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## Professional Hispano-Americans in China: Influence of Chinese Soft Power on Immigration Motivation

**ABSTRACT:** Professional Hispano-American immigrants without Chinese ancestry or cultural ties with this country have chosen it as their migratory destination, a topic that remains understudied. The objective is to comprehend their motivations, and to achieve this, 19 men and 6 women participated in in-depth interviews and surveys. It was observed that, especially for Generation Y, destination selection transcends economic factors, influenced by Chinese soft power through media and education. These mediums serve as intercultural bridges; at the meso-social level, prior to migration, connecting macrostructural conditions with the individual decision-making. Furthermore, it became evident that those influences are less relevant for the previous generation, emphasizing the importance of generational change. We argue that the individualized consumption of cultural products individualizes motivations and supports decision-making.

**KEYWORDS:** Immigration; China; Latin America; educational institutions; motivation.

## Hispanoamericanos profesionales en China: influencia del poder blando chino en la motivación migratoria

**RESUMEN:** Inmigrantes profesionales hispanoamericanos sin vínculos culturales o ascendencia china han elegido este país como destino migratorio, una temática aún no estudiada. El objetivo es comprender sus motivaciones, y para ello 19 hombres y 6 mujeres participaron en entrevistas en profundidad y encuestas. Se observa que, especialmente en la generación Y, la elección del destino va más allá de factores económicos, influenciada por el poder blando chino a través de medios y educación. Estos medios sirven como puentes interculturales; a nivel meso-social, previos a la migración, conectando aspectos macroestructurales con decisiones individuales. Además, se evidencia que el influjo de estos medios es menos relevante en la generación anterior, subrayando la importancia del cambio generacional. Sostenemos que el consumo personalizado de productos culturales individualiza las motivaciones y respalda las decisiones.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Inmigración; China; América Latina; instituciones de enseñanza; motivación.

### HOW TO QUOTE

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## Introduction

Throughout the 21st century, the number of international migrants has increased rapidly worldwide. In 2020 there were about 281 million migrants, representing an increase of 128 million in three decades (IOM, 2022). The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs defines international migrants as people who move to a country other than their original place of residence and reside in the receiving country for at least 12 months, regardless of the reason for migration or their legal status.<sup>1</sup> The People's Republic of China (hereafter: China) has one of the largest transnational communities<sup>2</sup> in the world itself, with about 10 million Chinese international migrants (2020 figure), mainly in Canada, Australia, the Republic of Korea, Japan, the United States, and Singapore (IOM, 2022).

On the other hand, even countries that historically have low rates of international immigration, such as China, have seen an increase in foreign residents. In the last two decades, the Asian country has implemented policies to attract international students, and, in the past few years, Asia has become the top destination, with almost half a million foreign students, and which are opportunities that can be transformed into a bridge for them to become workers in the country (Qi, 2021). In 2019, 1,030,871 foreign residents resided in China, accounting for 0.07% of the total population. Hong Kong (284,848) and South Korea (196,874) are the main origin countries. In the case of Latin American immigrants, the two main countries of origin are Brazil (78,301) and Peru (14,211).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Although there is no internationally agreed definition of migrant, the most useful one has been implemented by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA 1998). According to this definition, long-term international students and workers assigned to another country are also immigrants. Refugees correspond to involuntary migration and are a subcategory of migrants.

<sup>2</sup> They correspond to new forms of community established by immigrants in the era of globalization, characterized by the hybridization of feelings of belonging and identity. They are composed of individuals or groups residing in different national societies and united by shared interests and references, such as religious or linguistic aspects, supported by social networks that reinforce their solidarity across borders (Tsakiri, 2005). This definition relates to the term "*Huáqiáo*" (华侨), which refers specifically to people of Chinese nationality living abroad. The Chinese government recognized their value as a source of investment and as a link with abroad, accepting and promoting this concept in Chinese society (Huang, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> According to the 2020 annual report on Chinese international migration (中国國際移民報告2020年) (Zhōngguó, 2020), published by The Center for China and Globalization (CCG) under the jurisdiction of China's Ministry of Civil Affairs (中国民政部).

Currently, China is developing as an emerging global power and consequently is transitioning from a predominantly migrant-sending nation to a recipient of international immigrants.<sup>4</sup> Because this change is recent, migration studies in China still mainly focus on internal labor migration, with a rich corpus in this regard (Qian and Florence, 2021; Gao, 2021; Sun, 2014; Liu et al., 2015; Pun, 2016); as well as research on forced internal migration due to state development projects (Feng, Zhu and Wang, 2021). However, with the increase of foreigners in large cities, more studies are being conducted in this regard. These include research on high-skilled migration (Li et al., 2021), experiences of African traders in the south of the country (Carling and Haugen, 2021; Jordan et al., 2021), and on Chinese policies to attract immigrants and internationalize its major cities, turning them into global cities (Ong, 2011).

Given that these inquiries are in their early stages, we find vast generalizations, such as using the term “western expats” (Cai and Su, 2021), and shortcomings in the internal definitions of western immigrants from the global north or Africa. In this context, it is essential to develop a precise approach for each immigrant minority from various regions of the world, including Latin America. This research is based on two key points:

First, the research subjects must be treated with an accurate terminological definition. For example, Latin America, as we use the concept here, refers to the largest cultural area of the American continent, which includes 18 countries,<sup>5</sup> where Spanish is the most widely spoken language, the common language.<sup>6</sup> This concept has been used in classic historiographical and anthropological writings such as Urbanski (1978), and the reason for its adoption here is its scientific precision as opposed tendency to use terms such as *Latino* or Latin American. Torres (2016) indicates in his historiographic research that the commonly used concept of

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<sup>4</sup> Idem.

<sup>5</sup> These are: Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

<sup>6</sup> There are also indigenous languages corresponding to ethnic minorities in this region. These languages often do not lack official recognition. For example, in Bolivia, Quechua and Guaraní are official state languages; in Paraguay, Guaraní is also official. In Ecuador, Northern Quichua is commonly spoken, and Guatemala recognizes 21 Mayan languages.

"*Latino*" is a European political construct that lacks scientific precision.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the self-identification and self-distinction of immigrants should be considered, as there is evidence that Latin American immigrants in Japan manifest a desire to distinguish themselves from other foreigners (Piffaut Gálvez, 2020a; 2023). In the context of an emerging type of immigration to China, a subject still unexplored, it is essential to describe this group accurately from the beginning.

Second, it is crucial to precisely understand the motivations for migration for various groups of individuals, as this constitutes the fundamental starting point for understanding a particular migration process. In this context, as noted above in the review of previous studies, the case of Latin Americans in China remains an unexplored field. As the number of people residing with different origins in China increases, it is to be expected that their migratory motivations will also diversify. Here, we consider immigrant motivation as a psychological process that induces migratory behavior and directs it toward certain goals.

In psychological terms, motivation is formed through an interaction between internal and external factors. Intrinsic motivation drives people to participate in activities for the satisfaction they provide in themselves, while extrinsic motivation involves the pursuit of actions to obtain external rewards, such as compliments, recognition, or approval (Ryan & Deci, 2000). On the other hand, an inescapable theme in the contemporary migration history between East Asia and Latin America is the emigration of Peruvian-Japanese and Brazilian-Japanese to Japan, mainly during the 1980s and 1990s.

During this period Japan experienced economic improvements and stability -while Latin America faced economic difficulties- and offered work visas, which prompted greater immigration due to the need for workers. This phenomenon has been subject of research for more than 30 years (Yamanaka, 1996; Sekiguchi, 2005; Takenaka, 2005; Maeda, 2006; Tsuda, 2022; among many others). However, there is limited research (Cai

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<sup>7</sup> Because it originates in the linguistic concept that identifies languages descended from Latin and their speakers, so it includes Italians, French, Portuguese, Spanish and even Romanians in Europe; furthermore, in the case of the Americas "Latin American" includes Brazil along with all the other countries in the region, even if the main language of Brazil is different from the rest; and consequently, there are cultural barriers (Urbanski, 1978; Torres, 2016).

& Su, 2021; Li et al., 2021; Piffaut Gálvez, 2020a, 2020b, 2023) focused on the migration to East Asia of people from the Western Hemisphere who are not descendants of any diaspora. In this case, Latin Americans who have no ethnic ties with China, therefore, a geographically, linguistically, and culturally distant countries. It is necessary to consider what motivations have influenced them to choose China as a destination, discarding geographical, linguistic, and cultural alternatives closer to their origins, and which are preferred by so many other emigrants in the region, such as the United States, Europe or Australia.

In theory, over the last few decades migration studies have increasingly developed in an interdisciplinary way, drawing on disciplines such as media studies, which have focused on immigrants' use of social networks (Mcgregor and Siegel, 2013), the media-based construction of migration (Viola and Musolff, 2019), and the relationship of the media and its cultural products with immigrants, demonstrating the impact of media products on their acceptance (King and Wood, 2013). This article is positioned from this type of media studies; however, we add the notion of "soft power" to clarify our future analysis. What do we mean by soft power: the ability of a nation to obtain support, comprehension, empathy and international influence through the diffusion of its culture, political values and the attractiveness of its policies without the application of coercive forces; awakening admiration and respect in other nations (Nye, 2004).

On the other hand, in this article we will refer to cultural consumption, understood as "the set of processes of appropriation and uses of products in which the symbolic value takes precedence over the values of use and change, or where at least the latter is configured subordinate to the symbolic dimension" (García, 1999). At the same time, we understand that cultural consumption should be considered as a practice that manifests itself in the appropriation and use of cultural products, while their value is linked to culture and the interpretations that people make of it (Sunkel, 2002).

Likewise, originally cultural products are works of art, books, videos, music and video games (Cuadrado & Berenguer, 2002), focusing on mass production materialized through tangible support for consumption. However, in this article also education and its

contents are considered a cultural good, understanding that it delivers these meanings and possesses symbolic forms whose specificity is to be produced in a social field, a field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993), and, in addition, it is as in this case a paid consumer good (Verger, 2013).

Finally, the study of professional immigrants has been deepening our understanding of the diversity of migration processes in the early part of the 21st century, which is an era of global networks, transnationalism, and the movement of skilled personnel (Colic-Peisker, 2010; Cranston, 2016). We also included generational differentiation to delimit our subjects of study even further. Although there is no single standard of classification, in this research we follow Novella et al. (2018), who defines for Latin America, the Generation Y; also known as “millennial generation” (hereafter: Generation Y), as those born between 1984 and 1996.

As a result, the main objective of this study is to investigate the motivations of Generation Y Latin American professionals to choose China as a migration destination, focusing on the influence of Chinese soft power through its cultural products. It seeks to answer the following questions: How does Chinese soft power, expressed in its cultural products, affect the motivations of Generation Y Latin Americans to migrate to China? What are these cultural products? Thus, this article has six rationales:

- 1) Seeks to reintroduce the term “Latin American” to avoid confusion and uses this precision as a solid basis for analysis.
- 2) It fills the gap regarding studies on Latin Americans in China, which is important as this is an emerging immigrant group.
- 3) It emphasizes the importance of investigating their migratory motivations and recognizing the possible diversification of these reasons, which can only be discussed if it is studied from the beginning for this group of immigrants.
- 4) Recognizes the importance of approaching the topic from an interdisciplinary perspective, including media analysis and the concept of “soft power” to obtain a clearer understanding.

5) It focuses on Generation Y as a specific study group, allowing a clearer and more relevant differentiation in migratory motivations, which makes the sample more relevant.

6) Finally, it focuses on cultural consumption and education concerning international migration, providing a more complete perspective on the impact of Chinese soft power.

### Research methodology<sup>8</sup>

This study used a non-probabilistic qualitative sample, considered valid for its representativeness of the group under study. This approach does not attempt to make statistical inferences from the sample to the general population. Instead, grounded theory was applied through iterative non-probabilistic sampling until theoretical saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Generalization is based on theoretical saturation and analytical generalization rather than statistical generalization. The study was initiated with snowball sampling (Voicu, 2011), and later incorporated a purposive sampling approach (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). Purposive sampling is based on selecting the sample according to specific qualities relevant to the research topic.

Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth qualitative interviews (Taylor *et al.*, 2015) complemented with a closed-response questionnaire-type survey (Mellenbergh, 2008). First, exploratory interviews were conducted to identify individuals' experiences regarding their immigration process. Subsequently, in-depth interviews were conducted on the specific topic of their personal motivations as emigrants from their countries of origin and as immigrants in the receiving country.

Based on this research data, a questionnaire with closed-ended questions was constructed to cover the issues raised in the interviews in a clear, concise and quantitative manner. The first exploratory interviews were conducted from October to December 2021, the

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<sup>8</sup> This study is part of a larger project focused on Latin American immigrants in East Asia, and simultaneous research on immigrants living in Japan and South Korea is currently being implemented. In addition, the survey questionnaire was created by transcribing the results obtained in qualitative interviews with informants, coding the distinctive words and classifying the codes into categories, e.g., in Chart 4, the creation of categories within "audio-visual media" and "other"; and their subdivision, was created based on post-interview coding. Also, the battery of questions and structure presented in this paper will coincide with later work on the cases of Latin Americans in Japan and South Korea to facilitate later comparability.

qualitative in-depth interviews, questionnaires and their subsequent final analysis were conducted between August and December 2022. At the time of the research, the individuals resided throughout three of the most important and populated regions of China, namely, the directly administered municipalities of Beijing and Shanghai, plus Guangdong province, the first two being part of the northeastern region of China, and the latter part of the southern region. Interviews were conducted online given the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Twenty-five people participated in this study, 20 from Generation Y, 75.0% men (15) and 25.0% women (5). They were on average 30 years old (28 to 35 years old) at the time of the research. For comparative purposes, there was added a separate, smaller group of 5 middle-aged people, on average 46 years old (between 45 and 48 years old), of whom 80.0 % were men (4) and 20.0 % were women (1).

All participants are first-generation professional immigrants and Latin Americans without Chinese ancestry who have resided for at least 3 years in China and have a legalized residency status that allows them to work according to Chinese law. In addition, according to their professional background and educational level, they are all professional immigrants. The majority (92.0 %) are university graduates, but a minority (8.0 %) are graduates of professional institutes. A summary of the participants is presented in Chart 1.

**Chart 1.** Summary of participants.

Generation Y							
No.	Nationality	Age	Sex	Educational Level	Occupation	Years of residence	Region
#1	Peru	28	Male	University	Computer Engineering	3	Beijing
#2	Mexico	28	Female	University	Foreign language teacher	3	Beijing
#3	Argentina	28	Male	University	Administrative work	4	Shanghai
#4	Chile	28	Female	University	Translation and Interpretation	4	Shanghai
#5	Peru	29	Male	University	Administrative work	4	Shanghai
#6	Peru	29	Female	University	Translation and Interpretation	4	Beijing
#7	Peru	29	Male	University	Computer Engineering	4	Guangdong
#8	Peru	29	Male	University	Administrative work	4	Guangdong
#9	Mexico	30	Female	University	Translation and Interpretation	4	Guangdong
#10	Mexico	30	Male	University	Industrial Engineering	4	Shanghai
#11	Panama	30	Male	University	Accountant	4	Shanghai
#12	Venezuela	31	Male	University	Industrial Engineering	5	Guangdong
#13	Bolivia	31	Male	University	Administrative work	5	Shanghai



#14	Peru	31	Female	Professional Institute	Administrative work	5	Shanghai
#15	Mexico	31	Male	University	Computer Engineering	5	Beijing
#16	Venezuela	31	Male	University	Administrative work	5	Beijing
#17	Chile	32	Male	University	Foreign language teacher	5	Beijing
#18	Argentina	33	Male	University	Translation and Interpretation	5	Guangdong
#19	Mexico	35	Male	University	Consultant in export company	4	Guangdong
#20	Peru	35	Male	University	Foreign language teacher	6	Guangdong

#### Middle-aged group

No.	Nationality	Age	Sex	Educational Level	Occupation	Years of residence	Region
#21	Peru	47	Male	University	Entrepreneur	13	Beijing
#22	Peru	48	Female	Professional Institute	Foreign language teacher	12	Shanghai
#23	Mexico	46	Male	University	Entrepreneur	12	Beijing
#24	Chile	45	Male	University	Consultant in export company	14	Shanghai
#25	Colombia	45	Male	University	Translation and Interpretation	14	Guangdong

Finally, the present research is conducted at Kyoto University, Japan, therefore, it is under the Code of Ethics of the Japanese Sociological Society (JSS, 2008).<sup>9</sup> The purpose and scope of the research were explained to each participant, as well as the safeguards that would protect their privacy before obtaining their consent.

## Results

We will first present the results of the questionnaire survey on the participants' motivations for leaving their country of origin, and their subsequent choice of China as a destination. We will continue to analyze the influence of Chinese soft power through the cultural products with which the subjects interacted within Latin America: such as audiovisual media and Chinese educational institutions. Here, the relationship of Generation Y individuals to these educational products and institutions are analyzed through the subjective understanding of the participants as shared through the interviews. Then, a comparison with previous generation immigrants is presented to highlight experiential differences. Finally, characteristics of the process of building a relationship with China on a personal level, which explains their migration process, are discussed.

<sup>9</sup> The purpose and content of this code can be found (in Japanese) at: <https://jss-sociology.org/about/ethicalcodes/>.

### From the motivation to emigrate to the choice of China as a destination

Migration has long been described and explained by push-pull factors. For this type of model, push factors are regional, pushing people out of their countries of origin, while pull factors are those that drive people to a destination (Ishikawa, 2013). In our questionnaire, we asked Latin American participants to report the factors that pushed them to leave their country of origin. The categories are constructed according to expulsion factors expressed by them in the interviews. We allowed for dual responses to create a hierarchy of primary and secondary reasons. This allowed the selection of the responses and subsequent analysis, the results are classified into categories and summarized in Chart 2.

The primary reasons for emigration were in the economic category (64.0 %). These were “job dissatisfaction”; related to their job experiences in non-related jobs and their subsequent dissatisfaction, and “economic instability”, which refers to the perception of poor promotion prospects and a poor balance between salaries and hiring requirements. Thus, the primary reasons for leaving their countries of origin were poor economic and employment prospects, salary instability, and anxiety about job sustainability and job satisfaction levels. This was followed by motives within the sociocultural category (28.0 %), focused on improving their life quality, leaving crime and violence behind, which are perceived as serious problems in their respective countries, starting a family (marriage), and labor relocation. A less common category of motivations involves political issues (8.0 %).

**Chart 2.** Personal motivations for emigration.

Motives		Primary	Secondary
		n = 25	n = 25
Economic	Economic instability	12 (48.0%)	3 (12.0%)
	Job dissatisfaction	3 (12.0%)	0 (0.0%)
	Unemployment	0 (0.0%)	2 (8.0%)
	Poverty status	1 (4.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Sociocultural	Marriage	3 (12.0%)	0 (0.0%)
	Labor relocation	2 (8.0%)	0 (0.0%)
	Interest in living abroad	0 (0.0%)	15 (60.0%)

	Crime y violence	2 (8.0%)	3 (12.0%)
Political	Political instability	2 (8.0%)	2 (8.0%)

Turning to secondary motivations is where we find a marked and interesting trend. The most frequent secondary motivation was “interest in living abroad” (60.0 %), a considerable number of the participants who chose this option were those who had chosen “economic instability” as their primary motivation. The logic is reversed between primary motivations that can be considered more serious and urgent, and secondary motivations that are not connected to a serious and urgent problem but rather to personal desires, so that “job dissatisfaction” and “economic instability” seem to be associated with an underlying desire to live in a different culture and have international experiences.

On the other hand, those who had chosen “political instability” were equally subdivided between “interest in living abroad” and “economic instability”. Likewise, those who chose “marriage” and “job relocation” as their first motive selected “crime and violence” as well as “political instability” as secondary motives. Regarding the participants who chose more serious motivations, such as poverty and crime, as primary reasons (12.0 %), those who answered “crime and violence” were equally subdivided between “interest in living abroad” and “economic instability”, while those who chose “poverty” switched to “economic instability”, meaning that migrants with more serious motivations kept their answers in line with this, expressing more serious reasons for leaving their country.

The analysis of these data leads to the question of why our participants did not choose to emigrate to countries in the northern hemisphere, not only geographically closer but also culturally and linguistically; destinations to which it might be easier to adapt, such as Europe or the United States. In Chart 3, the personal reasons for choosing China present an interesting distribution that shows a considerable change in their motivations. While the personal motivations for leaving the country were mainly associated with the economic category, the dominant reason for choosing China was “interest in Chinese culture and society” (68.0 %).

In addition, all participants who previously expressed more serious motivations for emigrating also chose “interest in Chinese culture and society” as a secondary reason for

choosing China. This suggests a deeper logic underpinning their decision to cross to the other side of the world to reach far-away China, rather than seeking a country that is geographically and culturally closer, comparatively easier to immigrate to, and that would provide equally attractive benefits. The question that arises here is why and how the interest in China arose in these individuals.

**Chart 3.** Personal motivations for choosing China.

Motives		Primary	Secondary
		n = 25	n = 25
Economic	Expanding economy	0 (0.0%)	5 (20.0%)
	Opportunities for professional career	0 (0.0%)	6 (24.0%)
	Better living standards	1 (4.0%)	1 (4.0%)
Sociocultural	Interest in Chinese culture and society	17 (68.0%)	7 (28.0%)
	Safe and orderly society	2 (8.0%)	4 (16.0%)
	Marriage	3 (12.0%)	0 (0.0%)
	Labor relocation	2 (8.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Political	Political stability	0 (0.0%)	2 (8.0%)

To clarify this question, it is necessary to know what process led these immigrants to become interested in China despite having a society and culture so different from their familiar Latin American world; especially if we consider that they are not descendants of the Chinese diaspora and have no previous family ties to the country. Chart 4 presents a compendium of the means of contact with Chinese culture that have been alluded by the participants during the interviews. Based on the survey, the categories have been grouped and divided into primary means; the first encountered during each subject's lifetime, and secondary means; which represent the main resources that each subject subsequently discovered by deepening their individual interests.

In this way, the main means of contact with Chinese culture has been audiovisuals,

specifically cinematographic works of Chinese origin (92.0 %). The rest (8.0 %) is divided into documentaries and Chinese martial arts; 4.0 % each. On the other hand, the most frequent means of secondary contact was education (40.0%), a category constituted based on the frequent reference to educational institutions teaching Chinese language and culture; institutions directly related to the Asian nation. It is noteworthy that the audiovisual media category received a still considerable total percentage (44.0 %), even as a secondary medium. Undoubtedly, China's audiovisual media had a great influence on the respondents' approach to the country and, subsequently, on their decision to select it as a destination.

**Chart 4.** Means of contact with Chinese culture.

<b>Means</b>		<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>
		N = 25	N = 25
Audiovisual media	Cinematographic works	23 (92.0%)	0 (0.0%)
	Chinese news media	0 (0.0%)	5 (20.0%)
	Popular music	0 (0.0%)	3 (12.0%)
	Documentaries about China	1 (4.0%)	1 (4.0%)
	TV Series	0 (0.0%)	1 (4.0%)
	TV shows	0 (0.0%)	1 (4.0%)
Others	Formal education	0 (0.0%)	10 (40.0%)
	Family	0 (0.0%)	2 (8.0%)
	Literature	0 (0.0%)	1 (4.0%)
	Chinese martial arts	1 (4.0%)	1 (4.0%)

Chart 5 presents the age of the respondents at first contact with Chinese culture through the previously mentioned media. This was mostly during early adulthood: between 20 and 29 years of age (76.0 %). While experiences in essential stages of character formation, such as adolescence or childhood are less frequent: 20.0% of individuals between 10 and 19 years of age. Likewise, we have one case of contact during adulthood: at 30 years of age (4.0 %).

Experiences during essential stages of personality formation, such as adolescence,

often influence life choices, possibly even decisions as important as the choice of a migratory destination many years later. However, this adolescent contact was only true for people of the past generation, while those who had their first contact in their 20s are mostly members of Generation Y. While getting to know a culture during adulthood may not necessarily be as emotional as a bond created during childhood, this period should be a time of greater maturity and therefore influences the bond built. This will be discussed in the next section.

**Chart 5.** First contact with Chinese culture.

Age	n = 25
Under 10 years of age	0 (0.0%)
Between 10 and 19 years of age	5 (20.0%)
Between 20 and 29 years of age	19 (76.0%)
Between 30 and 39 years of age	1 (4.0%)

Finally, no particular differences were found between men and women, or between nationalities.

### **Chinese soft power in Latin America**

Here we will explain the macro-level conditions in the Latin American region concerning the means of Chinese soft power expansion, and how they relate to the bond that the participants in this study built with this country at the micro-social level, specifically in the personal aspect of decision-making. We also collected information on a subgroup of middle-aged immigrants, which shed light on certain changes over time.

#### *Chinese soft power and Generation Y*

Over the past two decades, multiple studies have pointed to China becoming the world's leading economy by 2050, followed by the United States and India (Gomez, 2013). Since its economic reform and opening to the world in 1978, China has taken a path focused on cooperation with developing countries in the economic aspect, leading to strategic

alliances with Latin American countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Venezuela among others, which in turn has borne fruit in the increase of exports and imports between both parties (Hernández, 2013). This situation was consolidated during the 2008 international financial crisis, since it strengthened the need for contact between Latin America and China (Gómez, 2013). Furthermore, China's approach to the world, and to Latin America in particular, is not only through economic and diplomatic means.

Since the early 2000s, Chinese leaders have actively pursued the development of Chinese soft power from a strategic point of view with a view to its positioning as a world power, including collaboration between social science researchers at leading Chinese universities and government officials (Yang, 2004). As part of China's international strategies, institutions seeking to promote Chinese culture, history, language and even worldview expanded during the 2000s. The first of these educational centers was founded in Seoul, South Korea, in 2004, and the second at the University of Maryland, College Park, in the United States, under the name of the Confucius Institute.<sup>10</sup>

It is estimated that the Chinese government has invested more than \$150 million in its institutes in the United States alone between 2006 and 2019 (Ford, 2022). By 2019 there were 540 institutions across five continents, specifically in 13 countries with one or more academies in the Latin American region, totaling about 30 in all (Confucius Institute 2020 in Ramirez et al., 2020). However, historically, before the concept of soft power policies, China had already achieved some presence in the audiovisual media. As has been discussed in studies related to Asian-Oriental mass media products in Latin America, parallel to the expansion of Japanese animation during the 70s and 80s, Chinese action and martial arts films also began to circulate, which over the decades became to some extent recognizable classics, although with less diffusion than Japanese products (Piffaut Gálvez, 2020b).

As can be seen, there are notable differences between the two types of soft power, both in their evolution over several decades and in their respective intentions; namely, high intentionality in the current era as opposed to previous decades. These differences

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<sup>10</sup> Information from the Confucius Institute Maryland (2018); added to bibliographic references.

will be clarified in the next section, particularly based on the generationally differentiated experience of the participants. Most of them, and thus our primary focus, belong to the Latin American Generation Y born between 1984 and 1996 (Novella et al., 2018), the generation that experienced the early stages of the digitalization era.

It is essential to understand the characteristics of this generation to explain their migratory process. They tend to prefer digital devices but still show an understanding and appreciation of analog instruments in daily life (Serres, 2014). More importantly, this is a generation that has not only experienced the diversification of available media that arose from the expansion of the internet, a diversification of its consumption and an expansion of its potential to know, as much as possible, the world remotely, but it is also the generation that was in a state of academic-professional training while the previously mentioned institutes were founded in their respective countries.

In addition, previous research regarding both Confucius Institutes and Chinese media has characterized them as means of expanding China's economic, cultural, and diplomatic reach through the promotion of the Chinese language and culture, basically through the creation and strengthening of a positive national image (Park, 2013; Lahtinen, 2015; Procopio, 2015; Biswas and Hartley, 2017). The attractiveness of cultural products from East Asian countries in Latin America has been attributed to the fact that they play the role of a symbolic reference that represents values of respect, resilience and social order, which in recent decades have been considered in decline in the hegemonic Latin American culture<sup>11</sup> (Flores, 2013); simultaneously, these cultural products have allowed Latin Americans in China to build a positive image of the latter country, despite the great cultural and geographic distance. For Generation Y this country has become increasingly familiar in the last decade; prior to their arrival in the country. How China emerged as a concrete candidate destination for international migration is reflected in the following testimonies:

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<sup>11</sup> When we speak of Latin American hegemonic culture, we refer, following Urbanski (1978), both to Latin American culture with its shared elements derived from a common history as part of the Spanish empire, as well as to the cultures that have been consolidated as national cultures or fundamental components of each of them. Significantly distant from the cultures of East Asia; we are talking about distinct cultural spheres.



When I started college, I got to know and took the time to watch some Chinese movies and series, because I met some otaku kids who were really interested in Asia and stuff. I was interested in the culture and searching I found information about the Confucius Institute.

There I found out more about China, and its growth, and since the country is quite safe, I started to think that it could be a better option for me than the United States; which I never really liked [...] Interest in Asia is seen as weird, I also saw these other guys that way, and in the end, I ended up living here (laughs) (#2) (Female, 28, Mexico).

I got to know Chinese culture when I was 15 [years old], because I started practicing Chinese martial arts. I got into that a lot, and until today [...] But it was thanks to the [Confucius] Institute that I managed to get here, otherwise I don't know how I could have gotten here [...]. I studied [at the institute] while I was in college, they gave me a scholarship to improve the language, and that was the gateway [...]. While I was studying, for me, China was not only a safe and growing country, but it was also a very interesting mix between the ancient and the futuristic; and now being here I feel that I was right (#3) (Male, 28, Argentina).

I started taking Chinese classes while I was in university because I wanted to learn about their culture beyond simple kung-fu movies and historical dramas I had seen on the internet. Since the professors are Chinese, it became quite fun to learn about their vision of Chile, and of China. Those studies helped me to get to China and be able to have my career in translation; it is a difficult language that takes time, but it is worth it [...]. At the beginning even my family criticized me, half seriously, half as a joke, because it is an uncommon interest; at least when I left [Chile] (#4) (Female, 28, Chile).

Watching movies and series I became interested in traditional [Chinese] culture, then I expanded a bit to historical documentaries. But I felt that I lacked knowledge of current things, so I started to study Chinese a little bit, on my own. But it's very complicated and I ended up learning with a teacher from the Chinese community in Peru, then I enrolled in a [Confucius] institute. And so on... until I was able to pass an exam to have the opportunity for an internship [...]. I think what caught my attention the most was the idea of an orderly

country, with very focused people and that they still have traditional values in many things (#20) (Male, 35, Peru).

For me learning Chinese and the culture of the country was the opportunity to leave Venezuela behind, which is in a very bad state, to live more securely and with a better quality of salary. But, anyway, you have to accept that the interest started from something as banal as Chinese movies and series [laughs] (#12) (Male, 31, Venezuela).

I started to learn about Chinese culture when I was 30 [years old], I started to watch more Chinese movies and series on the internet, mostly because what the gringos have been doing lately bored me. [...] because of that interest I decided to take an opportunity to learn Chinese and apply for a short scholarship, that was the moment that changed my life because they gave it to me, even though I didn't have many expectations. And well, I ended up having good results here, and changing the course of my career a little bit [...]. Now that I have lived here for a few years, I feel that it is much better without all the mess that there is in Mexico (#19) (Male, 34, Mexico).

For Latin Americans of this generation, the cultural products of Chinese audiovisual media, in this case mostly in the form of cinematographic works, formed a basis for their interest in this distant culture. However, it has been the previously mentioned institutes that have really concretized the learning of the language and culture, as well as fostered a re-imagination of China as a nation and the possibilities it could offer in the future. In addition to the above, the rise of the internet acted as a cross-cultural background for this generation since their adolescence, the internet opened the way for individuals of this generation to further deepen their interests, regardless of linguistic, cultural, and geographic distance. They even overcame economic barriers, with all 20 members of Generation Y claiming to have used the internet to deepen their interest in China, mainly through illegal downloads. This approach also made it easier for them to learn Chinese prior to deciding to emigrate, as all of them claim to have had access to additional educational materials via the Internet.

### *Generation X*

Although we focus on professional Latin American immigrants of the Generation Y, it is natural to ask how they differ from previous generations of immigrants in the country, through contrasts we can corroborate similarities and differences that further clarify this issue. Based on the same terms of analysis regarding their relationship with Chinese soft power, whether through cultural products of audiovisual media or educational institutions. To clarify the differences in experience between generations, narratives of middle-aged Latin Americans residing in China were examined. Using the previously mentioned generational categorization, this group would correspond to the late Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980. Below, we present excerpts from the interviews in which they explain their processes of contact with China.

First, I got to know kung-fu movies, Chinese-Peruvian food, and then I switched to Chinese music when I met my girlfriend [now wife, Chinese]. Eventually we got married and together we decided to come to China. Without knowing her I wouldn't have come, I'm sure (#21) (Male, 47, Peru).

As a child I watched several kung-fu movies with my older brothers, that was the first image I had of China. They liked it more than I did. After I met my future [Chinese] husband, I started to get more into Chinese culture, after we got married even more, I wanted to understand more about his country [...]. He already knew Spanish, and it was unfair that I didn't understand anything [...]. He had the opportunity to go back to China for work and I followed him (#22) (Female, 48, Peru).

I married a Chinese-Mexican woman, part of her family was still living in China, so one day... well, we decided to try our luck, especially because my job in Mexico was not going very well. So, with our savings and the reception from her family we were able to start our journey[...] Well... before I met her, I didn't know much about the country, beyond kung-fu, Chinese food and then the Chinese-Mexican community that I met through my girlfriend (#23) (Male, 46, Mexico).

Working in a company I was given the opportunity to come to China, I had to take Mandarin

Chinese courses to prepare myself, luckily it was paid [by the employer]. Before that I had some idea of China from kung-fu movies and Chinese food, but I didn't really know much more, I decided to come and stay for job projection. But, in the end, I have become enchanted with Chinese culture and its people, I already have my family here (#24) (Male, 45, Chile).

Differences with the experience of Generation Y arise in relation to the sociocultural and structural conditions of their generation. Looking again at Chart 3, the primary personal motivations listed for choosing China were all for categories other than "interest in Chinese culture and society"; three due to marriage to a Chinese national, and two due to labor relocation. In the former cases only after marriage; or after relocation for the latter, did a personal interest in the country really begin to develop. This is reflected in the choice of "interest in Chinese culture and society" as a secondary motivation for the three individuals who had previously selected marriage. While those who came for a labor relocation chose, one, "interest in Chinese culture and society", and the other, "opportunities for professional career".

On the other hand, for the former generation, Chinese audiovisual cultural products were familiarized at an earlier stage of life: four of them in their teens, and only one in their twenties (Chart 5). However, the variety of products they knew or cared about seems to have been much smaller, and furthermore their influence on motivations for migration was inconsequential. Also, the initial interest in Chinese cultural products seems to have been only circumstantial from their perspective. When members of this group were children or adolescents, the range of options for media consumption was much more limited.

It is worth noting that the five participants in this group had their first encounter with the image of China through cinematographic works. But, unlike Generation Y, their secondary means of contact are divided differently, within those who were motivated by marriage two chose "family" and one "popular music". While the two individuals motivated by labor relocation chose "education", in this case private, provided by the employer, since the objective was to train them at a basic language level for their subsequent relocation (Chart 4).

### **Building a Relationship between Latin Americans and China**

In order to refer to migration between Latin America and East Asia, it is essential to refer briefly to the only large-scale phenomenon in recent history: the migration of descendants of the Japanese diaspora (Nikkei) to Japan. Higuchi (2002) states that a system of mediation organizations or agencies (幹旋組織/assen-soshiki) was established in South American countries; mainly Peru and Brazil, where the largest Nikkei communities in the world were established, as in Japan, and this system played the role of a link at a meso-associative level, encouraging the immigration of descendants to Japan, in other words, influencing individual decision making in favor of the macro-structural economic factors of Japan at that time. Thus, while it is attractive to immediately link macro-structural factors to individual decision making, it is necessary to discover and understand the linkages at the medium-social level between macro conditions and individuals (Higuchi, 2002).

The present research describes the existence of a new means that acquired the position of an organizational connection at the meso-associative level; mainly Chinese educational institutions. The fact that Generation Y Latin Americans who did not possess family, ethnic or social ties decided to migrate to China despite the tremendous geographic and cultural distance indicates the existence of a constructed relationship with China that has developed over the years for each individual before leaving their countries for the first time. Generation Y participants were found to have been recipients of Chinese cultural products. And they in turn, as students, positively received a discourse regarding China from educational institutions directly related to the country.

In this case, the Confucius Institute has managed to capture the interest of a group of people in the Latin American region through a display of soft power, literally on the other side of the world and with no common cultural background. The immigrants built emotional connections to China through their approach to this foreign culture, it is that connection that gives meaning to their decision-making and courses of action. This emotional aspect of decision-making is also reflected in the subjects' narratives. We present excerpts below.

From the beginning, China became quite a desirable country, ideal almost, because it represents an order and values that are being lost in our countries. For example, watching movies and series I could feel the value they still place on a close family, then studying Chinese and meeting the [Chinese] teachers I learned about their customs for New Year and things like that... and I thought it was great that even with all the economic growth they stay true to who they are. Before I arrived, I wasn't completely sure about that, but living here I think it's true, and that satisfies me as much or more than a good job (#17) (Male, 32, Chile).

I think many of us created a very positive idea of China before coming, as a contrast to our country. A peaceful country with a wonderful millenary culture, many traditions, and a good future. Living in a place where you learn other things, good and bad, but in general, it is most positive (#6) (Female, 29, Peru).

At first, you watch kung-fu action movies because it's cool, but after I started learning about their culture and language, getting to know your teachers more, for example, I started to see it all deeper, as a country that has a lot of potential for the future, but also very traditional. The security also attracts you, especially because, I think, Mexico is getting worse. It kind of makes you want to be part of their [China's] growth (#10) (Male, 30, Mexico).

Participants saw the country as an attractive destination by absorbing the official discourses of the institution,<sup>12</sup> and then bonded with it through a renewed, and one could even argue, idealized image.

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<sup>12</sup> Through the promotion of Chinese culture and language, the discourses focus on China's millennial culture, highlighting its uniqueness in a context of technological and economic growth; and how this would position China as an emerging power that attracts foreign professionals, stimulating the search for employment in its expanding local labor market or its growing domestic market (Yellinek et al., 2021). This approach is in line with the vision of the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping, who noted that the institutes seek to promote a positive narrative about China (Wang, 2018). However, criticism has been raised due to the discourse created by omission, that is, content censorship, which omits topics such as individual freedoms, democracy, the Tiananmen Square protests, and the situation in Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang (Hartig, 2015).

Subsequently, the individuals internalized discourses and attitudes towards China, and then emigrated. Based on their testimonies, we understand that the individual begins by unilaterally building a relationship with the country through, for example, the media mentioned in this article, however, only after encountering Chinese institutions does a motivation to migrate start to crystallize. Then, simultaneously to the process of Chinese language study, the use of internet connectivity allows them to further deepen their particular interests.

There is a high component of individuality in their decisions, even to the point of being considered as “weird or strange” by their compatriots or even their relatives, due to the strangeness of their choice in the judgment of others. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) have described this type of individualization as a characteristic of the contemporary human being, as individual freedom of choice over one’s own life, detaching oneself from many sociocultural ties of previous generations. Therefore, it is natural that there is a process of individualization within contemporary international migration, which means that freedom of choice expands to the motivations and choice of migratory destination, regardless of the cultural background of the country of origin, or of the individual themselves who now decides what they want to approach.

The actions and motivations of immigrants are reflected in their personal narratives, driving their choice of destination. These participants received messages from Chinese media and institutions, which they integrated into their own narratives justifying their choice. Although other needs may arise, these are interwoven into the migration narrative, which supports their choice. The reason for wanting to leave the country of origin may not be intrinsically connected to the destination selected. However, these needs are linked to the narrative, reinforcing it, and justifying the specific process they chose.

The participants in this study can be understood as consumers of Chinese cultural products, either in their audiovisual media format, or through discourses delivered by educational institutions. Then, following Garcia’s theorizations (2012), as they consume such products, they may have come to recognize themselves through narratives and the images constructed around such products. On the other hand, significant internal

distinctions appeared between generations; these can be explained as arising from the structural conditions between China and Latin America, and from the media market available during their youth.

Finally, it is argued that, in order to understand contemporary and emerging migration processes more accurately, it is necessary to start from the perspective of the immigrants themselves, and then carry out a multifactorial analysis that goes beyond traditional macro-social and economic factors. It is argued that individualized consumption personalizes motivation. Over years of daily acts of consumption and exposure, the constituent elements necessary for decision-making naturally emerge. These elements can be shared with strangers, but who are still recipients of the same external incentives.

### **Limitations and future work**

These data correspond to a specific case in the field of international migration and social phenomena in China. Although we have explored the motivations of this particular group, future studies, either on a larger scale or on other cases, may shed light on similarities and differences between different groups. This study is part of a larger investigation of Latin American immigrants in East Asia, including professionals residing in Japan and South Korea. Our future analyses will focus on symbolic anthropology to understand how the image of the host country is constructed and its impact on the migration experience.

### **Conclusions**

In this research, based on empirical data collection on personal motivations for migration, we analyze the background structural conditions between the Latin American cultural region and China, in terms of Chinese soft power through its cultural products present in the region, and consider the need for a connection between the structural conditions surrounding this migration and personal migration motivations. The results of the survey and the analyses of structural conditions produced the following observations.

First, from an expulsion-attraction factor perspective, the personal motivations for leaving their countries are concisely accounted for, if the focus is on purely economic



migrants who prioritize economic needs. However, the mechanism of selection of geographically and culturally distant destinations is not satisfactorily explained. Here, it was found that personal motivations for choosing China as a destination are largely due to the influence of Chinese soft power. Secondly, when comparing the influence of Chinese institutions and media in Latin America among subjects of Generation Y, as well as a subgroup of Generation X, it was found that there is a generation gap between the two, so the older generation is motivated by different life situations that are not related to Chinese institutions. Finally, we find that it is a symbolic, emotional, and individual connection constructed by immigrants themselves to China that directly connects macro-social conditions and individual decision-making at the micro-social level. This connection manifests itself as idealistic narratives born out of their interaction with Chinese cultural products.

The previously mentioned characteristics indicate how structural conditions prior to migration are transformed into motivational prerequisites. A transformation happens through the individuals' interpretations prior to migration, revealing an interaction between the products received and individual decision-making.

Focusing on a process of selection of destination that transcends mere economic migration, this article constructs a framework that allows us to understand the influence of Chinese culture through its educational institutions in the mid-2000s; through the narratives of the immigrants themselves, providing an explanation that goes beyond economic factors, while clarifying the motives of Latin Americans in China and their particular migration about the macro-conditions of their countries of origin. This is not to deny the role of more classical factors in determining immigration destinations, however, here we deal with a particular immigration process in contemporary times, as well as with particular circumstances between particular countries, namely between China and Latin American countries during the 21st century. Our results highlight the need to diversify the research perspective on international migration and to reconsider the image of specific migration phenomena in China.

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