

## **A SEMIOTIC DECODING OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE BETWEEN CHINA AND PORTUGUESE-SPEAKING COUNTRIES**

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**Abstract**

This paper is the first in a series that examines how China engages in high-level political discourse (HLPD) via political speeches, bilateral and multilateral agreements, official documents, and media reports, with Portuguese-speaking countries (PSCs). Political discourse serves as a tool through which states convey policies, diplomacy, ideologies, and national image. For China, under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, there has been an explicit focus on building a robust discourse system to enhance its international communications and project itself as a peaceful, positive global power. In recent years, China has steadily increased its high-level exchange activities with PSCs, prompting this series of studies. The current paper focuses specifically on Portugal. Using official government sources, including websites of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, this study collected 32 textual samples of HLPD from high-level political communication events (HLPCEs) that took place between March 2013 and October 2022, during President Xi's first two terms in office. These events involved Xi Jinping, former Head of Government Li Keqiang, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi. The innovative aspect of this study lies in its use of semiotic analysis to decode the HLPD samples. This analysis concludes that China places significant emphasis on sustainable cooperation, particularly in trade and technology, while fostering people-to-people exchanges and human bonds.

**Keywords**

Portugal, China, Portuguese-speaking Countries, Political Narrative, Semiotics, Belt and Road Initiative (B&RI), International Relations.

**Resumo**

Este artigo é o primeiro de uma série que examina a forma como a China se envolve em discursos políticos de alto nível (DPN) através de discursos políticos, acordos bilaterais e multilaterais, documentos oficiais e relatórios dos media, com os países de língua portuguesa (PLP). O discurso político é um instrumento através do qual os Estados transmitem políticas, diplomacia, ideologias e imagem nacional. No caso da China, sob a liderança do Presidente Xi Jinping, tem havido um enfoque explícito na construção de um sistema de discurso robusto para melhorar as suas comunicações internacionais e projetar-se como uma potência global pacífica e positiva. Nos últimos anos, a China tem aumentado de forma constante as suas actividades de intercâmbio de alto nível com os CPS, o que motivou esta série de estudos. O presente documento centra-se especificamente em Portugal. Utilizando fontes oficiais do governo, incluindo sites do Ministério dos Negócios Estrangeiros, este estudo recolheu 32 amostras textuais de HLPD de eventos de comunicação política de alto nível (HLPCEs) que



ocorreram entre março de 2013 e outubro de 2022, durante os dois primeiros mandatos do Presidente Xi. Estes eventos envolveram Xi Jinping, o antigo Chefe de Governo Li Keqiang e o Ministro dos Negócios Estrangeiros Wang Yi. O aspeto inovador deste estudo reside na utilização da análise semiótica para descodificar as amostras do HLPD. Esta análise conclui que a China coloca uma ênfase significativa na cooperação sustentável, particularmente no comércio e na tecnologia, ao mesmo tempo que promove os intercâmbios interpessoais e os laços humanos.

### Palavras-chave

Portugal, China, Países de Língua Portuguesa, Narrativa Política, Semiótica, Iniciativa Faixa e Rota (B&RI), Relações Internacionais.

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## **A SEMIOTIC DECODING OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE BETWEEN CHINA AND PORTUGUESE-SPEAKING COUNTRIES<sup>1</sup>**

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### **1. Introduction**

The People's Republic of China and the Portuguese Republic (hereafter China and Portugal, respectively) have had more than 45 years of bilateral relations particularly over areas of trade and investment. In fact, their relations were first conducted via the Portugal-China Chamber of Commerce and Industry. In the last 25 years, there have been three main reasons to support close(r) ties between the two nations: first, it was the milestone retrocession of Macau to the Chinese sovereignty in 1999; second, China's reform and opening-up policy set a good tone for friendly cooperations. "Bringing in" foreign investment and Chinese enterprises "going out" form the rationale for this bilateral relationship. President Xi has continually emphasized this open approach to the Belt and Road Initiative (hereafter B&RI)—and Portugal signed a B&RI Memorandum (MoU) in 2018; third, against the backdrop of globalization, Portugal has been afforded prominence in China's geo-economic strategy towards the European Union (EU), as Portugal provides fast-track access to important EU market space (Fernandes et al., 2022, p. 68).

At the same time, Portugal is a participant of the B&RI, through which it seeks more cooperation opportunities. In November 2017, Portugal became the first EU country to establish a blue partnership with China. The two countries have jointly planned concrete cooperation and set up working groups, such as operating marine academic exchanges and establishing cooperative laboratories and shared centers for marine science. Likewise, China participates in constructing the Atlantic Joint Research Centre. These activities are making "China-Portugal Blue Partnership" a sort of branding to promote their relationship as a reference to all PSCs<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Portuguese-Speaking Countries



An examination of the discourse between China and Portugal will unveil insights into how the two interact politically. China has evolved into an important economic partner of Portugal (Xinhuanet, 2018). Consequently, on both sides, discussions mainly concern trade, investment, culture and economic cooperation, and that is reflected in China's high-level political discourse (hereafter HLPD). Given Portugal's relatively small market and desire for foreign investment, it is expected to continue to place a high political emphasis on strengthening economic ties with China. Simultaneously, bilateral political discussions may encompass matters such as EU-China relations, and these discussions may in turn lead to exploration of topics related to trade agreements such as the B&RI, intellectual property rights, and environmental sustainability.

After a brief introduction of Sino-Portuguese relationship, the authors put forward a foundation review of existing theories, which serves as a roadmap for developing methodological design. After this theoretical framework, we present a methodology for interpreting HLPD, including semiotics of textual analysis, followed by explaining what the Chinese HLPD<sup>3</sup> is building, with the consideration of two-state interaction. Finally, we conclude, drawing on China and Portugal's narrative cooperative preferences, the future development tendency.

## 2. Literature Review

The conceptual core of this research is to understand how the Chinese string together various discourses to build political narratives. The particular discourses we select to examine in this study are high-level political speeches.

Discourse transcends conversations: a discourse is a sequence of statements and other instruments that forge what is known as a "discourse world" or "discourse ontology". Discourers meticulously use words and language to build a narrative space, where ideas, information and other intended meanings are arranged to craft a specific version of reality, to be decoded by the audience (i.e., the receiver) (Chilton, 2004). Political discourses, in particular, hold great potential to influence if they are able to structure, even manipulate information, events and actions to craft stories—i.e., about who did what, to whom, when, where, and for what purpose; the characters and elements in the stories are the discourse referents, each playing a specific role based on its interrelations with others. Political discourses form the basis for these stories—narratives—to project a version of reality that suits a particular political agenda. In other words, using different discourses to form a storyline can become a platform for envisioning and launching political narratives (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). This very fact that discourse can be a formidable rhetorical tool to mold, steer and even ferment public beliefs and perceptions on society as well as the world is what political discourses take advantage of to turn intangible notions into reasoning and justifications for political actions (Chilton, 2004; Tannen et al., 2015). Such discourses can significantly influence public behaviors and

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<sup>3</sup> High-Level Political Discourse



decision-making regarding such matter as societal structures, national identity, security, and governance.

**Figure 1.** The Formation of Political Narratives

Types of Political Discourses ▶	Political Narrative ▶		Audiences ▶ Perceptions	
Congratulatory messages Political speeches Meetings Editorials (newspapers and magazines) Interviews (...)	Storyline Discourse referents "Good stories" Ideologies Power structures	Intended to foster positive public perspectives	Simplicity Appealing Positive Seeking retribution, Adherence and support	General Public Decision-makers Media Outlets
Source: Authors				

Narratives on the other hand are assemblages of discourses that are cherry-picked and sequenced into stories that appear coherent, logical and even convincing (Livholts and Tamboukou, 2015). As such, language and rhetoric are part and parcel of narratives, facilitating narratives' weaving together of events, characters, and settings to offer glimpses into both the personal and collective human layers beyond mere facts. Hinchman and Hinchman (1997) and Riessman (2008) underline the formidable capacity of narratives as their "ability to select, organize, and emphasize various discourse elements, thereby influencing the audience's interpretation".

Political narratives are logical sequences of political discourses within a certain political context, and typically have a well-defined structure (e.g., a chronology). Such narratives, motivated by political intentions, utilize contexts, characters, and plots to induce immediate, simple individual perceptions and stances. Political narratives that are particularly appealing and persuasive have a logical facade and the ability to transform political matters into comprehensible and emotionally compelling tales. Figure 2 illustrates how discourses and narratives intertwine in a political framework.

To understand the *narrative ability* (what politicians intend to communicate), *political reality* (the actual events), and their complex interplay that pertain to a political narrative requires narrative analysis (Shenhav, 2006, p. 247). For example, using B&RI-related narratives as a basis, Costa (2020, p. 27) suggests that narrative analysis is "critical because every political or social fact needs a story. A good story captures the reader or listener and maintains his or her curiosity to know more or even to participate. Consequently, a narrative is essential to have a process of communication and to induce reactions towards the narrated fact or story."

While narrative analysis focuses on storytelling, discourse analysis examines the use of language. Moreover, discourse analysis can be conducted through a semiotic lens to also study the signs and symbols embedded in the text to unveil their intricate meanings. Combining discourse analysis with semiotics can be particularly powerful for dissecting

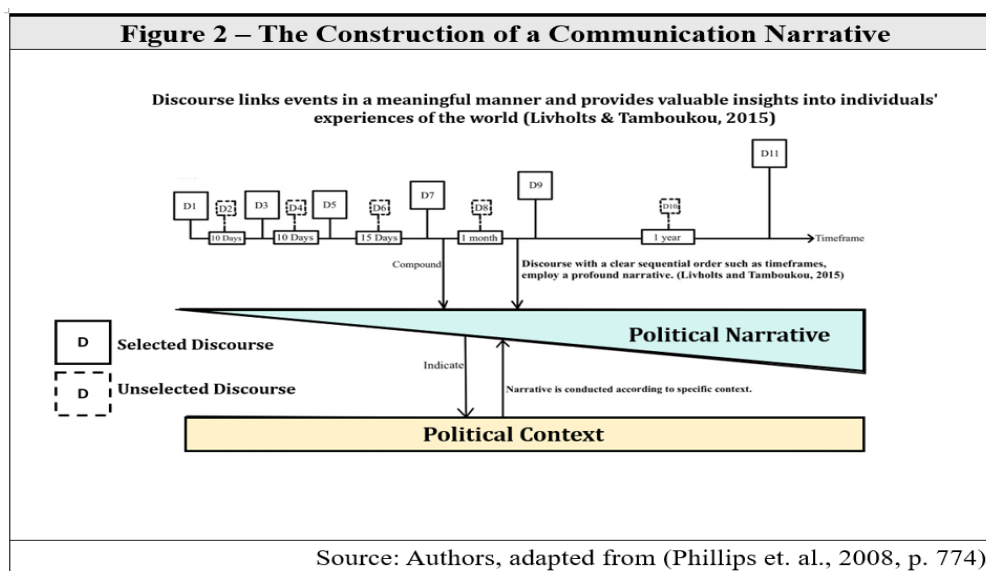


political narratives, as it examines the strategic use of symbols in crafting messages. These messages offer a deeper understanding on how narratives are constructed, conveyed, and are meant to be interpreted. In other words, they offer insights into the nature of the political communication, illuminating how it aims to influence public opinion and the political landscape.

For instance, Sengul's (2019) study on Australian right-wing populism showcases how linguistic choices and symbolic imagery are strategically woven to construct compelling narratives around themes like "national identity", "otherness", and "crisis". These narratives significantly impact public sentiment by framing national identity against perceived threats, thereby mobilizing support and directing political discourse. Similarly, using semiotics, El-Nawawy and Elmasry analyze the "strongman" archetype in leadership (2016) to expose the complex relationship between visual and textual symbols. In China's high-level political communications, we notice the repeated use of symbolic words such as "prosperity", "harmony", "common destiny", "(consultative) democracy" to bring a Confucian and patriarchal aspect into the political discourse. These symbolic words tap into social norms and values to elevate the emitters' appeal and reinforce their political legitimacy. By adopting a semiotic perspective, we can unveil the layered meanings within the political communications, uncovering the ideologies, power structures, and cultural schemas that drive the political narratives into actions.

In essence, semiotic discourse analysis allows for a nuanced examination of how political entities leverage language and symbols to construct meaning and narratives, establish authority, and influence societies. Through such scholarly inquiry, the multifaceted nature of political rhetoric and its impact on shaping political landscapes and public consciousness is more thoroughly understood. As asserted by Costa (2020, pp. 27–28):

*Through the merge of spaces, time and channels, political discourses became a product to be received by peers and by the public sphere in general. Media and political communication share attention and develop different channels of communication, which are mingled. The globalization of the communicational flows made of international communication a much attractive way to design international relations. Discourse became a crucial factor for the international narrative of the countries.*







Semiotic discourse analysis has previously been used to study the rhetoric of such political figures as former U.S. President Reagan (Lewis 1987), former Israeli Prime Minister Sharon (Shenhav 2005), Russian President Putin (Bacon 2012), and Indonesian President Widodo (Surdiasis & Eriyanto 2018). However, despite extensive research at the global level, political discourses and narratives in China remain understudied. It is therefore the intention of this paper to fill this gap and shed light on Chinese political communications. This research employs a qualitative analysis of Chinese political discourse vis-a-vis the Portuguese Republic. Specifically, we select samples of *political speeches*—which are public statements of political intentions toward a target audience, and are a type of political discourse that can become integral to the formation of political narratives—from specific events and arranged them chronologically. This sequence of speech samples illustrates a comprehensive narrative within the consideration of a broader political context.

## 2.1. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach that examines how language reflects, reinforces, or challenges power dynamics and social inequalities. Emerging in the late 1980s, CDA was spearheaded by scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak, and Teun van Dijk (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). This approach combines linguistic theory with social theory to analyze discourse as a form of social practice (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). CDA focuses on how discourse shapes and is shaped by social structures, power relations, and ideologies (Fairclough, 1995). It aims to uncover hidden meanings and power asymmetries in texts and conversations, revealing how language use can perpetuate or resist social hierarchies (Van Dijk, 1993). For instance, CDA has been used to analyze media reports, political speeches, and educational materials to identify instances of manipulation, discrimination, and exploitation (Wodak, 1997).

One of the key principles of CDA is that discourse is both socially constitutive and socially conditioned (Fairclough, 1992). This means that while discourse shapes social realities, it is also influenced by existing social structures and power relations. CDA researchers often employ a variety of methods, including textual analysis, ethnography, and critical linguistics, to examine how discourse operates in different contexts (Van Leeuwen, 2008). CDA is particularly concerned with making power relations visible and challenging dominant ideologies (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). By analyzing how language functions in various domains, such as politics, media, and education, CDA provides insights into how discourse can be used to maintain or challenge social inequalities and political hierarchy (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000).

When addressing the relationship between two states, CDA can be helpful by showing us if one of the parties was more active in setting the agenda process or if one of the states takes advantage of the weaknesses of the negotiation partner. Simultaneously, we can verify if the two parties' messages were clear and understood the same way.





### 3. Methodology

The study is divided into three parts: (1) first, data collection (sampling) within a timeframe, and transformation of raw materials into line codes (encoding); (2) second, HLPD analysis—using comparison to identify commanding themes under the ground theory methodological guidance; (3) third, the reason for unveiling the rationale of the high-level political narrative (HLPN), assembling all the HLPD codes (Table 1). In addition, this methodology allows for a comprehensive analysis of the bilateral communication events. By semiotically decoding the HLPD, the study highlights stories and identifies cooperative prospects between China and Portugal, contributing to decoding China and Portugal's cooperation objectives and their future development perspectives.

#### Step 1 Collecting and organizing sources of HLPN relating to High-Level Political Communicative Events (HLPCEs)

In this section, we explain the model that we use to analyze China's political narratives towards Portugal (Table 1).

**Step 1A:** We define the period of research as from March 2013 to October 2022, which aligns with the Chinese HoS's<sup>4</sup> three terms in office (see Figure 3). This timeframe is selected for two reasons: first, during this period, China and Portugal established a blue partnership (2017) and strengthened their 2005 comprehensive partnership; second, during this period under the leadership of President Xi, China became a global power, and it would be interesting to understand how China has been regarded by the PSCs.

Figure 3. The Chinese HoS's Terms in Office		
First term	Second term	Third term
From March 2013 to March 2018	From April 2018 to October 2022	From November 2022 to November 2026
Source: Authors		

**Step 1B:** We sampled only HLPCEs that involved three key Chinese figures — the HoS, President Xi Jinping; the Head of Government, former Prime Minister Li Keqiang; and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi — as they epitomize the apex of Chinese governance. In addition, we used political relevance as a criterion for selecting the discourse samples. The resulting dataset comprises samples from 32 HLPCEs which included, for example, talks held between Xi and President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa (Portugal) in April 2019, a congratulatory message that Li sent to Portuguese Prime Minister António Costa on his re-election in March 2022, and discussions held between Wang and Portuguese Minister

<sup>4</sup> Head of State.



of Foreign Affairs João Gomes Cravinho in September 2022, showing a diverse array of high-level diplomatic interactions.

**Step 1C:** To gather records of bilateral engagements, we examined official Chinese websites in detail, focusing on the English version of their content. These websites include those of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Xinhuanet. We classified the HLPCEs into three distinct types: (1) speeches and messages; (2) meetings; and (3) newspaper articles (NA). The use of different official documents offers us a tool to analyze and interpret the information retrieved from official channels, ensuring a comprehensive and structured investigation into the dynamics of bilateral engagements.

### **Step 2 HLPD analysis of each HLPCE5 – Employing NVivo 14 for textual analysis, and transforming content of HLPCEs into HLPD textual codes (Table 1)**

**Step 2A:** The coding process is facilitated by NVivo 14 (qualitative textual analysis software). With features including coding, thematic analysis, and visualization tools, NVivo 14 allows users to import large volumes of text data (e.g., documents, interviews, surveys, etc.) to be analyzed in depth.

Upon importing the text samples into NVivo 14, we created nodes to organize the data. In NVivo, nodes are containers that hold references to specific themes or categories identified during the research, while codes refer to the process of labeling parts of the text with these themes or categories. In this way, coding is the act of tagging or marking the data, whereas nodes serve as the organizational structure that stores all the coded references related to a particular theme. To organize the data according to the study periods, nodes were created for each period (e.g., Period 1: March 2013 –March 2018” and “Period 2: April 2018 – October 2022.”). These nodes helped to structure the data temporally, allowing us to analyze changes in political discourse over time. Within these broader period nodes, sub-nodes (or child themes) were created based on specific themes that emerged from the data. For example, a parent node labeled “Development” might have child nodes like “Sustainable Development” or “Practical Development” to capture more specific aspects of the theme. After coding the text samples, we queried the coded text to identify the most frequently appearing words and patterns, which helped reveal the underlying main themes. This parent-and-child node hierarchy lends more granularity and depth to the analysis, ensuring that the results are nuanced and provide a comprehensive understanding of the intricate themes embedded within the political narratives under examination.

**Step 2B:** Sentiments, which are the attitude or tone that coats each reference, are a pivotal component of the NVivo 14 analytical framework. This sentiment analysis involves categorizing the nature of the references related to each theme as either positive, negative, or neutral. Attributing such sentiment labels to the references also adds nuance to understanding the main and child themes, thereby enhancing the overall depth and richness of our interpretation of the political discourse.

**Step 2C:** The data gathered from steps 2A and 2B forms the basis for matrix coding

<sup>5</sup> High-Level Political Communication Events.



queries, leading to the creation of charts specific to Period 1 (Table 2) and Period 2 (Table 3) for the discussion section. A comprehensive overview of the entire period is presented in the Conclusion (Table 4), which contains a classification by sentiment of the various themes. The outcome of this analysis informs the subsequent discussion, where the distinctive characteristics characterizing each of the two periods of HLPD are thoroughly examined and expounded upon. This methodological approach enhances the granularity of the study, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the evolving sentiment dynamics within the political discourse.

### Step 3 Decoding of HLPN via Semiotics

**Step 3A:** This is where we combine discourse analysis with semiotics to examine the HLPD samples. Semiotic analysis is applied both to individual texts and to the broader political narratives they form. While semiotic discourse analysis uncovers meanings, symbols, and communicative elements in specific speeches or documents, semiotic narrative analysis reveals how these pieces connect to construct a cohesive political narrative. Using this approach, we can interpret both detailed discourse elements and the overarching high-level political narrative (HLPN) between China and Portugal.

**Step 3B:** It draws the conclusion by assessing China and Portugal's cooperation, development trends, and challenges. This step also outlines future directions for their relationship, emphasizing how political narrative can shape continued collaboration and growth.

Table 1 – Research Methodological Design (China → PSC: The Case of the Portuguese Republic)				
Text Analysis Themes, patterns, meanings and language structures	→ ↘	High Level Political Discourse Analysis (HLPD) The social and political decoding and relationships of the language: Audiences, keywords, figures of style, adaptation and impact (negative, positive or neutral). "(...) discourse as a particular way of talking about and understanding the world (or an aspect of the world)" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 1).	→ ↗	High Level Political Narrative (HLPN) Identification The assembly the analysis of several discourses and unveil the story they tell all together. Narratives (stories) (...) are discourses with a clear sequential order that connect events in a meaningful way for a definite audience and thus offer insights about the world and/or people's experiences of it. (Hinchman & Hinchman, in Elliott, 2005, p. 5)
Step 1 – Preparation: Data Selection, Collection, Organization and Sources		Step 2 – HLPD Analysis of Each HLPCE		Step 3 – Semiotic Decoding - The HLPN
1A: Setting the study timeline.		2A: Identify the keywords frequency in each HLPCE, to establish the theme correlation with the dominant message of the discourse.	Nvivo 14 Data Analysis Software	3A:  (ALL CE TOGETHER)  ↓ Apply the semiotic decoding of CE, to unveil the HLPN, as the result of the constructed sense of whole HLPD.
1B: Select all relevant High-Level Political Communication Events (HLPCE) originated in China and politically addressed to the Portuguese Republic: (1) Speeches and Messages (SM); (2) Meeting Transcripts (MT); (3) Newspaper Articles (NA).		2B: Decoding keywords adapted or not and its perceived impact in (1) Positive; (2) Neutral; (3) Negative.		
1C: Identify the HLPCE official sources in English.		2C: Evaluate keywords in the political context.		3B: Identify the China's cooperative preference, future development tendency and challenges may meet during engagement with Portugal.
Source: Authors – version 24.				



## 4. Discussion and Findings

This section decodes themes from the HLPDs between China and Portugal during the first two terms of Chinese President Xi's tenure (March 2013 to March 2018, and April 2018 to October 2022). Significant shifts in crucial themes relating to the three perspectives applied above can be observed (Tables 2 and 3).

### (1) Between March 2013 and March 2018

In this period, the HLPDs between China and Portugal concentrated on five central themes (see Table 2): **cooperation**, **relations**, **development**, **exchanges**, and **market** (these were the five most frequently appearing codes), each offering a distinct perspective on the evolving dynamics between the two nations.

**Cooperation** emerges as a thematic linchpin that not only lends an organizing principle to the collaborative efforts between China and Portugal, but also accentuates the intrinsically multifaceted nature of their bilateral ties. There is a particularly noteworthy emphasis on *practical cooperation*, which comprises a diverse array of initiatives to foster economic and strategic collaborations. However, while references to the main theme of cooperation and its child themes have predominantly positive sentiments which highlight the constructive nature that is part and parcel of collaborations, most of these references also carry a discernible neutrality stemming from cautiousness and pragmatism. (There is one negative reference, which underscores the complexity inherent in navigating cooperative endeavors.)

The frequent mention of "practical cooperation" not only spotlights the diversity in initiatives but also reflects the pragmatism in their approach toward economic and strategic collaboration. One source, for example, notes Chinese President Xi as saying:

*[I h]ope that both sides take this as an opportunity to deepen practical cooperation in such areas as economy and trade, technology, investment, agriculture and animal husbandry, tourism and maritime affairs and to promote the [sic] China-Portugal relations to a new level (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2014).*

Under the theme of *relations*, China-Portugal ties engenders more pronounced positivity in sentiments. This positivity does not stem from recognizing the inherently constructive nature of cooperation, but rather results from diplomatic achievements and optimism in the trajectory of the two countries' relationship. Moreover, there is a notable absence of negative references associated with relations, which reinforces the generally optimistic tone. However, there is also a substantial number of neutral references to suggest a certain cautiousness in optimism toward the peace and wellness of the ever-evolving political environment between the two nations. For instance, in 2016, as then Chinese Head of Government Li said, China and Portugal's bilateral relations would always maintain stability and health, and place emphasis on positive diplomatic achievements (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016c).



On the other hand, the theme of *development* emerges as a nexus of common development and sustainable progress. References to *development* are predominantly—but not overtly—positive (there are no negative references) and underscore a shared commitment to economic, social, and political progress. A case in point is the recurrent child theme, *common development*. It is under this theme that Forum Macao has, since being established in 2013, played an irreplaceable role in boosting economic and trade cooperation, facilitating cultural exchanges, as well as promoting development in both China (including the Macao SAR) and the PSCs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016a).

Narratives in the realm of *exchanges* unravel a multifaceted interaction spanning the cultural, political, and personnel dimensions. Here, exchanges between China and Portugal have induced some positive sentiments to underline the richness and depth of these interactions, but a considerably larger number of neutral references (though no negative references) can be construed as only a generally optimistic tone, highlighting a nuanced assessment of the opportunities and challenges embedded in such exchanges. For instance, an emphasis on cultural exchanges signals a positive tone, as China intensifies cultural exchanges with Portugal from high-level to personal (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016b).

*Market* is a main theme that relates exclusively to economics, and highlights potential areas of collaboration and market openness between China and Portugal. The positive sentiments here may signify a presence or even abundance of economic opportunities, but the apparent neutral and negative references here also shows cautiousness in both approach and outlook pertaining to economic collaborations, marking a departure from the predominantly positive tone in *cooperation* and *exchanges*. This cautiousness may be attributed to the complexities associated with market-related endeavors. For example, there is a focus on *third-party market cooperation*—e.g., in 2016, then Chinese Head of Government Li called on both China and Portugal to “develop third-party markets and promote cooperation in technology jointly” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2016a)—which underscores a circumspect optimism toward economic collaborations.

Overall, unveiled in Table 2 is a dynamic tapestry of China-Portugal relations characterized by cooperation, diplomatic relations, developmental aspirations, multifaceted exchanges, and economic considerations. While general positivity threads through *cooperation*, *relations*, and *exchanges*, the sentiments and reception toward each theme is more nuanced. The fact that *relations* and *development* have no negative references suggests optimism in outlook, while the evident caution in *market* points to a more measured approach toward economic collaborations. Understanding these nuances contributes to a comprehensive view of the complex diplomatic landscape between China and Portugal expressed through the political narratives during this period.

**Table 2.** Analysis on Sino-Portuguese HLPN from March 2013 to March 2018

Parent theme	Five most frequently mentioned child themes	Total number of references (among 32 events)	Sentiment		
			P o s i t i v e	N e g a t i v e	N e u t r a l
<b>Cooperation</b>	practical cooperation, third-party market cooperation, investment cooperation, multilateral cooperation, commercial cooperation	<b>45</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Relations</b>	bilateral relations, China-Portugal relations, EU-China relations, Portugal relations, political relations	<b>25</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Development</b>	common development, sustainable development, development strategies, development fund, development achievements	<b>23</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Exchanges</b>	cultural exchanges, high-level exchanges, Portugal-China exchanges, political exchanges, personnel exchanges	<b>14</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Market</b>	third-party market cooperation, mutual market openness, financial market, European market, market potential	<b>10</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>5</b>

Source: Authors

## (2) From April 2018 to October 2022

From April 2018 to October 2022, high-level China-Portugal relations unfolded through a number of themes, each adding nuance to the diplomatic discourse: *cooperation*, *relations*, *development*, *exchanges*, which have also been featured in the previous period, as well as *partnership*, *trade*, and *trust*.

Of these themes, *cooperation* takes precedence as it amasses a notable number of references to reflect an intensification of commitment between the two nations. The five most prominent child themes—*practical cooperation*, *third-party market cooperation*, *bilateral cooperation*, *maritime cooperation*, and *economic cooperation*—exemplify the multifaceted nature of the collaborative efforts between China and Portugal, while the predominantly positive sentiments associated with these themes acknowledge not only the beneficial outcomes that such collaborations have already achieved but also the strategic cooperations that the two nations can look forward to. For example, as Chinese President Xi stated, China and Portugal should “lead the way in growing the blue economy





by promoting maritime cooperation” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2018a).

As in the previous period, *relations*, which encompasses China-Portugal, China-EU, and international relations, remains a pivotal theme of the political narrative in the second period. Sustained diplomatic engagement is evident from the predominantly positive sentiments that underscore achievements in this regard, while the minimal number of negative references corroborates the notion that the overall outlook is optimistic. Specific attention on China-EU relations—e.g., in 2019, Chinese President Xi said: “It is believed that the Portuguese side will also continue to play an active role in maintaining the right direction of China-Europe relations” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2019a)—further contextualizes and reveals a particular layer of nuance in the geopolitical dynamics as well as the broader diplomatic landscape.

*Development* continues to be a theme of focus as it embodies both sides’ aspirations for mutual growth, and its five main child themes, *development strategies*, *common development*, *ocean development*, *long-term development*, and *global development*, underscore a commitment to sustainable progress. However, while positive references outnumber negative ones, the fact that the latter is present, coupled with a significant number of neutral references suggests thoughtful cautiousness toward long-term developmental initiatives. In particular, references to *global development*—for example, in 2021, Chinese HoS Xi said, “China has always worked to safeguard world peace, contribute to global development, and preserve international order” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2021)—show the visionary nature of *development*-themed narratives.

*In terms of exchanges, the political narrative unfolds along high-level exchanges, friendly exchanges, cultural exchanges, bilateral exchanges, and personnel exchanges (these were the top five child themes)—a multifaceted spectrum that shows the richness and depth of the interactions between China and Portugal. Moreover, these interactions, especially the cultural ones, are characterizable by positive sentiments. This (and the absence of negative references) is in line with the overall positive outlook in bilateral interactions, which is evident via references such as Chinese HoS Xi’s expectations of the two countries “to expand bilateral exchanges and cooperation in the fields of economy, trade and culture”, and of Portugal to continue to support the B&RI and be a well-positioned hub of the initiative in Europe (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2018a).*

*A partnership-based narrative—encompassing comprehensive strategic partnership, blue partnership, future-oriented partnership, and China-EU partnership—emerged in this period to show a diversification and evolvement of collaborations between China and Portugal. For example, in 2018, Chinese President Xi met with Portuguese President Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa and Prime Minister Antonio Costa. Together they reviewed both sides’ experience of developing bilateral relations. They also “drew blueprints for future cooperation, and agreed to intensify high-level exchanges, deepen political*





*mutual trust, improve the level of cooperation, consolidate traditional friendship, and enrich the connotation of comprehensive strategic partnership” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2018b). Such is the positive tone that overlays the theme of partnership, particularly references to strategic partnership.*

Economic dimensions come to the forefront through the theme of *trade*, which encompasses *free trade, two-way trade, multilateral trade, key trading partner, and international trade*. With 24 references, this theme signifies a concerted effort to strengthen economic ties. Positive sentiments highlighting economic opportunities are balanced by a few negative and a number of neutral references, reflecting cautiousness toward both opportunities and challenges in trade. This tone is evident in, for example, then Head of Government Li’s comment in 2019:

*We are willing to work with European Union (EU) countries, including the Portuguese side, to jointly uphold multilateralism and free trade, strengthen cooperation under the framework of cooperation between China and the EU and between China and Portuguese-speaking countries, and further intensify communication and coordination the United Nations and other multilateral frameworks to jointly safeguard the world peace, stability and development (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2019b).*

Finally, *trust* serves as a foundation for diplomatic engagements. With 20 references, the emphasis on *mutual trust* signifies its pivotal role. Positive sentiments underscore the importance of mutual confidence, while the absence of negative references indicates an optimistic expectation. Taking Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang’s words as example:

*Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Portugal nearly four decades ago, both sides have always enjoyed mutual respect, mutual understanding, mutual trust, and mutual support, as well as respected and accommodated each other’s core interests and major concerns, becoming a model of mutual learning and win-win cooperation between China and European countries as well as between the Eastern and Western civilizations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018c).*

This analysis of HLPDs in China-Portugal relations during Period 2 (Table 3) illuminates an intensified commitment and nuanced dynamics. While *cooperation* and *relations* continue to dominate, themes like *development, exchanges, partnership, trade, and trust* reveal a complex and evolving tapestry, and the predominantly positive sentiments underscore an optimistic attitude.

**Table 3.** Period 2 (April 2018 to October 2022) China and Portugal's HLPN Analysis

Themes	Most frequently mentioned child themes	Total number of References (among 32 Events)	Sentiment		
			P o s i t i v e	N e g a t i v e	N e u t r a l
<b>Cooperation</b>	practical cooperation, third-party market cooperation, bilateral cooperation, maritime cooperation, and economic cooperation	92	17	7	68
<b>Relations</b>	bilateral relations, China-Portugal relations, diplomatic relations, China-EU relations, and international relations	60	20	1	39
<b>Development</b>	development strategies, common development, ocean development, long-term development, and global development	38	11	4	23
<b>Exchanges</b>	high-level exchanges, friendly exchanges, cultural exchanges, bilateral exchanges, and personnel exchanges	33	10	0	23
<b>Partnership</b>	comprehensive strategic partnership, blue partnership, future-oriented partnership, and China-EU partnership	24	6	2	16
<b>Trade</b>	free trade, two-way trade, multilateral trade, key trading partner, and international trade	24	11	3	10
<b>Trust</b>	mutual trust	20	9	0	11

Source: Authors

Using the lengths of CDA, we identify a hidden rationale and several messages that shape the political discourse. There is a deliberate hidden message that frames the entire narrative in terms of inclusive and exclusive areas of bilateral interaction. The inclusive narrative highlights the positive benefits associated with development and remains open to further advancements. This narrative promotes cooperation and mutual growth, emphasizing the potential for continued collaboration and progress.

On the other hand, the hidden exclusive narrative signals an unwillingness to expand the high-level political discourse (HLPD) to other areas of diplomatic engagement. This reluctance suggests a desire to maintain the current diplomatic status quo, avoiding



deeper or broader interactions that could lead to significant changes in the existing power dynamics, also corresponding to the permanent dynamics of the international environment. By keeping certain areas of engagement off the table, the exclusive narrative aims to preserve established relationships and prevent potential disruptions, furthermore preventing possible disruptions resulting from an unstable agenda setting that could reflect the different economic or political power each State has.

### (3) Comparative Discussion

#### 3.1 Economic Cooperation:

In the first period (March 2013 to March 2018), the discourse focused on economics-related themes like *cooperation* and *market*. Strategies for *common development* and exploration of various markets, with a particular emphasis on *third-party market cooperation*, were consistently highlighted. Notably, Portugal's strategic geographic location along the B&RI has rendered it a significant partner for China's global trade and investment endeavors. China, recognizing Portugal as an essential gateway to Europe, endeavors to enhance maritime cooperation, tapping into the nation's historical maritime influence.

In the second period (April 2018 to October 2022), the researchers observed a distinct evolution in the discourse surrounding economic cooperation. Themes like *bilateral cooperation* and *economic cooperation* took center stage, signaling a stronger emphasis on fostering collaboration across various sectors. *Trade* in particular was a significant theme that reflected a broader strategy aimed at global trade partnerships and strong advocacy for free trade. A pivotal moment during this period was the elevation of China and Portugal's collaboration to a comprehensive strategic partnership, underscoring China's recognition of Portugal's growing global importance and its multifaceted role as a valuable ally across trade, culture, and diplomacy.

In the context of trade, data has shown that Portugal consistently maintained a deficit with China from 2013 to 2021 (Eurostat, 2023). This trend, despite the occasional fluctuations, showcases an overall upward trajectory in trade in services between the two nations. The signing of the B&RI MoU in 2018 was a significant turning point for bilateral trade in services, highlighting the instrumental role of the B&RI in enhancing economic ties (Ministry of Commerce People's Republic of China, 2018; Leandro, 2023).

The B&RI emerged as a transformative opportunity, perceived by both China and Portugal, to deepen their commercial cooperation. Leveraging their historical ties, both nations have sought to intensify collaboration across various domains through this initiative (Leandro, 2023), and the B&RI provides an overarching framework for investment, trade, and multi-level cooperation, particularly in major infrastructure projects between them. As the driving force behind the B&RI, China envisions not only infrastructural development but also a strategic move to bolster its global position and achieve a sustainable and prosperous society. This initiative has transcended conventional boundaries, offering mechanisms for global governance on both tangibles and intangibles, thereby reshaping the landscape of international relations (Leandro & Duarte, 2020).



China emphasizes strategically venturing into third-party markets, with Portugal playing an irreplaceable part in amplifying China's influence in this domain. Forum Macao notably emerges as a key platform for collaborations between China and PSCs (the PSCs together constitute approximately 7% of the global territories above sea level, surpassing China's 6.3%, and their excellent locations allow them to be promising partners for China). Such collaborations represent extensive prospects in natural resources and marine industries within the PSCs. Portugal has astutely recognized the potential of Sino-Portuguese economic collaboration since the advent of Forum Macao. In turn, Portugal is perceived not only as an entry point to the European Union but also as a catalyst for triangular cooperation with the PSCs, a symbiotic relationship that promotes economic cooperation and strategic partnerships involving China and the PSCs (Leandro, 2023).

### 3.2 Bilateral Relations and Diplomacy

In the domain of bilateral relations and diplomacy during the first period, the discussions primarily centered around *relations* and *development*. The discourse underscored the significance of bilateral relations, particularly in the context of the B&RI, which Portugal has officially endorsed. Portugal's proactive engagement demonstrated its willingness to align with China's long-term development vision and foster stronger diplomatic ties. The emphasis on development strategies was indicative of a shared aspiration for sustainable growth and mutual economic prosperity.

In the second period, the discourse broadened to include *diplomatic relations*, *China-EU relations*, and *international relations*. This widening scope indicated China's increasing prominence in global affairs, which aligned with its rise as a major global actor. Notably, *trust* emerged as a significant theme to show that both nations recognize the importance of nurturing stronger ties through promoting transparency and cooperation in various domains.

Noteworthy events marked significant milestones in Sino-Portuguese relations. In 2018, a joint statement was issued to strengthen their comprehensive strategic partnership and formalize their commitment. The signing of a B&RI MoU in the same year further solidified their collaboration. In July 2021, a significant diplomatic exchange took place, as China and Portugal held their first round of strategic dialogue at the foreign minister level. This dialogue aimed to enhance cooperation in several critical fields such as scientific and technological innovation, materials, marine, language, and cultural heritage. Portugal's distinction as the second EU country to establish foreign minister-level strategic dialogue with China underscores the depth of their engagement (Leandro, 2023).

The relationship between China and Portugal has been marked by other milestones, including China's support for Antonio Guterres's candidacy for the United Nations' Secretary-General, first in 2016 and again in 2021 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2016d; Xinhuanet, 2021). These milestones highlight the collaborative and supportive dynamics that characterize their interactions, further reinforcing their relationship.



### 3.3 Cultural Exchanges and Soft Power

Cultural exchanges and soft power have been a mainstay of the discourse between China and Portugal throughout the two periods of analysis. The discourse initially centered around *exchanges*, which showed the two sides' keen interest in enhancing cultural understanding and exploring potential markets. In particular, cultural exchanges signify the two nations' mutual desire for growth and cooperation.

An essential aspect of these cultural exchanges was personnel exchanges. Over the years, both China and Portugal have taken strategic steps to strengthen educational ties and facilitate academic interactions (Leandro, 2023). For instance, in 2013, China and Portugal signed a protocol aimed at simplifying the mutual recognition of academic diplomas and encouraging Chinese students to study abroad. Subsequently, in 2018, a cooperation memorandum devoted key points to the education sector, indicating their commitment to academic collaborations. Moreover, the establishment of "language campuses" such as Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms contributes to promoting China's cultural transmission in Portugal. These establishments have actively engaged with academic institutions, local schools, and education centers to foster a deeper understanding of the Chinese language and culture to residents (China Daily, 2019; DIG Mandarin, 2023; França, 2021). Exchange of cultural knowledge was further enriched through programs in language and international studies offered in Portuguese academic institutions as well as pilot programs of the Chinese language implemented in public and private secondary schools.

The extensive cultural exchanges and strategic educational initiatives underscore the concerted effort by both China and Portugal to deepen understanding and appreciation of each other's cultures, as well as to strengthen their relationship on multiple fronts. These stand as a testament to the enduring nature of their engagement and the value they place on intercultural conversation and cooperation.

## 4. Conclusion (highlights and future prospects)

In conclusion, this analysis to decode the political discourse between China and Portugal has elucidated a nuanced narrative. Economic cooperation forms the solid foundation of their engagement, reflecting a strategic alignment of their interests on the global stage. Bilateral relations and diplomacy serve as the conduit for realizing these cooperative goals, emphasizing the importance of direct dialogue and collaboration. Embedded within this discourse is a prominent focus on cultural exchanges and soft power dynamics, reflecting their commitment to mutual understanding and influence, thereby illustrating the multifaceted nature of their evolving relationship.

During the two terms in office of Chinese President Xi, from March 2013 to October 2022, in examining China and Portugal's high-level political discourse through the lens of economic cooperation by NVivo 14 (Table 3), bilateral relations and diplomacy, and cultural exchanges and soft power. The vivid narratives emerge, revealing the nuanced dynamics and aspirations that shape their engagement.

**Table 4.** Analysis on China and Portugal's HLPN from March 2013 to October 2022

Themes	Most frequently mentioned child themes	Total number of References (among 32 HLPCEs)	Sentiment		
			P o s i t i v e	N e g a t i v e	N E U T R A L
<b>Cooperation</b>	practical cooperation, third-party market cooperation, maritime cooperation, multilateral cooperation	137	25	8	104
<b>Relations</b>	bilateral relations, China-Portugal relations, Portugal-China Relations, China-EU relations, cooperative relations	85	25	1	59
<b>Development</b>	development strategies, common development, sustainable development, ocean development, global development	61	24	4	33
<b>Exchanges</b>	cultural exchanges, high-level exchanges, bilateral exchanges, political exchanges, nongovernmental exchanges	47	14	0	33
<b>Partnership</b>	comprehensive strategic partnership, blue partnership, future-oriented partnership, China-EU partnership	30	6	2	22
<b>Trade</b>	free trade, two-way trade, global trade, bilateral trade, multilateral trade	28	14	5	9
Source: Authors					

Economic cooperation stands at the forefront, as indicated by the prominence of the theme *cooperation* in the discourse, mentioned a staggering 137 times. This reveals a strategic orientation towards fostering practical and fruitful collaborations. The examples of practical cooperation, third-party market cooperation, and maritime cooperation highlight the diverse avenues for economic collaboration. These initiatives suggest a concerted effort to leverage each other's strengths in global trade and development. Trade, the sixth most frequently mentioned theme, further underscores their commitment to fostering economic interdependence and facilitating global trade partnerships. It suggests a concerted effort to align their goals, leveraging each other's strengths in trade and development. Notably, the phrase "multilateral cooperation" suggests a broader ambition to extend economic engagements beyond bilateral relations, encompassing a global network of partnerships.





In parallel, the discourse underscores the paramount importance of bilateral relations and diplomacy, mentioned 85 times. The frequent use of phrases such as “bilateral relations,” “China-Portugal relations,” and “Portugal-China relations” emphasizes the significance of direct communication and cooperation between the two nations. This discourse emphasizes the essential role of diplomatic interactions in forging stronger bonds and facilitating agreements that promote shared interests. Besides, “cooperative relations” reinforces the intent to cultivate a mutually beneficial relationship, where collaboration and understanding take center stage, further underlining the importance of diplomacy in advancing their shared goals. Embedded within this discussion of cooperative relations is the recurring theme of partnership (30 times), specifically within the context of bilateral relations and diplomacy. This highlights the intent to elevate the relationship to a strategic and comprehensive level. The term “comprehensive strategic partnership” underscores Sino-Luso’s close and healthy relationship, reflecting a commitment to deep engagement in various domains such as trade, economics, culture, and politics, promoting a multifaceted alliance for mutual growth and prosperity.

Cultural exchanges and soft power also emerge as significant aspects of the discourse, with the theme *exchanges* appearing 47 times. This reflects a pronounced focus on fostering cultural understanding and political dialogue. Phrases like “cultural exchanges,” “high-level exchanges,” and “political exchanges” signify a conscious effort to promote mutual understanding and cooperation through cultural interaction.

China and Portugal share a dynamic relationship with a strong focus on economic cooperation, a fact that has gained increasing importance as China’s global influence continues to expand. The engagement between these nations extends beyond mere economic transactions, encompassing strategic partnerships and collaborative ventures. In recent years, both countries have actively pursued economic agreements and partnerships, aiming to bolster trade and investment ties. China’s ambitious B&RI has piqued Portugal’s interest due to its strategic geographical position, presenting an opportunity for enhanced trade and connectivity. Portugal, with its well-established port infrastructure, particularly in Lisbon and Sines, emerges as a favorable partner who is aligned with China’s maritime trade objectives (Wise, 2020).

Portugal, as an EU member, views economic engagement with China as advantageous for capitalizing on China’s growing consumer market and investment potential. The two nations have explored cooperative ventures in sectors such as renewable energy, technology, and finance, seeking avenues for mutual growth. Portugal’s stability and economic progress position it as an attractive investment destination for China that is aligned with China’s strategy of diversifying its global economic engagements (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Barbados, 2021).

However, the economic collaboration prompts considerations regarding potential geopolitical influence and economic interdependence. Portugal, in line with other EU nations, carefully manages this aspect to ensure that economic partnerships with China adhere to EU regulations and do not compromise national and regional interests. Striking a balance between economic benefits and the EU’s concerns remains a challenge facing China-Portugal relations (Faget, 2019).

In addition, the political discourse is shaped by both inclusive and exclusive narratives.





The inclusive narrative fosters development and openness to new opportunities, while the exclusive narrative seeks to maintain the status quo by limiting the scope of high-level political discourse. This dual approach reflects a strategic balancing act, where the benefits of cooperation are promoted, but the boundaries of engagement are carefully managed to avoid unsettling the existing diplomatic framework.

Looking ahead, it is anticipated that China and Portugal will continue to nurture economic ties while addressing concerns related to fairness, sustainability, and alignment with international norms. Maintaining stability between economic cooperation and preserving national and regional interests will be vital as they navigate the evolving dynamics of their relationship within the intricate global landscape (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2022).

Similarly, the relationship between China and Brazil presents a fascinating study of how HLPD shapes bilateral cooperation, which will be explored in future research.

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