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Who Writes about Brazil-China? Epistemic Sovereignty and South- South Knowledge Asymmetries in Global International Relations

*Quem escreve sobre Brasil-China?
Soberania Epistêmica e Assimetrias
de Conhecimento Sul-Sul nas Relações
Internacionais Globais*

*¿Quién escribe sobre Brasil-China?
Soberanía Epistémica y Asimetrías de
Conocimiento Sur-Sur en las Relaciones
Internacionales Globales*

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Abstract

Debates in Global IR increasingly treat International Relations scholarship as an object of inquiry, yet little is known about how two Global South academic communities produce knowledge about a shared bilateral relationship and what such production means for epistemic sovereignty. Drawing on peer-reviewed articles published from 2000 to 2025 in CNKI, CSSCI, SciELO, and six Brazilian International Relations journals, the study combines descriptive bibliometric mapping with qualitative discourse analysis to compare Brazilian and Chinese scholarship on Brazil-China relations. The article argues that the two literatures diverge in scale, agendas, citation practices, and narrative framing. Such

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asymmetries complicate the ideal of horizontal South-South cooperation and contribute to Global IR debates on reciprocal knowledge production.

Keywords: Brazil-China Relations, Epistemic Sovereignty, Global IR, South-South Relations, Knowledge Production.

Resumo

Os debates em Global IR tratam cada vez mais a produção acadêmica em Relações Internacionais como objeto de investigação, mas ainda se sabe pouco sobre como duas comunidades acadêmicas do Sul Global produzem conhecimento sobre uma relação bilateral compartilhada e o que essa produção significa para a soberania epistêmica. Com base em artigos revisados por pares publicados entre 2000 e 2025 no CNKI, CSSCI, SciELO e em seis periódicos brasileiros de Relações Internacionais, o estudo combina mapeamento bibliométrico descritivo e análise qualitativa do discurso para comparar a produção brasileira e chinesa sobre as relações Brasil-China. O artigo argumenta que as duas literaturas divergem em escala, agendas, práticas de citação e enquadramento narrativo. Essas assimetrias complexificam o ideal de cooperação horizontal Sul-Sul e contribuem para os debates sobre Global IR sobre produção recíproca de conhecimento.

Palavras-chave: Relações Brasil-China, Soberania Epistêmica, Global IR, Relações Sul-Sul, Produção de Conhecimento.

Resumen

Los debates en Global IR tratan cada vez más la producción académica en Relaciones Internacionales como objeto de investigación, pero aún se sabe poco sobre cómo dos comunidades académicas del Sur Global producen conocimiento sobre una relación bilateral compartida y qué significa esa producción para la soberanía epistémica. A partir de artículos revisados por pares publicados entre 2000 y 2025 en CNKI, CSSCI, SciELO y en seis revistas brasileñas de Relaciones Internacionales, el estudio combina mapeo bibliométrico descriptivo y análisis cualitativo del discurso para comparar la producción brasileña y china sobre las relaciones Brasil-China. El artículo sostiene que las dos literaturas divergen en escala, agendas, prácticas de citación y encuadre narrativo. Estas asimetrías complejizan el ideal de cooperación horizontal Sur-Sur y contribuyen a los debates de Global IR sobre producción recíproca de conocimiento.

Palabras clave: Relaciones Brasil-China, Soberanía Epistémica, Global IR, Relaciones Sur-Sur, Producción de Conocimiento.





1. Introduction

The 21st century has witnessed an unprecedented reconfiguration of global power dynamics, with South-South relations emerging as a critical nexus of geopolitical and economic transformation. Among these relationships, the Brazil-China partnership offers a revealing site for examining how knowledge about international relations is produced, circulated, and legitimized across the Global South. Despite three decades of deepening diplomatic and economic ties, a fundamental question remains underexplored: who produces knowledge about Brazil-China relations, through what theoretical lenses, and with what implications for epistemic sovereignty in Global South partnerships? Addressing the question requires treating scholarly production as an empirical object of International Relations inquiry, rather than as a neutral reflection of diplomatic and economic relations, with particular attention to how Brazilian critical traditions inform debates on the politics of knowledge.

The Brazil-China relationship has evolved from a cautious diplomatic engagement in the 1970s to a comprehensive strategic partnership encompassing trade, investment, diplomacy, and multilateral cooperation. Bilateral trade expanded from about US\$2.43 billion in 2000 to roughly US\$158 billion in 2024 (World Bank 2025), making China Brazil's largest trading partner and Brazil one of China's principal suppliers of soybeans, iron ore, and oil. Economic integration has been accompanied by diplomatic coordination in forums such as BRICS, G20, and UN climate negotiations (Doctor 2023). Yet material deepening has not been matched by equivalent epistemic integration. Scholarly communities in both countries continue to produce largely parallel literatures that rarely engage substantively with each other's theoretical frameworks or empirical findings.

Existing scholarship has predominantly examined the material dimensions of Brazil-China relations, including trade flows, investment patterns, diplomatic alignments, and environmental cooperation. Less attention has been paid to how academic communities themselves construct, frame, and contest the meaning of the relationship. The gap is particularly significant because Brazilian IR has long emphasized theoretical autonomy and locally grounded conceptual innovation, while China's rapid expansion of area studies and Global South scholarship has reshaped the institutional conditions under which knowledge about Brazil and Latin America is produced.





The article makes three contributions to Global IR scholarship. First, it reconceptualizes bilateral relations research as a site of knowledge politics in which academic communities actively construct the realities they study. Second, it shows that epistemic asymmetries operate not only along North-South divides but also within Global South partnerships, complicating idealized understandings of South-South cooperation and resonating with Brazilian concerns about theoretical dependency. Third, it provides a methodologically transparent comparison of Brazilian and Chinese academic production, linking bibliometric patterns with discourse analysis to show how scale, agendas, citation practices, and narrative frames shape knowledge about Brazil-China relations.

By foregrounding the epistemic conditions of Brazil-China scholarship, the analysis advances debates on academic cooperation and the institutional design of South-South research networks. Durable cooperation depends not only on diplomatic and economic ties, but also on reciprocal forms of knowledge production capable of connecting Brazilian and Chinese scholarly communities.

2. Literature and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Brazilian IR Theory and the Quest for Epistemic Sovereignty

Since the 1970s, Brazilian International Relations has critically engaged with dependency theory, advocating for autonomous perspectives that reflect Latin American geopolitical and historical realities. Oliveira's (1977) seminal critique positions Brazil as a key center for critical IR thought, emphasizing the need for peripheral countries to develop their own analytical frameworks rather than relying on Northern paradigms that obscure structural inequalities.

This tradition of critical engagement persisted through Brazil's democratization in the 1980s and 1990s. Building on national-developmental debates, Jaguaribe (1986) linked foreign-policy autonomy to domestic developmental capacities and structural power asymmetries in the international system. In parallel, autonomy and autonomous reflection became organizing terms in Brazilian IR, sustaining a critique of theoretical deference to the Global North and legitimizing locally grounded innovation (Muñoz 2023).

The Brazilian Association of International Relations (ABRI) has institutionalized this commitment to epistemic sovereignty, creating spaces for theoretical debate





that center Southern experiences and challenge Northern hegemony in knowledge production. As Milani (2021) argues, Brazilian IR has moved beyond criticism of Northern hegemony and has begun constructing alternatives rooted in Latin American historical experiences. This tradition is key to examining Brazil-China knowledge production as a contested site of epistemic sovereignty.

Recent developments in Brazilian IR scholarship have further refined this tradition. Some scholars contend that epistemic sovereignty depends not only on theoretical innovation but also on institutional infrastructure for autonomous knowledge production. Key elements include locally oriented funding, Southern-facing publication venues, and curricula centered on Latin American experiences (Novelli 2022; Oliveira and Mendes Pinto 2024). Belli (2024) extends the analysis by examining how digital technologies and open-access publishing can either enhance or undermine epistemic sovereignty, depending on their governance structures and access patterns.

2.2 Global IR and the Limits of Horizontal Cooperation

Global IR scholarship has challenged the discipline's Western-centric foundations by calling for greater recognition of non-Western ideas, histories, and forms of agency. Acharya and Buzan (2007) argue that IR must move beyond treating the non-West mainly as empirical material and incorporate non-Western concepts into core theoretical debates. Yet much of the literature remains programmatic, with fewer empirical studies showing how knowledge hierarchies operate within Global South academic communities themselves. Barnett and Zarakol (2023) further caution that "add-and-stir" approaches may expand representation without transforming the discipline's deeper ontological assumptions, an argument particularly relevant to whether South-South academic exchanges generate conceptual reciprocity or reproduce asymmetrical forms of recognition.

Recent studies of disciplinary formation across the BRICS and other non-Western contexts provide a closer empirical basis for the present analysis. Kristensen (2021) shows that IR scholarship in Brazil, Russia, India, and China develops through a tension between global disciplinary standards and local intellectual traditions, rather than being either simply derivative of Western paradigms or fully autonomous. Loke and Owen (2024) similarly highlight the importance of contextual approaches to decolonizing IR knowledge production. However,





existing work has not systematically examined how two Global South academic communities construct knowledge about each other within a specific bilateral relationship.

Chinese IR debates also provide important resources for understanding knowledge production beyond Western theoretical templates. Qin (2018) argues that IR theorizing is shaped by cultural communities and background knowledge. Wang (2021) further shows that Chinese IR scholarship has moved from defensive engagement with Western theories toward a more confident, though still contested, articulation of alternative perspectives. Similarly, Araujo and Ferreira (2025) examine how Brazilian IR scholarship navigates the tension between global theoretical standards and local relevance, finding that Brazilian scholars increasingly assert their theoretical autonomy while maintaining engagement with global debates.

2.3 South-South Knowledge Production Beyond Rhetoric

South-South cooperation has emerged as a powerful diplomatic framework, promising more equitable partnerships based on shared postcolonial experiences and development challenges. The Bandung Conference of 1955 established the principles of South-South cooperation, emphasizing mutual respect, non-interference, and equality. These principles were further institutionalized through the Non-Aligned Movement and later through BRICS and other Global South forums.

However, scholarly analysis increasingly questions whether these partnerships genuinely transcend traditional power asymmetries. As Milani, Mariano, and Soares (2024) note in examining Brazil-China relations, the new geography of development creates complex dependencies that may replicate rather than resolve historical inequalities. The analysis of Brazilian exports to China reveals persistent patterns of commodity dependence that undermine Brazil's industrial development and technological autonomy. This critique extends to knowledge production, where linguistic barriers, publication hierarchies, and research infrastructure disparities continue to shape whose knowledge counts as legitimate (Palacios-Cívico, Maestro-Yarza, and Martí-González 2023).

Silva, Berta, and Nunes (2024) trace the evolution of Brazil's approach to China from President Lula's proactive "policy ambassadorship" to more neutral "international promotion", identifying academic exchanges as diplomatic





instruments. Barkawi, Murray, and Zarakol's (2023) critique of power, knowledge, and empire in Global IR similarly cautions that expanded representation does not necessarily transform hierarchies of recognition. Read together, these works suggest that South-South academic exchange is politically embedded rather than inherently reciprocal.

Chinese academic engagement with Brazil has historically been fragmented across different disciplines and institutions, with area studies only recently gaining institutional support through initiatives like the Belt and Road Academic Network (Li 2023). The rapid institutionalization raises important questions about whether Chinese scholarship can engage meaningfully with Brazilian critical traditions or will reproduce patterns of theoretical dependency. The Brazilian experience offers valuable lessons about maintaining epistemic sovereignty while engaging with major powers, a concern that resonates across the Global South (Gonzalez Jauregui et al. 2022).

Recent studies identify persistent challenges in building genuine epistemic communities between Brazil and China, including language barriers, divergent research priorities, and institutional asymmetries (Xu and Nascimento 2024; Frogeri, Leandro, and Li 2025). Their analysis suggests that building equitable knowledge partnerships requires deliberate institutional design rather than emerging naturally from diplomatic cooperation. Similarly, Guo (2019) examines how institutional contexts shape Chinese scholarship on Brazil, finding that Chinese academic engagement remains heavily influenced by state priorities and lacks the critical autonomy characteristic of Brazilian IR scholarship.

2.4 Theoretical Framework Epistemic Sovereignty in South-South Partnerships

Brazil-China knowledge production is viewed through epistemic sovereignty, which encompasses the right of communities to define their own intellectual traditions, methods, and theoretical frameworks. This concept draws on Quijano's (2000) coloniality of knowledge, which argues that colonial power structures persist in contemporary knowledge systems through epistemic hierarchies that privilege European ways of knowing. Bhabra's (2014) connected sociologies further elaborates this framework by showing how knowledge production is embedded in global power structures that shape what questions get asked, which methods are valued, and whose voices are amplified.





Santos (2014) develops the analysis through his concept of epistemicide, the systematic destruction of non-Western knowledge systems through colonial and neocolonial processes. He argues that building truly global knowledge requires recognizing the validity of diverse epistemic traditions and creating spaces for dialogue between them. This framework helps explain why South-South academic partnerships often reproduce rather than transcend traditional hierarchies. Language asymmetries, publication infrastructures, and research funding disparities create structural conditions that favor certain knowledge forms over others.

Mignolo (2011) extends this analysis through his concept of the “geopolitics of knowledge”, which examines how location shapes knowledge production and circulation. He argues that knowledge is always situated within specific geopolitical contexts that influence its content, form, and reception. This perspective helps explain why Brazilian and Chinese scholars produce such different accounts of their bilateral relationship despite shared material realities.

These studies and theoretical frameworks provide a foundation for analyzing Brazil-China knowledge production as a site of epistemic contestation rather than neutral academic exchange. They help explain how power asymmetries operate within South-South partnerships and why maintaining epistemic sovereignty requires deliberate institutional and theoretical work. The analysis specifically focuses on four dimensions of epistemic asymmetry: scale and growth trajectories of scholarly output; agenda divergence in research priorities; patterns of knowledge circulation and citation practices; and transnational co-production networks. Together, these dimensions reveal how the politics of knowledge shapes understandings of Brazil-China relations, with profound implications for Brazilian efforts to maintain theoretical autonomy while engaging with China.

3. Data and Methods

3.1 Corpus Construction and Sampling Strategy

The study employs a mixed-methods design combining descriptive bibliometric mapping with qualitative discourse analysis to capture both structural patterns and interpretive frameworks in Brazil-China scholarship. Two comparable corpora are constructed following PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic





Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure methodological transparency and reproducibility (Page et al. 2021). This design addresses a limitation in existing research, which often relies either on quantitative mapping of publication trends or on qualitative readings of selected texts without systematic sampling.

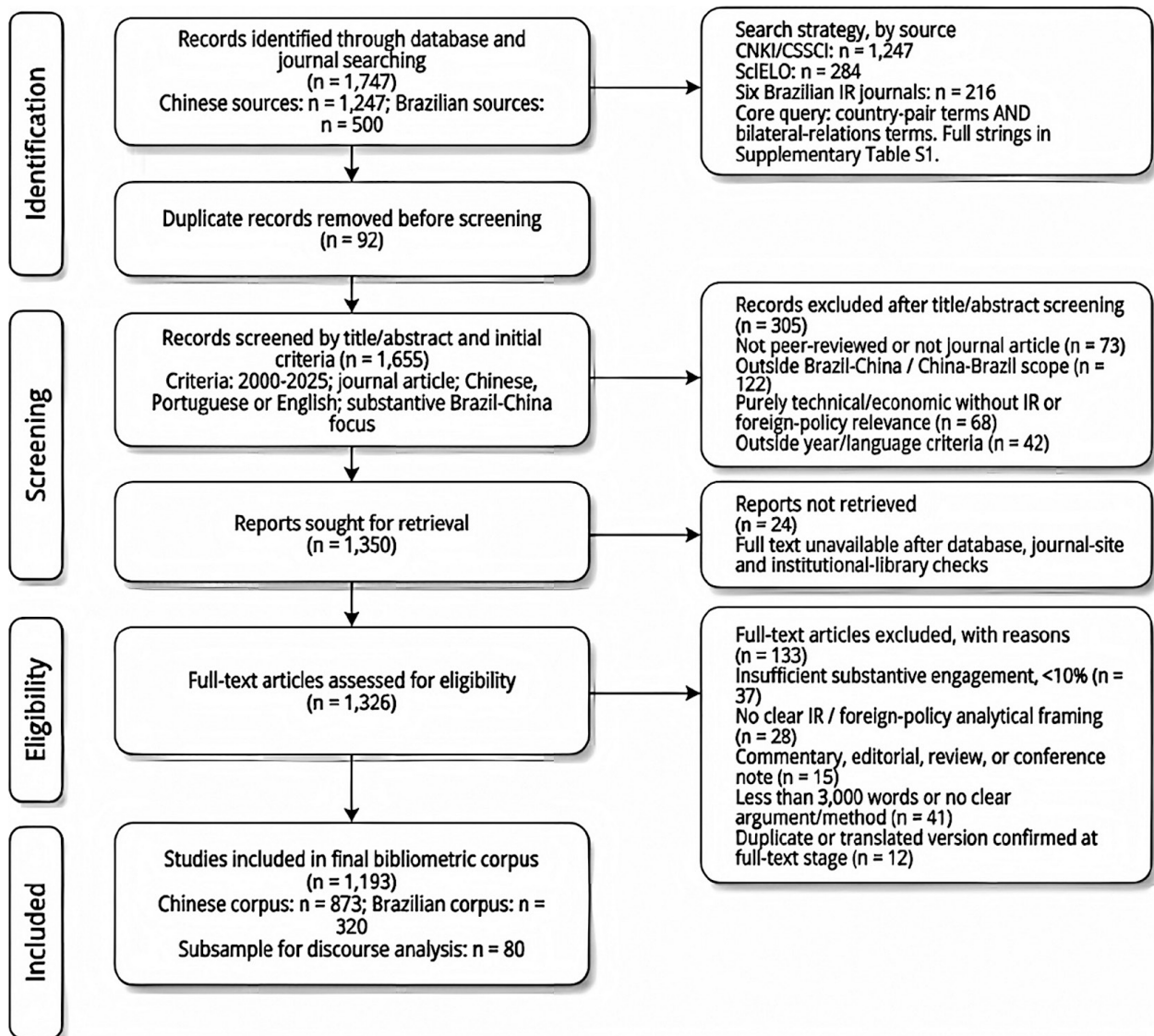
For the Chinese corpus, peer-reviewed journal articles from CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) and CSSCI (Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index) were selected for the period 2000-2025, using Chinese and English search terms to cover topics related to Brazil-China relations. The initial search yielded 1,247 records. The timeframe captures the period after China's accession to the WTO and Brazil's renewed South-South foreign-policy agenda under democratic governments, extending through the current period of multipolar global order.

For the Brazilian corpus, SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online) and six core Brazilian IR journals (Carta Internacional, Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional, Contexto Internacional, Monções, Oikos, and Austral) are searched using Portuguese and English terms. The initial search yielded 500 records. These journals are selected for their role in Brazilian IR scholarship and for their capacity to capture theoretically innovative work not fully represented in SciELO. The search strategy prioritized relational and IR-oriented descriptors, while issue-specific topics were addressed through post-retrieval thematic coding when they appeared substantively in the corpus.

Figure 1 reports the PRISMA-informed corpus construction process from identification and screening to eligibility assessment and final inclusion.

Inclusion criteria specified publication years, document type, subject focus, languages, and minimum length, while exclusion criteria eliminated non-peer-reviewed content, short non-research formats, articles without substantive Brazil-China focus, purely technical or economic analyses without International Relations or foreign-policy relevance, and duplicate or non-academic records. After 92 duplicate records were removed, 1,655 records were retained for title and abstract screening.



**Figure 1 – PRISMA-informed corpus construction flow diagram**

Source: Author's elaboration based on the PRISMA 2020.

During title and abstract screening, 305 records were excluded because they failed the article-type, thematic-scope, International Relations or foreign-policy relevance, year, or language criteria. Full texts were sought for the remaining 1,350 reports, of which 24 could not be retrieved after database, journal-site, and institutional-library checks. The remaining 1,326 reports were assessed for full-text eligibility.

At the full-text stage, 133 reports were excluded because they lacked substantive engagement with Brazil-China relations, clear International Relations or foreign-policy framing, sufficient length, argument, or method, or because they were short commentaries, non-research formats, duplicates, or translated versions.





The final corpus comprised 1,193 peer-reviewed journal articles, including 873 Chinese articles and 320 Brazilian articles. From this corpus, 80 articles were selected for in-depth discourse analysis through stratified sampling, including 42 Chinese articles and 38 Brazilian articles. Source-specific search strings, filters, search dates, and initial records are reported in Supplementary Table S1.²

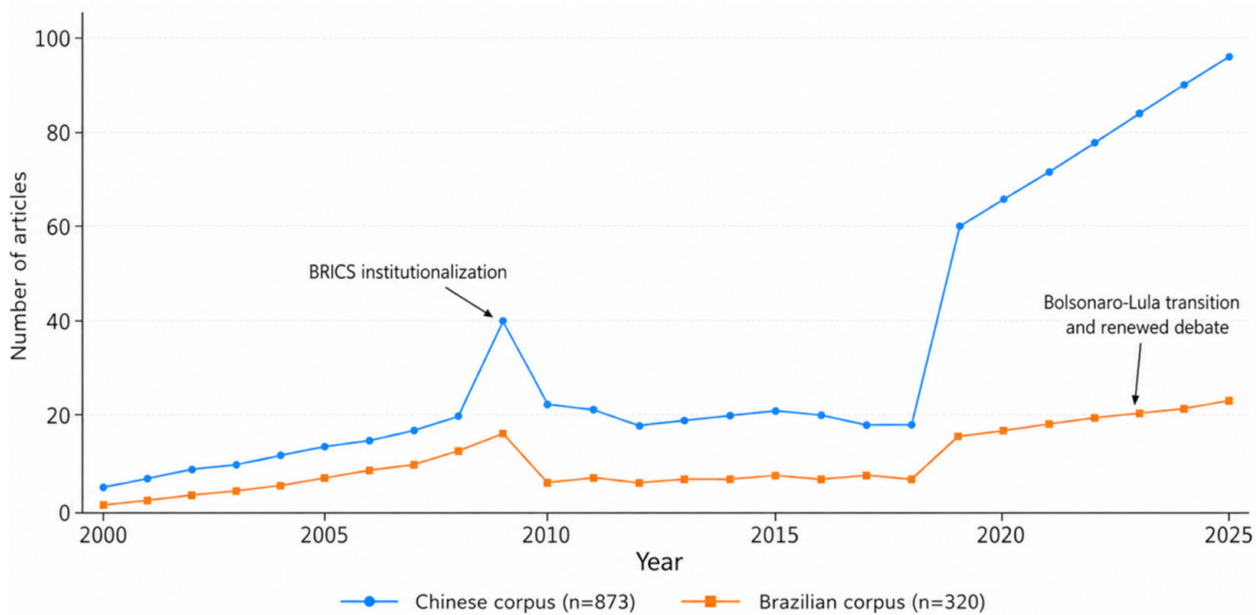
3.2 Descriptive Bibliometric Analysis Protocol

Descriptive and relational bibliometric mapping was conducted to examine how scholarship on Brazil-China relations is organized across the two corpora. The analysis uses bibliometric indicators not as purely quantitative measures, but as entry points for comparing agenda formation, institutional visibility, and knowledge circulation across Chinese and Brazilian academic communities. This design is consistent with the article's broader concern with epistemic sovereignty, since asymmetries in knowledge production appear not only in publication volume, but also in the concepts, institutions, and citation practices through which the bilateral relationship is interpreted.

The mapping focuses on four dimensions. Annual publication trends are used to identify changes in scholarly attention over time and to relate them to major diplomatic and institutional turning points. Institutional output distributions indicate the relative concentration or fragmentation of scholarship across universities, research institutes, and policy-oriented institutions. Normalized keyword co-occurrence captures the thematic organization of each corpus. Knowledge-circulation indicators, including cross-national co-authorship, citation orientation, and linguistic diversity, assess the degree of reciprocal engagement between the two scholarly communities.

² Supplementary Table S1 is available at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20813514>.



**Figure 2 – Annual Publication Counts on Brazil-China Relations (2000-2025)**

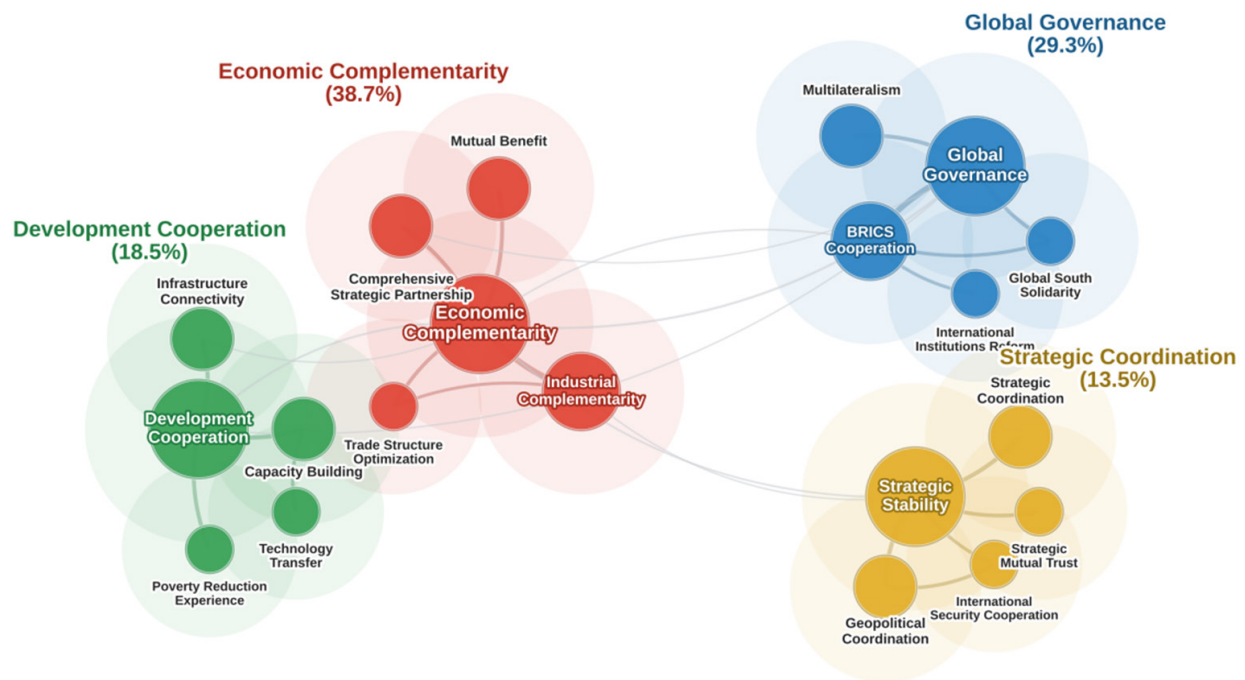
Source: Author's elaboration.

Publication trends are examined through annual counts, with period averages used to identify phases of growth and their relationship to major diplomatic, economic, and institutional turning points in Brazil-China relations. Figure 2 reports annual publication counts in the final corpus from 2000 to 2025 and provides the basis for comparing the scale and timing of scholarly attention in the Chinese and Brazilian corpora.

Keyword co-occurrence networks are constructed from normalized author keywords and indexed keywords. Synonymous terms, language variants, and closely related expressions are harmonized before analysis to reduce lexical fragmentation across Chinese, Portuguese, and English materials. Minimum occurrence thresholds are calibrated through pilot inspection to retain interpretable network structures while limiting excessive noise. In the network maps, node size indicates keyword frequency, link strength indicates co-occurrence intensity, and colors identify thematic clusters.

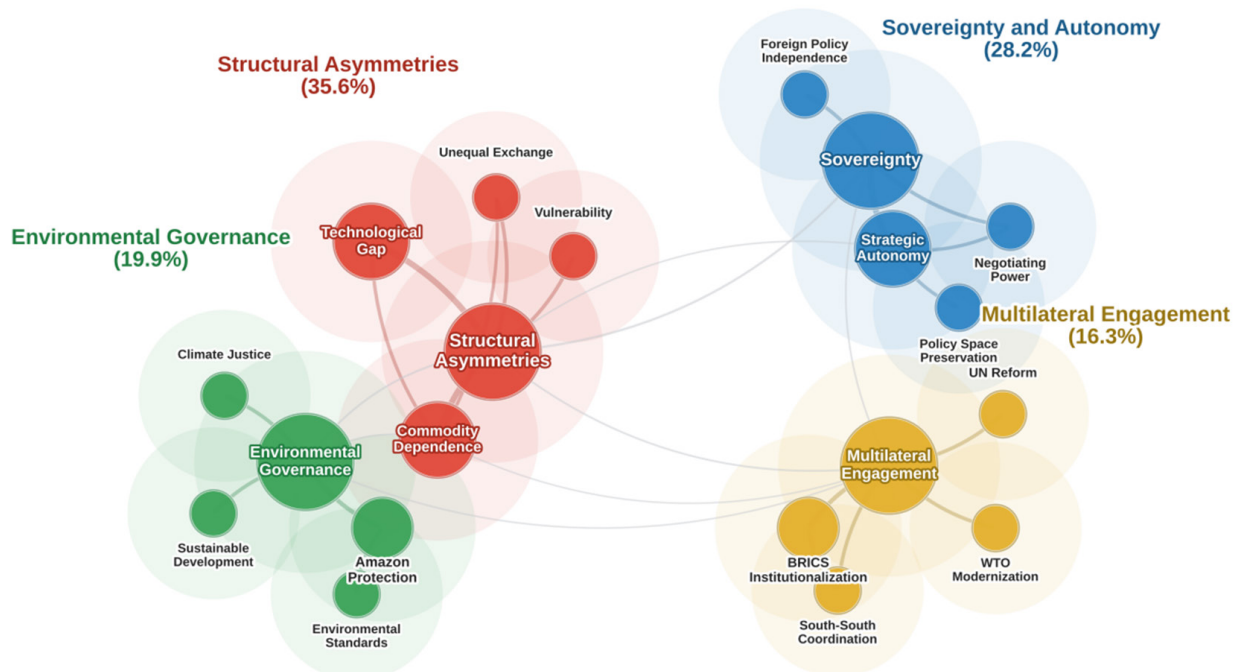


Figure 3 – Keyword Co-occurrence Network (China Corpus)



Source: Author's elaboration.

Figure 4 – Keyword Co-occurrence Network (Brazil Corpus)



Source: Author's elaboration.

Figures 3 and 4 present the keyword co-occurrence networks for the Chinese and Brazilian corpora. In the Chinese corpus, terms such as “economic





cooperation”, “global governance”, and “BRICS” occupy more prominent positions, indicating a stronger orientation toward complementarity, multilateral coordination, and development partnership. In the Brazilian corpus, terms such as “sovereignty”, “environmental governance”, and “strategic autonomy” are more visible, reflecting the influence of Brazilian critical traditions, dependency-oriented concerns, and debates over policy space.

Knowledge circulation is assessed through cross-corpus indicators rather than full citation-network modeling. These indicators capture whether articles include partner-country co-authors, how frequently they cite own-country, partner-country, and English-language scholarship, and the extent to which scholarship appears in non-native languages. The mapping results are then interpreted in conjunction with the qualitative discourse analysis, allowing structural patterns of production and circulation to be connected to deeper questions of theoretical autonomy, agenda-setting power, and epistemic asymmetry within South-South cooperation.

3.3 Discourse Analysis Protocol

Articles for in-depth discourse analysis were selected from each corpus through stratified sampling. The 80-article discourse sample comprises 42 Chinese articles and 38 Brazilian or English-language articles. Across the three periods, the Chinese sample includes 8 articles from 2000 to 2009, 16 from 2010 to 2018, and 18 from 2019 to 2025, while the Brazilian or English-language sample includes 5, 14, and 19 articles respectively. Sampling was stratified by publication period, thematic cluster, and institutional origin. The thematic allocation covers six strata: economic and trade relations; investment and finance; global governance and BRICS; environment, energy and climate; security, defense and strategy; and cultural, educational and knowledge issues. The three periods were defined *ex ante*, before discourse coding, and correspond to major phases in Brazil-China relations and Global South politics. The years 2000 to 2009 capture the initial expansion of bilateral scholarship after China’s accession to the WTO and Brazil’s renewed South-South agenda. The years 2010 to 2018 correspond to the institutionalization of BRICS and China’s growing economic presence in Latin America. The years 2019 to 2025 capture the Bolsonaro-Lula transition, intensified climate and sovereignty debates, and renewed contestation over Global South cooperation. The full list of the 80 articles, including corpus, period, thematic





stratum, bibliographic information, source database or journal, and DOI or stable URL where available, is provided in Supplementary Table S2³.

The coding scheme combined deductive and inductive procedures. Deductive codes were derived from the theoretical framework, especially Global IR, dependency theory, postcolonial and decolonial approaches, and standard classifications of International Relations theories and methods. Inductive refinement was based on pilot reading of articles from both corpora, allowing recurrent issue areas and narrative patterns to be incorporated when they appeared consistently across the material. Four coding dimensions were applied: substantive issue area, theoretical orientation, narrative frame, and methodological approach. Narrative frames were treated not as policy sectors, but as interpretive positions through which the relationship is given meaning. Developmental complementarity refers to accounts that present Brazil-China relations as mutually beneficial and structurally compatible. Critical asymmetry refers to accounts emphasizing dependency, vulnerability, unequal exchange, or constrained autonomy. Environmental stewardship captures framings centered on environmental responsibility, Amazon protection, climate justice, or sustainability standards. Multilateral leadership refers to accounts that present Brazil and China as actors shaping BRICS, South-South cooperation, or global-governance reform.

Coding was conducted by the author in the source languages of the articles, including Chinese, Portuguese, and English. To improve consistency in a single-coder design, a pilot coding round was first conducted on articles from both corpora. Category definitions were then refined, and ambiguous cases were revisited against the full texts. The discourse analysis examines how authors construct, justify, and contest interpretations of Brazil-China relations, with particular attention to conceptual tensions and competing frameworks.

Bibliometric mapping and discourse analysis were integrated through triangulation. Mapping identified major thematic clusters for closer qualitative examination, while discourse analysis interpreted the structural patterns identified in the mapping stage. Sensitivity checks across coding decisions and sampling strata assessed whether the findings reflected consistent tendencies rather than artifacts of a single methodological choice. The narrative frames are therefore treated as recurrent interpretive positions derived from the theoretical framework and refined through pilot reading. The search strategy, screening records, discourse-

3 Supplementary Table S2 is available at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20813514>.





sample metadata, processed figure data, and coding scheme are provided in the Supplementary Materials⁴.

4. Structural Patterns of Knowledge Production

4.1 Scale Asymmetries and Institutional Dynamics

Descriptive bibliometric mapping analysis indicates significant asymmetries in the scale and institutional organization of scholarly production. Chinese academic output on Brazil-China relations increased unevenly across the period, with the most pronounced expansion after 2019, rising from an average of 15 articles annually in 2000-2009 to 78 articles annually in 2019-2025. This late-period expansion corresponds with China's institutionalization of Global South scholarship and the expansion of Brazil-focused research centers within Chinese academia. The establishment of dedicated research institutes, increased government funding for area studies, and the integration of Global South research into national strategic priorities have all contributed to this rapid expansion. As Table 1 shows, the largest contributions come from institutions like Fudan University, China Foreign Affairs University, and Peking University, which dominate the Chinese scholarly landscape on this topic.

Brazilian scholarly production, while showing steady growth, remains significantly smaller in scale, averaging 8 articles annually (2000-2009) and 24 articles annually (2019-2025), with greater volatility corresponding to diplomatic events. The period surrounding BRICS institutionalization was associated with greater Brazilian scholarly attention, as was the 2019-2025 period marked by the Bolsonaro-Lula transition and intensified debate over Brazil-China relations. This volatility reflects the more reactive nature of Brazilian scholarship, which responds to political developments rather than following a sustained institutional agenda. Brazilian academic production is also more constrained by funding limitations and institutional fragmentation compared to the centralized Chinese system. Brazilian research concentrates in fewer institutions, with dominant contributions from Universidade de Brasília (UnB), Instituto Rio Branco, and Universidade de São Paulo (USP), as shown in Table 1, reflecting the more fragmented organization between university-based research and diplomatic training institutions.

⁴ The supplementary materials are available at: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20813514>.





The institutional landscape reflects these disparities. Chinese research is distributed across 127 institutions with major clusters at Fudan University (14.2%), China Foreign Affairs University (11.8%), and Peking University (9.3%), suggesting a high degree of vertical integration between research centers, government think tanks, and party schools. This integration creates cohesive research agendas aligned with diplomatic priorities but may limit theoretical diversity and critical perspectives. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) plays a particularly important role as a bridge between academic research and policymaking, ensuring that scholarly production serves national strategic interests.

This fragmentation creates tensions between academic autonomy and policy relevance, with university researchers often maintaining greater critical distance from government positions, while diplomatic training institutions tend to produce more policy-oriented analysis.

Table 1 – Top 10 Institutions by Publication Output (2000-2025)

Rank	Chinese Institutions	Articles	%	Brazilian Institutions	Articles	%
1	Fudan University	124	14.2%	UnB	68	21.3%
2	China Foreign Affairs University	103	11.8%	Instituto Rio Branco	48	15%
3	Peking University	81	9.3%	USP	42	13.1%
4	Renmin University	67	7.7%	UFMG	29	9.1%
5	Shanghai International Studies University	59	6.8%	UERJ	25	7.8%
6	Tsinghua University	52	6.0%	PUC-Rio	20	6.3%
7	CASS	48	5.5%	UFSC	16	5%
8	Zhejiang University	41	4.7%	UNESP	14	4.4%
9	Nankai University	37	4.2%	UFPE	12	3.8%
10	Sun Yat-sen University	35	4.0%	UFPR	10	3.1%

Source: Author's elaboration.





4.2 Thematic Divergence and Knowledge Circulation

Keyword co-occurrence analysis points to important differences in research agendas. The Chinese corpus clusters around four dominant themes: economic complementarity, featuring terms such as trade structure optimization, industrial complementarity, mutual benefit, and comprehensive strategic partnership; global governance, emphasizing BRICS cooperation, multilateralism, Global South solidarity, and reform of international institutions; development cooperation, focusing on infrastructure connectivity, capacity building, technology transfer, and poverty-reduction experience; and strategic coordination, including geopolitical coordination, international security cooperation, and strategic mutual trust.

The Brazilian corpus presents a contrasting thematic landscape. Its main clusters include structural asymmetries, with terms such as commodity dependence, technological gap, unequal exchange, and vulnerability; sovereignty and autonomy, featuring strategic autonomy, foreign-policy independence, negotiating power, and policy-space preservation; environmental governance, focusing on Amazon protection, climate justice, sustainable development, and environmental standards; and multilateral engagement, emphasizing BRICS institutionalization, UN reform, WTO modernization, and South-South coordination.

The thematic divergence reflects deeper epistemological differences in how each scholarly community conceptualizes the bilateral relationship. Chinese scholarship tends to emphasize positive-sum outcomes and mutual benefits, framing Brazil-China relations through development partnership and global-governance reform. Brazilian scholarship, influenced by dependency theory and critical IR traditions, pays greater attention to power asymmetries, structural constraints, and the question of whether the relationship serves Brazil's long-term developmental and strategic interests.

**Table 2 – Thematic Distribution by Corpus**

Theme	Chinese Corpus	Brazilian Corpus	Difference
Economic/Trade Relations	42.3 %	28.8 %	+ 13.5 %
Investment/Finance	21.5 %	15.9 %	+ 5.6 %
Global Governance/BRICS	24.9 %	22.5 %	+ 2.4 %
Environmental Issues	8.1 %	26.3 %	-18.2 %
Security/Defense	6.7 %	11.3 %	-4.5 %

Source: Author's elaboration.

Table 2 indicates the results of manual thematic coding. The distribution confirms the contrast suggested by the keyword networks: Chinese scholarship gives greater weight to economic exchange, investment, and global-governance cooperation, while Brazilian scholarship attaches more importance to environmental issues, security concerns, and questions of autonomy. The difference does not simply reflect variation in empirical interests; it also points to distinct ways of defining what is politically significant in the Brazil-China relationship. For Chinese authors, the relationship is more often framed through cooperation, complementarity, and institutional coordination. For Brazilian authors, the same relationship is more frequently read through the lenses of vulnerability, environmental pressure, and strategic constraint.

When citation practices, co-authorship, language, and publication patterns are considered together, the separation between the two scholarly communities becomes clearer. As shown in Table 3, cross-national engagement remains limited in both corpora. Chinese articles rarely include Brazilian co-authors and cite Brazilian scholarship only marginally, while Brazilian articles show only slightly higher engagement with Chinese scholarship. The predominance of domestic citation circuits and the low proportion of partner-country references suggest that academic production on Brazil-China relations continues to develop largely within separate intellectual spaces.



**Table 3 – Knowledge Circulation and Linguistic Indicators**

Indicator	Chinese Corpus	Brazilian Corpus	Difference
Articles with partner-country co-authors	7.3 %	12.8 %	-5.5 %
Citations to own country's scholarship	83.7 %	61.4 %	+ 22.3 %
Citations to partner country's scholarship	2.1 %	4.8 %	-2.7 %
Citations to English-language scholarship	76.3 %	84.2 %	-7.9 %
Linguistic diversity (non-native language articles)	10.7 %	37.5 %	-26.8 %

Source: Author's elaboration.

The publication patterns further reveal how knowledge infrastructure shapes epistemic sovereignty. Chinese scholarship benefits from strong domestic circulation and institutional concentration, but its reliance on Chinese-language publication limits broader transnational visibility. Brazilian scholarship shows greater linguistic diversity and wider international reach through Portuguese- and English-language publication, yet it has limited influence within Chinese academic debates and policy-oriented research communities. The result is not a shared epistemic field, but two partially connected knowledge systems whose interaction remains thinner than the diplomatic and economic depth of the bilateral relationship would suggest.

These structural patterns are relevant to the broader analysis of epistemic sovereignty. The Chinese system's centralized infrastructure enables rapid scaling of research output but tends to reinforce policy-oriented agendas and constrain theoretical diversity. The Brazilian system's more fragmented infrastructure supports critical perspectives and theoretical plurality, but limits research scale and policy impact. Both systems therefore face difficulties in building genuinely transnational epistemic communities capable of bridging linguistic, theoretical, and institutional divides.



5. Discursive Frameworks and Theoretical Orientations

5.1 Brazil-China Narratives of Complementarity and Asymmetry

Discourse analysis of the 80 stratified sample articles identifies recurring differences in the narrative frameworks used to interpret Brazil-China relations. In the Chinese sample, developmental complementarity is the most frequently coded frame, characterizing the relationship through metaphors of mutual benefit, natural partnership, and win-win cooperation. This frame draws on Chinese developmental discourse and emphasizes the complementary nature of China's manufacturing capacity and Brazil's natural resources.

Representative formulations present China-Brazil ties as structurally complementary and normatively cooperative. Zhang and Jin (2020) depict the two economies as mutually reinforcing, with China's industrial capabilities aligning with Brazil's resource and agricultural endowments. In a similar vein, Xu and Shen (2023) situate China-Brazil cooperation within broader Global South narratives that emphasize shared development agendas and collective agency.

These narratives often employ developmental metaphors that position China as a successful developmental model that can offer valuable lessons for Brazil, resonating with Chinese scholarship that counters dependency-oriented or threat-based interpretations of China's role in Latin America by emphasizing reciprocity, development, and South-South cooperation (Jiang 2023). The "China model" is presented as an alternative to Western development paradigms, emphasizing state-led development, infrastructure investment, and poverty reduction. Such a narrative frame serves multiple functions: it legitimizes China's growing influence in Brazil, positions China as a benevolent partner rather than a hegemonic power, and challenges Western dominance in development discourse.

In the Brazilian sample, critical asymmetry appears more frequently as a narrative frame, emphasizing power differentials, structural vulnerabilities, and sovereignty concerns. The frame draws on Brazil's rich tradition of dependency theory and critical IR scholarship, questioning whether the relationship truly serves Brazil's long-term interests.

Representative formulations present Brazil-China ties as rhetorically strategic yet materially asymmetric across trade and environmental arenas. Berringer and Belasques (2020) read Brazil-China relations under the Lula and Dilma governments through the lens of internal bourgeois interests and conflicted





subordination. Busilli and Jaime (2021) examine Chinese investments in Brazil as a form of economic diplomacy embedded in bilateral power relations. Milani (2024) connects the climate emergency and the right to development to tensions within Brazil-China relations.

The critical asymmetry frame often employs terms like “primary-export dependency”, “technological subordination” and “environmental sovereignty” to highlight structural inequalities in the relationship. This narrative challenges the official discourse of strategic partnership by revealing the underlying power dynamics that shape economic and political interactions. Brazilian scholars frequently reference historical patterns of dependency to contextualize contemporary China-Brazil relations, drawing parallels with earlier periods of economic subordination to European and North American powers.

Table 4 – Narrative Frames in the Discourse Sample by Corpus (% of Sample Articles)

Frame	Chinese Corpus (n = 42)	Brazilian Corpus (n = 38)
Developmental complementarity	78.6 %	15.8 %
Critical asymmetry	4.8 %	68.4 %
Strategic partnership	14.3 %	10.5 %
Environmental stewardship	2.4 %	26.3 %
Multilateral leadership	26.2 %	15.8 %
Technological cooperation	19.0 %	7.9 %
Cultural exchange	11.9 %	5.3 %

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 because frames are not mutually exclusive.

Source: Author’s elaboration.

Table 4 summarizes the prevalence of the main narrative frames identified in the 80-article discourse sample. These frames do not refer to mutually exclusive issue areas, but to recurring interpretive positions through which authors assign meaning to Brazil-China relations. In the coded sample, developmental complementarity is more frequently associated with the Chinese corpus, while critical asymmetry is more frequently associated with the Brazilian/English-language corpus.





5.2 Theoretical Traditions and Methodological Divides

As shown in Table 5, Chinese scholarship is more policy-oriented and quantitative, while Brazilian scholarship exhibits greater theoretical diversity and a stronger preference for qualitative and interpretive methodologies.

Table 5 – Theoretical Frameworks and Methods by Corpus (% of Sample Articles)

Dimension	Chinese Corpus	Brazilian Corpus
Theoretical Frameworks		
Policy-oriented/Developmental	64.3 %	18.4 %
Liberal institutionalism	19.0 %	26.3 %
Realism/geopolitics	9.5 %	15.8 %
Dependency theory	0.0 %	28.9 %
Constructivism	14.3 %	13.2 %
Postcolonial/decolonial	2.4 %	15.8 %
Global IR/pluralistic universalism	4.8 %	10.5 %
Methodological Approaches		
Quantitative analysis	52.4 %	23.7 %
Qualitative case studies	21.4 %	44.7 %
Policy analysis	33.3 %	18.4 %
Discourse analysis	4.8 %	26.3 %
Historical analysis	7.1 %	15.8 %
Mixed methods	9.5 %	21.1 %

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 because theories and methods may be multiply coded.

Source: Author's elaboration.

In the Chinese corpus, policy-oriented and developmental frameworks appear more frequently than explicitly critical approaches, often combining elements of liberal institutional cooperation and constructivist identity-building. This orientation can be read in relation to China's strategic priorities and to an institutional context in which policy relevance and state-defined agendas carry considerable weight. Explicit engagement with critical theories is limited in the





Chinese corpus, and dependency theory appears only marginally in the sampled articles on Brazil-China relations.

Chinese theoretical frameworks often draw on concepts including “peaceful development”, “harmonious world” and “community with shared future for mankind” to frame the bilateral relationship. These concepts emphasize cooperation, mutual benefit, and win-win outcomes while avoiding explicit power analysis or structural critique. The limited presence of dependency theory and other critical vocabularies in the Chinese corpus can be read in relation to theoretical preferences and institutional conditions that privilege policy relevance and alignment with official diplomatic vocabularies.

In methods, Chinese scholarship favors quantitative analysis using trade statistics, investment flows, and economic modeling, supplemented by policy analysis drawing on official documents and diplomatic statements. The preference for statistical and policy-oriented analysis reflects the dominance of economics and policy studies in Chinese IR scholarship, as well as the availability of quantitative data and institutional support for policy-relevant research. Qualitative approaches, case studies and discourse analysis, are less common, reflecting limited engagement with interpretive approaches in Chinese IR.

Brazilian scholarship displays theoretical diversity, with dependency theory remaining influential alongside liberal institutionalism and growing engagement with postcolonial/decolonial frameworks. Such diversity reflects Brazil’s rich tradition of critical IR scholarship and the greater institutional autonomy of Brazilian universities. Brazilian scholars engage with global theoretical debates while adapting them to Latin American contexts, creating hybrid theoretical frameworks that combine global concepts with local insights.

By contrast, the Brazilian corpus favors qualitative approaches, particularly case studies and discourse analysis, with quantitative methods playing a secondary role. This pattern reflects the influence of critical theory and interpretive approaches in Brazilian IR scholarship, as well as the emphasis on contextual analysis and power dynamics. Brazilian scholars often combine multiple methods to provide nuanced analysis of complex political and economic relationships.

The methodological divergence should therefore be read not as a simple contrast between Chinese pragmatism and Brazilian critique, but as the outcome of different institutional and political conditions of knowledge production. In the Chinese corpus, policy relevance, quantitative evidence, and alignment with official diplomatic vocabularies are reinforced by a state-centered research environment





in which social-science scholarship operates within more explicit political and institutional boundaries. This does not imply the absence of intellectual agency among Chinese researchers, but it helps explain why critical vocabularies such as dependency, asymmetry, and epistemic autonomy appear less frequently than concepts associated with development cooperation, strategic partnership, and global-governance reform. In the Brazilian corpus, greater university autonomy and the longer presence of dependency and critical IR traditions provide a more established vocabulary for framing Brazil-China relations through vulnerability, sovereignty, and structural constraint.

5.3 Environmental Governance Competing Normative Visions

Environmental issues provide a useful site for observing divergent normative frameworks in the coded discourse sample. Chinese scholarship on environmental aspects of Brazil-China relations primarily frames environmental cooperation as a technical and developmental partnership focused on capacity building, policy coordination, renewable energy, and technology-oriented problem solving. This frame emphasizes practical solutions and mutual benefits, while giving less centrality to normative debates about environmental standards, territorial governance, or sovereignty. Rather than treating environmental questions as a field of distributive conflict, the Chinese-language sample generally incorporates them into a broader vocabulary of development cooperation and South-South partnership.

The Chinese environmental narrative draws on the idea that environmental protection can be reconciled with economic development through technological innovation and state-led planning. In this framing, environmental governance is associated with policy learning, technical exchange, and the extension of development cooperation into sustainability-related fields. The emphasis falls on compatibility between growth and environmental protection, rather than on the social or territorial conflicts that may accompany trade, infrastructure, or investment flows. This does not mean that environmental questions are absent from Chinese scholarship, but that they are more often interpreted through a developmental and cooperative register.

Brazilian scholarship on environmental issues frames the relationship through sovereignty protection and environmental justice lenses. In the Brazilian/English-language sample, the Amazon, climate governance, agribusiness,





infrastructure, and sustainability standards appear not only as sectoral policy concerns, but also as sites through which asymmetries in Brazil-China relations become politically visible. This frame emphasizes Brazil's policy space, territorial authority, environmental regulation, and the protection of affected populations. Environmental governance is therefore less often treated as a purely technical arena of cooperation and more often as a domain in which autonomy, dependence, and distributive conflict are negotiated.

The Brazilian environmental narrative draws on concepts of environmental sovereignty and climate justice, emphasizing the need to protect Brazil's natural resources and vulnerable populations from external pressures. This narrative challenges the assumption that economic development and environmental protection are automatically compatible, especially when trade, infrastructure, and investment flows intensify pressure on sensitive territories. In contrast with the Chinese-language corpus, where environmental cooperation is more readily absorbed into developmental and diplomatic narratives, the Brazilian/English-language corpus more often uses environmental governance as a critical lens for evaluating the costs, limits, and political implications of South-South partnership. Environmental governance thus illustrates how the same bilateral relationship is made intelligible through different epistemic priorities: cooperation and development on one side, vulnerability, autonomy, and contested development on the other.

5.4 Temporal Evolution of Discourses

Discourse analysis across the three *ex ante* periods defined in Section 3.3 identifies evolving narrative patterns. In the early period, Chinese scholarship emphasized economic opportunity, market potential, and practical trade relations, with limited engagement with theoretical frameworks or critical perspectives. Brazilian scholarship was more diverse from the outset, combining optimism about South-South cooperation under Lula's foreign policy with emerging concerns over commodity dependence and the sustainability of export-led growth.

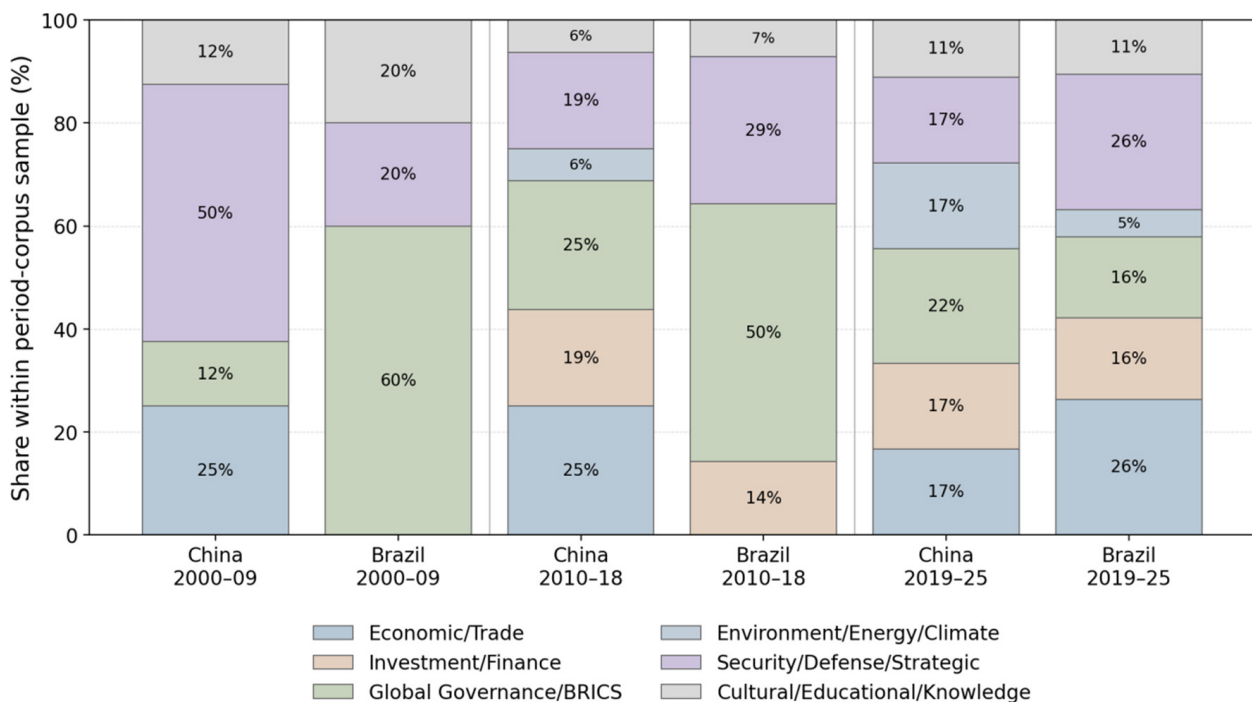
In Figure 5, the 2010-2018 period saw a clearer differentiation between the two corpora. Chinese scholarship increasingly incorporated global governance, BRICS cooperation, and concepts such as “community with shared future for mankind”, presenting Brazil-China relations as part of a broader project of multilateral reform and South-South coordination. Brazilian scholarship, by



contrast, developed stronger critiques of reprimarization, structural asymmetry, and environmental risk, especially regarding the long-term effects of China's demand for commodities and investments in environmentally sensitive sectors.

By 2019-2025, this divergence had become more visible in the coded sample. Chinese scholarship continued to emphasize partnership continuity, multilateral leadership, and global-governance reform, even during moments of diplomatic friction. Brazilian scholarship gave greater weight to sovereignty, climate governance, Amazon-related concerns, and the domestic political implications of dependence on China, especially in light of the politicization of China under the Bolsonaro government (Bessimo and Amorim Neto 2024). Periods of diplomatic tension, especially 2016-2018 and 2019-2022, accentuated this contrast: Chinese discourse remained closer to official diplomatic narratives, while Brazilian discourse showed greater responsiveness to domestic political shifts and environmental controversies.

Figure 5 – Thematic Evolution of Discourse Over Time (2000-2025)



Source: Author's elaboration.

These temporal patterns point to the co-evolution of scholarly discourse, domestic political change, and international developments. They also suggest that the two academic communities do not merely study the same bilateral relationship from different national locations; they periodically redefine its meaning through distinct institutional, theoretical, and political conditions.



6. Epistemic Sovereignty in South-South Knowledge Production

The findings point to significant epistemic asymmetries in Brazil-China knowledge production, but the claim about epistemic sovereignty does not rest on a single indicator. It emerges from the convergence of four observable dimensions: who produces knowledge, which agendas become central, whose scholarship is cited, and how the bilateral relationship is narratively framed. Institutional concentration and publication scale indicate the material infrastructure of knowledge production; thematic distribution and narrative frames capture agenda-setting and interpretive authority; citation-orientation and co-authorship indicators show the degree of reciprocal engagement between scholarly communities. Read together, these dimensions make the Brazil-China case a useful site for assessing whether theoretical autonomy can be maintained within South-South partnerships.

Three interrelated processes shape epistemic sovereignty. First, institutional infrastructures create the material conditions of knowledge production. China's centralized and state-centered academic system facilitates rapid output scaling through dedicated funding, state-aligned research centers, and integrated policy connections, but also channels scholarly agendas toward officially recognized strategic priorities. Brazil's more fragmented system supports university autonomy and theoretical diversity, yet limits research scale, funding continuity, and policy influence. The contrast suggests that scale and autonomy do not necessarily advance together: centralized coordination can expand output while narrowing the range of legitimate frames, whereas institutional pluralism can sustain critical perspectives while weakening cumulative capacity.

Second, theoretical genealogies shape bilateral interpretation. Brazilian scholarship draws on dependency theory, postcolonial thought, and critical IR to examine vulnerability, sovereignty, and unequal exchange. The Chinese corpus more often privileges developmental and policy-oriented vocabularies, leaving fewer explicit conceptual resources for self-critical analysis of asymmetry within South-South partnerships. This does not imply the absence of intellectual agency among Chinese researchers. Rather, it indicates that different political and institutional conditions make certain vocabularies more available, legitimate, and recurrent than others. The result is not merely a difference in topic selection, but a divergence in the conceptual tools through which the bilateral relationship becomes intelligible.





Third, linguistic practices structure knowledge circulation. Chinese-language publication creates domestic cohesion but limits international visibility, while Brazil's greater linguistic diversity facilitates external circulation without necessarily translating into influence within Chinese academic debates. Minimal cross-citation and weak transnational co-authorship reinforce this separation, making language both a medium of communication and a boundary of epistemic exchange. The result is a form of South-South knowledge production in which diplomatic proximity coexists with limited conceptual reciprocity.

These patterns complicate the assumption that South-South cooperation is inherently more horizontal than North-South relations. Epistemic sovereignty requires active construction rather than passive expectation. The thin layer of transnational co-production despite decades of diplomatic engagement suggests that political partnership alone is insufficient to generate shared epistemic frameworks. More equitable epistemic communities require institutional infrastructure that supports both scale and diversity, theoretical dialogue grounded in Southern traditions, and communicative practices that reduce linguistic barriers while preserving epistemic plurality. For Brazilian IR scholarship, the central challenge is to maintain critical theoretical autonomy while engaging China's expanding academic influence; for South-South cooperation more broadly, the case underscores the need for more reciprocal forms of research governance and knowledge circulation.

7. Conclusion

The study identifies epistemic asymmetries in Brazil-China knowledge production across scale, agendas, circulation, and collaboration. These asymmetries complicate the assumption that South-South cooperation is inherently horizontal, indicating that uneven forms of recognition may persist even within partnerships among Global South countries.

The findings contribute to Global International Relations by clarifying that epistemic sovereignty remains contested within South-South partnerships. The Brazil-China case highlights how material asymmetries, linguistic barriers, institutional structures, and theoretical traditions shape the production and circulation of knowledge about bilateral relations in ways that cannot be reduced to traditional North-South binaries.





The analysis further indicates that Brazilian and Chinese academic communities have not yet formed a shared epistemic field. China's centralized academic infrastructure supports rapid research output and policy visibility, while Brazil's more plural academic landscape sustains critical theoretical vocabularies and locally grounded debates. The divergence helps explain why the same bilateral relationship is often interpreted through partially disconnected conceptual frames and citation circuits.

Limited cross-citation and collaboration between Chinese and Brazilian scholars suggest that sustained diplomatic engagement has not automatically generated reciprocal knowledge production. More balanced South-South academic exchange therefore requires deliberate efforts to bridge linguistic, institutional, and theoretical divides.

For Brazilian International Relations, the analysis underscores the importance of preserving critical theoretical autonomy while engaging China's expanding academic and policy-oriented research infrastructure. More broadly, the article argues that plural forms of Global International Relations depend not only on who participates in knowledge production, but also on how knowledge is produced, cited, translated, and recognized across unequal academic spaces.

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