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## Cinema as soft power: China's strategic narratives in Brazil

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329202500216>

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 68(2): e016, 2025

### Abstract

This paper examines how China leverages cinema as a soft power tool in Brazil, focusing on film festivals, co-productions, and Confucius Institute initiatives. Adopting a poststructuralist approach, it analyzes the strategic narratives embedded in these efforts and their reception by Brazilian audiences. While initiatives like the Looking China Youth Film Project show promise, challenges persist, including Hollywood's dominance and limited audience reach. The delayed 2017 co-production agreement underscores the complexity of bilateral cultural engagement. By highlighting both the potential and limitations of China's cinematic strategy, the paper contributes to understanding the cultural dimensions of China–Latin America relations.

**Keywords:** Brazil; China; Soft Power; Strategic Narratives; Film Diplomacy; Hollywood.

Received: March 27, 2025

Accepted: July 21, 2025

### Introduction: Lights, Camera, Soft Power: China's Cinematic Diplomacy in Brazil

In an increasingly interconnected world, cultural exchange has become a crucial instrument of statecraft. This paper explores China's use of cinema as a soft power tool in Brazil, examining how film co-productions, distribution strategies, participation in cultural events, and Confucius Institute initiatives contribute to its broader strategy in Latin America. A poststructuralist perspective, which views visual images as political forces that shape both international events and our comprehension of them (Bleiker 2018), informs the analysis of how China leverages its burgeoning film industry to shape perceptions, cultivate cultural ties, and potentially counterbalance the influence of other global powers, particularly the United States, within the specific context

of Brazilian-Chinese relations. This paper argues that while China's cinematic soft power efforts in Brazil have fostered engagement and created opportunities for cultural exchange, their ultimate effectiveness is contingent upon navigating the complexities of the bilateral relationship, addressing cultural nuances, and competing with the established dominance of Hollywood.

Recent events illustrate this strategy. The 14th Beijing International Film Festival (BJIFF) in 2024 featured Brazil as its Guest of Honor, showcasing Brazilian films and fostering direct exchanges between Chinese and Brazilian filmmakers ("14th Beijing International Film Festival opens to boost cultural exchange." 2024). Further solidifying this engagement, bilateral agreements, including the 2017 film co-production treaty and the 2023 television cooperation agreement, have aimed to facilitate deeper industry collaboration (Chen 2024). This framework was strengthened in 2024 by signing two Memoranda of Understanding during the G20 Culture meetings in Salvador, Brazil, designed to promote joint projects, facilitate professional exchanges, and enhance audiovisual education between the two countries. The opening of the 2024 Chinese Film Festival in Rio de Janeiro formalized these agreements, reinforcing China's strategic engagement with Brazil through cinema ("Opening of the China film festival in Brazil." 2024). Partnerships with institutions like the China Film Administration and the China Film Archive underscore a growing institutional commitment to fostering cultural exchanges, co-productions, and knowledge-sharing in film preservation and research ("Opening of the China film festival in Brazil." 2024). This deepening collaboration suggests a deliberate effort by China to expand its cultural influence and strengthen ties through the audiovisual sector, specifically within the Brazilian context. It is important to note that these Chinese initiatives unfold within a Brazilian cultural landscape that has long been influenced by U.S. media and cultural exports, and where U.S. films and shows are very present in the theaters and streaming services.

Despite these strategic efforts, and against the backdrop of established U.S. cultural dominance, China faces significant challenges in achieving its cinematic soft power goals in Brazil. The Brazilian film market's heavy reliance on Hollywood productions, as this paper will demonstrate, poses a substantial obstacle to wider distribution and audience engagement for Chinese films (Guan et al. 2023). Furthermore, the success of China's soft power initiatives depends on navigating the nuances of Brazilian culture and ensuring that Chinese films resonate with local audiences. Despite their potential benefits, the delayed implementation of key agreements also points to the complexities of the bilateral relationship and the need for sustained political will to translate cultural exchange into tangible outcomes.

This paper is structured as follows: the next section establishes the theoretical framework by conceptualizing the use of cinema as soft power, strategic narratives, and how culture can impact global politics. Following this, the paper analyzes Chinese soft power through cinema, examining China's general focus on soft power, its application within the film industry, and its main initiatives. The paper will then analyze the China-Brazil relationship in the audiovisual arena, focusing on recent initiatives and their relevance to China's pursuit of soft power through cinema in Brazil. Finally, the paper will investigate specific initiatives, such as Chinese film festivals in

Brazil, initiatives by Confucius Institutes promoting Chinese film, the Looking China Youth Film Project, and the recently signed China-Brazil cooperation agreements, as case studies, exploring their impact and potential within the complex dynamics of the bilateral relationship.

## Theoretical Framework: Cinema, Soft Power, and Strategic Narratives

Soft power is defined as “the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes by attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment” (Nye 2021, 10). This concept, coined by Joseph Nye over 30 years ago, highlights a country’s capacity to influence others through its culture, political values, and foreign policies, making them appealing rather than imposing them. While the term has evolved and sometimes been distorted (Nye 2006; 2021), its continued centrality in Chinese foreign policy discourse justifies its use in this paper. As Nye (2021, 10) noted, he was “more surprised by the fate of the concept in China,” where leaders recognized that “as China’s hard military and economic power grew, it could frighten its neighbors into balancing coalitions. If it could accompany its rise with an increase in its soft power, China could weaken the incentives for these coalitions” (Nye 2021, 10).

Indeed, soft power has been a prominent term in Chinese foreign policy since the mid-2000s (Li 2019), frequently appearing in analyses of China (Wang 1994; Zhang 2017; Edney et al. 2020b; Mitter 2020) and in speeches by Chinese leaders (Hu 2007; Xi 2014; 2017; 2022). This pursuit aligns with Xi Jinping’s frequently stated goal of “telling well China’s stories and the Party’s stories, making China’s voice heard, and promoting exchanges and mutual learning between civilizations” (The State Council of the People’s Republic of China 2021).

Although several of the initiatives analyzed in this paper share features with cultural diplomacy – understood here as the deliberate use of culture by state actors to foster mutual understanding and influence foreign publics (Zanella et al. 2024) – the choice for the concept of soft power is deliberate. Soft power represents a broader and more flexible capacity to attract and persuade, emerging not only from state-led cultural initiatives but also from non-state actors, such as universities, popular culture, or civil society (Nye 2004; Roselle et al. 2014), and is therefore more suitable for the purposes of this analysis.

However, the concept of soft power is not without its limitations. Scholars have long pointed out that while Nye (2004) suggests that cultural products such as films can influence behavior, his conceptual framework often leaves the mechanisms of causality implicit. For instance, Rowley and Weldes (2016), commenting on Nye’s use of a quote from a Chinese activist who attributed a change in attitude to watching U.S. films, criticize the lack of theoretical and empirical substantiation for such claims. They argue that soft power analyses often assume a linear transmission of influence, overlooking the complexity of cultural reception and interpretation.

To address these concerns, Rowley and Weldes (2016) propose moving beyond the “conduit metaphor,” which treats cultural products as mere vehicles transmitting messages from sender

to receiver. Instead, they suggest adopting the “text metaphor,” which views cultural products as discursive constructions open to multiple interpretations, shaped by production, content, and audience reception. This approach highlights how meaning is not fixed, but constructed through the interaction between text and viewer, and how this construction contributes to broader political understandings, such as the formation of identities, interests, and structures in world politics.

In response to these challenges, this paper adopts the concept of strategic narratives. According to Miskimmon et al. (2013, 3), strategic narratives are “a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors.” Roselle et al. (2014, 71 emphasis in the original) go further, asserting that “Strategic narrative *is* soft power in the 21st century.” The framework of strategic narratives helps specify how soft power operates and under what conditions it is likely to succeed, filling conceptual gaps in Nye’s original formulation. China’s film industry, in this sense, functions as a platform for projecting these strategic narratives to international audiences.

This paper also recognizes that the effectiveness of soft power depends crucially on reception. Attraction is not automatic; it requires that audiences perceive and interpret messages in ways that resonate with their values and identities. As Roselle et al. (2014) emphasize, meaning is constructed in the interaction between narratives and their audiences. This renders the measurement of soft power particularly challenging, since it requires access to empirical data on audience perceptions and responses.

A relevant example is provided by Guan et al. (2023), who conducted an empirical study in Brazil to examine how exposure to films influences perceptions of the United States and China. Using surveys administered during the COVID-19 pandemic, they found that frequent cinema-goers exposed to U.S. films were more likely to express positive views about the U.S., whereas Chinese films had limited reach and impact. Their findings suggest that cultural products do influence international perceptions, but the effectiveness of soft power is strongly mediated by audience familiarity, existing biases, and market presence.

This paper attempts to identify the potential of each initiative discussed to disseminate China’s strategic narratives and contribute to soft power building in Brazil. When possible, specific reception data or indicators are highlighted. However, the limitations of the available evidence and the need for further research on how Brazilian audiences receive and interpret Chinese cultural initiatives are acknowledged.

Finally, this paper aligns with a growing body of scholarship that explores the role of culture in international relations. As Su (2022) notes, even market-driven film industries are deeply shaped by political values, institutional contexts, and diplomatic strategies. In a visual age, as Bleiker (2018) argues, images – including cinematic ones – have political power, shaping not only how we interpret international events, but also how these events are constructed in the first place. Culture, in this sense, is not a peripheral element of global politics, but a constitutive one. It influences the worldviews, behaviors, and political imaginaries of actors across borders (Qin 2018) and therefore deserves closer attention in IR analysis.

## Chinese Soft Power Through Films: A Complex Narrative

Chinese politicians and strategists recognize the importance of cultivating positive perceptions of China while mitigating negative reactions to the country's growing military power and economic influence (Edney et al. 2020a). Soft power has therefore been central to China's pursuit of soft power, shaping international perceptions and projecting a more welcoming image (Edney et al. 2020a, 1). This involves a concerted effort to leverage cultural products, with cinema playing a particularly significant role as a soft power tool.

In February 2019, Wang Xiaohui of China's Central Propaganda Department articulated the country's goal to become a "strong film power" comparable to the United States by 2035 (Davis 2019). He highlighted the need to enhance international influence, noting the significant disparity in film revenue between U.S. films in China (\$2.8 billion) and Chinese films in the U.S. (a few tens of millions) in 2018. To address this, Wang proposed producing at least 100 films annually that generate over \$15 million abroad, focusing on themes related to the "Chinese Dream" and patriotism while ensuring alignment with China's political ideology (Davis 2019).

Wang's speech highlights the Chinese government's recognition of cinema as a strategic tool. This significance is further underscored by the elevation of the Film Bureau to the State Council level, indicating increased government oversight (Kokas 2020a). Wang Wen asserts that "Movies will become important variables during the rise of China's national power," influencing various aspects of society, including soft power (Wang 2021). This perspective aligns with President Xi Jinping's focus on promoting Chinese culture globally and presenting a credible and respectable image of China (Xi 2022).

The Chinese government leverages cinema and other creative industries to promote soft power internationally, recognizing Hollywood's influence in disseminating the American ethos. From the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, film industry reforms revitalized the sector through distribution, production, and exhibition improvements while maintaining state control (Zhou 2015). By 2016, China had the largest number of movie theaters globally, and by 2020, it had become the world's largest film market (Wang 2021). Capitalizing on this market potential, China aims to "tell China's stories well," as stated by Xi Jinping (Xi 2017).

Under Xi's leadership, China has intensified its international propaganda efforts to promote its narrative and counter American influence (Guan et al. 2023). The country's film strategies include leveraging its market power in Hollywood, attracting Hollywood talent for co-productions, and creating Chinese blockbuster films featuring Chinese action heroes and Mandarin-speaking characters.

China's first strategy leverages its influential film market and position in Hollywood. As Hollywood increasingly relies on Chinese investment and box-office revenue, studios tailor films to Chinese audiences and censors. Between 2014 and 2016, Chinese investment in Hollywood reached over \$5 billion across 13 projects (Su 2022). This includes ventures like Oriental DreamWorks (Shambaugh 2013), Wanda's acquisitions of AMC and Legendary Entertainment

(Kokas 2017; Landreth et al. 2016), and Disney's collaboration with Chinese media (Thussu 2017). This financial dependence has fostered self-censorship, with recent Hollywood films notably lacking Chinese villains (Qin and Carlsen 2018; Tager 2020; Kokas 2022; Schwartzel 2022), as seen in films like *Red Dawn* (2012), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Pixels* (2015), and *Doctor Strange* (2016). While Chinese investment peaked in the first half of 2017, financing 25% of Hollywood exports to China (Su 2022), it also drew scrutiny from both Chinese regulators and the U.S. government. Consequently, while potentially expanding China's narrative reach, this market-driven approach faces increasing resistance, as exemplified by the *Mulan* controversy (Kokas 2020b), highlighting the limitations of leveraging economic influence for soft power gains.

China's second strategy focuses on attracting Hollywood talent and resources to create genuinely Chinese stories, moving beyond tokenistic representation (Zhu 2020). This co-production model combines Chinese investment and talent with Hollywood stars, as seen in *The Great Wall* (2016) (the largest Sino-American co-production to date) (Glasby 2021; Huang 2020). While some co-productions have faced criticism, successes like *The Meg* (2018) and *Over the Moon* (2021) demonstrate progress. This approach allows China greater narrative control, though creative compromises are sometimes necessary, and international resonance isn't guaranteed.

China's third strategy involves producing global blockbusters showcasing Chinese action heroes and Mandarin-speaking characters. *The Battle at Lake Changjin* (2021) exemplifies this, portraying China's grandeur and international power (Zhu 2020). While the film achieved a worldwide box office of \$902,548,476, an overwhelming \$899,400,000 of that came from China, accounting for roughly 99.65% of the total revenue, according to Box Office Mojo.<sup>1</sup> This stark contrast highlights the film's primarily domestic appeal. Similar to *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, films like *The Wandering Earth* (2019), *The Eight Hundred* (2020), and *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017) have seen the vast majority of their box office revenue come from China. The nationalistic overtones of these films, particularly *The Battle at Lake Changjin*, have drawn criticism. For instance, both BBC News (Yip 2021) and CNN (He 2021) labeled the film as "Chinese propaganda," with BBC News highlighting its connection to U.S.-China tensions and the perceived pressure to view it as a patriotic duty, and CNN emphasizing that it was "commissioned by the Chinese government." This contrasts with the analysis by Brazilian critic Inácio Araujo in *Folha de São Paulo*, who, while acknowledging the film's ideological nature, also emphasized its value in offering a non-Anglo-Saxon perspective on history and its use of cinematic techniques comparable to Hollywood productions (Araujo 2022a). This difference in reception highlights the complexities of how these films are perceived internationally, with some viewing them as blatant propaganda and others recognizing their cinematic merit and cultural significance. Therefore, the mixed international reception of these nationalistic blockbusters underscores the broader challenges China faces in its film diplomacy efforts.

<sup>1</sup> Available at: <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/title/tt13462900/>. Access: February 14, 2025.

These challenges, demonstrated by the varied reception of its blockbuster films, highlight the complex landscape of China's film diplomacy. Even leveraging Hollywood's influence, as seen in the production of *Mulan*, which Kokas (2020b) argues "exemplifies how Beijing has deputized it to advance China's political interests and national narrative," has generated mixed results and resistance, ultimately hindering soft power goals. Co-productions and Chinese blockbusters provide greater narrative control, potentially advancing soft power and foreign policy objectives. However, international reception remains varied, and their impact on perceptions is subject to debate. Therefore, while China's ability to "tell China's stories well" through cinema is increasingly important, there is still significant potential to enhance its effectiveness in achieving China's soft power objectives. The context of reception and pre-existing perceptions are critical factors, underscoring the need for context-specific studies, such as this analysis of China-Brazil relations.

This paper adopts a poststructuralist perspective, recognizing the political power of language in constructing representations (Weldes 1999; Hansen 2020). A mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data (budgets, box office, investments) and qualitative analysis (films, discourses), will identify and analyze key strategic narratives, particularly within the context of China-Brazil relations and their foreign policy implications. Furthermore, this paper employs a case study approach to analyze the relations between China and Brazil in the area of cinema and how these dynamics, including both cooperation and potential points of friction, can contribute to or hinder the objective of expanding soft power and improving China's image, specifically in Brazil, the focus of the next section.

## China-Brazil Audiovisual Relations: A Work in Progress

Chinese films, TV shows, and music have increasingly resonated with audiences in Latin America, contributing to a more favorable perception of China (Rouvinski 2024). Collaborations between Chinese and Latin American filmmakers have further enhanced cultural exchange (Morales and Menechelli 2025). The burgeoning relationship between China and Brazil in the audiovisual sector exemplifies China's broader soft power strategy in the region. As China seeks to cultivate stronger ties and project a positive image, cultural exchange, with cinema playing a central role, has become increasingly important. The recent flurry of agreements, festivals, and collaborative initiatives underscores the growing significance of this sector in the bilateral relationship.

2024 marked a significant year for China-Brazil audiovisual cooperation, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations. This milestone was celebrated at the 14th Beijing International Film Festival (BJIFF), where Brazil was the Guest of Honor (Chen 2024). The festival showcased four Brazilian films, offering Chinese audiences a glimpse into Brazil's cinematic landscape and fostering valuable cultural exchange (Chen 2024). This reciprocal exchange extends to Brazil, with the annual Chinese Film Festival in Rio de Janeiro and the São Paulo Chinese Film Festival featuring a diverse selection of Chinese films (Chen 2024). These parallel initiatives,

supported by bilateral agreements and partnerships, demonstrate a mutual interest in cinematic experiences and growing collaboration within the film industry (Chen 2024).

This momentum continued with the signing of two Memoranda of Understanding between the Brazilian Ministry of Culture and Chinese counterparts during the G20 Culture meetings in Salvador, Brazil, in November 2024 (Ministério da Cultura do Brasil 2024b). Formalized at the opening of the Chinese Film Festival in Rio de Janeiro, these agreements were highlighted as a new chapter in audiovisual cooperation (Ministério da Cultura do Brasil 2024b). One memorandum, signed with the China Film Administration, aims to promote dialogue and collaboration within the audiovisual sector, focusing on developing cinematic relations, familiarizing professionals with current industry trends and challenges, and creating opportunities for joint projects (Ministério da Cultura do Brasil 2024b). It also emphasizes cultural diversity through the promotion of films representing different perspectives and reinforces values like tolerance and friendship (Ministério da Cultura do Brasil 2024b). The second memorandum, with the China Film Archive, focuses on training and technical exchange, particularly in audiovisual preservation and research, as well as the dissemination of Brazilian and Chinese works (Ministério da Cultura do Brasil 2024b).

These agreements build upon previous collaborations, including the 2017 film co-production agreement and the 2023 television cooperation agreement, which provide a framework for joint ventures and facilitate deeper industry ties (Chen 2024; Ministério da Cultura do Brasil 2024b). As Minister of Culture Margareth Menezes stated, these initiatives represent the “third institutionalization of this cooperation in the audiovisual area,” highlighting the strategic importance Brazil places on this partnership (Ministério da Cultura do Brasil 2024b). The agreements provide for national treatment for co-productions, access to public funding, and recognition as national products in both markets, incentivizing collaboration and potentially increasing the visibility of both Brazilian and Chinese films in their respective countries (Chen 2024).

The “Looking China Youth Film Project,” which brings young Latin American filmmakers to China, further exemplifies this exchange (Ji 2024). Students from universities in Brazil and other Latin American countries participate in this project, creating documentaries exploring various aspects of contemporary China (Ji 2024). These films not only provide insights into China’s development but also foster personal connections and friendships, strengthening cultural understanding (Ji 2024). President Xi Jinping’s encouragement of increased visits from Brazilian friends underscores the importance China places on these people-to-people exchanges (Ji 2024).

While these initiatives demonstrate a clear commitment to strengthening audiovisual ties, the actual impact on China’s soft power in Brazil remains to be seen. As this study will explore next, the dominance of Hollywood films in Brazilian theaters presents a significant challenge. While co-production agreements and film festivals can increase exposure to Chinese cinema, they must compete with the established presence and marketing power of Hollywood. Furthermore, cultural nuances and pre-existing perceptions of China in Brazil will influence how these films are received. The next section, focusing on specific case studies, will delve deeper into these

complexities, examining the reception of Chinese film initiatives in Brazil and their potential impact on shaping perceptions of China.

## Case Study: The Limited Reach of Chinese Cinema in Brazil

Cinema holds potential to enhance China's image in Brazil by fostering cultural understanding and supporting foreign policy goals. However, context is crucial. Data from Guan et al. (2023) reveal the challenges China faces in using cinema as soft power. Their research highlights a significant disparity: Hollywood dominates Brazilian cinemas, while Chinese films are marginalized. Cinema attendance in Brazil is concentrated among wealthier, educated segments (Guan et al. 2023, 1), limiting the potential audience for Chinese films. Additionally, Brazilian moviegoers show a strong preference for foreign films, with many never having watched a national film (Guan et al. 2023). This preference and Hollywood's market saturation create a difficult environment for Chinese movies.

Distribution figures illustrate this imbalance. Between 2009 and 2019, while American, Brazilian, and European films each comprised roughly one-third of releases, American films accounted for 77.58% of ticket sales, compared to 13.87% for Brazilian films and 6.91% for European films (Guan et al. 2023). This demonstrates the overwhelming preference for Hollywood productions among Brazilian audiences.

The limited presence of Chinese films in Brazilian cinemas underscores the difficulty China faces in reaching Brazilian audiences. Guan et al. (2023) point out that Chinese films accounted for a mere 0.73 percent of releases and only 1.08 percent of box office revenue between 2009 and 2019. Even the few successful Chinese films released in Brazil were often Hollywood co-productions, such as *Iron Man 3*, *Transformers: Age of Extinction*<sup>2</sup>, and *Kung Fu Panda 3*. This suggests that Chinese films may need to leverage the popularity of Hollywood to gain wider acceptance in the Brazilian market, a strategy that presents both opportunities and potential compromises in terms of narrative control and cultural messaging.

Addressing these challenges, particularly the issue of biased representation and the limited presence on streaming platforms, underscores the importance of the initiatives analyzed in this paper, which are expected to increase in number and intensity, contributing to a more consolidated China-Brazil rapprochement. This is particularly relevant because, as Guan et al. (2023) demonstrated through an online survey of 908 Brazilian participants, exposure to films significantly shapes positive perceptions of a country. Their study revealed a direct correlation between the prevalence of American films in Brazilian cinemas and favorable views of the U.S.'s political and cultural influence. In contrast, the limited presence of Chinese films hinders China's ability to cultivate

<sup>2</sup> *Iron Man 3* and *Transformers: Age of Extinction* are examples of what Kokas (2017) terms "faux co-productions," or what Su (2017) calls "fake co-productions." These films feature primarily Hollywood storylines, limited Chinese investment, minor roles for Chinese actors, and brief Chinese scenery. *Kung Fu Panda 3*, however, is an example of a genuine U.S.-China co-production.

similar positive perceptions, even though it is Brazil's most important trade partner. Furthermore, Guan et al. (2023) found that while some dimensions of soft power, such as cultural influence, are readily activated through film, others, like military admiration, are more complex and context-dependent. This underscores the need for China to diversify its cinematic offerings and tailor them to resonate with Brazilian audiences, moving beyond potentially polarizing patriotic narratives.

Data from the 2023 Statistical Yearbook of the Brazilian Audiovisual Industry (*Ancine*<sup>3</sup>) further confirms Hollywood's market control. In 2023, all 20 top-grossing films in Brazilian cinemas were American (including one U.S.-Mexico co-production, *Sound of Freedom*). This dominance extends over the past decade (2014-2023), with 16 of the top 20 films being American (including one U.S.-Canada co-production, *Joker*), leaving only four for Brazilian productions. This data underscores the significant challenge not only for Chinese films but also for domestic Brazilian cinema in a market overwhelmingly dominated by Hollywood. Moreover, this market reality directly impacts the potential for Chinese films to gain audience exposure and, crucially, to foster genuine cultural reception among Brazilian viewers.

These findings reinforce the argument that while China invests heavily in film and cultural exchange, its cinematic soft power strategy in Brazil faces significant hurdles. Hollywood's dominance, the limited reach of Chinese films, and Brazilian audience preferences all contribute to this challenge. As Guan et al. (2023, 9) conclude, "American films not only have an advantageous distribution in Brazilian cinemas but also outpace other countries' films in terms of popularity." China, despite its economic influence, has yet to establish a comparable presence in the Brazilian film market.

This data provides essential context for understanding the recent agreements and film festivals. While these initiatives represent positive steps, they must be viewed within the context of Hollywood's established dominance. Overcoming this dominance and fostering genuine interest in Chinese cinema requires sustained effort and cultural understanding. However, mainstream distribution is not the only avenue. Film festivals and exchange initiatives have emerged as vital platforms for showcasing Chinese cinema and fostering cultural exchange. They offer curated selections of Chinese films to audiences, spanning various genres and themes, and often include related events like Q&As with filmmakers, workshops, and cultural discussions (Shao and Du 2024).

The São Paulo Chinese Film Festival<sup>4</sup>, organized by the Confucius Institute of Unesp, is a prime example. Its 9th edition (2024), themed "The farthest, the closest," highlighted deepening Brazil-China ties and celebrated 50 years of Chinese cinematic production. This exemplifies the interaction between different instruments of Chinese soft power. Beyond the Confucius Institute's direct involvement, Chinese economic influence also plays a role. The Chinese Film Festival<sup>5</sup>,

<sup>3</sup> Available at <https://www.gov.br/ancine/pt-br/oca/publicacoes/arquivos.pdf/anoario-estatistico-2023.pdf>. Access: February 1, 2025

<sup>4</sup> More information at: <https://mostracinema.institutoconfucio.com.br/>. Access: February 12, 2025.

<sup>5</sup> More information at: <https://mostradecinemas.com.br/>. Access: February 12, 2025.

promoted by the CPFL Institute, with the support of the Confucius Institute of Unicamp, offered free online and in-person screenings in 2023. In this specific case, the role of Chinese economic power is noteworthy. The CPFL Institute<sup>6</sup>, founded in 2003 and headquartered in Campinas (SP), serves as the social investment platform of the CPFL Energia Group, one of the largest electricity players in Brazil, which has been operating in Brazil since 1912. Notably, in 2017, CPFL Energia had its controlling stake acquired by the Chinese State Grid<sup>7</sup>. These initiatives provide a crucial avenue for Brazilian audiences to engage with Chinese culture through film, potentially filling the gap left by limited mainstream distribution.

The continued relevance of Confucius Institutes in promoting cultural exchange and “building bridges” (Wang 2024) is evident in the recent inauguration of the Confucius Institute at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA).<sup>8</sup> The UFBA CI’s 2023 inauguration, despite global CI closures, particularly in the U.S., and being the first in Brazil since 2019, demonstrates continued interest. In November 2023, the UFBA CI hosted the “Transoceanic Cinematographic Charm: China-Brazil Film and Culture Festival,” aimed at promoting cultural exchange through films, documentaries, and animations (Universidade Federal Da Bahia 2023). This festival, a collaboration between UFBA, Shanghai University, and the Shanghai Film Academy, highlights the organic network structure of CIs, as noted by Zaharna (2014). Zaharna (2014) argues that CIs’ collaborative network, connecting global universities and leveraging diversity, enables their growth and sustainability, unlike traditional cultural institutes.

The recurring nature of these festivals and CI events, combined with the proven reach of initiatives like the Looking China Youth Film Project, which has involved over 1,100 young people from 102 countries (Ji 2024), indicates a demand for Chinese films beyond mainstream releases. These platforms are crucial for introducing diverse Chinese narratives, beyond Hollywood co-productions, showcasing various aspects of Chinese culture and potentially challenging stereotypes. Initiatives like the Looking China Youth Film Project,<sup>9</sup> sponsored by the Huilin Culture Foundation and based at Beijing Normal University (Morales and Menechelli 2025), further enhance this cultural exchange. This project brings young Latin American filmmakers, including Brazilian students, to China to create documentaries about contemporary Chinese life (Ji 2024). These initiatives, according to Morales and Menechelli (2025), constitute “documentary diplomacy,” fostering dialogue and shaping perceptions of China.

The impact of Looking China is evident in the experiences of Brazilian participants like Davi Pina Barros and Letícia Kamiguchi, students from the University of São Paulo (Ji 2024). Barros’ documentary, *The Stone Whisperer*, focuses on a Chinese professor preserving Buddhist cave

<sup>6</sup> More information at: <https://institutocpfl.org.br/quem-somos/>. Access: February 19, 2029.

<sup>7</sup> More information at: <https://www.grupocpfl.com.br/institucional/conheca-gente>. Access: February 19, 2025.

<sup>8</sup> More information at: [https://www.ufba.br/ufba\\_em\\_pauta/ato-celebra-instalacao-do-instituto-confucio-na-ufba](https://www.ufba.br/ufba_em_pauta/ato-celebra-instalacao-do-instituto-confucio-na-ufba). Access: February 13, 2025.

<sup>9</sup> More information at: <https://english.bnu.edu.cn/lifeatbnu/artsculture/signatureculturalevents/lookingchinayouthfilmproject/index.htm>. Access: February 12, 2025.

statues, while Kamiguchi's *The Timeless Village* explores traditional Chinese family culture. These films, created through direct engagement with Chinese communities, offer Brazilian audiences unique insights into aspects of Chinese society often absent from mainstream media. The project's success is underscored by its scale: as of 2024, 1,100 young people from 102 countries, including Brazil, have produced over 1,000 award-winning short films (Ji 2024). The gratitude expressed by Brazilian students and teachers to President Xi Jinping further highlights the program's positive impact (Ji 2024). Additionally, this project exemplifies Zaharna's (2014) concept of organic networks. By inspiring young filmmakers to explore Chinese themes, Looking China cultivates future professionals who can contribute to a more positive image of China.

It's important to note that while these festivals, CI events, and initiatives like Looking China are valuable, their reach is still limited compared to mainstream cinema, dominated as they are by Hollywood productions. However, their increasing visibility and popularity suggest a growing interest in Chinese film that could be further cultivated. As Ji (2024) reports, Chinese films like *Endless Journey* and *YOLO* have recently been screened at Chinese film festivals across Latin America, drawing enthusiastic audiences. Actor Zhang Yi, who starred in *Endless Journey*, noted the emotional connection between China and Brazil despite the geographical distance, emphasizing the importance of sharing Chinese stories with the world (Ji 2024).

Recent China-Brazil audiovisual agreements, discussed earlier, may further boost these festivals and cultural exchange initiatives. The Memoranda of Understanding from the G20 Culture meetings in Salvador, emphasizing "joint projects, professional exchanges, and enhanced audiovisual education" (Ministério da Cultura do Brasil 2024b), could directly benefit these events by facilitating filmmaker participation, workshops, and providing resources. Similarly, agreements with the China Film Administration and the China Film Archive, focused on "developing cinematic relations" and "preservation and research of the audiovisual" (Ministério da Cultura do Brasil 2024b), could lead to greater collaboration through archival sharing, co-curated selections, and joint screenings. The agreements' emphasis on "promoting films that represent different perspectives" (Ministério da Cultura do Brasil 2024b) and the Beijing-Rio film festival cooperation (Ji 2024) demonstrate a commitment to showcasing diverse Chinese voices and fostering exchange.

The 2017 Brazil-China Film Co-production Agreement highlights the complexities of their evolving relationship. Despite being signed in 2017, the agreement remains unenforced in Brazil, currently pending review by the Committee on Foreign Relations and National Defense (CREDN), according to the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Concórdia Platform.<sup>10</sup> Notably, the Executive branch only presented the agreement to the Brazilian Legislature on July 29, 2024, nearly seven years after its initial signing.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Available at: <https://concordia.itamaraty.gov.br/detalhamento-acordo/12024?tipoPesquisa=2&TituloAcordo=coprodu%C3%A7%C3%A3o%20cinema&TipoAcordo=BL,TL,ML>. Access: February 12, 2025.

<sup>11</sup> Available at: <https://www.camara.leg.br/proposicoesWeb/fichadetramitacao?idProposicao=2450432>. Access: February 12, 2025.

Minister Margareth Menezes, in a 2024 Explanatory Statement to the Brazilian National Congress,<sup>12</sup> revealed that initial discussions regarding the Brazil-China Film Co-production Agreement began in 2007. She emphasized the significant potential of the Chinese film market, noting its rapid growth and status as the world's largest in terms of cinema screens since 2016. However, she also highlighted the restrictive screen quotas that pose barriers to foreign films. According to Menezes, co-productions offer a strategic solution, allowing films to be treated as domestic products in both countries, a strategy already utilized by sixteen nations, including the UK, France, and Canada. This statement highlights the strategic importance of the agreement for accessing the lucrative Chinese film market.

According to the Minister, the agreement mirrors existing Brazil-China instruments, aiming to enhance film industry collaboration. It facilitates co-production and allows for periodic reassessments to ensure mutual benefits. Notably, it incurs no state financial burdens and establishes a framework for private-sector agreements. Given China's competitive market, the agreement offers a strategic opportunity to attract Chinese investment into Brazilian audiovisual projects.

The agreement's delayed implementation may be attributed to Brazil's recent political context. During Michel Temer's administration (2016-2018), the Ministry of Culture was merged with the Ministry of Education, only to be reinstated following public protests. In 2019, during Jair Bolsonaro's first year (2019-2022), it was again dissolved and then re-established at the start of Lula's administration in 2023 (Lisboa 2022).

The Ministry of Culture's restructuring and renewed emphasis on cultural initiatives have spurred increased audiovisual cooperation with China. This was evident in Executive Secretary Márcio Tavares' visit to China in June 2024 (Ministério da Cultura do Brasil 2024a). During a meeting with Mao Yu, Deputy Chief Executive of the China Film Administration, they discussed closer collaboration between their audiovisual bodies. Tavares assessed the potential of this partnership, stating, "This is a promising partnership in the audiovisual sector, which demonstrates the potential for cultural and economic exchange between Brazil and China, strengthening ties between the two countries" (Ministério da Cultura do Brasil 2024a). Mao Yu outlined three key areas for cooperation: implementing co-production agreements, increasing filmmaker and distributor participation in film festivals and markets, and fostering cooperation between festivals (Ministério da Cultura do Brasil 2024a). Notably, these are some of the key areas highlighted in this paper, reinforcing the importance of co-production agreements and film festivals in fostering China-Brazil cultural exchange.

Despite these promising areas of cooperation, challenges persist. As Araujo (2022b) points out in her analysis of Netflix, issues such as the homogenization of "Asia," an emphasis on the "imperial past," and a lack of genre segmentation can obstruct a true understanding of contemporary Chinese society and culture, contributing to a biased representation of China. It is also important to consider the growing importance of streaming platforms for film consumption in Brazil. While

<sup>12</sup> Available at: <https://www.camara.leg.br/proposicoesWeb/fichadetramitacao?idProposicao=2450432>. Access: February 12, 2025.

precise viewership data for Chinese films on these platforms is limited, a general observation suggests they have less prominence than Hollywood productions, and that the available films often perpetuate the problems outlined by Araujo. This is why film festivals, like the ones discussed in this paper, potentially have the potential to reshape these perceptions, avoiding clichés and significantly influencing how Brazilian audiences interpret Chinese films. Further research into the algorithmic curation and reception of Chinese films on streaming platforms is needed to fully understand this evolving landscape.

These challenges, including the need to overcome biased perceptions and increase access to diverse Chinese films, highlight the importance of agreements like the 2017 co-production treaty, which, although promising, exemplifies the complexities of this relationship. As Minister Menezes noted in her 2024 Explanatory Statement to the Brazilian National Congress,<sup>13</sup> these agreements are vital for navigating Chinese market quotas. However, the seven-year legislative delay suggests a lack of political prioritization, possibly linked to the Ministry of Culture's turbulent recent history. The Lula administration's renewed cultural focus signals a potential shift, but tangible progress remains to be seen. Success depends on sustained commitment to cultural exchange and addressing market and cultural challenges.

Ultimately, as Guan et al. (2023) argue, China's soft power hinges on influencing popular culture and overcoming stereotypes, which requires more than economic investment. The initiatives discussed – festivals, CIs, co-productions, and youth projects – represent a multifaceted approach. Their success, however, depends on sustained commitment to cultural exchange, diverse narratives, and actively challenging stereotypes. Only then can cinema effectively bridge cultures and foster a balanced understanding of China in Brazil.

## Conclusion: Navigating the Complexities of Cinematic Soft Power: China and Brazil

This paper has explored the complex dynamics of China's cinematic soft power, drawing on the concept of strategic narratives to understand its implications for the country's strategy in Brazil. While mainstream distribution of Chinese films remains limited due to the entrenched dominance of Hollywood and the existing preferences of Brazilian audiences, film festivals and initiatives like the Looking China Youth Film Project have emerged as crucial platforms for fostering cultural exchange and introducing Brazilian audiences to diverse narratives from China. These initiatives, while valuable, face challenges within the Brazilian film landscape. This study shows the dominance of Hollywood in Brazilian cinemas, as evidenced by ANCINE data revealing the overwhelming presence of American films in the top-grossing lists, creating a significant barrier for Chinese productions. Even Brazilian films struggle to gain traction, highlighting the entrenched nature of

<sup>13</sup> Available at: <https://www.camara.leg.br/proposicoesWeb/fichadetramitacao?idProposicao=2450432>. Access: February 12, 2025.

Hollywood's influence. Furthermore, as Guan et al. (2023) point out, the limited reach of Chinese films in regular distribution underscores the difficulty China faces in reaching Brazilian audiences through traditional channels. This creates a complex scenario where economic partnerships and trade relations, even if strong, do not translate automatically into cultural influence. The Brazilian audience, accustomed to Hollywood productions, requires a more deliberate engagement strategy to cultivate interest in Chinese cinema.

Despite these challenges, there are promising developments. The growing popularity of Chinese film festivals in Brazil, alongside projects like Looking China and the active involvement of Confucius Institutes, suggests a latent interest in Chinese cinema among certain segments of the population. These festivals, supported by recent bilateral agreements focused on cultural exchange and audiovisual cooperation (Gov.br 2024), offer a vital space for showcasing a wider range of Chinese cinematic narratives. When analyzed through the lens of strategic narratives, these initiatives aim not only to disseminate content but also to shape perceptions and foster identification with Chinese values and worldviews. The Looking China project, highlighted by Ji (2024) and analyzed by Morales and Menechelli (2025), exemplifies this potential. By bringing young Latin American filmmakers to China, this initiative fosters direct engagement with Chinese culture and provides opportunities for emerging filmmakers to share their perspectives. The films created by Brazilian participants, such as Davi Pina Barros' *The Stone Whisperer* and Letícia Kamiguchi's *The Timeless Village*, demonstrate the power of cultural exchange through documentary filmmaking. Moreover, as Guan et al. (2023) demonstrated, exposure to films significantly shapes positive perceptions of a country, underscoring the potential of these initiatives to influence Brazilian views of China. Yet, as recent theoretical discussions remind us, attraction is not automatic: it depends on how narratives are received, interpreted, and recontextualized by local audiences. These festivals and projects are thus not only about showcasing films but about building bridges, promoting dialogue, and challenging preconceived notions.

The delayed 2017 co-production agreement exemplifies the complexities underlying this evolving relationship. As Minister Menezes noted, these agreements are crucial for navigating Chinese market quotas, allowing co-productions to be treated as domestic products. However, the seven-year legislative delay suggests a lack of political prioritization, perhaps linked to the Ministry of Culture's turbulent recent history. This underscores the importance of political will and sustained commitment to ensure agreements translate into tangible action. The delay also raises questions about Brazil's own cultural policy priorities. The effective implementation of such agreements requires a coherent national strategy that recognizes the value of international cultural exchange.

This lack of political prioritization, combined with other systemic issues, impacts the reception of Chinese films in Brazil – a decisive factor for soft power effectiveness. Furthermore, the influence of “Western mediation,” particularly through dominant media platforms, shapes perceptions of China in Brazil, as Araujo (2022b) argues. Araujo's (2022b) research on “algorithmic orientalism” on Netflix reveals how seemingly neutral platforms perpetuate biased representations, reinforcing

stereotypes and limiting diverse narratives. This raises important questions about the curation and promotion of Chinese films, even within film festivals. Are these films presented in ways that challenge existing biases, or do they inadvertently reinforce them through limited genre selection or an emphasis on traditional narratives? This also highlights the need for a more nuanced approach to streaming platforms, which, despite their challenges, offer a potential avenue for reaching wider audiences if curated effectively. Promoting diversity and resisting dominant discursive patterns remains a central challenge in the digital age.

In line with the theoretical discussion of this paper, this study reaffirms that soft power's effectiveness depends not only on cultural dissemination, but also – crucially – on audience reception and the construction of shared narratives. Future research should explore this reception more systematically, including comparative regional studies and the cultural negotiation of Chinese-Hollywood co-productions. Additionally, research into the impact of emerging technologies, such as virtual reality and augmented reality, on cinematic cultural exchange would be valuable. These technologies offer new possibilities for immersive storytelling and cultural engagement.

Ultimately, the success of China's cultural efforts in Brazil – and their capacity to translate into meaningful soft power – depends not only on formal agreements, but also on a nuanced understanding of local culture and media environments. It requires a sustained commitment to fostering genuine cultural exchange, promoting diverse narratives, and actively challenging existing stereotypes. Only then can cinema truly serve as a bridge between cultures and contribute to a more balanced and nuanced understanding of China in Brazil. This necessitates a long-term strategy that goes beyond short-term projects and events. It requires building sustainable partnerships, fostering cultural literacy, and promoting mutual respect. The goal is not just to showcase Chinese films, but to create a space for meaningful dialogue and understanding between the two cultures.

## Acknowledgements

This study was partly financed by the Coordination for the Advancement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), a foundation under the Ministry of Education of Brazil, through a PhD scholarship.

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**Cinema as soft power: China's strategic narratives in Brazil**

*Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional*

vol. 68, no. 2, e016, 2025

Centro de Estudos Globais da Universidade de Brasília,

**ISSN:** 0034-7329

**ISSN-E:** 1983-3121

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329202500216>