

# Lifestyles, Media Use, Horizons and International Student Mobility

## A Survey of Chinese and Brazilian University Students

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### **Abstract**

A survey was conducted in 2012 among Chinese and Brazilian undergraduate students. The family is the most trusted institution in both societies. Students' views of their country and the world are acquired by referring to both old and new media, which are sources that they only trust moderately, and news is reinterpreted during discussions with friends and family. Overall, students had generally neutral views of the other country when asked about its contribution to: environment, world peace and cooperation between peoples. This result is good news for those who wish to avoid conflict between the two countries. The Brazilian government envisaged sending thousands of exchange students to China, but this has not occurred. The survey showed that neither Chinese nor Brazilian students were interested in studying in each other's country, nor in other large developing countries such as Russia, India and South Africa (BRICS). Implications are drawn for the future.

**Keywords:** University students. China. Brazil. Comparative research. Survey research.

As relations between China and Brazil develop, the construction of meaningful dialogues becomes, at the same time, a value and a necessity. The article is based on a survey into values, lifestyles and horizons of young students (aged 24 and under) at three higher education institutions in the capital city and in the major financial and industrial center of each country, making up a total of twelve universities. Universities with high, medium and low selectivity of students were surveyed in each region. Students were selected randomly, 1,708 questionnaires were completed in China and 2,429 in Brazil. This survey therefore reflects the views of future members of a highly educated generation, which will play key roles in their own countries, and from which the elites will be drawn<sup>1</sup>.

The forces of globalization have pushed our countries to get to know each other quickly. In Brazil our shops offer ever increasing quantities of clothes and objects from China, growing numbers of Brazilians visit China as tourists and, with increasing immigration, the Chinese are now much better known in Brazil. This article uses survey data to draw a brief portrait of how young university students in Brazil and China relate to key institutions, and how they bring together new media, old media and traditional discussions with friends and family to construct their views of their country and the world. Having established this, we are then on safe ground to examine the views that each has of the other country's role in the world. There appears to be good news! However, while Brazilian and Chinese commercial relations have progressed in

<sup>1</sup> The research was a result of the collective efforts of the China Youth and Children Research Center (CYCRC), the China Youth and Children Research Association (CYCRA), the Brazilian Sociological Society (SBS) and the Institute for Planning and Applied Economics (IPEA). The results have been written up in the forthcoming volumes to be published by IPEA in Brazil and by CYCRC in China. The working title – in Portuguese – of the edited volume is: “Desenvolvimento, Valores e Educação Superior nos BRICS: uma Pesquisa Comparativa de Universitários Chineses e Brasileiros”. This text draws on and updates my own chapter: “Universitários em tempos de Pós-industrialismo e Globalização: Contribuições para o diálogo Sino-brasileiro.” In Brazil the research had the generous support of the IPEA, and of the author's Brazilian National Council for Scientific Research (CNPq) productivity scholarship.

leaps and bounds, the same cannot be said of educational relations. A lot remains to be done! Our data show that Chinese and Brazilian students much prefer the idea of studying in the older centers of world power than at universities of the large developing countries (BRICS). We then make some concluding remarks.

### **Confidence in Institutions – the importance of the family**

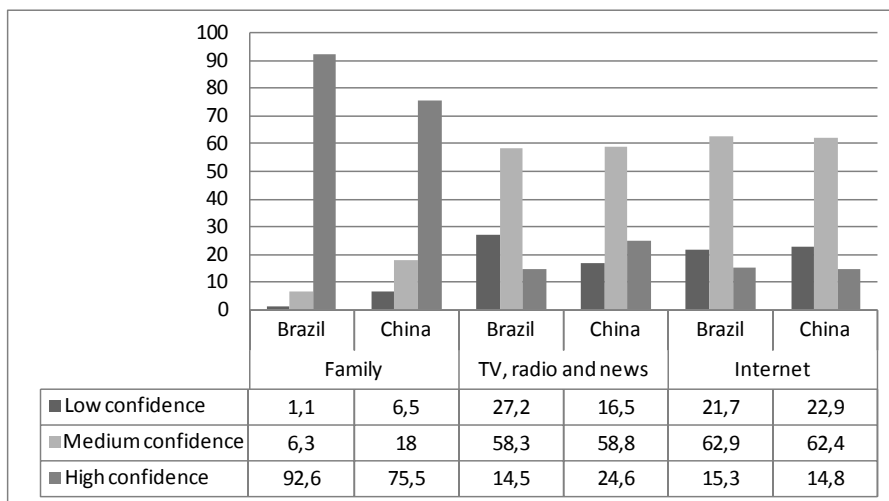
Any complex society is made up of a number of economic, political and social institutions. Each of them is trusted to a different degree by the population, and analysts assume their work is carried out in a systematic fashion. All of the BRICS countries have high levels of corruption and (except for South Africa) both an unfriendly climate for business, a press that cannot be considered free and (save Russia) high levels of inequality.

We asked interviewees to assign grades from 1 to 10 with respect to their confidence in 15 separate institutions. Answers were classified into three categories: low, medium and high. Graph 1 shows the perception of three of these institutions: family; traditional press (TV, radio, newspapers and magazines) that emerges with the spread of literacy, printing technology, modernity and a mass society; and internet, an institution that currently symbolizes the advance of the exchange of information and of individualism in a society characterized as post-industrial. In both countries the family is the institution that is most trusted by the interviewees: 92.6% of Brazilian and 75.5% of Chinese students (Graph 1)<sup>2</sup>.

Over the last two centuries, the family in both China and Brazil has been subject to massive strains: demographic changes, urbanization, enrichment, intersect with political and moral transformations, the impacts of increasing forces of rupture and an increasing autonomy of the individual are hypothesized. What has been the impact of such changes?

<sup>2</sup> The other institutions were: parliament, police, justice, armed forces, government, church/temple, non-governmental organizations, international bodies, school, social movements, associations and trade unions.

**Graph 1 – Confidence in some key institutions**



Source: IPEA, SBS, CYCRC, CYCRA, 2012.

Modernization theory leads us to imagine that, for Brazilian university students, who are simultaneously urbanized and have high levels of education, the family could be a weaker institution than in the past. This idea however, was not confirmed. While the family's role is central in Brazil, young people are also integrated to other groups. However, associative life appears to be much more important in China than in Brazil, and in the latter participation in religious organizations is a preferred activity, whereas this is extremely rare in China. In China, educated young people who have built their lives outside the family home (even though they may retain links to the family) find it important to belong to both types of institution. Even though we found relatively high Chinese participation in entities and activities – Xiaotong Fei (1992) refers to an “organizational mode of association” –, in China as in Brazil the family is the institution in which greatest confidence is deposited.

Comparative research must always be associated with a cautious attitude towards data. In different civilizations, what appears to be similar values, social forms or concepts may mean quite different things. According to Teixeira Leite (1999), since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> Century authors have drawn parallels between Chinese and Brazilian family life. Fei (1992) explained that the rural Chinese family is much more than a nuclear family. In China, all activities are organized through the family; when parents and children can look after themselves alone, the family may be as small as a single household. However, should it be necessary to perform other functions, siblings, cousins, uncles and aunts are called upon to form a wider-ranging family. Irrespective of size, the structural principle of differentiated relationships (he developed the concept “differential mode of association” – *chaxugeju*) on patrilineal bases is always the same. Families display continuity over the long-term, and are a means of organizing other activities: political, religious and economic. Discipline is necessary to ensure the efficient fulfillment of the varieties of practical demands that exist on family activities; there are no ‘common emotions’ in Chinese family ties since these clash with the need for discipline.

In the West, the political, religious and economic functions are the responsibility of other organizations (“organizational mode of association” – *tuantigeju*) and are not a part of the responsibility of the family household. Husband and wife are the main agents, and what unites them is their emotional link, and this is the quality that makes the family the principal source of support and comfort in the West.

For Fei (1992), family life and emotional life in the West and in rural China cannot be treated as though they were the same thing, and this still applies today in urban settings. In summary, the traditional Chinese family has a functional role, and the Brazilian family, whose origins are closer to the Western model, has a primary role of providing emotional support, without this undermining its functional role. However, one cannot help but be impressed by the centrality of the family in both

societies, particularly in view of the massive changes that have occurred since the beginning of the 20th century.

### **Communication: making friends and building world views in the post-industrial society**

Over recent times there has been a great deal of speculation about the impact of new information technologies on human communication and social life, and constant attempts to understand the concomitant roles of the traditional press in forming visions of the country and of the world. Within the sample of university students, Internet use has become universalized: 100% of Brazilians and 99% of Chinese declare themselves to be users.

Some North American authors hypothesized that the Internet would serve as an axis around which sociability would be reorganized, including the building of networks of interests and friendships. This is the view presented in the film “Social Network”, directed by David Fincher, on the origins of *Facebook*, where it was imagined that the interface would serve to make new friends, and particularly among the opposite sex. When asked to identify the three ways in which they made friends, the Internet was chosen by only a small percentage of Chinese students (7.3% of males and 6.3% of females) and Brazilians (8.0% and 5.5% respectively). Friends were principally made in face-to-face settings: the university, high school and primary school, through other friends and family; there was limited participation of voluntary organizations (like churches) in Brazil, and associations in China. Students make friends in manners that appear to be similar in both countries, and it is interesting that the Internet does not appear to be important.

The four most important qualities which young people look for when making friends also appear to be similar: feeling that I can trust the person, having similar tastes and preferences, having similar ideas and knowing that these people can help me in life (22.6% in Brazil and 25.0% in China). This last item refers to students’ wishes to further their

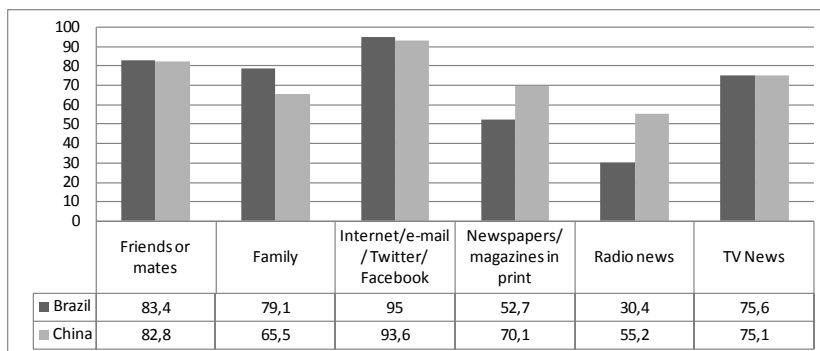
own interests. In both countries the search for friends is based on the desire to share values and tastes, and on trust.

When asked what they do in their homes during their spare time, the three most popular activities chosen from a list of ten activities are: using the internet (61.7% in Brazil and 48.9% in China), talking to parents and family members (48.4% and 41.1%), watching films (35.1% and 32.8%), watching television (32.9% and 32.2%) and resting (37.3% and 24.1%).

In Graph 1, we saw that in both China and Brazil, the students only moderately trust the Internet, radio, television and newspapers. The question is: how do people build their views of their country and the world when they only have moderate confidence in the institutions that convey information?

Graph 2 shows that the use of internet to acquire information about their country and the world during the week prior to answering the questionnaire, was extraordinarily high in both countries – 95% in Brazil, 94% in China. Paradoxically, this occurs in spite of the fact that, as we have seen, they display only a medium level of overall confidence in the Internet, a level that is similar to the confidence in the old media.

**Graph 2** – Means of acquiring information about events in one's country or worldwide



Source: IPEA, SBS, CYCRC, CYCRA, 2012.

Graph 2 shows that the students inform themselves using a constellation of means: television, radio, newspapers. One question is how do they validate the information they receive from so many different sources?

Broadcast television remains a particularly important vehicle in mass societies such as Brazil and China. It presents contents and projects visions of the world to large audiences, and the fact that many people watch the same newscast, documentary or set of images serves as a basis upon which, through conversation and exchanges of ideas with others, social links and distances are built. In mass societies, broadcast television's contents are discussed and debated in homes, classrooms, restaurants, tea houses and cafés. Thus, broadcast television has a role that is very different from individual reception, or fragmented audiences associated with the Internet and cable television (Wolton, 1990).

In Brazil, Silva's (1985) pioneering research carried out towards the end of Military rule, shows how the nation's number one television newscast was watched, interpreted, argued about, reprocessed and reinterpreted in working class families as they watched the news. In other words, the reception of broadcast television is a collective experience, quite different from the internet which is personal. Graph 2 shows that, in both China and Brazil, students receive a great deal of information from a variety of sources and, in interaction with family and friends – i.e. their social milieu – elaborate and re-elaborate their ideas. The acquisition of information might be individual, but the transformation of information into communication is the result of a reflexive construction that involves social interaction and discussion with others.

Brazilian and Chinese students have a marked difference around one point: when we asked them to select the three worst things about being young in a list of twelve, Chinese students (32.1%) are far more likely to fear being easily influenced than their Brazilian counterparts (2.4%). Brazilian students – and this is linked to the freedom of expression and the lack of censorship – exhibit much less trust in most of the key institutions and in their peers; however, very few fear being easily



influenced. Chinese students build their views of local and world affairs under constant surveillance, and a significant proportion of them fears being easily influenced – they do not trust themselves. In other words, Brazilian students are much more confident about their capacity to be informed, to discern and to construct themselves freely as subjects, than their Chinese counterparts.

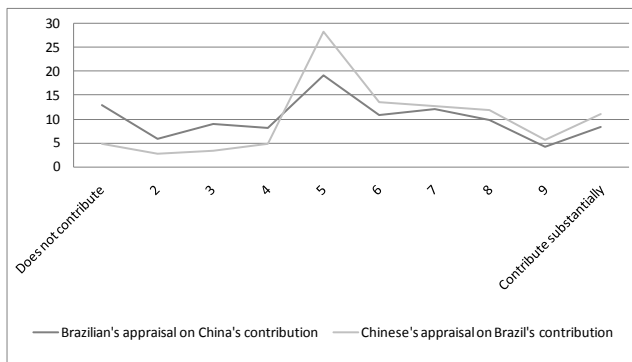
### **Chinese and Brazilian students' view of each other's country**

As China and Brazil interact more frequently through increasing trade, shared geopolitical notions and cultural exchanges, we can expect the above processes of 'opinion formation' to play an increasing role in shaping the image that citizens of one country have of the other. Of course, nothing guarantees that all the messages transmitted will be interpreted positively by the recipients. Often, the closer one gets to the other, the more exposed one becomes to the other, the more one becomes conscious of differences and, paradoxically, the likelihood of conflict increases.

Graph 2 suggests that the visions that Brazilians and Chinese have of each other's country are established on multiple bases. Brazilian journalists live in China and Chinese journalists live in Brazil, each tries to translate events and features of the host country into terms that can be understood at home. Increasingly our bookshops stock material about to China, our television channels include programs and news items, our cinemas exhibit movies. We have the impression that a similar process is occurring with Brazil in China. Such exposure serves, if not to approach the two countries, at least to make sure that each country becomes better known. A mere decade and a half ago, nobody could have imagined what is happening today! When we look at the strength of our trade and diplomatic initiatives and compare these with our current levels of general understanding, we conclude that a lot must be done to make each country better known to the other. The generalized lack of knowledge on China does not serve Brazil's national interests.

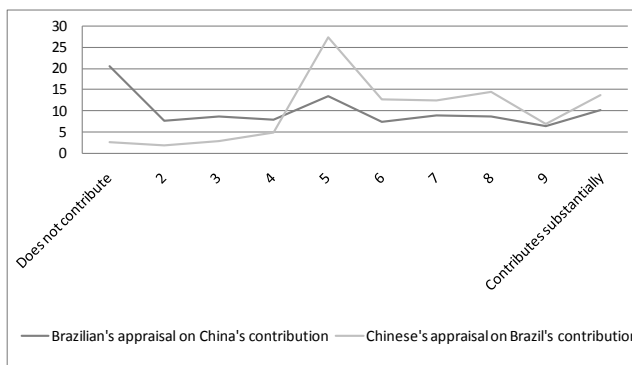
Brazilian students were asked about the image they had of China and vice versa. Such images, as we have just seen, are constructed through information from a variety of sources, which are re-elaborated within one's social group. We asked interviewees to rate the other country on a scale of 1-10 about three questions: contribution to the promotion of world peace, preservation of the environment and integration and cooperation between peoples.

**Graph 3** – Contribution of Brazil and China to promoting world peace



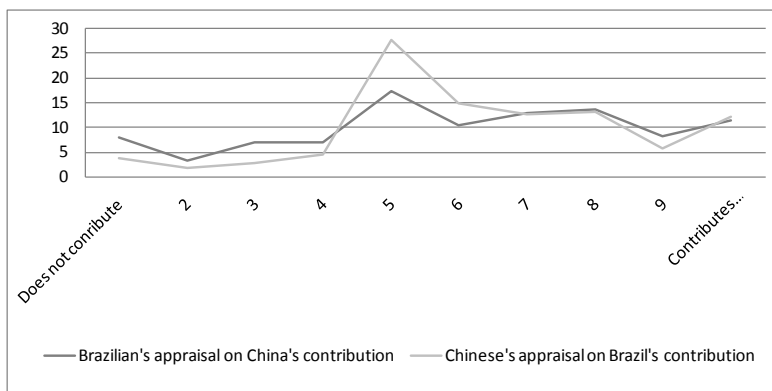
Source: IPEA, SBS, CYCRC, CYCRA, 2012.

**Graph 4** – Contribution of Brazil and China to preservation of the environment



Source: IPEA, SBS, CYCRC, CYCRA, 2012.

**Graph 5 – Contribution of Brazil and China to the integration/cooperation between peoples**



Source: IPEA, SBS, CYCRC, CYCRA, 2012.

Overall, Graphs 3, 4 and 5 show that Chinese and Brazilian university students do not have any negative views of the other country that are sufficiently strong to threaten the development of good relations between our two peoples. However, let me make a couple of quick observations: 1) Some Brazilians are very critical of China's treatment of the environment, whereas the Chinese are much more positive in relation to Brazil; 2) in their replies to the two other questions, the images that each have of the other's country are concentrated in the middle of the scale, neither positive nor negative, the graphs exhibit the same basic shape in both countries, only a small minority show very positive or very negative views. However, we observed that a sizeable group of Brazilians was very negative about China's contribution to world peace.

These results call upon us to further our understanding of the views that the population of each country holds of the other, and of their potential relevance for Sino-Brazilian exchanges. Just to give one quick example, as the consequences of global warming become more

catastrophic, populations in both countries will feel the effects, and youth leaders develop a common interest in accelerating the search for innovative solutions.

### **From Cultural Globalization to Student Exchange**

Cultural globalization multiplies small mutual influences in both countries. In Brazil, one sees an increase in Tai Chi Chuan and Kung Fu, schools of Mandarin, Chinese, Cantonese and other cuisines appear, and tourist packages for China appear! Such a general movement has not left the universities untouched. Universities these days seek to involve students and teachers in international exchanges – this constitutes a part of ‘internationalization’ strategies. Given the relevance of the matter, the questionnaire included questions about international student exchanges. First, we discovered that less than 10% of these young university students had already participated in some form of international exchange (8.2% in Brazil *vs* 7% in China).

The immense majority of students in both countries replied positively when asked if they would like to study outside their own country - 91.5% of Brazilians and 72.4% of Chinese. We presented a list of 21 countries or regions to those who replied positively to the previous question, and asked them to choose up to three preferred places of study. A Sino-Brazilian consensus exists about where to study: USA (48.3% in Brazil *vs* 65.1% in China), Canada (34.3% *vs* 21%), Great Britain (29.5% *vs* 26%) and France (21.9% *vs* 24%). Germany, in fifth position for Brazilian students, came in seventh place among Chinese students. The latter placed neighboring Japan (21.1%) in fourth position, whereas distant Brazilians placed it tenth (9.5%). In other words, a select group of developed countries and their universities has captured the attention of young students despite all the differences that separate China and Brazil. To explain these shared preferences we can speculate on the force of a shared vision formed in the context of cultural globalization, which values English as the common language of globalization, talks up the

reputation of the leading universities in these countries, the life-style and, in some cases, opportunities for migration.

In the 2012 academic year, around 230,000 Chinese students enrolled in higher education in the USA as against about 11,000 Brazilians (IEE, 2013). Chinese and Brazilian students in internationalized universities, and particularly in the US, can be expected to get to know each other and to interact intensively. However, the fact that interactions take place in the context of a third culture makes the development of wide mutual understanding more difficult.

Our data suggests that relatively few of those who express a desire to study overseas will do so upon completing their studies. Respondents were invited to make up to two choices from a list of nine. Among Brazilians, 13.9% chose to live outside their country for a period, as compared to 6.9% of Chinese; and 10.5% of Brazilians and 5.8% of Chinese chose travelling abroad. Between 'desire' and 'intention', motivational factors such as family and economic pressures, the lack of appropriate language skills and fear of the unknown come into play. In other words, we cannot make the mistake of thinking that all those who express a desire to study abroad will experience international student mobility.

The Brazilian and Chinese governments prepared an action plan for the years 2010-14, in which one of the objectives was the promotion of mutual understanding (JAP, 2010). Official support for scientists and university students was part of the plan, as well as to increase the offer of courses about the language and culture of each country. Over the last decade and a half, the offer of Portuguese language courses in Beijing universities has more than doubled, and a small number of university-based groups in China now conduct research into Brazil and Latin America. Also leading universities in China offer specialized courses in English. Brazilian public universities, however, appear to have been less willing to adapt to a changing world: Chinese language courses are not offered as a part of the regular curriculum, and only very recently

have research centers focusing on China or Asia been set up. Readily available Brazilian data shows that student and staff exchange has been very limited, however, there are some signs that this is changing. Interestingly, an increasing number of young Chinese students can be seen on some Brazilian university campuses.

Finally, both governments can be seen to be making efforts to promote better exchange. The Chinese government has committed to funding Confucius Institutes in ten Brazilian universities. CAPES funds a number of non-permanent positions in Brazilian culture and language at leading Chinese universities. The diplomatic corps from both sides may become involved in providing support for such contacts.

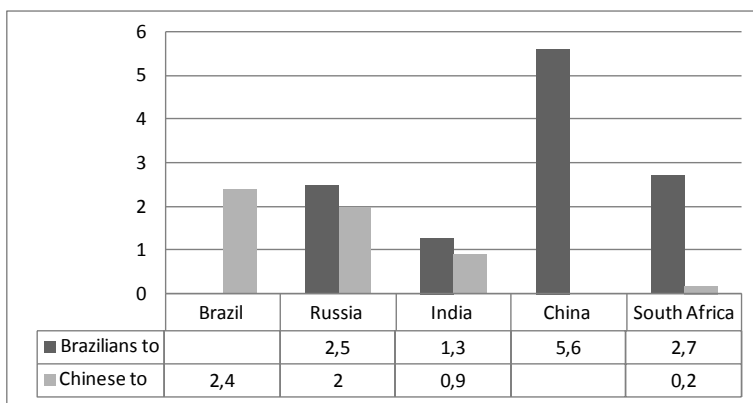
Given the growing importance of Brazil-China relations, it must be asked whether the level of international exchange between university students is sufficient<sup>3</sup>. Among the 21 possible choices of places to study suggested, we included the BRICS countries. In asking this question we drew inspiration from the European Community's Erasmus program that promotes intercultural dialogue, knowledge sharing and mutual understanding, through student exchange. Seen as a channel for reinforcing the foundations of a united Europe, the program grew strongly and took root over the years. In 2007, on its 20th birthday, the program had already hosted 5 million exchange students.

Both China and Brazil have higher education institutions that are ranked among the best in the world. Recent changes that have occurred in relations between our countries aroused our interest in how the considerable growth in commercial exchanges, and also in political and cultural relations affects students' choices. Our results show that there is currently very little demand (Graph 6); only 5.6% of Brazilian students expressed a desire to study in China (among three possible replies on

<sup>3</sup> We also anticipated a question that is the focus of a 2015 global summit of the BRICS universities, to be held in Russia. The central idea of the summit is to establish a network of universities, following Indian Premier Modi's suggestion of investigating the possibilities of establishing a university of the BRICS.

a list of 21 options), against 2.9% of Chinese who could potentially choose Brazil.

**Graph 6** – Desire for Student Exchange with the BRICS countries



Source: SBS, IPEA, CYCRC, CYCRA, 2012.

The low preference for China detected in the survey of Brazilian students also is reflected in available statistics. Up until June 2015, only 244 Brazilian students had been awarded scholarships by the “Science without borders” program to study in China<sup>4</sup>. The Brazilian government had reserved 5,000 places! Such a shortfall raises questions about how this number of positions was decided upon, and what Brazilian authorities did to promote the filling of these places. It also prompts us to suggest that research such as this survey can be designed to help to avoid repeating similar errors in the future, and to enhance potential

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.cienciasemfronteiras.gov.br/web/csf/bolsistas-pelo-mundo?p\\_p\\_id=mapabolsistasportlet\\_WAR\\_mapabolsistasportlet\\_INSTANCE\\_Y7eO&p\\_p\\_lifecycle=0&p\\_p\\_state=normal&p\\_p\\_mode=view&p\\_p\\_col\\_id=column-2&p\\_p\\_col\\_count=1&siglaPais=&nomePais=&codigoArea=&tituloArea=Todas&siglaModalidade=&nomeModalidade=Todas](http://www.cienciasemfronteiras.gov.br/web/csf/bolsistas-pelo-mundo?p_p_id=mapabolsistasportlet_WAR_mapabolsistasportlet_INSTANCE_Y7eO&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_state=normal&p_p_mode=view&p_p_col_id=column-2&p_p_col_count=1&siglaPais=&nomePais=&codigoArea=&tituloArea=Todas&siglaModalidade=&nomeModalidade=Todas). Out of the total of 78,173 scholarships awarded, only 15 Brazilians earned scholarships there for South Africa, 6 for Russia and 7 for India! (consulted on June 29, 2015). Obviously, not all Brazilian students in these countries are included in these statistics.

demand. Right now however, we can say that there is still a long way to go!

## Conclusions

We live in very confusing times. The forces of post-industrialism and globalization have combined to place us in a world where we can see everything; often, however, we do not have the necessary understanding, distance and time to reflect before acting. Errors, conflicts and disappointments follow, also giving rise to new opportunities, but to seize these, it is necessary to have knowledge, organization and a clear idea of one's interests.

Since 2009, Brazil's major trading partner has been China, and we know very little about that country. This article probed Brazilian students' perceptions of themselves, and of China, and vice versa. It established a preliminary vision of what appear to be shared values and visions: the centrality of family, friendship, a critical view of old and new media, the reception of news from multiple sources filtered and reinterpreted through discussions, and – in response to specific questions – a general lack of negative views of the other country's role in the world. There is a constant need to adjust and reevaluate strategies as we engage with others – this applies to individuals and to nations. Brazil's declared goal of sending thousands of Brazilian students to China – which was initially seen with enthusiasm prompting visits by Chinese university delegations, and was vaunted by political leaders – has fallen flat on its face! It is certainly time to assess what we have learnt so far, and to rethink the strategy.

Finally, I hope that I have been able to show that comparative research can be useful in indicating paths to dialogue with another. We learn to think about the other differently, and through this we rethink ourselves. In this article I have chosen to treat some very recent research into Brazilian and Chinese university students, hopefully further research into Brazil and globalization will be positively influenced by this effort.



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