

An Elite Experiment: How the Brazilian Ruling Class Sees China

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Abstract: This paper focuses on Brazilians' perceptions of China. Its central argument is that Brazilians' general perception of China can be well described as conflicting. It also argues that democracy and access to information are the issues that damage China's image the most, while the BRICS, culture, sports, and education are the topics that benefit China in the way it is seen in Brazilians' eyes. The work is divided into two parts. First, it explains the methodological tools used to develop and treat data tracked by this original survey of Brazilians' perceptions of China. Second, it presents the empirical findings gathered from the survey. In this section, the paper shows indexes related to twenty-two topics, eleven issues, and an index for the aggregate Brazilian perception of China. In addition to its empirical findings, this study claims its relevance based on its methodological process to turn qualitative measures into a quantitative index, and then turn it back into newly elaborated qualitative standards.

Keywords: China, perception, Brazil, environment, democracy, trade

Introduction

This article focuses on Brazilians' views of China. To achieve an understanding of the perceptions Brazilians have of the country's main commercial partner, the analysis was divided into three parts. Firstly, before going into its central argument – that Brazilian's general perceptions of China is conflicting – we will briefly discuss the concept of perception and its importance to the field of international relations.

Subsequently, the article will explain the methodological tools used to develop and treat the data tracked. Then, it will present the empirical findings gathered from the survey on Brazilians'

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perceptions of China. In this section, the paper shows indexes related to twenty-two topics, eleven issues, and an index for the aggregate Brazilian perception of China. In addition to its findings, this study claims its relevance based on its methodological process to turn qualitative measures into a quantitative index, and then turn it back into newly elaborated qualitative standards.

The main focus of this research paper is to understand how Brazilians seated in key positions at key offices of Brazil's private and public sectors see China, regarding eleven issues. The survey was sent electronically to 112 high representatives of the main segments of the government, civil society, third sector, and political parties. The response rate was 40%, as forty-four participants answered the questions during the first semester of 2017. It is important to emphasize the high institutional representativeness of the sample, involving respondents that occupy critical positions in a wide array of Brazil's key political inclinations and interest groups.

Amongst the respondents were high up representatives of civil society and business groups, such as the Federations of Industries of the states of Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina. Answers were also received from the top layer of national government agencies, such as the Ministry of Planning and the Ministry of Social and Agrarian Development.

Several high up governmental representatives also answered the statements, such as those from the International Relations of the Research Institute (IPRI-FUNAG), the Brazilian Space Agency, the National Agency of Waterway Transportation, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Tourism, and the Ministry of Foreign Relations, amongst others. Moreover, the survey gathered the perceptions of representatives of non-governmental organizations and civil society, such as "Instituto Socioambiental", "Instituto Ayrton Senna", Foundation "Educar DPaschoal", and the Presbyterian Church.

A Novel Methodological Approach: Pairs of Related but Opposing Statements

A perception can be considered the image of the world a decision-maker has at a given time (Vertzberger, 1990), and it is related to one's cognition. Cognition influences many studies in foreign policy decisions (Levy, 2013; Mintz & DeRouen, 2010; McDermott, 2004; Mintz 2004; Jervis, 2002; Vertzberger, 1990; Jervis, 1976). The turning point in the development of a cognitive

paradigm for international politics came with Jervis' (1976) pivotal study of perceptions and misperceptions in foreign policy (Levy, 2013).

Jervis assessed the theoretical and experimental evidence from many areas of psychology. He focused on areas that directly affect discussions concerning perception and misperception in international relations. Jervis contributed significantly to the recent enthusiasm towards psychological approaches in international relations. A central premise of the cognitive paradigm revolves around the complexity, incoherence, and inconstancy of the ever-changing world. Thus, people have limited capacities to make accurate depictions of reality, processing information that is far from the ideal standards of rationality.

Therefore, cognitive predispositions or mindsets would play a disproportionate role in shaping a person's perceptions. This paradigm argues that there is a tendency for people to see what they expect to see based on their prior beliefs and worldviews, despite reality. This scenario leads to the persistence of beliefs over reason. In other words, perception is more theory-driven than data-driven (Jervis, 1976). Many international relations scholars who have applied social psychology to their field have followed Jervis' line of thought (Levy, 2013).

The dragon was a symbol of imperial power during the Han dynasty. Currently, China is referred to by Western scholars as a dragon, due to its strength, although the Chinese mythological creature has little to do with the hostile animal sometimes portrayed in the West (Deng & Wang, 1999). On the contrary, the Chinese dragon is a spiritual and cultural icon which represents prosperity. On the other hand, Brazil's association with the small canary (*canarinho* in Portuguese) was first related to its national soccer-team yellow jersey. Since avoiding discord and disharmony, as well motivating other countries to cooperate, stands as a central facet of Brazil's diplomatic tradition (Borges, 2017; Centracchio, 2016), we use the image of this friendly and benevolent bird to refer to Brazil. The imaginary of such distinct creatures – and countries – makes one wonder: how the canary would see the dragon?

This article presents a methodological tool which consists of a survey procedure named *pairs of related but opposing statements* (PROS). It potentially implies a refinement of the way surveys' data are both collected and examined, and it therefore helps to overcome certain criticisms about

surveys' scientific validity.

In short, regarding how data are gathered, it does not use a single and independent question as its unit for data collection, but rather a set of two questions that, although related to the same selected topic, are based on statements (to be judged by respondents) that are opposing in their meanings. Regarding how data are analyzed, answers are not computed individually either, but instead they will be computed in pairs. This procedure aims to double-check respondents' answers to the first question of the pair via their answer to the second one.

Since the two questions of each pair hold opposite meanings, the answers given to them by the respondent are expected to be opposite as well. To obtain more robust data on respondents' perceptions of a particular topic, investigators must first add together the two algorithms which represent the answers given by the respondent. The PROS survey model aims to work as a technique that enables data to have a more balanced relationship between the respondent's original perception and the answers he/she gives in the survey's questionnaire. It is also expected to be a mechanism to ensure a more unbiased approach, since investigators - independent of their own positive or negative view of a certain topic - are required to build up the questionnaire's structures with both positive and negative statements to be judged by the respondents.

Hence, the study uses a conventional approach (i.e. a survey), but with some novel procedures. The survey is actually part of a seven-step analytical framework. First, it selects the key issues related to the subject under investigation, in this case, regarding the Brazilian perception of China. As for this study, the issues selected were the BRICS (an association comprised of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), economy and trade, democracy, the environment, multilateral relations, domestic politics, access to information, education, culture, sport and, last but not least, religion. These key issues work as intervening variables which distinguish between the nuances and proprieties of Brazilian perception.

Second, it develops the survey's questionnaire according to the novel PROS model. Therefore, the first question (i.e. the *A Type question*) of each pair always asks the respondent to judge a positive statement about China, while the second question (i.e. the *B Type question*) of the

pair always points out a negative statement on the same topic. For instance, supposing that the *A Type* question's statement is 'China is today's world leader in investments in greenhouse gas reduction', the *B Type* question could be 'China has increased its relative contribution to degrading the stratosphere'. Table 1 shows the selected key issues as well their respective pair of related but opposing statements.

Key Issue	Respective PROS (Type A Question and Type B Questions)
BRICS	A. The BRICS are an important incentive for Brazilian development. B. China does not give real importance to neither the BRICS nor to Brazil.
Economy & Trade	A. The Chinese government conducts fair and transparent trade negotiations. B. The Chinese manufacturing industry is a threat to jobs in Brazil.
Democracy	A. China's political regime is suitable for a country with a vast territory and population. B. China should be condemned for not being a democratic regime.
The Environment	A. China is a leader in investments in greenhouse gas reduction. B. China degrades the environment.
Human Rights	A. The Chinese government respects international human rights law. B. Chinese economic power is based on inhumane conditions imposed on workers.
Multilateral Relations	A. China represents the interests of the Global South in the international system. B. Chinese relations with the United States are more important to China than Chinese alliances with the developing world.
Domestic Politics	A. China's political system promotes the common good of Chinese society. B. China has high levels of corruption, impunity, and illegal political practices.
Information Access	A. The internet control carried out by the Chinese government has positive elements. B. There is no freedom of press in China. Restrictions on access to information are harmful to the Chinese population.
Education	A. Chinese educational system is better than the Brazilian one. B. There is excessive repression in the Chinese educational system.
Culture & Sports	A. Chinese traditional wisdom should be further explored by Brazil. B. China does not have much to contribute to Brazil in terms of culture and sport.
Religion	A. Chinese religions are elements of convergence with Brazil. B. Buddhism and Confucianism are rivals of the Brazilian Christian culture.

Table 1. The PROS's Key Issues

Starting the stage of the examination of the data, the third step consists of turning perceptions into numbers. Respondents' qualitative answers are transformed into rationally valid corresponding quantitative data, as shown in Table 2.

Respondents' qualitative array of answers	Corresponding arithmetical data
a. I completely agree	2
b. I agree	1
c. I have no opinion on it	0
d. I disagree	-1
e. I completely disagree	-2

Table 2. Turning perception into numbers

Since the second question of each pair (the *B Type* question) holds a negative statement, any answer given to it will be computed in its inverse value. This is necessary, due the model's assumption that someone's disagreement with a negative announcement reflects their positive perception of the subject to the same extent that someone's agreement with a negative announcement reflects their negative perception about it.

To operate the model's assumption properly, any results for the *A Type* questions will be multiplied for -1 . For instance, if the respondent's answer to a negative statement is "e" (I completely disagree), which corresponds to -2 , it will be multiplied by -1 , getting 2 as the product of the equation. Similarly, the -1 multiplier factor will be applied to the entire array of possible answers.

Fourth, the model reverses, now turning the numbers back into perceptions again, according to the array of arithmetical potential results and their corresponding qualitative measures, as shown in Table 3.

Arithmetical results	Corresponding perceptions
2	Highly positive
1	Positive
0	Null (has no impact on their general view)
-1	Negative
-2	Highly negative

Table 3. Turning numbers back into perceptions

Fifth, the model tracks the final index, which portrays the aggregate of all respondents'

perceptions on all issues (the Σ index). Table 4 shows the formulas used to calculate both I index and the Σ index.

Index	Specific Goal (To track the :)	Formula
I	Perception of a particular topic	$I = \frac{AQ + BQ}{2}$ In which: AQ = Result for Type A question BQ = Result for Type B question 2 = Number of questions
Σ	Aggregate of all respondents' perceptions of all issues	$\Sigma = \frac{II + OI}{NI}$ In which: II = Result for issue 1 OI = Other issues' results NI = Number of issues

Table 4. Indexes and their formulas

Lastly, it places the Σ index on a continuum in which Σ Index=2 is in one of the extreme points (comprising the most positive perception of China) while Σ Index= -2 is at the opposing extreme point (encompassing the most negative perception of China). The Σ index position in the continuum can be placed into one of nine perception zones: two positive ones, one neutral, two negative ones, and four zones of transition (Figure 1).

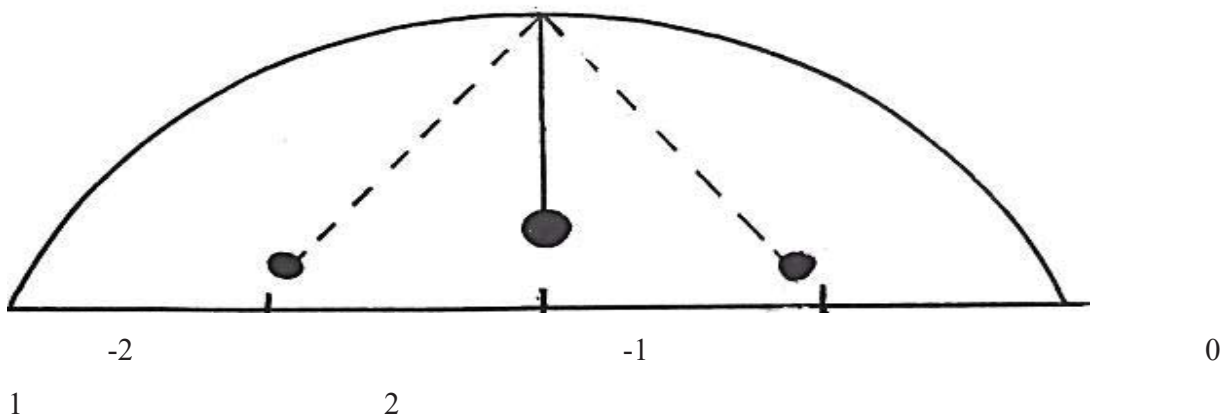


Figure 1

Index	Perception
1.6 to 2	Highly positive
1.5	Transition zone A (between highly positive and positive)
0.6 to 1.4	Positive
0.5	Transition zone B (between positive and null)
-0.4 to 0.4	Neutral (no impact on the issue/aggregate)
-0.5	Transition zone C (between null and negative)
-1.6 to -0.4	Negative
1.5	Transition zone D (between negative and strongly negative)
-1.6 to -2	Strongly negative

Table 5. The Perception Pendulum

Analysis of the Empirical Findings

Results for Type A Questions (Positive Statements)		
BRICS	The BRICS are an important incentive for Brazilian development.	0.83
Economy & Trade	The Chinese government conducts fair and transparent trade negotiations.	-0.60
Democracy	China's political regime is suitable for a country with a vast territory and population.	-1.00
The Environment	China is a leader in investments in greenhouse gas reduction.	1.00
Human Rights	The Chinese government respects international Human Rights law.	-0.60
Multilateral Relations	China represents the interests of the Global South in the international system.	0.43
Domestic Politics	China's political system promotes the common good of Chinese society.	0.80
Information Access	The internet control carried out by the Chinese government has positive elements.	-2.00
Education	The Chinese educational system is better than the Brazilian one.	1.00
Culture & Sports	Chinese traditional wisdom should be further explored by Brazil.	1.50
Religion	Chinese religions are elements of convergence with Brazil.	1.00

Table 6. Type A questions' results (positive statements) by topic

Results for Type B Questions (Negative Statements)		
BRICS	China does not give real importance either to the BRICS or to Brazil.	0.67
Economy & Trade	Chinese industry is a threat to jobs in Brazil.	1.00
Democracy	China should be condemned for not being democratic.	-1.00
The Environment	China degrades the environment.	-1.67
Human Rights	Chinese economic power is based on inhumane conditions imposed on workers.	-0.40
Multilateral Relations	Chinese relations with the United States are more important to China than Chinese alliances with the developing world.	-0.71
Domestic Politics	China has high levels of corruption, impunity, and illegal political practices.	-0.60
Information Access	There is no freedom of press in China. Restrictions in access to information are harmful to the Chinese population.	-1.00
Education	There is excessive repression in the Chinese educational system.	0.00
Culture & Sports	China does not have much to contribute to Brazil in terms of culture and sport.	-0.50
Religion	Buddhism and Confucianism are rivals of the Brazilian Christian culture.	1.00

Table 7. Type B questions’ results (positive statements) by topic

According to the survey, there is a positive view on the **BRICS**. When it comes to its role in Brazil's economic development, the 0.83 result for the Type A question (Table 6) indicates a supportive perception. This is confirmed by the 0.67 result for the Type B question (Table 7) generated by the answers to the question on the importance China gives to the BRICS as whole and to Brazil in particular. Therefore, Brazilians endorse China and the BRICS as necessary partnerships for boosting Brazil’s economic growth.

In relation to the topic **economy and trade**, the survey concluded that Brazilians have a negative perception of China’s commercial endeavors. The -0,60 result for the Type A question (Table 6) shows that Brazilians tend to mistrust China’s negotiations on trade, deeming them not as fair and transparent as Beijing states. However, Brazilians do not believe that Chinese companies are direct competitors of Brazilian companies. The 1.00 result for the Type B question (Table 7) indicates that Brazilians have a positive perception of Chinese industries, while analyzing its impact on jobs in Brazil.

According to the Perception Index on **democracy**, Brazilians’ view as a whole is negative. The -1.00 result for the Type A question represents that Brazilians do not consider that the Chinese

political regime would be a more suitable one for the country. In addition, the second -1.00 result for the Type B question negative view indicates that China should be internationally condemned for conducting a non-democratic political regime. The overall perception shows that a democratic regime matters. Therefore, as the Chinese regime is not considered democratic by the Brazilian people, they are concerned about it.

On **environmental** issues, the Brazilian perception about China is positive (result 1.00) when it comes to Chinese investments deployed to curb greenhouse gas emissions (Table 6). Nonetheless, the perception is negative regarding China's relation with environment deterioration. The -1.67 (Table 7) result suggests that Brazilians have a strongly negative perception about this issue. Brazilians see China as one of the world leaders in environmental deterioration.

In respect to **human rights**, Brazilians have one negative and one null perception on this topic. First of all, the -0.60 (Table 6) result showcases that Brazilians perceive China as a recurrent violator of human rights rules internationally. Besides that, the -0.40 (Table 7) survey result states that Brazilians do not have a fixed opinion when it comes to work conditions in China.

The topic on **multilateral relations** brings a negative and a null perception about China. Firstly, the null perception 0.43 (Table 6) about China's representativeness of Global South's interests means that Brazilians have no consolidated opinion on this issue yet. Nonetheless, the second question is negatively perceived (-0.71), as seen in Table 7. According to Brazilians' perceptions, China considers its bilateral relations with the United States to be more relevant than ones it establishes with countries in the developing world.

Regarding this part of the survey, there is a mixed view of Chinese domestic politics. When it comes to the role of China's political system in promoting the common good of Chinese society, the 0.80 (Table 6) result denotes a supportive perception, though this is contradicted by the reactions to the affirmative on its levels of corruption, impunity, and illegal political practices. The -0.60 (Table 7) result indicates that interviewees partially agreed with this negative perception.

In relation to access to information, the survey suggests that there is a predominantly

negative view. The -2.00 (Table 6) result shows that examinees strongly disagreed with the assertion that the internet control carried out by the Chinese government has positive elements. In addition, the -1.00 (Table 7) result reveals that individuals partially agreed that there is no freedom of the press in China and that restrictions to information are harmful to society.

The perception about Chinese education falls into a transition zone between null and positive. The 1.00 (Table 6) result suggests there is a positive perception of the Chinese educational system, which is considered to be better than the Brazilian one. The survey indicates that there is not a clear opinion on whether the repression in the Chinese educational system is excessive, since the result is null (0.00), according to Table 7.

In what concerns culture and sports, the results were contradictory. On the one hand, the 1.5 (Table 6) result implies that interviewees have a positive perception of Chinese traditional wisdom, which they considered should be further explored by Brazil. On the other hand, the 0.5 (Table 7) result means that the perception of the contribution that China could give to Brazil in terms of culture and sports is in a transition zone from null to negative.

BRICS	0.75
Economy & Trade	0.20
Democracy	-1.00
The Environment	-0.33
Human Rights	-0.50
Multilateral Relations	-0.14
Domestic Politics	0.10
Information Access	-1.50
Education	0.50
Culture & Sports	0.50
Religion	1.00

Table 8. I Perception Index

Finally, the survey showed there is a positive perception in regard to religion. The 1.00

(Table 6) result indicates a supportive perception of Chinese religions as elements of convergence with Brazil. Similarly, the 1.00 (Table 7) result reveals that Buddhism and Confucianism are not seen as rivals of the Brazilian Christian culture.

According the *I* Perception Index, Brazilians’ perceptions of China are positive on the BRICS, religion, education, and culture and sports. However, they are negative on democracy, human rights, the environment, and access to information. On issues such as domestic politics, economy and trade, and multilateral relations, Brazilians’ perceptions of China are still null or are almost null. As was said before, a null result does not imply the absence of any view on the issue, but it does indicate the presence of at least two conflicting points of view on the same subject.

The Aggregated Perception (Σ Index)

The Aggregated Perception (Σ Perception) Index is 0.04, which refers to the conflicting perception category. It indicates the non-prevalence of either an absolutely positive image or an absolutely negative image about China.

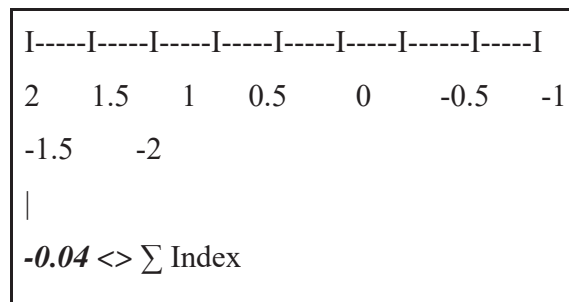


Figure 2. The Aggregate Perception Index (Σ Index)

This non-prevalence means an unstable situation, in which the aggregate perception could either remain in this state, or could easily and unexpectedly to shift into either a positive or negative position. It seems reasonable to state that policy makers and businessmen are better served in their goals and purposes if aware of the shifting and unstable nature of a concrete situation encompassed by any Σ Perception Index between -0.4 and 0.4.

Conclusion

The survey was conducted on Brazilians' perception of China during the first semester of 2017. It is relevant to mention that the results do not showcase either the Brazilian population's view or the official opinion of the organizations mentioned in the paper. Rather, it displays the perception about China of respondents seated in key positions at key offices in Brazil's private and public sectors. The strong qualitative nature of the sample ensures the distinctiveness of the research and the reliability of the results.

The *results for Type A questions (positive statements)* show that the environment and access to information were the main topics with negative rates. This highlights that Brazilians are aware of the struggles China is having with regards to those issues. As far as access to information is concerned, the majority of the survey's participants perceived China as a non-democratic country which restricts some internet contents to its population. Moreover, the way China deals with the press is one of the main concerns of Brazilian citizens. In relation to the environment, a topic that has drawn Brazilians' attention in the last few years is environmental degradation. Since both the media and researchers indicate that China is one of the world's largest gas-emitter due to its rapidly growing economy, Brazilians raise concerns about how pollutants' emissions can affect the environment as a whole.

However, *question Type B results* also display that the environment, education, and culture and sports have the highest positive rates. It is interesting to note that, although participants see China as one of the main environmental polluters, they also are aware of all investments China makes in renewable energy. China's efforts in this matter are well-known by various segments of government, civil society, third sector, and political parties. Education and culture and sports are other topics that were high-rated by participants, due to the positive perception Brazilians have of these items. For Brazilians, China represents a country committed to providing high quality education and high performance in sports. Brazilians know they have a lot to learn from China in those issues.

Different from the findings from the *results of the questions*, the *I* index indicates that the BRICS and religion received better rates as a whole. Participants see the BRICS as a relevant

coalition for the developing world, and believe that Brazil can gain considerable ground in the partnership. Moreover, Brazilians in general have a positive perception of China's engagement with the BRICS. Regarding religion, participants did not perceive China's religions as Christianity's rival. On the contrary, Brazilian understand that Buddhism and Confucianism, for example, can be an element of convergence with Brazil, as more and more Brazilians have declared themselves followers of Eastern religions in recent times.

With regard to negative rates, the survey findings indicate that questions of both Type A and B have similar results. Access to information and democracy received the worst rates in the index, which confirms what was said before: Brazilians perceive China as a non-democratic country which restricts communication channels. This result shows that the democratic system is a pivotal tenet for participants. Recent historical events make Brazilians in general more inclined to defend democratic values.

In general, democracy and access to information were the main issues which damaged China's image in Brazil. In contrast, the BRICS, culture, sports, and education were the issues that boosted China's image and drew Brazil's attentions. Therefore, according to the survey findings, Brazilians' overall perception of China is conflicting. This should come as no surprise, given the complexity and multidimensionality of China's presence in Brazilian society. In this sense, the fact that there are contradictory results is not a problem, but rather a sign of an interesting area that requires further research and explanation.

Another possible reason for the existence of conflicting notions regarding China can be found in Brazil's limited understanding of the Asian state. Few Brazilian nationals are sinologists, and even fewer have extensive experience in China or speak Chinese. Sadly, there is no sign that this is going to change any time soon, since there is no strategy or policy in force to foster broader interest in China, its language, reality, or culture. In contrast, Beijing invests heavily in the training of an elite group of analysts with a sophisticated understanding of Brazil - including precise goals on how many Chinese people should learn Portuguese. Thus, the fundamental nature of Brazil-China ties today is one of a deep asymmetry of knowledge: China knows a great deal about Brazil, while Brazil knows very little about China (Stuenkel, 2018).

That fact underlines the importance of this research project as a valid - and welcomed - effort to address this unevenness by understanding a phenomenon that remains largely unknown: how China is seen in Brazil, especially by those occupying critical positions in Brazil's governmental agencies, political parties, and interest groups. Overcoming this lack of knowledge is a necessary condition for Brazil to develop a proper strategy for dealing with China in a way that supports its national interests. In this sense, investment in academic research, including additional surveys, is a must.

Due to its limited scope and qualitative nature, this study focused on specific segments of Brazilian society, leaving the perception of other social groups unmapped. Thus, others can build on the results found by applying the survey in different niches - such as the working class and the population in general - to see whether this will lead to similar results. The information gathered would be a step in the direction of providing Brazil with needed insights to deal more wisely with its main Asian partner.

Besides addressing these issues, for future research, the survey method could be replicated spatially, temporally, and spatially-temporally. Spatial replication could be applied to other BRICS' countries to map the perception of China within their populations. This study would be relevant to understanding how tight the ties between China and the coalition are. On the other hand, temporal replication could be employed from the year 2017 onwards to follow up China's image throughout time. Finally, the survey modelling should be applied on a spatial-temporal basis, creating a historical series of the perception of China in other BRICS countries from 2017 onwards. The development of such research would be valuable to allow China to strengthen its image amongst some of its four main partners in the emerging world.

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