

# REFLECTING ON THE CONSTRUCTION OF CHINA'S IMAGE IN LATIN AMERICA

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**Abstract:** China's international image is not monolithic, it varies between developed and developing countries, which forms the background for China to build its national image. As a part of China's international image, China's image in Latin America has undergone a transformation from a "revolutionary ideological exporter" to a "cooperative partner". Throughout this transformation, China has been seen as "the business partner of Latin America", "the exemplar of an alternative development model", and "the builder of a multipolar world order". From the perspective of Latin Americans, China represents both an "opportunity" and a "risk". On one hand, "China's rise raises anxieties in Latin America due to its impact on the environment, migration, and demand for natural resources". On the other hand, "the sustainability of China's development in Latin America and its modes of overseas expansion influence Latin America's choices regarding development paths". Additionally, "China's presence in Latin America has prompted Latin Americans to reflect on their local governments and governance capabilities". The misunderstandings arising from cross-cultural differences and imperfections in bilateral operations need to be resolved by strengthening China's "soft power" construction within the framework of the "united front".

**Keywords:** China, Latin America, image change, soft power, image construction

## 1. HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF CHINA-LATIN AMERICA RELATIONS: FROM REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLOGY TO COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT

The ties between China and the Latin American can be traced back to the earliest globalized route in the latter half of the 16th century, the "Silver Road", connecting Manila, Philippines, to Acapulco, Mexico (Gordon & Morales, 2017). However, this route was interrupted in the 19th century due to the decline of Spain and the Qing Empire, as well as Mexico's independence in 1815. Nevertheless, this connection was replaced by the "coolie" trade in the mid-19th century: the Qing Dynasty was forced to establish formal relations with Latin American countries due to the suffering of the "coolies" trade (Ratliff, 2012, p. 32). From the fall of the Qing Dynasty, through the transition between old and new regimes, to the reform and opening-up of new China in the 1970s, the relationship between China and Latin America has undergone continuous adjustments. However, the nearly 200 years of domestic turmoil and external challenges deeply influenced China's international relations and image, including its ties with Latin America.

Since the foundation of the People's Republic of China, the relationship between China and Latin America has generally gone through three stages: the stage of people-to-people diplomacy, the stage of revolutionary experience sharing, and the stage of cooperative development (Ratliff, 2012, p. 33). The 1950s were the stage of people-to-people diplomacy. Due to the international Cold War context at the time, there were no formal diplomatic relations between China and most Latin American countries (except Cuba), and the activities between the two sides were mostly carried out by civil society actors. Unofficial interactions were frequent, and a large number of Chinese and Latin American literary works and leaders' works were translated and published into each other's country. Notably, Cuba chose to follow "The Chinese Path". The 1960s to the early 1970s were known as the so-called "revolutionary experience sharing stage", which was under the circumstance of the tension in China-Soviet relations. During this period, China sought to share its revolutionary experiences (guerrilla warfare) with Latin America to oppose "American imperialism". However, relations between China and Latin American countries became tense in the mid-1960s as Cuba turned to the Soviet Union and the guerrilla leader Che Guevara (1967) was killed in Bolivia. In the 1970s, China-Latin America relations entered a stage of establishing diplomatic ties and cooperative development, driven by significant events such as the Kuomintang (KMT) government withdrawing from the United Nations in 1971, the establishment of diplomatic relations between China

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and the United States in 1972, and China's reform and opening up in 1978. Since the beginning of the new century (2000), China-Latin America relations have entered a period of rapid development: In 2008, the release of the *"China's Policy Paper on Latin America and the Caribbean"* elevated China-Latin America relations to a "strategic level"; in January 2014, the Summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) adopted the *"Special Statement on the Establishment of a China-CELAC Forum"*, laying the foundation for the comprehensive cooperation process between China and Latin America; in 2015, China and Latin America officially launched the China-CELAC Forum. Therefore, the modern and contemporary development history of China, the development history of China-Latin America relations, and the cultural differences between two sides serve as key references for Latin America to interpret China-Latin America cooperation.

## 2. THE FRAGMENTED NATIONAL IMAGE OF CHINA

China's national image in the international community is not monolithic, but varies according to the development level and cultural differences of each region. Pew Research Center (2013) published a report titled *"America's Global Image Remains More Positive than China's"*. The report noted that from 2007 and 2013, regarding Latin American countries (including Argentina, Mexico, Chile, Venezuela, Brazil, Bolivia, and El Salvador), China enjoyed a relatively positive image in Latin America, especially in countries that export goods to China. For instance, in 2013, 71% of Venezuelans, 65% of Brazilians, and 62% of Chileans held a favorable view of China. It also pointed out that "attitudes toward China vary from region to region... with an average of 72% of Africans and 58% of Latin Americans have a positive view of China" (Pew Research Center, 2013, p.26). In 2019, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Pew Research Center conducted a report regarding China's economic development impact on 17 countries (both developed and developing countries) (Silver et al., 2019). The report showed that among the three major countries in Latin America, which are Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, the proportion of people who viewed that "China's growing economy is a bad thing" was 24%, 25%, and 28% respectively; people who viewed "China's growing economy is a good thing" were 64%, 55%, and 54% respectively; people who viewed that "investment from China is a bad thing" are 30%, 29%, and 47% respectively, viewed that "investment from China is a good thing" are 91%, 59%, and 43% respectively; people who believed that China had a substantial impact on domestic economies are 61%, 60%, and 61%. Between 2014 and 2019, countries whose economic growth benefited from China showed notable increases in positive perceptions: Mexico increased by 26 percentage points (from 38% to 64%), Brazil increased by 16 percentage points (from 39% to 55%), and Argentina increased by 13 percentage points (from 42% to 54%). At the same time, people in many countries believe that "maintaining bilateral economic relations with both China (66%) and the United States (64%) is good, but they believe that China's economic influence (48%) is more positive than the United States (42%); people in Mexico (76%), Argentina (66%) and Brazil (58%) are optimistic about their country's ties with China. In addition, there is a split in the survey on "China's image" in 34 countries (both developed and developing countries): Western Europe generally holds a negative view (Spain 53%, Sweden 70%); Central and Eastern Europe has a split view (positive in Bulgaria, Poland, and Lithuania; negative in the Czech Republic and Slovakia); the United States and Canada exhibited negative perceptions; neighbors of Asia and Australia viewed China unfavorably (South Korea 63%, Australia 57%, Philippines 54%); Russia (71%) and Ukraine (57%) displayed positive perception; the Middle East, Latin America (Brazil 51%, Mexico 50%, Argentina 47%) and Sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria is as high as 70%) generally held favorable views. Overall, young people are more likely to hold a positive view than the older generation, and developing countries are more likely to hold a positive view than developed countries.

It is clear from the Pew Research report that China's international image presents the following characteristics: In general, developing countries tend to have a more favorable view of China than developed countries (e.g., Europe and North America). Regions such as the Middle East, Latin America, and Sub-Saharan Africa predominantly hold positive attitudes toward China.

## 3. THE CHANGING IMAGE OF CHINA IN LATIN AMERICA

China's image in Latin America undergone changes over time. As the heirs of Western colonial culture, Latin America also inherited certain Western stereotypes about China—the knowledge custodian in the 18th century, the so-called "Yellow Peril" in the 19th century, the so-called "Red Peril" in the 20th century, an ancient thousand-year-old martial arts master, the holder of new Eastern knowledge, the threat to the Western economy and the creator of unemployment (Lee, 2006, p. 381). Nevertheless, due to the region's unique characteristics,

Latin America has not blindly followed Western views.

With the cooperation between the People's Republic of China and Latin America, China has gained a new image in Latin America. Mexican scholar Cristian Tapia Muro identified three findings through her analysis of content in two major Colombian media (2008–2010). First, Colombians are not only interested in bilateral relations with China, but also in China's capabilities, values and vast economic scale as a global actor. "China represents a model of non-enlightenment modernity" and its achievements challenge Western universal values, especially in terms of human rights and democracy. Secondly, Colombian media reflects two dominant perspectives on China: either as a positive business partner or a conflict maker in the global context. Finally, compared with the rise of Japan, China is seen as a threat to the United States (Muro, 2016, p. 67). Argentine scholar Mariano Mosquera (2019) conducted a discourse analysis of annual report "*Overview of International Integration in Latin America and the Caribbean*" (PII, 1998-2018) by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), pointing out that China's presence in Latin America evolves over time and is perceived as both an opportunity and a threat. Specifically, China's image in Latin American economic discourse embodies such significant characteristics: from 1998 to 2001, the primary discourse framework described China as a problem and a threat; since 2002, the discourse framework shift to the focus on opportunities brought by China (Mosquera, 2019, pp.137-157).

Raúl Bernal-Meza (2016), a Chilean international relations professor, analyzed the image of China in Latin American foreign policy and identified China's three images: 1) a business partner (although the expressions may be different, the perception of risk dominates); 2) A representation of an alternative model of national economic and social development and modernization; 3) a builder of one pole in a new non-hegemonic multipolar world order (p. 75). In general, Latin Americans view China's demands for Latin America are based on two considerations: in terms of geopolitical interests, in addition to maintaining its own national narrative (maintaining the "one China" principle), China strives to build an alternative world order independent from Western-led order; in terms of geo-economics, China aims to maintain the sustainable development of society and economy.

#### 4. REFLECTION ON CHINA'S IMAGE IN LATIN AMERICA

China's image in Latin America manifests both positive and negative aspects. The positive aspects dominate, manifesting contributions to local economic and social development, industrial construction, employment promotion, and environmental improvements (Ray et al., 2015). However, there are also negative images that deserve reflection, these negative images may hinder China-Latin America cooperation. Colombian scholar Ospina Estupinan (2017) selected five mainstream newspapers in five Latin American countries (Colombia, Peru, Mexico, El Salvador, and Dominican Republic) to analyze China's image reported in 2014. According to the research findings, at the economic level, China's investments in Latin America have brought opportunities but also impacted local industries with similar products; China pays little attention to environmental issues; China has become a strong local competitor due to its cheap labor and production (Ospina Estupinan, 2017, pp. 11-12). At the political level, China's proximity to Latin America by "BRICS" and "South-South Cooperation" is suspected of forming an alliance, particularly as China's disputes with neighboring countries (like Japan) have negatively impacted its image; China's military development cause the fear of subverting the world order (Ospina Estupinan, 2017, pp. 11-12). Although this study is rough, it generally outlines the reasons for China's negative image.

In 2015, Armoni and Velásquez (2015) analyzed the content and comments on Facebook of mainstream media in five Latin American countries (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru) to study the negative image of China. This research listed and evaluated the following negative aspects. In terms of product quality, Latin Americans perceive Chinese products as unsafe and unreliable, though paradoxically "criticize while consuming" the products, which significantly shapes their image of China. In terms of trade, though lacking real experience, Latin Americans view China-Latin America trade as unequal, unjust, or even illegal and abusive, and the media, government officials, and small and medium-sized enterprises often hold this critical view. In terms of culture, negative images arise from cultural differences and stereotypes (such as non-standard Spanish pronunciation, hygiene standards, consumption of dog meat, animal abuse). In terms of development, negative images arise from anxiety about China's development (such as population growth, environmental impact, and China's unlimited demand for natural resources) and the lack of knowledge about "socialist market economy" model (as market economy is a capitalist product in common sense). In terms of international relations, Latin Americans had concerns over dominance of China's economy, the threat of Chinese immigration, and the China's reconstruction of the international order, along with the belief that China did not provide adequate welfare for its citizens and damages the natural environment. In terms of Latin America's self-reflection, China's presence reflects Latin

America's local issues and contradictions, prompting Latin Americans to reflect on themselves, questioning capacities of local governments and state machinery to protect citizens' interests against China's substantial influence. In general, the lists of China's negative images proposed by Armoni and Velásquez (2015) reflect three main points: 1) China's rise causes anxiety among Latin Americans due to its environment impacts, immigration and natural resources demands; 2) China's involvement in Latin America has become a reference for Latin Americans to reflect deeply on their development, eliciting questions about sustainable development, respect for local laws, and economic growth. The attention paid to China's development and overseas expansion has continuously shaped Latin America's choices of development paths; 3) China's presence in Latin America has prompted Latin Americans to reflect on local governance capabilities (p. 141).

The analysis conducted by Armony and Velásquez is representative, reflecting the deficiencies and flaws in China-Latin America interactions. Real cases support this, for example, in 2018, the civil society of five countries, including Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru, required Chinese companies (petrochemical and mining groups) to: 1) incorporate human rights principles into their development strategies in Latin America; 2) monitor human rights conditions during project cycles; 3) adopt fair and corrective measures for victims; 4) abandon projects that violate national and international laws; 5) comply with the International Labor Organization (ILO) conventions (CICDHA, 2018, p. 28).

To summarize reasons of China's negative images: On the one hand, information asymmetry prevents sufficient communication and mutual understanding. On the other hand, "when in Rome, do as the Romans do". Based on present progress, China needs to optimize its presence in Latin America to promote the upgrading of Latin America's industrial structure, such as adapting to local customs and rules. As interaction and learning between Latin America and China have led to calls for a "China-Latin America Relations 2.0" (Winter, 2019), it's essential to improve and upgrade the form and content of China-Latin America cooperation.

## 5. RECONSTRUCTING THE IMAGE: THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL OPPORTUNITY OF LANDING IN LATIN AMERICA

Latin America is a region rich in critical consciousness, primarily derived from reflections on its colonial history and modernization process. Since the discovery of the Americas, Latin America has experienced two phases of modernity impacts. The first modernity was associated with the emergence of 16th century's world system that dominated by the Iberian Peninsula. The second modernity was associated with the Industrial Revolution and the Enlightenment in the 18th century, during which Britain replaced Spain as the global hegemon until 1945, controlling the Western European and world history, then followed by the presence of U.S. influence in Latin America (Blanco, 2009, p. 120). The colonial-driven modernization patterns deconstructed Latin American culture through economic and political control, restructuring the collective social memory of Latin America. According to Zhu (2016), "based on this vague identity, Latin American social development has deviated from Latin America's own reality, perpetually exploring under the guidance of foreign ideologies: from Romanticism, Positivism, Developmentalism, Marxism, Neoliberalism, to left-wing and even far-left ideologies" (p. 54). According to Latin American scholars, the disconnect between foreign development ideologies and local social realities, along with the complex social relations caused by colonialism, became the main impediments to Latin America's development.

In this context, the development path of Latin America was described by Mexican philosopher Leopoldo Zea (1976) as "'the Utopia of the new millennium', a future and aspiration disconnected from the past and reality. The realization of this future relies on pure aspiration, an aspiration without the support of reality" (p. 22). The historical social reality and thought in Latin America has become the primary materials and symbolic references for Latin American intellectuals to reflect on Latin American society, and the construction logic of history and social reality is an important theme of reflection. Development and dependence, modernity and coloniality, southern epistemology, resistance and liberation, world system theory, peripheral realism (*realismo periférico*), and peripheral thinking (*pensamiento periférico*) are ideological and theoretical tools commonly used by intellectuals. These ideas and theories are tools aimed at building a decolonized, sustainable and liberal Latin America. The cognition and national consciousness of Latin America exhibit distinctively critical, decolonizing, ethical, and utopian characteristics. Therefore, from a historical perspective, especially after World War II, the tortuous modernization path and the heavy colonial legacy have made Latin America both hopeful and vigilant about external forces attempting to land in the region, which exactly creates opportunities for developing China-Latin American relations.

## 6. RECONSTRUCTING IMAGE: BUILDING CHINA'S SOFT POWER IN THE NEW ERA

At a time when peace and development have become the main global themes, the construction of China's image in Latin America must rely on the development of "soft power". This involves two aspects, on the one hand, we must pay attention to the interests of Latin America, enhancing the study of the region's intellectual history, cultural history, and development theories to fully understand the national consciousness and collective imagination of Latin America. On the other hand, strengthening the dissemination of "soft power" within the framework of the "united front". Firstly, as analyzed above, Latin America's main concerns include whether China will continue the cooperative path between Western colonizers and Latin America, China's own development problems, the impact of China's development on the world and Latin America, and whether China will respect Latin American culture. Overcoming these issues must involve implementing President Xi Jinping's concept of a "A Global Community of Shared Future", starting from a "common people's methodology", deepening research into Latin American intellectual history in social, political, economic, and cultural fields, enhancing the study of local languages (language is a slice of life experience, one must grasp the local language to understand reality), promoting cultural exchanges, truly understanding Latin America, and truly achieving intercultural communication between China and Latin America. It's not advisable to vaguely speculate on Latin America's history and current reality based on fragmented abstract concepts and materials have been passed on several times. Secondly, it is clear that the external "soft power" dissemination should not be only confined to Joseph Nye's (2004) three resources of culture, political values, and foreign policies (p. 11). Instead, it should be revised according to the realities of China and the world, and its connotation should be expanded (covering non-coercive means in all fields). The external dissemination of "soft power" is not just the action of individuals, groups, or organizations, nor is it limited to cultural institutions and news media. It is a complex systematic project under the leadership of the Party, closely linked with the national "united front" work. The dissemination of "soft power" should not only involve ordinary people but also political and economic elites, opinion leaders, overseas Chinese communities, overseas student organizations, think tanks, news media, etc., covering fields of politics, business, finance, culture, media, education, and so on, which are all important "venues". The dissemination of "soft power" abroad aims not only to change the world's narratives that are unfavorable to China, but also to reconstruct the world's narrative about China.

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