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Nuances of Public Diplomacy: China in Chilean Op-Eds (2018–2021)

Abstract

This paper explores editorials and opinion columns published in four Chilean mainstream newspapers and analyzes how China is represented within the context of Chinese economic advances in the region and the contextual narratives surrounding bilateral relations. Through a content analysis of editorials and opinion pieces of elite media between 2018 and 2021, this study allows an understanding of how China and its growing influence are perceived locally. Ultimately, despite an overall alignment with China's public diplomacy centered around an economic-commercial dimension, there are still nuances in how China is represented in Chilean op-eds.

Keywords

Chile, China, media, editorials, columns, public diplomacy.

1. Introduction

That the People's Republic of China's (China, PRC) presence is central in Latin America today is a well-known fact. China is increasingly diversifying its investments, economic exchanges, and is widening towards other types of collaboration in the region (Dosch & Goodman, 2012; Wise, 2020). In fact, the White Paper on Latin America in 2008 –which constituted the first official Chinese foreign policy statement on the matter, along with a corollary of the Chinese economic and diplomatic offensives in the region– highlight that China's collaboration with Latin America is centered around economic aspects rather than ideological or political ones. The diplomatic/academic rhetoric toward the region has also stressed this economic perspective, leaving aside political issues (Jiang, 2008a; Jiang, 2008b). Previous studies have identified the main components of the Chinese discourse with Latin America, in which mutual benefit, win-win results, and common development are always included (Strauss, 2012). Recently, the narrative of cooperation towards the region has centered around the foreign aid targeted to fight COVID-19, known as “mask diplomacy” (Telias & Urdinez, 2021).

Although research about the Chinese rise in Latin America has been abundant since the 2000s (see, for example, Ellis, 2009, 2011, 2014 and many more; Jenkins, 2008, 2010, 2017, 2022; Dussel Peters, 2005, 2019, 2022), limited attention has focused on how Latin America perceives this

rise (Carreras, 2017) despite recent publications (see, i.e., Heine, Fortín & Ominami 2021).

This paper examines how Chilean editorials and opinion pieces (op-eds) published between 2018 and 2021 have explored how China's growing influence is presented locally. In

other words, it aims to understand how Chilean economic, political, and academic elites portray China's presence in the region as a way to explore the influence of Chinese narratives. For this, we identify the main themes and positions regarding China found within these op-eds, taking into consideration China's public diplomacy efforts.

Among multiple definitions, public diplomacy refers to “statecraft activities and engagements beyond traditional diplomacy, predominantly cultural and informational, that are designed to inform, influence, and engage global publics in support of foreign policy objectives tied to national interests” (Snow, 2020). Although, as Snow also underscores, the battle for narratives in a digital world goes well beyond mainstream media, it continues to be an important source of international public influence (Golan *et al.*, 2019). Moreover, as McCombs and Valenzuela (2021) explain, newspapers still influence people's attitudes and opinions, and news coverage –digital and otherwise– continues to shape our understanding of a complex world. Indeed, coverage of foreign nations can affect how the public perceives them (Wanta *et al.*, 2004). It is also particularly important in China's case since the country has appeared widely in the international media regarding the Covid 19 pandemic, so it is critical to understand how it assesses China (Jerden *et al.*, 2021).

Op-eds are particularly important as they are considered a tool for public diplomacy (Golan, 2013; Golan & Carrol, 2012) or, in this case, serve as a mirror that reflects how local elites feel toward China. Chile provides a relevant case study due to its long-standing relationship with the PRC and the importance of China for the Chilean economy as its biggest trading partner for more than a decade. In addition, Chile has not associated China with the contestatory left of countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia, or Argentina (Carreras, 2017), which might have a better image of China due to their ideological proximity. Instead, this case study presents Chile as a “trading state,” a country understood to have no ideological objectives. Moreover, “compared to China's relations with other large South American countries, this relationship is the least politicized” (Domínguez, 2006, p. 37). For example, if in 2006 the following governments of Michelle Bachelet (2006–2010 and 2014–2018) and Sebastián Piñera (2010–2014 and 2018–2022) –who were on different political spectrums– arguably continued relatively non-politicized diplomatic relations with the PRC, although this needs further research. Furthermore, the right-wing government of Sebastián Piñera (Gachúz, 2012; Oyarzún, 2013) gave much importance to the Sino-Chilean economic relationship and increased bilateral ties under his government despite the ideological gap. The importance China gave Chile within the Belt and Road Initiative further confirms this (Heine, 2021).

Based on this trading relationship, this paper explores the following research question: How is China and its growing influence portrayed locally in Chile? And do Chilean op-eds reproduce or challenge Chinese public diplomacy and the main narratives in Sino-Chilean relations? To answer this question, we collected opinion columns and editorials published from January 1, 2018, to August 31, 2021, in four mainstream commercially-run newspapers in Chile (*El Mercurio*, *La Tercera*, *Diario Financiero* and *El Mostrador*) using China as a keyword. We first identify these pieces, then analyze their main themes, to finally look into China's characterization and the general tone toward China.

The paper is structured as follows: first, it presents the case study, establishing the leading narratives that have prevailed among China and Chile, and then reviews the concept of strategic narratives in public diplomacy. The main hypothesis is then presented, which asserts that the representation of China in the Chilean media strongly centers around its economic-commercial dimension. Fourthly, this paper explains the methods used to answer the research question and test the hypothesis. We then present the results, discussing them within a broader framework of public diplomacy.

By doing this, we want to offer empirical work that sheds light on the interplay between public diplomacy strategies and their effects on public opinion. Ultimately, our data shows that,

despite an overall alignment with China's public diplomacy centered around an economic-commercial dimension, there are still nuances in how Chilean op-eds represent China.

2. Case Study: China's presence in Chile

In 2006, Chile became the first country to sign a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the People's Republic of China. Planned as a step-by-step agreement with progressive negotiations, the Sino-Chilean FTA focused first on the trade liberalization of goods, later expanding its services in 2010. Four years later, the agreement added an investment chapter. Currently, China is Chile's first commercial partner, exporting USD 2,591 trillion in 2020 and importing USD 2,056 trillion (Dirección de Estudios SUBREI, 2021). Between 2016 and 2020, bilateral trade grew 5.2% on average per year. With an average annual growth of 15% between 2016 and 2021, Chilean mining exports to China are mostly copper, followed by iron and cellulose. Yet, in the last years, trade has expanded to include other products, such as wine, cherries and pork. To date, "Chile is second only to France in the export of wine to the Chinese market" (Wise, 2020, p. 54).

Chinese investment in Chile started to develop, focusing on the resource sectors, as has been the case in other Latin American countries (Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe - CEPAL, 2021). It peaked in 2019, mainly concentrating on mining, energy, and transport infrastructure. In 2021, ECLAC listed Chile as the region's third recipient of Chinese foreign direct investment. Slightly overlapping with Chilean President Sebastián Piñera's second term (March 11, 2018, to March 11, 2022), the time frame under study here witnessed a growth in Chinese direct investment in the country and made evident the importance of bilateral economic exchange during a period marked by the COVID-19 pandemic¹. Therefore, we wanted to analyze this particular period for three main reasons. First, this period witnessed a boost in Chinese investment in the country, after a long time when Chile was behind other Latin American countries regarding investment, despite having the institutional framework that allowed it since its trade agreement in 2012. We also wanted to analyze it because the COVID-19 pandemic allowed China to develop a soft power strategy known as mask diplomacy towards Latin America, particularly in Chile (Telias & Urdinez, 2022; Urdinez, 2021). Finally, this period is interesting since China has drawn special media attention given the so-called 5G war with the United States, which may interlock with official Chinese soft power discourses (Tang, 2023).

During this period, reports have highlighted the growing concerns that heavy Chinese investment in key areas may bring (see, for example, Ellis, 2021, 2022). Indeed, growing Chinese investments in the country in key areas such as energy, as well as significant disputes between China and the US, have raised some alarms over the rising Chinese economic influence among Chilean economic and political elites. This concern is especially relevant, as the Chinese presence in Chile has been mostly welcomed without major criticism, unlike some of their neighbors (for further analyses, see Jenkins & Dussel Peters, 2009; Santiso, 2005). Moreover, at an aggregate level, previous research has shown that Latin America

¹ For example, Chile was one of the first countries in Latin America to secure Chinese vaccines early during the pandemic, and during the pandemic was a recipient of donations from the PRC, part of what became known as "mask diplomacy" (Telias & Urdinez, 2021). During this period, there has also been an exchange at the people-to-people level, as well as institutionally between Chinese and Chilean institutions (Araya, 2021; Montt Strabucchi, 2021). To date, there are three Confucius Institutes in the country, and the regional center for Confucius Institutes is based in Santiago (Fundación CLEC, Oficina Regional para América Latina y el Caribe, formerly known as CRICAL, Centro Regional de Institutos Confucio para América Latina) and many Chilean universities have exchange agreements with Chinese universities. At then Parliament, there is a Grupo Interparlamentario chileno-chino, through which the Chilean National Congress has also contributed to deepening the links between both countries (Recabarren *et al.*, 2020). In 2018, Chile signed a memorandum of understanding regarding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), but with apparently no relevant consequences in the short term (Wise, 2020, p. 31); investment and commercial exchange remain at the center of the relationship.

–particularly Chile– had positively seen Chinese influence on the region. Thus, “China appears to be garnering soft power in Latin America as a result of its economic dynamism and its contributions to Latin American economic success” (Carreras, 2017, p. 17). The Latin American Public Opinion Project (Zechmeister *et al.*, 2012) highlights that Chileans trust China more than the United States. As stated, Chinese influence has traditionally been perceived as positive for Chileans (Domínguez *et al.*, 2006; Pew Research Center, 2014). Indeed, according to the Pew Research Center (2014), 60% of Chileans have favorable views towards China –ranking second only after Venezuela– and 63% think that China’s growing economic influence is good for the country. However, half of the respondents do not trust Chinese President Xi Jinping, and only 20% said they believe the Chinese government respects its citizens’ freedom. Another study found that local perceptions of China do not covariate with those of the United States (structured by ideology and other factors). As a relatively new player, attitudes towards China are still unstructured (Morgenstern & Bohigues, 2021). Other studies have shown that Chinese diplomats have started to build reputations of goodwill and accessibility (Creutzfeldt, 2022). In terms of winning “hearts and minds,” a study published in 2022 showed how the US is visibly ahead of China, and yet, 40% of respondents in Chile hold a positive view of China. Still, approximately 20% have a “very negative” feeling toward China (Turcsányi *et al.*, 2022).

China’s relationship with Chile deepened during Sebastián Piñera’s second term, a change that coincided with discussions on Chinese investment in strategic areas (e.g., State Grid in energy or Aisino in national ID cards) and racist reactions related to the COVID-19 pandemic (Chan & Montt Strabucchi, 2021). This investment has brought academic attention to how China is perceived locally in Chile. For example, a recent study by Montt Strabucchi *et al.* (2022) highlighted how general cultural representations of orientalism, stereotypes, and essentialism are central to the way China and Chineseness are perceived. This is something that Ampuero and Labarca (2017) have also noted for business exchanges. In this sense, Chinese presence in Chile has been described as “conditional visibility,” while racism continues to reappear regularly, especially during times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Chan & Montt Strabucchi, 2020; Montt Strabucchi & Chan, 2020). Although this is not central to this article, it sets a precedent regarding how China’s presence is represented and perceived locally.

Within this context, recurrent topics, as well as the emphasis available in columns of opinion and editorials on China in Chile, are addressed in the following sections.

3. Narratives in Public Diplomacy: China and its presence in Chile

As stated by Natarajan (2014), “the discourse of a nation’s foreign policy is as much about consolidating and reiterating its self-perception of identity as it is about projecting its (*national*) interests” (p. 91). Indeed, strategic states create narratives based on crafted messages intended to build relationships with foreign audiences (Golan, Arceneaux & Soule, 2019). As Miskimmon, Roselle and O’Loughlin argue in their book *Strategic Narratives* (2013), communications are central to international relations and global politics; as they show, third parties interpret and interact with the narratives formed and projected by different actors. Strategic narratives are a means for “political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle, 2013, p. 3). This article focuses on how Chilean elites interpret and interact (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin & Roselle, 2017) with narratives formed by different actors, such as the Chilean and PRC governments, within the general environment of China’s presence in Chile and Latin America. In this sense, the notion of strategic narratives, one which shows how they persuade, understand, are challenged or freely accepted, is especially useful here as they show how we need to consider op-eds to understand the ways in which China (as a government, its industries, as well as its people) interact with Chile. In this sense, our analysis here is relevant as it contributes to understanding

how elites interacted with these strategic narratives between 2018 and 2022 and therefore contributed to public diplomacy efforts. As scholars have been debating for quite a long time (see, for example, the seminal work of Gilboa, 2008; Mellisen, 2015; and White, 2015, among many others), the original notion of soft power as an exclusive state activity as conceived by Tuch (1990). While we do not analyze China's or Chile's public diplomacy as a state activity, it is central to understanding the context within which these op-eds are being published.

In the last few years, China has become increasingly more concerned with its international image, investing in its public diplomacy and crafting careful messages to set not only its position toward Latin America but to frame particular messages to build trust (Labarca, 2013). China's White Papers (2008, 2016), as well as the actions and words of Chinese diplomats in Latin America, frame China's public diplomacy narratives between Latin America and Chile. For example, in the foreword of the book *Dimension of China's Diplomacy in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Altmann-Borbón & Rivero Soto, 2022), the Chinese Ambassador to Costa Rica emphasizes peaceful development and continuously growing friendly ties with Latin American countries, mentioning topics such as "environment and climate change, academic cooperation, investment and international trade, technological advances, city twinning and multilevel cooperation" as some of the many "dimensions and opportunities for collaboration" (Altmann-Borbón & Rivero Soto, 2022, pp. 9–10). Similar discourses appear in the bilingual book: *Chile y China: Reflexiones para una agenda integral (Chile and China: thoughts for a common agenda)* that the Chilean Embassy in Beijing and the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations jointly wrote. Economic cooperation is the central topic of the 14 articles, leaving aside political, military or other non-economical/commercial matters.

On the other hand, official narratives on China that prevail in Chilean state and governmental discourses have centered around economic advantages and a long-term diplomatic policy, which materializes in the "four firsts" or the "firsts narrative" (Labarca & Montt Strabucchi, 2019). This narrative holds that Chile was the first South American country to establish diplomatic relations with the PRC (1970), the first to support China's place in the United Nations (1971), the first South American country to sign a bilateral trade agreement to sign a bilateral agreement for the PRC's entry to the World Trade Organization (1999) and the first non-Asian Country to sign a trade bilateral agreement (2006). Furthermore, in 2004 it was the first country in the region to recognize China as a market economy. On occasion, other "firsts" are also added. Both China and Chile have constructed the "firsts narrative," which is part of a diplomatic discourse present in documents and academic texts, as well as in Chilean and Chinese diplomatic narratives. This discourse has granted Chile a "special" (narrative) place in its relationship with China. Previous research has shown that this narrative has also pervaded the private sphere, being included in bilateral commercial exchange (Labarca, 2015).

As previous literature has discussed, a relationship exists between media coverage of a foreign nation and how it is perceived (Wanta *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, the well-known concept of mediated public diplomacy developed by Entman (2008) refers to the deliberate attempt of governments to frame foreign policy through the media. Based on this, literature tackling Latin America's portrayals of China assumes a well-coordinated soft power strategy, not only through mechanisms such as Confucius Institutes (Hubbert, 2019) but also through the growing economic presence in the region (Serrano Moreno *et al.*, 2021; Wise, 2020) as well as official Chinese media and its growing links with local news outlets (Montt Strabucchi *et al.*, 2022). For example, based on the analysis of five Latin American media outlets, Ospina Estuminan (2017) reports seven frames highlighted by Latin American media when reporting on Chinese news: economic development (the most frequent one), investor, political power, environment, opinion, military development, and copyrights. Overall, his study shows that Latin American countries "have a strong belief regarding the Business Potential of the PRC"

(Ospina Estupinan, 2017, p. 12) and that “Latin American media is quantitatively and qualitatively prone toward economic events. Trade has come to reinforce politics and diplomacy, and [has become] a crucial tool of soft power strategy” (Ospina Estupinan, 2017, p. 13).

In their analysis of international news coverage in Latin American newspapers, Zhu and Wang (2018) examined the portrayal of outward Chinese foreign direct investment among 14 Latin American newspapers between 2008 to 2014, with conflict and economic consequences as the main frames. Their study found that two conservative newspapers in Chile, *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera*, had a positive attitude toward Chinese investment in the continent (an average of 2.67 on a scale from 1 = negative to 3 = positive). In comparison, coverage on this topic in newspapers in other countries tended to be more negative (e.g., Argentina, Colombia) or neutral (e.g., Brazil, Mexico). Zhu & Wang (2018) also found that national differences influenced the differences in journalistic tone rather than the political stances of the newspapers analyzed. In addition, their content analysis shows that both mainstream outlets *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera* favored economic consequences over conflicts in their coverage of Chinese investments in Latin America and that the consequences of these investments were mostly portrayed as mutually beneficial. Both newspapers relied on Chilean and Chinese government officials as sources and, to a lesser extent, on sources from Chilean and Chinese companies. Almost half of *La Tercera*’s articles also included researchers from Chile, other Latin American countries, and the US.

As has been argued previously (Labarca, 2015; Labarca & Montt Strabucchi, 2019), the abovementioned FTA triggered a well-established narrative of portraying China as an opportunity for Chilean development, unlike other countries in Latin America (Dussel Peters, 2005; Ellis, 2009; Ray *et al.*, 2016; Wise, 2020). This narrative is based on the understanding of China as a market for Chilean mining and agricultural products, a pivotal subject in an economic model based on free trade, globalization, and an export-oriented economic model (Ffrench-Davis, 2002; Montt Strabucchi & Rehner, 2020; Rehner *et al.*, 2015). This narrative has been functional to the Sino-Chilean diplomatic rhetoric in which economic cooperation and friendship act as the engine of bilateral relations within a comfortable interplay with governmental authorities and Chinese media rhetoric (Bernal-Meza, 2016; Labarca & Montt Strabucchi, 2019; República Popular China, 2008, 2016). Furthermore, many have argued that Chile is an interesting case study for understanding the Chinese geopolitical and economic strategy towards Latin America (Gachúz, 2012) since Chile may work as a demonstration of Beijing’s benign influence in the region (Labarca, 2013). While this article focuses on elites as political actors and not on the state, following Zhu and Wang (2018), we believe that the examination of editorials and opinion columns allows for the understanding of the attitudes of a country’s elite class and/or government towards Chinese presence in the region.

4. Hypotheses

Based on the literature, and as stated earlier, the overarching hypotheses informing this study is that opinion columns, and editorials in Chilean mainstream newspapers emphasize China’s role as an economic-commercial partner. Specifically, we posit the following hypotheses:

- H1. Both (a) opinion columns and (b) editorials in Chilean mainstream newspapers will predominantly address matters of economic and commercial nature.
- H2. Both (a) opinion columns and (b) editorials in Chilean mainstream newspapers will represent China mostly as an opportunity.
- H3. Both (a) opinion columns and (b) editorials in Chilean mainstream newspapers will (a) represent China as beneficial to Chile when discussing trade issues between these countries.
- H4. Both (a) opinion columns and (b) editorials in Chilean mainstream newspapers will (a) represent China as a threat when discussing Chinese investment in Chile.

5. Methods

This study uses content analysis to examine opinion columns and editorials discussing China published in major print and online newspapers in Chile between 2018 and 2021. The main objective is to understand China's portrayal in mainstream news media op-ed pieces. The time frame tackles a period of intense Chinese investment in the country and growing concerns over this among Chilean elites (Ellis, 2022).

We examined how China is presented to mainstream audiences and selected four news outlets: *El Mercurio*, *La Tercera*, *El Mostrador*, and *Diario Financiero*. *El Mercurio* and *La Tercera* are general newspapers with the largest circulation in Chile; both considered conservatively leaning, reaching mostly Chilean middle-class and elite readers. *El Mostrador* is a widely-read commercially-run online newspaper that, over the last two decades, has positioned itself as a more diverse outlet within the mostly conservative and homogeneous Chilean media outlets (see Bachmann, Valenzuela & Figueroa-Bustos, 2021), which often showcases different opinions from a broader range of political opinions and is left-leaning. *Diario Financiero* is the leading business newspaper in Chile with a politically conservative and economically neoliberal editorial approach. Once a month, *Diario Financiero* publishes *Conexión China* ("China Connection"), a whole section on China-related economic news and opinions; given its specificity and focus, for the sake of comparisons in our analysis, it was treated as a separate news outlet. This study is based on the print editions of the newspapers in the sample, except for *El Mostrador*, an online outlet whose content is free and open access on their website.

Two research assistants collected the sample for the printed media and reviewed the editorial pages. In the case of *El Mostrador*, they searched for the word "China" in this publication's search engine and then selected those results that were editorials or opinion columns. Advertorial pieces and content from news agencies (including Chinese ones) were excluded. This approach resulted in 240 columns and 117 editorials, a census of all published op-ed pieces that somehow discussed China between January 2018 and August 2021 (see Table 1 below). Considering the influence that newspapers still have in shaping people's attitudes and opinions –and even setting other media agendas (see McCombs & Valenzuela, 2021; Wanta *et al.*, 2004)– these findings go beyond the pages of these newspapers and resonate among public opinion and policymakers.

Table 1: Sample Overview.

Op-ed Piece Type	<i>El Mercurio</i>	<i>La Tercera</i>	<i>El Mostrador</i>	<i>Diario Financiero</i>	<i>Conexión China</i>
Editorials	86	16	5	10	0
Columns	32	35	71	12	90
Total	118	51	76	22	90

Source: Own elaboration.

The content analysis focused on the messages' meaning, characteristics, and extracted inferences (Neuendorf, 2017). In addition to identification variables, the coding scheme –informed by the literature and a qualitative analysis of the sample by the authors prior– included the gender and type of author (professional/businessperson, Chinese official, Chilean official, researcher, other). Regarding the content, the codebook required coding for the main subject (economics, politics, culture, other), the main topic of the piece (including the PRC-US war trade, coronavirus, the status of Taiwan or Hong Kong, and investments, among others), and the geographical scope of the matter about China being discussed (inner China, China-Chile, China-Latin America, China-US or China and the rest of the world). In addition, coders had to determine the attributes in China's portrayal and whether this country was represented as a threat (1 = yes; 0 = no), an opportunity (1 = yes; 0 = no) or as beneficial to Chile (1 = yes; 0 = no).

Two authors and two research assistants served as coders after being trained in the codebook. Based on a random sample of 12% of the stories, the online suit ReCal calculated the intercoder reliability used as Krippendorff's *alpha* (see Freelon, 2013). Scores ranged between .85 and 1.0, thus showing substantial agreement among coders.

6. Results

In general terms, the period with the most columns was from March to July 2020, mostly all on topics linked to Covid-19; 2018 was the year with fewer op-eds. Op-eds on China are continuous; throughout the entire period, there is only one month in which there is no op-ed on the topic. However, China is a relatively limited topic: not considering Covid-19, China does not appear more than ten times a month, and when it does, it was primarily related to the US-PRC trade war or Chinese investment (for this see, among others, Jenkins, 2022 or Sun, 2023). In fact, during certain months, op-eds on China and prominent themes peak rather than having a continuous presence. For example, during July 2018, op-eds concentrated on the US-PRC trade war, the coronavirus pandemic between March and May 2020, and investment between October and January 2021.

As shown in Table 1, of all analyzed op-ed pieces, about two-thirds were columns, although important differences exist among the different outlets. *El Mercurio*, for example, had more than twice as many editorials as columns, whereas the majority of the pieces from *El Mostrador* were columns. Moreover, the presence of op-eds pieces in the time frame under examination was constant, with only November 2019 as a month with no editorials or columns on China.

Most columns in the sample had only a single author (95.2%), and most of them were businesspeople (35.7% of all columns) or professors (24.2%), and they were overwhelmingly male (88.3% of 256 authors identified). Chinese diplomats or officials authored 22 columns, 9.2% of the columns in the sample.

H1 predicted that Chilean op-eds on China would mainly focus on matters of economic and commercial nature. However, politics was the main subject of both opinion columns (46.3%) and editorials (54.7%), followed by economics (40.0% of columns and 41.0 % of editorials), although there were statistically significant differences among news outlets (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: The main subject of columns and editorials by newspaper.

Subject	<i>El Mercurio</i> (N=118)	<i>La Tercera</i> (N=51)	<i>El Mostrador</i> (N=76)	<i>Diario Financiero</i> (N=22)	<i>Conexión China</i> (N=90)
Politics	60.2%	33.3%	59.2%	45.5%	35.6%
Economy	34.7%	62.7%	25.0%	40.9%	48.9%
Culture & Society	0.8%	2.0%	3.6%	5.5%	6.7%
Other	4.2%	2.0%	13.2%	9.1%	8.9%

Cramer's $V = .187$, $p < .001$.

Source: Own elaboration.

Further, while topics of a commercial nature, such as the trade war between the United States and China (23.2% of all op-ed pieces analyzed), Chinese investments abroad (14.8%), and Chinese foreign trade (13.2%), were the most common ones in the sample (see Table 3), these were often addressed from a political, rather than, economic approach. Thus, H1 was only partially supported.

Table 3: The main topic of columns and editorials by newspaper.

Topic	<i>El Mercurio</i> (N=118)	<i>La Tercera</i> (N=51)	<i>El Mostrador</i> (N=76)	<i>Diario Financiero</i> (N=22)	<i>Conexión China</i> (N=90)
US-PRC trade war	23.7%	41.2%	23.7%	27.3%	11.1%
Chinese investments	11.0%	15.7%	15.8%	27.3%	15.6%
China-Chile trade	11.9%	21.6%	5.3%	0.0%	20.0%
Technology	2.5%	2.0%	9.2%	22.7%	18.9%
Coronavirus	9.3%	3.9%	10.5%	4.5%	5.6%
Taiwan/Hong Kong	9.3%	2.0%	1.3%	0.0%	3.3%
Environment	0.0%	0.0%	2.6%	0.0%	2.2%
Human Rights	1.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.1%
Miscellaneous (mixed topics)	21.2%	5.9%	23.7%	9.1%	10.0%
Other	9.3%	7.8%	7.9%	9.1%	12.2%

Cramer's $V = .241$, $p < .001$.

Source: Own elaboration.

Thus, the US-PRC trade war topic dominated both columns and editorials throughout the period, followed by trade, investment and, starting in January 2020, the coronavirus and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Generally speaking, China was presented in op-ed pieces as an opportunity, with 61.1% of the overall sample portraying China in such terms and 43.1% casting the country as a threat. However, a breakdown by op-ed type shows an important difference: whereas most opinion columns presented China as an opportunity (160 out of 240 columns, 66.7%), editorials had a split portrayal, with 58 out of 117 editorials (49.6%) explicitly presenting China as an opportunity, and another 59 pieces not doing so (50.4%). Therefore, H2a was supported, but H2b was not. Editorials from *Diario Financiero*, the business paper, were the most likely to present China as an opportunity (8 out of 10 editorials). In contrast, editorials from *El Mostrador*, the left-leaning online newspaper, were the least likely to (2 out of 5 editorials). Arguably, conservative media editorials may be more cautious in their approach to China because of the general economic and commercial exchange with China, including the notion of China as an opportunity. However, in the case of *El Mostrador*, the sample is too small to reach any conclusions. Further, while presenting China as an opportunity leads to somewhat mixed results, the main subject of the op-ed pieces was whether China was a threat. Most opinion columns and editorials with a political focus presented China as a threat (58.6% and 56.3%, respectively), but those focused on economic matters did so less often (29.2% and 36.7%).

H3 predicted that columns and editorials would represent China as beneficial to Chile when discussing trade issues between these countries. The results of an analysis of the 47 op-ed pieces on China-Chile trade support the hypothesis, with 72.2% of opinion columns on trade and 81.9% of editorials on this topic portraying such commercial exchange as beneficial to Chile. This pattern holds across years in the sample, the type of author, and news outlet, except for *El Mostrador*, which only had 4 pieces on trade –half of them presenting trade with China as beneficial, and half of them not doing so– and thus the evidence is not conclusive. Columns as well as editorials on trade overwhelmingly portrayed China as an opportunity (87.2%) and did not cast China as a threat (70.2%), with the notable exception of the pieces from *El Mostrador* (3 out of the 4 columns and editorials did say China constituted a threat).

A similar approach with the 53 pieces discussing China's investments yielded results contravening H4. That is, a majority of both columns (56.2%) and editorials (57.1%) on investments *did not* present China as a threat, albeit there are significant differences by outlet. In the sample, 9 out of the 10 columns on investment in *El Mostrador* and 3 out of 4 columns on the topic in *Diario Financiero* mentioned China as a threat. Alternatively, both columns and editorials in *El Mercurio* and *Diario Financiero* were predominantly positive toward China.

Indeed, these pieces mainly presented China as an opportunity for Chile (71.7%) rather than a threat. Although at the same time, editorials on the topic opted out of explicitly portraying China as beneficial to Chile.

Table 4: China as a threat or opportunity in columns and editorials on Chinese investment by newspaper.

	<i>El Mercurio</i>		<i>La Tercera</i>		<i>El Mostrador</i>		<i>Diario Financiero</i>		<i>Conexión China</i>	
	Col	Ed	Col	Ed	Col	Ed	Col	Ed	Col	Ed
China as opportunity	75.0%	66.7%	100.0%	100.0%	40.0%	0.0%	75.0%	100.0%	85.7%	0.0%
China as threat	25.0%	44.4%	28.6%	0.0%	90.0%	50.0%	75.0%	50.0%	14.3%	0.0%
Number of cases	4	9	7	1	10	2	4	2	14	0

Source: Own elaboration.

7. Discussion and conclusions

As our data shows, despite an overall alignment with the bilateral narratives centered around an economic-commercial dimension, there are still nuances in how China is represented in Chilean op-eds. Results indicate that Chilean op-eds tend to mirror Sino Bilateral relations, which have traditionally been described as pragmatic (Coloma, 2020; Labarca, 2013) and centered around aspects that benefit both China and Chile with limited, although not totally absent, comments on issues that may be considered controversial by Chinese authorities (Labarca, 2015; Labarca & Montt, 2019). When examining specific themes, the most frequent are the US–PRC commercial war, trade /exchange, and investments, which may indicate that even when an op-ed is classified as political, political aspects are still subdued by economic aspects. In this sense, and in line with the findings of Ospina Estuminan (2017), Chilean op-eds also seem to have a strong belief in the business potential of the PRC, with economic events (including the US–China trade war, trade, and investment) at the center of op-ed topics.

On the contrary, the less frequent topics “contest” aspects such as human rights or Taiwan/Hong Kong. While it is possible to notice that these topics have been relatively absent from diplomatic discourse, our analysis shows that this also occurs in the media narrative during this period. Thus, it may be fair to assess that results indicate that Chilean elites align with the strategic narrative regarding the public diplomacy present in the bilateral relations between Chile and China. In other words, there is an alignment of what is present in op-eds with official diplomatic discourses both present in China and Chile. Moreover, support of the Sino–Chilean strategy, which mostly portrays China as a benign influence, can be interpreted as helping to increase Chinese soft power in the country. Indeed, like previous studies, China is presented as an opportunity for Chile, with economic cooperation and friendship acting as central to bilateral relations.

As shown above, mainstream media, including newspapers, continue to be a relevant source of public influence, where op-eds work as a tool for public diplomacy. Considering that there are still limited specialized academics and professionals on China in the Chilean media, and in the country in general, one can argue that this may lead these “voices” to be more impactful or for people to perceive these authors as “specialists.” As the results showed, most columnists were businesspeople keen to spread the benefits of Chinese economic investment. This angle may suggest that they engage with strategic Chinese narratives that promote the idea that Chinese economic engagement with Chile is positive for the country. In other words, to make strategic Chinese narratives sustainable, state actors must carefully craft them and secure the support of the local elites they are targeting, as shown in this case study.

The results also show that Sino–Chilean trade exchange is perceived as highly beneficial for Chile, in line with previous literature (Domínguez, 2006; Labarca, 2015). However, when

the economic dimensions coincide with political aspects (such as Chinese investment abroad), opinion columns and editorials are twice as likely to portray China as a threat. This suggests that benign Chinese influences may have nuances when the nature of economic engagement changes. For example, when commercial exchanges shift towards foreign direct investment. This finding supports previous research that has warned that Chinese economic influence has become “increasingly polemical and controversial in the past few years, with one camp emphasizing the opportunities that China presents if only Chile or Chileans learn to engage with China, and another camp emphasizing China as a threat and a force to be taken seriously” (Montt Strabucchi *et al.*, 2022, p. 61). Ultimately, results show that China is still mostly portrayed as an economic opportunity for Chile, highlighting its economic/market dimension, despite the growing concerns of particular sectors. Nonetheless, the results also show that this may vary regarding investment in which geopolitical fears may threaten Chilean sovereignty, although that aspect is less present.

The study thus shows that while there is a link between official narratives and op-eds, editorial and opinion columns rarely present views that move away from them. However, they also show that some topics continue to dominate the discourse on China, such as trade and commerce, as well as specific current issues such as COVID-19. In this sense, it will be interesting to explore, in the future, if there will be changes to this over the medium and long term in the same media outlets.

Further studies may want to look at the main discourses in op-eds from a qualitative perspective (e.g., discourse analysis) that would help broaden our understanding of how the Chilean media perceives the growing Chinese influence. Prevailing themes would be the perceptions of China in Chile, as well as in Latin America and globally and in other outlets, such as Twitter, in which PRC diplomats have had a growing presence. On another level, news on China and publications sponsored by the China Media Group or Xinhua have grown significantly in Chile in the last years, as well as opinion columns and editorials. Furthermore, future research may also focus on the nuances between industries and actors in Chile.

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