

Borrowing microphones: The instrumentalisation of media partnerships in China's public diplomacy efforts in Latin America

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Abstract

This article examines the role of media partnerships in China's public diplomacy efforts to reshape its perception in Latin America. It analyses four cases of collaboration between Chinese media organisations and their partners in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Venezuela. The study investigates the nature of these partnerships, the dynamics between the collaborators, and the discourses emerging from the co-produced programmes to advance China's soft power in the region. The findings reveal a subtle asymmetry, where Latin American voices are included primarily when they contribute to constructing a positive narrative about China's rise on the continent. Comparable to 'borrowing microphones', these media partnerships function as an extended platform for Beijing to disseminate key ideological concepts, such as the 'community of shared destiny for humankind', while reshaping China's image as a champion of free trade and globalisation, in opposition to protectionism and unilateralism.

Keywords

China, Latin America, media partnerships, public diplomacy, soft power

Introduction

The global expansion of China's media is a phenomenon that has attracted abundant attention in the field of international studies as well as media and communications (W. Sun, 2015; Thussu, 2018) and journalism (Marsh, 2016, 2023). The instrumentalisation of the media to advance public diplomacy goals reveals Beijing's geopolitical ambitions to gain discursive power in the international political sphere. However, China's unique understanding of the 'constructive' role of the media to accompany public

policy greatly differs from the 'watchdog' role expected in other parts of the world. For Beijing, the main concern is to improve the country's image and

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increase its soft power. For this, the media need to ‘tell China’s story well’ (Wang, 2014), both at home and abroad. This article explores how media partnerships are fundamental for China’s public diplomacy efforts in Latin America by borrowing microphones – or in China’s own words ‘borrowing boats to go out to sea’ – arguably replicating patterns of media imperialism rather than joining efforts to generate counter-hegemonic narratives. Specifically, we aim to explore what these co-productions reveal about relations between China and Latin American countries; how the co-produced programmes are discursively constructed and what this suggests about the dynamics between the media organisations involved; and finally, the underlying ideological messages of these collaborations and what they indicate about China’s soft power strategy in Latin America.

As we will argue in the following paragraphs, Chinese media influence in Latin America can be considered an important tool to enhance Chinese soft power, and thus an asset to further influence a region that has become increasingly dependent on China. For China, Latin America has been a key provider of natural resources needed for Chinese growth as well as an attractive market to export high-advanced products and a place to invest (Labarca, 2015; Ding et al., 2021; Jenkins, 2022). Indeed, since mid 2000, China has been seeking to strengthen ties with Latin America, both politically and ideologically (Labarca, 2015). Hence, Latin American economic relations have grown exponentially (Guo, 2023; Jenkins, 2022), and also its soft power towards the region (Ellis et al., 2022).

A report published in 2023 by the Pew Research Centre shows that, while China’s image in Latin America is comparatively more positive than in other parts of the world, negative views have been growing across the region (Silver et al., 2023). Some argue that China’s image is largely shaped by international media organisations (Guo, 2016, 2017; Ospina Estupinan, 2017), including news agencies mostly but not exclusively based in Western countries. Therefore, it is in China’s interest to communicate its own stories. Up until the late 2000s, Beijing’s strategy to improve its image and boost its soft power worldwide consisted in setting up its own

multilingual media outlets targeting international audiences. In the case of Latin America, it targets the region by offering content in both Spanish and Portuguese, through media outlets such as China Radio International, Xinhua News Agency, the magazine China Today and the newspaper People’s Daily Online, apart from China Global Television Network (CGTN, previously known as CCTV) which only broadcasts in Spanish. Considering the limited attention from audiences in the region, Chinese media organisations have shifted from being mere external actors to becoming increasingly closer partners (Morales, 2022a). Partnerships with local media allow Chinese news organisations to gain new platforms to showcase their productions and, more importantly, reach a greater audience (Cook et al., 2022).

Media partnerships have become central to China’s communicational engagement in Latin America. For over a decade, Chinese media have been signing partnership agreements in many countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Venezuela, among others. Previous academic studies show that partnership agreements have been key for China to diversify the way it is portrayed in Brazilian media (Morales & Menechelli, 2023). However, some of the most recent reports on the subject (IFJ, 2020, 2022) fail to suitably address the development of Chinese global media outreach in Latin America, while others (Cook et al., 2022) tend to emphasise the security implications of the phenomenon. This study aims to scratch the surface by highlighting the main discourses present in the co-productions between Chinese and Latin American media companies in the framework of China’s growing influence in the region. The contributions of this study are threefold. First, it analyses the main narratives and discourses present in the media partnerships that help to provide empirical evidence of its instrumentalization to advance public diplomacy goals, by adopting a cross-country comparative perspective. Second, it sheds light on the dynamics of media partnerships that appear to create spaces for dialogue but are primarily designed to serve the purpose of countering hegemonic narratives about China and improving the country’s image to be more attractive in terms of Nye’s (2004) soft power. Finally, the

authors raise questions regarding the scope and the implications of these types of partnerships.

China's international media: counter-hegemonic weapons or public diplomacy tools?

The proliferation of international media by non-Western countries is often regarded as an attempt to break with old patterns of media imperialism. Proponents of this paradigm argue that global media markets have long been dominated by Western companies (Chandler & Munday, 2020), which following their own interests exert pressure on the media of other countries 'without proportionate reciprocation of influence by the country so affected' (Boyd-Barrett, 1977, p. 117). This way, news organisations in the Global South that lack resources to send correspondents overseas to cover international affairs tend to replicate media narratives of international news agencies. Thus, the editorial power remains in the hands of news editors based in the Global North (Sparks, 2007). In other words, Global South media organisations present a world image shaped by an outlook that is both ideologically loaded and foreign to the immediate context of local populations. Furthermore, they reflect the geopolitical concerns of developed powers, which are not necessarily shared by the governments of their own countries. However, the proliferation of international media based in non-Western countries such as Al-Jazeera, CGTN, RT and Telesur, among others, is an example of the emergence of a counter-hegemonic flow of news (Thussu, 2006). These media organisations seek to counter the hegemonic narratives that are disseminated through mainstream media organisations based in the Global North such as CNN and BBC. For example, CGTN's own logo 'see the difference' symbolises its aim of questioning hegemonic views by adopting a distinct Chinese perspective to interpret the world (Suo, 2023).

International media organisations are also instrumental in advancing public diplomacy goals such as improving a nation's image to increasing soft power assets. As a type of strategic communication used by states, Public Diplomacy is instrumental to further foreign policy objectives by directly engaging with

populations overseas (Cull, 2008). The media are fundamental in this effort, as they constitute one of the pillars of engagement with foreign publics to achieve the aim of leveraging soft power (Cull, 2019). Coined by Joseph Nye (2004), soft power refers to the capacity of a country to influence others to follow its lead by winning hearts and minds rather than military threat (i.e., hard power). This seems to be Beijing's case. Increasing its soft power is seen by Beijing as essential to strength China's discourse power in the international political arena (Y. Sun, 2011). China's president Xi Jinping stresses the role of the media for the country's soft power strategy as follows:

To enhance national cultural soft power, efforts must be made to strengthen international discourse power. This includes improving international communication capabilities, carefully constructing an external discourse system, leveraging the role of emerging media, and enhancing the creativity, appeal, and credibility of external communications. It is essential to tell China's story well, spread China's voice effectively, and explain the unique characteristics of China convincingly. (Xi, 2013 as cited by Xueershixi, 2021)

Following this logic, Beijing has created an ambitious network of international media platforms, which has been largely documented (e.g., Blanchard & Lu, 2012; Deng & Yao, 2013; Edney et al., 2020; Hartig, 2019; Rawnsley, 2015; Repnikova, 2022) with some scholars even questioning its effectiveness (Kurlantzick, 2023). Others argue that, by using covert and targeted techniques to manipulate its image and level criticism at opponents, authoritarian states like China engage in *sharp* power, rather than *soft* power (Walter & Ludwig, 2017). From this point of view, China does not engage in public diplomacy but rather in propaganda. In other words, the use of international media to shape perceptions about China is rather considered part of ideological campaigns that seek to influence populations in foreign countries and ultimately disrupt the international world order. The distinction between soft power and propaganda hinges on credibility; as Nye (2011, p. 83) notes, credibility is undermined when governments are viewed as manipulative and their information is perceived as propaganda.

Borrowing microphones: influencing through co-productions

The limited effectiveness of its own international media platforms has led China to reconsider this strategy. Zheng and Yang (2023) describe some of the ways in which China needs to wage a 'media war', particularly vis-à-vis the West. First, Chinese media need to learn from Russia and use Western methods to influence Westerners:

The West is afraid of Russia's external propaganda¹ because Russia understands their internal emotions and uses Westerners' emotions to influence the West. In contrast, China's propaganda method is to simply express its own Chinese emotions, so it not only fails to influence others, but also arouses their anger (Zheng & Yang, 2023, p. 221).

Second, China needs to de-centre itself. 'Today's external propaganda is too focused on promoting China, and 'China' has become the only topic, so it has a very exclusive nature. When people see it as Chinese, they naturally feel resentful' (Zheng & Yang, 2023, p. 221). Finally, it needs to fully utilise Western markets, that is, 'as setting up some integrated media companies overseas to operate in the form of companies to promote China. However, it must be emphasised that these companies cannot focus solely on China, as China issues are only part of it' (pp. 221–222).

Having understood the need to reconsider its external communication strategy, a debate emerged around two different paradigms, that is, either 'building boats to go to sea' or 'borrowing boats to go to sea' (Cai, 2020). While the former refers to creating one's own platforms, the latter implies cooperating with others and 'borrowing' their resources to accomplish one's own goals. In other words, signing collaboration agreements with media organisations around the world allows China to place content on local media platforms, thus expanding the reach of its messages that otherwise would be left unheard. Telling China's story is not an easy task and requires understanding how audiences worldwide interpret messages according to their own background knowledge, including several stereotypes, biases, and

even contradictory images of China (Zhou, 2017). Local media professionals are better equipped to encode messages in a way that is better aligned with the interpretation practices of the audiences, thus maximising the effectiveness of this strategy.

While initially China was keen to engage in co-productions to attract both capital and talent to fill a know-how gap in its own capacity to produce high-quality audio-visual products (Colapinto, 2010), nowadays collaboration agreements have become a way of extending the reach of its own messages with the objective of re-shaping global narratives about the country. In addition, by associating themselves with reputable media organisations from around the world such as the BBC, NHK, KBS, Discovery and others, Chinese broadcasters are also making progress in terms of their international credibility (Rawnsley et al., 2021).

China's external communication and Latin America

Previous studies on China's growing influence in Latin America have mostly focused on economic activities (Ellis, 2015; Jenkins, 2010, 2022; Roby, 2020) as well as geopolitical implications, especially examining issues such as the tripartite relationship between China, the United States and Latin America (Ellis, 2009; Jenkins, 2010) and the extension of the Belt and Road Initiative to the region (Montoya et al., 2019; Moreno et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, a few studies looked at China's diplomatic response by examining the so-called 'mask' and 'vaccine' diplomacy strategy (Nolte, 2023; Telias & Urdinez, 2022; Urdinez, 2021). In the case of cultural diplomacy, some studies highlight Chinese efforts to culturally influence Latin America through the Confucius Institutes (Lo & Pan, 2016; Xiao, 2017) or through discursive diplomatic practices (Labarca & Montt Strabucchi, 2019).

Research in media and communication studies is still lagging. While there is an abundance of research exploring China's international media operations in the African continent (Gagliardone, 2013; Gorfinkel et al., 2014; Leslie, 2016; H. Li, 2023; Madrid-Morales, 2016; Marsh, 2016; Maweu, 2016; Umejei, 2018; Wasserman, 2018;

Wasserman & Madrid-Morales, 2018; Wekesa & Zhang, 2014; Xiang, 2018; Xiang & Zhang, 2020), Latin America has received less attention. While some studies look at China's image in Latin America as reflected by the local press (Armony, 2012; Labarca et al., 2023; Morante & Wu, 2023; Ospina Estupinan, 2017; Vila-Seoane, 2023), a growing body of literature examines the expansion of Chinese media in the region (Morales, 2018, 2022a; Camoça & Araújo, 2021; Duarte et al., 2022) and isolated cases of partnerships with local broadcasters such as Bandeirantes Group (Morales & Menechelli, 2023) or Telesur (Morales, 2022b). However, no study up to date offers a comparative perspective on the main contents broadcasted in Chinese and Latin American media partnerships. This study aims to fill this gap by examining what the main narratives and discourses present in these collaborations are and what they tell about China's soft power strategy in the region. This article adopts a comparative perspective by analysing cases in four countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Venezuela.

To explore this phenomenon, this study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: What do these co-productions indicate about the relations between China and Latin American countries?

RQ2: How are these programmes discursively constructed and what does this say about the dynamics between both media organisations?

RQ3: What are the underlying ideological messages of these collaborations and what does it tell us about China's soft power strategy in Latin America?

Methods

To answer the RQs, a comparative study of four programmes co-produced between Chinese and Latin American partners was conducted. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) based on Norman Fairclough's (1993) was selected as the suitable approach. This methodology was deemed appropriate since the purpose of this study is to analyse the

discourses embedded in the text as well as highlighting the societal perspective of those discourses, which is both complex and layered. In addition, it is dialectical insofar there is an interplay between discourse and power, as in case studies (Fairclough, 2013).

Sampling

Following an initial screening of Chinese media engagement across Latin America, four countries were identified where collaborations resulted in co-productions: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Venezuela. The researchers selected cases based on two main strategies: on the one hand purposive sample criteria was used (Miles & Huberman, 1994), that aims to deepen the degree of scrutiny rather than being representative (Palinkas et al., 2015) and illustrate the phenomena that is being studied (Booth, 2016). In addition, purposive sample criteria chooses the subjects/objects of study based on the richness of the data and therefore, provides the researchers with more insights (Campbell et al., 2020). The programmes were selected following three criteria. First, these four South American countries were chosen because at the time of the study they shared 'comprehensive strategic partnerships' with China (Bórquez & Bravo, 2021), which means a deeper relationship, based on trust and cooperation, including also the 'full pursuit of cooperation and development on regional and international affairs' (Fulton, 2019, p. 33). Although the definition has been contested (Wilkins, 2015), it is a stronger status than the most common 'strategic partnership' that China holds with more than 70 countries worldwide. The ideological discrepancies among the parties in power within the sample enriches the analysis and results. A second criterion was the focus on collaborations where journalism is the primary concern, excluding cases involving film co-productions. Consequently, the sample was limited to programmes broadcast by news media organisations, which provided richer data. The final criterion was the level of accessibility and availability of the programmes.

On the other hand, researchers also used the convenience sample technique, hence also considering the availability of the sample (Moser & Korstjens,

2018). Indeed, the samples were collected based on their public availability (free contents on web sites), which not always were listed systematically. To ensure the robustness of the sample, researchers did a first screening of all the material freely available and chose those based on the first criteria (purposive sample) to ensure richness of the data. Finally researchers also considered data saturation to complete the sample, understanding this contested concept as in Fusch and Ness (2015) in which there is 'no new data, no new themes, no new coding, and [there is the] ability to replicate the study' (p. 1409), and therefore following the original spirit of Glaser and Strauss (1967), cited in Saunders et al. (2018) in which 'saturation means that no additional data are being found whereby the sociologist can develop properties of the category. As he sees similar instances over and over again, the researcher becomes empirically confident that a category is saturated' (p. 1895).

The cases studied are (in chronological order): *Mundo China* (Brazil), *Efecto China* (Chile), *Espejo de Palabra* (Venezuela), and another *Espejo de Palabra* (Argentina). *Mundo China* or China World (henceforth referred to as B, for Brazil) has been a regular feature on BandNews TV since November 2019, after its parent company Bandeirantes Group and China Media Group signed a cooperation agreement which included, among other aspects, the co-production of a short news segment solely dedicated to China stories, including science and technology, culture, and China-Brazil relations. Privately owned, Bandeirantes Group is one of the largest broadcasters in Brazil, being BandNews TV among the most popular news channels in the country. *Efecto China* or China Effect (henceforth referred to as C, for Chile) in turn is broadcast by Radio Cooperativa, one of the most popular privately-owned news radio stations in Chile. A meeting between Fabián Pizarro, a journalist working for Radio Cooperativa, and a journalist from China Radio International in May 2019 reportedly facilitated the creation of this co-production (Biblioteca del Congreso Nacional de Chile [BCN], 2019). *Espejo de Palabra* or Word Mirror (henceforth referred to as V, for Venezuela) was first aired in 2021 and is a co-production between

CGTN and the international TV broadcaster Telesur. Primarily funded by the Venezuelan government, at the time of its inception Telesur was a project sponsored by 'like-minded governments' across Latin America, including Argentina, Uruguay, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua. Nevertheless, in the last decade, a few governments have stopped funding to the channel, notably Argentina, Uruguay, and Ecuador. Finally, the format was replicated a year later, maintaining the same name *Espejo de Palabra* (henceforth referred to as A, for Argentina) and in co-production with the news agency Télam, Argentina's state-owned national news agency.

The format differences between the programmes rendered the sampling process complex. All these are audio-visual co-productions, apart from C, the only radio programme. To strengthen the comparability, the universe of each programme was considered. While B and C have been broadcasting for longer and the universe consists of multiple episodes, there is only a handful of episodes for V and A. Considering this, the sample was set at five episodes each, with the exception of C with six episodes. Table 1 provides details regarding each episode sampled.

Data analysis

Once the sample was identified, three researchers participated in the coding process. First, programmes were allocated to native speakers of Spanish and Portuguese, respectively, who then produced transcriptions of each programme. Second, a coding guide was developed deductively following Fairclough's (1993) approach to CDA, which was then reviewed and altered inductively by closely examining the texts and identifying data components that addressed the research questions. Coders proceeded to annotate texts by identifying elements that were revealing of the textual, discursive, and societal dimensions, which are essential in this methodology. For the textual dimension, among many aspects, the coders examined the choice of words, particularly paying attention to naming practices (e.g., how are people, countries, institutions presented or defined?), the uses of adjectives (e.g., how are nouns qualified?)

Table 1. Sampling.

| Programme | Partners | Date | Duration | Code |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|------------|------------------------------------|------|
| <i>Mundo China</i> (B) | BandNews TV (Brazil) | 29/11/2019 | 0:03:19 | B1 |
| | + | 08/11/2020 | 0:10:18 | B2 |
| | CCTV (China) | 13/11/2021 | 0:10:16 | B3 |
| | | 19/11/2022 | Part 1: 0:07:33 Part 2: 0:09:54 | B4 |
| | | 23/09/2023 | Part 1: 0:06:56 Part 2: 0:10:07 | B5 |
| | | | | |
| <i>Efecto China</i> (C) | Radio Cooperativa (Chile) | 02/11/2020 | 0:27:52 | C1 |
| | + | 20/01/2021 | 00:27:14 | C2 |
| | CRI/CGTN (China) | 05/04/2021 | 0:27:08 | C3 |
| | | 28/03/2022 | 0:25:49 | C4 |
| | | 05/09/2022 | 0:30:49 | C5 |
| | | 07/08/2023 | 0:28:46 | C6 |
| <i>Espejo de Palabras</i> (V) | Telesur | 04/12/2021 | 0:05:10 | V1 |
| | + | 11/12/2021 | 0:05:42 | V2 |
| | CGTN (China) | 18/12/2021 | 0:06:17 | V3 |
| | | 25/12/2021 | 0:06:05 | V4 |
| | | 30/12/2021 | 0:05:53 | V5 |
| | | | | |
| <i>Espejo de Palabras</i> (A) | Télam (Argentina) | 25/10/2022 | 0:07:44 | A1 |
| | + | 26/10/2022 | 0:08:11 | A2 |
| | CGTN (China) | 27/10/2022 | 0:08:27 | A3 |
| | | 28/10/2022 | 0:08:27 | A4 |
| | | 29/10/2022 | 0:07:35 | A5 |
| | | | | |

and verbs, as well as register (e.g., is expression formal, colloquial, artistic, etc.?) and modality (e.g., the use of active vs. passive voice). For the discursive dimension, intertextuality was a key point of analysis. The coders examined and identified the uses of different voices to construct the text (e.g., whose words are cited in quoted or reported speech? And who is being interviewed in the programmes?). For the societal dimension, the coders elevated the level of abstraction to identify the underlying ideological framework through which the text was constructed (e.g., what is the dominant ideology or simply *weltanschauung* proposed by the text?). Beyond general concepts in political philosophy (e.g., modernity, postmodernism, neoliberalism, globalisation) rooted in Western thought, the coders also examined whether the texts were revealing of concepts pertaining to China's own ideology, for example, 'core socialist values', 'Chinese dream', 'community of common destiny for mankind' (See among other: Gow, 2017;

Miao, 2020). Given the richness of the data, the following section highlights some of the emerging themes pertinent to each RQ.

Findings

China as an attractive and powerful partner

Regarding RQ1, the programmes position China as an attractive and powerful partner for Latin American countries, particularly in relation to its strong economy and high-tech sector. For example, some of the programmes highlight the strong performance of the Chinese economy (B1), the speed of construction work (B1), the large scale of events such as the International Import Expo which is 'the world's largest import fair' (B3) and has attracted a 'significant contingent of global exhibitors' (B2). In technology, it stresses the significance of China's global exploration

(B3), the success of its aircraft production (B4), and important technological advances (C5). The use of ‘innovative technologies’, and ‘green fuels’ (B5) allow it to be responsible and protect the environment. China’s success is attractive for Latin American partners, especially because of the enormous potential for consumption due to the changing demographics (C2). For example, the Free Trade Agreement between Chile and China has allowed to diversify and ‘exponentially multiply’ the volume of products exported to China (C2), consequently becoming Chile’s most important trade partner (C4).

China’s development attests to the success of its unique model and the tenacity of its people. China represents a ‘paradigm shift’ (C1), with an ‘open’ economic model based on a ‘shared benefit mentality’ (A1). China is the ‘Asian Giant’ (C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C6), a country that has undergone overwhelming changes (C5), with cities that are ‘emblematic’ like Beijing (C3) and ‘cosmopolitan’ like Shanghai (C3). Its society is ‘modern, contemporary, with high buildings’ (C1). With ‘great leaders’ (C3), Chinese people ‘are capable of [achieving] anything’, working ‘tirelessly’ (A2) and having a ‘firm determination to create miracles’, ‘despite suffering repeated defeats’ (A3).

The programmes highlight the friendship between China and Latin American countries. As a ‘very strong partner’ and a ‘very active and strong supporter’ (B4) of multilateral institutions in global governance, China has an ‘inflexible will’ to ‘work together’ with those that ‘share the same yearning’ to strengthen globalisation (V5). In the case of Chile, for example, the relationship between both countries is described as at a ‘historical level’ (C1, C4), having an ‘integral relation’ (C1), a ‘strategic association’ (C4), with a ‘common agenda to solve complex problems’ (C1), where the exchanges have increased to ‘technology, scientific development and connectivity’ (C1), as well as environmental protection (C5). Their ‘friendship’ is based on ‘mutual respect’, ‘equality’ and ‘cooperation’ (C4). Similarly, there is a ‘profound friendship’ between the Chinese and Colombian people (V1), with both countries showing ‘great courage and an indestructible friendship in the fight for humanity’s destiny’ (V1).

Culture is the main area where parallels are drawn to Latin American countries. China’s culture is

described as ‘traditional’ (B2, B4), with a ‘long history’ (B2), ‘millennia-old’ (B3, CR), ‘rich’ (B4), and ‘mysterious’ (C6). However, not exempt from being influenced by Western culture (C3), as well as Latin America, particularly through literature (C2). For example, Mo Yan and García Márquez are authors of ‘immortal creations’ (V1), Mo Yan is described as a ‘young’ writer, ‘impressed’ by Latin American literature (V1), thus the connections between these two civilisations are ‘deep’ and ‘transcend time and space’ (V3). In addition, Confucianism and ‘Ancient Inca people’ left a ‘common legacy’ (V2).

The co-productions with state-sponsored media outlets adopt a more ideological tone, either individually or as a civilisational bloc. For example, Argentina is depicted as a ‘leading country in agriculture and farming’ and aiming to become a ‘full member’ of the BRICS (A1), it is ‘generous’ and plays a key role in the scientific exploration of Antarctica (A2), has given ‘great importance’ to the environment for a long time (A3). As a bloc, ‘China and Latin American countries’ foster ‘multilateralism’ and pursue ‘long term development’ by ‘helping others’ (V4) and achieving ‘common prosperity’ (V1), whereas other countries seek ‘unilateralism’ and focus on their ‘own interests’ (V4). The co-productions with private broadcasters highlight trade and other types of exchanges. For example, Chile is the ‘first South American country to recognise the People’s Republic (of China)’ (C1, C4), which offered ‘critical support’ for China to join the WTO (C1, C4). Chile sees itself as China’s ‘entrance door to South America’ (C4) and considers its relations with China as a ‘state policy that goes beyond the incumbent administration’ (C1).

As evidenced by the above analysis, the asymmetry between China and Latin American countries – where China is the more powerful and attractive partner – suggests the predominance of a hegemonic Chinese perspective. Even in instances where the Latin American voice is present, the use of words such as ‘giant’, ‘global’ and ‘successful’, as well as descriptions of China’s economic performance, frame it as a model for Latin American countries to follow. Although there is an effort to construct a narrative of equality, the use of hyperbolic adjectives when referring to China underscores the underlying power dynamics within the discourse.

Diversity of dynamics according to each partner

Regarding RQ2, the data revealed a form of parallel intertextuality that integrates voices and references from the cultures represented by each co-producer. This serves as the primary discursive tool in the sampled co-productions and reflects the varying dynamics between Chinese and Latin American media organisations. Similar to the textual dimension, a discrepancy emerges between private and state-sponsored media organisations. In Brazil and Chile, the discourse is primarily centred on China, whereas in Venezuela and Argentina, the focus shifts to the relationship between both partners, either as civilisations or as individual countries.

In the case of private media, co-productions incorporate both Chinese and local Brazilian or Chilean voices, either as presenters or as interviewees. However, while in Brazil the discourse is constructed by an overwhelming majority of Chinese interviewees, in the case of Chile, Chilean voices tend to dominate. This indicates that the dynamics between both partners vary. While in Brazil, CCTV editors play a greater role in the journalistic production of B, the producers of C seem to rely more on local voices. For example, in the sample analysed, besides the presenters, only a few Brazilians are present, such as a film critic and a 'volunteer' (B3). However, in the case of Chile, in addition to the presenter Rafael Pardo and the main announcer, there are appearances of representatives from Cruzando el Pacífico (C1, C2, C5) –or Crossing the Pacific, is a non-profit institution based in Chile that promotes academic, educational, and cultural exchanges between China and Latin America – as well as interviewees with scholars (C1, C2, C3), a student (C6) and other professionals such as an interpreter (C1) and employee at a Confucius Institute (C5). Among the few Chinese interviewees are the Ambassador to Chile (C4), the cultural attaché (C6) and an interpreter (C1). The history of the relations between both countries is constructed by mentioning exchanges between artists (C1) and the former Chilean president Salvador Allende as a supporter of the 'One China Policy' (C1). Other leading ideas are economic cooperation (C1, C4) and bilateral relationship that benefits Chile (C1, C3, C4).

The programmes also include references to books about China written by Chileans such as 'El sueño Chino' (C1), authored by the economist Osvaldo Rosales, and 'Hola China, Ni Hao' (C2) by Fernando Reyes Matta, former ambassador of Chile to China. Finally, even music is part of intertextual tools, for example, both by Chinese (C1, C2) and even Chilean singers like Violeta Parra, albeit in Mandarin (C3). Another striking difference is that while in Chile all sources are disclosed, in the case of Brazil some interviewees are not identified with their names or titles, including Chinese experts (B2, B3) and individuals (B2, B3, B4), as well as foreigners (B4), for example, an unidentified Thai politician praising China's partnership (B4).

In the co-productions with state-sponsored media, the dynamics between both sides tend to be more balanced, with each episode featuring presenters from both China, as well as Venezuela and Argentina, respectively. Similarly, each episode in the Argentinian version features two interviewees, one Argentinian and one Chinese, who comment on a particular topic, illustrating admiration for their respective cultures, for example, Ye Jiajun's passion for tango dancing and Roberto Taschuk's love for martial arts (A4). Furthermore, both series are structured following Xi Jinping's wisdom quotes. In the case of Venezuela, each episode is articulated by wisdom quotes used by Xi during his visits to Colombia (V1) or Mexico (V3), Chile (V4), and Spain (V5). In some cases, Xi writes letters to leaders (V2) or publishes articles in newspapers such as Chile's *El Mercurio* (V4) or Spain's *ABC* (V5). Similar to the Venezuelan format, Xi's voice is central to A, either arguing for 'openness and inclusivity' as a means conducive to prosperity for humanity (A1), stressing the importance of global governance of science and technology (A2), highlighting China's commitment to environmental protection (A3), supporting the idea that diversity is a positive value and that all civilisations are unique and equal (A4), or illustrating how 'China upholds a philosophy of people-centred development and unswervingly pursues prosperity for all. The way to govern the country begins by enriching the people' (A5). Unlike Xi, the then Argentinian president Alberto Fernández is only mentioned once (A1).

Parallelism is another rhetorical tool frequently used at the discursive level, with a small difference between V and A. While in the former, the dialogue is between civilisational interlocutors (China and Latin America), in the latter it is between countries (China and Argentina). For example, Chinese voices such as Mo Yan (V1), Ge Hong (V1) Sunzi, Mencius (V2), Pu Songling (V3), and Chen Shou (V5), are the interlocutors of the intellectuals from different countries in the Spanish-speaking world like Gabriel García Márquez (V1), Eduardo Galeano (V1), León Felipe (V2), Alfonso Reyes, Emilio Carballido Fernández (V3) and, José Ortega y Gasset (V5). However, in A there are references to Argentina's main literary masterwork 'Martin Fierro' (A1) and writers like Nicolás Cáraro (A2) and Jorge Luis Borges (A3), as well as quotes from Qu Yuan (A2), Xia Houxuan (A4), Zhong Lifeng (A4), and Guan Zhong (A5) as Chinese counterparts.

At the discursive level, thus, there is an effort to build a narrative of balance of power, either by comparing predominant figures of both regions, showing a more 'humane' dimension of Chinese leaders, or highlighting common topics in which both regions can engage together. As stated in previous literature (see for example, Labarca, 2015), perception of cultural distance, make more difficult a proper engagement and trust among China and Latin America. But by creating a narrative focused on common grounds, Chinese are prone to look for familiarity and trust given the attempt to build a co-created identity (Labarca, 2014).

Borrowing microphones to spread China's own vision for Globalisation

Regarding RQ3, the collaborations between Chinese and Latin American media organisations help Beijing expand its soft power by highlighting its positive contribution to the world. China is shown as a land of opportunities (B1, B2, B3, B5), attracting talents (B5), connected to the world (B2, B5). It is a force and a partner for global development (B4, B5, C5), based on 'true multilateralism' (B5), pursuing win-win cooperation and peaceful coexistence (B4), and embracing an 'ecological civilization' (B3, B4, B5, C5).

Globalisation is a key concept embedded in all cases studied. It facilitates exchanges both in culture as well as trade (C2), with twin cities programmes bringing people together and creating spaces of mutual learning (C3) and following a path of sustainable development to achieve 'common prosperity' (C5). Xi's vision of globalisation as a 'community of shared destiny for humankind' is even more salient in the co-productions with state-sponsored media. For example, only by avoiding protectionism (A1) and unilateralism (V5) can humanity 'build a home of harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature'. Scientific research is considered a shared value for the progress of humanity (A2) and protecting the environment is the only way to guarantee sustainable development (A3). In addition, these collaborations also highlight China's core socialist values, for example, harmony (V1), friendship (V1, V2), prosperity (V1, V3), freedom or liberalism (V4, V5) and civility (V1), as well as other concepts such as mutual benefit (V3), cooperation (V3, V4) and openness (V4). Diversity, tolerance, and acceptance are values that allow countries to thrive (A4), and a socialist approach to development (A4).

China's contribution to humanity is illustrated through its international aid efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in Chile, the vaccine diplomacy narrative is salient (C1, C3, C4), and the construction of the Sinovac factory is framed as a cooperation between both countries (C4). In Venezuela, the first-person plural is frequently used to stress the sense of joint efforts,. However, China is often described as a model, for example, through its donations of vaccines (V2), and putting its own interests aside to 'shoulder the burden and move forward together with others' (V3). China cooperates with others to seek solutions, for example, Xi Jinping and Chile's president Gabriel Boric are described as reaching 'ample consensus in cooperation such as the fight against the pandemic, economic cooperation and global governance' (C4). Geopolitical positioning is rarely addressed, for example, China's ambassador in Chile highlights Beijing's initiative of a peaceful solution by negotiation and against unilateralism regarding the conflict in Ukraine (C4).

Finally, China's soft power strategy seeks to improve the country's image. Despite some exoticism (B1, B2), Chinese culture is described as both traditional and modern, embracing classical and innovative elements (B5), that is, a place with 'artistic legacies declared as intangible cultural heritage of humanity' (B3), but technologically advanced (B2, B3, B5). All this allows China's soft power (B3, B5) to grow, for example, 'Outside the country, Chinese blockbusters are increasingly winning over the audience' (B3).

This dimension highlights the narrative of China as a benign power (Labarca, 2014; Jiang, 2011), which is a strategy China has been pursuing globally since the 2000, when both political and academic voices start to warn the growing power of the country. Although the portrait as a benign power is not new, the subjects in which the narrative is based are. In simpler terms, China is aware of the relevant global topics such as the environment, world peace, as well as being portrayed as an opportunity for talents.

Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to explore the articulation of China's public diplomacy strategy by analysing the main discourses present in co-production projects between Chinese and Latin American media organisations. The four cases examined demonstrate that by establishing agreements with various types of media organisations – differing in platforms, ownership, and funding models – China effectively maximises the reach of its messages and creates more opportunities to 'tell China's story well'. For instance, China's state-sponsored news media have partnered with both public and private media companies that provide multimedia services ranging from audio-only radio programmes to live broadcast audiovisual news segments on television, as well as online content primarily designed for social media consumption.

The dynamics between partners reveal varying degrees of reciprocity, challenging the notion of 'win-win cooperation'. While the presence of both Chinese and Latin American voices creates the impression of inclusive and equal collaborations,

this is only partially the case. For instance, in B and C, the focus is predominantly on China and its relevance to local audiences. In these cases, China is portrayed as an opportunity, with local voices included primarily to construct a positive narrative about China's rise. In other words, none of the episodes analysed adopted a critical lens to examine China and its presence in Latin America.

The same applies to V and A, albeit with nuances. While the structure of these programmes suggests substantial symmetry in the inclusion of voices from both sides, the core message remains centred on China and serves to amplify Beijing's ideology. For example, in V, the essence of each episode revolves around a quote attributed to Xi Jinping (even if not necessarily his own), with the Latin American perspective functioning as a complement. Another indication of asymmetry is that China, as a single nation, is positioned as a civilisational interlocutor on par with Latin America as a whole, rather than with individual countries – in this case, Venezuela. Compared to the other cases, A appears to be the most balanced, with Chinese and Argentinian voices presented on a more equal footing.

Regarding the discourses that emerge from these co-productions, it is possible to identify a South-South cooperation discourse –together with variations such as 'win-win opportunities' and 'learning from each other'– constituting the overarching theme among all collaborations. This is present in the overall discourse towards the region as shown by the white papers published by the Chinese Government (Labarca & Montt Strabucchi, 2019; Chinese State Council, 2016; Stallings, 2016). However, the stress is evidently tilted towards highlighting the significance of China's rise and prompting populations in Latin America to adopt more favourable attitudes vis-à-vis China's operations in the region. First, the design of the programmes indicates a limited scope in terms of the targeted audience. The programmes are produced primarily for Latin American consumption. Without exceptions, all presenters speak either Spanish or Portuguese, even seemingly Chinese nationals. While V and A circulated on Chinese social media with Mandarin subtitles, it is unclear if other programmes were also translated. Second, the content focuses primarily on showcasing China in a more

advantageous manner, that is, economy and technology, portrayed as a leader but also as a responsible and caring actor within the global arena. A third topic is the perceived emphasis on the uniqueness of China, for example, stressing its millennia-old history and its exotic culture.

At a superficial level, these programmes seem to be devoid of clear political or ideological positionings, which is coherent with the overall discourse of China's relationship with Latin America centred on trade and overall cooperation. However, the texts show clues that are indicative of an ideological agenda. These programmes are instrumental to 'telling China's story well' and positioning Beijing both as a leader of the Global South as well as a defender of liberalism, multilateralism, and globalisation. At the same time, there is a very clear positioning against protectionism and unilateralism, which can be interpreted as a direct critique of the wave of nationalism that has shrouded political debates in many Western countries.

In conclusion, the metaphor of 'borrowing microphones' effectively illustrates the central argument of this article, that is, media partnerships constitute tools for Beijing to extend the reach of its public diplomacy efforts to enhance soft power. Despite variations and a certain degree of agency by local partners, the asymmetric dynamics in the relationship between broadcasters suggest that Latin American media become an extended platform for Chinese media (and ultimately the Chinese government) to disseminate their messages. This dynamic appears to align more closely to media imperialism rather than with the idea of 'winning hearts and minds' as suggested by Nye's (2004) conceptualisation of soft power. This article does not oppose media agreements *per se* or the potential benefits for all partners involved. However, the apparent asymmetry in these relationships warrants further scrutiny. Moreover, the emphasis on 'telling China's story well' and prioritising positive reporting raises the risk that these co-productions may be perceived as part of a broader propaganda campaign orchestrated by Beijing. From Nye's (2011) perspective, this would undermine efforts to generate soft power. In our view, it would also reinforce the argument that authoritarian regimes engage in sharp power.

Finally, this study merely scratches the surface of this phenomenon, leaving many questions

unanswered. For instance, given the seemingly asymmetric relationship between both parties, to what extent is the coverage of China journalistically sound? In other words, how would these programmes address critical issues related to China? It is also important to acknowledge certain limitations of this study. As one of the first of its kind, the research examined only four programmes from a qualitative (CDA) perspective, focusing on four Latin American countries. The selection followed specific methodological criteria but was also influenced by availability. Future research should consider a larger sample and adopt a longitudinal perspective to provide deeper insights into this evolving dynamic.

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Data availability statement

Data available by request.

Note

1. The original Chinese version uses the word *xuanchuan* (宣传), which is often translated as propaganda. In Chinese, the term propaganda only refers to the dissemination of information particularly of public interest and lacks the negative connotation that exists in English and other languages. In the last few years, official translations have migrated from using the word ‘propaganda’ to ‘publicity’.

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