

CHINESE CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: FROM BRICS ALLIANCE OF MUSEUM TO CURITIBA LOCAL AGENDA

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ABSTRACT: The main purpose of this paper is to analyse how China is present in Brazilian society by its arts and cultural diplomacy since BRICS Museums Alliance signed in 2018. Thereby, many Chinese artistic exhibitions and other cultural and visibility events have been happening in Brazilian spaces and public museums. Therefore, by problematizing arts as a tool of foreign policy interests, we sought to analyze the content of these exhibitions to identify current values of Chinese cultural representation, especially in the City of Curitiba that demonstrated significant involvement with China.

Keywords: Chinese Art; Curitiba; Diplomacy.

DIPLOMACIA CULTURAL CHINESA: DA ALIANÇA DE MUSEU DO BRICS À AGENDA LOCAL DE CURITIBA

RESUMO: O principal tema deste artigo é analisar como a China estaria presente na sociedade brasileira por meio de sua arte e sua diplomacia cultural a partir da assinatura da Aliança de Museus do BRICS. Desde então, muitas exposições artísticas chinesas e outros eventos culturais e de visibilidade ocorreram em espaços e museus públicos brasileiros. Portanto, para problematizar as artes enquanto ferramenta de interesses da política externa, decidiu-se por analisar o conteúdo dessas exposições para identificar valores correntes da representação cultural chinesa, especialmente na Cidade de Curitiba que demonstrou envolvimento significativo com a China.

Palavras-chave: Arte chinesa; Curitiba; Diplomacia.

RESUMEN: El tema principal de este artículo es analizar cómo China puede estar presente en la sociedad brasileña a través de su diplomacia artística y cultural después de la firma de la Alianza del Museo BRICS. Desde entonces, muchas exposiciones artísticas chinas y otros eventos culturales y de visibilidad han tenido lugar en espacios públicos y museos brasileños. Por lo tanto, para problemas como las artes al utilizar intereses de política exterior, selecciónelos analizando el contenido de estas exposiciones para identificar valores de variaciones en la representación cultural china, especialmente en la ciudad de Curitiba, que ha mostrado una participación significativa con China.

Palabras clave: Arte china; Curitiba; Diplomacia.

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INTRODUCTION

In April 2018, Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) established the BRICS Alliance of Museum (AM-BRICS). By the initial theme *Uniqueness and Convergence* (April 12-22, 2018), the collective exhibition initiative held in Beijing (China) and it sought to bring together and understand the civilizations present and represented by the five member States. The institutions represented there were the National Museum of Fine Arts (MNBA, Brazil), the State Museum of Oriental Art (Russia), the National Gallery of Modern Art (India), the National Museum of Art of China (NAMOC) and the Iziko Museum (South Africa). According to its content presentation:

This exhibition is an important foreign exchange program of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. In 2017, during the second BRICS Meeting of Ministers of Culture, representatives of the five countries of China, South Africa, Brazil, Russia and India signed a letter of intent to establish a union of museums and art galleries for multilateral cultural exchange and cooperation. National Art Museum of China, the agency of accountability for the union in China, planned a special exhibition with the theme of Uniqueness and Convergence, while hosting the Forum of BRICS Alliance of Art Museums and Galleries, to develop a more diverse and rich platform for dialogue. In the background of advocating “mutual learning between civilizations”, the exhibition will display 62 works from the BRICS galleries and museums. It is believed that this exhibition will not only be conducive to enhance friendship among the BRICS, but also of far-reaching significance to the promotion of international art exchanges. (Namoc, 2018, p. 1)

As we can identify in its presentation content, the *Uniqueness and Convergence* exhibition materializes the mutual objectives of cultural rapprochement among BRICS members. However, China's strong interest in materializing AM-BRICS is noticeable while hosting the opening event and from more initiatives below present in this paper. Based on Chinese Arts and Cultural Agenda and BRICS initiative, this paper comprises exhibition presented in Brazil as a strategic part of Chinese foreign interest as “cultural serves to mark or reaffirm certain presences, circumstances that, properly worked on, can have consequences of all kinds, including commercial ones” (Ribeiro, 2011, p. 40, our translation). Then, why study Chinese cultural diplomacy in Brazil? This delimitation is justified by our place of speech, as researchers seeing the increase of Chinese exhibitions in Brazil and China's recent engagement in dialogue directly with local governments to improve an image through arts, as we can see in the case of Curitiba City. Besides, China built institutional tools to improve its arts and cultural agendas to BRICS members – and Brazil is one of them.

Regarding the collection of materials since 2006 (creation of BRICS), we identified all the Brazilian public museums and their public exhibition agendas that directly or indirectly dealt with China and its culture or artists. We analyze the content of the outreach materials, the artistic works themselves, the supporters and sponsors, and eventually our perceptions as a public of these events. Thus, this article seeks to: i) analyze the contextualization of Chinese cultural diplomacy and the creation of BRICS Alliance of Museum; ii) analysis of museums and exhibitions in Brazil that have been aligned with Chinese cultural diplomacy; and iii) the analysis of Curitiba as a current case of Chinese cultural diplomacy, by government speeches and interviews in the local agenda. To expose the data and our analysis, the four steps mentioned are in the same sequence of the following sections presented in this paper.

Chinese cultural diplomacy: BRICS as an institutional tool of values and practices

Diplomacy, as a public policy, can encompass various sectors and strategic themes for cooperation and relationship between nations. In the case of culture, many International Relations theorists have already addressed its relevance for foreign policy. Institutional authors such as Joseph Nye and his idea of soft power as “(...) the ability to what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments.” (Nye, 2004, p. 256); post colonialist with the perpetuation of values, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010); and even constructivists such as Alexander Wendt (1992) dealing with the construction of truths and reiterating the ability of arts and culture to interfere into the behavior of societies – and their States. More objectively we can say that cultural diplomacy is public policy that, through the diffusion and cooperation of cultural values and goods, seeks gains by relating in the short, medium and especially long term with another nation.

As a way to understand cultural diplomacy we can use Cummings (2009, p. 1) definition for the subject as being “the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding”. Therefore, as the author arguments, this exchange can also happen in a unilateral form when just one nation decides to promote its culture to the rest of the world – and not necessarily will receive the same effort from the other nations.

China, like other nations, engages in dialogue with national governments, but also with local governments due to foster trade and political relations that improve Chinese penetration and friendliness in the locality. “Culture is seen as an important tool for China to increase its soft power, which, through cultural exchanges, hopes to assure the world that it is a civilized, responsible, and reliable nation” (Lai, 2012). The cultural diplomacy for China is also a tool to against the “China threat theory”, based on the feeling in the international arena after the growth of China in areas as economy, military power and others (Pan, 2013, p. 29). China’s diplomacy would be a way to avoid any kind of sanctions by showing it’s more “peaceful” and “friendly” profile and that is when arts becomes important to governmental agendas.

In 2004, Hu Jintao gave a speech in the 10th Conference of Chinese Diplomatic Envoys Stationed Abroad about the necessity of a cooperation with other nations, highlighting the importance of a peaceful way to develop the diplomacy of China. Both, peace and development, would be the matters to still guide China’s diplomacy, being the friendship with another countries the goal for the “new stage” of China international relations (People’s Daily, 2004). Then, one of the strategies seen by Chinese cultural diplomacy is the financing of exhibitions and dissemination of Chinese cultural goods in museums and cultural institutes in many cities around the world.

Through its Confucius Institutes, in addition to the direct actions of ambassadors and diplomats, it is possible to see the realization of these policies: “China spared no efforts or resources to strengthen its cultural diplomacy. Among the most evident actions in this process, the internationalization of the Chinese media, the strengthening of Chinese movies, and the spreading of Confucius Institutes (CI) are the most prominent” (Becard and Menechelli, 2019, p. 1). Becard and Menechelli (2019) identified a particular way to implement this international arts and culture agenda from China:

On the one hand, it could be argued that China uses instruments of public and cultural diplomacy that are similar to other countries (international media, academic exchange programs, international cultural and art exhibitions, and cultural institutes abroad (Lai 2012)). On the other hand, there are particularities in China’s conceptions of soft power and cultural diplomacy, such as: valuing culture in the concept of soft power – which leads to the concept of cultural soft power [...]; a more pragmatic rhetoric when it comes to the use of culture as an instrument of power [...]; a more central role played by the state in actions of cultural diplomacy – which has more control over the narratives that will be disseminated abroad, and will decide what goes into the country [...]; the less

evident distinction between public diplomacy and propaganda [...]; and the use of cultural diplomacy to ensure cultural security and domestic coherence [...]. Perhaps these characteristics are not enough to demonstrate the existence of a Chinese model of cultural diplomacy, but they are enough to demonstrate that there are aspects that demand a deeper, more attentive analysis, which takes into consideration Chinese perspectives on concepts that might hold different meanings from those featured in traditional literature.

There are many tools and mechanisms, as Confucius Institutions (CI), spreading Chinese values around the world. However, in the case of Brazil, China has one more mechanism for inserting its culture and values: the BRICS and its Alliance of Museum (AM-BRICS) and that improves the Brazil as an interesting case of study. Thus, what is BRICS?

In 2001, the Goldman Sachs Economic Research Group released an article by Jim O'Neill about the idea of a group that would involve part of the largest emerging market economies (O'Neill, 2001, p. 3). In this article, O'Neill explores the global economy situation at the time as an argument to why these four nations (Brazil, Russia, India and China) should collaborate in a new strategic partnership. O'Neill idea took a practical turn in 2006, when Brazil, Russia, India and China met and proposed an international partnership to discuss and cooperate on various agendas settings as international economy, market and politics. South Africa later became a member, giving the name BRICS the initial letter of each member. In addition to the interests mentioned by the institution itself as strengthening international support, the BRICS becomes a mechanism for legitimation and regional insertion.

Moreover, China has the largest population (1,395,380,000), as well as the largest GDP in BRICS as being 13,368,073M.\$ (Country Economy, 2020). Its weight within the multilateral institution is important and its trade relations are already weighing in the balance, as in the case of Brazil where China has become its largest export revenue partner (Government of Brazil, 2019). Therefore, Chinese practices within BRICS would be not only commercial but also cultural, as we can see in the BRICS Alliance of Museum (AM-BRICS). The BRICS Alliance of Museum initiative, formulated in 2017 and implemented in 2018, marks concern with the cultural approach among social levels - and not just the international alignment of foreign policies or economies.

AM-BRICS is known as part of BRICS' cultural agenda to improve their cultural diplomacy among themselves and abroad. In 2019, a few days before the Fourth Meeting of Culture Ministers, hosted in Curitiba (Brazil), the Russian Culture Ministry's museum department Vladislav Kononov said:

The program envisages a discussion on the strategy of developing cooperation between the creative industries of BRICS countries. I plan to make a report on cultural cooperation between BRICS countries. [...] Brazil, which presides in BRICS this year, has touched upon the topic of creative economy, creative industries, and my report will be devoted to how cultural institutions, particularly museums, affect and create such creative economy. They represent the points of attraction for tourists, students, local residents. Museums carry out educational activities and preserve cultural heritage, they have direct effect on economic development since it is necessary to accommodate for tourist flows, and this leads to developing infrastructure, starting from food places and not ending in roads, transport, and so on. (BRICS Information Portal, 2019)

That is why we can justify the importance of studying museums, arts and AM-BRICS as part of cultural diplomacy of each Member State. AM-BRICS is not just a treaty in a paper, but it is growing based on BRICS practices national governments as the same time other institutions, local governments, business corporations and social agents are involved. However, why would China be interested in using the arts to improve its relationship with Brazil?

Starting from Alexander Wendt's concept (1992) that people create and share ideas and these ideas create cultures and societies, we see societies creating nations that in turn make international relations and improve their own values into other societies and cultures. Then, arts also reflect values and ideas about the reality that will help shape the present and future reality – but not so fluid. We can see Chinese strategies, for example, to improve specific values and images of a new China in arts exhibitions all around the world. Moreover, Chinese arts and culture (as objects and images that materialize ideas and values) interact with the environment in which they present themselves creating a third image of itself³. We can say that: i) on one hand, China wants to achieve traditional goals as improve relationships to benefits trade, economic and political gains; ii) on the other hand, to foster strategic values in Brazilian society that should become more friendly to China, especially since they are not historical collaborates.

Ignorance and psychic distance (Hilal and Hemais, 2003) interfere with investments and the strengthening of business and internationalization ventures. That is, the more Brazilians know about Chinese culture, less suspicious and insecure Brazilians will be in investing and consuming Chinese goods and values. Ways of life are based on values as the same time friendship is based on shared values. In this case, China managed to promote arts exhibitions in Brazil before and after AM-BRICS. However, AM-BRICS itself already stands as a tool that legitimizes the present perspective on the importance of international relations in the study of Arts and cultural local agendas. To do so, we will measure the values and identify the interests present in Chinese cultural diplomacy to Brazil.

Chinese Arts Exhibitions in Brazil 2006-2019

When we seek to identify which museum in Brazil held Chinese art exhibitions we decided to create a list of the largest Brazilian museums by number of visits and we achieved 41. From these 41 museums, only 6 were fit for analysis according to the following criteria: i) private museums were not selected (as the purpose of this research is the cultural diplomacy); ii) non-research-themed museums were excluded from the selection (planetariums, naturals and others); iii) and public museums that did not have documentary exhibitions direct to China. Then, just 4 Brazilian museums had Chinese arts and/or culture exhibitions during the period 2006-2019, namely: São Paulo Museum of Image and Sound (MIS-SP); University of São Paulo Museum of Contemporary Art (MAC-USP); São Paulo Museum of Art (MASP); and Oscar Niemeyer Museum (MON).

Thereby, we decided to apply Maria Emilia Sardelich concepts of image reading as a method (2006) to extract the political and social content from exhibitions' art objects and other shared materials and texts. Working on semiotics methods, Rudolf Arnheim (1957), Sardelich (2006) helped us to separate what the art objects and public policies wanted to and what our society, as the main audience, could signify about China. For the author, the images can create values more than just inform the audience about their contents:

Nearly everything of the little we know about the produced knowledge reaches us through the means of information and communication. These, on their turn, also build world images. Images to delight, entertain, and sell, suggesting what we should dress, eat, look like and think. In our contemporary society, it is discussed the need for a visual alphabetization that takes on several names, such as image reading and critical understanding of the visual culture. (Sardelich, 2006, p. 451)

³ The first image is the self-perception, in other words, how Chinese perceps China. The second one is how foreign nation's perceps China and the third one is how China projects a strategic image to interfere the first and the second images.

Thus, we can read art objects, subtitles, divulgation materials, interviews and other sources to create our own perception of the exhibitions trying to notice their ideas and values. Therefore, we faced our perceptions to official speeches and texts. As the main results, we found ideas and practices (values) about China and its culture in the exhibitions that we share in the following paragraphs.



Figure 1: Details of *Ai Weiwei Interlacing* in MIS-SP 2013
Source: Printscreen from Jornal Nacional, 2013.

At MIS-SP, we noticed four exhibitions related to Asian culture and we considered *Ai Weiwei Interlacing* exhibition, in 2013 (Figure 1), as the most pertinent to the present study: a series of photos, videos, texts and installations exhibited by the artist Ai Weiwei that sought to promote a criticism of the lack of freedom present in China (ZYLBERKAN, 2013). The second exhibition was also related to the artist Ai Weiwei: the Artist Book Interview release, whereby the curator made a presentation about the theme of the conversation with the artist, as well as how he presented his influences and philosophy among others (MIS-SP, 2013). As an analysis of exhibitions contents and the artist's speech, we identified words and expressions that suggested that China has been modernizing and opening up to the Western commercial world. However, it is happening with low adherence to civil and individual rights present in the Western world, such as freedom of expression.

Despite of Ai Weiwei importance as an artist that represents China, we can't ignore the political aspect of his artworks. Using his artistically expressions as a way to criticize China's politics and social aspects (Archtrends Portobello, 2019), Ai Weiwei needs to be seen not as only a representation of China's voice, but also as a more critic vision about some aspects of China.

At MAC-USP we find the Asian-themed exhibition *Community of Tastes: Chinese Contemporary Art Since 2000*, in 2011 (Figure 2). Composed by photographs, the event sought to bring a little more of Chinese reality to Brazilian eyes, with poetic portrayals about popular and Chinese spaces. The text presented by the exhibition's curator seeks to present the evolution of Chinese art from historical milestones and internal revolutions, however, a part that stands out in the presented text deals with how the West tends to behave superiorly in the world. that deals with Asia, creating

difficulty in the artistic exchange that could occur and benefit Chinese Contemporary Art (MAC-USP, 2011).

An interesting point about this exhibition was its promotion by Chinese artists and by Iberia Center for the Arts, a Spanish academic institution responsible for the international management of this exhibition. This promotion by artists and a Spanish institution rejects the idea of a lonely Chinese foreign policy. Maybe we could say that other agents – including a non-Chinese or Brazilian institutions – can develop initiatives that end up promoting Chinese art and its values in paralel of the main governmental agenda.



Figure 2: Photo in *Comunidade de Gostos: Arte Contemporânea chinesa desde 2000*
Source: MAC-USP, 2011.

At MASP, in 2009, Yang Shaobin's photography exhibition, *Primeiros Passos, Últimas Palavras* (*First Steps, Last Words*, Figure 3) seeks to bring social and political criticism from 50 art works produced since 1996. It was the first time in Latin America of one of the most popular Chinese artist in Europe and North America (ARTMAP, 2009). By directing some of his criticism to other political models, Yang Shaobin has in his series of photographs the exposure of the individual's suffering and daily challenges as a reflection of globalization. The artist not only confines himself to criticism of the violence present in the world, but also reaffirms the message of strengthening relations between West and East. According to Yang Shaobin: “In art, collaboration between cultures is as important as in business relations. It is a chain of mutual dependence, where each link is contained in the other” (ARTMAP, 2009). The artist's speech seems to reaffirm that what happens in China is happening here.



Figure 3: Painting at *Primeiros Passos, Últimas Palavras*, 2009
Source: Artmap, 2009.

Finally, MON was the museum with the most complete virtual collection of past exhibitions, as well as providing access to news about visitations and changes in the museum in a complete and timely manner. MON presented during the period of analysis three major exhibitions with the Asian theme. The first one was about Asia, not focusing only in one country, and the second, Bienal de Curitiba 2017 (Curitiba International Art Biennial), was themed on China. The third one was *Ai Weiwei Raiz* in 2019, closely to MIS-SP exhibition in 2013.

The Curitiba International Art Biennial of 2017 was widely promoted and sponsored by the Brazilian government, as well as accompanied several events related to the promotion of cultural exchange between China and Brazil. In 2017, Curitiba International Art Biennial (CB) celebrated its 24th anniversary, choosing China as a tribute from the edition entitled *Antipodes: Diverse and Reverse* (Antipodes - Diverse and Reverse), by Tício Escobar as the curator. CB takes place every year, with each one approaching a different theme that will guide the selection of arts to be exhibited during the proposed period. In 2017, it was announced that the theme would be China, where artists from around the world would contribute with works within the proposed theme. CB is not limited to just one museum; on the contrary, it is an artistic circuit present in several museums around the city, highlighting the MON's own structure and exhibition capacity. Nevertheless, as we identified initiatives that went beyond the exhibition and AM-BRICS, we will address the case of Curitiba in its own section below.

Even though we did not find any specific Chinese or Asian exhibitions in MNBA (Rio de Janeiro), we found out a visit of the Vice Minister of Culture of China, in 2017. During this visit, Deputy Minister Yang Zhijin shared the Chinese interests in promoting the exchange among artists from both nations to MNBA, reaffirming the intention of his visiting agenda, which had in his schedule a meeting with the Brazilian Minister of Culture Roberto Freire (IBRAM, p. 01, 2017) to manage future activities and projects between China and Brazil. These intentions are present in the case of Curitiba as we can see in the following section.

China and cultural diplomacy in Curitiba

In 2017, The Curitiba International Art Biennial (CB) honored China as the main theme of its exhibitions (Figure 4). The CB has a wide range of sponsors, such as Copel, Itaipu, Sanepar⁴ and the Paraná State Government. Nevertheless, an important emphasis should be given to the Chinese sponsors: i) Ministry of Culture of the People's Republic of China; ii) Embassy of People's Republic of China in Brazil; iii) General Consulate of People's Republic of China in Sao Paulo; iv) CAEG - China Arts and Entertainment Group; v) CAFA Art Museum; vi) Government of Zhejiang Province; vii) Power Station of Art, and others (Bienal de Curitiba '17, 2017, p. 01).



Figure 4: Chinese Vice Minister of Culture and Tourism Zhang Xu (left) and the Chinese Artist Li Hongbo in front of his *World of Fairy Tale* (right) during 14th CB
Source: Bienal de Curitiba, 2017.

The support of institutions linked to the Chinese government reaffirms the speech of the president of the CB, Luiz Ernesto Meyer Pereira, who in his acknowledgment cited the perspective for cooperation between Brazil and China as one of the motivations for choosing China as the honored country in 2017.

In 2017, People's Republic of China is the honored country, an initiative of the Biennial that contributes to cultural cooperation between Brazil and China. I appreciate the valuable support of the Chinese Embassy, the Ministry of Culture of China and CAEG (China Arts and Entertainment Group), which made it possible for Chinese artists to participate in this edition (Bienal de Curitiba '17, 2017, p. 01)

Pereira shows the importance of the support of Chinese Embassy to ensure the presence of Chinese artists at the Biennial, but the focus of his speech goes to the search for cultural cooperation between the Brazilian and Chinese nations. The character of cooperation as the main focus of the 2017 CB marks the theme of a state-level government agenda, as well as contributing to national goals. As discussed earlier in this paper, domestic public policy is a form of foreign public policy, which may fit into the current analysis where, the politics of a public museum (MON, Paraná) has consequences in the construction of the national-international agenda as the same time that relates local institutions to another national State (China).

An example of Cultural Diplomacy between local institutions and China is the role of Curitiba City Hall. In the same year of BC, Curitiba's Mayor Rafael Greca decided to honor China in a new

⁴ These are state companies responsible for, in sequence, energy and water treatment.

public monument near the City Hall. In this occasion, Chinese Ambassador in Brazil Li Jinzhang said:

I thank the Mayor of Curitiba Rafael Greca and the City Councilors of Curitiba for their fair tribute to China with the creation of “Largo da China”, located in the Civic Center in Curitiba. I highlight the strategic partnership of the Ministry of Culture through the Federal Culture Incentive Law (Bienal de Curitiba '17, 2017, p. 02, our translation).

Largo da China (China’s Square) was a project approved in the first public round to put the Confucius statue in a new public square. The statue is a gift from the Chinese government to Curitiba and made by Chinese artist Wu Wei-Shan and it is in an important area of the City called *Centro Cívico* (Civic Center), where the Paraná and Curitiba’s government buildings are. In the law text, we can read the following justification: “the creation of *Largo da China* opens the perspective of the large consumer market for products and commodities of Parana, expanding foreign trade and the beneficial cultural exchange among people” (Câmara Municipal de Curitiba, 2017).



Figure 5: Inauguration of *Largo da China*
Source: Prefeitura Municipal de Curitiba, 2017.

The Mayor of Curitiba Rafael Greca attended the inauguration of *Largo da China* and its statue of Confucius, as well as Brazilian Minister of Culture Sérgio Sá Leitão, Parana State Secretary of Cultural Affairs João Luiz Fiani, and the Chinese Ambassador in Brazil Li Jinzhang. During an interview at the inauguration, Mayor Rafael Greca spoke about what the statue would represent in the relationship between the two countries:

At this moment, we want this statue [of Confucius] and this Largo da China to be a portal of friendship and commerce, of cultural and humanitarian exchange, as the opening of our State and our City to the Great Continent. [...] Our deep respect for Confucius and all that China stands for. (Curitiba, 2017, p. 01, our translation).

Mayor Greca's speech opens several doors for analysis, specifically with regard to “and everything that China stands for,” where one can discuss which Chinese identity Greca is referring to. China has been an increasingly important economic force on the global stage, and its trade relations with Brazil are increasingly strengthened (an example can be the month of December of 2019, when exports to China reached a total of 5318.27 USD against the 505.88 USD on November of 2019 (Trade Economics, 2020). The economic issue had already been debated as one of the drivers for the approximation between the two States. Chinese Ambassador Li Jinzhang efforts the cultural alliance:

I believe that Largo da China will become a spiritual monument of access to Chinese culture, understanding and friendship between the two peoples. [...] It is exciting for the cultural exchange between the two States and demonstrates the open, tolerant and inclusive spirit of Brazilian culture. (Curitiba, 2017, p. 01, our translation)

The Brazilian Minister of Culture Sá Leitão also sought to stress the importance of another form of cooperation between the two States than the economic one. He said: “This is what we are celebrating, this partnership, Brazil and China, not just in the dimension of economy, not only in the dimension of politics, but also in the dimension of culture, so that it can continue and get closer from now on” (Curitiba, 2017, p. 01, our translation). The use of the word culture in economics and politics, as mentioned earlier, gives new heights to this area, adding governmental agendas to a more fundamental role that requires attention as well as other topics.

During the opening of CB in 2017, the Chinese Minister of Culture Luo Shugang appointed that China's presence was not only because it was the honored country, but also to promote alliance between the two States. He was enthusiastic about this way to express the relationship between both States by culture initiatives such as arts. According to the minister,

Cultural dialogues bring hearts closer, increase mutual understanding and strengthen the bonds of friendship among nations. Since the 16th century, when Chinese culture first met Brazilian culture, despite the vast oceans separating them, both countries have conducted cultural interactions, especially in recent years, as cultural exchange and cooperation have enriched and enhanced to help promote a solid and comprehensive bilateral strategic partnership (Bienal de Curitiba '17, 2017, p. 01, our translation)

Curator Fang Zhenning wrote in the exhibition text a justification of *Antipodes* theme as it referring to diametrically opposed positions between Brazil and China: “The physical spaces are connected by art, and art is universal. The differences and geographical distance generate the cultural diversity that reflects the interactivity of creation and artistic expression”. Thereby, we noted a perception that relations between Brazil and China are not historical and that the distance would not only be geographical, but cultural. Even though, we would develop our both communication in a diversity way. Returning to Culture Minister Luo Shugang's speech, an important caveat should be made regarding the mention of the BRICS:

We look forward to seeing greater cinergy between the two countries in our cultural dialogues and collaborations that are open, inclusive, reciprocal and advantageous, as advocated by the *Cinturão e Rota* [Belt and Road] initiative and by BRICS cooperation mechanism. Increasing our mutual understanding and friendship among our peoples based on full respect for cultural diversity, shared values and cultural understanding will forge stronger ties between China and Brazil as two Member States of the BRICS community with common interests and destinies, and will support the social and public policies foundations for China-Latin America cooperation (Bienal de Curitiba '17, 2017, p. 01, our translation).

The BRICS mention made by the Chinese Minister of Culture is important for this analysis. It supports the idea that cultural cooperation is present in the agenda of BRICS, becoming one of the driving forces in strengthening the relationships among its members, as well as the use of art as a way of building a common identity beyond economic agenda. This idea is presents in the Minister Luo Shugang's speech:

When China is honored at the Curitiba Biennial, it also illustrates an increasingly broad and deep cultural exchange between the two countries. In recent years, I have seen the growing interest and enthusiasm of both peoples to know and understand each other. Activities such as cultural month, film week, photo exhibitions, shows and fine art exhibitions, as well as Rio 2016 Olympic Games and other sporting events, all contributed to our mutual understanding and rapprochement. This strengthens the basis for bilateral cultural exchanges, creating new mechanisms and expanding horizons. (Bienal de Curitiba '17, 2017, p. 03, our translation)

Regarding the identity promoted by the Chinese government during the CB, we noticed the dissemination of the idea of a “friendly China”, as we can see in Luo Shungang’s words:

Over five millennia of history, a sense of humanity centered on brotherhood and benevolence has been formed in China, an ideology of governance based on ethics and balance, an aspiration for peace and good neighborliness, as well as a concept that values harmony of differences (Bienal de Curitiba '17, 2017, p. 04, our translation).

This speech, however, goes against the accusations of Chinese artists, as previously seen in other events such as MIS-SP and MAC-USP. Nevertheless, the Chinese Minister of Culture demonstrates the idea of a Chinese identity focused on a fraternity environment, using the term “good neighborhood” as a possible attempt to position China, even by words, friendly and closer to Brazil. It is possible to see an intention to affirming that China is searching for harmony and respecting differences inside and outside its borderlines. This image (or identity) would be developed by cultural exchange that, according to the Minister, would have support from the Chinese government:

Both President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Li Keqiang consider cultural exchange activities to be of utmost importance. During their visits to Latin America, they announced initiatives such as scholarships in China, the Bridge to the Future Program to train 1,000 young leaders from China and Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as the creation of a China-Latin America Press Center to train communication professionals. All of this offers guidance and assurance for the flow and mutual learning about our differences (Bienal de Curitiba '17, 2017, p. 06, our translation).

Luo Shugang also spoke about numbers of Chinese investments in Brazil, as well as trade. The exposure of these numbers, as well as Chinese programs in Brazil, seems to be part of the identity construction already discussed before. Chinese investment and youth support programs are demonstrating that they are increasingly building a friendly relationship with Brazil, promoting development in certain areas that would put the country in a better position for cooperation among States. About the governments and mutual investments, Luo Shugang said:

[...] About governments, we should take full advantage of the role of the COSBAN Cultural Subcommittee (Sino-Brazilian High-Level Commission for Consultation and Cooperation) to put into practice the consensus reached by the leaders and carry forward the action plan on the theme and the installation of cultural centers. In terms of civil society, we need to expand channels to promote cooperation in

culture, education, sports and tourism, strengthening our historic friendship. We will develop commercial and non-profit projects to foster a partnership among cultural industries, arts education, concerts, audiovisual production, literary translation and institutions such as museums, libraries and cultural heritage. Artists, on the other hand, are welcome to events such as the China International Culture and Art Fair, the Beijing, Shanghai and Curitiba Biennials, to learn from the outstanding achievements of the two cultures, giving new vigor to their innovation and progress differences [...] enriching the content of the Global Strategic Partnership between the two nations. (Biennial Of Curitiba '17, 2017, p. 04, our translation).

The construction of a State identity that seeks cooperation and development from its “neighbors” (even if geographically distant) proves to be part of an agenda to be maintained in the future by the Chinese government. The search for promotion of new cultural programs places this theme as also central to the Chinese State, with no evidence of focus solely on the economic sector – but we cannot forget cultural diplomacy as an open-market tool. Nevertheless, we did not find a discourse of "leadership" in relation to Brazil, but a friendly approach, placing both States as central actors in promoting cooperation between them.

In the case of decentralization, the city of Curitiba becomes a strategic Chinese objective for the region, having support and partnership actions with the local and international agenda of the City Hall. Thereby, Curitiba has also demonstrated initiatives with China through an institutional way by the BRICS. According to Curitiba International Relations Office in 2019:

All negotiations between Curitiba and China take place through the BRICS. All agreements signed in Curitiba of interest with China are in the level of BRICS, which also involves South Africa, India and Russia. What we deal with China ends up being valid for the other Members. The agreements are also by sectors. This year [2019] we had meetings with representatives of the BRICS governments. We had the customs authorities among the BRICS for export and trade, culture and we used the Curitiba Biennial [2019] to bring together the cultural authorities of these countries and, last week, the meeting was about the health area. [...] China is one of the most active BRICS Member and so it is strategic partner for our internationalization. (Interviewed by authors, 2019)

Given the events in 2019, we can observe a continuity of actions between Curitiba and China institutionally intermediated by BRICS. The Curitiba International Relations Office (CERIN) demonstrates strategies for associating local events to bring together BRICS officials, as in the case of the Biennials (2017 and 2019). In 2019, MON held *Ai Weiwie Raiz* exhibition (Figure 6) reinforced the local interests on China culture. This exhibition was financed by Brazilian National Government and Parana State Government, the largest one in life of Weiwei (MON, 2019) and the largest in MON's period of 2018-2019, from 17 thousand visitors in 2018 to 25,8 thousand of visitors in 2019 (MON, 2019).



Figure 6: Law of the Journey (Prototype B)

Source: Ai Weiwei Raiz Exhibition Folder, MON, 2019.

Therefore, it is important to highlight that the dialogue between Curitiba (and Parana State) and China takes place directly, as shown by the speeches of Chinese representatives and our interviews at Curitiba City Hall. Only the agreements and the bureaucratic part would evoke the BRICS. In the perception of CERIN, China facilitates the relations to the other BRICS members when an agreement will be on the others. That is why we can say that the local agenda of culture (Curitiba) permeates a collective action with China and improve local interests in Chinese artists and culture.

Final Considerations

Throughout this paper, we seek to relate art exhibitions in Brazil to Chinese cultural diplomacy. We analyzed Brazilian 41 museums, from 2006 to 2019, and we found out four museums that had exhibitions and artistic-cultural events about Chinese art and culture. We also noticed that even before the BRICS Alliance of Museum, in 2018, the Chinese government was already present in Brazilian institutions, especially closer to Curitiba. Nevertheless, after some interviews with CERIN at Curitiba Hall, in 2019, we understood the BRICS role to improve the relationship between Curitiba and China that explains the increase of Chinese arts exhibitions in the City.

China's initiatives to promote cultural diplomacy through the BRICS Museum Cooperation Treaty (AM-BRICS), in 2018, materialized a strategy of rapprochement and friendship with member nations, their local governments and social institutions. When we read the artistic exhibitions by image reading, as a method developed for Maria Emília Sardelich (2006), we found out some Chinese strategic values: as tradition; friendship; technology; alternative to West; and a country opened to the contemporary world. However, on the other hand, we saw values as violence, disrespect of human rights, loss of individual identity among a multitude, pollution and other critics against Chinese government. All of them interfering in our perception of contemporary China and its culture.

Besides these artistic values, the Chinese governmental speeches improve an image of trust (by its tradition and history), friendship, partner in trade and culture, opened to diversity and interested to cooperate in local, national and international levels. However, these contradictories ideas maybe still speak about China and if we think about cultural diplomacy to get closer, it is working:

Brazilian society is getting closer to Chinese reality, culture and arts. The numbers of visitors in MON increased significantly from 2018 to 2019 by the opening of Ai Weiwei exhibition.

In Curitiba, the Chinese authorities were trying to lay off the lack of relations between the two cultures and to create a new history of cooperation. Some artists during the CB, in 2017 (and 2019) criticized Chinese government and other national problems. Therefore, the Biennials received support from Chinese government and reunited authorities from other BRICS State Members. The Chinese authorities show positive values instead of some artists – and Brazilian authorities, as Mayors and Ministers reproduce the positive values. That is why, in our final words, we would like to highlight that Brazilian museums and local governments are in processes of cooperation with China, as the same time BRICS demonstrated an important role to intermediate and to implement the Chinese cultural diplomacy and its agenda settings in Curitiba, especially by cultural activities and the arts exhibitions.

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