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Navigating Political Change in Argentina

By Juan Pablo Cardenal¹

CHINA

INTRODUCTION China's inroads in Argentina have been truly remarkable during the last five years. In that time, China has established a presence in almost every sphere of life in the Latin American country. The economy is the most obvious one: Bilateral trade reached US\$14.8 billion in 2016, while a combination of Chinese loans and investments is behind some of the most vital national projects of the coming years. Politically, ties between Buenos Aires and Beijing are experiencing a golden age, even after elections at the end of 2015 swung power from one end of the political spectrum to the other.

An informal indicator of the growing relationship between China and Argentina is the Chinese community of roughly 180,000,² which began to migrate in significant numbers to Argentina less than three decades ago and has already become Argentina's fourth-largest immigrant community, and the largest from a non-bordering country. Notably, the second generation of Chinese-Argentines is taking on a more prominent role in Argentine society.

Having developed strong economic and political ties with Argentina, the Chinese government is now more active in areas where it traditionally has been less likely to be involved. "To consolidate their position in the country, they cannot look scary," explains one China analyst in Buenos Aires. Thanks to its own form of soft power,³ China is more visible than ever before: It holds greater sway over the local media; it has built up strong links with the academic community, including a network of devoted scholars; and it monopolizes almost every aspect of Chinese culture in Argentina.

More concretely, Beijing closed deals with some of the main media groups in the country, particularly under former president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, and is taking the first steps toward gaining visibility on Argentine television. In the academic sphere, more than 25 Argentine

universities and academic institutions have cooperation and exchange programs in place with Chinese counterparts, while eighteen others offer studies on contemporary China. Culturally, the Chinese embassy has taken control over Chinese New Year celebrations in Buenos Aires, an event that reaches out to the general public and attracts several hundred thousand people every year.

In addition to all of the above, China's steady penetration of Argentina is also linked to Beijing's effective people-to-people diplomacy. Influential elites of all fields now have connections with Chinese peers and are regularly invited to visit China, too. Another good indication of China's efforts in Argentina is how active the Chinese ambassador has been in personally pushing China's soft power agenda.

Since presenting his diplomatic credentials in September 2014, Ambassador Yang Wanming has visited local newsrooms eight times, authored fourteen op-eds, and granted ten interviews to local media. He met with executives and participated in events organized by foundations and think tanks 21 times, and engaged personally with universities at least five times. Yang held meetings with representatives of political parties eight times and also paid no less than fourteen visits to members of Congress. He also hosted official receptions in China's embassy in Buenos Aires, attended a number of seminars, and met with representatives of different business chambers.⁴

In this context, the development of closer ties with China is generally well-accepted and faces little resistance in Argentina. Domestic politics are key in understanding why this is happening. General elections at the end of 2015 resulted in a major shift of power. Up to that moment, president Cristina Kirchner and, previously, her husband Nestor Kirchner, had cumulatively been in power for twelve years, a time during which the society became increasingly polarized. The Kirchners' populist and protectionist economic policies ended up severely hurting the country's economy and finances. This coincided with Argentina's disputes with the West over repayment of its debt, which further isolated the country internationally when its access to international financing was cut off.

This was a crucial factor that spurred Argentina to break away from the Western orbit, moving closer to China and other authoritarian countries such as Russia, Iran, and Venezuela. Diplomatic ties between Argentina and China intensified at the same rate that Argentina's relationship with the United States and Europe deteriorated. This was consistent with Beijing's decision to upgrade the bilateral relationship in 2014, when Argentina became one of only five Latin American countries to enjoy a comprehensive strategic partnership with China.⁵ In the final months of Cristina Kirchner's mandate, more than thirty agreements and memorandums of understanding were signed between the two nations. Some of these deals were highly controversial, including a fifty-year concession to build and run a space facility in the country's remote West, China's first such facility in the Southern Hemisphere.⁶

At that time, Beijing had already provided US\$20 billion in loans to finance a handful of large-scale infrastructure projects.⁷ In the eyes of Buenos Aires, China was not only a key economic ally, but was also perceived as an ideological alternative to the West. However, critics cautioned that the Kirchner administration had become utterly dependent on China financially and that the country could end up paying a high price for such dependency. Argentina's trade deficit with China soared too, and in the months ahead of the 2015 presidential election, China was caught in the crossfire of the nation's political fight. The controversy reached a high point when the winner of the election, Mauricio Macri, issued a clear warning to Beijing: the late deals

signed between Argentina and China under the Kirchner administration would be reviewed as soon as he took office.⁸

Just after Macri's victory, it was in fact expected that Argentina would put some distance between itself and China, while it moved closer again to its traditional American and European allies. However, the Kirchner government had agreed to a cross-default clause in the contract signed with China's Development Bank to secure funding for the Kirchner and Cepernic hydro-power dams that significantly limited Macri's room to manoeuvre.⁹ Now, almost two years into his presidency, Macri has re-established normalcy in Argentina's relationship with the West, but there have not been any significant reversals on most of the major agreements adopted during the previous Kirchner administrations. As a result, the Macri administration benefits from now having more international partners and can be freer in how it frames the country's relationship with Beijing. During Macri's official visit to Beijing in May 2017, both presidents signed a number of new deals, and a few older ones were ratified. As far as Buenos Aires is concerned, China remains a key player for its future development and well-being. The bilateral relationship is now cruising nicely.

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With very few exceptions, the political class in Buenos Aires seems to agree that a closer relationship with China is necessary for Argentina's economic development. They argue that there is no bigger export market than China for the country's commodities, particularly soybeans and other agricultural products. They refer to the fact that Beijing is ready to provide loans and investments, unlike traditional investors that regard Argentina as overly

risky. They also perceive China as the only partner that can potentially finance and build the key infrastructure that is needed for the country, including railway networks, hydropower dams, or nuclear plants. Very few Argentine experts interviewed by this author mentioned potential risks—for example, economic dependency or weakened democratic principles—that Argentina might face in developing a closer relationship with China. Likewise, the author did not observe any significant public debate taking place on these themes in the mainstream local media.

Asked if China's corruption or human rights record should be taken into account in the bilateral relationship, Argentina's political class has commonly taken refuge in pragmatism: "It would be stupidity and suicide for Argentina," one congressman said.¹⁰ This sentiment among Argentina's ruling class is significant because it influences opinion in other areas of society. But it is also relevant to acknowledge that this frame is not unconnected to Beijing's people-to-people diplomacy, which finds fertile ground across Argentina's political spectrum. During the last few years, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in particular has been extremely active, and successful, in engaging with top representatives of Argentina's main political parties, without ideological distinction.

The CCP has not only cultivated close ties with the *kirchneristas* and other left-wing parties, but has an equally warm relationship with the center-right Republican Proposal (PRO) party that it had developed before Macri's election. Even if a shared political ideology is less important to such relationships than it was in the past, it is still striking to see how far PRO's comradeship with the CCP has gone, given that the two parties' political ideologies reflect opposing ends of the political spectrum. Senior representatives of both parties met on four occasions in 2016, and twice more in the first half of 2017. The same Argentine politicians who were the

most vocal critics of Cristina Kirchner's close alliance with the Chinese government now take advantage of every opportunity to fly to Beijing or to meet with their Chinese counterparts.¹¹

It is evident that the development of closer ties between Argentina and China's political parties is a CCP-led initiative, but one that also reflects a pragmatic way of engagement. "It is part of China's cultural diplomacy. These meetings consist of pompous statements, a picture, and little more," says one Argentine academic. Many point out the innocuous nature of these meetings, since they are very formal, lack substance, and usually touch on generic issues. However, this begs the question of why both sides are interested in meeting so often if there is really no hard agenda, as well as why Beijing would invest so much effort and resources to engage with Argentina's ruling class. Not many people in Buenos Aires appear to be doing this kind of questioning. Others even criticize those who enquire about the nature of the relationship between Argentina and China's ruling party: "There is no such contradiction [in PRO meeting with the CCP]. In the modern world this type of speech...arises from prejudice," PRO's president wrote in an op-ed in the *Clarín* newspaper.¹²

China's own forms of soft-power efforts to build bridges with Argentina's political elites involve other Chinese players, too. For example, the Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, an organization that aims to "make friends in the international community on behalf of the Chinese people," has met with Argentine entrepreneurs, members of the Senate, and even with representatives of the Leo Messi Foundation in Spain. In addition, delegations of Chinese national or provincial legislatures pay periodic visits to their counterparts in Buenos Aires, while members of the Parliamentary Group of Friendship with China take part in all sorts of China-related activities. The different China-Argentina chambers of commerce have a fluid relationship with the embassy, and its executives also join the China trips. In addition, more than thirty Chinese and Argentine cities are now twinned. Most of all, the Chinese ambassador is particularly active. "I am certain that he personally knows all of the party leaders in Argentina. It is reinforcing, although it is probably not central," says a local scholar.¹³

What makes China's people-to-people strategy powerful is that not a single flank is left uncovered. For example, it has seen value in engaging with two Buenos Aires-based foundations whose mission is to train Argentina's next generation of political leaders. Representatives of one such group—the Contemporary Foundation, linked informally to center-right parties—participate on average two to four times a year in ten- to twenty-day-long trainings in China hosted by the Communist Youth League of China. These efforts have an obvious side effect: The legitimation of the Chinese system. Such legitimation is justified with a familiar narrative: China's singularity, history, identity, and scale. Sensitive issues are left out.

The other group of young leaders, the Latin American Center for Political and Economic Chinese Studies (CLEPEC, in Spanish), has close links to left-wing parties.¹⁴ Despite being a regional foundation, most of its China-related activity is done in Argentina. Like the Contemporary Foundation, its members also receive training in China. They are mostly young researchers or post-graduate students that China awards with scholarships. But the real importance of their mission is when they return home, where the students offer courses and trainings on China across Argentina to audiences that include members of provincial governments and academic institutions. "China's relationship with Latin America is very asymmetric. We cannot change this, but we can negotiate better. To do so, our future leaders need to have a better knowledge of what China is," explains one CLEPEC executive.¹⁵



Put in these terms, the concept is impeccable. The lack of awareness about China in Argentina has to be addressed somehow. But the key issue is the kind of narrative that CLEPEC's researchers are passing along. The foundation has a reputation for having an ideology that sympathizes with China's state-managed system. In addition, CLEPEC's Chinese peer, the Communist Youth League of China, is not an independent player but an intrinsic part of the party-state structure of the People's Republic. Moreover, the researchers who travel to China on scholarships are only exposed to the official Chinese government perspective. A fundamental question then emerges: What is the narrative presented during these trips regarding topics such as China's democratization, human rights abuses, the situation in Tibet and Xinjiang, Internet censorship and freedom of expression, Falun Gong's persecution, or civil society's forced retreat? The answer is not unexpected: The narrative is party-line propaganda. By the end of 2016, CLEPEC had taught around 20 courses in Argentina to some 2,200 students and public servants, according to the foundation.

Argentina's general lack of awareness about China, the conflicting interests and power struggles of Argentine political elites, and China's people-to-people diplomacy are a powerful mix—one that is illustrated by the curious tale of Jian Ping. A Chinese-born businessman, Jian was elected out of nowhere in 2015 to the Buenos Aires city legislature under the PRO party list, becoming the first PRC citizen to do so. The local press linked his nomination to the donation of US\$1.2 million by Chinese businessmen to Macri's party. Treated initially as a colorful example of the country's sometimes entertaining politics, the media quickly lost interest in him. Very few people in Buenos Aires thought that Jian's enigmatic election deserved explanation. The media and the politicians fell mostly silent on this topic.¹⁶

Known in Argentina as Fernando Yuan, Jian was new to politics and speaks little Spanish after living in Argentina for three decades. He does not give interviews either, except to Chinese media. No one the author spoke with in the course of conducting interviews with the local policy community knew much about his background, and an analysis of local Argentine media coverage found that only his business achievements were discussed. Scholars have documented China's long-term efforts to amplify its influence abroad through the political mobilization of the overseas Chinese. In fact, Beijing's support for ethnic-Chinese candidates abroad is not new and was referred to as an area "for further development" in internal Chinese official documents more than a decade ago.¹⁷

Media

During the last few years, China has taken every available opportunity to exert influence in the Argentine media. These efforts are part of a comprehensive media strategy, which the Chinese have tried to implement through a variety of means. At the regional level, China has invited Latin American journalists to participate in trainings in China. In Argentina, the Chinese are pushing partnerships with national television networks that would be potentially willing to broadcast Chinese-produced content. They have also been successful in inserting the *China Watch* supplement regularly into several local media outlets. This supplement is nothing more than paid content produced by the official Chinese state media.

In addition, China's Xinhua news agency and other official Chinese media have signed deals with several Argentine media groups. Xinhua has its own sponsored supplement, *China*, but is generally inclined to make its news content freely available to as many Argentine media outlets as possible. The Chinese embassy is also active, circulating its own news bulletin twice a year across government agencies,¹⁸ supporting two television programs that emphasize Chinese culture, and having the ambassador publish op-eds or be interviewed in leading local newspapers.¹⁹ It could be argued that the impact of such a media strategy is uneven, but it is also true that China's efforts have been remarkable.

One such opportunity for making inroads in the Argentine media scene was during Cristina Kirchner's administration, particularly in her last two years when the political environment became more contentious. At the time, most media groups actively participated in Argentina's political dogfight by taking sides for and against the former president. Some of the groups were at war against Kirchner's government, for the most part led by *Clarín* and *La Nación*, the two most influential newspapers in Argentina. Political scandals would reach the front pages on an almost daily basis, and in such context China could not escape criticism in relation to the most controversial aspects of the bilateral relationship: asymmetric trade, the space facility, the hydropower dams, and the lack of transparency behind the bilateral deals.

Nevertheless, China was able to gain ground even in this turbulent environment. Starting in 2015, shortly after Beijing upgraded the diplomatic status of its relationship with Argentina to a comprehensive strategic partnership, the *China Watch* supplement was inserted in a number of media outlets owned by media groups that vigorously supported Kirchner's government. Some of these groups emerged during the Kirchner era and were able to survive financially, or even make good profits, allegedly thanks to institutional advertising and other political favors. After the change of power, many of those media groups went bankrupt.

One of them was Grupo Veintitrés, whose *Tiempo Argentino* newspaper had Xinhua's four-page supplement inserted every other week from March 2015 until the year's end. The deal was part of a larger cooperation agreement between the Chinese news agency and the Argentine media group. At the time, it was made public that Xinhua would provide graphic materials and news content under the signed deal. The group's television channel CN23 would also broadcast a daily news segment about China, along with Xinhua-produced documentaries and feature stories on weekends. Similarly, the group's Infonews website would have a special China section to click on for instant access to "all the Chinese breaking news." The Chinese ambassador referred to the importance of having "complete and direct information about China." However, the arrangement did not last long: Grupo Veintitrés and its various subsidiaries were almost completely dismantled as soon as Kirchner left office.

The final period of Kirchner's presidency was quite rewarding for Xinhua in terms of extending agreements of intention to Argentine media outlets. Grupo Indalo, another media group linked to the former government, agreed to use the agency's content "to raise awareness on economic, political and social current issues of one of the world's big powers." Previously, Argentina's official news agency Télam had signed several cooperation agreements with Xinhua too, including one to exchange news content.²⁰ Xinhua also succeeded in having its banner posted on the Argentine–Chinese Chamber's website. While some of Xinhua's deals are rather vague and have little practical significance, the more important agreements took form after Cristina Kirchner's administration entered into a strategic alliance with Beijing in 2015.

Beijing scored some media achievements even after Macri assumed the presidency. Grupo América, Argentina's second-largest media corporation, closed an agreement with *China Daily* to insert the four-page *China Watch* supplement twice a month in five of the group's newspapers, including *El Cronista*, the country's top business daily.²¹ Grupo América's main shareholders also run businesses in the oil, energy, construction, telecommunications, and wine industries that are strategically pointing to China with the purpose of having the Chinese as partners in Argentina and elsewhere. Observers in Buenos Aires express little doubt that the shareholders' lobbying efforts, rather than a pure media deal, are behind the *China Watch* insertion. Unsurprisingly, the deal was saluted with great fanfare in a presentation in Beijing.²²

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China has a tradition of adapting and making the most of the opportunities presented to it. This is clearly the case with Grupo América, which accorded the Chinese an opportunity to take its media penetration to a new level in the area of television. The affinity and coordination between the two was key to the airing of the Chinese program "Milenarios" on Channel A24, one of the group's television cable networks. The show is now said to have a weekly audience of 100,000 viewers.²³ Furthermore, in mid-2017 Grupo América and China Global Television Network (CGTN, formerly known as China Central Television, CCTV), co-produced the first of a series of thirty-minute documentaries that commemorate the 45th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Argentina and China.

At the time of writing this report, the film "Cerca y Lejos" ("Near and Far") had been aired in China but not yet in Argentina. The film, which can be viewed on the Internet, presents a positive telling of the two countries' bilateral relationship, touching on the cultural, historical, and political ties between China and Argentina and highlighting China's impressive development during the last decades. The film emphasizes both countries' "mutual trust," "friendship," and "cooperation to build a relationship of mutual benefit and a future of common prosperity."²⁴

CGTN's efforts to be visible and influential in Argentina do not seem to stop with documentaries. In a regional forum held in Lima in late 2016, the director of CGTN en Español announced a cooperation agreement with Grupo América to screen CGTN's programs once a month on Channel A24. She said both networks would "jointly produce the programming and would screen it on their respective channels," and she also predicted that CGTN could be aired in Argentina through Grupo América's cable network.²⁵ In this regard, sources in Buenos Aires

consulted by this author speculate that Grupo América might become another avenue for China to express its soft power in a seemingly innocent way in Argentina.

While this initiative was being discussed, China's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT) was also in conversations with another player to explore joint cooperation opportunities: Argentina's Federal System of Public Media and Content (SFMCP, in Spanish), the country's public media body. In fact, when SAPPRFT met with its Argentine counterpart, they agreed to facilitate the screening of each other's television content and to co-produce documentaries and other products.²⁶ However, most important for China is Argentina's readiness to allow CGTN to broadcast "as soon as possible" in Argentina through the state television digital platform, in the same way that Russia's RT is currently doing. "There are no obstacles for CGTN to be aired in Argentina. It is in the agenda, so it will eventually happen," says a source familiar with the issue in Buenos Aires. Consequently, China's aim of having its own television channel in Argentina seems to be just a matter of time.

China not only puts eggs in different baskets, it also has the ability to weather unfavorable situations and, eventually, reverse them. Its relationship with *La Nación* is a case in point. This influential, privately owned national newspaper was journalistically confrontational toward the Cristina Kirchner government. Given this administration's close relationship with Beijing, that meant also being one of the most China-critical media outlets in Argentina at the time. In a polarized society, part of which was then deeply concerned about the country's future if Kirchner were to remain in office, many appreciated the paper's stance and, consequently, the newspaper's readership increased.

In mid-2015, when China was facing more criticism over a number of deals that the Kirchner administration was signing with Beijing, China's *People's Daily* and *La Nación* made public a deal to "jointly distribute news content."²⁷ Then, in September 2015, *La Nación* published a sixteen-page supplement, paid for by China, on the 66th anniversary of the PRC's founding. Newspaper sources say that "the opportunity of sharing experiences" arose in a meeting with the Chinese ambassador—at his suggestion.²⁸ However, apart from having the effect of breaking the ice, nothing substantial resulted from the deal except for the Argentine newspaper's participation in the One Belt One Road Media Collaboration Forum organized by *People's Daily*, another example of Beijing's people-to-people diplomacy. But the move ended up paying dividends in a different way when the winds changed in China's favor.

After Macri won the presidency, the political situation in Argentina calmed down, and gradually, *La Nación* lost a significant portion of its readership.²⁹ Later, the newspaper's bet on a television project did not produce the expected results either in terms of audience.³⁰ In a context of financial uncertainty, several heavyweight Chinese companies with interests in Argentina continued with or purchased significant advertising campaigns.³¹ Coincidence or not, criticism of China in *La Nación* seems less common than in the past, while soft news about China and Chinese corporations is more and more visible. More importantly, in *La Nación* China now has more opportunities to spread its message and narrative: The Chinese ambassador in Buenos Aires has authored at least six op-ed articles since he first met with the newspaper's executives in 2015, and he has been interviewed at least once.³² In *Clarín*, Argentina's main newspaper, the ambassador has authored four additional op-ed articles during the past 18 months.

This case highlights a fundamental risk: That Beijing is well-positioned to leverage varied tools in order to elicit friendly treatment or neutralize criticism in foreign independent media outlets. Considering the financial challenges that many media outlets face, even those that have a well-earned reputation for journalistic integrity may be at risk of having their editorial independence compromised. The Chinese regime has at its disposal the ability to engage personally with journalists and news editors in democratic media through people-to-people diplomacy, which includes economically promising “cooperation” deals with Chinese media. In addition, the ability to step in with advertisement campaigns, through both institutional paid insertions and Chinese corporations’ advertisement campaigns, is another point of leverage. As in the political arena, the combination of personal engagement and the lure of economic gain, at a time when traditional media are facing financial challenges, can potentially work to China’s advantage.

The way in which China can have an impact in the financially troubled media sector of many democracies is disturbing. Local societies clearly pay the price, since the media in democratic systems are supposed to play an independent watchdog role. What is sometimes less clear is that Chinese companies—whether state-run or privately owned—can potentially support, in one way or another, China’s initiatives and national interests. In this sense, the simple recommendation of a high-ranking official of the Chinese embassy to a Chinese state-owned company to economically support any given cause is expected to be followed. In addition, large, nominally private Chinese companies, which typically enjoy preferential treatment, are also generally willing to play a role in furthering CCP interests. Therefore, taking action through such various channels makes China’s influence efforts ever more successful.

Culture

The greatest expression of Chinese culture in Argentina and, at the same time, China’s most visible cultural achievement in Buenos Aires is the Chinese New Year celebrations. What was once a relatively small event celebrated locally by Argentina’s Chinese community in the capital city’s Chinatown has grown exponentially within the past few years into a two-day festival that attracts 600,000 people every year, according to official estimates.³³ The event brings together all the expected varieties of Chinese culture and folklore: from traditional dragon and lion dances to martial arts exhibitions; from tai-chi performances to Chinese cooking and calligraphy demonstrations; from ballet shows and traditional instrument recitals to spectacular fireworks displays.

Observers interviewed by the author attributed the event’s transformation to support from the “invisible hand” of the Chinese embassy in Buenos Aires. Before 2013, members of the Taiwanese community, who were among the original residents and shop owners of Buenos Aires’ Chinatown, organized the Chinese New Year celebrations. Back then, it was a truly grass-roots-organized cultural event based on authentic traditions practiced by the local ethnic Chinese community. Despite international tension between Taiwan and the People’s Republic of China, the event avoided political controversies by abstaining from making distinctions between Taiwanese or PRC nationals, and event organizers took great care not to exhibit Chinese or Taiwanese flags. However, all of that changed when Phoenix Dorada International Media Company, a cultural management company owned by Chinese nationals that has close links with the Chinese embassy, took over the event after 2013.³⁴

Moving the celebrations away from the city’s Chinatown to a larger area, seeking the involvement of the city authorities, and the need for additional funding for a more sophisticated and professional

event displaced the original local Taiwanese organizers. Phoenix Dorada denies receiving any direct funding from the Chinese embassy but admits that the embassy's support is key in convincing "important sponsors" to contribute.³⁵ According to Phoenix Dorada's website, fourteen Chinese companies, including Huawei, ZTE, Sinopec, and Sany, made a joint donation of 110 million pesos (US\$6.87 million) for the 2016 Chinese New Year alone.³⁶ The embassy's "invisible hand" that made this donation possible is another example of how effectively the Chinese government can encourage Chinese companies—both state-owned and private—to support the CCP's agenda.³⁷

While backed by generous support from high-profile Chinese companies, the Chinese New Year celebrations are presented as an official event. The local Argentine press commonly describes the festival as being "presented by the Chinese embassy," China's ambassador is directly involved in the planning and is typically the event's keynote speaker, and the PRC's red flags are now prominently on display around the celebration's premises. Only the masters of ceremonies remain of Taiwanese origin.³⁸



Phoenix Dorada also organizes or is involved in many other cultural activities and events that are in line with China's cultural soft power efforts. These include a photo exhibition about the "70th Anniversary of the Great Antifascist People's Victory" against Japan in World War II, a singing contest among Argentines of Chinese ethnicity that awarded the winner a visit to China, the commemoration of the PRC's founding, and the production of a TV program teaching Mandarin.³⁹

Phoenix Dorada says that it has managed more than 90 cultural projects in five years, reaching an audience of more than six million people.⁴⁰ It also describes its relationship with the embassy and its staff as being limited to little more than "having their moral support," or getting a few contacts from them, but says there are no formal links of any kind. However, many in Buenos Aires say they are certain that the Chinese embassy outsources its cultural agenda to Phoenix Dorada. "They are the embassy's soft guards in cultural matters," says a member of the Taiwanese community.

Although the embassy's cultural section does not have the human resources to handle a vast cultural agenda, there are most likely more than just operational reasons for doing this—

namely, being able to exert behind-the-scenes control of all overseas ethnic-Chinese matters. The embassy seeks to play the role of being the main cohesive force behind the overseas Chinese community. “The embassy simply could not allow the organization of the Chinese New Year to be in Taiwanese hands,” argues a local student in Chinese studies.

While it promotes and manages Chinese culture that show a benign face, the embassy has been very active in trying to stop independent Chinese cultural activities from taking place. Shen Yun Performing Arts, a Chinese artistic group forbidden in China, has performed in Argentina despite the Chinese embassy’s continuous interference and pressure on local Argentine cultural authorities.⁴¹ Shen Yun sources in Buenos Aires say that the Chinese embassy has tried to stop the show at least three times by warning Argentine authorities of the implicit “political message” of the show.

This is just the tip of the iceberg of a larger effort on the part of the Chinese embassy to intimidate the Falun Gong spiritual movement in Argentina, to which Shen Yun is affiliated.⁴² Falun Gong practitioners face constant harassment and sometimes violence from the local Chinese community when they demonstrate in front of the Chinese embassy or distribute Falun Gong materials in Buenos Aires’ Chinatown. Practitioners accuse the Chinese embassy of being behind such attacks.

But this turbulence is an exception, because the Chinese regime generally enjoys a more pleasant relationship with third parties in Argentina. For example, China has a reliable partner in the House of Chinese Culture, whose parent institution is the privately-owned University of Congress in Argentina’s Mendoza province. It was founded in 2015 at the Chinese embassy’s suggestion, given the fine personal connections between the diplomatic personnel and the individuals who currently run the cultural center. The previously mentioned main shareholders of Grupo América, who have China-related business interests and have fostered various deals with China’s official media, are also board members of the University of Congress and its foundation.

In its first two years, the House of Chinese Culture has organized a number of cultural activities in both its Buenos Aires headquarters and on the campus of the University of Congress, in Mendoza. These have ranged from the screening of Chinese films and documentaries to photography, painting, and calligraphy exhibitions; from seminars on Chinese cooking to conferences and roundtables with Argentine Sinologists, academics, and congressmen; from the launching of *China Watch* to book donation ceremonies. Some of these activities were organized on behalf of, or with the support of the Chinese embassy.

The center is entirely financed by the University of Congress, which aims to establish itself as one of the country’s top institutions for Chinese studies. In 2017, the university sealed an association agreement with *Dangdai*, a high quality local magazine that touches on Chinese culture. The partnership between academic (University of Congress), cultural (House of Chinese Culture), and media players (Grupo América, *Dangdai*) is likely to be viewed positively by the Chinese embassy. Official Chinese rhetoric would call it a win-win cooperation deal.

On the education front, Argentina’s two Confucius Institutes in Buenos Aires and La Plata also devote much attention to spreading Chinese culture. In addition to such standard cultural activities as painting, music, literature, or cinema, the University of Buenos Aires’ Confucius Institute offers 27 courses on Chinese culture every academic year.⁴³ These courses are currently attended by some 600 students per year, in addition to 2,000 Mandarin-language

students that the institute and its associated centers claim to have. Out of that figure, around 45 students every year continue their short- or long-term language education in China.⁴⁴

For its part, the University of La Plata, which hosts the second Confucius Institute in the country, has organized seminars in recent years that have an evident soft power angle: China's cultural diversity, the historical evolution of 21st century China, and contemporary China. Both Argentine Confucius Institutes are very active in promoting Chinese culture. However, since the public universities hosting them provide 50 percent of institutes' budgets, critics feel uneasy about the fact that Argentine taxpayers are partially supporting China's cultural diplomacy in Argentina.⁴⁵

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Academia

In addition to the political ruling class, no other social sphere in Argentina has closer ties with China than academia. The number of senior scholars who have studied contemporary China for more than twenty years is small, and possibly just a handful of them focus on politics, economics, and international relations. This group of experts publishes China-related materials regularly, and they are perceived as authorities. A second group of academics has concentrated on China from a cultural, philosophic, religious, or artistic perspective; hence, their visibility is somewhat limited. There is, however, a much larger base of young intellectuals in their thirties who have shown an interest on China in recent years.

This growing base of younger Argentine scholars is no coincidence. Neither is the noticeable increase among major academic institutions in Argentina in establishing some sort of connection to China, which is plain evidence of growing academic interest in the country. More than two-dozen universities, academic, and scientific institutions have setup various kinds of agreements with Chinese counterpart institutions, primarily for scholarships, joint research and publications, and teacher exchange.⁴⁶ To reach this stage, many of these institutions have put together Chinese studies programs as part of their curriculums in recent years. This has not only spawned scores of seminars and extracurricular activities with an emphasis on China, but it has also stimulated academic visits across the Pacific like never before.

This academic and scientific network, which includes think tanks and other institutions, is only expected to grow in the future. Both countries have a common interest in expanding the bilateral relationship at all levels, and in this context academia believes it has a role to play to reduce the knowledge gap between the two. A good example of the potential that this cooperation may have is the recent agreement between Argentina's most important official research entity, the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET, in Spanish)⁴⁷ and Shanghai University (SHU). In April 2017, both institutions announced the creation of a Joint International Research Center (CIMI, in Spanish) with head offices in both Buenos Aires and Shanghai.⁴⁸ The idea is to produce joint academic research on globalization and social issues.

CONICET has a record of cooperating with other Chinese research institutions, including the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS).⁴⁹ While some may argue that these types of international collaboration are not unusual for CONICET, given that the institute is publicly funded and has joint research agreements with counterparts in Argentina and other countries, the creation of

CIMI is a milestone achievement for China in terms of soft power. It is the first research center of its kind in Latin America. Moreover, the agreement has a clear goal and an explicit agenda: research on globalization issues through the lenses of history, culture, religion, and politics, rather than simply through the economy. It has also been endowed with funds and human resources, and it was forged only after several years of personal engagement and shared academic work.

It is indisputable that exploring the effects of globalization is academically relevant—especially with China at center stage. But, the new research center’s most significant aspect is its potential to boost China’s soft power narrative across academia and beyond. CIMI has made transparent that it expects “to clarify” the way in which China is perceived in Argentina’s public opinion. For this, focusing on social sciences may prove more rewarding since it is a discipline in which boundaries are more difficult to define. In fact, it is difficult not to connect this initiative to the CCP’s pledge to strengthen what it calls “a system of social sciences with Chinese characteristics,” which the Chinese leadership perceives as crucial to building their own guiding ideology.⁵⁰

Furthermore, if the new research center’s ideological position was to be made too obvious, then expectations of becoming a leading institution on globalization issues would probably need to be downgraded. In this sense, two of the new institution’s main driving principles are for Argentines to “strongly understand China” and to “break the Western vision,” or lens, through which many Argentines currently view China.⁵¹ The center’s promoters have committed to being open to new methodologies and to distance themselves from the way in which the social sciences are approached in “hegemonic or imperialistic countries that have oppressed us, and that have not yet incorporated Chinese language in their publications.”⁵²

During the same time period when CIMI was established, CASS, the Latin American Council of Social Sciences, and the University of Buenos Aires’ Gino Germani Research Institute signed a letter of intent to open a joint research center in Argentina that should become the counterpart of the newly created Center for Argentine Studies in Beijing. The fact that the latter needed an exceptional approval by CASS reveals the importance that Beijing gives to building academic bridges with Argentina in the area of social sciences.⁵³

More broadly, Beijing has seen value in engaging in so-called think tank diplomacy as a way to broadcast Chinese views of the world,⁵⁴ since Chinese academic institutions of all kinds are perceived as important carriers of national soft power. There can be no better place for this than Argentina, given that there are some 120 universities and 138 think tanks in the country. The Chinese embassy in Buenos Aires and its ambassador are committed to engaging with these institutions: they pay personal visits, support their activities, and frequently take part in seminars, thus serving as a bridge to achieve cooperation between institutions of both countries.

The Argentine Council for International Relations (CARI, in Spanish) and the Center for the Implementation of Public Policies for Equity and Growth (CIPPEC, in Spanish)—which ranked fifth and sixth in Latin America in the University of Pennsylvania’s 2016 Global Go To Think Tanks Index Report—are two of many with which the embassy has warm relations. CARI organizes 250 activities per year, 10 percent of them related to Asia-Pacific issues. For the embassy, even minor forms of collaboration with such well-established institutions, such as a small contribution of US\$5,700 it made to support a CIPPEC seminar in Buenos Aires in 2016, represent a symbolic achievement by allowing the embassy to become a more important player in Argentina’s policy debates and discussions.

In this context in which academia is fully engaged with China, Beijing's people-to-people diplomacy fits perfectly. An example of how well this strategy works in China's favor was the conference given by two local scholars of one of Argentina's most prestigious think tanks, after returning from a Beijing-sponsored trip to Tibet.⁵⁵ Their narrative matched that of CCP official propaganda, stressing the alleged economic achievements, public health, schooling rate, environmental sensitivity, and even the conservation of Tibet's cultural heritage. Not a single word was said on such sensitive topics as the 2008 riots in Lhasa, the dam construction scheme on all major Tibetan rivers, religious pressure, or the self-immolations of 140 Tibetans since 2009. No one in the audience referred to any of this either.⁵⁶



Analysis

The success that China may have achieved with its soft power strategy in Argentina has a recognizable starting point in Argentines' lack of awareness about China. As in many other places, only a small number of people in the Latin American country have a solid knowledge and a deep understanding of China, its history, its political and economic system, or its puzzling characteristics. Cultural difference, geographical distance, and the fact that the ties between the two countries are relatively recent are all elements of this unfamiliarity. This explains, to a large extent, why views of China in Argentina are basic for the most part—if not stereotyped.

Different assumptions and impressions commonly held by many Argentines shape China's image in the country. One powerful icon is China's traditional culture, which tends to be perceived as mysterious and unique. Contemporary China is generally associated with luxury and money, based on China's "economic model" that has successfully lifted millions out of poverty, the proliferation of products "Made in China," the prospects provided by China's domestic market as a huge potential source of buyers of Argentine goods, and powerful transnational companies. Many Argentines still appreciate China's recent financial assistance during the period when the country was isolated from other sources of international credit. Commercial exchanges that have grown over the last two decades are also viewed positively. At a micro level, Chinese migrants' image improved when the approximately 10,000 Chinese supermarkets were recognized for helping to keep food prices down during the worst periods of Argentina's economic crisis in recent years.⁵⁷

These factors, as well as the absence of historical quarrels or territorial disputes between the two countries, explains why China is largely perceived in Argentine society as a benevolent power. Even in circles of society where one might expect debate to be more sophisticated, such as in the political class or in journalism, knowledge about China also lacks insight—even beyond ideology. In such circumstances, academia’s aspiration to play an active role in reducing the knowledge gap is nothing but noteworthy. This is ever more necessary in the country’s current context of unbridled enthusiasm about China, but scholars should be poised and equipped to evaluate what kind of knowledge and narrative are being passed along.

It is here that China’s soft power efforts make a difference. Not only is the CCP active in inviting representatives of Argentine political parties from across the spectrum to China, but more concerning is the impact that these trips may have on them. Here is one example: More revealing than public statements made by PRO members to justify the sudden comradeship with an ideologically antagonistic party are the party leaders’ private reflections after a trip to China in July 2016: “More than fifteen [party members] travelled, including congressmen. Fourteen days, all expenses paid by China. They returned hypnotized: the five-star hotels, the feasts, the luxury, the different visits. No mention of ideology; they instead referred to their ‘Chinese friends.’ They are all crazy about China. One even said: ‘Now we are all Chinese.’ This shows that the strategy is working,” says a colleague of those politicians who participated in the trip.⁵⁸

If experienced politicians are so easily convinced, what can then be expected from more junior representatives who are also targeted by China’s people-to-people diplomacy? This is the case with foundations, such as CLEPEC, that are linked to political parties and whose aim is to train Argentina’s next generation of leaders. Their representatives are regularly invited to China for ad hoc trainings. Upon returning, they spread the one-sided perspective that they have acquired to audiences of students and civil servants across Argentina. In this way, the party-line narrative shared through China’s people-to-people diplomacy has a multiplier effect. Consequently, not only is the Beijing regime successful in putting forth its own version of events—one of its soft power priorities—it also shows a great ability to lobby politically.

While the media are focused on covering domestic issues as well as ensuring their own economic sustainability, in academia, dozens of scholars appear devoted to the Chinese cause. Of those invited to China, some take the opportunity to collect first-hand information and are not easily influenced, because they have a solid academic training on Chinese issues. “Others that do not have the proper training might be influenced,” admits one academic. In Argentina, like in most other countries, there is probably a considerable amount of self-censorship, particularly among China specialists who have not yet built a reputation or advanced far in their own careers. By being openly critical, or by crossing so-called red lines, they may be risking their own future access to China or contact with academic peers.

Scholars who are perceived as critical of China have little visibility, and are commonly not invited to conferences and events. Consequently, the accounts that tend to be put forth by part of Argentina’s scholarly community are incomplete, if not sometimes completely biased. There are hardly ever any references to the most controversial aspects of the Chinese regime: its dictatorial nature, the human rights abuses, the crackdown on dissent, the situation in Tibet, the Tiananmen massacre, and others. Whether this is self-censorship, sincere intellectual belief, ideological activism, academic self-interest, or a combination is difficult to tell. But some go as far as saying, without the blink of an eye, that “the Chinese system cannot be described as

authoritarian” and that its political regime “is profoundly legitimate.” This was declared by one respected Argentine analyst who frequently authors op-eds and analysis in Argentina’s most influential media.⁵⁹

With few exceptions, academia’s standpoint with respect to China is deeply troubling, mainly because academia is an area of society where divergence is not only accepted but should be welcomed and even encouraged. But while critical perspectives on China are scarce, some voices are starting to surface. One academic makes an accurate diagnosis of the situation: “There are topics that we never talk about out of fear of hurting the feelings of the Chinese. China is wonderful; its leaders are converted democrats and only want our well-being. Instead, you hear there is a complete absence of alternative critical thought about China. Unfortunately, we are in a process in which intellectuals are giving up [on their duties].” To some extent, sections of Argentine academia now play a role that is similar to the Confucius Institutes: promoting a favorable image of China to gain support and sympathy for their country.

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In a recent book, Argentine scholars Carlos Moneta and Sergio Cesarín identified that “a critical, internal debate in Argentina that is broad and clarifying about the influence of the ‘China factor’ is an unresolved matter.”⁶⁰ The only criticism that is very slowly making its way to the surface—including the referenced book, rare opinion articles, or occasional debates—relates to Argentina’s “new dependency” or the asymmetric bilateral relationship.⁶¹ This is important, given the general belief that China is strategic for Argentina’s future and, even more so, that there are already tangible examples that Argentina is largely benefiting from China’s investments. However, some argue that such a perception does not necessarily reconcile with reality, since many announced deals have yet to materialize, and a number of proclaimed investments are in fact loans. Unlike Brazil or Chile, Argentina has a trade deficit with China despite being an exporter of natural resources and food.

Interestingly, this asymmetry issue cannot be completely unconnected from China’s recent efforts to introduce Confucian dialectic into the debate. In 2014, the Confucius Institute established Confucius Institute Day worldwide, an event that the Argentine institutes have responded to with a number of related activities. It is now also more common for academic institutions in the country to include dialogues, courses, and debates about Confucianism in their activities. The new joint Sino-Argentine research center CIMI announced for the end of 2017 an international meeting that will touch on social sciences and religion. This Chinese philosophy provides the Beijing regime a friendly ideological façade.

The first International Forum on Confucianism, organized in late 2016 in Lima, Peru, with the participation of Chinese and Latin American scholars, revealed how Confucian doctrine may be manipulated in favor of China’s soft power purposes. “It was all pure, smartly distilled propaganda. Confucianism was presented as the essence of China’s awakening and success, and it was said that the rest of the world needs to learn how the Chinese think” for the sake of the world, says Isabelle Lausent-Herrera, a Lima-based scholar who attended the event.⁶² It is probably no coincidence that this kind of narrative is being spread across academic circles at this moment, given the asymmetry in China’s economic relationships with many Latin American

countries, including Argentina. Critics argue that it is a way of moving away from the tricky asymmetry debate.

Here is why: China presents Confucianism as a model of virtues that inherently competes with those ideas it labels as Western. “When this debate is inspired, the negative aspects of the Chinese model are more easily hidden. The friendly face of Confucianism is therefore very useful for legitimizing the authoritarian Chinese model,” argues Lausent-Hererra. Her words inevitably echo the fact that the Beijing-based International Confucian Association is behind many of these related activities and exchanges, whose aim is to boost “the popularization of Confucianism in the international community” and push for “freedom and equality of mankind and the peaceful development” of the world.⁶³

However, despite all its soft power efforts and the country’s incredible achievements, China still faces challenges in Argentina and elsewhere in terms of efficiency. To start with, continuous appeals to friendship, which are dressed up with the oft-repeated rhetoric emphasizing win-win cooperation and China’s peaceful rise, are not very convincing to all audiences. China’s soft power strategy and narrative encounter a fundamental downside: the fact that it is made very obvious that its strategy is hierarchical and state-driven. This handicap is clear in the media, where Chinese visibility and impact in Argentina is limited. Xinhua’s aim to spread its Spanish news service in Argentina does not seem to have been very successful.

The Chinese state media operating in the country have been upgraded in recent years without clear, tangible results, proving that they still have a long way to go to become credible players in the realm of international news.⁶⁴ Even though China’s official communication efforts are intense, the Chinese embassy in Buenos Aires does not have a press attaché on its staff—despite having attachés in many other areas. This suggests that transparency is not precisely in the regime’s nature. Together with the absence of independent Chinese nongovernmental organizations, China faces in this regard an insuperable burden. Contrary to democratic systems, authoritarian regimes bear the fundamental problem of their own lack of credibility.

But being occasionally and inherently ineffective does not mean that China is not trying to make an impact in Argentina. China’s huge efforts in different areas of society—mostly in the media, academic, and cultural spheres—is indisputable and have the sole purpose of influencing, if not manipulating, Argentine society in Beijing’s favor. Very few are really in a position to critically analyze this trend, and therefore the Chinese regime’s narrative is slowly but steadily soaking in as an alternative point of view. Despite the apparent weaknesses of China’s soft power strategy if measured in terms of attracting larger audiences and participants to its activities, the Chinese regime’s activities should not be perceived as harmless. On the contrary, they need to be further researched, examined, and understood.



RUSSIA

INTRODUCTION Much like its effect on Argentina's relationship with China, Macri's arrival in power resulted in an adjustment of the country's bilateral ties with Russia—rather than a complete change. Argentina's diplomatic re-orientation to North America and Europe, which implied taking a greater political distance from Moscow, has been balanced by Macri's pragmatic economic policies. Russia is perceived as an attractive export market for Argentina's agricultural production, as well as being potentially important in areas such as hydropower dam construction or nuclear plant development in Argentina. Russia is also appealing as a source of military equipment and technology.

When Argentina had trouble securing loans in the international capital markets during the Kirchner era, Moscow was recognized as an alternative financial source. In fact, Buenos Aires chose to cultivate and establish close economic ties with strong state-driven regimes like China and Russia, rather than with transnational companies whose strategic investment decisions are based on profit expectations. However, while several large-scale Russian investment projects have been announced in the last few years, very little has actually materialized.⁶⁵ Likewise, the majority of the roughly 180 bilateral agreements signed during the last decades between the two countries has yet to be implemented.

Bilateral trade between Argentina and Russia experienced a golden age in 2013 and 2014, exceeding US\$2 billion in both years, but it halved in 2015 due to Russia's economic crisis and Argentina's increased protectionism. While economic relations between Argentina and Russia have varied from highs to lows, their political relationship has been more solid, particularly under Kirchner. Both countries shared a common understanding of international affairs, opposed Washington's policies and views, and advocated for a multipolar world. Moscow backed Buenos Aires in its long fight with American hedge fund creditors and supported Argentina's long-term claims to the Falkland Islands.

Moscow established close links, including the sale of military equipment, with non-aligned Latin American countries that were ideologically opposed to the United States. Argentina is a case in point, going from one of the most enthusiastic regional supporters of globalization during the 1990s to openly questioning the Western-style liberal democratic model after the

depression that followed. The bilateral relationship reached its peak in 2015, when Kirchner and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a comprehensive strategic association. Despite publicly backing Russia's intervention in Crimea, Argentina abstained from voting on a U.N. resolution condemning the annexation—a decision that did not please any of the parties involved. The main Argentine media did not support Moscow's annexation either.⁶⁶

Moscow's soft power efforts in Argentina and the region are consistent with its determination to repair the damage done to its image by its involvement in Crimea and the rest of Ukraine, as well as a way out of its international strategic isolation after being kicked out of the G-8 club of the world's largest economies.⁶⁷ Argentine analysts also connect Russia's increasing presence in Argentina and the region to what they call Moscow's "repair policy"—a way for Russia to balance its relationship with the West as a result of what Moscow perceived as a Western policy to encircle and humiliate Russia. Despite the change of power in Argentina, Russia has not surrendered its soft power strategy there.

Russia is slowly but surely building its soft power capabilities in Argentina. Its main achievement has been to have RT (formerly known as Russia Today), a network funded by the Russian government, aired on Argentine public television. Media cooperation further increased in 2017 with announcements to co-produce television programs, share content, exchange journalists, and cooperate in areas such as Internet and social networks. While these agreements have not been fully implemented yet, they are important because they show that both governments are on the same wavelength in the media field. The Argentine government's magic word to justify the collaboration with an authoritarian regime's state media is "plurality." Ironically, authorities in Moscow seek to prevent such pluralism in their own country.

Also at an early stage but ongoing are the cooperation agreements signed since 2016 between universities of both countries, while the number of scholarships granted by the Russian government reached 47 in 2017. Rossotrudnichestvo, the government agency operating under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that is in charge of Russia's public diplomacy, invites young Latin American leaders of different fields who are between twenty and forty years old to Russia under the "New Generation" program. "They want us to see Russia with our own eyes, and not through what we've been told by others," says one attendee. Trips last one week and participants are lectured in Spanish on Russian politics, economy, and diplomacy. The Russian Center of Science and Culture, a branch of the Russian Embassy in Buenos Aires, also promotes an agenda of Russian cultural activities.

Media

In October 2014, just three months after Putin's visit to Argentina and when the diplomatic relationship between Buenos Aires and Moscow was at its peak, the television network RT en Español began to broadcast on Argentina's public television platform, known as Open Digital Television (TDA, in Spanish). This was a landmark agreement. It was only the second time that a foreign television network (after Venezuela's Telesur) was aired on the Argentine public network, which at the time was made available to 82 percent of the country's population. In other words, an audience of between 33 million and 35 million people could potentially access the Russian channel—24 hours a day, in Spanish, for free.

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The deal was celebrated politically, as evidenced by Putin and Cristina Kirchner's twenty-minute televised linkup from Moscow and Buenos Aires during the channel's debut. Kirchner referred to the deal as "serious multilateralism," and welcomed that both countries could communicate from that moment "without intermediaries" to "transmit our own values." Putin cautioned against media that can manipulate social awareness, and therefore saluted "alternative sources of information" that oppose international players' attempts "to establish their monopoly of truth."⁶⁸

Nevertheless, the deal stumbled in mid-2016 following Macri's presidential victory, when it was made public by the new administration that it would be suspended. Although technical reasons were officially cited, Macri's actual purpose was to end the politically motivated deals signed by his predecessor. The new government first terminated the cooperation between the Argentine public news agency Télam and the official Cuban agency Prensa Latina. The Venezuelan-backed television Telesur was next. In fact, it would have been contradictory for the Argentine state to maintain its shares in Telesur, since the channel's editorial line was openly critical of the Macri government, as well as of its Western allies.⁶⁹

When Argentina then announced that it was putting an end to the deal with RT, which meant that the Russian channel would have to cease broadcasting on the TDA platform, the decision sparked an immediate reaction from the Russian community. The Coordinating Council of the Organizations of Russian Compatriots (CCOCR, in Spanish), which unites different organizations of Russians living in Argentina, called on Macri to reverse the decision. A petition campaign was launched on social networks, and some voices rose against closing down a channel that they argued offered "plurality" and "alternative views" in the midst of the Western media's dominant viewpoints.



But it was Moscow that reacted most ferociously. Russia's official media described the move as being "against freedom of expression," and accused the Macri government of trying to impose a media dictatorship in Argentina: "Now we will have a single, U.S.-friendly viewpoint about current affairs." Authorities in Moscow blamed the United States and suggested reprisals against Buenos Aires. The Russian ambassador allegedly had a vitriolic reaction, too. "He was very

upset and protested officially. He mentioned how important it was for Russia that RT continue to be aired on Argentina's public television platform," said an Argentine government source.⁷⁰

It did not take long for the Russian pressure to pay off. Within a few weeks, the government's decision was reversed and RT was allowed to keep its place on TDA's platform. It is unclear what exactly triggered the Macri government's 180-degree turn, but government sources in Buenos Aires mentioned Moscow's threat to halt imports of Argentine beef and to withdraw a multibillion-dollar loan for a major infrastructure project in Argentina. Another source, who is familiar with the negotiations, summed up the situation in these terms: "We can tell Venezuela that we'll end the deal with Telesur, but we cannot tell Russia that we want to do the same with RT."⁷¹

Whatever the motivation was, it worked well, because the deal between the two went from being almost killed to being renewed and then upgraded in a matter of weeks. The scope of the extended deal was announced in late 2016 at a re-launching event in Buenos Aires.⁷² It included cooperation in a number of new areas: joint production in films and television cultural content, exchange of information and journalists, Internet cooperation, and development of new technologies and social networks. Argentina's Federal System of Public Media and Content (SFMCP, in Spanish) and RT were even planning a joint live program on political affairs that would be broadcast simultaneously in both countries.⁷³

Russia's objectives go well beyond having RT on the air in Argentina. They point toward a future information society "which will be ruled by personal content, smartphones, and other technological advances."⁷⁴ For its part, the Argentine government places importance on offering audiences "a diversity of content," as well as having Argentine-produced cultural content aired on Russia's television—such as a documentary on tango, considered the first example of cooperation in the new era between both institutions. The importance of what the Russians have accomplished with this deal is summarized in the words of one Argentine government official: "RT is an absolutely biased channel. No commercial platform would ever broadcast them."⁷⁵

Russia's efforts to impact Argentina's media landscape go beyond television agreements. Along with RT, the Russian news agency Sputnik is Moscow's other main bet in the medium term, even if it currently has just one correspondent in Buenos Aires who depends on the agency's regional desk in Montevideo, Uruguay.⁷⁶ In Argentina, Sputnik has granted free access to its service and content to a number of media outlets, including the news agency Télam; online news websites Infobae, Infonews, and Tiempo Argentino; the *Página 12* newspaper; and *Perfil* magazine. Although this has had very little discernible impact so far, the agency's efforts suggest Sputnik's aspiration of becoming a well-known agency in the country.

All of this was happening at the same time when *Russia Beyond the Headlines (RBTH)*, Russia's official supplement published in different languages and intended for foreign audiences, discontinued its print edition and became an online news website available in Spanish. In the past, *RBTH* was successful in having its paid supplement inserted in Argentina's two most influential newspapers for five years. *RBTH* and its predecessor, *Rusia Hoy (Russia Today)*, were inserted twenty times in *Clarín*, the country's main newspaper, between 2010 and 2011. *RBTH* was inserted in *La Nación* once a month between 2013 and 2015, totalling 49 inserts. According to *La Nación*, its circulation on weekdays is 100,000, not including the digital audience. A survey of the supplement's impact found that readers' satisfaction was "good," newspaper sources say.

Culture

Most of Russian culture in Argentina rotates around the Russian Center of Science and Culture in Buenos Aires. This institution, which depends on Russia's public diplomacy and cooperation agency Rossotrudnichestvo, has two main tasks: to spread Russia's historical narrative, culture, and economic and political policies; and to support the learning of the Russian language. The cultural center's self-described strategy, as well as its activities in Argentina, is no different from what Moscow does in over one hundred other countries where it is established.

Moscow's cultural links with Argentina date back to the Soviet era, when it was common for Russian operas, theatre, ballet, films, literature, music, and other examples of Russian art to be introduced in Buenos Aires. Nowadays, however, bringing over large groups of Russian artists occurs less frequently due to high travel costs. "In the Soviet days, costs were not a problem: The state would pay for everything. Aeroflot would also reach all Latin American capitals. But not anymore: Now it is a long and expensive trip with other airlines. This is the main obstacle for more artists to come," says a Russian diplomat in Argentina.

Today's financial limitations have had an obvious impact on Russia's cultural agenda in Argentina. It is now probably a less ambitious and more modest cultural proposal, but it still serves the purpose of spreading Russian culture, although in a slightly different manner. Without the attractive performances of the past, many cultural activities sponsored by the Russian government seem to have a well-defined emphasis beyond mere culture. For instance, of the roughly 75 events and cultural activities organized by the Russian Center of Science and Culture between 2012 and 2016, a large number of them appealed to Russian patriotism.

The Great Patriotic War, as Russians refer to World War II, is the most recurrent topic: from events that honor those who lost their lives to photo exhibitions of the battle of Stalingrad; from activities on the anniversary of Leningrad's liberation to Soviet and Russian films about the two world wars; from conferences that commemorate the battle of Kursk to seminars on Russian history. Other activities hosted by the Russian center have had an even sharper political angle. One was a "very successful" conference by Alexander Dugin, a controversial Russian political scientist who allegedly has direct links with the Kremlin and whose anti-Western views have been described as fascist.⁷⁷ Another example was the premiere of a movie on Crimea, just months after Russia annexed it from Ukraine.⁷⁸

The main target of such messages is the Russian community. The so-called Russian compatriots are of fundamental importance for Moscow, as illustrated by the fact that Rossotrudnichestvo has been tasked with strengthening ties to the Russian diaspora. Argentina's Russian community is relatively small,⁷⁹ but the CCOCR in Argentina is quite involved with the Russian Center of Science and Culture, jointly organizing cultural events on historical, patriotic dates. The cultural center is the venue where all Russians compatriots can get together, and it also serves people who studied or worked in Russia or are students of Russian language, history, and culture.

The cultural center is also the main institution in Argentina that offers courses on Russian language, history, culture, and traditions. It grants scholarships for language courses at universities in Russia that last from one to ten months, along with other scholarships that include summer courses at Russian universities for one to four weeks, training courses for teachers, and university or postgraduate degrees.

Academia

Relations between Russian and Argentine academia remain at a low level, even as Moscow has made efforts since 2015 to reverse this trend. Russian universities have signed eight cooperation agreements with Argentine counterparts since that year, with others forthcoming.⁸⁰ These deals are, however, little more than framework agreements that so far have been only partially effective in offering a handful of scholarships to students. Due to a lack of financial resources, there are presently no expectations of taking cooperation to another level, such as joint research projects or scholars' exchange programs.

It is not for lack of interest. Russian academic promoters underline the solid institutional relationship between both countries and value the responsiveness of the Argentine academy. However, they admit that language barriers as well as geographical distance, which make the programs very costly, are the main obstacles to further engagement.

The Russian State Social University has been the most active institution in establishing links with Latin American counterparts during the past three years, founding the Ibero-American Center in 2014, with the purpose of strengthening the relationship with Latin American academia. This center, which represents *Rossotrudnichestvo* in Latin America, joins efforts by both the Ministry of Education and Science and the Pushkin Institute to launch an internationalization strategy in the region. In March 2017, representatives of the Ibero-American Center and *Rossotrudnichestvo* toured several countries in the region, including Argentina, to promote Russia's academic offerings among Latin American students. In a presentation at the University of Buenos Aires, they announced that Russia would allocate 47 scholarships to Argentine applicants in 2017—up from fewer than 20 per year—out of a total of 15,000 scholarships granted to international students every year by the Russian state. The purpose is to attract young professionals who will “remain loyal to Russia” in the future.⁸¹

Analysis

Russia lost Argentina as an important political ally in Latin America when Macri was elected president of Argentina in late 2015. The previous government did not vote against Moscow at the UN after Russia's annexation of Crimea, and generally speaking, Argentina and Russia agreed that Washington and the rest of the Western world were mainly responsible for what they argued were geopolitical imbalances. Now, however, the bilateral relationship is dominated by pragmatism, and it is probably thanks to this dynamic that Moscow has ultimately been able to hold onto its main soft power treasure in Argentina: the free, 24-hour broadcasting of the television network RT en Español.

The Russian channel's impact in Argentina is unclear. TDA, the public platform over which RT is aired, reaches 82 percent of the population. This means that 33 million to 35 million viewers can access the channel's signal. Nevertheless, given the limited number of receivers installed in households, the potential audience is thought to be closer to 3.5 million viewers. Although Macri's government attempted to prevent its broadcast, Moscow's energetic reaction reversed the situation. More than that, cooperation between TDA and RT was raised to a new level.

A number of undetermined cooperation initiatives were also announced around that same period—including content co-production, exchange programs, and Internet and social network collaboration. If implemented, the presence and impact of RT in the Argentine television

market will increase considerably. Media observers in Buenos Aires warn about the risks of considering Russia’s television content a contribution to pluralism. “It is important to keep in mind who the country is behind this kind of deal—and its ideology. These are countries with no freedom of expression at home, but that are quite assertive through its content. Therefore, we have to check what kind of content is offered for free to Argentine audiences,” says one analyst with a media association in Buenos Aires.⁸²

Moscow uses RT, other official media, social networks, and culture to change the perception that the region, including Argentina, has of Russia. Currently its image is of a country that is a continuation of the Soviet Union, which was the embodiment of hard, militarized power. Looking to the future, Moscow’s goal is to promote a more culturally and technologically inclusive image, which is seen as key to being perceived as a modern, preeminent power, not just a strategic one. The challenge for Moscow is significant, not only because it needs to engage culturally with Argentina and the region, but also because it seeks to overcome what the regime sees are “Western prejudices” of Russia. The Kremlin sees new technologies as a great opportunity to reverse the situation in its favor.

Argentina’s Russian diaspora is also viewed as a channel for projecting soft power. While they play a role in keeping the overseas Russian community united, Russia’s efforts in Argentina seem to be mostly targeted at mobilizing those who are already convinced of Moscow’s official viewpoints, instead of focusing on those who do not share Russia’s values and goals. While this seems to contradict the concept of soft power, it also highlights the bumpy road ahead for Russia’s soft power objectives. It is not the only example. The National University of La Plata’s chair in Russian studies is another revealing case in point. It was created in 2011 to establish links with Russian universities, teach Russian language, and analyze Russia’s current affairs from an academic perspective. However, due to the lack of resources to finance an academic team of Russia experts, the chair has effectively been discontinued.

The views expressed in this paper represent the opinions and analysis of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for Democracy or its staff.

NOTES

- ¹ The author wishes to acknowledge Ludmila Flavia González Cerulli, a Buenos Aires-based journalist who is a contributor to CADAL’s Observatory of International Relations and Human Rights, for providing local research support to conduct fieldwork in Argentina.
- ² Source: María Romina Casas Silva, “Representaciones Sociales Sobre los Chinos y Taiwanese en los Medios de Comunicación en Argentina,” *Diversidad Cultural*, no. 11, December 2015–June 2016, www.diversidadcultural.net/articulos/nro011/11-03-Mag-Romina-Silva-Casas.pdf.
- ³ Editor’s note: Although the overview essay to this report uses the term “sharp power” to characterize the more malign and manipulative aspects of authoritarian influence, the authors of the individual country reports instead generally use the broader term “soft power.” In the country studies, the authors were asked to inventory and analyze the methods of authoritarian influence applied by China and Russia in democratic settings. The concept of “sharp power” introduced in the overview essay is an outgrowth of their comparative findings.
- ⁴ The Chinese ambassador’s activities have been compiled by the author from information published on the website of China’s embassy in Argentina. According to this information, the institutions that have engaged with the Chinese ambassador include twelve media outlets (*La Nación*, *Clarín*, *Dangdai*, *Télam*, *Agencia Noticias Argentinas*, *Tiempo Argentino*, *El Cronista Comercial*, *Revista Económica*, *Ámbito Financiero*, *Perfil*, *CCTV en Español*, and *Revista Oriental*) and the Federal System of Public Media and Contents (SFMCP, in Spanish); three political parties (Republican Proposal, the Justicialist Party, and the Socialist Party of Argentina); and twelve foundations and think tanks (Casa Patria Grande; the Center for the Implementation of Public Policies Promoting Equity and Growth; the Foundation of Political, Economic, and Social Studies for the New Argentina; the Latin American

Center for Political and Economic Chinese Studies; the Institute of Strategic Planning; the “New Majority” Center of Studies; the Network for Political Action; the Contemporary Foundation; the Argentine Council for International Relations; the Center for Research and Social Action; the Ibero-American University Foundation; and the Open Embassy Foundation).

⁵ The comprehensive strategic partnership between Argentina and China was signed on July 18, 2014. The details of what this type of association means have not been made public in Argentina nor in China, but such comprehensive strategic partnerships made with China commonly include cooperation in the following areas: politics; defense; science and technology; agriculture; culture and education; health and medical sciences; environment, forestry and natural resources; nuclear energy; and space.

⁶ Argentina granted China 208 hectares to build and run a space facility in a remote area near the Chilean border for a 50 year period. Though it has been announced that the facility will be used for China’s moon program and, therefore, is purely for scientific purposes, this project is highly controversial because of its military and geopolitical implications. The station’s main asset is a 35-meter diameter antenna that allows communication with devices such as deep-space satellites, but critics warn that the military use of such a facility cannot be ruled out because of the antenna’s double use capabilities. The facility, which will be run by a state company linked to the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, is expected to be in full operation by early 2018.

⁷ Luke Patey, “China Made Mauricio Macri A Deal He Couldn’t Refuse,” *Foreign Policy*, 24 January 2017.

China’s loans jumped to US\$25 billion by 2016, according to Argentina’s ambassador in China. Among others, three main projects will be financed with those funds: the rehabilitation of Argentina’s main railway infrastructure, two hydropower dams, and two nuclear plants. The railway network, known as the Belgrano Cargas, is key for Argentina’s economy since it will allegedly upgrade infrastructure from the food producing provinces to the ports. The plan includes a complete renovation of 1,626 kilometres of tracks and 120 bridges.

⁸ Before the 2015 elections, members of Macri’s political party PRO handed a letter to China’s ambassador in Argentina that said that the deals “endanger the Argentine state for the next few decades” and that “the Argentine government’s conduct could violate the national Constitution and go against the most basic principle of transparency.” Mauricio Macri was a signatory to the letter, which was made public by *El Cronista*.

Néstor Restivo, “Los candidatos frente a China,” *Dangdai*, Winter 2015.

⁹ Macri’s intention to review the conditions for the construction of the Kirchner and Cepernic hydropower dams in the country’s south, which entailed a US\$4.7 billion loan, came to nothing when Beijing made it clear that the cancellation of this project would lead to the revocation of a US\$2.1 billion loan granted to renovate the Belgrano project, the country’s main railway infrastructure. A letter from the China Development Bank to the Argentine government in March 2017 said that “the Kirchner-Cepernic dams and the Belgrano project are major projects promoted by the [Chinese Communist] Party” and each of the agreements “contain cross default clauses.” At a later stage, both countries agreed to lower the capacity of the two dams that are allegedly the biggest to ever be built by a Chinese company abroad. Rubén Rabanal, “La Argentina acordó con China ante amenaza de cross default,” *Ámbito Financiero*, 24 March 2017, www.ambito.com/833726-la-argentina-acordo-con-china-ante-amenaza-de-cross-default.

¹⁰ Author’s interview with an anonymous source. Buenos Aires, December 2016.

¹¹ Meetings between the CCP and PRO happened indistinctly in Beijing and Buenos Aires. On one occasion, a member of the CCP Politburo’s Standing Committee offered a conference at PRO’s headquarters in the Argentine capital and was also received by Macri in the Casa Rosada, the government headquarters. Trips to China include meetings with party cadres as well as tourist visits to the Great Wall, other Chinese cities, or to company headquarters such as Huawei. Representatives of most other Argentine political parties have also been invited by the CCP to visit China. Sergio Massa, a presidential candidate in the 2015 election, was invited in March 2017. Source: Information collected by the author from articles about those exchanges published by the Argentine press.

¹² Humberto Schiavoni, “China, brújula para nuestro desarrollo,” *Clarín*, 30 August 2016.

¹³ Author’s interview. Buenos Aires, November 2016.

¹⁴ CLEPEC is a regional foundation based in Buenos Aires that was founded in 2013. It has historically been linked to the *kirchneristas*, and most of its China-related activity is done in Argentina and Venezuela.

¹⁵ Author’s interview. Buenos Aires, November 2016.

¹⁶ The best exception in the media was the article “Un chino anda suelto en la legislatura,” published by the political magazine *Qué* on 9 November 2016.

¹⁷ James Jiann Hua To, *Qiaowu: Extra-Territorial Policies for the Overseas Chinese*, Chinese Overseas Series, xiv (Brill, May 2014), 39–43.

¹⁸ *Boletín Informativo* has been published twice a year by the Chinese embassy in Argentina since 2015. Along with its online edition, it is printed and distributed to Argentina’s Congress, the Presidency, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Economy, Culture and Education, and other government agencies.

- ¹⁹ Since late 2014 the Chinese ambassador has published at least fifteen op-eds and has been interviewed ten times in the main national media outlets. *La Nación* and *Clarín* published ten of the fifteen op-eds. He also visited five media headquarters during that period. Source: Chinese embassy website; information collected by the author.
- ²⁰ According to the Argentine press, Xinhua and Télam signed several cooperation agreements during the last decade, including a deal “to deepen links” between both agencies signed in 2011. The deal includes information exchange.
- ²¹ *China Watch* was first published on March 15, 2016, and the campaign was ongoing in mid-2017 at the time of writing. The paid insert appears every fifteen days in the economic daily *El Cronista*, Rosario’s *La Capital* newspaper, and in the three local editions of *Diario Uno* in Mendoza, Santa Fe, and Entre Ríos provinces. The total combined circulation of these publications is 150,000, while combined weekday sales reach around 100,000.
- ²² Fernando Arredondo, “Destacan a China Watch como ejemplo de la fortaleza del vínculo con China,” *Diario Uno*, 10 May 2016, www.unosantafe.com.ar/santafe/destacan-china-watch-como-ejemplo-la-fortaleza-del-vinculo-china-n884361.html.
- ²³ Conducted by a TV presenter of Taiwanese origin, “Milenarios” is a television program that aims to bring China closer to an Argentine audience. It touches on Chinese culture, tourism, cooking, business, and similar topics. It debuted in April 2016 and is broadcast every Saturday. Channel A24 has national and regional coverage (except to Brazil) through cable and is one of the three most viewed channels in Argentina. As of mid-2017, *Milenarios* had 5,613 likes on Facebook, 366 Twitter followers, 717 YouTube subscribed viewers, and 487 followers on Instagram. According to sources, the program’s producer initially approached the Chinese embassy for funding. The embassy connected them to the House of Chinese Culture, which linked them to the group’s media holding Grupo América.
- ²⁴ The documentary can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGG4sOrT3dQ>.
- ²⁵ Statements by Wang Yu, director of CCTV Spanish, at a TV forum held in Lima, Peru, 7 December 2016.
- ²⁶ Both institutions agreed to actively cooperate to broadcast soap operas, animated shows, and documentaries; to promote television programs, sports activities and other television and film programs of the two countries in their own territories; and to co-produce documentaries, animation, and other television and film products. To do so, they agreed to create an audiovisual content database. Previously, the two countries signed a framework agreement in February 2015. The co-production of a documentary on tango was being discussed at the time of writing this report, but things had slowed down after the initial Chinese impetus, according to Argentine sources.
- ²⁷ “Acuerdo con el Diario del Pueblo, de China,” *La Nación*, 14 June 2015, www.lanacion.com.ar/1801618-acuerdo-con-el-diario-del-pueblo-de-china. The Argentine press reported that the *People’s Daily* was incorporated in Argentina on November 25, 2014, with a social capital of CN¥ 276.422.764 (US\$45 million at the time), suggesting that its initial plans in the country were very ambitious. As of 2017, the Chinese newspaper allegedly has one correspondent in Buenos Aires. *People’s Daily* is one of the regime’s main media outlets, with a daily circulation of more than 3.5 million copies. It also publishes nine other newspapers and six monthly magazines.
- ²⁸ China’s ambassador to Argentina, Yang Wanming, held a meeting in the newspaper’s newsroom on January 13, 2015, with the newspaper’s general manager and the editor in chief. According to the embassy’s public note, they “shared opinions on cooperation between both countries’ media.” The Chinese ambassador also met with *La Nación* executives on May 20 and June 12, 2015. On the day of the June meeting, he also attended the signing of the cooperation memorandum between *La Nación* and the *People’s Daily* newspaper. The ambassador paid another visit to *La Nación* on November 30, 2015. “El Embajador Yang Wanming visitó la sede del diario *La Nación*,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Argentina, 16 January 2015, <http://ar.china-embassy.org/esp/sgxw/t1229196.htm>; “El Embajador Yang Wanming se reunió con autoridades de la Nación,” 21 May 2015, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Argentina, <http://ar.china-embassy.org/esp/sgxw/t1265912.htm>; “El Embajador Yang Wanming se presentó en la ceremonia de firma del memorándum de cooperación entre Diario de Pueblo y *La Nación*,” 16 June 2015, Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Argentina, <http://ar.china-embassy.org/esp/sgxw/t1273353.htm>; and “El Embajador Yang Wanming se reunió el Gerente General de Diario *La Nación*,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Argentina, 1 December 2015, <http://ar.china-embassy.org/esp/sgxw/t1320283.htm>.
- ²⁹ *La Nación*’s average daily readership dropped from 169,896 in October 2011 to 119,193 in June 2017. Sources: “Diario *La Nación*: record histórico de ventas,” Taringa, www.taringa.net/posts/noticias/14577801/Diario-La-Nacion-record-historico-de-ventas.html, and <http://enciclomeditos.com/>. *Clarín*, the other major Argentine newspaper that was also very critical of the Kirchner government, also lost more readership during those same years.
- ³⁰ *La Nación* launched the digital TV channel LN+ in November 2016. According to press reports, its average rating was 0.01 in May 2017, ranking last among the other news broadcasts in Argentina. The media group says that its TV project is long term. “LN+ no repunta su rating y C5N le pisa los talones a TN,” *Urgente 24*, 8 June 2017, www.urgente24.com/265707-ln-no-repunta-su-rating-y-c5n-le-pisa-los-talones-a-tn.

- ³¹ After more than a century, *La Nación* decided on October 2016 to reduce the newspaper to a tabloid-size format, allegedly to reduce the high costs of paper. “La Nación, con un nuevo formato: la edición impresa ahora es un compacto,” *La Nación*, 30 October 2016, www.lanacion.com.ar/1951757-la-nacion-con-un-nuevo-formato-la-edicion-impresa-ahora-sera-un-compacto.
- ³² According to the website of China’s embassy in Argentina, Chinese ambassador Yan Wanming authored op-eds on April 4, 2015; January 31, 2016; November 8, 2016; March 28, 2017; June 28, 2017; and September 20, 2017. The ambassador was also interviewed on August 22, 2016. “Noticias de la Embajada,” Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Argentina, <http://ar.china-embassy.org/esp/sgxw/>.
- ³³ “Belgrano recibe otra vez el Año Nuevo chino,” *La Nación*, 3 February 2017, www.lanacion.com.ar/1981371-belgrano-recibe-otra-vez-el-ano-nuevo-chino.
- ³⁴ Phoenix Dorada International Media Company was incorporated in Buenos on April 5, 2016, with two female shareholders who were 58 and 86 years of age at that time. It changed its name from Fundación Muralla Dorada (Golden Wall Foundation), which was founded in 2012. “The change in the company’s name was purely cosmetic. We chose the name Phoenix because of the director’s spirit, because of the Phoenix’s revival and its celestial message.” Currently the company employs 20 people. According to its website, its mission is to “produce and distribute television and film programs, [and] medium and large scale cultural events.”
- ³⁵ According to the company’s website, it received a US\$30,000 donation from the Chinese embassy in May 2015. “La Embajada China dona un fondo especial a La Fundación Muralla Dorada,” Phoenix Dorada website, accessed 15 May 2017, <http://phoenixdorada.com/la-embajada-china-regala-fondo-especial-a-la-fundacion-muralla-dorada/>.
- ³⁶ “Las empresas chinas auspician el Festival Año Nuevo Chino,” Phoenix Dorada website, accessed 15 May 2017, <http://phoenixdorada.com/las-empresas-chinas-auspician-el-festival-ano-nuevo-chino/>.
- ³⁷ It is relevant to mention that among large private Chinese companies, such as Huawei, Sany, Alibaba, and many others, shareholders typically have a very close relationship with the Chinese government. In this sense, it is not precise to equate these Chinese private companies with private companies in the West, where shareholders are mostly private individuals and entities.
- ³⁸ The Taiwanese were the first ethnic Chinese to migrate to Argentina in the 1970s, one and a half decades ahead of those from mainland China. At the time, the Taiwanese community amounted to 60,000, but the number has decreased to 10,000. The Taiwanese immigrant population congregated in a neighbourhood in Buenos Aires that later become the city’s Chinatown. Today the second generation of Taiwanese are the most successful members of the ethnic-Chinese community, given that the later wave of mainland Chinese arriving in Argentina generally had little education. For this reason, the better-educated Taiwanese are commonly chosen over the mainland Chinese to represent the Chinese community at public events.
- ³⁹ The program *Chino Básico* (Basic Chinese) made its television debut in 2014 and was aired weekly for two seasons. As the first Chinese television program in Argentina, it was dedicated more to Chinese culture than to Mandarin. The program had an average audience of 45,000, and is now available online. *Chino Básico* has 13,000 subscribers on YouTube.
- ⁴⁰ Phoenix Dorada International Media Company, accessed 8 November 2017, <http://phoenixdorada.com/#about>.
- ⁴¹ Mostly Chinese-born artists, many of them dissidents, founded Shen Yun Performing Arts in New York in 2006. Its four companies tour the world with the slogan: “Revive 5,000 years of Chinese civilization.” Shen Yun accuses the CCP of subjecting ancient Chinese culture “to a process of systematic annihilation” with the purpose of settling the party’s own culture “to monopolize power without interference.” It aims to recover Chinese culture through a show of classical dance, acrobatics, and music. The company, which is connected to the Falun Gong spiritual movement, says the show has performed in more than 130 countries and has been viewed by more than 1.5 million spectators.
- ⁴² Falun Gong practitioners have filed several complaints in Argentine courts against Chinese embassy personnel for harassment, threats, and beatings. The spiritual movement has also filed a criminal case in Argentina against the Chinese leadership in Beijing for crimes against humanity for the Falun Gong’s persecution.
- ⁴³ The following have been the topics of the cultural courses in the first semester of 2017: Confucius thought; Chinese economy; traditional Chinese painting; learning Qigong; Taichichuan; Chinese supply chains; Beijing Opera; Chinese history; Chinese thought; Chinese calligraphy; today’s Chinese society, culture, and business; and traditional Chinese medicine.
- ⁴⁴ Students receive six or twelve-month scholarships, as well as scholarships for three-week summer camps in China. Argentina received four scholarships from the Chinese government in 2015 and 25 for the 2016–17 academic year. In May 2017 Beijing announced that it would increase the number of scholarships available for Argentines to 40 per year. Also, the Confucius Institutes offer their own scholarships, while other grants follow bilateral deals between universities. Argentine students awarded with Chinese scholarships up until 2015 are estimated to be more than 400, said the Chinese ambassador in a media interview. In June 2017, the Association of Former Scholarship Students in China (ADEBAC, in Spanish) was founded in Buenos Aires for networking purposes.

- ⁴⁵ Scholar and Sinologist Eduardo Oviedo refers to this idea in his book *Historia de las Relaciones Internacionales entre Argentina y China, 1945–2010*. He is also critical of the Confucius Institutes, since they are part of the Chinese state and are established on campus, a factor that may compromise academic autonomy and freedom. See more: Oviedo, Eduardo Daniel, *Historia de las Relaciones Internacionales entre Argentina y China, 1945-2010*, (Buenos Aires: Editorial Dunken, 2010).
- ⁴⁶ “El Puente Científico,” *Dangdai*, Autumn 2017.
- ⁴⁷ CONICET depends on the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Productive Innovation and is considered the most important research institution in Argentina. According to its website, CONICET is in charge of promoting science and technology in Argentina. Its objective is to boost and implement scientific and technical activities in all fields of knowledge, including social sciences and humanities. The institution has its own researchers and was founded in 1958.
- ⁴⁸ Before the creation of CIMI, both institutions had built a relationship for quite some time. CONICET’s Center for Labor Studies and Research and Shanghai University’s Center for Global Studies were engaged academically for several years through a mix of academic cooperation programs and activities. These included the exchange of PhD students, scholarship awards, and participation in seminars, workshops, and conferences in the social sciences. In 2015 CONICET and Shanghai University signed a framework agreement that led to the creation of CIMI in April 2017, with a validity of four years. CIMI is allegedly financed by both institutions and has head offices in both Buenos Aires and Shanghai. In terms of structure, it has one director per institution, a scientific board, an evaluation committee, and a consultative board, as well as staff with fifteen to twenty people. Source: Author’s interviews with anonymous sources in Buenos Aires, June 2017.
- ⁴⁹ A profile of CICIR published by the Open Source Center states that this Chinese think tank “is affiliated with China’s top intelligence agency, the Ministry of State Security, although this fact is rarely acknowledged in PRC media.” Source: “Profile of MSS-Affiliated PRC Foreign Policy Think Tank CICIR,” Open Source Center, 25 August 2011, <https://fas.org/irp/dni/osc/cicir.pdf>.
- According to Argentine press, CONICET and CICIR signed a framework agreement in 2009 that was renewed in 2014 “so that delegations of researchers can make academic and scientific visits between both countries.” In 2013, both institutions agreed to facilitate international cooperation projects in the areas of international politics and strategic relations between China and Argentina. Since then, the cooperation between the two has led to the organization of seminars, mutual visits by researchers, and published materials.
- ⁵⁰ “Building soft power of social sciences,” Opinion, *Shanghai Daily*, 19 May 2017, www.shanghaidaily.com/opinion/chinese-perspectives/Building-soft-power-of-social-sciences/shdaily.shtml.
- ⁵¹ Interview with CIMI’s promoters. Buenos Aires, June 2017.
- ⁵² Néstor Restivo, “Lanzaron un centro mixto histórico el Conicet y la Universidad de Shanghai,” *Dangdai*, 7 April 2017, http://dangdai.com.ar/joomla/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7705:lanza-ron-un-centro-mixto-historico-el-conicet-y-la-universidad-de-shanghai&catid=4:actualidad&Itemid=100.
- ⁵³ The Center for Argentine Studies was officially established on November 24, 2015 as part of the CASS Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS). It required special approval since CASS’ rules allow only five study centers to be established per institute—which ILAS already had. The new center was created as a platform to stimulate research on Argentine politics, economics, diplomacy, society, and culture, as well as to promote academic exchange and provide consultation services to governments and companies in both countries. Also that year, Sichuan University, Jilin University, Shanghai University, Sun Yat-sen University, and Xi’an University of International Studies established the Chinese Association of Argentine Studies for the same purpose.
- ⁵⁴ Jérôme Doyon, et al., “A Hundred Think Tanks Bloom in China,” European Council on Foreign Relations, August 2016.
- ⁵⁵ The Information Office of China’s State Council organized the “2016 Forum on the Development of Tibet” in July that year in Lhasa, which was attended by 130 foreign academics and diplomats. The attendees signed the Lhasa Consensus declaration that emphasized the importance of “helping the world better understand Tibet,” which Tibetan groups say is political language for endorsement of Chinese Communist Party propaganda. See Zhang Jianfeng, “Full Text of Lhasa Consensus,” CCTV, 8 July 2016, <http://english.cctv.com/2016/07/08/ARTIAoc2iH4o5uSNxYIQLrD160708.shtml>.
- ⁵⁶ CARI’s seminar “Relationship Strategies with China” was held on November 25, 2016, in Buenos Aires, and was attended by the author.
- ⁵⁷ There were 10,316 Chinese supermarkets in the country in 2015, according to Cámara de Autoservicios y Supermercados Propiedad Residentes Chinos (Casrech), the chamber of Chinese supermarkets in Argentina. Source: “Los súper chinos sufren la competencia y cierran comercios” *Infobae*, 9 March 2015, www.infobae.com/2015/03/09/1714726-los-super-chinos-sufren-la-competencia-y-cierran-comercios/.
- ⁵⁸ Interview with the author. Buenos Aires, March 2017.
- ⁵⁹ Interview with the author.
- ⁶⁰ Carlos Moneta and Sergio Cesarín, *La Tentación Pragmática. China–Argentina: Lo Actual, Lo Próximo y Lo Distante*, Editorial de la Universidad Nacional Tres de Febrero (Buenos Aires: Euntref, 2016).

- ⁶¹ A debate in Argentina's Senate in June 2017 warned against Latin America's "new dependency" on China, whose practices in the region were condemned as "imperialistic." In addition, a former congressman had previously published an op-ed on a minor website under the headline, "China, what nobody says," warning about some of China's more well-known downsides, such as the country's human rights record and the role of the state in the economy.
- ⁶² The forum was held in Lima, Peru at the University of St. Martin of Porres on December 10–11, 2016, and was attended by Chinese and Latin American scholars, including Argentines. The keynote speaker was former Peruvian president Alan García, who has a very close relationship with China. His book *Confucius and Globalization: Understanding China and Growing with Her* (original title in Spanish: *Confucio y la Globalización. Comprender China y Crecer con ella*) was published in Mandarin by China's People's Literature Publishing House in 2014.
- ⁶³ The International Confucian Association (ICA) was officially established in Beijing on October 5, 1994. According to its website, it has the purpose of "studying and carrying forward Confucian thought in order to push for the freedom and equality of mankind and the peaceful development and lasting prosperity of the world," and "strives to unite Confucian societies, scholars and professionals to boost the study, dissemination, popularization and application of Confucianism in the international community." Specifically, ICA's work includes organizing international academic conferences and lectures, carrying out academic research, and promoting friendly international exchanges and cooperation, among other duties.
- ⁶⁴ Xinhua traditionally used to have only one correspondent. In the last few years, the Xinhua bureau in Buenos Aires has been upgraded to six people. As of December 2016, it includes one Chinese delegate, one cameraman, one photographer, and three Argentine journalists. For the Buenos Aires bureau, CGTN recently hired Carolina Cayazzo, former CNN senior correspondent. China Radio International and *People's Daily* have one correspondent each.
- ⁶⁵ Thanks to its larger financial resources, China's economic presence in Argentina is clearly more visible. Despite Chinese competition, a Russian-led consortium was awarded a US\$2.2 billion project to build a hydropower dam. In 2017, the project seemed to stumble after the Macri government demanded better financial terms for the repayment of the loan. Russia is also behind the building of a new nuclear plant in Argentina, and a US\$180 million project to build a port was announced, too.
- ⁶⁶ Analysis of editorials and op-ed articles from January 2014 to early 2017 shows that the Argentine media were almost unanimously critical of Russia's annexation of Crimea. *La Nación* published five editorials and twenty opinion articles, all of them disapproving. *Clarín* published nine critical opinion articles. *Página 12*, close to the Kirchner government, referred in its articles to the United States' responsibility in the Ukrainian crisis. Argentine experts on Russian matters agree that the media's coverage of the Ukrainian conflict lacked historical analysis.
- ⁶⁷ Although it emerged earlier as a way to consolidate power among compatriots in the post-Soviet space, Russia's soft power was formally introduced in its Foreign Policy Doctrine of 2013. Moscow reacted to the West's promotion of democracy in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine by encouraging a soft power strategy with the creation and reinforcement of institutions directly or indirectly linked to the Kremlin. Among them, the Ruskiy Mir Foundation, the Russia Today television network (now RT), the Alexander Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' agency in charge of Russia's public diplomacy, known as Rossotrudnichestvo. The doctrine defines soft power as a set of instruments for achieving foreign policy aims by means of civil society institutions, information technology, communication interactions, humanitarian outreach, and other methods that differ from classic diplomacy. Alexander Sergunin, "Understanding Russia's Soft Power Strategy," *Politics* 35 (2015): 347–63.
- ⁶⁸ Despite the diplomatic honeymoon atmosphere at the time when RT began to be aired in Argentina, the Russian channel had been extremely critical of Cristina Kirchner in the past. A documentary screened in 2012 on the Patagonia region's land sale to foreign millionaires suggested the Kirchners were responsible for the massive land sales to Jewish people, while it accused the Kirchner government of turning the Argentine army into "third-world obsolete junk" and of being "absolutely covered with corruption." The documentary was erased from RT's website just a few days after the deal between Kirchner and Putin was signed in July 2014.
- ⁶⁹ During the Cristina Kirchner administration, Argentina participated in Telesur along with the governments of Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Uruguay. The Argentine state had a 20 percent share and, therefore, had to partially finance the channel, but it had no influence over its editorial line.
- ⁷⁰ Author's interview with anonymous source. Buenos Aires, October 2016.
- ⁷¹ Author's interview with anonymous source. Buenos Aires, November 2016.
- ⁷² More than 100 people attended the event, including the head of Argentina's Federal System of Public Media and Content, Hernán Lombardi. The Senate's president mentioned the "strategic relationship" between Russia and Argentina and showed gratitude for Russia's "permanent support on the Falklands issue." The 25-minute documentary "Falklands, a Dormant Conflict," produced by RT, was aired during the event. The Russian ambassador said that RT reached an audience of millions of people in Argentina after broadcasting for two years.
- ⁷³ In the months that followed the signing of the framework agreement, very little has been put into practice.
- ⁷⁴ "Lombardi firmó un acuerdo con su par ruso," *El Tribuno*, 19 October 2016, www.eltribuno.info/jujuy/nota/2016-10-9-1-30-0-lombardi-firmo-un-acuerdo-con-su-par-ruso.

- ⁷⁵ Author's interview with anonymous source.
- ⁷⁶ Sputnik has six other correspondents across Latin America, each of whom produces between six and eight stories per day.
- ⁷⁷ Following Dugin's visit to Argentina in 2015, a series of articles in favor of and against Russian President Vladimir Putin were published in *Gladius*, an intellectual magazine of Catholic thought. The article "Vladimir Putin, a Singular Statesman," in the magazine's issue 93, triggered a controversial discussion among intellectuals after portraying Putin in a positive fashion in the midst of the West's alleged moral decline.
- ⁷⁸ In February 2015, Viachesláv Kraskó's film "Krymchei" was shown at the Russian Center of Science and Culture in Buenos Aires, the film's premiere outside of Russia. The film tells the story of two friends who hitchhike across Crimea asking local people one question: Whose is Crimea? Supposedly, all opinions are presented without censorship or cuts. The film ends by highlighting how 93 percent of respondents voted yes in the March 2014 referendum on Crimea's annexation to Russia.
- ⁷⁹ It is estimated that there are 300,000 residents in Argentina with Russian origin, although the figure could be higher depending on whether the Ukrainian community is included. According to a source from the Russian embassy, there are "less than 10,000 people in Argentina who speak Russian." There are around a dozen clubs or associations of Russians throughout the country.
- ⁸⁰ The Russian State Social University signed cooperation agreements with Bahía Blanca's National University of the South (Universidad Nacional del Sur) in 2015; with Mendoza's National University of Cuyo in 2016; and with St. Louis University (Universidad de San Luis) in 2017. After two years of negotiations, a deal that includes the mutual recognition of qualifications was also agreed with the University of Buenos Aires, but had not been signed at the time of writing this report. Allegedly, another agreement was also signed with Santa Fe's National University of Litoral. Other academic ties include agreements between the University of Buenos Aires and the Altai State University and Peoples' Friendship University of Russia; between the National University of Mar del Plata and Saint Petersburg State University; and between the National University of Central Buenos Aires and St. Petersburg Polytechnic University.
- ⁸¹ Russia's state-funded scholarship program has offered 15,000 spots for international applicants every year since 2014. Around 500 Russian universities in 80 cities have joined this program. Along with the 47 scholarships for Argentine applicants, Russia also offers 100 scholarships to Cubans, 87 for Colombians, twenty to Paraguayans, and five to Peruvians. The scholarships cover tuition for the duration of the program, academic materials, and accommodation for both long-term studies and short courses. They also include a monthly maintenance stipend of between US\$50 and US\$150, but do not include travel costs, living expenses, or health insurance. Through this program, Russia aims to train foreigners who "will remain loyal to the Russian Federation" and will "establish close contacts with Russian educational institutions." In effect, Moscow believes it is "recruiting personnel for the Russian economy and education system." "Glebova: Russia Invites 15,000 Foreigners for Free University Education," Sputnik, 3 September 2016, <https://sputniknews.com/interviews/201603091035999331-rossotrudnichestvo-russia-invites-foreign-students-free-university-education/>.
- ⁸² Author's interview with anonymous source. Buenos Aires, November 2016.