

China's Cultural Diplomacy in a New Era of Multilateralism: The Case of the China-Community of Latin American & Caribbean States (CELAC) Forum (CCF)

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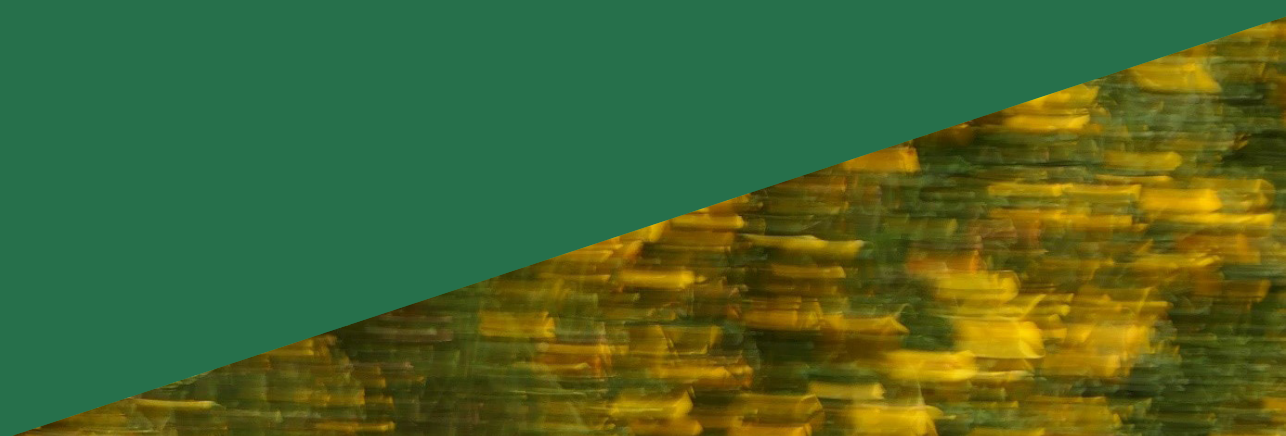
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China's Cultural Diplomacy in a New Era of Multilateralism

*The Case of the China-Community
of Latin American and Caribbean
States (CELAC) Forum (CCF)*

Ximena Zapata



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Abbreviations

AACAL	<i>Asociación de Amistad entre China y América Latina</i> China-Latin America Friendship Association
AACHILAC	<i>Asociación de Amistad China-Latinoamericana y el Caribe</i> Chinese-Latin American and Caribbean Friendship Association
ACCWS	Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies
ACD	Asia Cooperation Dialogue
ACFY	All-China Youth Federation
ACSF	All-China Sports Federation
ACYF	All-China Youth Federation
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
AIL	<i>Alianza Informativa Latinoamericana</i> Latin American Informative Alliance
ALADI	<i>Asociación Latinoamericana de Integración</i> Latin American Integration Association
ALAECH	<i>Asociación Latinoamericana de Estudios Chinos</i> Latin American Association for Chinese Studies
AMRO	ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office
APACHIN	<i>Asociación de Amistad Paraguay-China</i> Paraguay-China Friendship Association
APLMF	Asia-Pacific Legal Metrology Forum
APSCO	Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization
APT	Asia Pacific Telecommunity
ARGG	Academy of Regional and Global Governance
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BC	Before Christ
BFSU	Beijing Foreign Studies University
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
BRNN	Belt and Road News Network
CACMS	China Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences
CAEG	China Arts and Entertainment Group
CAF	<i>Corporación Andina de Fomento</i> Development Bank of Latin America
CAFA	Central Academy of Fine Arts

CAITEC	Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation
CALAS	Chinese Association for Latin American Studies
CASCF	China-Arab States Cooperation Forum
CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CCBTC	China Council for BRICS Think Tank Cooperation
CCC	Chinese Cultural Center
CCCWS	China Center for Contemporary World Studies
CCETCF	China-Caribbean Economic and Trade Cooperation Forum
CCF	<i>Foro China-CELAC</i> China-CELAC Forum
CCIA	China Cultural Industry Association
CCOIC	China Chamber of International Commerce
CPC	Communist Party of China
CCPIT	China Council for the Promotion of International Trade
CDAC	Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations
CEAP	Center for Asia-Pacific Studies
CECHIMEX	<i>Centro de Estudios China-México</i> China-Mexico Center of Studies
CECHIVER	<i>Centro de Estudios China-Veracruz</i> China-Veracruz Studies Center
CECLA	<i>Comunidad de Estudios Chinos y Latinoamericanos</i> Community of Chinese and Latin American Studies
CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
CELAC	<i>Comunidad de Estados Latinoamericanos y Caribeños</i> Community of Latin American and Caribbean States
CELC	<i>Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos sobre China</i> Center for Latin American Studies on China
CFAU	China Foreign Affairs University
CFIS	China Foundation for International Studies
CFIT	China Funds-in-Trust
CGTN	China Global Television Network

CHILACFA	China-Latin America and Caribbean Friendship Association
CI	Confucius Institute
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia
CICIR	China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations
CIEA	China International Exhibition Agency
CIFCA	China International Friendship Cities Association
CIIS	China Institute of International Studies
CIPG	China International Communications Group
CIPI	<i>Centro de Investigaciones de Política Internacional</i> International Policy Research Center
CIYEC	China Youth Center for International Exchange
CLACPC	<i>Centro de Prensa China-América Latina y el Caribe</i> China-Latin America and the Caribbean Press Exchange Center
CLACSO	<i>Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales</i> Latin American Council of Social Sciences
CLEPEC	<i>Centro Latinoamericano de Estudios Políticos y Económicos de China</i> Latin American Center for Political and Economic Studies on China
CMG	China Media Group
CMIM	Chiang Mai Initiative Multilateralisation
CNIE	China NGO Network for International Exchanges
CNKI	China National Knowledge Infrastructure
COSC	Counsellors' Office of the State Council
CPAFFC	Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPIFA	Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs
CRA	Contingent Reserve Arrangement
CSTEC	China Science and Technology Exchange Center

CVEC	<i>Centro Venezolano de Estudios sobre China</i> Venezuelan Center for Chinese Studies
CWA	Chinese Wushu Association
CYLC	Communist Youth League of China
e.g.	Latin: <i>exempli gratia</i> for example
ECLAC	United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
ESPOL	<i>Escuela Superior Politécnica del Litoral</i> Litoral Polytechnic School
et al.	Latin: <i>et alia</i> and others
etc.	Latin: <i>et cetera</i> and other similar things
EU	European Union
FALCARPC	<i>Federación de América Latina y el Caribe de Amistad con la República Popular China</i> Federation of Latin America and the Caribbean for Friendship with the People's Republic of China
FAWK	<i>Federación Argentina de Wushu Kung Fu</i> Argentina Wushu Kung-Fu Federation
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FEALAC	<i>Foro de Cooperación Asia Oriental-América Latina</i> Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation
FLACSO	<i>Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales</i> Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences
FNU	Fujian Normal University
FOCAC	Forum on China–Africa Cooperation
FWRM	<i>Federación de Wushu de la República Mexicana</i> Wushu Federation of the Mexican Republic
GDI	Global Development Initiative
GRULAC	<i>Grupo de América Latina y el Caribe</i> Group of Latin America and Caribbean Countries
ICH	Intangible Cultural Heritage
ICOMOS	International Council on Monuments and Sites

ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IDB	Inter-American Development Bank
IDCPC	International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China
IGO	Intergovernmental Organization
ILAS	Institute of Latin American Studies
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INBAR	International Bamboo and Rattan Organization
IT	Information Technology
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
Jr.	Junior
JSNU	Jiangsu Normal University
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean
LCD	Liquid-crystal Display
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MOST	China's Ministry of Science and Technology
n.d.	no date
NAMOC	National Art Museum of China
NATCM	National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine
NDB	New Development Bank
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NLC	National Library of China
OAS	Organization of American States
OBOR	One Belt One Road
OBW	<i>Organización Boliviana de Wushu</i> Bolivian Organization of Wushu
OFDI	Outward Foreign Direct Investment
OIJ	<i>Organización Iberoamericana de Juventud</i> Youth Organization for Ibero-America
PCC	Central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba
PRC	People's Republic of China
RCEP	Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIIS	Shanghai Institutes for International Studies

SOE	State-owned Enterprise
SSC	South-South Cooperation
STI	Science and Technology Innovation
TWMG	Tang West Market Group
TYSP	Talented Young Scientist Program
UCJ	<i>Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas de Cuba</i> Young Communist League of Cuba
UDUAL	<i>Unión de Universidades de América Latina y el Caribe</i> Union of Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNAM	<i>Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México</i> National Autonomous University of Mexico
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
US	United States
USD	United States dollar
VTV	<i>Venezolana de Televisión</i>
WB	World Bank
WBA	Worldwide Women's Business Alliance
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization
YSF	Young Scientist Forum

Foreword

The rise of China as an economic power is accompanied by the intensification of its cultural engagements abroad. The author, Ximena Zapata, gives an overview of recent developments and analyses its motivations and strategies. She covers motivations such as facilitation of regional knowledge acquisition for economic cooperation and informs about established instruments such as regular fora for media, friendship cities, local governments, think tanks, and youth participation, shedding light on this topic through different means beyond flagship Confucius Initiatives. The author shows how these engagements are complemented by strategies to shape narratives in multilateral organizations on a global level and eventually the multilateral landscape itself.

I would like to thank the author, Ximena Zapata, for her commitment to this research project and for accepting this complex task to simultaneously analyse cultural engagements in different layers of regional platforms and the multilateralism of the UN. In addition, I would like to thank my ifa colleagues, Sarah Widmaier and Ivana Putri, for accompanying the research project and careful editing this report.

This study forms part of ifa's Research Programme "Culture and Foreign Policy", in which experts provide analysis on current developments relating to culture and foreign policy with the aim of involving academics, practitioners, policymakers, and civil society. Only fully informed societies can choose and develop their methods and goals to maintain cultural relations as a democratic practice. Even in a changing world order, cooperation will remain essential. Risk mitigation, contextualisation and capacity assessments need to be part of its far-sighted strategy.

Odila Triebel

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Abstract

Cultural diplomacy has been one component of China's foreign policy since its very foundation. However, it is only in recent decades that culture has been wielded as a tool to serve high-reaching goals commensurate with China's rising superpower status and its capacity to contend for global hegemony. This study examines China's recent efforts to enhance cultural exchanges in multilateral and regional platforms. The primary aim is to analyse the rationale, motivations, main initiatives and strategies underpinning China's cultural diplomacy based on a conceptual framework centred on the notions of cultural diplomacy and hegemonic transition. The author begins by presenting the guiding conceptual framework and providing an overview of China's overall cultural diplomacy approach over the last two decades. The analysis then delves into China's engagement in well-established and new multilateral platforms such as UNESCO, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the BRICS group, and regional forums established between China and developing regions. Shifting the focus to Latin America, the research investigates the China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) Forum (CCF) as a platform for cultural exchanges and an instrument of China's cultural diplomacy, and systematizes its cultural initiatives, prioritized areas, key actors involved, and strategies. By way of conclusion, the study summarizes the main findings, assesses the trajectory of the CCF in the cultural dimension and proposes recommendations.

Executive Summary

China's rise as a global economic power is undoubtedly one of the most relevant events of our time. Thirty years ago, it was almost impossible to imagine that China, considered by many as a “whale country” unviable in the development debates, would become an economic superpower, the latest “miracle” in the development race and the main challenge to the Western hegemony since the beginning of the 21st century.

China's recent emergence has been accompanied by deliberate efforts to advance its cultural influence and bolster cultural exchanges worldwide. It is hard not to find traces of China's cultural diplomacy in multilateral institutions, regional forums, and exchanges at the national and societal levels. Cultural diplomacy has been a component of China's foreign policy since its very foundation. However, it is only in the last decades that culture has been wielded by the Chinese government and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) as a tool to serve high-reaching goals commensurate with its current superpower status and its capacity to contend for global hegemony.

This research examines China's cultural diplomacy and its use on multilateral and regional platforms as an instrument to achieve ambitious national objectives in the framework of the current hegemonic transition. The primary aim is to analyse the rationale, motivations, key initiatives, and strategies underpinning China's cultural diplomacy. To achieve this, this study draws on conceptualisations around the notions of cultural diplomacy, hegemony and hegemonic transition and begins by exploring China's cultural engagements in well-established and new multilateral institutions. These include the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and regional forums which developing regions maintain with China. The focus then shifts to Latin America and the cultural ties which this region and China have been trying to cultivate in the framework of the China-CELAC Forum (CCF).

The CCF is an interesting case to study because it operates within the universe of institutions mainly created by China's initiative to establish closer ties, including cultural engagements, with other regions. In this line, the CCF is akin

to “sister” institutions to the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF) and the China-Africa Cooperation Forum (FOCAC) and as such it is part of China’s broader multilateral strategy towards regions in the Global South. It is also the most encompassing institution ever created in the history of Sino-Latin American relations to foster exchanges and cooperation across various domains, including culture.

Findings

China’s cultural diplomacy at the multilateral level

- China has adopted a more assertive approach to cultural diplomacy under Xi Jinping’s leadership. China’s cultural diplomacy is linked to his “Major Country Diplomacy” foreign policy doctrine which calls the country to assume a leadership role in global affairs, increase its international influence, play a greater role in global governance, and become a leading country in culture and sports by 2035.
- China’s foreign policy and, by extension, cultural diplomacy policies aim to create what can be described as “inside-out parallel worlds”. The intention is not an immediate replacement of the dominant multilateral institutions but the gradual encircling of the liberal institutional architecture to such an extent that the old system becomes irrelevant and is replaced by a new system (Zhang 2017, 16).
- Following this logic, China has actively engaged in and strengthened cultural initiatives within organizations such as UNESCO and circumvented the liberal institutional architecture by creating alternative platforms like the BRI and BRICS and regional forums like the CCF, each with a variety of spaces for cultural exchange.
- When comparing the cultural initiatives implemented across the newly created multilateral and regional platforms, it becomes evident that they generally share similar features. These institutions have a Media Forum, a Friendship Cities and Local Governments Cooperation Forum, and a forum for think-tanks and the participation of young people. All these platforms are part of China’s well-established repertoire of cultural diplomacy programmes.

China's cultural diplomacy in Latin America

- China's efforts to influence and win the sympathy of Latin Americans has a long history which dates back to its foundation in 1949. China's foreign policy towards Latin America has gone through three phases. Initially, it focused on "people-to-people diplomacy" until the mid-1960s, then shifted from class struggle to economic recovery and the establishment of diplomatic and economic relations with Latin American countries until the 1990s. Since the turn of the century and especially since the creation of the CCF in 2014, there has been a renewed interest in China to elevate the importance of culture in Sino-Latin American relations and link this dimension to accomplish broader strategic objectives and implement the BRI as its flagship initiative and "development promise" to peripheral countries.
- China's strategic imperative lies in cultivating approval and receptivity from peripheral regions, including Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), to achieve consensual hegemony. Despite not holding immediate regional significance for China, LAC's alignment with the broader Global South and the geographic proximity of the region to the US render the region a vital player in China's pursuit of hegemony amid the ongoing hegemonic transition in the world order.
- The CCF hosts various cultural initiatives in the subcategories of education, arts, sports, people-to-people and subnational exchanges, and media, bringing together a myriad of actors such as university scholars, artists, students, young people, journalists, media outlets, friendship and sports associations, and local authorities.
- These exchanges take place in different formats and platforms: within the framework of permanent subforums integrated to the CCF's formal structure by celebrating annual gatherings; medium- to long-term projects for training, research exchanges and media collaborations; and cultural programmes such as art exhibitions celebrated on a regular basis. By 2023, there were at least ten subforums in the cultural area.

Objectives

China's cultural diplomacy objectives in Latin America align with those pursued in the multilateral arena. These include:

Projecting a favourable image

The aim is to project a favourable image of China which shifts away from its past revolutionary ideals and projects a modern united nation which preserves the aesthetics of a millenary civilisation and culture. In the regional Latin American context, this involves, for instance, emphasizing China's shared path as a formerly peripheral country which achieved economic success through autonomous development.

Conveying political standpoints

China's cultural diplomacy is driven by the need to propagate political stances on conjunctural events (e.g. China's role in the pandemic, US-Taiwan ties) which have tarnished its global reputation. The dissemination of China's own narratives, often referred to as the "Chinese version" of stories, is crucial for China in this sense. In Latin America, these narratives stress partnership, cooperation and mutual benefit as core principles of China-Latin America relations, in contrast to the perceived asymmetrical ties historically sustained by the region with core powers, mainly the US.

Understanding the region

China has a genuine interest in strengthening cultural bonds to understand the region. Geographical distance, limited knowledge, stereotypes, and the distinctive cultural attributes of Latin American societies are the main factors which pose a challenge to the deepening of Sino-Latin American relations, according to China's perspective. Beyond building people-to-people connections through music, art, language, and exchanges, China's cultural diplomacy is also intended to ease the difficulties confronted by Chinese companies and entrepreneurs which invest and do business in the region.

Presenting alternatives to the West

In its search for hegemony, China aims to position itself as a responsible power which offers alternative paths for development and governance to peripheral regions like Latin America. China's "development promises" are intended to strategically address the gap caused by the US' inability to fulfil its role as a hegemon and provide solutions to the problematics of periphery and the international system as a whole.

In the LAC region, these proposals include the "1+3+6 cooperation framework", the "3x3 cooperation model" and, more recently, the BRI and Global Development Initiative (GDI) which have been diffused on platforms like the Young Political Leaders' Forum, the China and LAC Dialogue between Civilisations Forum, the China-LAC Think Tank Forum, and the China-CELAC High-Level Academic Forum.

Strategies

China has enhanced the cultural dimension of the CCF through the following strategies:

- Revitalisation of past instruments of cultural diplomacy used in Latin America such as guided tourism, printed material, the establishment of like-minded friendship associations, and engagement with influential figures.
- Replication of cultural initiatives and projects previously applied in the BRICS and China's regional forums, like the CASCF and the FOCAC.
- Centralisation of dispersed cultural exchanges between Chinese and Latin American actors and their integration in the structure of the CCF.
- Decentralization of China's excessive role in organizing and implementing CCF's cultural projects by involving Latin American organizations and universities in planning and hosting events in Latin American cities.
- Establishment of collaborations between prominent regional organizations such as CLACSO, ECLAC and FLACSO and Chinese academic institutions and publishers for the dissemination of knowledge and joint publications.

Balance and recommendations

- There is a noticeable imbalance with regard to the contribution of Chinese and Latin American actors in upholding culture-oriented initiatives within the CCF. The CCF serves as a platform for China to employ its repertoire of cultural diplomacy instruments. Cultural exchanges within the CCF are largely shaped by the parameters of China's well-established cultural diplomacy. China has a predominant role in determining the cultural initiatives to be implemented in the CCF, their organization and continuation.
- The members of CELAC have not agreed on fundamental principles, objectives and guidelines for their engagement with China, let alone specific policies or strategies in the field of cultural diplomacy.
- Achieving the desired level of intensity in cultural exchanges between China and LAC countries remains a challenge. Many of the CCF's cultural initiatives are made possible through arrangements in high-level spheres without much involvement from civil society actors in strategic decisions.
- The challenge lies in finding ways to decentralize the CCF's cultural initiatives, allowing for a more direct engagement by Chinese and Latin American civil society groups while minimizing the excessive role of governments.
- It is crucial for CELAC to establish its own cultural diplomacy parameters as a regional body in alignment with its goals and values, and to set specific objectives in the field of culture with regard to China and other regions like the European Union (EU).
- The EU, in its recent efforts to relaunch its ties with Latin America based on the "New Agenda for Relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean" and the "Global Gateway Investment Agenda", is confronted with the challenging task of demonstrating that its vision of "fair and inter-connected societies" extends beyond its geopolitical interests.

- Both the EU and China should ensure that their desires for “vibrant people-to-people partnerships”, whether through the BRI or the Global Gateway Investment, are rooted in genuine mutual cooperation and a shared commitment to addressing and preventing even deeper neocolonial and unequal cultural relations which may arise.

Introduction

China's rise as a global economic power is undoubtedly one of the most relevant events of our time. While for most of the developed and developing world the end of the 20th century was marked by a harsh economic, financial and debt crisis, China already showed consistent results in its strategy of moving away from a marginal position to an enviable status as the world's largest exporter and manufacturer as well as the second largest economy (World Bank 2013, xxi)¹. Today, it verges on a cliché to observe China's emergence as an economic powerhouse.

China's assertive moves in the field of culture are a more recent development. China is now more familiar to international audiences than it has ever been. One frequently comes across Chinese performing arts, films, dance, and acrobatic shows, the popularisation of sports and martial arts, courses to learn Chinese cuisine and the Mandarin language, and so on, in numerous countries. The systematic intervention of the Chinese government in the field of cultural diplomacy to achieve more ambitious goals in the global arena is a relatively new trend.

Although the promotion of culture has been a part of China's international diplomacy since the 1940s, it is only since the past decade that culture has been utilized as an instrument by the State and the CCP to reshape the world order. Based on a less dogmatic approach, China's cultural diplomacy operates at different levels: multilateral, regional, nation-to-nation, and societal (people-to-people²), all strategically aligned with Xi Jinping's long-term objectives of "Major Country Diplomacy". These goals primarily include the fulfilment of the "Chinese Dream" or the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and the implementation of the BRI, the world's largest infrastructure project which stands as Xi Jinping's distinctive trademark.

While some remain fascinated by the so-called "Chinese miracle" and the richness of its millenarian culture and traditions, other actors, especially in the West, including media, politicians and academics, perceive the propagation of

¹ According to the World Bank, China will overtake the US before 2030.

² The term "people-to-people" has a double connotation. In overall terms, it refers to direct interactions among individuals and civil society organisations from different countries. When the Chinese government uses the term "people-to-people diplomacy", this typically comprises government-led efforts and state programs involving organisations and individuals which may be subject to government oversight.

Chinese culture as a tactical instrument wielded by the Chinese government to attract and co-opt others to admire and share China's core interests. This latter view is particularly evident in a myriad of reports and scholarly articles which commonly draw upon Nye's soft power theorisations to warn about what is construed as China's dangerous intentions: the disruption of the established "rules-based liberal international order" and its associated institutions, along with the expansion of its authoritative influence into other regions (Edney, Rosen, and Zhu 2020).

Clearly, China has shifted its role in multilateral diplomacy from being a passive observer to consolidating itself as an assertive actor in global institutions of the liberal order, such as the United Nations (UN) bodies, in conformity with its new political and economic status. Furthermore, China has assumed an advocacy role within regional frameworks. It interacts with developing countries in organizations like FOCAC (established in 2000), CASCFC (created in 2004) and, more recently, the CCF (founded in 2014). It is virtually impossible not to find traces of China's cultural diplomacy in the multiple exchanges which take place within these multilateral and regional institutions.

When it comes to Latin America, after decades of a low-profile approach, China's cultural exchanges with the region are gaining ground. The creation of the CCF in 2014 marked a milestone in relations between China and LAC countries. For the first time in history, both actors formalized a common intergovernmental platform through which China and 33 LAC countries have the possibility to enhance their connections and collaborate on shared objectives across various dimensions. The CCF stands out as the most encompassing institution (in terms of membership) ever created at the intergovernmental level in the LAC region for engaging with China. Its importance is derived from its role as an organization which aims at reorganizing the universe of dispersed initiatives advanced between China and LAC countries while simultaneously developing ties on a bilateral basis (Vadell 2022, 192).

The CCF is usually portrayed as a high-level platform led by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of China and the CELAC member states for addressing pressing issues of common interest in the main dimensions of China-LAC relations: economy, trade, finances, and investment. CELAC is one of the emblematic institutions in Latin America which has embraced a form of high-level summit

diplomacy (Sanahuja 2014, 92) and this is also reflected in the CCF. However, it is important to consider that the CCF has proved to be a broad mechanism of interaction not limited solely to top governmental authorities. It also serves as a coordinating space for civil society actors and non-governmental organizations. Moreover, along the “hard-core” dimensions of the China-LAC interaction, culture has never been a neglected area, even in the initial steps of the CCF.

In fact, the first subforums³ created at the 1st CCF Ministerial Meeting of 2015 included the China-LAC People’s Friendship Forum, the China-LAC Young Political Leaders’ Forum and the China-LAC Think Tanks Forum. Over time, other culture-oriented subforums and initiatives have emerged, involving a more encompassing myriad of actors such as artists, athletes, scholars, students, and journalists, thereby broadening the scope of involvement and collaboration in cultural matters.

This research seeks to investigate China’s cultural diplomacy efforts within both multilateral and regional contexts. It aims to analyse the rationale of China’s cultural diplomacy, its underlying motivations, main initiatives and strategies. Initially, the study delves into China’s engagement in well-established and new multilateral institutions such as UNESCO, the BRI and the BRICS group⁴, and in China’s regional forums. Subsequently, it narrows its focus to examine China’s cultural diplomacy in Latin America within the specific framework of the CCF.

Theoretically, this research places the current efforts of the Chinese government to promote cultural exchange activities abroad and specifically in Latin America within the framework of cultural diplomacy conceptualisations. From a global and international relations perspective, it also relies on the notions of hegemony and hegemonic transition and delves into foreign policy strategies to understand

³ Other subforums initially created within the CCF include the China-LAC Forum of Ministers of Agriculture, the China-LAC Scientific-Technological Innovation Forum, the China-LAC Business Summit, the China-LAC Infrastructure Cooperation Forum, and the China-LAC Political Parties Forum.

⁴ Multilateral institutions are understood here as formal and informal sets of rules that “...prescribe behavioural roles, constrain activity, and shape expectations” among at least three national governments (Keohane 1989, 3). While UNESCO, BRI and BRICS fall under this broad definition, it is not superfluous to mention that UNESCO widely differs from the latter two institutions because of its structured governance, persistent norms and procedures and higher level of institutionalisation.

the overall interests, timing and reasons which explain China's diplomacy at a macro level and the recent intensification of cultural exchanges between China and the LAC region.

Methodologically, this research is of an exploratory and explanatory nature. It takes a qualitative approach and relies on official documents on China's foreign and cultural policies and scholarly literature as well as official resources from UNESCO, BRI, BRICS, and China's regional forums. For the specific case of the CCF, official documents are examined, such as China's policy papers on Latin America from 2008 and 2016, and the CELAC and China Plans of Action covering the periods 2015-2019, 2019-2021 and 2022-2024 to understand the CCF's approach to culture, the prioritized subareas and planned initiatives. Moreover, a database was built which systematizes those CCF initiatives in the field of culture which were actually implemented, especially from the creation of the CCF in 2014 until 2023. This compilation is based on various sources, including official reports from the CCF, news articles and press releases.

This study is divided into seven sections. The first three offer: a) a conceptual approach which guides the research; b) an overview of the motivations which have driven the Chinese government's focus on cultural diplomacy in the past two decades, along with the underlying objectives of this strategic shift; and c) an analysis of the implementation of cultural diplomacy initiatives by Xi Jinping's government in multilateral institutions such as UNESCO, BRI, BRICS, and regional forums.

The fourth section provides a historical account of the relationship between China and Latin America, with a focus on their cultural ties. Section five is devoted to the analysis of the CCF as a platform for cultural exchanges and an instrument of China's cultural diplomacy. It systematizes the cultural initiatives and structures which have emerged since the CCF's inception, its prioritized areas and the main actors involved. Sections six and seven examine the drivers of China's cultural diplomacy in the CCF in connection with its broader national objectives. They further delve into the strategies employed by China to ensure the continuation and effectiveness of these cultural initiatives. Finally, by way of conclusion, the study summarizes the key findings, assesses the history of the CCF in the cultural dimension and suggests recommendations.

1. Cultural diplomacy and hegemony: a conceptual approach

This study positions the current efforts of the Chinese government to advance cultural exchange activities abroad within the framework of cultural diplomacy conceptualisations. Based on the idea that cultural diplomacy cannot be understood without reference to the historical moment and international context in which it operates, this analysis also relies on the notions of hegemonic transition and hegemony. These concepts offer valuable insights into the understanding of the timing, reasons and interests which have guided China's implementation of cultural diplomacy since the beginning of the 21st century.

The concept of cultural diplomacy is often ambiguous and can be mistaken for terms like public diplomacy, soft power and cultural relations. One widely recognized definition of cultural diplomacy, coined by Cummings, characterizes it as *“the cross-cultural exchanges of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding”* (Cummings 2009, 1). Seen from this perspective, the distinction between cultural diplomacy and cultural exchanges or relations becomes blurred. Other authors consider this differentiation and understand cultural diplomacy as a facet of governments' foreign policy endeavours in the areas of education, culture, science, and cooperation. Arndt further elaborates that cultural diplomacy only takes place when governments pay attention to the complex field of cultural interactions and try to give sense to it, configure it and put it at the service of national interests (Arndt 2009, 31).

For the purpose of grasping the Chinese government's endeavours in fostering cultural relations with other nations in the international arena, one could assume some elements of these definitions and understand cultural diplomacy as involving a systematic intervention of governments in cultural expressions, operationalized by governmental and non-governmental agents, and predetermined by official, national and unified visions and understandings of culture. Viewed through this lens, the notion of national projection as a key component of cultural diplomacy stands out.

In overall terms, national projection involves cultivating a favourable perception of a nation in the minds of foreign actors, promoting and supporting geopolitical, economic, trade and foreign policy objectives, and securing the interest of states in the international arena. Given that the state is the primary driving force, cultural diplomacy, in this context, is built on a one-way

communication model which aims to project or impose national cultural values and carefully crafted beliefs on global audiences (Grincheva 2020, 21).

Considering the top-down approach of cultural diplomacy in China and the fact that it is clearly an authoritarian government which implements it, the notions put forward above would suffice for the strict purpose of analysing the Chinese government's attempts to use cultural exchanges in its bilateral relations, regional and multilateral institutions as vehicles for national projection, and to achieve other national interests. However, the other component of cultural diplomacy which also needs to be addressed beyond national projection is precisely cultural relations.

Cultural diplomacy also implies a form of cultural transfer. As pointed out by Droste, this cultural transfer presupposes “...a circulation of ideas, people and cultural objects creating a space of cultural consumption and interaction, where political messages eventually reach their intended audiences” (Droste cit. in Grincheva 2020, 24). Even in the extreme case of China, cultural diplomacy cannot be solely controlled and put forward by the Chinese government. It also develops through the interactions of several agents, including transnational agents, non-governmental actors and civil society. Moreover, once cultural diplomacy “leaves China”, it is implemented by a variety of actors which may or may not endorse the official messages or possibly even endorse official narratives unintentionally. Furthermore, the outcomes of cultural diplomatic activities are no longer in the hands of governments but of national and global audiences and the public, who ultimately value the cultural exchange based on their own terms.

Cultural diplomacy as seen from the lens of national projection and cultural relations is not a new practice and its application is not limited to China. The noteworthy issue is that it has only been for the last few years that a myriad of debates and literature on China's cultural expansion has appeared in political and academic circles. These discussions not only share an undisguised sense of concern but also warn the international community about China's dangerous intentions to disrupt the established rules-based liberal international order. This heightened level of concern and attention towards China's moves has not been seen before. And hence the question is: why now?

The contention in this study is that a more comprehensive understanding of China's cultural diplomacy, along with the alarming reactions it elicits, can be advanced if we consider the historical time when it is taking place: a time of hegemonic transition. Hegemonic transition is understood here as a period characterized by breakdowns and crises of prevailing hegemonic orders. In this context, the incumbent hegemonic state, in this case the US, finds itself lacking the means and/or the will to continue leading the system of states in a direction which is widely perceived as expanding not just its power, but the collective power of the system's dominant groups (Arrighi 2007, 150). During periods of hegemonic transition, the political structure which has been put in place by the declining hegemon starts to disintegrate. While new competing parallel structures and institutions emerge interstitially, we still find ourselves in a period when the old is dying and the new cannot be born, to borrow from Antonio Gramsci's (1971) terms.

It is in this context that Chinese leaders are enacting policies under the banner of "Major Country Diplomacy", calling the country to assume a leadership role in global affairs in conformity with its new political and economic standing. Cultural diplomacy thus becomes a natural component of these overarching foreign policy objectives. During this time of hegemonic transition, China has not only exhibited greater proactivity in its cultural diplomacy initiatives within longstanding multilateral institutions such as UNESCO, but it has also ventured into new arenas such the BRICS, BRI, and CCF to forge ties in the area of culture. To make sense of China's rationale behind its cultural diplomacy endeavours in these multilateral and regional bodies, the study resorts to the notion of "inside-out parallel worlds" taken from the field of foreign policy studies.

China's foreign policy and, by extension, cultural diplomacy policies aim to create inside-out parallel worlds. The intention is not an immediate replacement of the dominant multilateral institutions; rather, it involves gradually encircling the existing institutional architecture. This strategy may also imply engaging and strengthening liberal organizations, circumventing the institutional architecture and developing alternative institutions within the cultural sphere. In essence, this overall approach entails keeping the old system temporarily intact while concurrently crafting a new parallel system. As Zhang posits, "*While the two systems do not engage in head-to-head competition directly, the new paradigm may*

gradually grow to such an extent that the old system becomes increasingly irrelevant” (Zhang 2017, 16).

Hegemony is also an umbrella concept in this study. The understanding of hegemony here draws from the perspectives of Gramsci and Arrighi. Arrighi builds on Gramsci’s core idea, which indicates that supremacy is manifested as both domination as well as intellectual and moral leadership. Taken to the international scale, hegemony is employed to characterize a situation in which a dominant state, by virtue of its accomplishments, becomes the model for other states to emulate and carries them along its developmental trajectory. Within this context, hegemony also involves the dominant state taking the lead on the system of states in its desired direction, a situation which is accepted and widely perceived as pursuing the general interest (Arrighi 2007, 149).

Culture is not overlooked in this interpretation of hegemony. Indeed, according to Gramsci, the dissemination of ideologies, values, norms, beliefs, and perceptions is key to achieving consent. This diffusion occurs through various channels, including regimes, institutions, schools, and media, among others (Gramsci 1971; Lears 1985).

Understanding culture linked to the notion of *consensual* hegemony is key. Although culture can indeed become a battleground for conflicting nations, it is essential to avoid oversimplifying cultural diplomacy as a tool to “*get others to do what they otherwise would not*” (Nye 1990, 177), as soft power literature would claim. In times of hegemonic transition, the rising hegemon needs the periphery to carry out a fundamental reorganization of world politics. This restructuring involves establishing an institutional world-system complex which is *recognised* as pursuing the collective interest and *embraced* by actors from the international system, including those from the periphery. This institutional framework must also address and accommodate the demands from subordinated groups, movements and nations and implement policies for their benefit to ensure consensual hegemony (Silver and Arrighi 2003, 325, 329).

Putting in place a renewed institutional architecture and a system of rules to replace the old-world order, as appears to be China’s intent, requires a new set of ideas, values and norms widely *accepted* throughout the system or, in

Wallerstein's lexicon, a new geoculture⁵. In this vein, cultural diplomacy strategies or cultural claims put forth by an ascending hegemonic power like China serve a broader purpose which goes beyond merely securing political power and economic advantages. They also aim to reshape geoculture and transform the way people think about the world (Kumar and Welz 2001, 226).

In a context of hegemonic rivalries and enduring influence of Western culture, this can be a difficult endeavour for China. China's potential rise as a hegemonic power, coupled with its non-Western identity, Asian origin and authoritarian rule, generates inherent suspicions in multilateral UN bodies and especially in institutions like the BRICS regarding the underlying motivations of its cultural diplomacy initiatives, perceived as seeking an alternate world order. These suspicions also challenge their effectivity and reception, particularly in peripheral regions like Latin America, which have historically been part of the US' sphere of influence.

⁵ The term "geoculture" is used and discussed by Immanuel Wallerstein in his book "World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction". The author refers to geoculture as "[a] term coined by analogy with geopolitics. It refers to norms and modes of discourse that are widely accepted as legitimate within the world-system. We argue here that a geoculture does not come into existence automatically with the onset of a world-system but rather has to be created" (Wallerstein 2004, 93).

2. China's cultural diplomacy in a new era

The growing importance of cultural diplomacy in China can hardly be overstated. Under the leadership of Hu Jintao, the role of culture in shaping foreign policy was explicitly underscored. A whole plenary session was dedicated to the topic of culture during the 17th Congress of the CPC held in 2007, which ended with a final declaration on China's new national goal: to turn China into a socialist cultural superpower (Shambaugh 2015, 99). Convinced that culture is an integral part of China's national strength and that it is becoming an arena of competition between powers, the report delivered to this Congress emphasized the need to promote China's millenarian culture abroad more vigorously and use cultural diplomacy to enhance the country's soft power.

A turning point in China's cultural diplomacy occurred in 2013. Following the closing of the 18th Congress of the CPC in 2012, Xi Jinping, who had recently assumed the position of Secretary of the CPC Central Committee, introduced for the first time the idea of the "Chinese Dream"⁶. This took place when Xi Jinping, along with fellow Chinese leaders, visited "The Road of Rejuvenation" exhibition at the National Museum of China (Singh 2022, 39).

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, a more assertive approach towards cultural diplomacy has been evidenced. The promotion of culture has not only gained full force but has also been aligned with more ambitious goals. "*The Chinese nation ... has stood up, grown rich, and become strong – and it now embraces the brilliant prospects of rejuvenation ... It will be an era that sees China moving closer to centre stage and making greater contributions to mankind,*" the Chinese leader announced at the 19th Congress of the CCP held in 2017 (Chinadaily 2017). China's cultural diplomacy has thus become a natural and strategic component of Xi Jinping's "Major Country Diplomacy" which calls the country to assume a leadership role in global affairs in conformity with its new political and economic status.

⁶ This concept underscores and encompasses the advancement of the economy and societal progress, with the goal of establishing a robust, flourishing and culturally advanced nation. The essence of the Chinese Dream is rooted in the aspiration to achieve the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". The "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" has at its core the "...building [of] a moderately prosperous society in all respects and a modern socialist country that is prosperous, strong, democratic, culturally advanced and harmonious" (Singh 2022, 40).

According to Xi Jinping's balance of the last decade, China has shown a sense of duty as a responsible major country and gained widespread recognition, influence and appeal in the international arena (Xi 2022). These perceptions, along with the belief that China's cultural rise will parallel its strategic ascent, are deeply ingrained in the country's vision of its cultural diplomacy.

Even though China repeatedly asserts that it has no intention of seeking hegemony, regardless of the stage of development it reaches, its goals in the field of culture and its multi-faceted cultural diplomacy are carefully crafted towards very ambitious objectives. Over the span of five years, China aims to increase its international influence and play a greater role in global governance. By 2035, China wants to become a leading country in culture and sports through the enhancement of its soft power (Xi 2022). China's aspiration extends beyond dealing with core countries by acting as a major country for all the international community.

Culture is at the heart of these objectives and represents a key element to achieving consent among international actors. As elucidated in the analytical framework of this research, the establishment of hegemony requires widespread consensus by the international community and must be perceived as pursuing the collective interest. Culture plays a crucial role in this process, a fact which China recognizes, as highlighted by Xi Jinping's assertion:

We will stay firmly rooted in Chinese culture. We will collect and refine the defining symbols and best elements of Chinese culture and showcase them to the world. We will accelerate the development of China's discourse and narrative systems, better tell China's stories, make China's voice heard, and present a China that is credible, appealing, and respectable. We will strengthen our international communications capabilities, make our communications more effective, and strive to strengthen China's voice in international affairs so it is commensurate with our composite national strength and international status. We will deepen exchanges and mutual learning with other civilizations and better present Chinese culture to the world (Xi 2022).

Based on this statement and numerous other official pronouncements, it becomes evident that Chinese leaders perceive the imperative to implement an effective cultural diplomacy for several reasons and at differentiated levels of interaction.

First, China's cultural diplomacy aims at building and presenting an appealing image of the country. Unlike the Maoist era, when China's cultural diplomacy objective was to consolidate a cultural counterhegemony against capitalist globalisation, today's strategy is to present a benign image of China devoid of revolutionary ideals. Far from a cultural diplomacy based on a class perspective and the sanctification of the peasant collective, the image which China wants to project to the world today is that of a unified millenarian civilisation with a rich cultural history under the control of a strong unified State (Shi 2000, 201). The emphasis lies on the continuity and stability of Chinese civilisation over the centuries, born long before many Western states.

“We must stay confident in our history and culture, make the past serve the present, and develop the new from the old” (Xi 2022). Based on this understanding of the past, present and future, policymakers intend to link China's modern image to the aesthetics of a traditional civilisation and culture (Zhu 2022, 676). The promotion of China's cultural heritage, as reflected in the promotion of cultural sites, handicraft, traditional medicine, Chinese philosophy, and traditional sports, is not only part of a nation-branding strategy and 'heritage diplomacy' but, as Nakano and Zhu suggest, it also *“[...] feeds into global and regional competitions over the attainment of cultural and moral supremacy”* (Nakano and Zhu 2020, 870).

Second, China's cultural diplomacy serves another purpose beyond building a favourable image. It aims to counteract the narratives which have been constructed around the idea of the “Chinese threat”. In the economic dimension, China's rise is portrayed, especially within US and European circles, as a threat to the stability of the system. China is well aware of the multifaceted factors, including economic competition, the concerns over China's policies on human rights, its military power, authoritarian governance, and negative image of Chinese companies, especially in extractivist sectors which have undermined its reputation and could continue to hinder its ability to attain its strategic economic and political objectives.

Zhao Qizheng, a pioneer of public diplomacy in China and once the Director of the Central Propaganda Department of the CCP, referred to the importance of improving China's international image in a speech delivered in 2004:

More than 80 percent of international news is now supplied by news agencies of advanced countries. It is indispensable for China to explain itself to counter the image shaped by these media of advanced countries. It is especially important for us to give high priority to offering explanations to the international community about matters such as the human rights issue, the Tibetan and Taiwanese questions, the issue of religion, the Falun Gong cult question, and the theory of a 'China threat'. If China can better explain itself, then, its leaders hope, China's international image will improve (Qizheng cit. in Zhai 2004, 3).

Leaders in official positions are optimistic that China's international image will improve if the country diffuses its own narratives or, in other words, shows the "Chinese version" of the story versus distorted versions of the hegemonic Western media. This concept of conveying a clearer message from China to the world was already addressed by Qizheng in 2004. However, under Xi Jinping's leadership since 2013, the notion of effectively communicating "China's story" has gained even more prominence (Huang and Wang 2019). To enhance and spread China's international discourse, it is in the government's interest to foster collaboration between Party-state media and quasi-private entities.

The third aim is closely related to the objective of creating its own narratives: China's cultural diplomacy is to position itself as a viable alternative to the Western model. As a rising power with ambitions to challenge the dominance of the US and Western influence in the global order, China's cultural diplomacy campaigns aim to project a peaceful, responsible and proactive partner in the international community.

As outlined in the analytical framework guiding this study, in times of hegemonic transition, the rising hegemon needs to find ways to accommodate the demands of the actors in the international system through consensual forms of leadership and hegemony. This is because the current hegemon is no longer capable of defining the general interests of the actors and continuing to uphold

the global system of governance it has established. In this sense, China's long-term objective leans towards the creation of an alternative governance complex, endowed with greater organizational capabilities. China is trying to go beyond its traditional role as rule-taker to become a rule-maker in global governance. To advance its political position, China aims to transform the current liberal order built under the US hegemony towards one which reflects the new power configurations and Chinese characteristics (Gao 2010; C. Xi 2015).

In this sense, cultural diplomacy is a transversal strategy which permeates all of the areas where China seeks to provide alternative solutions, such as global interconnectivity, energy, infrastructure, environment, economic development, international cooperation, and security, among others. The new hegemon, be it in the form of a nation state or other structures, needs to have the consensus of larger parts of the international community regarding its leadership role. Therefore, China's cultural diplomacy is targeted not only to economically advanced countries⁷ but also extends to peripheral countries.

When engaging with developing countries, China's message underscores the existence of alternative paths beyond Western notions of governance and development. In the ongoing phase of hegemonic transition and under a renewed Bandung Spirit and South-South Cooperation (SSC)⁸, China's cultural diplomacy aims to portray itself as a potential leader for peripheral countries. This projection envisions China as possessing the economic capabilities and the determination to address their development demands within a new 'post-Western' global governance scheme.

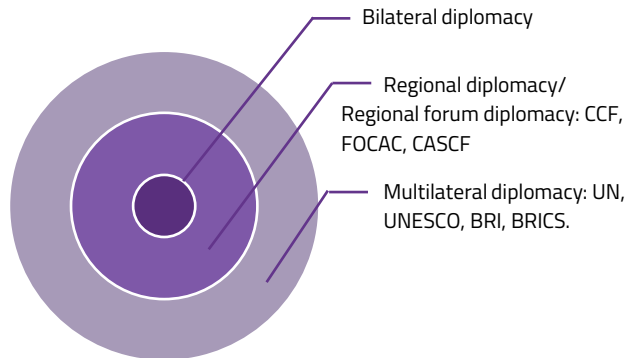
⁷ In the case of developed countries, China's cultural diplomacy is more centred on providing a platform for information and cultural exchange and attracting large groups of citizens fond of or interested in Chinese culture. Workshops, exhibitions and artistic performances are adapted for local audiences with the collaboration of local actors – Chinese and foreigners – and are meant to encourage an open-mindedness towards Chinese culture (Damm 2021).

⁸ China has historically advocated in defence of SSC principles which are based on the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. These include mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and cooperation for mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence. These principles were incorporated in the historic Conference of Bandung of 1955, formed the basis of the Non-Aligned Movement established in 1961 and are currently supported by the UN system.

If “certain countries” criticize others of “free riding” attitudes (benefitting from but not incurring costs) or for not “paying up”, the China of Xi Jinping on the contrary “...openly welcomes all the countries of the world to get on board the express train towards development” (Xinhua 2022; Xu 2019, 110). The discourses raised by China’s leaders and monumental projects like the BRI have fed the “developmentalist illusions” of several countries of the South which regard with admiration China’s development path as an alternative to the neoliberal model, an alternative path which, according to Chinese leaders, offers “a new option for other countries and nations who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence; and [...] the Chinese wisdom and approach to solving problems facing mankind” (Xi 2017a).

In practice, the systematic intervention of the Chinese government to foster cultural relations with the world as part of its national projection objectives navigates from the multilateral level to the regional sphere and to national domains of engagement. Figure 1 illustrates the levels of operation of China’s cultural diplomacy.

Figure 1. Levels of China's cultural diplomacy



Source: Author's elaboration.

At the broadest level of interaction, China’s cultural diplomacy is deployed within the universe of multilateral institutions. The strategy involves the active participation in multilateral organizations which play a central role in the liberal

world order and which were created under US leadership. These include, for instance, the UN and its specialized agencies, mainly UNESCO, with its specific mandate in the field of culture. At the same level of interaction, China's approach encompasses the gradual encirclement of these networks of institutions by creating a new parallel system with alternative organizations. In particular, China has been an advocator of the BRICS alliance, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's flagship institution and most ambitious initiative.

At the regional level, China has implemented a type of diplomacy known as regional forum diplomacy. This entails the creation of institutions in different regions of the world to facilitate interactions at an intermediate level. These regional platforms have been typically initiated under China's auspices and are a component of China's broader strategy with developing regions of the Global South. In this sense, the creation of the CCF in 2014 is akin to older "sister" institutions such as the FOCAC, established in 2000, and the CASCF, founded in 2004. These regional forums or "minilateral" agreements, as some scholars refer to them, serve as platforms through which China disseminates ideas, practices, culture, and new forms of institutional arrangements (Vadell 2022, 192).

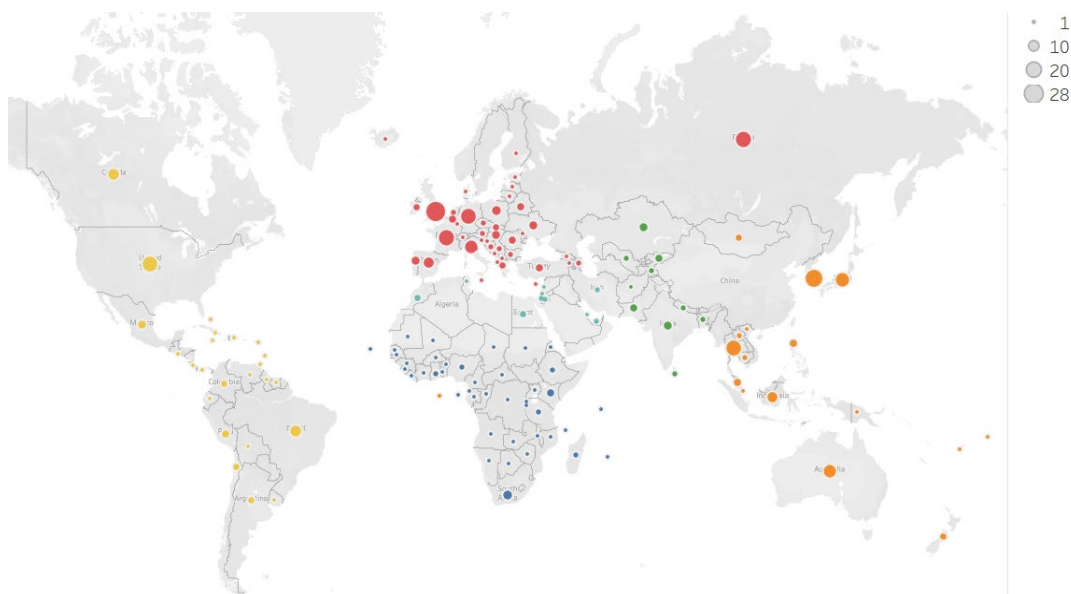
The bilateral sphere is another level where China's cultural diplomacy is deployed. China uses a variety of instruments to enhance its cultural presence in individual countries through official actors and formal channels. These comprise, for instance, the popularisation of Chinese language, academic and cultural exchanges, international media, promotion of Chinese culture, and stadium diplomacy⁹. These bilateral cultural endeavours align with China's national projection objectives, which form a significant component of its overall cultural diplomacy strategy.

By way of illustration, the Confucius Institutes (CI) and Chinese Cultural Centers (CCC) are widely recognized as some of the most prominent instruments of Chinese cultural diplomacy. In 2004, a total of only four CIs were in operation in the US, South Africa, Uzbekistan, and Kenya. However,

⁹ For an overview of China's instruments of cultural diplomacy, see Knudsen (2021b).

their presence expanded enormously over the following years, accounting for a total of 453 CIs distributed across 146 countries, most of them located in the United Kingdom (UK) (28), South Korea (22) and the US (21) (AidData 2022), as illustrated in **Figure 2**.

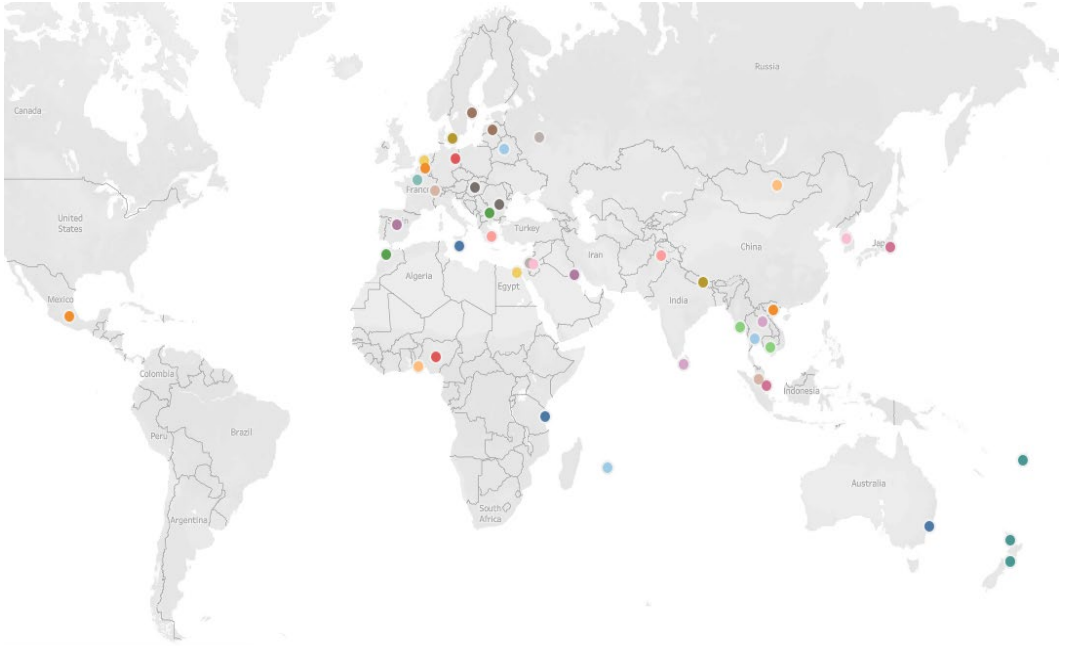
Figure 2. Confucius Institutes in the world



Sources: AidData 2022. | *Author's elaboration.*

The CCCs have attracted less attention than the CIs, despite serving a similar purpose and having a longer history. While the first CCC was established in Mauritius in 1988, Wang's research of 2023 shows that a total of 44 CCCs have been established across regions including Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, Australia, and Oceania, as **Figure 3** shows (China Cultural Center 2021; Wang 2023; Wu 2014).

Figure 3. Chinese Cultural Centers (CCCs) in the world



Sources: Wang 2023 and China Cultural Center 2021. | *Author's elaboration.*

3. China's cultural diplomacy at the multilateral level

China's participation in multilateral organizations has undergone significant changes. In the years following the postwar era, China played a limited role in international institutions. In the Cold War era, the country focused primarily on its internal issues, but more crucially it was marginalized in multilateral regimes. China failed to acquire a legal status in the UN and was kept out of the organization for twenty-two years. Additionally, its memberships in organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO), World Bank (WB), IMF (International Monetary Fund), and World Trade Organization (WTO) were blocked. Negotiations to enter this latter institution, for instance, took fifteen years. By 1966, China had become a member of just one intergovernmental organization and sixty-eight international non-governmental organizations (Kent 2013, 133).

The UN's official recognition of China in 1971 and the right to a permanent seat in the Security Council ended the period of Chinese isolationism and facilitated its participation in UN bodies such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), UNESCO, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), and other international organizations. Despite this crucial event, China's approach to multilateralism went in hand with its self-assigned role as a learner in global affairs. As a newcomer in the multilateral system, China was slow to engage in meaningful participation in UN agencies. It was not until 1976, following the death of Mao Zedong, that China joined the WB and the IMF (Kent 2013, 132).

The scene shifted significantly by mid-1990. China's emergence as an economic powerhouse became increasingly evident, leading to a corresponding rise in its influence both internationally and regionally. This influence extended particularly to fields involving security, environmental matters, human rights, and the political economy. By 2000, China had secured membership in over 50 intergovernmental organizations and its engagement spanned across 1,275 international non-governmental organizations (Kent 2013, 133). Another milestone in China's multilateralism was its admission to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. Not only did this mark the initiation of a new phase of economic openness, but it also reinforced China's full integration into the international system of governance.

As of 2021, China's participation in international organizations had expanded substantially to a total membership of 3,315. Among these, 201 were intergovernmental organizations, while 3,114 were international non-governmental organizations. This achievement positioned China as the 29th nation with the highest count of affiliations with international institutions (UIA and Koninklijke Brill NV. 2022).

Having left behind the “watching and learning” approach which characterized the early phases of its insertion into the global system, China has become a proactive player, agenda-setter, defender, and advocate of multilateralism. Its foreign policy approach to multilateralism has also become more sophisticated.

Following Xin Zhang's notion of “inside-out parallel worlds” (2017), in this still early phase of hegemonic transition, China's strategy since the turn of this century has been to keep the existing institutional architecture established under US hegemony intact. Indeed, Chinese authorities have declared China's firm position to safeguard the international order and the system of institutions centred around the UN while adhering to the universally accepted framework of the UN charter which governs state-to-state relations. Even if this approach may appear simple and obvious, it is actually quite a strategic move by China, which was reinforced amid the backdrop of President Trump's attempts to bypass and dismantle the rules of the liberal order established by the US itself.

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, China put forward the notion of “true multilateralism” as opposed to “pseudo-multilateralism” or “fake multilateralism”, capitalizing on the US' institutional disengagement. In the 2021 Position Paper on China's cooperation with the UN, China articulated the following:

China has always held high the banner of multilateralism and practiced true multilateralism. China believes that international affairs should be addressed through consultation by all, and that the future of the world should be decided by all countries together. China firmly opposes unilateralism, protectionism and bullying acts, and firmly rejects pseudo-multilateralism in such disguises as group politics and small circles. China is committed to making the global governance system more just and equitable (PRC 2021).

China's idea of "true multilateralism" has persisted despite the end of Trump's administration. Although President Biden has somewhat eased tensions in US relations with its allies and opponents (similar to the way President Obama did with the Bush Jr. administration), in essence, the underlying attempt to restore US leadership and hegemony remains evident in Biden's "America is back" agenda following the Trump era. In the face of the US' unwillingness to adjust and accommodate to the shifting geopolitical reality, and as the US is increasingly becoming a destabilizing force in the world¹⁰ (Payne and Silver 2023, 170), China is striving to present itself to the world as a "responsible power".

In this sense, China boasts about the fulfilment of its financial obligations, showcasing what it considers to be a great "sense of responsibility as a major country".¹¹ Indeed, China is now the second most substantial contributor to both the UN's regular budget and peacekeeping operations, accounting for 15.21% of the total, trailing only behind the US (27.89%) and preceding Japan (8.56%) and Germany (6.09%) (United Nations 2022).

Moreover, there has been a steady rise in the number of Chinese nationals serving in leadership positions in UN organs, funds, specialized agencies, and programmes. China has also actively engaged in hard lobbying to secure the election of its nominees¹². It is worth noting that, while contributions from US and European personnel at the UN are significantly larger (Fung and Lam 2021), concerns have arisen within the US prompting the State Department and the White House to "*...develop an ongoing war room-style operation to beat Chinese-*

¹⁰ According to David Calleo (1987, 142), the breakdown of international order is not solely due to the emergence of new challengers, but also because declining powers often seek to solidify their waning dominance into an exploitative hegemony rather than adapting and accommodating to changing circumstances. Payne and Silver (2023) identify the US as a source of instability across multiple contexts. This is evident through its military interventions and regime changes (Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya are among the most prominent examples), support of authoritarian regimes, unilateral actions, and dominance in financial institutions (IMF, WB) which have perpetuated global inequalities by means of structural adjustment programmes.

¹¹ See China's statement on this issue:

http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/hyyfy/202211/t20221123_10980085.htm

¹² See China's representation in international organisations:

[https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-07/PRC_Representation_in_International_Organizations_July2022.pdf)

[07/PRC_Representation_in_International_Organizations_July2022.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2022-07/PRC_Representation_in_International_Organizations_July2022.pdf)

backed candidates for leadership posts at the UN and other international organizations” (Goldberg 2021)¹³. This highlights how the arena of multilateralism has evolved into yet another stadium for power rivalries.

In addition to actively participating in existing institutions, China’s strategy encompasses their gradual encirclement through creation of a new parallel system with alternative organizations. Over the past two decades, China has established an extensive network of institutions across various domains, as Annex 1 illustrates. Many of these structures include marginalized countries which are also in search of new international development partners. Developing countries have enthusiastically joined China’s initiatives.

In particular, China has been an advocator of the BRICS alliance and the BRI and has taken the lead in launching and financially backing regional forums such as the CCF, FOCAC and CASCF. These forums mirror similar regional platforms established by the US and the EU in other regions. Flagship institutions include the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB), the AIIB and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Other less prominent initiatives comprise the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the South-South Human Rights Forum created in 2017 to promote human rights in developing countries, and the Boao Forum for Asia.

In sum, China has been involved in the establishment of at least 20 different multilateral initiatives over the past three decades. These platforms span a spectrum from informal forums to formally established intergovernmental organizations (IGO), including countries from every major world region (Stephen 2020, 21). Along with its engagement in existing institutions, China’s proactive participation in recently created institutions, whether in a leadership capacity or as a member, contributes to the gradual emergence of alternative structures which extend beyond the Western-dominated frameworks.

Culture is a transversal dimension which permeates the work of many of the organizations mentioned above. In what follows, an overview is provided of China’s efforts to strengthen its cultural ties at the multilateral level within a

¹³ See concerns on China’s role in UNESCO: <https://thediplomat.com/2017/09/should-china-now-lead-unesco/>

well-established institution, UNESCO, and in three recently created platforms: BRI, BRICS and China's regional forums (FOCAC, CASCFC and CCF).

3.1 UNESCO

As previously stated, China's cultural diplomacy approach at the multilateral level involves its active participation in the existing institutional architecture of the liberal order, including the network of UN institutions. UNESCO is unique in nature compared to other UN bodies which deal with so-called "high politics"¹⁴. Culture and education are at the heart of UNESCO's activities and its mission to strengthen understanding, dialogue and peace.

China's approach to cultural diplomacy has not overlooked the potential which a strategic participation in a multilateral platform like UNESCO can bring to the accomplishment of several objectives, for example, the improvement of its external image as a responsible power which values cultural diversity and is home to a rich civilisation and multi-ethnic society; international recognition for upholding UNESCO's values; and the creation of spaces for the promotion and acceptance of its initiatives, mainly BRI.

China's approach to cultural diplomacy in UNESCO is not monochromatic but consists of a mix of strategies, including engaging and shaping. Rather than the watchful or hands-off approach applied mostly before the turn of this century, China now views its participation in UNESCO as beneficial. Consequently, it engages actively in the organization's existing structures as a system-affirming actor within the organization and tries to reshape its programmes and procedures to better suit its own interests (Wuthnow, Li, and Qi 2012, 276).

China was a founding member of UNESCO in 1946, yet its membership was reactivated only in 1971, following its formal readmission to the UN. Moreover, China's cooperation with UNESCO remained in-existent until the first half of 1978. By 1980, China had only one World Heritage site recognized (Lu 2015). During Trump's presidency, the United States withdrew from UNESCO in

¹⁴ These UN institutions deal with geopolitical and international security matters and include the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), United Nations Peacekeeping Operations, United Nations Disarmament Commission, and the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

2018 over accusations of anti-Israel bias. The question of rejoining was being debated during President Biden's administration until mid-2023 when the US officially regained membership (Marwecki 2019; UNESCO 2023b). During this period of absence, China has been eagerly engaging in the institution and has reinforced its mandate by several means.

China's active participation in UNESCO is reflected in its financial contributions to the institution's budget. The fulfilment of its financial obligations at a time when the US had stopped contributing to the UNESCO budget is interpreted by the Chinese government as a sign of its sense of responsibility and commitment to uphold the institutions of the liberal order. China contributed 40,564,315 USD to UNESCO's regular budget in 2019, making it the highest contributor among all members (Ji 2020). This surpasses payments made by Japan and Germany since 2019¹⁵. Additionally, China's national government, local governments and the private sector make additional voluntary contributions, for instance to the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Fund, donations to special programmes such as Global Priority Africa, the UNESCO-China Funds-in-Trust Project (CFIT) to support education in Africa (with 8 million USD) and programmes under the UNESCO-China-Africa partnership (UNESCO 2017).

China has also engaged with UNESCO through the ratification of legal agreements and active participation in UNESCO frameworks and a dynamic participation in UNESCO regimes. It has endorsed fifteen UNESCO international conventions, six of which were ratified between 2000 and 2014. By comparison, the US has ratified twenty instruments, mostly during the 1950s and 1970s, with only one instrument ratified in the 21st century, specifically in 2005. Particularly significant is China's ratification of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in 2007 and the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage 2004, neither of which has been ratified by the US. China was among the first countries to ratify this latter instrument (UNESCO n.d. -a).

¹⁵ For an overall view of China's financial allocations in multilateral institutions, see: Morris et al. 2021: <https://www.cgdev.org/publication/mapping-chinas-participation-multilateral-development-institutions-and-funds>

More importantly, the Chinese state has seriously engaged in the implementation of these conventions. In practice, this has translated into a proactive pursuit of and a sort of race for the inscription and recognition of as many cultural heritage elements as possible. Every inscription entails tedious institutional procedures and a series of real commitments and coordination among national and subnational actors as well as local communities. This engagement underscores China's skillfulness not only in navigating the bureaucratic intricacies of UNESCO recognition but also in positioning its narrative as an exemplary member state, as proposed by some authors. Tomczak (2017) suggests that China's commitment to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, as mandated by the 2003 Convention, has been earnestly addressed at the policy and institutional levels.

One year after the ratification of the 2004 Convention, China's Ministry of Culture initiated the most extensive national census of China's intangible cultural heritage (2005-2009), establishing an inventory system spanning national, provincial, municipal, and county-level lists of elements¹⁶. In 2006, the first batch comprised 518 elements categorized in ten groups¹⁷. To date, the number of items on the national lists (batches one to four) has reached a total of 2,438 (Chinese Cultural Studies Center n.d.). As of 2022, China had 43 elements registered on UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage. This includes, for instance, the recent recognition of traditional tea processing techniques. China holds the world record for the largest number of heritage items on the UNESCO list, surpassing France's 23 elements. Furthermore, China has 57 cultural and natural heritage sites, just below Italy's first place with 58 sites. Due to the annual nomination limit established by UNESCO, China's current under-review nominations stand at 13 (UNESCO 2023a).

China has further reinforced the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage platform by hosting several events. A highlight in this sense is the Chengdu International Intangible Cultural Heritage Festival held biennially since 2007¹⁸.

¹⁶ In this census, 1.5 million folk artists were visited.

¹⁷ These categories include folk literature, traditional music, traditional dance, traditional opera/theatre/drama, narrative/storytelling traditions, traditional sports, recreational activities and acrobatics, traditional arts, traditional handicraft skills, traditional medicine, and folk customs.

¹⁸ See the website of the Chengdu Administration of Cultural Heritage:
<https://cdwgj.chengdu.gov.cn/cdwgj/index.shtml>

Moreover, China serves as the host for the UNESCO-affiliated World Heritage Institute of Training and Research for the Asia-Pacific Region, which consists of three subinstitutes. The particularity is that all these headquarters are located in China (Beijing, Shanghai and Suzhou), setting it apart from other regions globally which host only one headquarters (WHITRAP 2012).

In sum, by actively engaging in UNESCO, China has also worked domestically towards building a new sense of multi-ethnic Chinese identity under a unifying and State-dominated nationalism, which appears to have been successful. China's involvement in the UNESCO heritage framework has triggered a wider movement in Chinese society which is actively implicated in the protection of endangered manifestations of traditional culture. Internationally, China has gained prestige in the field of cultural heritage protection. This is reflected in the interest shown by other nations, such as those from Eastern and Central Europe, which have been eager to understand China's approach in institutionalizing the 2003 Convention and digitizing its intangible cultural heritage elements (Tomczak 2017, 307).

The cultural heritage elements recognized by UNESCO contribute positively to China's nation-building, nation-branding and status-seeking strategies while also attracting international tourism. UNESCO's heritage system provides a platform for China to legitimize selected cultural manifestations as they undergo evaluation processes by expert non-governmental organizations like the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). As Nakano notes, the effect of having inscriptions on the World Heritage List is widespread in terms of publicity, *"The news of a World Heritage inscription is likely to get local, national, and international media attention at least temporarily. For the tourism industry, World Heritage inscription is a great business opportunity."* (Nakano 2022, 6, 7).

Another type of strategy employed by China has been the shaping of existing initiatives in UNESCO to better fit the country's interests. The iconic example in this sense is UNESCO's Silk Roads Project. The history, shared legacy and knowledge of the vast trade networks of the Silk Roads has been used by UNESCO as a focal point for intercultural dialogue and international cooperation initiatives for many years. Between 1988 and 1997, UNESCO

implemented a research project entitled the “Integral Study of the Silk Roads” to raise awareness of the common roots of civilisations along the Silk Road. In 2001, in collaboration with Japan, UNESCO launched the “Digital Silk Roads” initiative. Additionally, in 2002, it held the International Symposium on the Silk Roads in Xi’an, China, and adopted the Xi’an Declaration for the conservation of World Heritage elements of the Silk Road. Starting from 2003, it became possible to nominate transnational heritage elements situated along the Silk Roads for their inclusion in the UNESCO World Heritage list (Feng 2005, 2; Nakano 2022, 8).

Since then, China has been an active participant in this initiative and played a significant role in shaping the framework of the ancient trading route and historical narratives associated with it. Indeed, it was to Chinese territory – the Chinese section of the Silk Roads – that UNESCO sent the first expert mission with a view to its possible candidature for inscription on the World Heritage List in 2003. In 2014, the Chan’an-Tian-shan Silk Road Corridor, a transboundary trading corridor of 5,000 kilometres across China, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan which dates to the 2nd century BC, became the first stretch of the Silk Road to be inscribed on the UNESCO list (UNESCO n.d. -b).

There has not been a lack of tension in the Silk Roads nomination project. As Wang mentions, “[...] *two contrasting views have emerged: a ‘monumental approach’ with a focus on the imperial power of ancient China, and an ‘assemblage approach’ that regards the Silk Roads as a collection of various civilisations*” (Wang cit. in Nakano 2022, 9). These tensions have become even more pronounced following President Xi Jinping’s announcement of the BRI in 2013. China’s strategy since then has been geared towards conveying BRI-related messages through UNESCO. This implies, for instance, the synchronisation of UNESCO’s Silk Roads Project with China’s mega initiative, the BRI. Additionally, it involved shaping historical narratives from the past as well as present and future narratives in line with the current perspectives of the Chinese government (Mitter 2020).

The link between the Silk Roads Project and the BRI is evident in the sense that the proposed heritage nominations to UNESCO align with the multilateral structures proposed by the BRI. To illustrate, the nomination of the South Asian Silk Road matches that of the BRI’s Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar

Economic Corridor. Similarly, the proposed heritage corridor in Central Asia closely corresponds to the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor of the BRI (Winter 2016). In other words, there is a surge in Silk Roads nominations at UNESCO's committee meetings and this runs in tandem with the strong impetus of China in the BRI project.

China's involvement with UNESCO's Silk Roads Project is also reflected in the initiatives it has supported financially. One example of this is the establishment of the Silk Roads Youth Research Grant in 2021 (UNESCO n.d. -c), made possible with funding from the National Commission of China for UNESCO. Furthermore, projects like the "Interactive Atlas of Cultural Interactions along the Silk Roads" and the "Youth Eyes on the Silk Roads Photo Contest" have received funding from the China World Peace Foundation (UNESCO n.d. -d). It is worth noting that not only the national level but also subnational bodies and businesses from China are involved in the Silk Roads Project. For instance, the Xi'an Municipality, the Tang West Market Cultural Investment Group of China and the Provincial Government of Shanxi Province have played a role in hosting various events such as meetings, exhibitions, annual Silk Road Festivals, and performances related to music and dance along the Silk Roads (UNESCO n.d. -e).

China's strategy of aligning the BRI with UNESCO's Silk Roads platform is interpreted here as serving two main purposes. On the one hand, it is an attempt to smooth out the political frictions, rivalries and suspicions which arise from this mega geocultural project. On the other hand, this strategy also aims to project China's civilisational centrality in the world (Winter 2019). In this sense, neighbouring countries like Korea and Japan, driven by their aspirations to establish their own historical narratives, are concerned about China's prominent role in this UNESCO programme. They worry that China's prominence might disrupt the balance within these institutions. For instance, there is a perception that a Sinocentric Silk Roads narrative is emerging which disproportionately highlights China's contribution and the role of figures like Zhang Qian in opening Western routes while omitting the involvement of other players like Mongolia and Russia. Overall, Kang warns, "*With China's capital and immense human resources, the Silk Roads Heritage project has naturally been absorbed into the politics of the country's Belt and Roads Initiative*" (Kang cit. in Nakano 2022).

3.2 BRI: the Belt and Road Initiative

Among the network of institutions created or strongly promoted by China, the BRI stands out as the most ambitious and far-reaching initiative which the Asian country has ever put forward. Launched in 2013, the BRI is at the core of China's foreign policy agenda, aiming to ultimately place China at the political, economic and cultural centre of a vast geographic overland, maritime and hyper-connected space. The official promotion of the BRI by the Chinese state is somewhat different though. Xi Jinping's narrative around the BRI is centred on the idea that this modern multistake holder platform – with its large-scale infrastructure projects and transport, trade, security, and civil society initiatives stretching across the Eurasian landmass and the Indian Ocean – will replace the vast network of Eurasian exchanges of the ancient Silk Roads active until the mid-15th century (Xi 2017b, 656-665).

It is clear by now that the BRI is doing more than just enhancing trade, market and energy access, and exporting China's industrial overcapacity to infrastructure projects. In the current context of hegemonic transition and systemic chaos, China's quest to revive the Silk Roads through the BRI can be interpreted as the promise offered by China as a rising hegemon, in particular to peripheral countries, to accommodate their development demands, unfulfilled by US hegemony. For countries from the Global South, decolonisation and the promise of 'development' or 'catching up' to the standards of the West were the promises of US hegemony. As is known, the US' 'Fair Deal' promised by Truman to poor countries in 1949 has not materialized.

In the search to overcome worldwide chaos, the BRI is China's bet to carry out a fundamental reorganization of world politics through "inclusive globalisation". Considering the analytical foundation of this study, the BRI can be interpreted as the most iconic example of China's strategy of circumventing, that is, the creation of new institutions operating outside the existing liberal architecture aimed towards an alternative order, with new regimes, members, rules, and structures designed by itself which better align with China's preferences (Wuthnow, Li, and Qi 2012, 276).

While a large part of the existing literature has explored the political, economic, security and infrastructure links of the BRI, there has been relatively little

analysis focusing on the BRI as a hub of cultural production and cultural politics. In China's geographic imagery, the BRI is envisioned not only as a conduit for transporting goods, but also people, information, technology ideas, and culture, which would ultimately help countries improve their development prospects and overcome poverty. Culture is not merely intertwined with other areas of the BRI; it is a pivotal element and diplomatic tool employed by China to build international legitimacy and gain consensual approval. The BRI has almost become synonymous with Chinese diplomacy and culture, the vehicle through which China seeks to reinterpret the past and reinforce its narrative of mutually beneficial cooperation (Winter 2019, 24).

But the BRI's scope extends beyond just governments. Based on the idea that societies have long been connected and culturally entangled, Winter argues that the BRI's goal is to go beyond political boundaries and reestablish historical connections and cultural ties between societies which have long been interlinked. In pursuit of this objective, the BRI centres around the use of the past as a mechanism for great power diplomacy, with past cultural roots and connections between China and the world's regions being dug up, carefully restored and put on display. In other words, the Silk Road offers China a new form of geocultural power. According to the author, “[...] *the geocultural is akin to the geopolitical ... Power is accumulated by organizing and operationalizing geographical space. And, given that processes of heritage are about ordering the past into particular spatialized narratives, we see how the ‘ancient’ Silk Roads have become the apparatus that orders people and places—potentially separated by vast distances—into modes of cooperation across multiple sectors*” (Winter 2019, 17).

In practice, it is difficult to disentangle those initiatives in the BRI which appertain only to the field of cultural diplomacy. Nonetheless, most of them fall under one of the pillars laid out by the Chinese government in 2015 in a key document: “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road”, the so-called “people-to-people bonds” (PRC 2015). After One Belt One Road (OBOR) was released, China's strategy was to integrate the BRI narrative into the operation of the existing traditional instruments of cultural diplomacy (e.g. CIs, CCCs) and the plans of governmental institutions and other Chinese institutions. Official media, think tanks, research institutes, universities, ministries, government officials, and cultural industries, among other actors in China, incorporated the BRI vector in

their plans or operations. For instance, institutions like the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, the China National Tourism Administration, and the General Administration of Sport of China have well-defined plans, strategies and specific initiatives to realize the objectives outlined in the 2015 “Vision and Actions” of the BRI.

In the field of education, the Chinese government released the “Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative” in 2016 and announced several initiatives for BRI countries (PRC Ministry of Education 2016). Over the past years, cultural diplomacy in education has been concentrated in Southern Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe, with recent expansion to Southern Europe, Northern Europe and the Middle East and Northern Africa. The initiatives stretch across many sectors and include student exchanges, scholarships, agreements for mutual recognition of academic qualifications, vocational training programmes, language and cultural education through CIs, promotion of entrepreneurship education through forums, prizes, competitions, and entrepreneurship networks, research collaboration through alliances, partnerships, and the creation of research centres and think tanks (Woo 2022).

Since the inception of the BRI, many BRI-related networks, research institutes and think tanks have been created within China and in countries like Czechia, France, Kyrgyzstan, and Thailand, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1. Networks, associations, research institutes, and think tanks associated with the BRI.
<u>Networks and Associations</u>
- New Silk Road Law Schools Alliance
- Silk Road Think Tank Association
- Silk Road Think Tank Network (eSILKS)
- Silk Road Universities Network
- United Nations Maritime-Continental Silk Road Cities Alliance
- University Alliance of the New Silk Road
<u>Research Institutes and Think Tanks</u>
- Cambodia 21 st Century Maritime Silk Road Research Center, Phnom Penh
- Chinese Think Tank Cooperation Alliance for the “Belt and Road Initiative”, Beijing

- City University of Hong Kong Research Centre on One-Belt-One Road, Hong Kong
- Collaborative Innovation Center of Silk Road Economic Belt Research—Xi'an Jiaotong University, Xi'an
- Confucius Institute of Maritime Silk Road, Thailand
- Council of Cooperative "The Belt and Road Initiative" Think Tank Association
- European Think Tank Network on China, Paris
- Institute of Maritime Silk Road of Huaqiao University, Quanzhou
- International Think Tank for Landlocked Developing Countries, Ulaanbaatar
- Macau "One Belt, One Road" Research Center, Macau
- Malaysian Institute of Strategic and International Studies (member of SiLKS), Kuala Lumpur
- New Silk Road Institute Prague, Prague
- BRI China-Latvia Centre for Academic Exchange
- One Belt One Road Institute—The Center for China and Globalization, Beijing
- One Belt One Road Research Institute—Shanghai Lixin University of Accounting and Finance, Shanghai
- Peking University One Belt and One Road Research Centre, Peking
- Research Center of Silk Road of Beijing Jiaotong University, Beijing
- Silk Road Economic Development Research Centre, Hong Kong
- Silk Road Research Center of International Ataturk-Alatoo University, Kyrgyzstan
- Silk Road Research Institute—Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing Silk Road Research Institute of Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing.

Sources: Winter 2019, 197, 198. | *Author's elaboration.*

The BRI has evolved into a catalyst for knowledge production, thanks to those actors involved such as universities, research centres and think tanks. These actors engage in public diplomacy on behalf of the Chinese government, undertake cultural exchanges, organize conferences, publish joint books and material covering BRI topics, and build networks with their counterparts in BRI countries¹⁹.

¹⁹ For more information regarding the initiatives undertaken in the field of education in the BRI, see: Venture Education 2019: <https://www.britishchamber.cn/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/BritCham-Education-on-the-belt-and-road-english.pdf>

In the field of cultural promotion, the “Ministry of Culture Belt and Road Cultural Development Action Plan (2016-2020)” established key objectives, principles and tasks. These activities include, for instance, expanding the presence of Chinese cultural centres in countries along the BRI and converting ongoing initiatives into platforms for international exchange and cooperation. Examples of such initiatives encompass:

- The Xinjiang International Folk Dance Festival
- Silk Road International Arts Festival
- Maritime Silk Road International Arts Festival
- Silk Road (Dunhuang)
- International Cultural Expo
- World Ocean Week in Xiamen
- China Marine Culture Festival
- Silk Road Week
- Silk Road International Film Festival (PRC 2016a).

It is remarkable that many of the initiatives which this Plan established came to fruition. These include the Silk Road International League of Theatres (66 theatres located across 21 countries), the Silk Road International Library Alliance, the International Alliance of Museums of the Silk Road, the Silk Road International Alliance of Art Museums, the Network of Silk Road Arts Festivals, and the Arts University Alliance of the Silk Road. Today, these mechanisms operate at the intergovernmental level, multilaterally and in the framework of regional organizations and forums (Winter 2019, 103).

It is also important to mention some cultural initiatives around the BRI which have emerged through collaborative efforts among national, subnational and business organizations. An illustrative case of this is found in Xi’an, situated in Shaanxi province, recognized as the gateway to the Silk Road. In this context, the Tang West Market Group (TWMG), a prominent cultural industry consortium, has played a central role. This consortium has been instrumental in the development of tourism infrastructure projects, notably Silk Road International Museum City and the Silk Road Expo Park. These projects are centred around museums and exhibitions showcasing arts, crafts and archaeological objects from countries involved in the BRI (Winter 2019, 113). Additionally, the TWMG has formed a strategic alliance with UNESCO to establish the Silk Road

International Culture and Art Center in Xi'an. This pioneering cultural complex encompasses theatres, art galleries, centres, and versatile halls designed to accommodate conferences and cultural events²⁰.

3.3 BRICS

The BRICS alliance is an example of a recently established institutional platform where China has significantly led the way in promoting cultural exchanges.

In 2009, BRICS became more than just an acronym and constituted itself into a formal intergovernmental organization. Its most relevant initiatives revolve around the fields of security, economics, development, and finance and include the creation of an alternative financial architecture with institutions such as the New Development Bank, the BRICS payment system and the BRICS Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA).

Clearly, culture is not the priority of BRICS; however, China has given a great push to consolidate spaces for cultural exchange. There are at least 20 institutionalized spaces within the BRICS structure for the promotion of culture in its different dimensions, including sports, film festivals, academic exchange, art, and literature, among others. Annex 2 summarizes these schemes.

The BRICS countries take turns annually to host summits and events, with China assuming hosting responsibilities in 2011, 2017 and 2022. While BRICS signed the Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Culture in Ufa, Russia, in 2015, it was under China's role as host country in 2017 that many of the cultural initiatives materialized (BRICS 2022). This was evident during the second Culture Ministers' Meeting held in Tianjin, China, in 2017, where the Action Plan for the implementation of the Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Culture (2017-2021) was adopted. Additionally, the signing of four Letters of Intent led to the creation of the BRICS Alliance of Art Museums and Galleries, the BRICS Library Alliance, Libraries Cooperation, and Museums and Theatre for Children and Young People (National Art Museum of China 2020).

²⁰ For more information on the Silk Road International Culture and Art Center, see: Shaanxi Provincial Government 2022: http://en.shaanxi.gov.cn/if/ssrie/202208/t20220816_2246274.html

China's strong interest in materializing the BRICS Alliance of Art Museums and Galleries is noticeable because the country has played a prominent role in the direction, organization and hosting of events, meetings and exhibitions. This alliance is under the leadership of Wu Weishan, Secretary General until 2023, who currently holds the position of Director of the National Art Museum of China (NAMOC). In 2018, NAMOC took the lead in hosting the first joint exhibition entitled "Uniqueness and Convergence: Special Exhibition of BRICS Alliance of Art Museums and Galleries", showcasing 62 works of art from the member nations.

As part of the 2022 BRICS China Year, at least 18 online, hybrid and on-site cultural activities, including forums, festivals and competitions, were planned. Other initiatives which China has promoted include the BRICS media forum proposed by the Xinhua News Agency in 2015, the Friendship Cities and Local Governments Cooperation Forum, which was held for the first time in Hainan, China, in 2011, and those listed in Annex 2 which are related to competitions, prizes and contests, think-tank exchanges, and the participation of young people. It becomes evident that intergovernmental forums proposed by China have very similar, that is to say the same initiatives in the field of culture.

3.4 Regional forums

In addition to BRICS, China has been active in the creation of spaces for cultural exchanges in regional forums such as CASCF, FOCAC and CCF. As evidenced in Table , it is no coincidence that many of the institutional spaces created within these organizations revolve around the same themes, target specific groups and even have the same names. That is the case of the forums directed towards young leaders, the think tanks forums, the friendship and subnational forums targeted at certain actors in civil society, the forums for academic exchange, and the dialogues between civilisations – clearly a Chinese initiative aligned with the broad cultural promotion strategy underpinning the BRI.

CASCF	FOCAC	CCF
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sino-Arab Relations Seminar & Civilisation Dialogue Mechanism - Higher Education and Scientific Cooperation Seminar - Arab-Chinese Digital Library - China-Arab Youth Development Forum - Arab Businessmen's Conference - Chinese Arts Festival Course - Sino-Arab Friendship Conference - Arab and China Friendship Association Federation - Arabian arts festivals in China - Chinese Art Festival in the Arab countries - China-Arab Media Cooperation Forum - Cultural cooperation initiatives 2022: exchanges among cultural and tourist companies, translation of Chinese and Arabian masterpieces, audiovisual programmes, China-Arab Cooperation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - China-Africa Think Tanks Forum - China-Africa Think Tank 10+10 Partnership Plan - China-Africa University 20+20 Cooperation - Forum on China-Africa Local Government Cooperation - China-Africa People's Forum - China-Africa Young Leaders Forum - China-Africa Friendship Group - China-Africa Friendship Organization Leaders Meeting - Happy Spring Festival and China-Africa Cultural Focus - China-Africa International Film Festival - "Belt and Road" Africa-China Art Exchange Exhibition - Africa-China Culture Forum - Forum on China-Africa Media Cooperation - Cultural cooperation initiatives 2022- 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - China and LAC: Dialogue between Civilisations Forum - China-LAC Think-Tanks Forum - China-CELAC High-Level Academic Forum - China-CELAC University Dean Forum Presidents - China-CELAC Countries Forum for Cooperation among Local Governments - China-LAC Young Political Leaders' Forum - China-LAC People-to-People Friendship Forum - Youth Development Forum - China-LAC Tai Chi Competition - China-LAC Martial Arts Exchange Forum - Share the Beauty: Exhibitions of LAC Contemporary Art - China-CELAC Forum on Traditional Medicine - China-LAC Media Forum - Cultural cooperation initiatives 2022-2024: sustainable touristic routes, cultural products based on cultural

<p>Plan 10+10 for universities, professional trainings for young Arabs, think tanks exchanges, Chinese-Arab artists exchanges, the development of Chinese and Arab institutions, academic and scientific exchanges in the field of traditional and modern medicine²¹.</p>	<p>2024²²: China-Africa Vocational Education Cooperation Plan “Future for Africa”, “Employment through training” scheme for African students in China, China-Africa youth alliance to enhance exchanges between Chinese and African middle school students, China-African culture and tourism training sessions, exchanges among twin cities, cooperation in cultural industry, cultural heritage exchanges, museum exhibitions, co-production of TV programmes, film exchanges, China-Africa youth services forum, China-Africa Women’s Forum.</p>	<p>heritage in LAC, exhibition, research and museum administration, co-production and training of talents, cooperation in media outreach communication, building a network of China-LAC twin provinces/cities.</p>
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Sources: FOCAC, BRICS Policy Center, CCF, CASCF. | *Author’s elaboration.*

Another aspect worth highlighting is China’s influence at the rhetorical level. Political slogans play an important role in Chinese politics, but they are also used multilaterally to project short, digestible messages and certain narratives which

²¹ Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed several initiatives on “China-Arab practical cooperation” in the China-Arab States Summit held in December 2022, see Xinhua 2022: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202212/10/WS639493dba31057c47eba3c4a.html>

²² See FOCAC 2015: the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Dakar Action Plan (2022-2024): http://www.focac.org/focacdakar/eng/hyqk_1/202112/t20211222_10474206.htm

actors are eager to promote abroad. As Zeng argues, rather than concrete strategic plans, slogans are mostly used as a way of drawing attention and exhorting to action and, more broadly, to challenging the Western hegemonic monopoly on discursive power (Zeng 2020, 1, 2, 139).

In both regional forums and within the context of BRICS, slogans often follow a similar format: typically, extended sentences conveying notions of openness, inclusiveness, cooperation, mutual and shared benefits. For instance, slogans like “Broad Vision, Shared Prosperity, Developing Friendship Cities, Promoting Cooperation”, “Uniqueness and Convergence: Forum of BRICS Alliance of Art Museums and Galleries”, “Inspire Youth Potential, Shape BRICS’ Future”, “Promoting Youth Participation for a Beautiful Future”, “China and Latin America: Exchanges between Civilizations and Mutual Learning” reflect this pattern. China’s influence is also evidenced in the increasing occurrence of forums and exchanges among members centred around themes which align with China’s interests, particularly the BRI. In this context, political slogans are similarly adapted to further these objectives.

4. China's cultural diplomacy in Latin America

The aim of this section is to systematize and understand China's cultural diplomacy in the LAC region, considering national projection as one of its key elements. The focus is on the regional LAC level, more specifically the cultural exchanges which have taken place within the CCF. The CCF can be interpreted not only as a constituent of China's network of regional forums (FOCAC, CASCF and the Boao Forum for Asia) but also as an additional platform where culture is wielded as a strategic tool to dispel concerns about China's rise and gain support to implement the BRI, the largest mega geocultural project worldwide.

Before delving into the specific initiatives, actors, strategies, and interests which drive the cultural exchanges within the CCF, what follows provides a historical account of China-Latin American relations, with a focus on their cultural ties. This would allow the identification of those instruments and strategies of cultural diplomacy applied by China which have persisted over time and shed light on the shifts in China's approach to the region, based on its changing worldviews and self-perception, and the varying circumstances of Latin American countries.

4.1 1949-1960: "people-to-people diplomacy"

After the foundation of the PRC in 1949 and in the Cold War era, one of the main components of China's foreign policy towards Latin America was the deployment of "people-to-people diplomacy". This strategy involved cultivating friendly ties with targeted groups and individuals and forging cultural exchanges. Given China's marginalisation in international regimes, the primary goal of these policies was to gradually establish diplomatic relations with as many LAC countries as possible. Under a "watching and learning" approach, an additional objective was to secure the Latin American countries' support for China's admission to the United Nations (UN) (Alba 1961, 57; Ratliff 1969, 57).

China's own views of the international and Latin American context were also crucial in defining and shaping its "people-to-people diplomacy" on the

continent. China observed that the balance of power in the international context of the late 1950s was shifting towards the “anti-imperialist” forces. In Latin America in particular, events such as South America’s negative reception of Nixon’s trip in 1958 and the ousting of several dictatorships²³ in the region were perceived by China as indications of the growing revolutionary consciousness among Latin American people²⁴ (Ratliff 1972, 849). The Cuban Revolution (1953-1959) further fuelled this perception. From China’s perspective, Latin America represented a space where US and Soviet “imperialism and hegemonism” needed to be challenged (Angell 1997, 102, 103; Mora 1997, 38–40).

Based on such perceptions of Latin America, China’s foreign policy and “people-to-people diplomacy” had a strong ideological component. It strived for a broad cross-section collaboration with governments, parties and radical leftist revolutionaries to forge a united front of Third World nations. China sought to underscore historical and ideological commonalities, emphasizing the need to overcome underdevelopment at home, oppose US imperialism abroad and fortify rural guerilla warfare to seize political power. The goal was to increase the widespread anti-American sentiment in the region and propagate the Chinese social and economic model among communist and non-communist Latin American circles. As Lee’s research documents, another related aim was to “[...] convince the Latin Americans that Chinese revolutionary experience and strategy is applicable to their situation” (Lee 1964, 1123).

Given the absence of official diplomatic channels between China and most LAC countries, China’s strategy consisted of approaching governments and establishing cultural contact and exchanges with groups in civil society (Lee 1964, 1123). Between 1949 and the mid-1960s, China took significant steps to create the first institutions dedicated to the dissemination of China’s overseas publicity and cultural diplomacy initiatives in Latin America.

²³ For instance, the dictatorships of Juan Perón (1955), Gustavo Rojas Pinilla (Colombia, 1957) and Marcos Pérez Jiménez (Venezuela, 1958).

²⁴ Chinese premier Chou-En Lai declared in 1958 that “*Latin American peoples are outstanding in the forefront of ... [the] struggle against US imperialism*” (Ratliff 1972, 849).

The main agency responsible for handling China's cultural relations with other countries was the People's Association for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), established in 1954 (Lee 1964, 1124)²⁵. For Latin America, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) created the Institute for South American Affairs and a nucleus of pro-Chinese organizations, such as the Association for Sino-Latin American Friendship (AACAL), which was founded in 1960 under the auspices of the CPAFFC. Additionally, cultural institutes and bilateral friendship associations were set up to facilitate these exchanges²⁶.

One of the main instruments used by China were the so-called "cultural delegations", which targeted prominent individuals who exerted great influence in their home countries, such as writers, intellectuals, communist leaders, journalists, doctors, students, and other professionals²⁷ (Alba 1961, 54, 55; Mora 1997, 38). The core of Chinese cultural diplomacy was "guided tourism". According to Ratliff (1969, 57, 61, 62), the number of Latin Americans visiting China as part of these initiatives increased from ten in 1949 to over five hundred in 1960. Xu Shicheng (2006, 103) further reveals that, between 1950 and 1959, about 1,200 people from nineteen LAC countries visited China. Additionally, sixteen groups of artists from China, including the Peking Opera, troupes of acrobats, folk ensembles, as well as union and trade delegations, made visits to Latin America.

²⁵ Other Chinese institutions involved included the All-China Federation of Trade Unions, the All-China Youth Federation, the National Women's Federation, the China Peace Committee, the All-China Federation of Literary and Art Circles, the Union of Chinese Writers, the All-China Journalists Association, the China Committee for Promotion of International Trade, the All-China Athletic Federation, the Red Cross Society of China, the Political Science and Law Association of China, the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs, the Scientific and Technical Association of China, and the Chinese Medical Association (Lee 1964, 1124). In many of these institutions, there is a specific department devoted to LAC issues (Jiang 2006, 64).

²⁶ The first friendship associations were established in Havana, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, La Paz, Santiago, Bogota, Montevideo, and Caracas (Alba 1961, 54). By 1960, there were a total of twenty-two binational cultural centres, ten of them in Chile (Ratliff 1969, 76).

²⁷ Some influential Latin American figures who visited China were the poets Jorge Amado from Brazil (1952, 1957), Pablo Neruda from Chile (1951, 1957), the Ecuadorian writer, Jorge Icaza (1960), the Ecuadorian painter, Oswaldo Guayasamín (1960), the Argentinian writer, Alfredo Varela (1956), and the Guatemalan Nobel Prize winner in literature, Miguel Ángel Asturias (1956), among others (Alba 1961, 55; Ratliff 1969, 61).

Other instruments of Chinese diplomacy included printed media, radio and news broadcasts. In the late 1950s, publications circulating in China and Latin America increased. Books, pamphlets and politically oriented writings with communist content were circulated in the Spanish language. China's Foreign Languages Press alone had published sixty books and pamphlets in Spanish by 1958 (Ratliff 1969, 69)²⁸. Chinese propaganda found its way through the Xinhua News Agency, also known as New China News Agency, which opened its first branch in the region in Havana in 1959 and was operated using Chinese personnel. Subsequently, in 1960, additional branches were set up in Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela. News about China and information about social movements as well as the social and communist parties of Latin America was also spread through Radio Peking. It was created in 1958 and broadcasted in Spanish and Portuguese (Alba 1961, 54; Ratliff 1969, 78).

From the Latin American point of view, China enjoyed a positive image. Besides being perceived as an exotic country, China was considered an example of a communist country which successfully implemented agrarian reforms and was implementing an autonomous development and industrialisation model, free from domination by external forces. Latin Americans saw China's achievements as a stimulus for their own endeavours. By 1960, some Latin American pro-Chinese circles, including political parties, leftist organizations and people's movements, looked upon China as a model and inspiration for their own social and economic development (Ratliff 1969, 78; 1972, 861). The prevailing Latin American internal context at the time, coupled with the region's positive image of China, favoured the expansion of China's cultural diplomacy initiatives.

China's cultural diplomacy initiatives were also positively received in the region. Upon returning from the tours arranged by China, Latin American participants of cultural delegations conveyed favourable views of China. They shared their

²⁸ Publications included legal, political and economic writings, such as the Constitution of China in Spanish, Mao Tse-tung's texts on agrarian reform, poems and speeches, guerilla warfare writings, peasant policies, literary works, albums of the Peking Opera, the China Reconstructs periodical, *Revista de Pekin*, *Ciencia China*, and *Mujer China* (Alba 1961, 54).

positive experiences through public talks, statements, writings, and books²⁹, and actively advocated in their home countries for the establishment of diplomatic relations with China. Some of them were key in the creation of cultural centres and friendship associations in their respective nations. These venues serve as platforms for showcasing Chinese printed materials, movies and exhibitions, all aimed at forging closer ties with China (Alba 1961, 55).

The bright years of China's cultural diplomacy in Latin America came to an end due to internal changes which occurred in both China and Latin America. Failure to implement China's Second Five Year Plan (Great Leap Forward 1958-1962) and introduce the people's communes as a key initiative to transition from an agrarian to a communist society damaged the country's image in the eyes of Latin Americans, once fond of China's economic model. Moreover, the return of military governments to power in some Latin American countries curtailed the freedom to spread China's propaganda and cultural initiatives. Even in those Latin American countries which remained democratic, measures were taken to restrict foreign influence and infiltration, further limiting China's cultural outreach. In this context, China's more militant international policy caused a decline in guided tours and a more belligerent tone in publications. By the mid-1960s, cultural contacts between China and Latin America had diminished significantly (Ratliff 1969, 79).

4.2 1970s-1990s: pragmatic readjustments

The 1970s brought important developments in Sino-Latin American relations. The readmission of China to the UN in 1971 and US-China rapprochement marked by Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972 favoured the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and Latin American countries³⁰.

²⁹ According to Alba, at least 20 books were written by prominent Latin American travellers in this phase in Mexico, Buenos Aires, Montevideo, and Havana. "*None of them is critical in tone, nor even merely a dispassionate account,*" the author affirms (Alba 1961, 55).

³⁰ In this decade, 11 LAC countries, namely Chile, Peru, Mexico, Argentina, Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Venezuela, Brazil, Suriname, and Barbados, adhered to the One China Policy. This policy acknowledges the PRC as the sole legitimate government representing China, while recognizing Taiwan as part of its territory (Shicheng 2006, 104).

Beijing began to de-radicalize its foreign policy approach in the late 1970s. Rather than making ideology one of its core drivers, the country established diplomatic relations with developing countries based on other common denominators, mainly nationalistic aspirations and political and economic independence. The adoption of a new development strategy in China also influenced the country's way of conducting its relations with other nations. The Chinese government under Deng Xiaoping started to pursue a modernisation reform and open-door policy (1978-1984) to rebuild the economy through the introduction of foreign investment, technology and open trade while maintaining socialist features (Huan 1986).

The introduction of China's new development strategy and the readjustments of its foreign policy had important implications for Latin America. The shift in focus entailed moving away from the previous "people-to-people" diplomatic approach to one centred on establishing diplomatic, trade and economic ties. During the 1980s, Beijing's targets were states and the private sector, and the goals for this region included seeking legitimacy, access to capital and new markets. These changes were driven by the aim to break from the economic disarray of the Cultural Revolution and to undermine Taiwan's presence in the region (Mora 1999, 95).

Diplomatic relations intensified. The presidents of eight Latin American countries and foreign ministers from fifteen Latin American nations visited Beijing in the period mentioned. High-level delegations from China also visited Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela in 1981 as well as Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico in 1984³¹. Moreover, China and twelve Latin American countries signed twenty-two agreements in the fields of technological and scientific cooperation in the period between 1979 and 1989 (Mora 1999, 97, 98, 100).

³¹ These visits provided opportunities for China to express its support of Argentina's claim for sovereignty over the Falkland Islands and oppose colonialism. China also supported regional initiatives such as the Contadora Group, which aimed to mediate the Central American conflict, and the Cartagena Group, which sought to end Latin American's debt problem.

Beyond state-to-state links, the CCP started to establish contact with political parties in Latin America, echoing its approach from the 1950s when it attempted to gain support from non-state actors and intelligentsia. By 1989, the CCP had ties with more than 30 political parties in the region. In the field of educational exchanges, there was an increase in student mobility between China and Latin America. According to Li, more than 300 students from China studied in Latin America and 160 Latin Americans studied in China in the period between 1965 and 1985 (Li cit. in Mora 1999, 98).

In the 1990s, cultural relations were not at the heart of China's foreign policy towards Latin America. The Tiananmen incident of 1989 and the fall of Communism in Europe prompted a readjustment of China's approach to Third World countries. In 1989 and 1990, scholars from the Institute of Latin American Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (ILAS-CASS) encouraged the Chinese government to adjust its relations with Latin American countries and "*[...] take advantage of Latin America's solid foundations and favorable conditions for developing South-South cooperation...and fast-growing trade and economic cooperation*" at a time when China felt diplomatically vulnerable and isolated from the West (Zhang and Xu cit. in Mora 1999, 101).

In practice, this shift entailed a focus on economic diplomacy, the strengthening of mutual political support and diplomatic relations, and monitoring Taiwan's activities in the region. It is interesting to observe that, despite China's attempt to neutralize Taiwan, Taipei's "yuan diplomacy" of 1989 proved successful in Latin America. Out of the 29 countries which recognized Taiwan, fourteen were from the LAC region, with the majority concentrated in Central America and the Caribbean (except Paraguay) (Mora 1999, 101).

The relations between China and Latin American countries continued to intensify in the 1990s. This was evident in the fact that the number of LAC countries which officially recognized China increased to 19 by the end of the 1990s. High-level visits also increased³² and trade flows rose steadily, reaching

³² Worthy of highlighting is the visit by China's President Yang Shangkun to Mexico, Brazil, Uruguay, Chile and Argentina in 1990. It was the first visit by a Chinese president to this region. China's President Jiang Zemin visited Cuba and Brazil in 1993 and Mexico in 1997 (Shicheng 2006, 107).

8.278 billion USD in 1999. In terms of local cooperation, friendship agreements between Chinese and Latin American cities and provinces started to be established, including the provinces of Buenos Aires and Hebei in 1992 as well as Entre Ríos and Jilin in 1996, and the cities of Beijing and Buenos Aires in 1993 and Rosario and Shanghai in 1997 (Jiang 2006).

4.3 2000s and onwards: multifaceted links

A substantially deeper relationship between China and the LAC countries has emerged since the beginning of the 21st century. These links have taken place within the context of an ongoing hegemonic transition and intensifying global rivalries. China, having attained a strong position as one of the world's largest economies, contrasts with Latin America's traditional peripheral role in the global economic landscape. Based on this differentiated role, an unprecedented level of multifaceted links in a wide range of areas has taken place. Never in the history of these relations have China and Latin America been so interconnected as now.

Over the past two decades, China's presence in and impact on the political and economic dynamics of the LAC region have grown dramatically. Although Latin America's trade with China steadily grew during most of the 1990s, a sharp increase occurred at the beginning of the 2000s. China's access to the WTO in 2001 and its rising energy consumption and resource demands are important factors which mark a new phase in China and LAC relations.

Political and diplomatic links became an important aspect of the relationship between China and the LAC region. Over the period from 2001 to 2022, three Chinese presidents—Jian Zemin, Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping—undertook 28 visits to eleven Latin American countries. Chinese Prime Ministers have also engaged in high-level visits to the region³³. In turn, presidents of nearly every Latin American country have visited China. Additionally, during the last decade, several Latin American countries have shifted their recognition from Taiwan to

³³ Top destinations have been Brazil (five presidential visits), Argentina (four), Chile (three), and Peru (two) (Dussel 2015, 7).

the PRC. These countries include Panama, El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and Honduras. As of 2023, 25 LAC countries recognize the PRC, while seven³⁴ maintain official relations with Taiwan.

In addition to bilateral ties, China's foreign policy towards Latin America also targets multilateral and regional organizations on the continent. China actively participates in these institutions, assuming different roles such as partner, observer and member. As a partner, China engages with organizations like the Rio Group, Mercosur and the Latin America Economic System. As an observer, China involves itself in institutions such as the Latin American Integration Association (ALADI), the Organization of America States (OAS), the Latin American Parliament, and the Pacific Alliance. Furthermore, as a member, China participates in the Caribbean Development Bank, China-Caribbean Economic & Trade Cooperation Forum, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the CCF (Legler, Turzi, and Tzili-Apango 2020, 43). Through these various involvements, China seeks to establish and strengthen its presence and influence in the multilateral and regional governance landscape of Latin America.

A turning point in China and Latin America's relations occurred in 2008. For the first time in the history of their relationship, the Chinese government released its first Policy Paper specifically dedicated to the LAC region. The relevance of this document is manifested in its establishment of long-term goals considering the entire region. It outlines a comprehensive programme to enhance cooperation in fourteen areas. These include economy, trade, investment, scientific and technological cooperation, education and culture, energy, and infrastructure, all framed under the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence. The differences between China's White Paper of 2008 governing its foreign policy towards Latin America and those directed at other developing countries, particularly on the African continent, are minimal and practically negligible.

³⁴ These countries include Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, Paraguay, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Saint Kitts and Nevis.

In November 2016, the Chinese government issued a second official document ratifying its commitment to further expand its ties with LAC countries. The distinguishing factor in the 2016 White Paper is the explicit recognition by the Chinese government of the strategic nature and significance of the relationship in achieving its development objectives, particularly the transformation of China into a modern socialist country (PRC State Council 2016; Zapata, Castro, and Benzi 2018, 5). Furthermore, the document also referred to the CCF, established in 2014, as the high-level institutional framework for cooperation through which China would engage multilaterally with its LAC counterparts.

Since the creation of the CCF, there has been a remarkable establishment of spaces for the promotion of cultural exchanges among a myriad of actors. This denotes a renewed interest by China in elevating the importance of culture in Sino-Latin American relations and linking this dimension to other high-level economic and geopolitical objectives and initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As will be evidenced in the subsequent section, cultural exchanges have regained prominence since the creation of the CCF.

5. The CCF as an instrument of China's cultural diplomacy

At the broadest level of interaction, cultural exchanges between Chinese and LAC actors take place within the framework of CELAC's CCF, created in 2014, and its thematic subforums. The CCF can be considered as an institution of a two-fold nature: multilateral and regional. It operates within the universe of multilateral institutions, most of which are created by China's initiative to establish closer ties, including cultural engagements, with other regions. In this line, the CCF is part of China's network of regional institutions like the CASCF and the FOCAC. As such, the CCF is part of China's broader multilateral strategy with developing regions in the Global South.

From the LAC perspective, CELAC also maintains a dialogue with other regional actors beyond China. For instance, this includes the European Union (EU) through the EU-CELAC summits and Russia with the CELAC-Russia Mechanism for Political Dialogue and Cooperation (CELAC 2011). However, unlike the CCF, both institutional spaces have remained paralyzed for the most part. The EU-CELAC summit scheduled for 2017 was cancelled. In an attempt to win Latin America over as a strategic partner, the EU declared that Latin America will be "high" on the agenda of the EU in 2023, and so the most recent EU-CELAC Summit took place in 2023, after an eight-year period of inactivity (European Parliament 2023, I). The CCF stands out as the most active, dynamic and continuous mechanism of the CELAC, compared to other spaces with other regional actors.

Its regional nature is reflected in that CELAC comprises different subregions of Latin America (South America, Central America and Mexico, and the Caribbean) and attempts to affirm and consolidate a unified LAC identity and uphold it on the international stage.

The CCF was officially created in 2014 at the 2nd CELAC Summit held in La Havana, Cuba. This event marked a significant juncture for LAC countries, offering them a strategic venue to diversify their relations beyond conventional partners such as the US and the EU in a context of global power shifts from the Atlantic to the Asia-Pacific. For China, the CCF is one more instance of its multilateral diplomacy and renewed approach towards the Global South.

The inauguration of the CCF was formalized by the convention of its first Ministerial Meeting, held in Beijing in January 2015. The establishment of the CCF was a milestone in China-LAC relations because it constituted itself as the main platform for promoting China-LAC overall cooperation. The creation of the CCF was meant to consolidate links under the principles of SSC and in light of previously existing initiatives and bilateral agreements between the parties. In general terms, the CCF aims at developing a comprehensive partnership based on the principles of equality and common development between China and the 33 CELAC members³⁵ (MFA 2016, 3, 4).

The CCF is a high-level platform led by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of China and the CELAC member states to address issues of interest in several areas including policy, economy, science and technology, trade, finances, environment, social development, and culture. The main mechanisms of the CCF are of a high-level nature and include the Ministerial Meeting, the Dialogue of Foreign Ministers of China and the Quartet of CELAC, and the Meeting of National Coordinators (MFA 2016, 15, 16). These structures reflect the importance of the CCF's adhering to diplomacy and high-level politics.

Whereas the CCF officially projects itself as a cooperation platform which operates under the principles of respect, equality, plurality, mutual benefit, SSC as opposed to North-South cooperation (together with its aid normativity), and non-conditionality, the asymmetric nature of the relationship between China and the CELAC countries is evident. This asymmetry is rooted not only in the peripheral positioning of the CELAC countries and the broader LAC region, juxtaposed with China's prominent status as a global power, but it also pertains to the distinctive manner in which each entity engages with the other. While China has delineated a clear set of objectives, areas of priority and overall guidelines which govern its links with LAC countries, as evidenced by its White

³⁵ The CELAC members are Antigua and Barbuda, Argentina, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Dominica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Grenada, Guatemala, Guyana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Santa Lucia, Suriname, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

Policy Papers of 2008 and 2016, CELAC as a collective entity has yet to forge a common strategy for its engagement with China.

As will be evidenced in further subsections, China has narrowed down its objectives and initiatives in the specific field of culture and people-to-people exchanges with CELAC. For their part, the CELAC member countries have not even agreed on general parameters on which to base their links with China, let alone particular policies concerning cultural diplomacy. Certainly, it is important to highlight that the CCF, as a joint institutional body, has released three Action Plans for its operation (2015-2019, 2019-2021 and 2022-2024). However, these Action Plans can be interpreted as an additional Chinese policy instrument or, in other words, as more specific derivations of China's White Papers to the LAC region, including those related to culture. LAC's voice or strategic objectives towards China are not quite evident in the CCF's Action Plans. This is why it is more accurate to refer to "Chinese cultural diplomacy" being deployed in the LAC region and not to "CELAC's cultural diplomacy" in its relations with China.

Another reason for arguing that the CCF serves as a platform and instrument of China's cultural diplomacy is related to China's excessive role in keeping the cultural initiatives with the CELAC countries afloat. It is the Chinese government and specifically allocated institutions which propose, implement and give continuity to cultural-exchange initiatives with LAC. Worthy of highlight is the fact that many of the subforums and cultural activities carried out in the CCF are the same or very similar to those which China maintains with other regional forums such as FOCAC, the Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEE), and CASCF. Drawing upon its extensive cultural diplomacy engagements with other regions and multilateral bodies, China sets the terms, contents and programmes which govern the cultural exchanges taking place within the CCF space. This is nonetheless slowly changing as China is gradually seeking to enhance the engagement of LAC actors in leading and organizing cultural initiatives.

Furthermore, the CCF can be interpreted as an additional platform where China can use cultural exchanges as an instrument to dispel concerns about the rise of China and gain support to implement the BRI, its flagship global mega project.

5.1 Culture in China’s approach to LAC

The main official documents which summarize China’s policy towards Latin America, including the field of culture, are China’s 2008 and 2016 Policy Papers for LAC. A close examination of these documents reveals the importance which China assigns to the cultural dimension in its relationship with LAC countries. Moreover, a comparison of both policy papers shows an evolution regarding the number of cultural initiatives, targeted actors and areas of action.

Table 3. China's 2008 and 2016 Policy Papers in LAC: main objectives in the cultural dimension	
2008 Policy Paper	2016 Policy Paper
Objective 3. Draw on each other’s strengths to boost common progress and intensify exchanges. The two sides (China and CELAC countries) will carry out more cultural and people-to-people exchanges, learn from each other and jointly promote development and progress of human civilization.	Objective 3. Exchanges and mutual learning, as well as carrying forward the friendship from generation to generation, is the solid foundation of the relations. China stands ready to strengthen exchanges with Latin American and Caribbean governments, legislative bodies, political parties, and entities at the local level and cooperation in the fields of education, science and technology, culture, sports, health, journalism, and tourism. China will actively hold dialogues between civilizations to bring the hearts of our peoples closer and make contributions to promoting the harmonious coexistence of different civilizations in the world.

Sources: China’s Policy Papers on LAC 2008 and 2016. | *Author’s elaboration.*

Table 3 illustrates that both of China's Policy Papers on LAC from 2008 and 2016 share a common third objective which pertains to enhancing cultural connections with the region. The 2016 Policy Paper expounds upon this objective in a more comprehensive and elaborate manner. It specifies other targeted sectors within the cultural area, including education, sports and journalism. Noteworthy is that it also resumes Xi Jinping's narratives on the "dialogues between civilisations" used in other multilateral spaces, this time adapted to the Latin American context.

Regarding China's understanding of the area of culture, the 2008 Policy Paper aims at the promotion of four subfields: sport exchanges, media cooperation, education, and people-to-people exchanges. China's 2016 Policy Paper is more specific in elaborating what is meant by media cooperation and includes more subareas such as the press, publications, radio, film, and television. Moreover, it also encourages academic and think tank exchanges, human resources training, and non-governmental exchanges, as Table 4 shows.

2008 Policy Paper	2016 Policy Paper
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <u>Area 3. Cultural and social aspects</u> - Cultural and Sports Exchanges - Media Cooperation - People-to-People Exchanges - Cooperation in Science, Technology and Education - Cooperation in Medical and Health Care - Consular Cooperation and Personnel Exchanges - Cooperation in Environmental Protection - Cooperation in Combating Climate Change - Cooperation in Human Resources and Social Security - Disaster Reduction, Disaster Relief and Humanitarian Assistance - Cooperation in Poverty Alleviation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <u>Area 4. Cultural and people-to-people fields</u> - Cultural and Sports Exchanges and Cooperation - Education and Human Resources Training - Exchanges and Cooperation in Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television - Tourism Cooperation - Academic and Think Tank Exchanges - Non-governmental Exchanges - Consular Cooperation

Sources: China's 2008 and 2016 Policy Papers on LAC. | *Author's elaboration.*

The Chinese government also proposed the development of specific cultural initiatives in both the 2008 and 2016 Policy Papers. As Table 5 suggests, the initiatives presented in the 2016 White Paper exhibit a greater scope and, interestingly, incorporate existing instruments of Chinese diplomacy, including the CIs and the Confucius Classrooms. The White Paper also encompasses new initiatives such as the LAC-China Cultural Year 2016, protection of cultural heritage, art festivals, and exhibitions. Moreover, the 2016 Policy Paper accentuates efforts within the sphere of communication and media, publications, translations, and co-productions of programmes and portals.

Table 5. China's 2008 and 2016 Policy Papers on LAC: initiatives in the cultural dimension

2008 Policy Paper	2016 Policy Paper
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cultural and educational mixed committee - Twinning of sister cities - China-Latin America Entrepreneur Summit - China-Caribbean Entrepreneurs Meeting - Cultural cooperation agreements - Exchange of visits between Chinese and LAC cultural authorities - Cultural exchange programmes - Bilateral sports exchanges - Agreement on mutual recognition of diplomas and academic degrees - Chinese government scholarships for LAC students - Exchanges and cooperation between Chinese and LAC media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dialogue between cultural authorities - Art festivals - Visual arts exhibitions - Dialogue among civilisations - LAC-China Cultural Exchange Year 2016 - Protection of cultural heritage - Sports exchanges and events - Educational exchanges - Mobility research projects - Training for Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese speakers - CIs and Confucius Classrooms - Chinese government scholarships for LAC students - Chinese language teaching - Dialogue, cooperation and signing of bilateral agreements in press, publication, radio, film, and television - Co-production of programmes - Festivals/exhibitions on press, publication, radio, film or television - Media personnel exchanges - Joint media interviews - Media portal development - Mutual translation of philosophical and cultural classics - Publication of classic works - Cooperative research between universities, academic exchanges and seminars

- “Future Bridge” Training Program for One Thousand Chinese and Latin American Youth Leaders
- Latin American Youth Cadres Training Program
- Women’s empowerment initiatives

Sources: China’s 2008 and 2016 Policy Papers on LAC. | *Author’s elaboration.*

5.2 Culture in CELAC-China Action Plans

The CCF has developed its activities based on three plans: the “Plan of Cooperation between China and the Latin American and Caribbean Countries (2015-2019)”³⁶, the “CELAC and China Joint Plan of Action for Cooperation in Priority Areas (2019-2021)”³⁷ and the “China-CELAC Joint Action Plan for Cooperation in Key Areas (2022-2024)”³⁸. These documents identify specific areas for cooperation while outlining initiatives which both China and the CELAC countries are tasked with implementing within a certain timeframe (CCF 2015, 2018b, 2021b).

The outlined plans are meant to be implemented under the principles of equality, mutual benefit, cooperation, respect, and non-conditionality. These parameters establish a normative framework which intends to distinguish itself from traditional North-South cooperation and its aid normativity (Vadell 2022, 193). Common to the three plans is the emphasis on a flexible and voluntary implementation by the member states. This means that countries are not obliged

³⁶ See the full text of the plan in:

http://www.chinacelacforum.org/eng/zywj_3/201501/t20150123_6475954.htm

³⁷ See the full text of the plan in:

https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/ziliao_674904/1179_674909/201802/t20180202_7947812.shtml

³⁸ See the full text of the plan in:

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjbxw/202112/t20211207_10463459.html

to take part in the initiatives or programmes proposed. Additionally, the CCF plans do not affect or replace any pre-established bilateral cooperation project.³⁹

China's relevant role in the definition of the CCF Action Plans and prioritisation of areas of cooperation thus becomes apparent. China's 2008 and 2016 Policy Papers for LAC have provided the basis for the definition of CCF's Plans. Evidently, the prioritized domains and specific initiatives underscored in China's 2008 and 2016 Policy Papers closely mirror those reiterated in the context of the three distinct CCF Action Plans.

China has not issued an updated version of its policy towards the region since 2016. However, the overarching principles and initiatives delineated in the two CCF Plans (2019-2021 and 2022-2024) are in harmony with China's most recent strategic projects. The BRI is a case in point in this sense. China's official invitation to CELAC members to take part in the BRI was made during the proceedings of the 2nd Ministerial Meeting of the CCF, held in 2018. Within the framework of this forum, member states signed the "Special Declaration on the Belt and Road Initiative"⁴⁰ and additionally adopted the 2nd CCF Joint Plan for Action 2019-2021, whose preface explicitly mentions that such a Plan was agreed upon, "*...taking into account the presentation made by China on the possibilities offered by the Belt and Road Initiative*" (CCF 2018b).

The cultural dimension assumes a relevant position in the three CCF Action Plans. In the CCF Plan for 2015-2019, four out of the thirteen priority areas were closely linked to the promotion of culture, including education, culture and sports, media and publications, and "friendship among peoples". Moreover,

³⁹ Regarding the principles of implementation of the Action Plan, the following statement reflects the flexibility of the CCF's approach, "Any CELAC member state may completely or partially refrain from participating in an approved initiative, be it for a period defined beforehand, or for an indefinite period, without preventing it from later joining the total or partial implementation of that initiative, with prior approval from China and the participant States. In implementing this cooperation plan, due consideration will be given to the challenges and needs of the least developed countries, landlocked developing countries and small island developing states of CELAC." (MFA 2016a, 15).

⁴⁰ See the full text of the declaration in CCF 2018a:

<https://www.rree.go.cr/files/includes/files.php?id=1317&tipo=documentos>

cultural initiatives are proposed in other transversal areas mentioned in the plans, for instance politics, and science, technology and innovation.

Many of the cultural initiatives contained in the CCF Plans 2015-2019, 2019-2021, and 2022-2024 (listed in Annex 3) were proposed by China. Worthy of highlight are the scholarships targeted to Latin Americans to be financed exclusively by China: 6,000 for the period 2015-2019, 6,000 for 2019-2021 and 5,000 for 2022-2024, totalling 17,000 scholarships between 2015 and 2024. This does not include the training opportunities further offered by China and the “Bridge to the Future” programme which targets young leaders from China and LAC countries. Another important initiative from China which was conceived for the first time for the Latin American context was the “Year of China-LAC Cultural Exchange 2016”. Far from being a new initiative, China has already conducted several annual cultural exchanges with other regions and countries. According to Chinese sources, the Chinese Ministry of Culture authorizes 2,000 cultural exchange programmes with at least 60 countries every year, involving 30,000 participants (China.org.cn, n.d.).

5.3 CCF subforums related to culture

As a platform for intergovernmental cooperation between China and LAC countries, the CCF operates through three main mechanisms: the Ministerial Meeting, the Dialogue of Foreign Ministers of China and the Quartet of CELAC, and the Meeting of National Coordinators. These mechanisms bring together high-level authorities, including heads of state and ministers, in recurrent summits and meetings. In tandem with these established frameworks, the CCF's initiatives in the different fields of the relationship are developed and implemented through subforums.

Table 6 is a compilation of the subforums within the CCF which operate in the field of culture. By 2023, there were ten subforums in which governmental and non-governmental actors meet on a regular basis to enhance ties in the dimensions of education, youth exchanges, sports, media, local government cooperation, civil society connections, and traditional Chinese medicine.

Table 6. CCF subforums in culture-oriented areas	
Education	Year launched
China-LAC Think-Tanks Forum	2010
China-CELAC High Level Academic Forum	2017
China-CELAC University Dean Forum	(Proposed)
Young People	
China-LAC Young Political Leaders' Forum	2013
China-LAC Youth Development Forum	2021
Cultural Exchange	
Seminar/Forum on China and LAC Dialogues between Civilisations	2017
China-LAC People-to-People Friendship Forum	2007
China-LAC Traditional Medicine Exchange Forum	2021
China-LAC Wushu Exchange Forum	2021
Communication & Politics	
China-LAC Media Forum	2018
China-CELAC Local Government Cooperation Forum	2016

Sources: CCF website, CCF Action Plans | *Author's elaboration.*

It is important to mention that the CCF has absorbed some of the initiatives and institutional structures of the China-LAC exchange which existed before the CCF was created in 2014. This is precisely the case for three subforums: the China-LAC People-to-People Friendship Forum created in 2007, the China-LAC Think-Tanks Forum established in 2010, and the China-LAC Young Political Leaders' Forum, which first met in 2013.

The creation of these forums before 2014 is an indication of the early recognition of the importance attributed by both China and Latin American countries to cooperation and exchanges among non-governmental actors such as think tanks, civil society and young political leaders. It also underscores the pivotal role assumed by the CCF as an umbrella institution, which not only made previous cultural exchanges visible but also gives them continuity on a higher level of engagement.

It is worth highlighting that a substantial array of subforums has been launched since the establishment of the CCF. Over the past six years, a total of eight subforums has been created, all of which are intricately linked to the cultural sphere. These subforums have manifested a focus on novel participants and subject areas. Particularly significant is the emergence of three new subforums in 2021, following the global pandemic: the China-LAC Youth Development Forum, the China-LAC Traditional Medicine Forum and the China-LAC Wushu Exchange Forum.

5.4 Cultural initiatives in the CCF

Just like certain institutional structures for China-LAC exchanges, several cultural initiatives which existed before the CCF was established in 2014 were incorporated into the CCF's ambit, thus ensuring their continuity. Others emerged under the subcategories of education, culture, art and sports, people-to-people and subnational exchanges, and media. These collaborative endeavours further enriched the spectrum of cultural engagement under the purview of the CCF.

5.4.1 Education

There are at least four broad initiatives within the CCF in the field of education, three of which were established after its creation.

Young Cadres of Latin America and the Caribbean: launched for the first time in 2010, this initiative consists of yearly seminars targeted to LAC's youth organizations of political parties, governmental youth affairs departments and national social youth organizations. The aim of this programme is threefold: to diffuse knowledge about China among LAC youth, foster ties between Chinese and LAC youth organizations and promote cooperation in culture, politics and economics. The programme takes place in China and comprises conferences on China's politics, history, culture, economics, and youth cooperation, and dialogues with young Chinese scholars. Different cities are toured to understand China's development trajectory.

By 2023, nine sessions had been held and, since the sixth one, this initiative has been carried out within the framework of the "Bridge to the Future Training Camp for Young Leaders from China and LAC Countries". The main Chinese counterpart in charge of the organization of this programme is the International Department of the Communist Youth League of China (CYLC)⁴¹, which is controlled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and has been in existence for 100 years (FEALAC 2015).

Bridge to the Future Training Camp for Young Leaders from China and LAC Countries: the origins of this programme go back to 2014 when, in the framework of the China-CELAC Summit, President Xi Jinping announced the plan to launch this initiative in 2015. After this announcement, the initiative was incorporated in the 2015-2019 China-CELAC Action Plan and mentioned in the two subsequent plans. In the field of education, the "Bridge to the Future" is one of the biggest programmes since it has a timeframe of ten years and is meant to involve 1,000 young leaders from China and LAC countries in training

⁴¹ For more information on the CYLC, see Parton 2022: <https://merics.org/en/comment/chinas-communist-youth-league-eternally-young-hundred>

programmes. It is also of a high-level and strategic nature, not only because it was mentioned in Xi Jinping's keynote speech, "Build a Community of Shared Destiny for Common Progress" for the China-LAC Summit held in Brasilia in 2014, but also because it is part of China's broader multilateral and cultural diplomacy strategy with other regions. Indeed, China also implements the same type of training programme targeted at the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Central and Eastern European young leaders through institutions like the International Department of the CYLC or the All-China Youth Federation (ACYF)⁴².

At least five editions of the China-LAC "Bridge to the Future" have been held since 2015. The programme takes place in China and usually lasts ten days, involving around 100 participants each year. Among them, there are participants from Central American countries which do not have formal diplomatic relations with Beijing and recognize Taiwan. The programme encompasses diverse activities such as seminars, workshops, guided tours, and field excursions to Chinese cities and governmental establishments. It also encompasses training sessions and deliberations with Chinese youth representatives (Cardenal 2017, 31, 32; MFA 2016, 51, 52).

China-LAC Young Scientists Exchange Program: this programme was also proposed by President Xi Jinping at the China-LAC Summit of 2014. It was officially launched in 2015 within the framework of the 1st China-LAC Scientific and Technological Innovation Forum. The 2015-2019 Action Plan incorporates this programme and it is further mentioned in the two most recent China-CELAC Plans. The China-LAC Young Scientists Program is not per se a new initiative specifically devoted to the LAC region (MFA 2016, 51, 52). It is part of China's broader cultural diplomacy initiative called "*International Outstanding Youth Program*", the Talented Young Scientist Program (TYSP) launched in 2013 and implemented by the Ministry of Science and Technology of China with special funds under the "Science and Technology Partnership Program". This initiative is of a highly strategic nature because it is linked to the

⁴² For more information about the European Youth Association, see: <https://europeanyouth.org/bridge-for-the-future-china-central-and-eastern-europe-youth-campus/>

accomplishment of the BRI scientific and technological innovation action plan and its cultural youth exchange objectives (TYSP 2023).

The programme finances young scientists, academics and researchers from developing countries, including the LAC region, to spend six to twelve months in China doing scientific work with Chinese partner universities and companies in selected areas related to technology and innovation⁴³. The overall aim, as officially stated, is to establish cooperative links between Chinese and developing countries' research institutions (ibidem). In practice, it is known that, in 2014 and 2015, China's Ministry of Science and Technology enabled fourteen scientists from Latin America to conduct research in China with almost full financial support (MFA 2016, 55, 56)⁴⁴. It is unclear how many researchers from LAC have benefitted so far from this programme.

China-CELAC High-level Academic Forum: this forum, hosted twice in Chile in 2017 and 2021, distinguishes itself through its connection with a higher instance of the CCF. Compared to similar initiatives like the China-LAC Think-Tank Forum, this forum is at a higher strategic level because its aim is to yield concrete proposals from an expert and academic point of view. These proposals subsequently inform the recurring meetings conducted by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of China and CELAC nations. The two forums held have produced reports which have served as contributions to the Second and Third Ministerial Meetings between China and CELAC. Moreover, these reports have significantly influenced the crafting of the China-CELAC Cooperation Plans spanning the years 2019 to 2021 (BCN 2017; ECLAC 2021).

In both of the forums held, the role of Latin America's main think tank, the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), has been very prominent. In close collaboration with ILAS-CASS,

⁴³ These areas include: agriculture, environment and related areas, pure and applied sciences, social sciences and communication, law and related areas, economics, business and administration, education and teacher training, engineering and technology, health and medicine (Ministry of Education Argentina 2022).

⁴⁴ According to the guidelines of the Talented Young Scientist Program, the Chinese counterpart covers housing and insurance fees (RMB 12,500, around € 1,580 monthly), while the participant is responsible for the funding of their flight tickets (TYSP 2023).

ECLAC has acted as organizer and host of the forums, gathering high-level authorities from national delegations, experts and scholars. The main topics covered include trade, financial and investment relations between LAC and China, the LAC and China Science and Technology Cooperation and, most importantly, entire discussion sessions around the China and LAC Cooperation on the BRI and Health Silk Road. It is important to highlight that ECLAC is consolidating itself as an advisory institution to CELAC and the CCF; its role in the China-CELAC High-level Academic Forum is proof of this.

As is the case with other CCF subforums and initiatives, cultural side activities have accompanied this forum including, for instance, book donation ceremonies among Chinese and LAC universities and institutions and the signing of memorandums of agreement, for instance between ECLAC and ILAS-CASS.

Other initiatives: there are other initiatives promoted in the educational field by China within the CCF which are part of the main instruments of China's cultural diplomacy. These include, for instance, the establishment of CIs and Confucius Classrooms in more Latin American countries, the incorporation of the Chinese language into the CELAC countries' school curricula, and the provision of scholarships to LAC citizens to study in China. These initiatives are mentioned in the CCF plans, but mostly correspond to China's overall cultural diplomacy instruments.

5.4.2 Culture, arts and sports

Since the establishment of the CCF, a concerted effort has been made at the highest level to elevate and encourage cultural initiatives and exchanges in the field of the arts. Since 2014, the CCF has been instrumental in fostering the continuous growth and enrichment of art festivals and exhibitions, showcasing the creative contributions of artists from both China and Latin America. Importantly, these endeavours have not only been sustained but also bolstered under the auspices of the CCF.

Over the past five years, an increasing number of subfields within the artistic sector have garnered prominence as part of the initiatives of the CCF subforums dedicated to culture. These encompass the circulation of traditional Chinese medicine and sports such as Wushu and Taijiquan through exchange forums and competitive events and the organization of seminars such as the “Dialogue of Civilisations”. The recent inception of these initiatives within the LAC arena is interpreted here as a facet of China’s broader endeavour to mobilize its geocultural potential as a millenarian civilisation, deeply intertwined with the aspirations of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a comprehensive geocultural undertaking.

Latin American & Caribbean Arts Season: this initiative was held for the first time for a one-month period in 2013. Just as with some of the initiatives mentioned in the field of education, the LAC Arts Season is the materialisation of Xi Jinping’s announcements in his first official visit to Latin American countries in 2013⁴⁵. The objective of this initiative is to serve as a platform to present LAC’s art and “...let more Chinese people know and love Latin American countries” (FEALAC - Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation 2015). The Ministry of Culture of China is the main organizer of the LAC Arts Season in coordination with the embassies of LAC countries in China. In 2013, the LAC Arts Season comprised several activities in different categories: the Latin American Concert, the Caribbean Music Festival, the Latin American Art Exhibition, and visiting scholars’ and artists’ symposiums; it involved coordination with nineteen LAC embassies in China (ibidem). By 2018, the LAC Arts Season had been held five times, including five hundred events involving China’s invitation to “...more than 200 artists of 20 Latin American and Caribbean countries [...] in Beijing, Zhejiang, Hunan, Guizhou, and Sichuan” (Guo 2018, 247) to participate.

China-LAC Cultural Exchange Year 2016: this initiative was already proposed in CCF’s high political spheres in 2014. In Xi Jinping’s speech at the 1st China-LAC Summit held in Brasilia, the Chinese president anticipated the designation

⁴⁵ In his first official visit to Latin America, Xi Jinping visited Mexico, Costa Rica, and Trinidad and Tobago in June 2013 prior to his meeting with US president Barack Obama.

of 2016 as the “Year of Cultural Exchanges” between China and LAC. It is considered to be the largest cultural programme held in China and LAC since the establishment of the PRC (Huizhi 2018, 65, 66). Thirty LAC countries and China participated throughout the year in this initiative, which included a wide variety of cultural events such as music, food and film festivals, art exhibitions, and artistic performances. The China-LAC cultural year comprised a two-way street exchange, that is, events as part of the “Chinese Culture in LAC” and the “LAC Art Festival” held in China. The main objectives were the spread of Chinese culture in Latin America and the improvement of friendship and mutual understanding (Yan Dongjie 2016).

The “Chinese Culture in LAC” section comprised five main themes organized by China’s Ministry of Culture and developed by the China Arts and Entertainment Group: the Wildness Tour, the Drama Tour, the Music Tour, the Visual & Art Tour, and the Civilisation Tour. The itinerant events around these five themes were held in several LAC countries and featured China’s traditional culture as well as modern developments in the fields of art, film, literature, tourism, and gastronomy. These included well-established Chinese shows such as the Terracotta Warriors Show, Cultural Relics Show, Art Show of the National Art Museum of China, the China Ceramics Show and Minority Fashion Show, and the Olympic Painting Show (Chinaculture 2014).

In turn, the LAC Art Festival was held in several Chinese cities including Beijing, Guangdong, Shenzhen, and Shanghai. It comprised art exhibitions which showed the work of over 280 LAC artists (paintings, photography and sculptures), the screening of LAC documentaries under the theme of “Inheritance and Development”, a three-day Caribbean music festival held in Beijing, Caribbean Film, Food and Rum Tasting festivals, and the “Magic and Reality” and “Sharing the Beauty” LAC art exhibitions. Part of the cultural initiatives included the “Artist Exchange Programme” which enabled LAC artists to visit Huanan, Xiangxi and Changsha and hold exchanges with local artists as well as the publication in the LAC region of thirty-two novels and poetry books by contemporary Chinese authors (Cardenal 2017, 28; FEALAC - Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation 2016).

According to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China, 240 projects were carried out in China and 24 in Latin American countries as part of the 2016 China-LAC Cultural Year. These projects included 650 activities in the fields of the arts, literature, the cultural market, historical relics, tourism, and media with the direct participation of 6.3 million people and an audience of 32 million people (Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China cit. in. Guo 2018, 246).

Xi Jinping's official visit to Chile, Ecuador and Peru in 2016 was taken as an opportunity for the Chinese political leader to participate in the closing ceremony of the 2016 cultural year in Lima. So far, this has been the only cultural year between China and the LAC region.

Sharing the Beauty Exhibition: this modern art exhibition is a cultural initiative which has taken place yearly in Beijing since 2011. The "China Millennium Monument" Museum has been one of the main locations in Beijing where the exhibitions have been held under the coordination and organization of the Ministry of Culture of China, the LAC embassies in China and the China Arts and Entertainment Group (CAEG). Under the framework of this initiative, LAC artists are invited to China to exhibit their artwork such as oil paintings, photos, installation art, and films (CAEG 2021). It is important to mention that the hybrid version of the 2022 China-LAC Sharing the Beauty Exhibition came to be part of a broader initiative, the Silk Road International Arts Festival. Launched in 2014, this festival is held annually in Xi'an City, Shaanxi province, a strategic cultural hub which is considered to be the starting point for the ancient Silk Road and nowadays attempts to be positioned as the heart of the New Silk Road economic belt. This evidences China's efforts to redirect its cultural diplomacy initiatives with LAC towards the accomplishment of more encompassing strategic objectives, mainly those of the BRI.

China-LAC Taijiquan Competition: this initiative is mentioned in the CCF Action Plan 2022-2024. It took place for the first time in 2021, in line with the CCF's objective of encouraging sports teams' competitions. The competition was organized by the China Interactive Sports Technology Invention and hosted by the Chinese Wushu Association. Around 893 Taijiquan practitioners from fourteen countries, including China, Argentina, Bermuda, Bolivia, Brazil,

Mexico, Peru, Costa Rica, and Uruguay, participated in the event, which was held online during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chinese Wushu Association 2021).

This initiative is an example of China's efforts to expand cultural ties with a broader variety of civil society groups and in original areas. It is the first time that Taijiquan athletes from China and the LAC region participated in a sports initiative proposed by the CCF. Since it was an online competition, it included contributions from "netizens" (around 7 million) who voted for the best recorded clip (Chinadaily 2021). Additionally, with this event, China ventured into the use of one of its many internationally recognized traditional sports as an instrument of cultural diplomacy in LAC. In the opening ceremony of the competition, the President of the International Wushu Federation and the Chinese Olympic Committee, Gou Zhongwen, highlighted the cultural value of Taijiquan by mentioning that it is part of UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity and serves as "*an important vehicle for cultural and people-to-people exchanges*" (Gou 2021).

Wushu Martial Arts Exchange Forum: this forum was held online in 2021 together with the above-mentioned Taijiquan competition. The launch of this forum is mentioned in the CCF Action Plan 2022-2024 and its implementation is expected to continue on a regular basis. The forum gathered several Chinese and LAC Wushu (Kung fu) federations or associations including, for instance, the OBW-Bolivian Organization of Wushu, the Brazilian Wushu Confederation (Sao Paulo), the Wushu Kung Fu Federation of Costa Rica, and the FWRM-Wushu Federation of Mexico, among others⁴⁶. The creation of the forum goes in line with the CCF's objective of encouraging exchanges between Chinese and LAC sports associations. During the event, the President of the International Wushu Federation announced the hope of organizing a Wushu Summer Olympics in the future to "*contribute to the friendship and health of the people*" (Gou 2021). So far, this forum has been held once.

⁴⁶ Other LAC Wushu associations which participated in the event included the Argentina Wushu Federation, Wushu/Kung-Fu Argentinian Federation (Buenos Aires), Bermuda Wushu Association, Peruvian Wushu Association, International Lung Wushu Kung Fu Federation, Tiger Wushu Association, Golden Lion Wushu Club, Peruvian Health Qigong Association, and Peruvian Wushu Team Athletes.

China-LAC Traditional Medicine Exchange Forum: this forum was launched online for the first time in 2021 under the slogan of “*Give full play to the role of traditional Chinese medicine in epidemic prevention and control and deepen cooperation in traditional medicine between China and Latin America*”. The forum gathered institutions and experts in the field of health such as the State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine of China, the World Federation of Chinese Medicine Societies, the World Federation of Acupuncture and Moxibustion Societies, the Technical Committee of Traditional Chinese Medicine of the International Organization for Standardization, and experts and official authorities in the field of health from nineteen LAC countries (Embassy of the PRC in Mexico 2015).

This initiative is included as part of China’s cultural diplomacy efforts because, beyond the health-related objectives of this forum, the centre of attention is on the role of traditional Chinese medicine, understood as a “treasure of the Chinese civilisation”. At the end of the forum, participants adopted the “Special Declaration on Strengthening Traditional Medicine Cooperation between China and CELAC”, in which the delegations established intertwined health and culturally related objectives such as to continue to summarize and promote the experience of traditional Chinese medicine in fighting epidemics, to strengthen mechanisms for information sharing in epidemic-related issues, and “*cooperate to jointly build a human health community and a China-Latin America community with a shared future*” (ibidem).

5.4.3 People-to-people and subnational exchanges

China’s cultural diplomacy towards Latin America is implemented through a multitiered approach which not only considers state actors and high-level authorities but also targets local actors at different administrative levels and groups from civil society. The cultural initiatives held under the auspices of the CCF mainly comprise forums of exchange which existed before the CCF and are now under the umbrella of this organization, as well as newly created spaces for exchange in line with China’s most recent policy objectives. The actors involved

include friendship associations from Latin American countries with China, think tanks, young political leaders, and local authorities.

Exchanges within the China-LAC People-to-People Friendship Forum: this is the oldest platform established by China and Latin American countries with the objective of building and strengthening friendship ties. It was created in 2007 and continues to be hosted by the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC), a social entity of the CCP established in 1954 and officially considered to be a "people's organization", which is also in charge of managing China's twin city relationships. After the creation of the CCF, this forum was incorporated as part of the CCF's subforum structure. By 2015, the China-LAC People-to-People Friendship Forum had been held on five occasions on a rotation basis in Chongqing, La Habana, Fuzhou, San José, and Hangzhou (MFA 2016, 33).

Participating institutions include, for instance, the representatives of bilateral Latin American friendship associations with China, China's provincial associations for friendship with foreign countries, the Friendship Federation of LAC and China (FALCARPC), the Central American Federation of Friendship Associations with China, and the China-Latin America and Caribbean Friendship Association (AACHILAC/CHILACFA). This later institution has a long trajectory and was created in 1960.

Exchanges within the China and LAC Dialogue between Civilizations Seminar: the promotion of the dialogue between China and LAC "civilisations" builds upon prior initiatives established by China with other regions and is also connected with UNESCO's multilateral initiative, the Silk Roads Programme (see Section 3.1). These platforms encompass, for instance, the Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations (CDAC)⁴⁷, celebrated for the first time in Boao, Hainan, in 2016, and the Symposium on China-Arab Relations and China-Arab Civilization Dialogue founded in 2005⁴⁸ (Guo 2018, 228). In opposition to what China considers as the West's narrative on the "clash of civilisations"

⁴⁷ For more information on the CDAC, see: <http://english.2019cdac.com/>

⁴⁸ By 2021, the Symposium on China-Arab Relations and China-Arab Civilisation Dialogue had been held nine times. See: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjbxw/202109/t20210916_9712538.html

popularized by Samuel Huntington, China's approach seeks to position the idea that civilisations are not destined to clash, but can coexist harmoniously (China Today 2019). The essence of China's dialogues between civilisations in different regions, including LAC, is based on this renewed understanding.

The dialogue between China and LAC civilisations was officially proposed by China in the speech given by the first Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang at ECLAC headquarters in 2015. During his visit, he encouraged the LAC counterparts to establish a mechanism for dialogue between civilisations and make it part of the formal structure of the CCF (Guo 2018, 232, 233). Holding dialogues between China and LAC civilisations is also mentioned in China's second policy paper for Latin America from 2016 and in the CCF Action Plans. It is, in fact, aim number three of China's Policy Paper for the LAC region, which states, "*China will actively hold dialogues between civilizations to bring the hearts of our peoples closer, and make contributions to promoting the harmonious coexistence of different civilizations in the world*" (PRC 2016b).

In practice, the 1st Seminar on China and LAC Dialogue between Civilisations took place in the Chinese city of Changzhou in Jiangsu province in 2017. Since then, there have been five seminars held in the cities of Nanjing, Xuzhou and Beijing with the participation of Chinese and LAC think tanks, universities, scholars, and local authorities. It is important to note that, since 2022, the initiative went from being a "dialogue" to consolidating itself as a "forum". This implies, at least for the Chinese counterpart, an upgrade in terms of the initiative's importance and, more significantly, it is now part of the CCF's structure. The Chinese government facilitates the participation of LAC actors in the forum, which so far has only taken place in China. This support includes the funding of most of their expenses, including domestic transportation, accommodation and meals (CECLA 2018).

Beyond the declared official aims of this initiative, which encompass dialogue, cultural exchanges, mutual understanding and sharing of development experiences, it is important to highlight that the political impulse given to this initiative in the LAC space cannot be dissociated from China's strategic mega project, the BRI. The creation of regional platforms under the banner of

“Dialogues between Civilisations” serves deliberate purposes: to garner support for the BRI in neighbouring and distant regions like Latin America and to overcome the cultural differences, obstacles and suspicions already arising from this mega project.

The fact that most of the editions of the China-LAC Dialogue of Civilisations Forum have been held in the province of Jiangsu is not merely a coincidence. The choice of Jiangsu holds particular significance because of its strong connections to the BRI. This province is one of China’s foremost economically advanced regions and plays a pivotal role as a vital conduit for commerce and transportation, connecting China with nations along the BRI corridors. Additionally, Jiangsu occupies a prominent position in various sectors of manufacturing, notably textiles, electronics and machinery. Its economic expansion and international collaborations have been further augmented by partnerships forged with other nations and regions participating in the BRI initiative (Ourjiangsu 2019; Zeng 2019).

Additionally, worthy of note is the creation of the Institute for China-LAC People-to-People Exchange in Jiangsu within the framework of the 3rd China-LAC Dialogue of Civilisations Forum which took place in Xuzhou, Jiangsu, in 2019. This institute is fully sponsored by Chinese institutions such as the Foreign Affairs Office of Jiangsu Provincial People’s Government, ILAS-CASS, the Center for International People-to-People Exchange, and Jiangsu Normal University (JSNU). According to the official version, this institute is conceived as a “...type of professional think tank which integrates political consultation, research, exchange and spreading and focuses on “Sino-LAC humanistic communication study” with combination of theory and practice” (JSNU 2019). There is currently limited information available regarding the most recent activities of this institute.

Another noteworthy aspect is the release of the “Beijing Declaration of the Dialogue Between the Civilisations of China and the LAC” during the 4th Dialogue Between Civilisations of China Forum held in 2021. While the primary organizers of this discussion predominantly consist of Chinese governmental institutions, the declaration was crafted with the explicit intention

of showcasing the involvement of non-governmental bodies such as think tanks, media outlets, universities, publishing houses, and Chinese and LAC local governments. Furthermore, the declaration delineates objectives which encompass the fortification of the China-LAC People-to-People Exchange initiative in Jiangsu, serving as a conduit for reciprocal learning activities, and the reinforcement of the China-LAC research network to facilitate collaborative publications and research endeavours. The document also expresses the aspiration to host future dialogue sessions within Latin American countries (CCF 2021a).

Exchanges within the China-LAC Think Tanks Forum: this forum is also a case of an already existing platform which was absorbed and incorporated into the CCF's structure as a subforum. It is the second oldest exchange space between China and LAC countries after the China-LAC People-to-People Friendship Forum. It aims at serving as a space for knowledge exchange among Chinese and LAC think tanks and providing intellectual input to deepen China-LAC ties. The first edition of this forum was in 2010 and included the participation of over one hundred scholars and experts from China and fifteen LAC delegations (MFA 2016, 31, 32). By 2021, the China-LAC Think Tanks Forum had been held six times: four times in Beijing, once in Santiago de Chile, and the 2021 forum as an online event.

Participants usually include scholars from think tanks and universities in China and the LAC countries, current as well as former government officials, business leaders, and media representatives. The Chinese institutions which are actively part of the organization and responsible for hosting this forum are the Chinese People's Institute of Foreign Affairs (CPIFA), ILAS-CASS and the China Foundation for International Studies (CFIS). It is important to mention that, given the prominent, recurrent and excessive role of Chinese institutions in keeping this forum running, the strategy has been to try to involve Latin American institutions in the organization and hosting of this initiative. In this sense, ECLAC served as one of the organizers and hosts of the 4th Forum, celebrated at its headquarters in Santiago de Chile, and had a co-hosting role in the 6th online edition of the forum.

Regarding the subjects discussed in this subforum, worthy of highlight is the fact that, especially since 2017, the topics have converged towards China's priorities. Under China's logic of slogans, the 2019 Forum was named "*Promoting High-quality Belt and Road Cooperation: Toward a Connectivity Partnership between China and Latin American and the Caribbean Countries*". Moreover, in addition to classic topics of discussion centred around development, trade, investment, and financial Sino-LAC relations, the 2021 Forum had an entire discussion module on China-LAC cooperation regarding the BRI and Health Silk Road. While Latin American countries are eager to participate and have a say in China's BRI, clearly it is China which sets the tone and discussion topics in this China-LAC Think Tanks Forum.

China-LAC Young Political Leaders' Forum: this forum is one of the initiatives proposed by China before the CCF was established. In 2012, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao proposed the creation of this initiative in his official visit to Latin America and, when the CCF was born, it was incorporated in its structure as a subforum. It is a platform for holding conference exchanges among young political leaders of China and Latin American countries. More especially, participants of the five editions which took place until 2018 included young members of LAC political parties, young government officials, Chinese student representatives, scholars from Chinese and Latin American research centres, and young representatives of regional institutions such as the Youth Organization for Ibero-America (OIJ) and the Central American Parliament. The organizing and hosting institutions have been Chinese to date, mainly the All-China Youth Federation (ACYF) and the China Youth Center for International Exchange (CIYEC).

It is not the first time that China has launched a regional initiative involving young people. The China-Africa Youth Leaders Forum has been held since the beginning of the 2000s and, similar to China's plans for the LAC region, China launched a three-year thousand-talent plan in 2005 to invite 1,000 young African politicians to China (FOCAC 2015). A similar initiative is the China-Central and Eastern European (CEE) Youth Development Forum, also organized by the ACYF and the CIYEC.

All of the editions of the China-LAC Young Political Leaders' Forum have been held in Beijing. The topics discussed have included sustainable development, innovation and youth entrepreneurship. As is the case with the China-LAC Think Tanks Forum, the topics of the China-LAC Young Political Leaders' Forum have been oriented since 2017 towards the BRI. In the 2017 Forum, the link between the BRI and the participation of young people was already discussed and, by 2018, the fifth forum's slogan was, "The Belt and Road Initiative and Youth Development".

No records have been found of further editions of this forum after 2018. However, it is important to mention that, in 2021, the China-LAC Youth Development Forum was also held under the organization of the ACYF and Shanghai International Studies University and targeted the same public: young leaders of political parties, young government officials and leaders of national youth organizations. It is therefore assumed that the China-LAC Young Political Leaders' Forum turned into the China-LAC Youth Development Forum.

Local level exchanges: the initiatives examined in what follows correspond to China's policy mandate to enhance local level activities and to the growing local level engagement in LAC as a result of the interest of Chinese local authorities and the competitive behaviour of Chinese provinces. According to Liu Mensheng and Qian Xingwang, the China-LAC engagement at the subnational level can be explained as part of the competitive drives by local Chinese actors to achieve better economic growth and to the need for executing national policies such as the promotion of foreign direct investment (FDI), the BRI and central government's 'going global' policies (cit. in Myers 2020, 6).

Enhancing local level exchanges and cultural ties is also a priority for the central government. China's Policy Papers on LAC of 2008 and 2016 encourage initiatives at the local level, such as the twinning of Chinese and LAC provinces, states, regions, or cities. The CCF Action Plans also set objectives to initiate and continue to hold two specific platforms: the China-LAC Capital City Mayors' Forum and the China-LAC Local Governments' Cooperation Forum. The main organizer and promoter of these initiatives at the local level is CPAFFC. At the global level, CPAFFC has established forty-six regional or national China

friendship associations and set up friendship cooperation relations with 413 non-governmental organizations in 157 countries (Myers 2020, 13). In short, local level exchanges between China and LAC countries take place on both multilateral and bilateral bases; their nature is two-fold. On the one hand, the cities and provinces themselves take the initiative to forge ties with their counterparts and, on the other hand, their ties are also encouraged by central bodies at the national level (Niño 2014, 7).

China-LAC Local Government Cooperation Forum: this forum was held for the first time in Chongqing in 2016, complying with the mandate from the CCF 2015-2019 Plan. The organization in charge of its implementation was CPAFFC which, although portrayed as a “people’s organization”, closely coordinates this forum with the head of the Latin American and Caribbean Affairs Division of China’s MFA. The overall objective of the China-LAC Local Government Cooperation Forum is to “...*promote mutual understanding and pragmatic cooperation and sharing of developmental and administrative experience for the mutual development among local governments of the two sides*” (FEALAC - Forum for East Asia-Latin America Cooperation 2020).

The first forum had about two hundred participants from fifteen LAC countries and twenty cities, fifteen international and regional organizations and fifteen Chinese localities (Myers 2020, 13, 14). By 2022, the forum had been held three times: once in Chongqing as previously mentioned, once in Wuhan and the last one virtually. The topics of discussion included the promotion of local cooperation in trade, urban development, industry, tourism, and culture.

As is the case with other forums examined in this section, the Chinese counterparts of this platform have redirected the topics towards the BRI. For instance, in the 2022 Forum, Lin Nan, the Vice Mayor of Chengdu City, highlighted and shared the experience of her city in the construction, governance and economic vitality of park cities. In line with the local authorities’ drive to promote their territories around the BRI’s objectives, she further highlighted that Chengdu was an important economic centre and a “core node of the BRI”.

China-LAC Capital City Mayors' Forum: the idea of gathering capital city mayors from China and other regions is not new. China has held forums with capital city mayors from Central and Eastern European countries and, by 2019, four editions of this forum had been held. In LAC, this initiative has not taken off nor has it been implemented on a permanent basis.

There have nonetheless been delegations of local LAC leaders who have visited China under the auspices of CPAFFC. In 2010, the “*China-LAC Friendship Cities Forum*” took place in Shanghai, where LAC delegations of mayors attended conferences and were taken on visits to Shanghai World Expo and the cities of Yiwu, Harbin and Beijing (Embassy of the PRC in Costa Rica 2010). In 2013, 23 local authorities (mainly mayors) from Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, and Mexico met Chinese city officials in Beijing and Tianjin and visited the Baidu company headquarters and Tianjin City Planning Exhibition. It is important to mention that one of the political interests behind CPAFFC’s initiatives at the local level is related to the promotion of the One China Policy. By 2013, many of the participants in this event – El Salvador, Honduras, Panama, and Paraguay – had not established diplomatic relations with the PRC but continued to recognize Taiwan (Myers 2020, 14). Even if there is no record of further meetings between LAC and China’s mayors, it is worth mentioning that cooperation agreements between local authorities generally take place on a bilateral basis.

Twinning of sister cities: China’s national and local policies of enhancing twinning processes with other cities are not particularly focused on the Latin American region. In other words, the establishment of twinning agreements between Chinese and LAC local bodies remains consistent with China’s overall approach with other regions.

The Chinese institutions which give a great impetus to the twinning processes are CPAFFC, as previously mentioned, and the China International Friendship Cities Association (CIFCA), established in 2008. This latter institution promotes paradiplomacy and international relations among Chinese and other regions’ local governments.

In 2015, there were at least 147 twinning agreements between LAC and Chinese local bodies; by 2016, this number increased to 168 pairs of twin provinces and cities; by 2018, there were 175 pairs; and by 2022, China and LAC had established more than 190 pairs of twin provinces, states and cities (Foreign Affairs Office of the People's Government of Guangdong Province 2022). Local twinning agreements stand out with South American countries, but are widespread in the entire Latin American region, as Raggio suggests:

Some cases have shown very significant increases, such as Argentina (17 to more than 40), Chile (13 to more than 30) or Uruguay (4 to more than 15). In the three cases of the Southern Cone countries, the vast majority of their provinces, regions or departments have signed twinning agreements. At the same time, all the countries with diplomatic relations with China in South America have at least one twinning, while in Central America and the Caribbean Mexico and Cuba stand out, in addition to having cases in Costa Rica, Jamaica, Panama, Grenada and Dominican Republic. On the Chinese side, almost all of its provinces and autonomous regions have some type of twinning with Latin American countries. This strengthens the relationship at the regional level within the framework of the China-CELAC Forum, turning it into a space for dialogue, not only with China, but also among the countries of the region, which, in addition to finding common ground at the regional level, also may have common interests at the subregional level (Raggio 2022).

As the author suggests, ties between local bodies and the multilateral dynamics which arise at CCF reinforce both the regional and subnational levels of Sino-LAC interactions. A recent initiative which is worth mentioning is the “2022 Guangdong Latin American Friendship Cities Exchange Day”, organized by the Foreign Affairs Office of the Guangdong Provincial People's Government and the Jiangmen Municipal Government. The event was meant to coincide with the celebration of the 50th anniversary of China's establishment of diplomatic relations with Mexico and Argentina and the anniversary of the friendship

between Guangdong Province and seven pairs of provinces and cities in Latin America, including Mexico, Brazil and Chile. Participants included authorities from provinces and cities such as Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Valparaiso, Mendoza, and La Rioja. Cultural side activities were held as part of the events, such as the World Heritage Scenery Photo Exhibition, postcards to commemorate the event and the signing of memorandums of cooperation (Foreign Affairs Office of People's Government of Guangdong 2022).

5.4.4 Media

The China-LAC initiatives in the field of media within the CCF seem to have advanced at a very slow pace over the last decades. The importance of strengthening ties between Chinese and Latin American media is nonetheless recognized in the face of several identified challenges. Guo Cunhai, Director of the Community of Chinese and Latin American Studies (CECLA)⁴⁹, claims that the situation regarding Sino-LAC media exchange is worrying because, while Chinese media tends to project a neutral or positive image of Latin America, Latin American media pays more attention to a “China with problems” rather than a “China with illusions”. According to the author, this is explained by the West’s influence on LAC media and the low number of Latin American journalists who work in China (Guo 2018, 256).

Further difficulties are that, for the most part, it is China which actively approaches Latin America to boost media cooperation while this region remains passive. It is interesting to observe that, from the Chinese perspective, media coordination and the implementation of new initiatives in the communication field with Latin America are conceived as a means of dealing with cultural differences and problems between the two actors. In this sense, *“...policy and economy remain priority topics, however, in recent years, as cultural obstacles have become an increasingly important factor affecting China-Latin America relations, both sides, especially China, have realized the importance of cultural*

⁴⁹ The Community of Chinese and Latin American Studies (CECLA) is a joint Chinese and Latin American non-governmental organisation created with the aim of enhancing bilateral academic and cultural communication and research.

exchanges” in Sino-LAC relations (Guo 2018, 257). Media thus becomes an instrument of cultural diplomacy aimed at correcting what is considered as a “serious” and “worrying” situation in terms of media exchanges (ibidem: 255-257).

One of the first attempts to promote media exchanges between China and LAC in the last decade was the first “China-LAC Media Leaders’ Summit”, held in Santiago de Chile in 2016. It was an event organized by the Information Office of the State Council of China and ECLAC. Representatives and presidents of 80 media organizations in more than 20 LAC countries and 20 Chinese news institutions, including the People’s Daily, Xinhua News Agency, China Radio International, among others, participated.

In the opening ceremony of this high-level summit, President Xi Jinping and Chile’s President Michelle Bachelet were present. In his speech entitled “Create a New Pattern of China-Latin America Media Cooperation”, the Chinese leader highlighted the willingness of his country to elevate China-LAC media exchanges to a new level in order to display “*a more authentic and vibrant China and Latin America*” and voice joint opinions on world peace and development to the world (MFA 2016a).

In short, behind China’s efforts to advance media cooperation with LAC lie intertwined interests related to the improvement of China’s image. In a distant and peripheral region like Latin America, the Chinese government is aware that the visions of China have been historically shaped by the views held by the US and, more broadly, the Western world. This is why, in times of hegemonic rivalries, it is one of China’s primary interests to create its own narratives, messages and images and transmit them directly to the LAC media without intermediary media actors from the US “distorting” the image of a “prosperous China”. Media is also seen by China as a potential means of projecting unified China-LAC visions in the multilateral arena regarding the world’s pressing issues and promoting the activities of the BRI. Finally, media exchanges with the region are also meant to spark the interest of the Latin American public in China and forge closer cultural ties among their peoples.

In the 2016 Media Summit, Xi Jinping also announced China's plans to establish a China-Latin America Media Exchange Centre and train five hundred media professionals from LAC countries in the following five years. The China-LAC Media Forum is an initiative announced in the 2022-2024 Plan which has not, however, been held on a regular basis.

China-Latin America and the Caribbean Press Exchange Center (CLACPC): in 2017, one year after Xi Jinping's announcement, CLACPC was created as a subordinate subcentre of the China Public Diplomacy Association⁵⁰, functioning in coordination with the Public Diplomacy Research Center of Beijing Foreign Studies University⁵¹. Since 2018, this Association has been implementing media exchange projects not only with Latin America, but also with Africa, Southeast Asia and South Asia.

CLACPC is at the heart of China's efforts to connect Chinese and Latin American journalists. The main task of the centre with regard to the region is to bring LAC journalists to China on visits and study training (Barrios 2018). At least two delegations of journalists and reporters from LAC countries have visited China as part of the CLACPC project. One of the visits was to Sichuan in 2017: ten journalists came from eight Latin American countries, including Brazil, Mexico and Argentina. The second group included 13 selected journalists from ten Latin American countries who received training in Beijing for six months (Center for Public Diplomacy Studies 2018). China's strategy is to show the participants successful initiatives, for instance for Sichuan's economic and social development and its role in the BRI, and examples of post-earthquake reconstruction, poverty alleviation, environmental and cultural heritage

⁵⁰ According to the official website of the China Public Diplomacy Association, this institution was established in Beijing in 2013. It is presented as a national and non-profit organisation consisting of experts, scholars, enterprises, and celebrities in the field of public diplomacy. Its mission is to promote the development of China's public diplomacy through consultation services, international exchanges which give "full play to the role of non-governmental channels", to enhance "mutual understanding and friendship between the Chinese people and people of all countries in the world", and to show the world "China's civilized, democratic, open and progressive national image" for China's peaceful development (China Public Diplomacy Association 2018).

⁵¹ The Public Diplomacy Research Center is a leading think tank in the field of public diplomacy, policy consultation and cultural exchanges.

protection. The sessions also comprise cultural activities such as visits to museums, universities, cuisine experiences, and opera performances (The People's Government of Sichuan Province 2017).

According to Guo Cunhai, the CLACPC project on LAC has had good results, "...[I]t has helped Latin American journalists to know and report an objective, true, and dynamic China, changing the content and forms that they used to use before" (Guo 2018, 258). In fact, during the journalists' stays in China, part of the activities also comprised holding interviews and writing reports on the positive side of China and the BRI. Rarely are such reports critical.

China-LAC Media Forums: this initiative was announced in the 2022-2024 Plan, but has not been held on a regular basis. The forum was first held in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 2018. The three-day event was organized by China's Xinhua News Agency and Argentina's Federal System of Media and Public Content and involved the participation of 13 Chinese media outlets and 100 news agencies from 20 LAC countries (Xinhua 2018). Worthy of highlighting at this event was China's emphasis on the connection between the media and BRI. In this sense, the president of China's Xinhua News Agency invited LAC media organizations to join the Belt and Road News Network (BRNN), a Beijing-based platform formed by 213 media organizations from 99 nations involved in the BRI.

The interest behind this network lies in having a centralized source of information on the BRI with as many news agencies in the world as possible positively promoting the initiative and pushing forward a convergence of channels and joint favourable reporting. Since the creation of the network, Latin American and African delegations consisting of editors-in-chief, journalists and heads of media outlets have actively participated in all-expenses-paid conferences and workshops organized by the BRNN (BRNN 2019).

It is relevant to highlight China's efforts to project unified visions together with its LAC media counterparts with regard to the narratives surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic. As a response to some Latin American governments'

criticism⁵² of China as a Covid-19 country of origin and its initial response to the pandemic, the China Media Group (CMG) and ECLAC hosted “The Latin America Partners Media Cooperation Online Forum” in 2020 with panel discussions on the topic, “Strengthen Collaboration & Defeat the Pandemic”. Fifteen media organizations and 33 guests from ten Latin American countries participated in the event, including the Brazilian El Globo Group, Latin America’s largest media corporation. The intention was to discuss ways of fostering exchanges and business opportunities and moving forward in the fight against the pandemic (Duarte, Albro, and Hershberg 2022, 16).

From the declarations of high-level authorities and the joint statement made during the forum, it is clear that the event was part of China’s efforts to control the messaging of its role during the pandemic and create common narratives. For instance, President and Editor-in-Chief Shen Haixiong remarked that it is the task of the media to join the battle against the pandemic in a scientific manner by reporting the truth instead of “shifting the blame onto other countries”. Additionally, some LAC participants took this opportunity to thank the CMG for sending anti-pandemic material and stated the need to support and strengthen the World Health Organization (WHO). In the face of the US’ own attacks and questioning of the WHO as the international authority in the health field, China and LAC media agencies attempted at this event to project a unified and alternative vision regarding the narratives which attacked China’s role in the pandemic and the importance of multilateralism and the media to bridge “the mutual knowledge gap” between both sides of the world (CGTN 2020).

During the event, the “Programa Hoy” TV show was launched as a result of a partnership between CCTV Video News Agency and the largest LAC non-

⁵² Duarte, Albro and Hershberg summarize these critics, “Chinese embassies and other government social media accounts have also sought to discredit leading thinkers and politicians in LAC who criticized China’s initial response to the pandemic, and China has at times also used vaccines as leverage to quell critiques. When Peruvian Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa published an opinion piece in March 2020, the Chinese embassy in Lima called his work a “smear” campaign; when Brazilian politician Eduardo Bolsonaro leveled more blunt criticism in March, the Chinese embassy in Brasilia suggested that he contracted a “mental virus” during a recent trip to the United States. In May 2021, Sinovac executives reportedly told Brazilian officials that vaccine shipping delays were due to Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro’s continued ridicule of China as Covid-19’s country of origin.” (Duarte, Albro, and Hershberg 2022, 19).

profit television network, Alianza Informativa Latinoamericana (AIL, in English: Latin American Informative Alliance) (Duarte, Albro, and Hershberg 2022, 16).

China-LAC Media Action Project: within the framework of the 2nd Meeting of Ministers of the China-CELAC Forum, the China Global Television Network (CGTN) and 30 media organizations from LAC launched this initiative in 2021. The project aims at promoting cooperation among Chinese and Latin American organizations through a variety of instruments, mainly forums, and co-productions such as documentaries on China and Latin America.

The event also saw the promotion and launch of the following initiatives: the China-LAC Film and Television Tour of CGTN, the CGTN and Telesur joint TV programme “Espejo de Palabras”, the Youth Opinion Program of the CGTN “Café con CGTN” (CGTN 2021), and the interactive website by CGTN in Spanish, “New starting point for relations between China and Latin America”.⁵³

5.5 Actors active in cultural diplomacy in the CCF

This subsection provides a systematisation and examination of the Chinese and LAC actors involved in CCF’s cultural initiatives. A review of about 50 initiatives implemented within the CCF in the cultural field since its creation reveals the participation of a wide range of Chinese and LAC institutions. These are located at different levels of governance and hierarchy and operate in several cultural areas. One overall finding derived from the analysis is that an entire network of coordinated Chinese actors plays a pivotal role in the organization, hosting and continuation of many of the CCF’s initiatives. LAC actors for their part are mainly the targets of China’s cultural diplomacy, as there are very few

⁵³ The website is accessible at:
<https://espanol.cgtn.com/event/2021/Nuevo-punto-de-partida/index.html>

instances of LAC's active role as promoters and coordinators of cultural proposals.

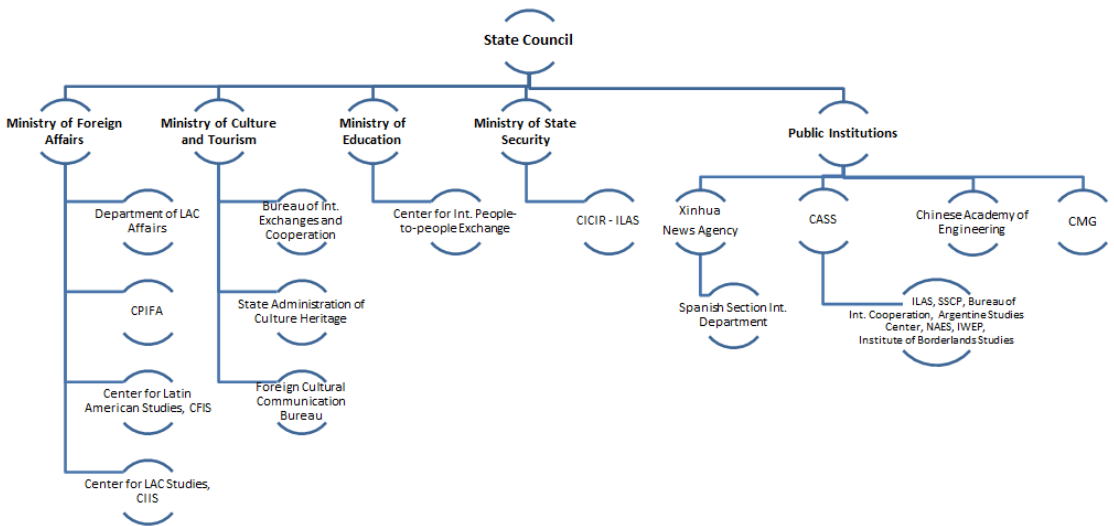
5.5.1 Chinese actors

The initiatives described in Section 5.4 have been carried out with the participation of a myriad of Chinese actors which are classified here as follows: institutions of the State Council which respond to the Central People's Government, State-Owned Enterprises (SOE), organizations under the leadership of the Communist Party of China (CPC), local actors, non-governmental and quasi-governmental organizations, educational institutions, and private actors.

5.5.1.1 Institutions of the State Council

Several institutions under the leadership of the State Council are part of many of the cultural initiatives which have been implemented by the CCF since 2014. Graph 1 shows the main state institutions, including ministries and public bodies involved in the initiation and implementation of CCF's cultural activities.

Graph 1. Chinese government's institutions active in cultural diplomacy in the CCF



Source: Author's elaboration

The main ministries under the leadership of the State Council which act as coordinators, participants and organizers of some of the CCF's initiatives in the cultural field include the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and its Department of Latin American and Caribbean Affairs, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education and, less prominently, the Ministry of State Security.

Worthy of highlighting are the various institutions under the leadership of the Chinese MFA with specifically dedicated organizations for the LAC region, such as the Centers for Latin American Studies of the China Foundation for International Studies (CFIS) and of the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS). CFIS and CPIFA, for instance, are part of the institutions appointed by the Chinese government which have so far organized and implemented the six editions of the China-LAC Think Tank Forums. Under its leadership, the Ministry of State Security oversees the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), which includes the Institute of Latin American Studies. Scholars from ILAS-CICIR have acted mainly as participants

in all of the editions of the China-CELAC High Level Academic Forum and the China-LAC High Level Academic Forum.

Another type of bodies directly under the control of the State Council are the public institutions. Those which have been active in some of the CCF's cultural initiatives are: the Xinhua News Agency and the China Media Group, which operate within the framework of the China-LAC Media Action Project, the China-LAC Media Forum and the China-Latin America Media Leaders' Summit; the Chinese Academy of Engineering; and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).

CASS and, within it, ILAS are key institutions in charge of the implementation and management of several of the CCF's cultural spaces. These are comprised of strategic projects for the Chinese government, such as the Seminars on China and LAC Dialogues between Civilisations, the China-CELAC High Level Academic Forum and the China-LAC Think Tanks Forum. Other subinstitutes within CASS which are also active in the CCF cultural initiatives include the Editorial Social Sciences in China Press, the National Academy of Economic Strategy, the Argentine Studies Center, and the Institute of World Economics and Politics.

It is important to mention that state institutions such as the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Xinhua News Agency and China Media Group have close ties to the Chinese Communist Party and hence report to the Central Committee's Publicity Department (Lawrence and Lee 2021, 29).

Other actors located at the national level include the Chinese embassies in LAC countries and their Offices of Culture, as well as the institutions systematized in Table 7.

Table 7. Institutions under the leadership of the Chinese government active in sports, arts, education, and medicine

Sports	Arts	Education	Medicine
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Chinese Olympic Committee ▪ Chinese official sports authorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ China National Art Fund ▪ China National Opera & Dance Drama Theater ▪ Culture Place of Nationalities ▪ World Art Museum ▪ China Millenium Monument 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Center for Latin American Studies at CFAU ▪ Center for LAC Studies, Southwest University of Science and Technology, Sichuan ▪ CSTEC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine ▪ CACMS ▪ Guang'anmen Hospital ▪ Chongqing Hospital of Traditional Chinese Medicine ▪ Zhongjing Institute of Traditional Chinese Medicine

Source: *Author's elaboration*

CFAU: China Foreign Affairs University, CSTEC: China Science and Technology Exchange Center, CACMS: China Academy of Chinese Medical Sciences

The actors in the field of medicine, such as the State Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine as well as institutes and hospitals of traditional Chinese medicine, participated in the China and LAC Traditional Medicine Exchange Forum and are included here since Chinese traditional medicine is perceived by the government as a strategic instrument of cultural diplomacy.

5.5.1.2 State-owned enterprises

While the involvement of Chinese state-owned enterprises in CCF initiatives is not the rule, the few companies responsible for organizing cultural events between China and Latin America have played a pivotal role in their implementation and continuation.

A case in point is the well-established LAC Art Exhibition “Share the Beauty”. The direct organizers of this yearly event which has taken place since 2011 are the China Arts and Entertainment Group (CAEG) and the China International Exhibition Agency (CIEA). Established in 2004, CAEG is the largest SOE in China’s entertainment and arts exhibition industry. Its creation marked a milestone in China’s transformation of art institutions into modern enterprises. For its part, CIEA is one of the core members of CAEG and has a history of over fifty years as one of China’s leading operators of Chinese performing arts worldwide (CCIA 2013).

Due to its close coordination with the Bureau of International Exchanges and Cooperation of China’s Ministry of Culture, it can be stated that CAEG and CIEA are the primary operational Chinese state firms of the CCF’s cultural initiatives in the fields of arts, music, exhibitions, and entertainment. More broadly, these bodies are crucial in the operationalisation of China’s cultural diplomacy initiatives in Latin America.

It is important to highlight that CAEG and CIEA operate globally and are the main organizers of annual festivals, for instance the Meet in Beijing Arts Festival, the Venice Biennale-China Pavilion, the Asian Arts Festival, and country and regional cultural years such as the China-France and China-Russia cultural years (CCIA 2013).

In the field of sports, the China Interactive Sports Technology Invention Co., Ltd. (Interactive Sports) is an emerging actor in charge of implementing two of the CCF’s newest initiatives: the China-LAC Wushu Exchange Forum and the China-LAC Taijiquan Online Competition. Interactive Sports is one of the main organizations in China’s sports industry, with close ties to the Chinese State. It was founded in 2003 by the All-China Sports Federation (ACSF)⁵⁴ and the Chinese Olympic Committee with the aim of combining digital technologies and sports to enhance China’s sports industry (Huao Star Network 2020).

⁵⁴ ACSF is officially a non-governmental organisation under the supervision of the China State General Sports Administration and the Ministry of Civil Affairs.

The company's scope is not limited to Latin America. It has also organized Taijiquan Online Competitions within the framework of the China-ASEAN partnership in collaboration with the Chinese Wushu Association, the Wushu Federation of ASEAN-China and the General Administration of Sports of China.

In short, the few SOEs involved in the CCF's cultural initiatives have a well-established history in the implementation of cultural diplomacy projects beyond Latin America. Their work in the region can thus be interpreted as an extension of their international operations. These companies are the operational arms of China's cultural diplomacy as well as actors delegated to enforcing ties with CELAC in the fields of the arts, entertainment and sports.

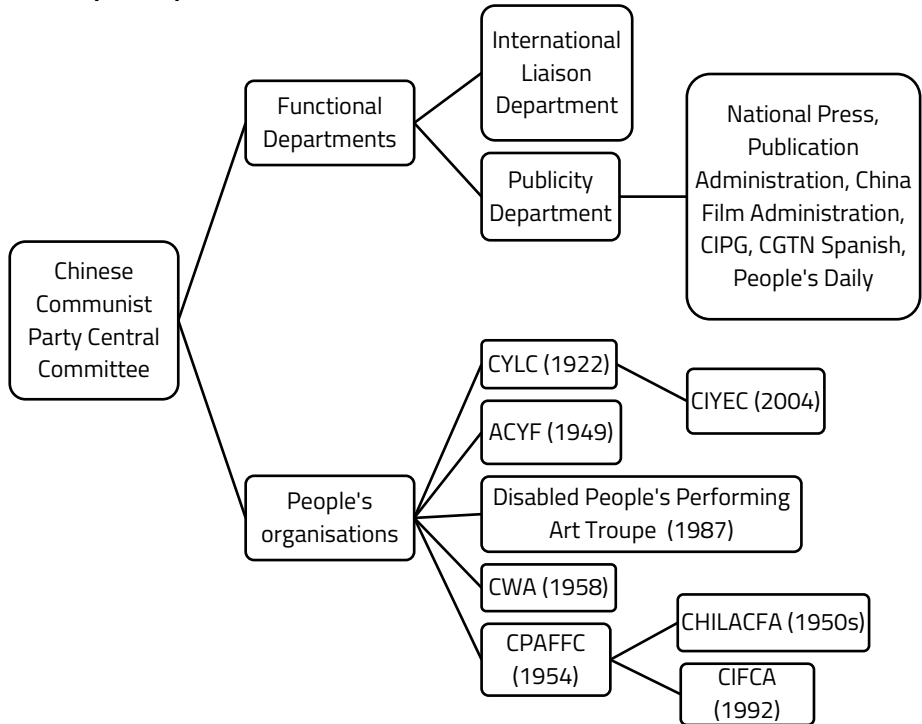
5.5.1.3 Institutions linked to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

There are several institutions actively involved in some of the CCF's subforums and initiatives related to culture which work under the leadership and coordination of the CCP. Officials from two functional departments, namely the International Liaison and Publicity (propaganda department in Western literature) Departments of the CCP Central Committee, have usually participated in the inauguration of events such as the China-LAC Think Tank Forums and the China-LAC Media Forums. While these departments do not seem to be directly involved in the implementation of the CCF's initiatives, the so-called "people's organizations" are the institutions behind the organization of events which are coordinated with these two bodies.

Portrayed as non-governmental organizations or quasi-governmental organizations, the social organizations linked to the CCP focus their work on one of the facets of China's cultural diplomacy: "people-to-people" and local diplomacy involving subnational actors.

Graph 2 shows the social organizations which are recognized as part of the CCP and have made some the CCF's cultural initiatives possible.

Graph 2. Institutions under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party active in cultural diplomacy in the CCF



Source: Author's elaboration based on author's database.

CYLC: Communist Youth League of China; ACYF: All-China Youth Federation; CWA: Chinese Wushu Association; CPAFFC: Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries; CIFCA: China International Friendship Cities Association; CIYEC: China Youth Center for International Exchange

All of the people's organizations in the CCP have a long history of being in the CYLC, one of the oldest institutions which has served as a proving ground for young leaders with high prospects (Parton 2022). Created in 1922, the CYLC is a huge organization with more than 73.7 million members (aged between 14 and 28 years old) and works at several levels of governance: regional, autonomous city level, autonomous district level, prefecture, municipal, provincial, etc. In the China-CELAC Forum, the CYLC, ACYF and CIYEC (this latter institution works as a functional organization of the CYLC and ACYF) are the main bodies

in charge of organizing and hosting the Young Political Leaders' Forum targeted at young politicians from LAC countries. The author's database also indicates that the Shanghai Junior Administrative Cadre Training Institute and the Shanghai Youth Federation have also been active in one of the Forum's editions.

The Disabled People's Performing Art Troupe and the CWA have participated in the field of arts and sports, the Chinese Culture Tour in Latin America and the China-LAC Taijiquan Competition, respectively.

The work of CPAFFC, CHILACFA and CIFCA deserve special attention. These institutions play a crucial role in facilitating contacts and agreements at the local level with LAC subnational actors. CPAFFC's stated mission is to promote people-to-people exchanges, enhance public diplomacy and build friendships around the world. In practice, it also connects Chinese businesspeople and their counterparts in other countries and arranges twinning agreements between cities, regions and provinces in the LAC countries and China.

In the field of subnational diplomacy, CPAFFC's action is channelled through CHILACFA and CIFCA as well as several overseas China Peoples Friendships Associations in LAC. These institutions have been key in the implementation of large-scale and multilateral events such as the China-LAC People-to-People Friendship Forum and the China-LAC Local Government Cooperation Forum (Myers 2020, 13).

5.5.1.4 Local actors

The participation of Chinese local actors within the structure of the CCF is mainly evidenced in three areas: the China-LAC People-to-People Friendship Forum, the China-LAC Local Government Cooperation Forum and the China-LAC Dialogue between Civilisations. Local actors refer here to subnational authorities and bodies at the regional, provincial, municipal, and other lower levels of administration as well as local cultural institutions.

A revision of all of the previously mentioned forums reveals that provincial and municipal governments are the two types of actors which have mainly been engaged in forging exchanges with their Latin American counterparts. The international (or foreign affairs), the cultural and tourism offices, and the local friendship associations of the Chinese provincial and municipal governments are key entities in this sense.

Table 8. Municipal and provincial governments of China involved in CCF's forums	
Municipal People's Governments	Xuzhou, Chongqing, Wuhan, Jiangmen
Provincial People's Governments	Guangdong, Jiangsu, Henan, Liaoning, Sichuan, Zhejiang, Xiamen, Xi'an, Shaanxi

Source: *Author's elaboration.*

Table 8 shows some of the local actors which have participated in the events carried out within the People-to-People Friendship Forum, the China-LAC Local Government Cooperation Forum and the China-LAC Dialogue between Civilisations. It is important to highlight that these events are organized and coordinated with key actors located at different administrative levels, including CPAFFC, the Chinese municipal and provincial governments, CASS, and representatives of the LAC division of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Worthy of note is also the role of Jiangsu and Guangdong provinces and Xuzhou and Chongqing municipalities as key hubs for the BRI due to their strategic locations, infrastructure connectivity and economic significance.

Other types of local actors which operate in the field of culture and arts within the CCF's initiatives include the Beijing Capital Library, Shaanxi Province Art Museum and Xiayuan Artists Village.

5.5.1.5 Non-governmental organizations and quasi-governmental institutions

Chinese non-governmental organizations which have been involved in some of the CCF's cultural initiatives are mainly found in the academic field. These include, for instance, associations of scholars, students and researchers interested in the study of Latin America in China. Some of the non-governmental

institutions which have participated in the China-LAC High Level Academic Forum, China-LAC Think Tank Forum and the China-CELAC Dialogue of Civilisations include the Chinese Association for Latin American History Research, the Chinese Association for Latin American Studies (CALAS), the Chinese Association for the Study of Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American Literature, the Community of Chinese and Latin American Studies (CECLA), and the Silk Road Think Tank Association. Additionally, directors or representatives of CIs headquartered in the Córdoba National University, Argentina, Sao Paulo State University, Brazil, and La Plata National University, Argentina, have also participated in the CCF's subforums in the field of education. Other independent groups from Chinese civil society which have been part of the CCF's cultural initiatives are Taijiquan practitioners, Chinese Wushu Associations, dancers, film makers, Kung Fu and Tai Chi athletes, singers, painters, and artists.

CIs fall more into the category of quasi-governmental organizations than NGOs, despite China's attempts to portray CIs as depoliticized organizations. Even though the Chinese International Education Foundation, registered as a non-governmental charity organization, has taken over responsibility for the CIs since 2020, usually the Chinese government and the CCP control and support the CIs financially (Knudsen 2021a, 2).

5.5.1.6 Educational institutions

Chinese educational institutions have actively participated in some of the cultural initiatives and subforums implemented by the CCF. In particular, Chinese private and public universities, institutions dedicated to regional and Latin American studies within Chinese universities and think tanks, and art centres and schools have been part of several editions of the China-CELAC High-Level Academic Forum, the China-LAC Think Tank Forum and the China-LAC Dialogue between Civilisations. Table 9 shows a list of the regional and Latin American institutes in China which have been involved in the above-mentioned CCF forums.

Table 9. Regional and Latin American institutes in China involved in CCF's initiatives
Center for American Studies, Shanghai Institutes for International Studies - SIIS
Center for BRICS Studies, Beijing Normal University
Institute of American and Oceania Study, CAITEC - Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation
Center for China-Latin America Management Studies, Tsinghua University
Center for Latin American Law Studies, China University of Political Science and Law
Center for Latin American Studies, Sun Yat-Sen University
Center for Latin American Studies, Charhar Institute
Center for Latin American Studies, Nankai University
Center for Latin American Studies, Renmin University of China
Center for Latin American Studies, Changzhou University
Center for Latin American Studies, Shanghai University
Latin American Research Center, Hebei University
Institute of Latin America Studies, Anhui University
Institute for China-LAC People-to-People Exchange, Jiangsu
Center for Latin American Studies of the China Foundation for International Studies (CFIS)
Institute of Latin American Studies of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR)
Center for Latin American Studies at China Foreign Affairs University (CFAU)
Institute of Latin American and Intercultural Studies, Huadong University

Source: *Author's elaboration.*

It is important to highlight that the release of the Provisional Measures for the Formation and Creation of Regional and Country Studies Centers by China's Ministry of Education in 2015 has given a great impulse for the establishment of Latin American institutes in China. According to Guo Cunhai's survey on the development of Institutions of Latin American Studies in China (1949-2019), there were 56 institutions dedicated to the study of Latin America in China. In 2017 alone, 14 new centres were created. Most of the recently established Latin American institutions in China have been set up at universities with close ties to the Project of Regional and Country Studies developed by the Chinese Ministry of Education (Guo Cunhai 2022, 39, 40).

The author also suggests that the promotion of Latin American studies in China is explained by the need to advance the BRI. Since knowledge about other countries is crucial for gaining support for and consensus around the BRI, the creation of regional institutions which, among other tasks, provide policy advice for specific regions and countries is crucial for the Chinese government (ibidem).

Other actors which have been involved in the CCF's education initiatives include Chinese universities and academies as well as institutions in the fields of the arts, communication, languages, and traditional medicine, as shown in Table 10.

Table 10. Chinese universities and institutions in other fields involved in CCF's initiatives	
Chinese universities	Institutions in other educational fields
Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies (ACCWS)	Academy of Press and Media of Tsinghua University
Academy of Regional and Global Governance (ARGG), Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU)	Art Museum of the Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), Beijing
Beijing Normal University	Peking University Resources Tianzhu Art Center
China Center for Contemporary World Studies (CCCWS)	School of Arts and Communication, Beijing Normal University
Jiangsu Normal University (JSNU)	School of Foreign Languages, University of Economics and Foreign Trade
Institute of Sociology and History, Fujian Normal University (FNU)	Henan University of Traditional Chinese Medicine
Beijing University	
Nanjing University of Finance and Economics	
Nankai University	
Shanghai Institute of Global Governance and Regional Studies	
Shanghai International Studies University	

Tsinghua University	
University of Hebei	
Zhejiang International Studies University	

Source: *Author's elaboration.*

5.5.1.7 Private actors

The participation of private Chinese firms in the CCF's initiatives is still limited. Just a few of the forums, namely the China-LAC Dialogue between Civilisations, the China-CELAC High Level Academic Forum and the China-LAC Think Tank Forum, have sporadically been held with the participation of representatives of Chinese companies such as China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and the Department for Latin America of Huawei Technologies Co. For its part, the BOE Technology Group, one of the world's largest manufacturers of LCD and flexible displays, has supported the "Share the Beauty" LAC exhibitions of contemporary art in China both technologically and logistically.

The Chinese firms of CNKI and Huawei do not have a prominent function in CCF events. They have mainly acted as presenters rather than organizers or coordinators. Despite their negligible role, their presence in CCF forums is not coincidental. CNKI's participation in CCF forums is explained by its aim to explore new markets and business opportunities in the academic field in LAC. In the 2019 China-LAC Dialogue of Civilisations, CNKI presented the report, "The Big Data Analysis of Chinese Literature on Latin America Research in China" mainly for the purpose of introducing and offering LAC scholars the company's academic databases and possibilities of subscription to access academic resources (SOHU 2019).

Huawei's department for Latin America is more inclined to forge ties with LAC within the CCF in areas regarding the region's development, growth, innovation, digitalisation, and technology as new axes in China-LAC cooperation ties. This is part of a broader strategy by Huawei, the Chinese

government and the CCP to spread 5G hardware and technology for the region's digital transformation.

It is worth highlighting that, outside the CCF, Huawei has established several initiatives with Latin American actors in the information and communication technology (ICT) sector. Together with UNESCO, the EFE News Agency and the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), Huawei gathered LAC business leaders, experts and students at the LAC ICT Talent Summit in Mexico City in 2022 to discuss the challenges of connectivity, scarcity of ICT personnel and digital education in the region (Huawei 2022).

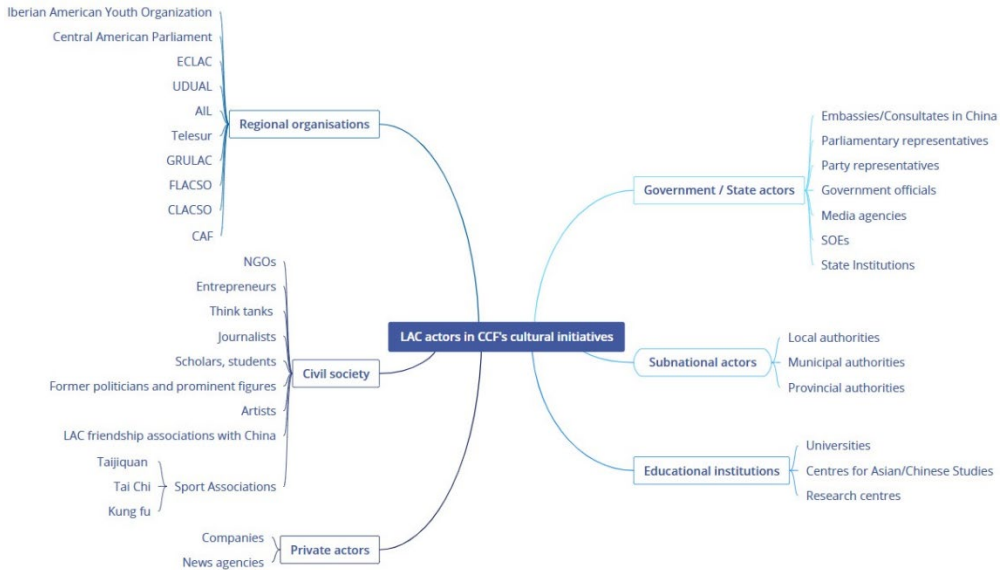
Huawei is becoming an actor in its own right with regard to cultural diplomacy in LAC. Beyond the usual business practices, Huawei's department for Latin America has offered training programmes for at least 50,000 people and granted 18,000 scholarships to Latin American students (Seeds for the Future Program) which include visits to Huawei's headquarters in Shenzhen, China. Moreover, it has established the Huawei Global ICT Competition, the Huawei Developer Competition and the Huawei ICT Academy Program, which provides capacity-building opportunities in coordination with 400 LAC universities (*ibidem*). Given Huawei's existing initiatives with the LAC region, it is plausible to anticipate that the company will carry out future collaborations within the framework of the CCF's cultural and educational areas.

5.5.2 Latin American actors

The cultural initiatives within the framework of the CCF count on the participation of a diverse range of actors in the LAC region. Graph 3 presents an initial categorisation of these actors, which is based on the author's analysis of numerous editions of the CCF's thematic forums. This classification encompasses various bodies, such as regional organizations, governmental and state actors (e.g., embassies and consulates of Latin American countries in China, state institutions, government officials, state-owned enterprises), subnational actors at the municipal and provincial levels, educational institutions, civil society groups (including friendship associations between LAC countries and

China as well as artists), and private actors, including companies and news agencies.

Graph 3. LAC actors in CCF’s cultural diplomacy initiatives



Source: *Author's elaboration.*

Subsequent subsections will provide evidence that these actors primarily engage with the CCF's subforums in a participatory capacity. Nevertheless, a more detailed analysis, particularly of recent initiatives, unveils the growing involvement of LAC actors as organizers and coordinators in collaboration with Chinese institutions.

5.5.2.1 Regional organizations

Latin American regional organizations have been part of several of the CCF's subforums related to culture, as Table 11 shows.

CCF initiative	Actor	Role			
		Organizer	Co-organizer	Host	Attendee
4 th Dialogue between the Civilisations of China and the LAC	FLACSO	X			
	CLACSO	X			
China-LAC Think Tanks Forum	ECLAC	X		X	
	UDUAL	X			
	FLACSO				X
	CAF				X
“Sharing the Beauty” Latin American Modern Art Exhibition 2021	GRULAC		X		
China-CELAC High Level Academic Forum	ECLAC	X	X	X	
	UDUAL	X			
China-LA Media Leaders Summit	ECLAC	X		X	
Young Political Leaders’ Forum	Central American Parliament				X
	Iberian American Youth Organization				X
China-LAC Local Government Cooperation Forum	GRULAC				X

Source: Author's elaboration.

The nature and field of action of these organizations vary. For instance, ECLAC and GRULAC operate not only at the regional level, but also engage in the multilateral sphere as they are both part of the UN's institutional framework which focuses on the LAC region. Although both bodies have been active in the CCF, the extent of their involvement differs. While GRULAC has participated

in the China-LAC Local Government Cooperation forum as an attendee, ECLAC's role within the CCF is more prominent and noteworthy.

ECLAC has established itself as a prominent think tank within the region. Over time, its relationship with China has evolved in tandem with China's increasing influence in LAC. In addition to its core responsibilities of monitoring and analyzing economic dynamics between LAC and China and offering policy insights, ECLAC has taken on roles as an organizer, co-organizer and host of various subforums under the CCF. These subforums include the China-CELAC High Level Academic Forum, the China-LAC Think Tanks Forum and the China-LAC Media Leaders' Summit. In comparison with other regional actors, ECLAC's involvement in hosting and facilitating these subforums underscores its active and integral position in fostering academic, think tank and media exchanges between China and LAC.

From China's standpoint, the engagement of ECLAC in the CCF is of strategic significance. Given ECLAC's well-established legitimacy, ample resources and operational capabilities within the region, it can assume a more proactive role in financing and organizing initiatives within the CCF. This approach contrasts with the rest of the CCF's initiatives, where China often bears the primary responsibility. ECLAC's active involvement alleviates China's burden and fosters in part a more collaborative and balanced partnership in the forum. ECLAC's participation in the CCF as organizer, co-organizer and host demonstrates that China-LAC cultural diplomacy is not totally unidirectional.

Researchers and authorities from FLACSO and the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO) have also actively engaged in initiatives concerning culture within the CCF. These two institutions are significantly prominent in the region due to their extensive research projects, graduate programmes and academic activities in the field of social sciences. Alongside Chinese institutions like ILAS-CASS, ACCWS and CIPG, FLACSO and CLACSO were the main regional organizers of the 4th edition of the Dialogue between the Civilisations of China and LAC.

FLACSO and CLACSO have been fostering strong collaborations with various Chinese institutions. For instance, FLACSO established the Contemporary Chinese Chair in 2021, which provides training programmes on contemporary Chinese studies and China-LAC relations for students and professionals. Additionally, FLACSO signed Memorandums of Understanding with ILAS-CASS in 2021 and with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China in 2022. In the same year, FLACSO approved the PRC as an observer state of the institution (FLACSO 2021a, 2021b, 2022).

For its part, CLACSO, another prominent think tank in the region, has launched a series of lectures centred on the different aspects of China and LAC relations in coordination with institutions like ILAS-CASS, CNKI, CALAS, CECLA, FLACSO and ALAECH. Moreover, CLACSO has established dedicated research groups specifically devoted to the study of China. One such group is “China and the World Power Map”, which gathers several scholars from the region to investigate China’s projection in the world economy. Finally, it is noteworthy that CLACSO and Blossom Press from China entered into an agreement in 2021 to publish books together under this editorial collaboration (CLACSO 2021).

Other less prominent regional institutions involved include UDUAL in the field of education, CAF, the Central American Parliament, and the Iberian American Youth Organization in the area of youth development.

5.5.2.2 Government and state actors

The most prominent governmental actors from Latin America which have so far engaged in the CCF’s cultural initiatives include state institutions (mainly Ministries of Foreign Affairs and their subunits for Asia and Pacific Affairs and, in certain cases, the Ministries of Development and Planning as well as Ministries of Culture and Indigenous Affairs), LAC embassies and consulates with representation in China, state-owned media agencies and, in more general terms, government officials, parliamentary members and representatives of political parties.

In addition to the formal representation of LAC embassies in CCF's cultural events which have taken place in China, it is important to underscore their significant role as co-organizers. Specifically, LAC embassies have played a pivotal role in facilitating various sessions of the "Sharing the Beauty LAC Contemporary Art Exhibition" and the 2016 Chinese Culture Tour in the LAC region. An analysis of the LAC embassies' involvement in the former initiative reveals that most country exhibitions (encompassing film, paintings, music, and photography) held in China originated from South American countries, Mexico and Cuba. In comparison, the participation of Central America and the Caribbean has been relatively less prominent. Nevertheless, records indicate that the embassies of Jamaica, Dominica, Nicaragua, Panama, and Trinidad and Tobago in China have also engaged in the co-organization of these cultural events, dispelling any notion of the isolation of these regions.

Within the media domain, LAC state-owned news agencies have been actively involved in various events such as the China-LAC Media Forum, the China-Latin America Media Leaders' Summit and the China-LAC Media Action Project, as indicated in Table 12. Notably, the China-LAC Media Forum was jointly organized in 2018 by Argentina's System of Media and Public Content and Xinhua News Agency. On the other hand, the rest of the state-owned news agencies have primarily participated as attendees in the aforementioned initiatives.

Table 12. Latin American state-owned media agencies participating in CCF's initiatives
Argentina's Federal System of Media and Public Content
National Radio of Argentina
Cuban News Agency Prensa Latina
Jamaica Public Radio Corporation
Publishing House Editora Peru
Notimex Mexican News Agency
VTV- Venezuelan Television Corporation
Telesur
Peruvian News Agency Andina
National Radio and Television of Colombia
ECUADOR TV

Source: *Author's elaboration.*

Finally, representatives of political parties and parliaments of LAC countries also participate, especially in the CCF's initiatives and notably the Young Political Leaders' Forum, the Youth Development Forum and the China-LAC People-to-People Friendship Forum. These forums target participants especially from left-leaning organizations such as the UCJ-Cuba Young Communist League, the Cuba-China Parliamentary Friendship Group, the Youth of the Brazilian Worker's Party, the Progressive Liberal Party of Bahamas, Grenada's Senate, and the Central Committee of Cuba's Communist Party (PCC).

5.5.2.3 Subnational actors

The China-LAC Local Government Cooperation Forum is the main platform within the CCF which gathers subnational actors from LAC to enhance collaboration in areas such as city development, local governance and urban management with their Chinese counterparts. This forum has been instrumental in bringing together municipal and provincial authorities from both sides to facilitate meaningful exchanges and partnerships. Participants in previous editions of the forum included various local bodies, such as the Municipal Department of Culture in Manaus, Brazil, the General Secretary of the Florida Provincial Government of Uruguay, the Mayor of Tijuana, Mexico, as well as

authorities from San Juan Province in Argentina and Salcedo Province in the Dominican Republic.

Latin American subnational actors have not played a prominent role in this forum. The forum has been consistently organized by CPAFFC (Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries) and the Chinese government, facilitated through the LAC Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China. Furthermore, the forum has been held exclusively in China, specifically in cities such as Chongqing and Wuhan, with no editions taking place in a Latin American country so far.

5.5.2.4 Educational institutions

Within the context of the CCF's cultural initiatives, educational institutions, particularly universities and research centres, emerge as among the most numerous participants. Their participation spans across different platforms such as the Dialogues and Seminars Between the Civilisations of China and the LAC, the China-LAC Think Tanks Forum and the China-CELAC High Level Academic Forum. Table 13 illustrates the Latin American research centres which have taken part in some editions of these forums.

Center of Chinese Studies, La Plata National University	Argentina
CLEPEC-Latin American Center for Political and Economic Studies on China	Argentina
CECHIVER-Centro de Estudios China-Veracruz	Mexico
CECHIMEX-Center for Chinese-Mexican Studies, UNAM-National Autonomous University of Mexico	Mexico
CVEC - Venezuelan Center for China Studies	Venezuela
CELC - Center for Latin American Studies on China, Universidad Andrés Bello	Chile
Center for China and Asia-Pacific Studies, Universidad del Pacífico	Peru
CEAP - Center for Asia-Pacific Studies, ESPOL Litoral Polytechnic School	Ecuador

Source: *Author's elaboration*

An examination of the country of origin of the universities and research centres involved in the CCF's forums and initiatives reveals the significant presence of institutions from major Latin American economies. Participation is widespread, with representation from nearly all South American countries⁵⁵, as evidenced in Figure 4.

Figure 4. LAC educational institutions involved in CCF's initiatives



Source: *Author's elaboration.*

⁵⁵ The author's database does not register the participation of educational institutions from Bolivia, Paraguay and Suriname.

Notably, a considerable proportion of these educational institutions hails from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Mexico. However, it is important to highlight the involvement of universities from Central American and Caribbean nations, including the University of West Indies in Barbados, the International Policy Research Center (CIPI) in Cuba, El Salvador University, the Academy of Sciences of the Dominican Republic, the State University of Haiti, the National Autonomous University of Honduras, the Academy of Sciences of the Dominican Republic, and the National Autonomous University of Honduras.

5.5.2.5 Civil society groups

In addition to regional organizations, educational institutions, governmental bodies, and subnational actors, China's cultural diplomacy in the context of the CCF comprises a diverse array of civil society groups and private entities. These actors play an important role as participants and organizers of the various cultural initiatives discussed in Section .4.

The systematisation of the main actors belonging to this category offers evidence of the importance of a particular group of Latin American civil society groups. This is the case for the LAC national friendship associations with China, along with the federations which gather these associations. These associations' well-established connection with their Chinese counterparts dates back to the 1960s, as Section of this study documents.

The principal Latin American bodies actively involved in the editions of the China-LAC People-to-People Friendship Forum encompass AACHILAC (Association of Friends of China in Latin America and the Caribbean), the Friendship Federation of Latin America and China (FALCARPC), along with the Central American Federation of Friendship Associations with China. These bodies maintain a closely coordinated relationship with the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries (CPAFFC) and have convened in the China-LAC People-to-People Friendship Forum biennially since 2007, with the hosting location alternating between a city in China and a Latin American city.

FALCARPC, founded in Argentina in 2005 with the support of CPAFFC, is at the most encompassing level. It brings together the LAC associations of friendship with China. According to information from the 3rd Ordinary Congress of FALCARPC, the Federation is composed of at least 19 national LAC friendship associations with China, each of them with about 100 members (APACHIN n.d.). FALCARPC's main objectives include the grouping and guiding of national associations; promoting friendship ties and cooperation between members and the Chinese people; facilitating cultural, scientific, educational, touristic, and sports exchanges; promoting an understanding of the history, culture and socio-economic development of China, Latin America and the Caribbean; and encouraging the formation of national friendship associations in countries where they are not present (López n.d.). It is also important to highlight that the Federation has formal procedures and internal structures, including an elected Executive Committee voted in by the members.

For their part, the bilateral friendship associations with China are civil organizations from LAC countries which bring together people from the public and private sectors interested in strengthening the relationship between their corresponding country and China. Typically, these associations consist of politicians, former ambassadors, government-affiliated individuals, business leaders, representatives of trade and industry chambers, and members of associations of scholarship holders which have studied in China, among others. The associations and their respective countries of origin are illustrated in Table 14.

Table 14. Bilateral LAC friendship associations established with China		
No.	Country	Name of Association
1	Argentina	Rosarino Institute of Argentine-Chinese Friendship
2	Bahamas	Bahamas-China Friendship Association
3	Brazil	Brazil-China Friendship Association
4	Bolivia	China-Bolivia Friendship Association
5	Chile	Chile-China Friendship and Knowledge Association
6	Colombia	Colombo-China Friendship Association
7	Costa Rica	Costa Rica-China Friendship House
8	Cuba	Cuban Institute of Friendship with the Peoples

9	Cuba	Cuba-China Friendship Association
10	Ecuador	Ecuadorian-Chinese Friendship Association
11	El Salvador	Salvadoran Association of Friendship with China
12	Guyana	Guyana-China Friendship and Culture Association
13	Honduras	Honduran Association of Friendship with the People of China
14	Jamaica	Jamaica-China Friendship Association
15	Mexico	Mexican Society of Friendship with the P.R. China
16	Nicaragua	Nicaragua-China Friendship Association
17	Panama	Panamanian Association of Friendship with China
18	Paraguay	Paraguay-China Friendship Association
19	Peru	Peruvian-Chinese Cultural Institute
20	Santa Lucia	St. Lucia-China Friendship Association
21	Venezuela	Venezuela-China Friendship Association

Source: *Author's elaboration.*

Another type of LAC Friendship Association is represented by the Friendship Groups with China, established by Chambers of Deputies or parliamentary members. Such is the case with Mexico, which established such a group in 2022, and the Cuba-China Parliamentary Friendship Group.

The ties between LAC Friendship Associations and China can be regarded as a successful case of China's cultural diplomacy in the region, attributable to three key factors: firstly, these associations have demonstrated an enduring presence, fostering continuous and lasting connections over the course of several decades. This persistence is attributable to the proactive efforts of Latin American individuals and China enthusiasts who have consistently upheld and nurtured these organizations, with Chinese entities only playing an accompanying role. Moreover, entities like FALCARPC serve as pivotal platforms, facilitating the creation of new friendship associations.

Secondly, Chinese entities responsible for fostering links with LAC civil society associations, such as CPAFFC and the binational association of AACHILAC, have effectively advocated the establishment of the China-LAC People-to-People Friendship Forum. This has provided the LAC Friendship Associations

with China with a more institutionalized and high-level platform for cooperation and exchange.

Thirdly, this shows China’s successful cultural diplomacy because, overall, the political position of the LAC Friendship Associations and its members backs the official position of the Chinese government. For instance, the associations celebrate their anniversaries of the establishment of diplomatic relations with China, recognize the One-China principle and hold official meetings with Chinese government authorities such as embassies and members of the CCP.

Other types of civil society groups from LAC countries include sports associations, which include Taijiquan, Wushu and Kungfu practitioners, as illustrated in Table 15.

Table 15. LAC sports associations involved in CCF's initiatives	
Organization	Country
FAWK-Argentina Wushu Kung-Fu Federation	Argentina
Bermuda Wushu Association	Bermuda
OBW-Bolivian Wushu Organization	Bolivia
Brazilian Wushu Confederation	Brazil
Wushu Kung Fu Federation of Costa Rica	Costa Rica
FWRM-Wushu Federation of the Mexican Republic	Mexico
Peruvian Wushu Association	Peru
Tiger Wushu Association (Peru)	Peru
Golden Lion Wushu Club (Peru)	Peru
Peruvian Health Qigong Association	Peru
Wushu and Kungfu Organization of Uruguay	Uruguay

Source: Author's elaboration.

These organizations have been active in the China-LAC Wushu Exchange Forum and the China-LAC Taijiquan Online Competition.

In the field of media and within the framework of the China-LAC Media Forum, the China-Latin America Media Leaders’ Summit and the China-LAC Media Action Project, it is important to highlight that, in addition to state-owned media agencies, the presence of private media outlets is also prominent. Some

examples of these types of actors which have participated in the editions of the above-mentioned forums are exemplified in Table 16.

Table 16. Latin American private media outlets active in CCF's initiatives	
Private Media Outlet	Country
America Group	Argentina
El Clarín Newspaper	Argentina
Indalo Media Group	Argentina
El Globo	Brazil
Avantgarde	Colombia
Diario Extra Group	Costa Rica
Tribune	Honduras
Cosmos	Mexico
Nicaragua News	Nicaragua
TV 10 channel	Nicaragua

Source: *Author's elaboration.*

Lastly, various civil society groups have actively engaged in the CCF's cultural initiatives and programmes. Among them are Latin American and Caribbean artists from diverse fields, including filmmakers, painters, dancers, singers, and photographers who have taken part in events like the "Share the Beauty" exhibitions. Additionally, participation has extended to researchers, journalists, entrepreneurs, cultural organizations, representatives from think tanks, distinguished politicians, former political leaders, and private companies. Together, these diverse actors have played an important role in enriching and advancing the cultural initiatives undertaken by the CCF.

6. The rationale of China's cultural diplomacy

After thoroughly examining the significance of culture within the CCF and systematically analysing the cultural initiatives involving Chinese and LAC actors, this section shifts the focus towards exploring China's overarching interest in the CCF within the cultural field in connection with its wider national objectives. It further delves into the strategies employed by China to ensure the continuation and effectiveness of these cultural initiatives.

6.1 Objectives

China's cultural diplomacy in the context of the CCF is intended to support and advance the country's wider strategic objectives. As previously examined, China's cultural diplomacy is a key component of Xi Jinping's "Major Country Diplomacy" policy, which aims to position the nation as a global leader in line with its heightened political and economic standing.

More specifically, China's strategic imperative lies in cultivating approval and receptivity from peripheral regions, including Latin America and the Caribbean. Despite not holding immediate regional significance for China, LAC's alignment with the broader Global South and the geographic proximity of the region to the US render it a vital player in China's pursuit of hegemony, amid the ongoing hegemonic transition in the world order.

In the subsequent analysis, this subsection establishes a link between the primary goals of China's cultural diplomacy and the particularities of the LAC region.

6.1.1 Fostering a positive image

From an overall perspective, China endeavours to cultivate a favourable global image which portrays the nation as a unified civilisation with a rich historical legacy and a modern economy. In its pursuit of appealing to the Latin American public and gaining attractiveness, China specifically emphasizes several aspects of its own image.

First, China seeks to establish a connection to the region by underscoring a shared trajectory of development, showcasing how China, as a developing country, has achieved economic prosperity and transformed itself into a modern economy. This undertaking involves portraying China as a successful development model. China's attempt to reflect this image can be observed in the prevalence of certain themes across all CCF initiatives and subforums which are well received by the LAC counterparts, including poverty eradication, China's development experience, local governance at subnational levels, and the development of industrial urban areas in Chinese provinces. These themes are especially prominent in specific forums such as the China-LAC Government Cooperation Forum, the China-LAC Dialogue between Civilisations Forum, the China-LAC Think Tanks Forum, and the China-CELAC High Level Academic Forum.

Second, in the context of the CCF, China endeavours to portray itself as one single nation with a vibrant cultural heritage. To achieve this, a diverse range of traditional and well-established cultural shows has been presented as part of such initiatives as the China-LAC Share the Beauty Contemporary Art Exhibitions and China's cultural year in the LAC region. These initiatives feature a plethora of artistic expressions, including traditional Chinese opera and dance drama theatre, the Cultural Relics Show, Terracotta Warriors Show, China Ceramics Show, Minority Fashion Show, and Chinese acrobatic performances, among others. In addition to these cultural expressions, it is also important to highlight China's attempt to engage the Latin American audience in the field of sports and medicine. China took the initiative to establish new spaces for interaction in the CCF under its leadership and organization, including the China-LAC Wushu Exchange Forum, the China-LAC Taijiquan Competition and the China-LAC Traditional Medicine Exchange Forum. Through these initiatives, China emphasizes the longstanding history and traditional significance of these practices engrained in Chinese culture.

Third, China seeks to correct the "distorted image" of the country which has been projected in the LAC region and deconstruct negative discourses such as the "Chinese Threat" narrative. This effort to "rectify" is evident in the statements made by Chinese authorities, scholars and participants during events

such as the China-LAC Media Forum, China-LAC Media Summit and China-LAC Media Action Project. These declarations tend to constantly emphasize a shared narrative: news about China in the region has primarily originated from Western sources, namely Europe and the United States. In other words, Chinese actors commonly share the perception that news about China in the region is pre-filtered, hindering the audience's comprehension of the "truth of the events".

Hence, according to a representative of Xinhua News Agency who participated in the 2018 China-LAC Media Forum, a key aim of China-LAC cooperation in the field of media is "*...to present Chinese people with a true LAC and tell true Chinese stories to LAC people*" (Cai Mingzhao cit in. MercoPress 2018). In addition to countering the inaccuracies in reporting current events in China, Chinese actors within the CCF have also highlighted the importance of correcting the way China's history is presented by addressing biased narratives, inaccuracies and "convenient omissions" (Shicheng Xu cit in. Rojas 2017, 7).

Additional statements made by Chinese actors demonstrate their awareness of the association of China's external engagement with neocolonialism and the prevailing level of distrust among Latin Americans concerning China's intentions. In particular, Chinese scholars suggest that allegations of neocolonialism are primarily rooted in the dissemination of distorted information by the Western media, which finds widespread acceptance in regions like Africa and Latin America. This is something which prevents the internationalisation of China, according to these views (Guo Cunhai 2018, 292, 293). In the light of this, Guo Cunhai, the Director of CECLA, emphasizes the critical importance of eradicating any lingering suspicions harboured by LAC actors regarding China's BRI mega project by promoting culture (Guo 2018, 230, 231).

6.1.2 Conveying political standpoints

The cultural initiatives undertaken within the CCF are not deprived of political messages. In every event, even those which are under the lead of non-governmental actors, a representative of or authority from the Chinese central government is present, either inaugurating the opening ceremony, delivering a speech or fully participating in the event. The declarations derived from such events carry inherent political significance as they often tackle contemporary issues, enabling China to position itself and assert its own narratives as well as to rally support from the LAC countries.

One of the intertwined messages conveyed by China within the CCF pertains to its stance on cooperation. In a context where traditional Western donors face criticism regarding their cooperation practices, China emphasizes the non-political conditionality of its cooperative approach. Instead of assuming the role of “donor”, China positions itself as a “partner” to LAC countries. Rather than pursuing “alliances”, China fosters “partnerships” founded on principles of equality, mutual benefit and win-win cooperation. These narratives are then tailored to fit into the field of culture.

For instance, the name “Sharing the Beauty” attributed to the China-LAC art exhibitions is intended to convey the notion of a genuine cultural exchange, wherein both China and the LAC region openly share the finest aspects of their cultural expressions with one another. In a similar vein, the China-LAC Dialogues between Civilisations aim to emphasize the recognition of diverse civilisations and advocate common human values, countering the Western notion of the so-called “clash of civilisations”. Overall, the underlying political message implies that the era of one-way cooperation or North-South cooperation has become outdated in LAC and that China, unlike the West, embraces a more balanced SSC approach.

Another illustrative example is found in the field of communication. During the 1st Seminar on China and LAC Dialogues between Civilisations, held under the theme of “China and Latin America: Exchanges between Civilisations and Mutual Learning”, several significant political messages were conveyed. These

included, for instance, advocating the democratisation of international relations, fostering cooperation between LAC and China to achieve the “Chinese Dream” and the “Latin American Dream” and emphasizing the importance of formulating joint cultural diplomacy policies to counteract the hegemony of the English language in political, commercial and academic relations (Rojas 2017, 2, 3).

At a more specific level, certain cultural spaces established by the CCF have served as a medium for China to present its stance on conjunctural events. One notable example was observed during Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan in August 2022, which was the first visit by a US House of Representatives Speaker to the island in 25 years. In response to this visit, Chinese authorities utilized the 5th China-LAC Dialogues between Civilisations, held in September 2022, as a platform to express their disapproval and condemnation of Pelosi’s visit to Taiwan.

Despite the focus of the 5th Forum on China and LAC Dialogues between Civilisations on culture-related matters such as the Chinese diaspora’s role in LAC, communication, media, educational exchanges, and knowledge for development, the Chinese authorities took this event as an opportunity to address this highly political, sensitive issue. During the Forum’s opening ceremony, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Xie Feng condemned the United States for Pelosi’s visit, interpreting it as a deliberate attempt to undermine the One-China principle and a violation of the principle of non-interference in internal affairs. Xie Feng also characterized the visit as a provocative action contributing to heightened tensions in the Taiwan Strait, akin to a “new Cold War” (MFA 2022). In addition to directly condemning the United States, his statement also intended to portray China as a responsible power which behaves differently. He suggested that the US, in pursuit of its hegemony and self-interest, remains fixated on a law-of-the-jungle mentality, emphasizing isolation over cooperation, arrogance over mutual learning and conflicts over coexistence (*ibidem*).

Within the context of the 9th China-Latin America High Level Academic Forum held in 2020, another significant event with political implications centred

around the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic. As allegations concerning the origin of the outbreak of COVID-19 engendered discussions on China, scholars from both China and Latin America convened virtually to examine the post-pandemic global landscape and its repercussions on China-Latin America relations. These discussions, along with the subsequent publication of the book, “China and Latin America facing the pandemic”, edited in Spanish, emphasized the necessity of forging stronger cooperative bonds between China and Latin America. Additionally, the book addressed several other politically sensitive issues, including the escalating tensions between China and the United States which were derived from their corresponding initiatives, such as the “Growth in the Americas Initiative” and the BRI, and the call for strong state intervention after the pandemic in contrast to neoliberal governance (Center for China and Asia-Pacific 2020).

6.1.3 Understanding the region

The rationale behind the launch of cultural initiatives within the CCF is deeply rooted in a problem perceived by Chinese authorities and scholars, particularly since the second decade of this century. This problem pertains to the persistent lack of mutual knowledge and understanding between Chinese and Latin American authorities and societies.

From the Chinese perspective, the views on China by Latin America present a more complicated panorama compared to the active and positive impression which China’s presence has left in Africa (Le Corre et al. 2015). According to Chinese actors, the reasons behind this are the geographical distance, limited mutual knowledge, delay in the development of China-LAC links, and the more complicated cultural and historical characteristics compared to those of Africa (Guo Cunhai 2018, 296, 297). Enhancing cultural exchanges with LAC is thus seen as a crucial means of tackling these issues, deemed equally as important as economic and trade relations, and warranting serious attention and action.

Chinese scholars acknowledge the necessity for Chinese actors to acquire a more profound knowledge of the LAC region. Notably, Shicheng Xu, an honorary

member of CASS and an ILAS scholar, emphasized during the 1st Seminar on China-LAC Dialogues between Civilisations the importance of Chinese actors refraining from perceiving LAC as a uniform and indivisible entity. Instead, he called for awareness regarding the region's diversity and cultural heterogeneity (Rojas 2017, 5).

It is worth noting that China's use of cultural diplomacy to understand the region extends beyond merely enhancing people-to-people connections: it is intrinsically linked to pragmatic economic and political objectives. This aspect was highlighted by Chinese scholar Gao Bo during the 5th Forum on China and LAC: Dialogues between Civilisations. Gao Bo pointed out that Chinese companies encounter obstacles when conducting business in Latin America, which include navigating the region's distinctive business environment compared to other regions, grappling with complex tax systems and dealing with different labour protection standards (Yuan 2022). This observation is clearly connected to the widespread criticisms in Latin America concerning controversial practices of Chinese companies in LAC countries, particularly in sensitive sectors such as mining and oil operations, and the conflicting relations between Latin American governments and the local communities, indigenous groups and other local actors affected by these investment projects. In the light of this situation, the scholar suggested that:

[...] Chinese academics should study the political ecology and power system of the LAC countries in more in-depth manner, rather than focusing only on the macro level [...] We should conduct more research at the micro level such as studying non-governmental organizations, churches and communities, to help Chinese enterprises foster a clearer understanding of the region. (Yuan 2022)

From the Chinese standpoint, Chinese entrepreneurs are regarded as essential agents in the construction of China's national identity. In short, China's emphasis on cultural diplomacy is an attempt to better understand the intricacies of the region and address economic concerns alongside the complex social and environmental implications of Chinese companies' investments.

The rationale behind the attempt by Chinese actors to understand the region is underpinned by political considerations. The reservations expressed by certain Latin American actors towards US interventionism and their perception of the US' lack of understanding of the region's nuances prompt Chinese actors to exercise caution and avoid repeating similar mistakes. This perspective resonates with the critique made by US scholar Howard Wiarda, who argued that “[t]he United States is willing to do anything for Latin America, except understanding it” (2003, 432). In the light of this critique, Guo Cunhai (2018, 306) emphasizes the need for China to adopt a distinct approach which stresses genuine understanding of the region, eschews the replication of past US errors and rejects the use of stereotypes and ethnocentrism in its interactions with Latin America.

6.1.4 Presenting alternatives to the West

As an emerging global power seeking to challenge the dominance of the US and Western hegemony in the world order, China's cultural diplomacy campaigns not only aim to project the image of a peaceful, responsible and proactive partner in the international community, but are also intended to offer tangible solutions to the problematic development faced by the Global South under the premise that “[t]he development of China cannot be possible without the development of other developing countries, including countries in Latin America and the Caribbean” (PRC 2016b). In this line, China pursues the presentation of itself as an alternative to the West in the Latin American context, relying on the CCF's existing platforms for cultural exchange to spread the message and gain support.

Since the launch of China's first policy paper on Latin America and the Caribbean in 2008, China has presented the region with a series of proposals aimed at fostering “mutual beneficial cooperation” and “common development”. These included the “1+3+6 cooperation framework”⁵⁶ and the

⁵⁶ The “1+3+6” cooperation framework for LAC was announced in 2014, one year after the launch of the BRI. “1” refers to one plan (the China-CELAC Cooperation Plan 2015-2019), “3” to the driving forces of trade, investment and financial cooperation, and “6” to the key areas of cooperation including energy and resources, infrastructure works, agriculture, manufacturing, scientific-technical innovation, and information technology (Dussel 2020, 3).

“3x3 cooperation model”⁵⁷ launched in 2014 and 2015, respectively. Following their announcement in the highest spheres of the CCF, subsequent discussions and dissemination of these initiatives took place in the CCF’s subforums related to culture, mainly the China-LAC Think Tank Forum.

A case in point is the 3rd China-LAC Think Tank Forum convened in Beijing in 2016 under the banner of “New Time for China-Latin America Cooperation – Go Forward and Build the Future”. In his opening speech, State Councillor Yang Jiechi articulated China’s commitment to supporting LAC countries in advancing “common development” and building an upgraded version of China-Latin America “pragmatic cooperation” from a strategic and long-term perspective (SELA n.d.). Furthermore, the experts and scholars from both the LAC region and China engaged in discussions on various dimensions of the “1+3+6” and “3x3” cooperation models, including topics such as industrial cooperation, infrastructure development, production capacity cooperation, scientific and technological innovation, and financial cooperation. The forum also held dedicated sessions to explore the deepening of cultural exchanges, the “common development” of China-LAC cultural industry cooperation and China’s national image shaping in LAC (Liu 2017).

It is worth highlighting that China’s proposals came at a crucial juncture for Latin America, following the decline of commodity prices in 2014. Amid the evident need for the region to shift away from excessive reliance on commodity trade with China, the focus of cooperation between China and the LAC turned to prioritizing industry, energy, production, and infrastructure as key drivers of development. It is also important to mention that discussions concerning the region’s scenarios after the commodity boom were not observed in similar

⁵⁷ The “3x3” model refers to a new approach proposed by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang to CELAC countries in 2015 which focuses on cooperation in three areas: logistics, power and information; three types of actors involved: business, society and government; and three financing channels: funds, credits and insurance. In practice, China has established three regional funds with Latin America since 2015 to implement the “3x3” model: the China-LAC Cooperation Fund holding US\$10 billion (a private equity investment fund), the China-LAC Industrial Cooperation Fund (CLAI) holding US\$30 billion and the Special Loan Program for China-Latin America Infrastructure holding US\$20 billion (PRC State Council 2015).

institutional contexts with other extra-regional partners such as the United States.

As of 2023, the “1+3+6” and “3x3” cooperation models and the discursive rhetoric which accompanied them within the CCF have diminished in importance. Instead, starting in 2017 and with increasing emphasis since 2018, the primary focal point of China’s “development promise” lies in the BRI. Even though the BRI was initially announced by China in 2014 as an attempt to bridge Asia and Europe via Africa and the Middle East, it was only in 2018 when, in the framework of the 2nd Ministerial Meeting of the CCF held in Santiago, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi presented the initiative to the LAC countries and invited them to be part of it (MFA 2018).

The effort by Chinese leaders to modify the initial narrative of the BRI and include the LAC region as a “natural extension” of the Maritime Silk Road was successful. It resulted in the signing of the China-CELAC Forum “Special Declaration on the Belt and Road Initiative” in January 2018 and a strong interest from LAC countries to join this project (CCF 2018a). By February 2023, a total of 21 Latin American countries had signed memorandums of understanding with China, signalling their commitment to establishing an effective partnership within the BRI framework (CGTN 2023; Nedopil 2023).

Several cultural initiatives within the CCF have become platforms for China to showcase and advocate the BRI to the world and the LAC region as the most promising mega project for international cooperation and development. Virtually all of the CCF’s subforums have addressed the subject of BRI and explored the cooperation prospects between LAC and China arising from this ambitious initiative. In fact, specific editions of certain CCF subforums have been entirely dedicated to discussions centred around the BRI and related topics, as Table illustrates.

Table 17. CCF's subforums dedicated to discussions around the BRI		
Initiative Year	Slogan	Subtopics
5 th Young Political Leaders' Forum 2018	The Belt and Road Initiative and Youth Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable development, youth participation in BRI, "Bridge to the Future" Programme
2 nd Seminar on China and LAC Dialogue between Civilisations 2018	Belt and Road Initiative towards China-Latin America Civilisational Dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a base for intercommunication between peoples within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative from cultural, entrepreneurial and media perspectives • Book launch: The BRI and Latin America. New Opportunities and New Challenges
5 th China-LAC Think Tank Forum 2019	Promoting High Quality Belt and Road Cooperation: Toward a Connectivity Partnership between China and Latin American and the Caribbean Countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote high-quality BRI cooperation: concept, practice and meaning • Towards a connectivity partnership between China and LAC countries: vision, objective and path • Sustainable development and UN SDGs 2030 • Innovation in China-LAC cooperation • China-LAC Civilisations: deepening dialogues, strengthening people-to-people ties
2 nd China-CELAC High-Level Academic Forum 2021	China-Latin America Cooperation: Meeting Challenges and Creating the Future Together	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mutual Learning of China-LAC Development • China-LAC Cooperation on the BRI and Health Silk Road under the Global Challenges • Emerging Areas of Cooperation between China and LAC: Digital Economy and the Energy Transition

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Future-oriented Sino-Latin America Cooperation
5 th Forum on China and LAC Dialogues between Civilisations 2022	Global Development Initiative and China-LAC Community with a Shared Future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • China-LAC cooperation in business, green development, agriculture, science, and high technology • Building a high-quality development partnership between China and Latin America • Building a knowledge network for development between China and Latin America • Mutual appreciation of development experiences and responsibilities of LAC media • The role of the Chinese diaspora

Sources: Author's database | *Author's elaboration*

In addition to the active promotion of the BRI within the CCF, China has also endeavoured to strengthen its latest proposal, the Global Development Initiative (GDI), at the multilateral level. In the 76th session of the UN General Assembly in 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping put forward the GDI as a global initiative to support the achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The GDI targets developing countries, in particular those belonging to the Group of Friends of the GDI⁵⁸, and aims at implementing “practical cooperation projects” in areas such as

⁵⁸ As of October 2022, 68 countries have joined the GDI and more than 100 organisations and countries support it (United Nations n.d.).

poverty reduction, food security, pandemic response and vaccines, industrialisation, green development, climate change, and digital connectivity⁵⁹.

China has sought to promote the GDI, its principles⁶⁰, objectives and projects within the LAC regional sphere through its engagement with the CCF. The BRI and GDI serve as prominent illustrations of China's approach to propagating its proposals at the multilateral level and subsequently adjusting them to fit the specific regional contexts. Notably, the CCF plays a crucial role as the primary regional platform for engaging with the LAC countries in this process. Under the slogan of "Global Development Initiative and China-LAC Community with a Shared Future", the 5th Forum on China and LAC Dialogues between Civilisations, held in 2022, was exclusively dedicated to presenting and discussing the GDI and its related subtopics (see Table 17).

In sum, China has introduced various initiatives to address the development needs of the countries in the LAC region and presented them on the CCF's cultural diplomacy platforms. These initiatives include the "1+3+6 cooperation framework," the "3x3 cooperation model," the BRI, and the GDI. The purpose of these proposals is directly related to China's ambition to seek hegemony through consensus and offer alternative paths for development and governance to peripheral regions. In this way, China intends to address the gap left by the US' inability to fulfil its role as a hegemon by providing solutions to the existing disorganization of the world order.

⁵⁹ The implementation of these projects is under the coordination of Chinese institutions such as the China Foundation for Rural Development, the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA), the Ministry of Commerce of the PRC (MOFCOM), and multilateral agencies such as UNESCO, the World Food Program (WFP), UNDP, and UNIDO.

See projects and beneficiary countries of the GDI:

https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/202209/P020220921624707087888.pdf

⁶⁰ These include the principles of "extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits, win-win cooperation and common development". See: http://un.china-mission.gov.cn/eng/chinaandun/economicdevelopment/202201/t20220121_10631405.htm

6.2 Strategies

This subsection delves into the most salient strategies put forward by China within the CCF to achieve its cultural diplomacy objectives. In its pursuit to present a favourable image of China, assert political stances, offer alternative initiatives for addressing pressing issues in Latin America, and better understand the region, China has adopted an array of strategies. These strategies draw upon China's historical engagement in cultural diplomacy with Latin America, its experience in similar undertakings on the multilateral stage and its more extensive involvement in cultural diplomacy within regional institutions and frameworks akin to the CCF. Although not all strategies are entirely novel, China actively seeks to tailor and adjust them to the current context, considering its new status as an influential superpower and the complex position of Latin America, which finds itself at a critical crossroads, balancing the influences of traditional and emerging powers.

6.2.1 Revitalizing past instruments

As discussed in Section 4, during the peak of China's cultural diplomacy in the 1949-1960 period, the country employed various instruments to enhance cultural exchanges with Latin America, including guided tourism, printed material, the establishment of like-minded friendship associations, and engagement with Latin American local influential figures. These instruments continue to be utilized in the present context, albeit with adaptations to suit evolving circumstances and objectives.

Guided tours, for instance, remain an integral aspect for the Latin American participants attending the CCF subforums meetings and events hosted in Chinese cities. While the nature of these tours may vary based on the target group, the Chinese actors in charge usually organize standardized visits to cultural heritage sites (such as museums, temples, palaces, and UNESCO sites), offer experiences in art and performances, facilitate meetings with local authorities as well as diplomatic engagements with Chinese officials, and arrange business and economic visits to industrial zones and economic centres. It is

noteworthy that the emphasis of these visits has shifted towards showcasing successful examples of industrial and technological developments rather than directly promoting ideological ambitions (e.g., the formation of a counter-hegemonic force). Nevertheless, the objective of the tours is that LAC participants return home with a positive perception of the Chinese regime (Cardenal 2017, 27).

Another important point to highlight is that the participation of LAC actors in the CCF's subforums is further stimulated by the financial backing provided by the Chinese authorities overseeing the organization, a pattern which has been evident in China's cultural diplomacy efforts during previous decades. An illustrative example is related to the coordination arrangements for the 3rd China-LAC Dialogue between Civilisations Seminar, where Chinese authorities from ILAS-CASS, CECLA, the Jiangsu Provincial Government, and Blossom Press made an open call to researchers and experts from the cultural and artistic sectors of both LAC countries and China to attend the event. The Chinese organizing committee offered to cover local transportation, accommodation and meal expenses during the two-day seminar, while participants were responsible for the funding of their international travel to China (Cardenal 2017; CECLA 2018). Given that China bears part of the financial burden while the national counterpart usually covers the rest, this becomes an appealing option for Latin American participants, regardless of their views on the Chinese regime.

With regard to written materials, the strategy adopted by China within the specific framework of the CCF involves coordinating the production and launching of printed and digital books. In contrast to the printed materials from the period 1949-1960, which could be categorized as "printed propaganda", the contemporary publications presented within the CCF framework take the form of edited academic volumes. These books typically compile the contributions of scholars, both Chinese and Latin American, who have participated in the CCF's subforums, as Table 18 illustrates.

Book	Year	Event	Publisher
10134 Kilometers Across China	2022	5 th China-LAC Dialogue between Civilisations Forum	Blossom Press of China of International Publishing Group
China and Latin America in the face of the pandemic	2020	9 th China-Latin America High Level Academic Forum	University of Chile, Faculty of Humanities
Oral history: voices and witnesses of the cultural exchange between China and Latin America	2019	3 rd Seminar China-LAC Dialogue between Civilisations	Blossom Press of China of International Publishing Group
The Belt and Road Initiative and Latin America: new opportunities and new challenges	2019 2018	2 nd Seminar of China and LAC: Dialogue between Civilisations	Blossom Press of China of International Publishing Group, China Intercontinental Press
Opportunities amid transformation. A multidimensional analysis of the prospects for cooperation between China and Latin America	2018	7 th China-LAC High Level Academic Forum	Economic Management Press, China

Source: *Author's elaboration.*

These edited books are usually published in Chinese and Spanish and are coordinated by CECLA, edited and printed by Blossom Press, a publishing house of the China International Publishing Group, financed by the China National Publication Office and launched during CCF events (Wu Sixuan 2018).

The approach taken to encourage LAC scholars to engage in the CCF's subforums involves inviting them to present papers during the event. These are

then recommended for publication in Chinese academic journals such as the *Journal of Latin American Studies* (ILAS-CASS and Chinese Association of Latin American Studies), the *International Sinology Magazine* (University of Beijing Foreign Studies) or the *International Communications Magazine* (China International Publishing Group) (CECLA 2018). It is pertinent to emphasize that the aforementioned books and other publications generally adopt a non-critical, academic tone and align with the Chinese government's perspectives.

Another longstanding instrument for Chinese cultural diplomacy which has persisted over the years is the establishment of bilateral friendship associations between China and LAC countries, which dates back to the 1960s. As previously discussed, these associations serve as pivotal pro-Chinese institutions and have fostered people-to-people relationships over several decades. It is worth noting that, in the contemporary context, the significance of these friendship groups has become more visible, as some of their activities are held under the framework of the China-LAC People-to-People Friendship Forum, which has been integrated into the broader structure of the CCF.

6.2.2 Replication of initiatives

Prior to the establishment of cultural diplomacy initiatives in the CCF in 2014, China had already gained extensive experience in implementing forums in other multilateral and regional organizations. This previous experience was primarily derived from China's involvement in institutions such as CASCF, FOCAC and BRICS, all of which were established before the CCF. China's approach to cultural diplomacy in the CCF is strategic in the sense that the country does not misuse its accumulated experience in these spaces and deliberately replicates the same or comparable cultural initiatives in the CCF, as Table 19 illustrates.

Table 19. Forums in the CCF, FOAC, CASCF and BRICS

Forum/Organization	FOCAC 2000	CASCF 2004	BRICS 2009	CCF 2014
People-to-People Friendship Forum	X			X
Think-Tanks Forum	X		X	X
Young Political Leaders' Forum	X			X
Local Government Cooperation Forum	X		X	X
Academic Forum			X	X
Dialogues between Civilisations Forum		X		X
Media Forum	X	X		X
Traditional Medicine Exchange Forum			X	X
Wushu Exchange Forum				X
Youth Development Forum		X		X

Sources: Websites of CCF, FOAC, BRICS, CASCF, and press releases. | *Author's elaboration*

Moreover, regardless of the specific spaces in which they are implemented, China's cultural diplomacy initiatives, such as the local government cooperation forum, media forum, youth forum, and young political leaders' forum, follow similar formats and are organized and coordinated by fixed Chinese institutions responsible for their execution.

Given this institutional consistency, it is plausible to anticipate the potential replication in future of initiatives which already exist in other frameworks within the CCF such as FOAC, CASCF and BRICS. Examples include the BRICS Film Festival, BRICS Women's Business Alliance, BRICS Alliance of Art Museums and Galleries, Arab-Chinese Digital Library, Africa-China International Film Festival, and Africa-China Culture Forum.

6.2.3 Centralizing the dispersed

As mentioned previously, even before the formal establishment of the CCF in 2014, China and Latin American countries had already established collaborative platforms involving diverse actors, including young politicians, scholars from universities and think tanks, local governments, and friendship associations. In an effort to bring visibility to these dispersed initiatives and centralize them within a unified, regional and more prestigious framework of cooperation, Chinese and Latin American authorities capitalized on the actors' extensive experience and history of collaboration. As a result, these non-governmental actors were integrated into the structure of the CCF through the creation of three distinct subforums: the China-LAC People-to-People Friendship Forum, the China-LAC Think-Tanks Forum and the China-LAC Young Political Leaders' Forum.

The existence of coordination platforms between Chinese and LAC actors prior to the creation of the CCF in 2014 provides evidence of the early recognition on both sides of the importance of promoting cooperation and exchanges among non-governmental actors. Additionally, since the incorporation and creation of subforums and initiatives to the CCF, this institution has become an umbrella organization which has not only brought previous cultural exchanges to the forefront but also ensured their continuation at a more elevated and institutionalized level. Moreover, the centralisation of dispersed initiatives within the CCF facilitates Chinese and Latin American authorities' ability to oversee the activities carried out by these actors.

6.2.4 Decentralizing the organization of initiatives

A close examination of the cultural diplomacy implemented in the CCF evidences the more prominent role of Chinese actors compared to their Latin American counterparts with regard to the organization, coordination and hosting of the initiatives. Notably, the Young Political Leaders' Forum, the

Youth Development Forum, the Taijiquan Competition, the Wushu Exchange Forum, and the Local Government Cooperation Forum are completely organized and hosted by Chinese institutions. Moreover, except for the Taijiquan Competition and Wushu Forum, which were held online, the editions of the other three types of forums have taken place in Chinese cities. For the “Sharing the Beauty” art exhibitions, the responsibility for organizing all of the editions has consistently rested with specific Chinese institutions, primarily China’s Ministry of Culture and CAEG. These institutions work in coordination with the embassies of LAC countries in China.

Chinese authorities are well aware that a significant portion of the initiatives within the CCF has been implemented due to China’s active promotion and contribution, often stemming directly from the mandate of Xi Jinping. Such circumstances have led to criticism that the cultural exchanges between China and LAC may be one-sided and excessively centralized and that they lack the spontaneous engagement of decentralized actors from civil society (Cardenal 2017, 32, 33; Guo Cunhai 2018, 298).

Recognizing these concerns, Chinese actors have been endeavouring to involve LAC institutions in the organization, preparation and hosting of events within the CCF. A notable shift is observable in the most recently created subforums and their latest editions. For example, while the first and second editions of the China-LAC Dialogue between Civilisations Seminars were exclusively organized by Chinese institutions such as ILAS-CASS, the Blossom Press of the China International Communications Group (CIPG) and the Jiangsu Provincial Government, the subsequent editions (third, fourth and fifth) were co-organised with Latin American institutions including FLACSO, CLACSO, the University of Buenos Aires, the Catholic University of Salta and the Patria Institute of Argentina, the Chinese Studies Center of Veracruz of the Veracruzana University in Mexico (CECHIVER), the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, and the University of Chile, among others.

Another approach to bolstering the engagement of LAC actors and empowering them to assume more leadership in CCF initiatives involves the organization of events in Latin American cities. It would seem that this approach is being

implemented at a slow and gradual pace. A review of several editions of the CCF's subforums by the author indicates that approximately 60 % of these events were conducted in China, while about 15 % took place in various Latin American countries, where Santiago de Chile was the primary host city. Other cities, such as La Habana, Buenos Aires, San José, and Manaus, have also hosted some of the CCF's initiatives. Furthermore, the remaining events were conducted either online or in a hybrid format.

6.2.5 Establishing collaborations

The CCF's initiatives and events serve as occasions for institutionalizing further collaborative relationships between significant actors from China and the LAC region. Within the LAC circle, Chinese authorities focus on forging collaboration agreements especially with institutions which have a well-established history and regional legitimacy. Organizations like ECLAC, FLACSO and CLACSO are particularly important in this context, as they also possess the capacity to assume a more prominent role in the organization and leading of CCF initiatives. Such a collaboration has the potential to steer China's approach to cultural diplomacy in the region away from being perceived as a one-way street.

In this sense, the collaboration between Blossom Press, the Chinese publishing house in charge of promoting publications from Chinese and LAC authors within the CCF, and CLACSO, renowned for having one of the most extensive open-access social science repositories in the world, is noteworthy. In 2021, these two institutions entered into a cooperation agreement during the 4th China-LAC Dialogue between Civilisations Forum. The primary objective of this partnership is to facilitate the dissemination of knowledge pertaining to China-Latin America relations. The agreement encompasses various aspects, including the exchange of publications and materials, joint publications, translations, distribution and promotion of their respective publications (CLACSO 2021). Other agreements include the memorandums of understanding signed by ILAS-CASS, ECLAC and FLACSO to strengthen collaborations in the fields of research, academic exchange and publications (ECLAC 2017; FLACSO 2021b).

7. Conclusions

China's recent emergence as a global economic power has gone in parallel with a deliberate and assertive effort to advance its cultural influence and enhance cultural exchanges worldwide. This study has shed light on the promotion of culture by the Chinese government and its strategic use as a means of achieving ambitious national goals within a context marked by power shifts, reconfiguration of traditional alliances and a new era of multilateralism.

Cultural diplomacy has been one component of China's foreign policy since its very foundation. However, it is only in recent decades that culture has been wielded as a tool by both the State and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to serve high-reaching goals commensurate with its superpower status. In contrast to previous phases in which China had the intent but lacked actual economic power, China's cultural diplomacy in the 21st century is supported by and corresponds to its renewed position as the world's preeminent economic powerhouse as well as aligning with its actual capacity to contend for global hegemony.

Based on a less dogmatic approach than that of the 1960s, China's current cultural diplomacy operates at different levels: multilateral, regional, nation-to-nation, and societal (people-to-people), all strategically aligned with Xi Jinping's long-term objectives for "Major Country Diplomacy". This study has focused on the most encompassing levels of China's diplomacy: the multilateral and regional arenas based on a conceptual framework which links the notions of cultural diplomacy, national projection, hegemony, and hegemonic transition.

China's passage from its initial "watchful and hands-off" approach during its early involvement in the multilateral scenario to a more determined stance in which China actively engages with and reshapes norms and programmes has had significant implications for how China conducts its cultural diplomacy in multilateral settings. The detailed examination of China's cultural diplomacy within long-standing multilateral institutions, such as UNESCO, as well as within newly established platforms like the BRICS, BRI and the forums of both a multilateral and regional nature which China maintains with Africa, the Arab world and LAC, has unveiled China's multifaceted strategy which targets different fronts but ultimately seeks to achieve interconnected objectives.

China's approach entails an active participation in multilateral institutions established under US hegemony, positioning itself as a system-affirming actor in the liberal world order. In the context of UNESCO, this study has shown that this role is evident in several aspects of China's endeavours: the timely fulfilment of its financial obligations and voluntary contributions, the ratification of UNESCO's international conventions, and its pursuit to secure the recognition of numerous cultural heritage elements. This commitment takes on significance when considered in the context of the US' withdrawal from UNESCO during the period 2018 to mid-2023, and nurtures China's narrative regarding its sense of responsibility in upholding the institutions of a liberal architecture.

Apart from its involvement in long-established organizations, China's cultural diplomacy also extends to a network of multilateral and regional institutions established under its strong advocacy. In the specific field of culture, the examination of China's moves within the BRICS and regional subforums like FOCAC, CASC and the CCF reveals a wide range of cultural initiatives targeting multiple actors, including universities, scholars, artists, young people, women, and other groups in civil society. While it is clear that the BRICS and other regional forums do not exclusively serve China's interests, it is hard to ignore China's influential role in shaping the nature of cultural exchanges within these organizations. When comparing the cultural initiatives implemented across these platforms, it becomes evident that they largely share similar features. All of these institutions have a Media Forum, a Friendship Cities and Local Governments Cooperation Forum, a forum for think-tanks and for the participation of young people; all of these platforms are part of China's well-established repertoire of cultural diplomacy programmes.

Continuing within the multilateral dimension, this study has also touched upon the BRI and its developments in the cultural area. In connection with the theoretical foundations regarding the notions of hegemony and hegemonic transition, this research has argued that the BRI holds a distinct strategic significance for China. Besides being an iconic example of China's strategy of circumventing the existing liberal architecture with a grand interconnectivity project, China's quest to revive the Silk Roads through the BRI is interpreted here as the promise offered by China as a rising hegemon, in particular to peripheral countries, to accommodate their development demands, unfulfilled by US hegemony.

Cultural exchanges within the BRI are essential. The BRI is not solely about trade and infrastructure connectivity; it is also envisioned in China's imagery as a hub for cultural production and people-to-people exchanges. Moreover, culture plays a crucial role in China's efforts to gain international legitimacy and garner consensus in its pursuit of hegemony.

Beyond the multilateral level, this research has also explored China's quest to enhance cultural ties at a more localized regional level. The aim was to examine how China's objectives and instruments in the field of cultural diplomacy have navigated from the multilateral sphere to a more focused minilateral regional platform, exemplified by the establishment of the CCF in 2014. The case of the CCF is noteworthy because it stands as the newest organization within China's network of subregional forums formed with other developing regions.

The systematisation and analysis of the existing cultural initiatives in the CCF, the Chinese and Latin American actors involved, the specific areas within the cultural dimension which are prioritized, as well as China's interests and strategies for sustaining and expanding cultural ties in this forum, have enriched the still limited research on cultural undertakings in the CCF. Several conclusions can be drawn from this examination.

Evidence supports the assertion that cultural exchange within the CCF is mainly dictated by the parameters of China's well-crafted cultural diplomacy. The CCF functions as another platform for the deployment of China's toolkit of diplomatic instruments. It is difficult to argue the reverse and refer to the existence of CELAC's cultural diplomacy in the CCF. This is due to the excessive role of China in determining the cultural initiatives to be implemented by the CCF, the fact that the CCF's Action Plans (2015-2019, 2019-2021, 2022-2024) and their prioritized cultural activities are simply more specific derivations of China's 2008 and 2016 Policy Papers towards LAC, and the fact that some of the CCF's subforums related to culture are also found in other regional forums initiated by China. CELAC members, for their part, have not even agreed on general parameters on which to base their links with China, let alone specific policies concerning cultural diplomacy. The CCF's Action Plans do not clearly reflect the perspectives or fundamental objectives of the LAC region in its dealings with China.

Regarding the drivers of China's cultural diplomacy in Latin America, this study has revealed that they are closely linked to those guiding its approach at the multilateral level. These include efforts to project a favourable image which shifts away from its past revolutionary ideals and projects a modern united nation which preserves the aesthetics of a millenary civilisation and culture; to counteract distorted perceptions of China (e.g., the Chinese threat) which have tarnished its global reputation; to disseminate its own narratives, often referred to as the "Chinese version" of stories; and to position itself as a responsible power which offers alternative paths for development and governance beyond the prevailing Western centric view of North-South asymmetric patterns.

When taken to the regional level, these objectives are adjusted to the particularities of Latin America. As such, China emphasizes specific aspects of its own image to resonate with the region, for instance its shared history as a peripheral country which nonetheless could achieve economic prosperity through an autonomous model of development. Additional aims include conveying political standpoints regarding conjunctural events (e.g., China's role in the pandemic, US-Taiwan ties) and reinforcing narratives which are aligned more closely with Latin America's interests. These narratives emphasize China's willingness to foster partnerships rather than donor-recipient relationships, cooperation instead of alliances, and mutually beneficial relations as opposed to the asymmetric and conditional ties which Latin America has traditionally maintained with core powers, mainly the US.

It is common to see that within culture-oriented platforms facilitated by the CCF, China and Latin American countries engage in discussions regarding China's proposals to the problem of development in the LAC region. These have so far included the "1+3+6 cooperation framework", the "3x3 cooperation model", the BRI since 2018 and, more recently, the GDI as China's initiative to support the achievement of the SDG goals. In particular, platforms like the Young Political Leaders' Forum, the China and LAC Dialogue between Civilisations Forum, the China-LAC Think Tank Forum, and the China-CELAC High Level Academic Forum have been the preferred spaces for the diffusion of China's multilateral and regional proposals. This purpose is directly related to China's broader ambition of establishing consensual hegemony in peripheral regions and advancing Beijing's alternatives to the Western liberal international order.

It is important to mention that, in addition to its overarching strategic goals, China has a genuine interest in strengthening cultural bonds as a means of understanding the region. From China's perspective, a set of factors including geographical distance, limited knowledge, stereotypes, and the distinctive cultural attributes of Latin American societies poses a challenge to Sino-Latin American relations. In this sense, while China's use of cultural diplomacy in the region aims at building people-to-people connections through music, art, festivals, language, and sports, it is also intended to ease the difficulties confronted by other representatives of China's cultural diplomacy, such as companies and entrepreneurs, when engaging in investments and business in the region.

When examining the type of cultural initiatives carried out within the CCF, this research has found that they fall mainly into the subcategories of education, culture, arts and sports, people-to-people and subnational exchanges, and media. These initiatives take different formats, the most prevalent being the permanent subforums integrated in the CCF's institutional structure. Chinese and Latin American participants—university scholars, artists, students, young people, journalists, media outlets, friendship associations, and local authorities—convene annually at events which last one or two days and encompass activities such as conferences, discussions, guided visits and tours, and book launches. By 2023, there were at least ten subforums, all of them intricately linked to the cultural sphere.

Although there is not a dedicated subforum within the CCF focused solely on the arts, the “Sharing the Beauty” art exhibitions are an example of a well-established and long-running initiative which has been consistently carried out annually since 2011 under the organization of Chinese state and private actors in coordination with LAC embassies in China.

Another category of initiatives involves short- to medium-term projects such as the “Bridge to the Future” and “Young Scientists”. These programmes offer scholarships to Latin American students and researchers, enabling them to participate in training programmes and research stays in China. Additionally, in the field of media, the China-LAC Media Action Project, targeted to Latin American journalists to receive training and encourage media co-productions, stands out.

When assessing the history of the CCF in the cultural area since its creation, key observations can be made concerning China's overall approach to enhancing cultural ties in the CCF, the role of Chinese and Latin American entities in shaping and sustaining these initiatives, and the challenges which have so far emerged.

China's cultural diplomacy has effectively navigated well in two directions: from the multilateral to the regional level and from the bilateral to the regional Latin American sphere of interaction. During the early stages of the CCF, China demonstrated strategic acumen when replicating subforums and similar multilateral initiatives within the newly established CCF framework. For instance, initiatives in the education sector such as Bridge to the Future and the Young Scientists Program, and subforums like the China-LAC Think-Tanks Forum, China-LAC Young Political Leaders' Forum and the China-CELAC Local Government Cooperation Forum, which had previously been implemented in other multilateral and regional platforms, were adapted and incorporated in the CCF.

Furthermore, China has leveraged its historical trajectory of cultural diplomacy at the bilateral level with LAC countries. Interactions which had endured over decades were given space in the CCF's structure; this is the case regarding the long-standing China-Latin America bilateral friendship associations which found their space in the China-LAC People-to-People Friendship Forum of the CCF. This illustrates how the CCF's cultural sphere of dimension evolved from the dispersion of initiatives at the multilateral and bilateral levels to the establishment of dedicated and formalized spaces.

There is a noticeable imbalance regarding the contribution of Chinese and Latin American actors in upholding culture-oriented initiatives within the CCF. Chinese institutions have predominantly assumed a central role in initiating, hosting and ensuring the continuity of projects. Most of these programmes have taken place in China rather than in Latin America, and China has defined and prioritized these proposals based on its experiences on other platforms, drawing upon its own repertoire of cultural diplomacy instruments. In the face of this reality, the CCF has been striving to enhance the engagement of LAC actors in

leading and organizing cultural initiatives. Consequently, institutions like ECLAC, FLACSO, CLACSO, UDUAL, and GRULAC have taken on roles as organizers of certain editions of the Forum for Dialogue between Civilisations of China and the LAC, the China-LAC Think Tanks Forum and the China-Latin America Media Leaders' Summit.

Nearly a decade following the establishment of the CCF, it becomes evident that achieving the desired level of intensity of cultural exchanges between China and Latin America remains a significant challenge. Many of the CCF's cultural initiatives have been made possible through arrangements in high-level spheres. Therefore, the challenge lies in finding ways to decentralize these initiatives, allowing for their appropriation and a more direct engagement by Chinese and Latin American civil society while minimizing governments' intervention. Without the involvement of CCF governments, particularly the Chinese government, very few of these initiatives could stay afloat at the regional level. China's determination to exert control over the shaping of narratives within the CCF in alignment with its interests and goals carries the potential risk of undermining the efficacy and value of China-Latin America cultural exchange. It could lead to the formation of exclusive pro-Chinese circles which are uncritical of and disconnected from the societal dynamics of Latin American countries— complex dynamics which China seems eager to understand.

For its part, it is crucial for CELAC to establish its own cultural diplomacy parameters in alignment with its goals as a regional body, values and specific objectives towards other regions and countries, including China. Just as it is vital for China to understand Latin America, it is equally important for CELAC to gain knowledge of and cultivate cultural connections with China, given China's significant multidimensional presence in the LAC region, its geopolitical importance worldwide and the more interconnected character of China-Latin America societies. Determining these parameters of action would facilitate a more balanced point of departure for the definition and implementation of cultural initiatives with the CCF, in connection with the priorities of both parties.

In the current era of transition, uncertain alliances, shifting power dynamics, and geopolitical changes, Latin America, whether through CELAC or other platforms, must reconsider the foundations of its cultural engagement not only with China but also with traditional actors like the EU.

It is evident that the EU's cultural diplomacy towards Latin America is more comprehensive, involving a wider range of instruments, actors and levels, and it follows a less decentralized approach. The EU has a deeper history of engagement and a more effective record in this regard compared to China's cultural diplomacy. However, a renewed partnership for the 21st century between the EU and LAC countries can no longer be advocated solely on the assumption of their being "natural" partners connected through language, history and migration. This idea must be critically examined, particularly in light of the Eurocentric interpretations often associated with it and the acknowledgement that colonialism and its remnants have been a central aspect of this presumed "natural" partnership.

The EU, with its recent urgency to renew its relationship with Latin America through initiatives like the "New Agenda for Relations between the EU and Latin America and the Caribbean" and the "Global Gateway Investment Agenda", unveiled during the long-awaited EU-CELAC Summit in July 2023, faces the difficult task of convincing the Latin American and Caribbean governments and people that its aspirations for "fair and inter-connected societies" are not solely driven by its own geopolitical interests: countering China's presence in Latin America, gaining support in the ongoing war in Ukraine and securing access to critical resources like lithium and green hydrogen for its energy security, jeopardized since the Russian invasion. In this era of uncertainty and rivalries, it is imperative for both the EU and China that their desires for "vibrant people-to-people partnerships", whether through the BRI or Global Gateway Investment, are genuinely rooted in mutual cooperation and a shared commitment to correcting and anticipating even more deeply those neocolonial and unequal cultural relations which could emerge.

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Annexes

Annex 1. China's Participation in Multilateral Institutions, 1990-2017				
Name	China's role	Field	Description	Year
APSCO Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization	Founding member	Technology	Air and space cooperation among eight Asian states. The first memorandum of understanding was signed in 1992. The IGO was inaugurated in 2008.	1992
APLMF Asia-Pacific Legal Metrology Forum	Founding member	Economy	International forum of legal metrology authorities from economies in the Asia-Pacific region to promote international trade by harmonizing legal metrology.	1994
SCO Shanghai Cooperation Organization	Founding member	Security	Began as an informal group in 1996; since 2003, a formal IGO to promote collaboration of security among its members.	1996
INBAR International Bamboo and Rattan Organization	Founding member	Economy	IGO which uses bamboo and rattan for further sustainable development and reduction of poverty in Asia.	1997
APT Asia Pacific Telecommunity	Founding member	Multiple	Informal cooperation forum between the ten ASEAN members plus China, Japan and Republic of Korea.	1997
CICA Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia	Founding member	Security	Summit series involving intergovernmental conferences on security; includes a permanent secretariat since 2002.	1999

FOCAC Forum on China–Africa Cooperation	Leading role	Multiple	Summit series involving ministerial conferences every three years between African nations and China.	2000
Bao Forum	Leading role	Multiple	Non-profit transnational organization created by 29 countries to support annual economic summits for Asia; modelled on the World Economic Forum.	2001
ACD Asia Cooperation Dialogue	Founding member	Multiple	Series of intergovernmental summits to build an “Asian Community” including a Provisional Secretariat in 2013.	2002
China–Arab States Cooperation Forum	Leading role	Multiple	Formal dialogue forum between China and member states of the Arab League with biennial summits.	2004
CCETCF China-Caribbean Economic and Trade Cooperation Forum	Leading role	Economy	China-initiated series of ministerial meetings between China and Caribbean countries to enhance economic and trade cooperation. Initiated in 2004; ministerial meetings took place in 2005, 2007 and 2011.	2005
BRICS Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.	Leading role	Multiple	Annual summit and numerous working groups to support cooperation between Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (joined 2010).	2009
Cooperation between China and Central and	Leading role	Economy	Annual summit between China and 16 Central and	2012

Eastern European Countries (17 + 1, formerly 16 + 1)			Eastern European countries. Known initially as 16 + 1, it became 17 + 1 with Greece's entry in 2019.	
World Internet Conference	Leading role	Technology	Annual conference and technology expo hosted by the Cyberspace Administration of China and the People's Government of Zhejiang Province on Internet issues.	2014
China–CELAC Forum	Leading role	Economy	Platform for intergovernmental dialogue between China and member states of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, with triennial ministerial meetings.	2015
Lancang Mekong Cooperation Framework	Leading role	Economy	Cooperative platform initiated by China with Mekong riparian countries (Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam).	2016
NDB New Development Bank	Founding member	Finance	Multilateral development bank to promote infrastructure and sustainable development in the member countries.	2015
AIIB Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank	Leading role	Finance	Multilateral development bank to support infrastructure development in Asia.	2016
AMRO ASEAN+3 Macroeconomic Research Office	Founding member	Economy	A formal IGO which serves as a macroeconomic surveillance monitor of the Chiang Mai Initiative	2016

			Multilateralisation (CMIM, a currency swap arrangement).	
Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation	Leading role	Economy	International political and economic forum hosted by China in support of the Belt Road Initiative launched in 2013 (then known as One Belt, One Road).	2017
South-South Human Rights Forum	Leading role	Human Rights	International forum on "South-South Human Rights Development" organized by the State Council Information Office and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China. Repeated in December 2019.	2017

Sources: Stephen 2020, 5, 6. | *Author's elaboration.*

Annex 2. BRICS Institutions for Cultural Exchange		
Initiatives	Description	Chinese institutions involved
BRICS Civil Society Organizations Forum	Launched in 2015, this forum encourages dialogue between civil society organizations and academia in BRICS nations. It aims to prioritize well-being with a people-centric approach, address global governance challenges through true multilateralism, enhance people-to-people connections, and foster a united human community.	International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (IDCPC), China NGO Network for International Exchanges (CNIE), China Council for BRICS Think Tank Cooperation (CCBTC).
BRICS Young Scientist Forum	Forum targeted at young scientists to build friendships, establish partnerships, advance BRICS Science and Technology Innovation (STI) cooperation, and promote the interconnectedness of society through research and innovation	China's Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST), Xiamen Municipal People's Government, China Science and Technology Exchange Center (CSTEC),

	for inclusive development. So far, there have been eight editions of the forum.	the Torch High Technology Industry Development Center of MOST, Xiamen Bureau of Science and Technology, and Xiamen University.
BRICS Young Innovator Prize	Competition to reward promising young researchers from the BRICS countries for innovative initiatives in the field of low-carbon technologies, biomedicine, artificial intelligence, renewable energy sources, and agriculture which can contribute to the socio-economic development of the five countries. Five editions have been held.	
BRICS Library Alliance	Launched by the National Library of China in 2017, the BRICS Library Alliance fosters collaboration among national libraries, professionals and information institutions across BRICS nations. It facilitates knowledge sharing, resource exchange and expertise through forums, exhibitions, digital library development, ancient book preservation, and best practice exchange.	National Library of China (NLC), Bureau for External Cultural Relations, Ministry of Culture of China.
BRICS Film Festival	Enhance cultural exchanges and mutual understanding among the BRICS countries through films and BRICS-themed film exhibitions.	China Film Administration, Shanghai International Film and TV Festival Center.
BRICS Women's Business Alliance (WBA)	Promote women's entrepreneurship, increase their participation in economic processes and global value chains and expand women's business networks.	China Investment Corporation, BRICS WBA Chinese Chapter
BRICS Women's Innovation Contest	Spotlight successful women-led business practices and initiatives in BRICS nations, acknowledging outstanding female entrepreneurs	China Chamber of International Commerce (CCOIC), BRICS WBA Chinese Chapter.

	across various fields and fostering social welfare and economic development.	
BRICS Women's Leadership Forum	Enhance collaboration among businesswomen in BRICS nations, recognizing exceptional women dedicated to driving social welfare and economic progress across diverse sectors.	China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT) and China Chamber of International Commerce (CCOIC)
BRICS Alliance of Art Museums and Galleries	Enhance inter-museum exchanges and cooperation, show the cultural features of different nationalities and the latest achievements of contemporary arts in the BRICS countries, "tell the story" of the BRICS members, and strengthen people-to-people exchanges.	National Art Museum of China, Tsinghua University, Chinese National Academy of Arts, and Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA), Art Museum of CAFA, Art Museum of Beijing Fine Art Academy, Beijing World Art Museum at the China Millennium Monument, Yan Huang Art Museum, Minsheng Art Museum, Tian Jin Art Museum, Art Museum of Tianjin Academy of Fine Arts, and Times Museum.
BRICS Skills Competition	A contest in three skills including Web Application Development, Machine Learning and Big Data, and Rail Vehicle Technologies.	General of the Department of International Cooperation and Exchanges, Ministry of Education of China, Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security of China, Xiamen Municipal People's Government.

BRICS Academic Forum	Facilitate dialogue among the academic communities of the BRICS countries and propose ideas and solutions on numerous social, environmental and educational issues.	CCBTC, International Department of the Central Committee of the CPC
BRICS High-level Forum on Traditional Medicine	Strengthen exchanges and cooperation with BRICS countries in traditional medicine, combat COVID-19 epidemic, contribute to the development of traditional medicine and protect the life and health of people in all countries.	National Administration of Traditional Chinese Medicine (NATCM), Fujian University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Chinese Academy of Engineering, Zhangzhou Pien Tze Huang Pharmaceutical Co., Ltd.
BRICS Think Tank Forum	Enhance exchange and cooperation of think tanks in BRICS, pursue mutual learning and expand people-to-people exchange and cooperation.	Research Center of the Counsellors' Office of the State Council (COSC) and CAITEC.
BRICS Culture Ministers' Meeting	Strengthen exchanges and interactions in the field of culture under the BRICS framework and enhance friendly relations among the peoples of BRICS countries.	China's Ministry of Culture, National Art Museum of China.
BRICS Sports Ministers' Meeting	A platform for BRICS authorities in the field of sports where they review results of cooperation plans, discuss and make decisions on topics such as competitive sports, the sports industry and international sports affairs.	General Administration of Sports of China
BRICS Games	Advance BRICS sports cooperation, promote traditional sports culture and deepen mutual understanding and friendship among peoples. Football, volleyball, Wushu and Taolu tournaments have been held.	General Administration of Sports of China

Friendship Cities and Local Governments Cooperation Forum	Promote exchanges between friendship cities and cooperation between local governments, making positive contributions to world peace and prosperity and cities' sustainability.	CPAFFC and CIFCA
BRICS Media Forum	Proposed by Xinhua News Agency in 2015 and initiated with mainstream media outlets from BRICS countries, the objective is to expand cooperation in areas such as news reporting, think tank exchanges, information services, personnel training, and digital media.	Xinhua News Agency, Chinese media outlets.
BRICS Youth Camp	Develop innovative approaches to engage young people with BRICS, targeting young experts in the fields of journalism, IT and web design. Three editions have been held.	All China Youth Federation (ACFY).
BRICS Cultural Festival	This festival was celebrated in Xiamen, China, in 2017 and included painting and photo exhibitions, concerts, presentations, and film showings. The aim was to introduce the Chinese public to the cultures of the BRICS countries.	Department of External Cultural Relations of the Ministry of Culture, China's National Opera, Dance Drama Theater, National Ballet of China.

Sources: Websites of BRICS Russia 2020, BRICS India 2021, BRICS China 2022, BRICS-YSF, BRICS South Africa 2023, BRICS WBA, and TV BRICS. | *Author's elaboration.*

Annex 3. The Cultural Dimension in the CCF Plans for 2015-2019, 2019-2021 and 2022-2024			
Dimension	CCF Plan 2015-2019	CCF Plan 2019-2021	CCF Plan 2022-2024
Politics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Exchanges among political parties, local governments and young people. - China's invitation to 1,000 political LAC leaders from CELAC 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continue China-CELAC Young Politicians Forum. - Draft of annual training courses for young cadres in CELAC. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expand contacts at different levels of governance. - Promote exchanges

	<p>member states to visit China in the next 5 years.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Initiate the Forum of Mayors. - Initiate the Forum for Cooperation of Local Governments. - Continue China-LAC Young Politicians Forum. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - China's invitation to 200 members of LAC political parties to visit China in 2019-2021. - Continue Forum of Cooperation between China-LAC Territorial Governments. 	<p>between local governments.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continue China-CELAC Forum for Cooperation among Local Governments.
Science, Technology and Innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Initiate the 1st China-LAC Scientific-Technological Innovation Forum. - Launch China-LAC Scientific & Technological Association. - Promote "China-LAC Young Scientists Exchange Program". 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hold 2nd China-LAC Technological Innovation Forum. - Continue China-LAC Scientific & Technological Association. - Continue Exchange Program between China-LAC Young Scientists. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote exchange programs between young scientists. - Encourage participation in the "Work Program in China for outstanding young scientists from developing countries". - Continue China-CELAC Science, Technology and Innovation Forum.
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote exchanges and research programmes among Chinese and LAC educational institutions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encourage research and development of Sinology and China studies on LAC cultures and thinking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support higher education institutions, research institutes and think tanks to increase

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In 2015-2019, China will provide 6,000 scholarships, 6,000 training positions in China and 400 master's thesis opportunities for CELAC members. - Launch China's 10-year training programme "Bridge to the Future", aimed at training 1,000 young leaders from China and LAC. - Promote incorporation of Chinese/Spanish/English language teaching into local curricula of China and CELAC countries' educational institutions. - Promote opening of CIs and Confucius Classrooms in CELAC countries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Deepen cooperation in academic exchanges. In 2019-2021, China will offer 6,000 government scholarships for CELAC members. - Promote academic collaboration between China and CELAC universities and think tanks. - Continue China-LAC Think Tank Exchange Forum. - Continue "Bridge to the Future" programme to train 1,000 young leaders from China and LAC. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> exchanges among professors and students, especially women. - In 2022-2024, China plans to provide 5,000 scholarships and 3,000 training opportunities in China for CELAC members. - Continue China-LAC Think Tanks Forum. - Continue China-CELAC High Level Academic Forum. - Initiate China-CELAC University Dean Forum Presidents with gender equality perspective. - Continue "Bridge to the Future" training programme. - Hold China-LAC Youth Development Forum. - Encourage CELAC countries
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			<p>to incorporate Chinese language into curricula.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote opening of CIs and Confucius Classrooms.
Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encourage Chinese Initiative "Year of China-LAC Cultural Exchange" in 2016. - Promote exhibition of artistic works in international art festivals and visual art exhibitions in China and the region. - Encourage exchanges in traditional and emerging art forms and culturally creative industries. - Collaboration to protect cultural heritage. - Expand sports exchange, exchange of athletes and establishment of high-performance sports centres. - Promote exchanges between civil groups, academic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continue China-LAC Friendship Forum. - China willing to send young volunteers to the CELAC countries. - Promote exchange of artists in festivals and LAC countries. - Encourage exchanges in traditional cultural expressions and culturally creative industries. - Support right of states in their fight for the restitution of cultural assets. - Promote creation of cultural centres. - Promote cooperation in the field of material and immaterial cultural heritage. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote mutual learning about Chinese and LAC civilisations. - Promote cultural centres in China and CELAC countries. - Support cultural and creative industries. - Promote cooperation in the field of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. - Strengthen cooperation in areas of exhibition, research and museum administration, protection, restoration of cultural patrimonies,

	<p>institutions and think-tanks in China and among CELAC members.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support 5th China-CELAC Forum of Friendship to be held in Hangzhou, China in 2015. - Continue China-Latin America Think-Tanks Forum. - Intensify cooperation between women's organizations and empowerment of women. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote exchanges in the field of museology and museography, joint archaeological exploration, the protection and restoration of cultural property, and restitution of their cultural assets. 	<p>restitution of cultural assets.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote mutual learning between artists. - CELAC to support Beijing's hosting of 2022 Olympic and Winter Paralympic Games. - Support China-LAC Online Tai Chi Competition. - Continue China-LAC Martial Arts Exchange Forum. - Encourage exchanges between sports associations and encourage sports teams in competitions. - Support the pairing of twin provinces/cities. - Build a network of China-LAC twin provinces/cities. - Strengthen entities involved in people-to-
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			<p>people friendship.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continue China-LAC People's Friendship Forum.
Communication and Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intensify dialogue between the information departments of China and CELAC members. - Encourage signing of agreements for broad coverage in radio, television and cinema. - Support collaboration between the China-LAC news media, reciprocal dispatching of correspondents, joint interviews, exchange and training of personnel. - Encourage development of portals and creation of new press capabilities. - Welcome the broadcasting of Chinese radio and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthen cooperation and exchange in the field of press and media. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote collaboration among the media. - Encourage exchanges in radio and television, audiovisual services on the Internet, programme co-production and training of talents, present TV series. - Encourage the screening of cinematographic contributions. - Explore the establishment of a mechanism for China-CELAC to cooperate on Media Outreach Communication. - Hold China-LAC Media Forum.

	<p>television programmes in the LAC region.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encourage cooperation between the publishing industries and the translation and publication of Chinese literary works in the Community and Latin American and Caribbean literature in China. 		
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Sources: China's 2008 and 2016 Policy Papers on LAC. | *Author's elaboration.*

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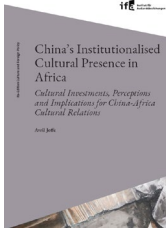
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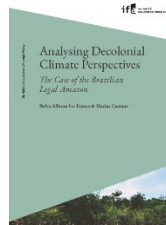


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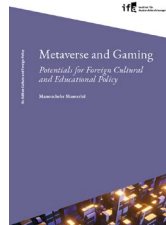
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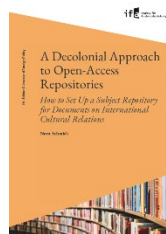
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China's Cultural Diplomacy in a New Era of Multilateralism

The Case of the China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) Forum (CCF)

Cultural diplomacy has been one component of China's foreign policy since its very foundation. However, it is only in recent decades that culture has been wielded as a tool to serve high-reaching goals commensurate with China's rising superpower status and its capacity to contend for global hegemony. This study examines China's recent efforts to enhance cultural exchanges in multilateral and regional platforms. The primary aim is to analyse the rationale, motivations, main initiatives and strategies underpinning China's cultural diplomacy based on a conceptual framework centred on the notions of cultural diplomacy and hegemonic transition. The author begins by presenting the guiding conceptual framework and providing an overview of China's overall cultural diplomacy approach over the last two decades. The analysis then delves into China's engagement in well-established and new multilateral platforms such as UNESCO, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the BRICS group, and regional forums established between China and developing regions. Shifting the focus to Latin America, the research investigates the China-Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) Forum (CCF) as a platform for cultural exchanges and an instrument of China's cultural diplomacy, and systematizes its cultural initiatives, prioritized areas, key actors involved, and strategies. By way of conclusion, the study summarizes the main findings, assesses the trajectory of the CCF in the cultural dimension and proposes recommendations.