shooting took place. This dynamic led to the production of four episodes of ca. 25 minutes each. The first episode *Ziran de jiyi* (the mark of nature) focuses on Argentina’s natural wonders and economic resources. The second episode *Xuanli Rensheng* (Magnificent life) centres around people and their passion for art and sport. The third episode *Juangu zhi di* (Blessed land) features the produce of the land, from meat and wine to seafood and quinoa. The final episode *Wuyue de taiyang* (May sun) highlights Argentina’s multicultural society, where tradition and modernity coexist. MA was broadcast in Mandarin by CCTV between 29 November and 2 December 2018.

After the shooting in Argentina was completed, it was the turn of the Argentinian team to travel to China. Technicians and producers from TPA, Fueguina Public TV and CCTV worked together for three weeks in September. SC is thematically organised around two aspects. On the one hand, it is a story about China’s opening to the world and how it has changed the country, thus highlighting the contrast between tradition and modernity. On the other hand, the second theme focuses on the links between Argentina and China. In other

words, stories that bring China closer to Argentina. For example, besides Beijing and Shanghai, the locations to shoot SC also included the city of Hangzhou and Guizhou province. Guizhou province was selected because of its twinning with Argentina's Jujuy province.

SC consists of two episodes that were broadcast by TPA on 29 November 2018, at 9 p.m. and 30 November at 11 p.m. The idea of bringing China closer to Argentina is a constant theme in SC. Both episodes feature personal stories that have an Argentinian connection, from Lou Yu, a Chinese translator of Argentinian literature, and Ou Zhanming, a Chinese tango aficionado, to Guillermo Bravo, an Argentinian who opened the first Hispanic American bookstore in China, and staff from the Argentinian Embassy in Beijing. Most of these interviewees have also appeared in the later episodes of CyL.

Different from SC, *China en una mano* was conceived as a more informal way of engaging Argentine audiences by showing an Argentinian journalist travelling around China. This programme was produced by TPA, in collaboration with TV Pública Fuegoína, with the contribution of the government of Tierra del Fuego province. The series features Pablo Coppari, producer and presenter, exploring China with the help of his mobile phone as a guide. This flexible format allowed viewers to see China in a less formal way. However, unlike the series of documentaries MA and SC, there was no series starring a Chinese journalist travelling through Argentina.

The success of this first co-production project led to a second project, SCA. Initially conceived by TPA's desire to produce a programme to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the People's Republic of China in 2019, SCA highlights the growing relationship between both countries. The first episode focused on China's Space Base in Neuquén province, which had stirred some controversy in the local press. Access to the base was secured thanks to the Chinese Embassy in Buenos Aires, which also assisted in helping producers contact other Chinese companies operating in Buenos Aires. Subsequent episodes featured both Chinese investment in Argentina (e.g. South America's largest solar plant in Cauchari), as well as cultural ties (e.g. Chinese footballers training in Argentina; a bilingual school in Buenos Aires; Argentinians living in China). While a few episodes were broadcast between October and November 2019, the project was disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequently discontinued.

### *Brazil*

In the case of Brazil, the approach was articulated in relation to the country's membership in the BRICS organisation. While it is officially branded as the "first ever collaboration" between the then-five members (Xu, 2019), it was a project led by the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (CCTVJingji, 2023). Indeed, already in 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping had

“proposed for the first time the initiative of BRICS countries to cooperate in film production at the 8<sup>th</sup> BRICS leaders meeting, which was unanimously approved by leaders of various countries and opened up a new path for BRICS people-to-people and cultural exchanges” (SCIO, 2021). With the renowned Chinese filmmaker Lu Chuan acting as general director (Tao, 2019), the main theme agreed was that of children from the BRICS countries pursuing their dreams (Guangming, 2019). The production lasted a year (SCIO, 2021), and the premiere took place in Brasilia in 2019, coinciding with the BRICS summit there (Tao, 2019). The documentary series was named after the Brazilian one *Kids and Glory (K&G)*, *Haitong he rongyao*, (Guangming, 2019), to be later repackaged as a new documentary film with the title “Youth without borders” (*Shaonian wujiang*) (SCIO, 2021).

Among the directors invited by Chinese director Lu Chuan was the Brazilian Tiago Arakilian (CRI, 2021). Apart from the opening and closing credits that contain text written in Chinese characters including the names of the presenters and producers, the Brazilian documentary is devoid of any mention of China. Following the general theme, it highlights the central role that football plays in the imagination of Brazilians by focusing on the story of a young Brazilian teenager and his dream to join a training centre belonging to Flamengo, one of the most popular football clubs in Brazil. The film depicts the challenges of an average middle-class family to improve their lives and the struggle to realise the dreams of their children, thus encapsulating the main spirit of this documentary series. According to the production company Titânio Films, K&G was shown on China’s CCTV channel with more than 200 million viewers (*Portfólio*, n.d.). In 2023, another documentary (“Inhotim from Within”) produced by Titânio Films and directed by Arakilian was included in “History Illuminates de Future: My Museum Story” (*Lishi zhaoliang weilai: wo de bowuguan gushi*), a second jointly produced documentary series focusing on the stories of unique museums from the BRICS countries (Y. Li, 2023).

The success of K&G caught the attention of Brazil’s embassy in Beijing, who invited the production company Titânio (led by Arakilian) to participate in a new project featuring Brazilian street culture. These projects were supported by both Chinese and Brazilian companies. The first was “Brasil, o país de futebol de rua” (*Baxi: jietou de zuqiu wangguo, Brazil, the country of street football*) a 10-episode internet series in Mandarin about Brazilian street football (Renminwang, 2021). Featuring Chao Chen, a Chinese presenter who lives in Brazil, it was directed by Luis Gustavo Ferraz and co-produced by the Brazilian Embassy in China and Titânio Films, with the support of both Chinese (e.g., Huawei, Three Gorges Corporation, and CRRC) and Brazilian (e.g., Friboi, Sadia, and Suzano) companies. The second, “Sabor das ruas do Brasil” (*Jiewei baxi, Taste of the streets of Brazil*), was a 10-episode internet series focusing on Brazilian street food in São Paulo (CRI, 2021). Featuring two (seemingly) Chinese-Brazilian presenters, Nire Chen and Alice Sun. The Brazilian car-hailing company 99 appears as another supporter. A third, “As cores de São Paulo” (*Shengbaohuo de tiaosepan, The colours of São Paulo*), is a 6-episodes internet series,

focusing on street art in São Paulo (Mandacaru Design, n.d.) and featuring the Chinese presenter Si Liao. Like the other series, it was supported by both Chinese and Brazilian companies. However, in this case it was produced by Mandacaru Design, with cultural support of Pula Muralha, One Solve and Digital 35.

## ***Category 2: education***

*Looking China (Kan Zhongguo)* is a youth film project where university students from across the world are invited to travel to China to produce short documentary films assisted by local volunteers from Chinese universities (Looking China, n.d.). The project is sponsored by the Huilin Culture Foundation and hosted by the Academy for International Communication of Chinese Culture, an institute jointly established by BNU and the US-based International Data Group (Ma & Subbiondo, 2022). Huilin Foundation is a non-profit foundation, named after Huang Huilin, an emeritus professor from BNU and proponent of the “Third Pole Culture”, an initiative that seeks to position China as a “third pole”, on par with the American and European cultural poles that have long occupied a central position in cultural industries around the world (Huilin, 2014).

Table 2 shows how LC has grown exponentially, from only nine participants in 2011 to over a hundred in 2023. This was thanks to its strategy of partnering up with both overseas and local universities. While partner universities overseas oversee recruitment among students majoring in film, those in China assist by hosting the participants and encouraging their own students to volunteer as co-producers. At first LC only took place in Beijing and gradually grew to cover up to 13 provinces. As travelling restrictions during Covid-19 pandemic saw the number of participants decline, two alternative chapters were created in 2020 to encourage remote participation –*Yuancheng rongmeiti*, remote media integration– and reflect on their past experiences –*Huikan Zhongguo*, Looking back China–. Additionally, recruitment was extended to include foreign students already studying in universities across China.

**Table 2.** Number of participants per year.

Year	Cities/Provinces/Chapters	Total participants	Latin American
2011	1 city	9	n/a
2012	1 city	10	0
2013	2 cities	20	0
2014	6 cities	54	0
2015	10 cities	89	5
2016	13 provinces	92	9
2017	12 provinces	102	11
2018	11 provinces	103	15
2019	10 provinces	101	16
2020	7 provinces + 2 chapters	88	13

Year	Cities/Provinces/Chapters	Total participants	Latin American
2021	8 provinces	63	4
2022	7 provinces	64	4
2023	11 provinces + 2 chapters	107	13

The students undergo a preselection process in their own universities and their participation is made possible thanks to scholarships that cover all costs of travel and stay in China. Students choose from a list of topics predesigned by the coordinators and submit a plan for their own project. Coordinators choose topics they believe viewers might find interesting. Once in the country, they are divided into groups to continue their way to other locations across the country. Data available on the programme's website shows students from the same country –and sometimes culturally close– are allocated to the same groups. Participants are paired up with a local student who assists them with both the production process as well as navigating language problems. Local students were not necessarily majoring in film production and the main requirement for their participation was having English-language skills. Teachers from both the foreign and local universities act as coordinators that mediate between the programme organisers and the students, as well as support during the production stages, e.g., solving the problem of access to locations, etc. During the post-production process, students receive feedback and then participate in a general exhibition in front of a panel. Famous filmmakers are invited to provide feedback and the best films receive prizes. The local press also attends the ceremony and interviews participants. The Huilin Foundation oversees the distribution and publication of the films through various online platforms. LC prohibits students from seeking profit and requires them to ask for permission before submitting their films to cinema festivals around the world.

Among Latin American countries, the number of participants has grown gradually –with the exception of the pandemic years– (see Table 3) and most of them come from countries where partner universities are located, e.g., National School of Film Experimentation and Production and Cinema University in Argentina, Iberoamerican University in Mexico, Higher Technological Institute of Cinema and Acting in Ecuador, University of São Paulo in Brazil, Bogotá National University in Colombia.

**Table 3.** Number of Latin American participants per country and year.

Year	Total	Argentina	Brazil	Ecuador	Mexico	Other
2015	5	0	1	2	2	0
2016	9	5	4	0	0	0
2017	11	2	5	0	2	2 (Colombia)
2018	15	5	3	3	3	1 (Chile)
2019	16	5	5	1	3	2 (Cuba)
2020	13	5	4	1	3	0
2021	4	1	1	0	2	0

Year	Total	Argentina	Brazil	Ecuador	Mexico	Other
2022	3	0	0	2	1	0
2023	13	3	6	2	1	1 (Bolivia)
Total	89	26	29	11	17	6

The sampled short films tend to tell stories that highlight China's culture and society, from its rich cultural heritage (calligraphy, traditional painting, martial arts, dancing), to its ethnic diversity and family values, such as harmony, respect for elders and tradition. Family values are also symbolised by the important place that food occupies in Chinese society, as an element of unity. Additionally, the uniqueness of Chinese food culture is exemplified by tea, food markets and even the manufacturing of chopsticks. China is portrayed as a safe and welcoming place for foreigners (work, marriage, study) and Chinese people as industrious and hard-working. Overall, the discourse emerging from the documentaries is that of China as a country that is thriving, thanks to many years of growth and development that have helped improve living conditions for people both in rural and urban spaces.

## **DD as a win-win approach**

Discussions with participants from both industry and education categories reveal three key themes that underscore DD as a win-win approach. First, the dynamics between both sides appear as positive and constructive, despite minor challenges. Second, the experiences were life-changing and enabled new opportunities. Third, concerns regarding censorship were largely downplayed.

Professional documentary filmmakers described the experience as positive, and even “fantastic”, and characterized the Chinese side's attitude as “super proper”. There was a genuine interest to know each other's countries and both sides of the co-production were free to adopt their own approach to tell the stories about each other's countries. Similarly, students praised the experience as being enriching for both sides and promoting the integration of both cultures. In fact, one of the coordinators stressed that *LC* was primarily an exchange programme, the main goal being that the participants experience China and become friends with the volunteers. Even if the students are supported throughout the process and encouraged to do the best they can, the production of the documentary itself becomes secondary. In order to achieve this goal, both foreign and local coordinators are in charge of pairing participants and volunteers, as well as accompanying them and making sure that the experience runs smoothly by identifying and solving any potential or real issues between the students and their peers. Despite this, some problems emerge. For example, language differences can render the interaction and production process somewhat difficult at times. In the case of *LC*, some students struggled to interact with local volunteers who were not necessarily majoring in film or communication studies. Therefore, foreign participants oversaw all the creative and

technical aspects. Nevertheless, the experience was overwhelmingly positive.

The co-production of documentary films between Chinese and Latin American participants was deemed as a life-changing experience that enabled new opportunities. In the case of professional documentary filmmakers, the positive experience led them to participate in other co-production projects, sometimes invited by the Chinese side, and some of them even initiated by the Latin American side. The experience was particularly life-changing among students. On the one hand, it changed their views about China and made them eager to participate again. The experience of being in China made them understand better the country even if they were surprised about the cultural differences:

We are very different, we have so many different issues, but I had never travelled so far. I had never met people (who were) so far away from me physically. So, I was prepared for the difference, to be enchanted by what I had never seen. But what really enchanted me was seeing how similar we are.  
(anonymous interview)

One of the coordinators described LC as a “wonderful opportunity, that fell from the sky and transforms these students’ lives” (anonymous interview). In fact, one of the student participants explained: “This film was very important for my career, really. Because later it allowed me to make others” (anonymous interview). In some cases, the films caught the attention of TV channels in Latin America interested in broadcasting them.

Finally, concerns regarding censorship were largely downplayed. Professional filmmakers reported that each side was supportive and did not impose an editorial veto. During the production process, changes regarded artistic aspects, which were within standard practice in the industry worldwide. Furthermore, the Chinese side did not seek to exert editorial control, e.g., “no one from China accompanied our filming or told us how we had to film or what kind of language we were going to use” (anonymous interview). Student participants voiced similar views. While some of them reported being concerned about censorship, they did not experience any of it at a personal level. In other words, they neither felt any pressure from the tutors nor were asked to modify anything. On the contrary, filming was quite free, and everyone was very helpful and ready to solve problems. Some students agreed that they knew that they were going to China and that it was not possible to make a film about anything. Sometimes there was no clear indication of why certain materials could not be used. For example, a student was advised against shooting at cemeteries and temples, or even asking for people’s salaries. There was no formal conversation about this issue, which led speculations to circulate among participants. Only in one instance, a student mentioned the existence of a “censorship committee” that was tasked to provide feedback. However, contrary to expectation, no changes were required even if certain elements were ambiguous and could be constructed as being critical of the system. In any case, some considered these perceived taboo areas as

part of cultural differences that needed to be respected. They were eager to cooperate, even if some of them felt that the topics were chosen to “promote” China.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This paper examined the articulation of China’s PD strategy in Latin America through documentary film co-productions. While our initial hypothesis –that film co-productions serve as a PD initiative that is devised to increase exposure of Chinese audio-visual content and re-shape China’s image in Latin American countries– is validated, the findings highlight a much more complex scenario than previously suggested.

The examples studied show a plurality of frameworks and dynamics of interaction between partners in China’s DD in Latin America (RQ1). First, reflecting China’s relational approach to Public Diplomacy, partnerships are established with both state and non-state actors –even if the level of control exercised over non-state actors (of both countries) may jeopardise their nature as civil society institutions. Second, Latin American partners are also diverse in their modes of funding. Both private and state-funded public institutions such as broadcasters and universities act as partners. Third, the framework of engagement varies from bilateral co-productions like in Argentina, as well as *LC*, to multilateral projects such as *K&G*. Finally, the engagement with both professional and aspiring filmmakers shows how China seeks to engage with different segments of society and with a look into the future. Rather than seeking short-term gains, this project is about planting seeds with the hope that they can bloom in the longer term.

From the main discourses emerging from the audio-visual (RQ2), we can observe that China’s DD is designed to portray positive stories that centre on China’s view of the world as a “community of common destiny for mankind”, highlighting the commonalities of human experience and the richness of different cultural traditions. This is in line with Tong’s (2018) view that topics are deliberately uncontroversial. The cases of co-productions between professionals tend to display a certain degree of balance where Latin American countries are also part of the conversation. Reflecting Hartig’s (2016) observation regarding China’s approach to PD stressing the importance of mutual understanding and engagement, co-production projects, particularly those among professional practitioners, show a high degree of complementarity where both sides seem to benefit from the experience. While the initial projects, for the most part, helped China advance its own PD goal of reshaping China’s image, they also allowed Latin American partners to do as much. A clear example is that of the twin documentary series *SC* and *MA*. On the one hand, the support provided by each team helped them learn from each other’s experiences, while enjoying editorial independence, as reported. On the other hand, the reciprocity was crystalised by the fact that both documentary series were shown in both countries. This way, viewers had a unique opportunity to observe how their own countries were being perceived and shown by other cultures. Contrary to this,



the sole beneficiary of LC seemed to be China itself, due to the unique design of this programme.

Assessing the experience of participating in these programmes (RQ3), it appeared to be a consensus among interviewees that it was highly positive. Unlike other parts of the world (Peng & Keane, 2019), censorship did not seem to pose a major challenge for collaborations with Latin American partners. On the contrary, both parties praised the genuine curiosity and enthusiasm of their peers in collaborating and supporting one another. Latin American participants agreed that this was an enriching and life-changing experience, with many inspired to continue engaging in this type of projects that also helped them grow as professionals. In this sense, Latin American partners were not merely passive participants. Throughout all the cases studied they displayed agency to utilize these experiences to advance their own interests. In the case of professional co-productions, we can see how Latin Americans continued engaging in new projects, like the subsequent additions of episodes for CyL as well as the production of ArgenChina. In the case of K&G, it was interesting to see how the project inspired the Brazilian Embassy to initiate its own series of mini-documentaries about Brazil for the sole consumption of Chinese viewers. In the case LC, the students interviewed reported using this experience to participate in international festivals and strengthen their CVs.

Across all cases studied, it is possible to see that China's DD is perceived by participants as a win-win approach, which is experienced at two different levels. On the one hand, China's DD constitutes a mechanism that contributes to the PD efforts of both sides of the partnerships. On the other hand, it offers participants an opportunity that will contribute to their own professional advancement. These findings show how DD is a useful tool beyond the importance of the documentary genre per se. In the words of Han Fei (2023, p. 6),

Documentary diplomacy is an important way to convey kindness, deepen friendship, and promote people-to-people connections. The significance of such activities lies not only in the transmission of information, images, and values carried by the documentary itself but also in making the exchanges and interactions behind the documentaries play a greater role through exchange activities that use documentaries as a medium.

In conclusion, the contribution of this study is twofold. Empirically, we provide evidence of the complexity of China's PD in Latin America, and specifically how it is articulated through innovative co-production programmes targeting both professional and aspiring filmmakers. The data shows how these programmes are perceived by participants as highly beneficial. Conceptually, we add nuance to the debate on the role of non-state actors in PD by problematising the applicability of this category in scenarios where such distinctions become blurry. Finally, DD can be regarded as a distinct and unique engagement mechanism that

creates a perception of mutual benefit by those involved.

Finally, this study is not without its limitations. First, while we have engaged with multiple Chinese sources that are openly available, the difficulty for foreign academics to conduct interviews in China undermines our capacity to show a more balanced picture that includes more voices from participants in that country. Second, while Latin American participants reported no editorial interference, there is no evidence to suggest that some may have been conditioned to please their partners (and consequently self-censor), rather than being perceived as unwelcoming. Given these limitations, we invite other scholars to conduct further research in this gradually growing area.

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