

## **UNDERSTANDING CHINA'S STANCE IN SINO-BRAZILIAN RELATIONS: THE CHINA MODE**

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### **Abstract**

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Sino-Brazilian relations were affected by the election in January 2019 of Jair Bolsonaro as President of Brazil. Various voices were raised on the topic of Sino-Brazilian relations, with some people believing that the attitude towards China that Bolsonaro held damaged Sino-Brazilian relations to a noticeable degree. However, several studies also suggested that the election of Jair Bolsonaro did not have any negative impact on Sino-Brazilian relations, in the form of actual results. In the post-epidemic era, with the new Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva taking office, Brazil and China's strategic



partnership seems to have been strengthened. Lula not only expressed his friendly attitude towards China after taking office, but also paid a state visit to China from April 12 to 15, 2023. China and Brazil subsequently signed the Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Federative Republic of Brazil on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. China and Brazil not only continue to cooperate in trade, but have also expanded cooperation in aerospace, electronic technology and other fields. Using Guanxi theory as its theoretical framework, this paper studies China's attitude and policies towards Brazil during Covid-19 and after the epidemic, from a Chinese perspective. It analyses the different attitudes and policy orientations of Brazilian leaders towards China, as well as China's responses to ensure the maintenance of Sino-Brazilian relations, discussing the various actions taken.

### Keywords

Sino-Brazilian relation, Guanxi Theory, Bolsonaro, Lula.

### Resumo

Durante a pandemia de Covid-19, as relações sino-brasileiras foram afetadas pela eleição, em janeiro de 2019, de Jair Bolsonaro como Presidente do Brasil. Várias vezes se levantaram sobre o tema das relações sino-brasileiras, com algumas pessoas acreditando que a atitude de Bolsonaro em relação à China prejudicou as relações sino-brasileiras em um grau notável. No entanto, vários estudos também sugeriram que a eleição de Jair Bolsonaro não teve qualquer impacto negativo nas relações sino-brasileiras, na forma de resultados reais. Na era pós-epidemia, com a posse do novo presidente brasileiro, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a parceria estratégica do Brasil e da China parece ter sido fortalecida. Lula não apenas expressou sua atitude amigável para com a China após assumir o cargo, mas também fez uma visita de Estado à China de 12 a 15 de abril de 2023. A China e o Brasil assinaram posteriormente a Declaração Conjunta entre a República Popular da China e a República Federativa do Brasil em Aprofundamento da Parceria Estratégica Abrangente. A China e o Brasil não só continuam a cooperar no comércio, mas também expandiram a cooperação nos setores aeroespacial, tecnologia eletrônica e outros campos. Utilizando a teoria de Guanxi como referencial teórico, este artigo estuda a atitude e as políticas da China em relação ao Brasil durante a Covid-19 e após a epidemia, a partir de uma perspectiva chinesa. Analisa também as diferentes atitudes e orientações políticas dos líderes brasileiros em relação à China, bem como as respostas da China para garantir a manutenção das relações sino-brasileiras, discutindo as diversas ações tomadas.

### Palavras-chave

Relações sino-brasileiras, Teoria de Guanxi, Bolsonaro, Lula.

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### **Introduction**

The year 2024 marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Brazil, and after half a century of exchanges, the Sino-Brazilian relationship continues to develop. But this relationship has not always been problem-free, and this is related to the different governing strategies and attitudes of Brazilian leaders towards China. Looking back at former Brazilian President Bolsonaro's electoral campaign and the Covid-19 epidemic period, we can find that Sino-Brazilian relations fluctuated then. Particularly when national leaders make negative remarks, tensions will arise in official discourse between two countries. Under the dual influence of the epidemic and official discourse, cooperation between China and Brazil in various fields at the official level was hindered to a noticeable extent.

After being re-elected as President of Brazil in 2023, Lula continued his former friendly attitude towards China. He visited China in 2023 and signed a series of agreements in various fields with China. He emphasized China and strategic partnership (China, 2023b). China has been Brazil's largest trading partner and export destination for fourteen consecutive years. Brazil is China's largest trading partner and largest direct investment destination in Latin America (Bian, Zhuodan; Chen, Weihua; Xie, Zhao & Zhou, Yongshui, 2023). In 2023, the bilateral trade volume between China and Brazil was US\$181.53 billion, a year-on-year increase of 6.1%, of which China's import volume will be US\$122.42 billion, a year-on-year increase of 11.9%. It mainly consists of iron ore and its concentrate, soybeans, crude oil, paper pulp, and soybean oil, etc. (China, 2024c). It can be seen that China is the largest buyer of Brazilian products, especially agricultural products (Brasil, 2024). Based on the trade situation between China and Brazil, Lula has a positive attitude towards future cooperation and the development of bilateral relations between Brazil and China. Relations between China and Brazil appear to be getting closer.

Bolsonaro and Lula have exhibited different attitudes towards China. The Chinese government also responded accordingly to the different attitudes of the Brazilian government. Considering the results, the relationship between China and Brazil has not fundamentally changed. There is no doubt that the changing attitude of the Bolsonaro



government imposed certain obstacles on cooperation between the two countries in important areas (such as technology), and further made the Sino-Brazilian relation tense for a time. However, after the Lula government took office, faced with this more positive and friendlier attitude, the Chinese government quickly restored its friendly attitude towards Brazil.

This paper explores the impact of the changes in the attitudes of the two Brazilian leaders since Bolsonaro came to power in 2018 and the actual relations between China and Brazil, and how China responds to the behavioural patterns of the leaders of other countries, and their different attitudes and strategies towards China. This manuscript uses Guanxi Theory for this analysis. This research paper suggests that the interaction between the governments of China and Brazil reflects China's specific behaviour model—relationship model in international relations. This relationship model is a dynamic communication process and changes as the process changes. However, the relationship established through this model is long-term oriented, i.e. the two parties establish a trusting relationship and even a cooperative relationship with each other during their long-term interaction. In the case of China and Brazil, the two countries have a strong basis for trade relations. Although some tensions may arise due to the government's attitude, the foundation of the relationship previously established between the two countries has not been fundamentally shaken.

This paper uses commercial trade data, official visit data, and public speeches to illustrate Bolsonaro's propositions for diplomacy, investment and cooperation with regard to China during his administration (2019-2022), and since Lula took office in 2023. Firstly, this paper analyses official texts made by each government, in the form of speeches and interviews, to determine their different attitudes towards developing diplomatic relations with China. This manuscript also analyses the Chinese government's responses, and its attitude towards the Brazilian government. Secondly, this paper analyses the destinations for, and timing of, diplomatic visits under each administration and their intended goals, and then examines trends in international trade numbers and partnerships under each president. It is worth noting that China and Brazil's trade was undoubtedly affected by Covid-19 during Bolsonaro's administration. This manuscript will also take this into consideration. In addition to the above sources, I also use newspaper sources, other government publications, and academic research as auxiliary data to support the views presented in this paper.

### **Guanxi Theory: Understand Chinese mode**

In order to understand China's attitude and foreign affairs, it is necessary to discuss the Chinese international relations theories which have been developed in modern China. Chinese scholars have developed international theories based on the Chinese cultural background, which inspired various thoughts and debates. For example, Yan Xuetong who was inspired by ancient Chinese political philosophy, developed the discussion of modern Chinese international relations (Yan, 2013). Even there was no specific concept of an "international society" or "international politics" in ancient China, it does not mean there was no international political thought. Ancient Chinese thoughts based on the idea



of “Tianxia (天下)”, which means the largest world in people's recognition, at that time was China in pre-Qin dynasty. This “Tianxia” concept is still used in modern world, to represent the whole earth. Thus, ancient Chinese thoughts could be treated as Chinese international political thought (Yan, 2013). Because of this, Yan compared the concept of “hegemony” in ancient Chinese thoughts with Western international theories, which share the similarity of “the great power” (Mearsheimer, 2001; Keohane & Nye, 1973; Yan, 2013). He also pointed out that the political power in ancient Chinese thoughts involves two aspects, namely the ability to govern and the “virtue and self-cultivation” of important officials (Yan, 2013). Then he developed the concept of Moral Realism (Yan, 2014; Yan, 2023) and the idea of the leadership of the great power (Yan, 2019). Yan’s thought thus incorporated of human authority into international relations (Paltiels, 2011). Paltiels claims that Yan’s discussion can be regarded as the contribution of Chinese scholars to international relations study (Paltiels, 2011). Yan’s ideas concentrate on the discussion of the connections between power, leadership and norms, and debates on conflicts. However, there is a lack of discussion on finding a solution to the problem of cooperation (Paltiels, 2011).

Another Chinese scholar, Ye Zicheng, has introduced the geopolitical discussion of China’s relations with various countries (Ye, 2010). He claims that “different countries have different requirements for comprehensive national power” (Ye, 2010, p33). He explains national strength as a combination of ability to survive, capacity for development and international influence (Ye, 2010). Thus, a national state may have different requirements for its national strength in different periods. From a geopolitical view, China has different strategic choices to its neighbouring countries, both large countries (i.e. Russia, Japan, India) and small countries (i.e. Singapore, South Korea, Vietnam). Ye emphasizes the importance of developing the economy, together with the anxiety and suspicion brought by China’s fast development (Ye, 2010). In general, Ye has provided a diversity to discussions on Chinese international relations rather than developing any specific theory.

When it comes to Sino-Brazilian relations, I chose Guanxi theory, which is suitable because of its relational perspective. The Guanxi theory proposed by Qin Yaqing is now considered as being able to explain China's contemporary international relations (Nordin, Smith, Bunskoek, Huang, Hwang, Jackson & Nakamura, 2019; Kavalski, 2022; Eisenman, 2023). Guanxi Theory is based on the Chinese social and cultural background, and exhibits Chinese characteristics. Unlike Western society, which takes the independent individual as the basic unit, the thinking mode of Chinese society is “family, country and the world.” (Qin, 2018) Whether it is family, country or the world, they are all collections of individuals. In other words, the identity of an individual is closely related to groups. The identity of an individual changes according to the different groups to which she or he belongs. Due to this Chinese cultural value, one critique of Guanxi theory is whether it could be sufficiently universal in the field of international relations. In fact, Guanxi theory provides a relational aspect, which is also reflected in the “relational turn” in Western international relations studies (Kavalski, 2017). Guanxi theory explains that the establishment of a network of relationships is dynamic, and that actors influence each other in the process of establishing relationships. Individuals also form new groups and establish new relationships because of interactions between the different groups to which



they belong. Qin describes international relations as a set of intertwined binary relationships, each of which represents a unique connection in the unique social connection group of both parties (Eisenman, 2023). Guanxi theory is claimed to provide a better explanation of the "complex, eclectic, and non-objective blend" in interactions between cultural universals and culturally specific patterns (Chen, 2011).

Qin argues that from the perspective of relational logic, the influence and power of actors come from their larger circle of relationships, and other closer and more important actors. These circles have higher social prestige, and manipulation of circles is an important source of their influence (Qin, 2016). This means that in Guanxi Theory, actors become more powerful by sharing resources with other actors through established relationships rather than by simply using their own resources. Relational logic is not altruism (Xue, 2023), but a strategic move. It is carried out with the expectation of receiving more loyalty and reciprocity from the recipient. This practice is not just to achieve the short-term interests of others, but to regard others as part of their long-term self-interest (Kavalski, 2017; Xue, 2023). States gain power and resources by establishing relationships. Although there is a lack of discussion of hierarchy in Guanxi Theory, especially the forced obedience of weak countries to strong countries, for the sake of maintaining relationships and long-term interests, great powers should obey stricter international norms while giving marginalized weaker countries room to manoeuvre (Shih, & Huwang, 2014). In other words, only when weak countries can truly obtain resources from big countries and transform them into their own interests can they establish a long-term reciprocal mechanism. The acquisition generated through relationships is two-way, and both the strong and weak parties in the relationship can interact and exchange through the establishment of a relationship network. Therefore, the focus is not on any specific individual, but on the specific nature of the interactive relationship between individuals.

Guanxi Theory emphasizes social norms and trust building in relationships (Qin, 2018). Mutual respect and mutual respect are necessary conditions for China to achieve its relationship management goals and are also the focus of China's normative power. (Qin, 2018; Kavalski, 2017; Xue, 2023; Kavalski, 2013). Xue (2023) points out the difference between the concept of "respect" under Chinese norms and Western ideas in modern international politics. He believes that the Treaty of Westphalia emphasizes the principle of respect for each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The United Nations Charter explicitly advocates and encourages respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all, regardless of race, gender, language or religion. This respect is based on the premise of "respect for what I say, not what I do." The logic of relations emphasizes that Beijing's normative power makes other countries participate in the practice of mutual respect - that is, "they do as China does" (Xue, 2023). Following this understanding, China emphasizes the practicality of respect rather than following certain clearly defined values and rules. For long-term considerations, China often adopts a continuous attitude in establishing and maintaining diplomatic relations. Even if conflicts arise in the short term, China will tend to take actions to safeguard its long-term interests. Such actions may manifest themselves in different ways depending on diplomatic style, but the common point is the emphasis on the long-term development of relations and interests. However, most of the debate regarding Guanxi theory still



concentrates on the relations that have been built already. There's a lack of discussion on the interactions to develop new relations. From this aspect, the development of new relations relies on a "middleman", that is a third party that has already built relations and trust with those two sides.

In recent years, China's foreign policy discourse has always tried to emphasize harmony, reciprocity and respect for differences. In Guanxi Theory, the interaction process of actors is also a process of mutual tolerance (Qin, 2018). Individuals with different natures can coexist in the process of interaction, rather than by one party eliminating the other. Similarly, competition, conflict or struggle may also exist. But actors can achieve the so-called state of coexistence through bargaining or mutual transformation in the process of interaction. This enables actors to better practice mutual respect and reciprocity (Berenskoetter, 2007), that is, the "seeking common ground while reserving differences" emphasized by Chinese society. Under the constraints of this norm, actors try to transform the resources of others into part of their own interests by coexisting with other actors with different characteristics, and at the same time, their own resources will also be transformed into part of the interests of others. Based on this logic, when understanding China's diplomatic model, it is inseparable from the discussion of actual resources and interests. In the Sino-Brazilian relation, this especially refers to trade exchanges. The following section explores the characteristics of China's behaviour model in the face of the different attitudes exhibited by the two Brazilian leaders towards China.

### **The Bolsonaro government and Covid-19: Changing bilateral relations**

Former Brazilian President Jair Messias Bolsonaro had some very distinct political characteristics. During his administration, the diplomatic discourse between China and Brazil fluctuated between positive and tense. As a right-wing politician, Bolsonaro, as could be expected, aligned himself with the right-wing US President Donald Trump, who was in power from 2017 to 2021, interrupting good relations with China (Damacena, 2021). In 2018, during Bolsonaro's campaign, he was nicknamed Tropical Trump, and as a presidential candidate he made clear his desire to realign foreign policy, forge closer ties with the United States, and distance Brazil from its growing ties with China and other emerging powers (Lapper, 2019). In February 2018, Bolsonaro visited Taiwan. He became the first Brazilian presidential candidate to visit Taiwan since Brazil recognized Beijing as the sole Chinese government in 1979 (Agência Lusa, 2018). The visit to the island was part of a tour of East Asia that includes Japan and South Korea but did not include China (Santoro, 2018), Brazil's largest trading partner. In Taipei, Bolsonaro called Taiwan "one country" and said it was the best of the United States and Japan combined (Santoro, 2022). The move prompted condemnation from China. The Chinese Embassy in Brazil issued a letter condemning Bolsonaro's trip to Taiwan as "an insult to China's sovereignty and territorial integrity" (Andreoni, 2018). This raised concerns about whether the presidential candidate would affect Sino-Brazilian relations (Spring, 2018).

Among other comments, Bolsonaro portrayed China as a predatory economic power during his campaign (Lapper 2019; China Daily, 2018). On the China issue, the Brazilian leader has often expressed concerns about Chinese purchasing land in Brazil, citing national security concerns to avoid Chinese state-owned enterprises participating in the



privatization process of government energy companies (Gabriel, Mandelbaum, Campos & Carvalho, 2019). He claimed during his campaign that Beijing is not only “buying things from Brazil, but also buying Brazil (Andreoni, 2018).” China's official English-language newspaper “China Daily” admitted in an editorial that Beijing authorities and Chinese companies operating in Brazil were questioning the extent to which Brazil's new leader would affect relations between the two countries (China Daily, 2018). In 2018, Chinese investment in Brazil fell by more than 60% (Cariello, 2018). This may have been due to Chinese investors' concerns that Bolsonaro could make changes in Brazil's existing China policy after taking office (Zheng, 2020). In response to Bolsonaro's attitude, the China daily newspaper wrote that “Dumping China [...] may serve some specific political purpose”, but “the economic cost can be backbreaking for the Brazilian economy” (China Daily, 2018). This view was similar to that of some academics and analysts. Maurício Santoro, professor of International Relations at the State University of Rio de Janeiro, said that from a pragmatic perspective, Bolsonaro would continue to maintain friendly relations with China once he entered the government (Andreoni, 2018), and that Brazil's agricultural sector had benefited from China's feud with Trump, especially in the wake of the U.S.-China trade war. China sharply reduced its purchases of U.S. soybeans, making up the difference with Brazilian grain. Brazil's soybean exports to China increased by 22% in 2018 and currently accounts for approximately 80% of Brazil's total soybean exports (Voice of America, 2018). From China's perspective, maintaining trade relations with Brazil is important. The economies of China and Brazil are considered “truly complementary” and have “few competitors” (China Daily, 2018). At this stage, though it was difficult to say that Bolsonaro's political ideology had changed Sino-Brazilian relations, all sectors of society were generally concerned about the friendly relations between China and Brazil. Obviously, part of the exchange of interests in the Sino-Brazilian relation came from trade. From the perspective of maintaining long-term trade relations with Brazil, China tried to express its hope that friendly relations could continue by emphasizing the close economic and trade cooperation between the two countries.

Bolsonaro has always regarded China as one of Brazil's most important ideological rivals, yet portraying China as an enemy has political and economic consequences (Guimarães & Silva, 2021). China is Brazil's largest trading partner and consumes most of Brazil's agricultural and mining exports. These goods account for 80% of Brazil's total exports to China (Zhang & Jin, 2020). To many Bolsonaro supporters, China is far more important than the United States. Brazilian farmers' decisive support for Bolsonaro's electoral victory could be undermined by a tougher stance on China. As Bolsonaro continued to view China as an adversary, even discussing with U.S. authorities during a visit to Washington how to reduce Brazil's dependence on China, important supporters began to complain about the government's anti-China bias (Folha de São Paulo, 2019).

Bolsonaro's criticism of Chinese investment did not last long. After Bolsonaro was elected, his government made friendly gestures towards Chinese investment. On March 8, 2019, Bolsonaro announced that he would visit China later that year (Verdélío, 2019). On May 24, 2019, the Brazilian Vice President Mourao paid an official visit to China. Mourao emphasized that the new Brazilian government led by President Bolsonaro continued to attach great importance to relations with China (China, 2019b). The leaders of the two countries expressed their willingness to further expand trade cooperation while opposing





unilateralism and trade protectionism. Mourao's visit was seen as an attempt to create a friendlier atmosphere between the two countries, following Bolsonaro's visit to Taiwan. However, at Bolsonaro's personal request, Mourao eventually had to give up his favourable position towards Beijing (Junqueira, 2019; Guimarães & Silva, 2021). This is obviously inconsistent with the attitude expressed by Bolsonaro in his official statement. As mentioned earlier, considering the real situation, Bolsonaro chose to send a friendly signal to China, but it does not mean that he had really changed his attitude towards China.

China did not adopt the same view towards Brazil as Bolsonaro did to China. This is specifically reflected in China's support for Brazil on the issue of Amazon fires (Guimarães & Silva, 2021). As fires in the Amazon begin to spiral out of control, Bolsonaro's government had to contend with growing international criticism from many quarters. The French President Emmanuel Macron said: "We cannot allow you (Bolsonaro) to destroy everything." This was considered an indirect challenge to Brazil's sovereignty in the region (Associated Press, 2019). Asked about the Amazon fires, Minister-Counsellor Qu Yuhui of the Chinese Embassy in Brasilia said Brazil has one of the most effective environmental laws in the world (Oliveira, 2019). Although the diplomat stressed that his views were personal and did not represent Beijing's official position, Brazil sees China's stance on the Amazon as a bridge to rebuild relations (Guimarães & Silva, 2021). As a result, Bolsonaro publicly announced approval of China's support for Brazil's sovereignty over the Amazon for the first time (Landim, 2019). Bolsonaro's attitude towards China has also begun to change. Since then, Bolsonaro has publicly expressed interest in visiting China to improve tense bilateral relations. On July 25, Bolsonaro met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi to discuss relations between the two countries and his visit to China in October (China, 2019a). Bolsonaro said Brazil is very interested in deepening trade negotiations with China (Estadão Conteúdo, 2019). On October 25, during his visit to China, Bolsonaro stated that although he was dissatisfied with the unbalanced trade relationship between Sino-Brazilian during the election, he recognized the importance of Sino-Brazilian relations to Brazilian society (Zheng, 2020).

Interestingly, judging from the speeches made by the leaders of the two countries during this meeting, the two sides exhibited completely different attitudes. Bolsonaro's comments on China seemed to be more focused on economic and trade opportunities (Fernandes, 2019). He claimed that the only purpose of visiting China was to do business (Guimarães & Silva, 2021). He also commented that coming to China was "coming to a capitalist country (Senra, 2019)." In contrast, Chinese leader Xi Jinping's official speech emphasized the friendly development of bilateral relations since the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries, citing the principles of mutual respect, equal treatment, mutual benefit and win-win results and the outlook for future bilateral relations (China, 2019c). Chinese leaders often adopt the same pattern in such speeches, expressing a friendly attitude towards bilateral or multilateral relations by elaborating on the historical origins of establishing relations with other countries and looking forward to long-term cooperation in the future. A new term that began to appear in Brazilian-Chinese dialogue was "strategic partner". Despite the ideological differences between the two countries, Brazil was recommended to adopt a pragmatic approach toward China (Guimarães & Silva, 2021). As far as Bolsonaro's first year in power (2019) was



concerned, regardless of his attitude towards China, Bolsonaro generally conducted pragmatic diplomacy with China along the lines of strategic partnership (Santoro, 2022). The participation of Chinese state-owned enterprises in the November 2019 oil auction was politically significant—without Brazilian government approval, only Petrobras would have participated in the operation due to operating rules (Rosa, 2019). But at the same time, although Bolsonaro signed multiple infrastructure development and agricultural trade agreements with Chinese companies, he did not reach any major agreements with China in economic and technological cooperation as some optimistic observers had predicted (Zheng, 2020).

Up to the end of 2019, Sino-Brazilian relations seemed to be improving, but after the Covid-19 epidemic broke out, the Bolsonaro government's attitude towards China changed again. 2020 is considered the tensest year for the political relationship between China and Brazil, and even triggered a diplomatic crisis (Sawicka, 2020). Members of Bolsonaro's government began openly attacking China on social media. Eduardo Bolsonaro, a federal police officer who is the son of President Bolsonaro, likened the Covid-19 outbreak to the Chernobyl disaster, and accused the communist regime of hiding the truth in the wake of the pandemic and claimed that "freedom is the solution" (Bolsonaro, 2020). Chinese Ambassador Yang Wanming and the Chinese Embassy in Brazil responded quickly on social media, accusing Eduardo Bolsonaro's remarks of being an "evil insult against China and the Chinese people" (Yang, 2020). Subsequently, the Chinese Embassy in Brazil issued a severely worded statement expressing strong condemnation of Eduardo Bolsonaro (Laio, 2020). The statement emphasized that Eduardo's remarks are likely to have a negative impact on bilateral relations. These official statements from China attracted the attention of the Brazilian Congress. Rodrigo Maia, President of the Brazilian House of Commons, apologized to the Chinese Ambassador for Eduardo Bolsonaro's remarks on behalf of the House of Commons on social media (Maia, 2020). Hamilton Mourão and Ernesto Araújo also emphasized in interviews that the deputy's personal opinion does not represent the government's position (Sawicka, 2020). A similar situation occurred again shortly after the US national security adviser visited Brazil in November. Eduardo Bolsonaro accused Huawei's 5G technology on Twitter of bringing espionage and cybersecurity problems to Brazil. Although the post was deleted, the Chinese Embassy responded in harsher terms, stating that Eduardo's stance could lead to "negative consequences and bear historical responsibility for disrupting the normality of the partnership between China and Brazil" (Embaixada da China, 2020). Instead of taking action to calm the situation, the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs preferred to criticize China for its offensive and disrespectful behaviour when it publicized its outrage on social media (de Sousa, Souza, da Fonseca, Carneiro, Abrão & dos Santos, 2020). Similarly, on the issue of the COVID-19 virus, President Bolsonaro himself has made no secret of his suspicion and made accusations against China. He has repeatedly stated that the coronavirus was deliberately created in a Chinese laboratory (Murakawa, 2021). He even explicitly hinted that the epidemic was a Chinese conspiracy in a public speech: "The military knows what chemical warfare, bacterial warfare and radioactive warfare are. Aren't we facing a new war? Which country has the highest GDP? I won't tell You. (Bolsonaro, 2021)"



It can be seen that Chinese diplomats in Brazil reacted to this situation with more confidence than in the past (Santoro, 2022). They chose to respond to critical remarks and demonstrate China's attitudes and views directly through the news or social media. This approach is considered the new "Wolf Warrior" Chinese diplomacy of the Xi Jinping years (Martin, 2021). It should be pointed out that this approach is not aimed at the bilateral relations between China and Brazil, but is a change in the overall style of China's diplomacy. Compared with the low-key diplomatic orientation adopted by China in the 1990s and early 2000s, China's diplomacy during the epidemic period was more robust (Martin, 2021). This exchange between Chinese diplomats and Brazilian politicians is also considered as being unprecedented. While China's assertive style of diplomacy spreads around the world, it also appears to be intensifying in Brazil (Santoro, 2022). This may be due to the fact that this is possible in the case of Brazil. Brazil's dependence on the Chinese market gives China more room to manoeuvre. For example, there is no fear that a national government will declare its diplomatic personnel *persona non grata* and deport them (Santoro, 2022). However, some scholars believe that in the face of deliberately biased remarks, the Chinese authorities are limited to issuing notes denying conspiracy theories and repudiating Sinophobia in Brazil. The lack of a tougher stance could be a signal to members of Bolsonaro's government that demonstrating Sinophobia has no real consequences (Quinan, Araujo & De Albuquerque, 2021). On the one hand, China does not want to break off friendly relations with Brazil, as that would have a huge negative impact on the mutual interests of the two countries. On the other hand, due to the change in the attitude of Brazilian leaders, which showed a trend of breaking away from the previous norms of interaction between China and Brazil, the Sino-Brazilian relation has also fluctuated. China has chosen to adopt a relatively tough attitude to try to maintain the relationship between the two countries under the original norms.

Bolsonaro's negative comments about China have not stopped. The narrative surrounding the COVID-19 viral disease has gradually shifted from the concept of "Chinese virus" to "Chinese vaccine." (Ramos, Leite & Mendonça, 2024). Health Minister Eduardo Pazuello announced his intention to purchase 46 million doses of Coronavac, a vaccine against COVID-19 from the Chinese laboratory Sinovac Biotech, tested in Brazil by the Butantan Institute. Less than 24 hours after the news, Bolsonaro fired his health minister and said the Brazilian government "will not buy" Coronavac (Farias & Gullino 2020). Bolsonaro's rationale is that "any vaccine must be scientifically proven by the Ministry of Health and certified by Anvisa before being made available to the public" (UOL, 2020). At the same time, another COVID vaccine was also in Phase 3 testing, but it not yet proved its efficacy, and not been authorized for use by Anvisa. That vaccine received a special approval of 1.9 billion reais from the Brazilian government for the purchase, production, and distribution of 100 million units of the vaccine (de Sousa et al., 2020). The president made no secret of his fear of China when considering vaccine: "We're not buying from China. I don't think it gives people a sense of security because of its origins. That's what we think" (Bolsonaro & Paraguassu, 2020). Bolsonaro's behaviour during the epidemic is considered to be a continuous use of social fears to transform false narratives into official national discourse and public policies. (Kalil I., Silveira, Pinheiro, Kalil A., Pereira, Azarias & Amparo, 2021)



Bolsonaro's comments led some key players to begin linking delays in deliveries of active pharmaceutical ingredients from China to the disastrous conduct of Brazilian diplomacy under Bolsonaro (Ramos, Leite & Mendonça, 2024). The president of the Butantan Institute, Dimas Covas said that the Bolsonaro government's attacks on China led to delays and reductions in the delivery of raw materials needed for vaccine manufacturing, and that multiple delays in sending immunizers could be understood as diplomatic retaliation (Oliveira, 2021). Chinese Ambassador to Brazil Yang Wanming denied such diplomatic retaliation and delayed delivery of the CoronaVac vaccine, saying that the delay was due to high demand for the vaccine (UOL, 2021). However, after Trump stepped down, Bolsonaro immediately changed his tone and showed favour to China. Bolsonaro said during the vaccine negotiations between China and Brazil that Brazil needed China and China needed Brazil, "I hope China can help Brazil regardless of past doubts" (Marques & Lázaro, 2021). He reiterated the trade relationship between China and Brazil and emphasized China's need to purchase agricultural products from Brazil. Domestically, political groups in Brazil have put pressure on the government to adjust bilateral relations. For example, telecom companies that do business with Huawei have pressured the Bolsonaro government not to implement major changes (de Sousa, Gajus, Porto, Freitas, Abrão, Rodrigues, Silva & Santos, 2022). The defeat of Donald Trump and the election of Joe Biden as President of the United States prevented Bolsonaro from establishing a good relationship with Biden, making alliance plans with Washington unfeasible (Berringer, Soprijo, Almeida, Mitake & Antoniazzi, 2021). Factors at home and abroad in Brazil caused the Bolsonaro government's change of attitude.

In general, during Bolsonaro's administration, he always regarded China as Brazil's political and ideological opponent. But when confronted by a real situation, especially trade and COVID-19, Bolsonaro has shown that his attitude towards China is not always consistent with his diplomacy. China's diplomatic stance has also become tougher. The Sino-Brazilian relationship was tense during Bolsonaro's administration and has continued to fluctuate. The Sino-Brazilian relation went through a period where it was not considered a priority (Lopes, Carvalho, Thales & Santos, 2022). The bilateral relationship was ultimately dominated by pragmatism and still maintained a certain degree of cooperation that was not completely destroyed. From China's perspective, the persistence of the Sino-Brazilian relation has been emphasized several times in diplomatic speeches, which shows that China attaches great importance to the long-term goal of establishing and maintaining a network of relations. In Sino-Brazilian relations, China and Brazil each obtained what they needed. It is true that the Bolsonaro government may have had different views on the benefits and power that Brazil could obtain in this relationship. But the Bolsonaro government does not seem to have been able to gain greater benefits from the changing relationship. China's attempt to maintain the original relationship status and resource exchange has also prevented the bilateral relationship from undergoing major changes due to the Bolsonaro government's governing philosophy.



## **The Lula government: friendly and close cooperation in the new era**

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva maintained good cooperative relations with China during his first two terms in power (2003-2010). This previously established good relationship laid a secure foundation for Sino-Brazilian relations after he took office again. For the Lula government, China is strategic for Brazil from both a political and economic perspective (Berringer & Belasques, 2020). For China, this means that Brazil and China have established and followed a set of behavioural norms in their interactions, and both sides are willing to continue to be bound by such norms and conduct a new round of continuous exchanges of interests. After the start of the new term, the Lula government believed that Brazil's foreign relations were negatively affected by the Bolsonaro government (Brasil, 2022). One of the important foreign policies of the Lula government has been to try to rebuild the tense relations with China (de Sousa, Abrão, & de Souza Porto, 2023). Lula said in a speech that Brazil hopes to establish a relationship with China that goes beyond economics and trade (Brasil, 2023b). This means that Brazil and China have again become strategically related in Brazil's global diplomacy. In 2022, Lula announced that China would be one of his first visit destinations after taking office (Chade, 2022), and China sent Vice President Wang Qishan to attend the inauguration ceremony of President Lula (China, 2022). This shows that China attaches great importance to bilateral relations and has not changed due to the ups and downs during the term of former President Bolsonaro. This was also considered to be a symbol of renewed political reconciliation between Brazil and China (de Sousa et al., 2023). After taking office, Lula quickly moved to repair relations with China. In March 2023, Brazil and China reached an agreement that they will no longer use the U.S. dollar as the intermediate currency in the future but will instead use their own currencies for trade settlements (Martello, 2023). Since China is Brazil's largest trading partner, this has a great impact on reducing trade costs between the two sides. In September, the first fully closed-loop transaction using the currencies of the two countries for trade settlement was realized (Sá, 2023). That is to say that, compared with their previous trade relationship, China and Brazil have expanded their cooperation to the financial field and bypassed the US dollar for transactions. In their interactions, the two sides have begun to expand the areas of norm-building and the influence of their relationship.

Although Lula's visit to China was postponed due to illness, it did not affect an eventual meeting between the leaders of the two countries. Lula visited China from April 12 to 15, 2023. The leaders of the two countries signed a series of cooperation agreements and issued a joint statement on deepening the comprehensive strategic partnership (China, 2023). Compared with the joint statement issued during Bolsonaro's visit to China, bilateral relations now showed a clear relaxation. The statement expressed the view that both parties believe that President Lula's visit was a complete success and is of great significance in the history of bilateral relations (China, 2023). Considering the specific content of the talks, Lula's visit involved more cooperation areas and more detailed plans. Whether in terms of discourse or specific measures, the relationship between China and Brazil became more positive during Lula's visit. At the same time, compared with former President Bolsonaro's visit to China, the agreement signed by Lula with China emphasized the field of industrial science and technology, especially communications, satellites and aerospace cooperation plans (China, 2024c). This is consistent with the Lula



government's mission to "reindustrialize Brazil and promote more competitive international integration" (Brasil, 2022).

This also triggered Brazil's consideration of improving the quality of bilateral relations when re-establishing close relations with China. As mentioned earlier, Brazil's exports to China mainly focus on bulk commodities, and it is necessary to seek diversification in commodities (Brasil, 2023a). However, considering the low competitiveness and complexity of the Brazilian economy, the main difficulty in increasing the export of high value-added products is structural (Rocha, de Oliveira, Porto, Neiva & Pina, 2022). Lula also attempted to improve the situation during his visit to China. The two sides signed an agreement on health requirements for animal protein trade, which is beneficial to Brazil's agricultural exports (Brasil, 2023a). However, it must be admitted that under the current sales situation of Brazil's national industry, it is difficult to realize the interests and diversification of Brazil's agricultural export base (de Sousa et al., 2023). In addition to the commercial aspect, the Lula government focuses on cooperation between China and Brazil for finding Chinese investment to achieve the country's goals of reindustrialization, job creation and technological advancement (Brasil, 2023b). In other words, Brazil hopes to seek more resources owned by China in the interaction and to be able to transform them into its own interests. This kind of interest acquisition is long-term oriented. In this model, the Sino-Brazilian relation becomes closer through continuous reciprocity.

Compared with the Bolsonaro government, the Lula government is more pragmatic and has a friendlier attitude towards China. In 2023, Brazil's exports to China will increase by 16.6%, reaching US\$104.31 billion. This increase significantly exceeded the 1.7% increase in Brazil's total exports (Exame, 2024). This reflects the strong and diverse business partnership between Brazil and China that continues to strengthen. In addition to this, although Brazil has chosen not to join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), it has expressed interest in studying the synergies between Brazil's development policies, investment plans and South American regional integration initiatives and the BRI. (23-6). For China, this does not affect the progress of Brazil-China relations. When meeting with Lula, Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that the two sides should strengthen the strategic alignment between the joint construction of the "Belt and Road" and Brazil's "re-industrialization" and "accelerated growth plan" (China, 2024a). 2024 marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Brazil. Wang Yi said in his speech that China and Brazil would work together to create the next "golden 50 years" of bilateral relations (China, 2024d). In addition, Celso Luiz Nunes Amorim, Chief Special Advisor to the President of Brazil, visited China at the end of May (China, 2024b). This shows that the Sino-Brazilian relation have become closer. Both China and Brazil have shown a positive attitude towards cooperation and the intention to maintain the long-term development of relations.

In general, the Lula government has repositioned the Sino-Brazilian relation after taking office. Brazil's attitude towards China has undergone significant changes. Faced with the friendly attitude shown by the Brazilian government, the Chinese government has responded equally positively. Changes in Brazil's foreign policy have also expanded cooperation between China and Brazil from agriculture to technology. It can be said that the Lula government's re-establishment of bilateral relations has achieved results. From



China's perspective, the bilateral relations between China and Brazil have a long-term foundation and will not be easily shaken. And out of long-term considerations for future development, even under the influence of the previous Brazilian president, China tends to maintain the previously established interaction model and maintain its interests. Lula's friendly attitude has repaired the previous tension in the Sino-Brazilian relation, making bilateral relations closer and allowing more exchanges and cooperation in various fields. Sino-Brazilian relations have entered a period of close cooperation.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Since the beginning of 2019, Sino-Brazilian relations have experienced tensions, and fluctuations, but now they have rebuilt a close and friendly relationship. It's clear that the changing attitudes of Brazilian leaders affect the Sino-Brazilian relation. Based on the Guanxi perspective, the previously built relations and trust between China and Brazil helped to reanimate current relations. The Bolsonaro government's view of China as an ideological rival has affected Brazil's attitude towards China. Therefore, the Bolsonaro government tried to reduce its interactions with China, and China was no longer Brazil's leading priority. This was so much so that during Bolsonaro's term, although China and Brazil had a number of agreements and cooperation exchanges, they were not as numerous or important as those of the later Lula government. As long as China's national sovereignty is not compromised, China's attitude towards Brazil remains friendly and cooperative, and this is also based on the previous bilateral relations between China and Brazil. When the Bolsonaro government repeatedly made negative remarks against China due to COVID-19, China showed a tougher attitude than in the past. Even so, when China responded to the Bolsonaro government, it emphasized the healthy and friendly development of Sino-Brazilian relations in the past, and at the same time tried to warn the Brazilian government to consider the overall situation and maintain a good environment for the development of bilateral relations.

The historical origins of bilateral relations are a recurring expression in China's official narrative. For China, bilateral relations and even multilateral relations are based on long-term orientation. As the explanation of Guanxi theory, this long-term oriented relationship builds trust through the interaction between the two parties, and even a specific model or norm, which provides a certain foundation and guarantee for future relationships. Under this model, even if bilateral relations fluctuate due to different diplomatic strategies of leaders, there is still some room for relaxation. When both parties change due to diplomatic strategies and political goals, the trust and models established through previous long-term relationships will also have an impact on new cooperation and negotiations. In the Sino-Brazilian relationship, Lula has reached cooperation and consensus with China during his previous two terms, establishing a foundation of trust, so much so that after Lula started his new term, he aimed to repair the Sino-Brazilian relations. On this basis, China quickly responded with positive feedback and expressed its willingness to deepen Sino-Brazilian relations.

Apart from official statements, neither China nor Brazil has taken direct actions to damage relations between the two countries. Whether it was the Bolsonaro government's criticism of China or China's counterattack against similar criticism, most of the steps



stop at the diplomatic discourse-level on official websites. Perhaps out of pragmatism, despite various criticisms of China by the Bolsonaro government, China has not taken any action to sever relations between the two countries. China and Brazil have close economic and trade ties. Obviously, the political strategies of the Bolsonaro government and the Lula government towards China were different. The Bolsonaro government tended to distance itself from China and approach closer to the United States. But such a strategy meant destroying the interaction model and interest exchange that China and Brazil had established over a long period. The Lula government chooses to continue to maintain the reciprocal model with China and tries to seek further development on this basis to establish a closer bilateral relationship. Whether it is the Bolsonaro government or the Lula government, when dealing with the Sino-Brazilian relations, they need to consider the actual impact of weakening or strengthening this relationship. Out of long-term considerations for bilateral relations, China is relatively cautious about diplomatic discourse or political measures that may affect bilateral relations. Regardless of whether China's diplomatic style is tough or not, at this stage, China does not want to damage Sino-Brazilian relations. Therefore, although the Sino-Brazilian relations were once strained due to the attitude of the Bolsonaro government, under the friendly attitude of the Lula government, China can restore its close ties with Brazil based on the trust and interaction model that has been established.

In general, China pays more attention to long-term interests and maintaining long-term relationships when establishing and developing diplomatic relations. A mutually beneficial situation can only be achieved when both sides can achieve resource sharing through interaction and transform it into their own interests. Only when both sides recognize that relationships and interactions can bring benefits to themselves and actively abide by the behavioural norms and profit models established through interaction can this relationship be sustained and deepened. When one side questions the relationship, as in the actions taken by the Bolsonaro government, it often causes fluctuations or even stagnation in the relationship. In the face of the other side's doubts, China may adopt different ways of diplomatic discourse, either tough or gentle. But no matter what diplomatic style, China prefers to maintain the existing mutually beneficial model. This also enabled the Lula government to smoothly ease the legacy of tense Sino-Brazilian relations from the Bolsonaro government and promote the expansion of China-Brazil interaction to more and new areas.

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