

Original Paper

A Study on the Cross-Cultural Social Integration of Chinese Enterprises in Brazil

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Abstract

In recent years, the process of globalization has accelerated, particularly after the introduction of the Belt and Road Initiative, leading an increasing number of Chinese enterprises to invest in Brazil, and strengthening the trade and economic relations between China and Brazil. In their operations, to reduce costs and enhance market competitiveness, Chinese enterprises have attempted to hire Brazilian employees. However, during the process of cross-cultural communication between managers and local employees, barriers to social integration for foreign enterprises have gradually emerged, posing obstacles to the further development of Chinese enterprises in Brazil. This paper takes Chinese enterprises in Brazil as the research object, utilizing literature review and survey research to clarify the challenges they face in social integration, analyze the underlying reasons, and finally propose constructive strategies for enhancing cross-cultural communication skills to better integrate into the local society.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative, Enterprise Management, Cross-Cultural Communication

1. Introduction

Brazil, as the eighth largest economy in the world, plays a crucial role in the global energy and agricultural sectors. With the continuous advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, Brazil has become China's largest trading partner and investment destination in the Latin American region. Since Gree began investing in a factory in Brazil in 1999, there have been numerous collaborations, including the 2006 Brazil Caceline natural gas pipeline project by China Petrochemical Corporation, the construction and management of the Beautiful Mountain Hydropower Station by State Grid Corporation of China in 2015, and the recent establishment of the XCMG Industrial Park in Brazil. Over the past decade, more than 200 Chinese enterprises, including State Grid, Chery, and TCL, have settled in Brazil, with Chinese investments in Brazil growing at an average annual rate of over 29%.

On the other hand, Brazil's complex political landscape, corporate culture, and social values have also posed challenges to the development of Chinese enterprises in Brazil. Firstly, Brazilian President Bolsonaro's pro-American stance and a series of unfriendly remarks towards China have cast a shadow over Sino-Brazilian economic and trade cooperation (Wang, H. Z., 2021, pp. 99-114, p. 137). Secondly,

Brazil is a federal country with multiple political parties, and there are significant policy differences among local governments, along with a complex tax system. For example, ZTE's Brazilian subsidiary was fined 258 million RMB by the São Paulo state government for allegedly evading the ICMS tax, even though the company had already paid this tax in Espírito Santo state. The lack of timely communication between local governments led to this situation. Thirdly, the long-standing election benefits have resulted in high social welfare and comprehensive labor protection policies in Brazil. However, the unrestricted labor protection has caused low overall work efficiency, and Brazilian employees typically refuse to work overtime, which conflicts with the corporate culture of most Chinese enterprises. Moreover, Brazilian employees tend to give direct feedback, which contrasts sharply with the Confucian principle of moderation that is deeply embedded in Chinese culture (Qiao, J. & Li, C., 2018, pp. 92-107).

Through a series of investigations, this study examines the cross-cultural social integration issues faced by Chinese enterprises in their operations and management in Brazil. By addressing these issues and overcoming the cultural barriers between China and Brazil, the aim is to bridge the gap between management and employees and establish a unique corporate culture for Chinese enterprises with Brazilian characteristics. This will facilitate the genuine integration of Chinese enterprises into Brazilian society, improve management efficiency, generate greater economic profits, and foster a more authentic and positive image of China (Chen, Y. T., 2020, pp. 1-15, p. 154).

2. Case Studies of Chinese Enterprises in Brazil

In recent years, with the deep implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, an increasing number of Chinese enterprises have invested in Brazil. By the end of 2022, over 200 Chinese companies had established operations in the country, including well-established domestic companies such as State Grid, TCL, and Gree, as well as emerging internet companies like Alibaba and Didi Chuxing. Some have grown into pillars of Brazilian society, such as State Grid Brazil Holding and TCL, while others, like ZTE and Xiaomi, have faced multiple setbacks but continue to persevere. Overall, Chinese enterprises in Brazil respect local culture and actively integrate into Brazilian society, becoming a key force in foreign investment in Brazil. They have not only generated economic benefits but also showcased a positive image of China.

(1) State Grid: Localization Strategies to Promote Integration, Public Welfare Activities to Build Image
State Grid entered Brazil in 2011 after winning the bid for the Louisiana Substation Expansion Project. During its deep involvement in the country, the company actively promoted localization strategies, relying on local talent to solve problems and gaining a thorough understanding of the local society, while continuously strengthening cultural integration and communication. Relying on the advanced technology of "Ultra-High Voltage" and the "State Grid Green" environmental concept, the company successfully completed high-quality projects such as the Terry Pierce Transmission Project, the Beautiful Mountain Hydropower Ultra-High Voltage Direct Current Transmission Project, and the Beautiful Mountain Phase II Project, delivering affordable and clean electricity to the Brazilian people. Over time, the company grew into the second-largest transmission company in Brazil. While achieving robust growth, State Grid Brazil has also placed a strong emphasis on contributing to Brazil's development, actively participating in various charitable activities. It has been twice recognized as the "Best Company in Brazil's Power Industry" and received the "Best Practice Award for Social Responsibility Management" from the United Nations Global Compact. During the COVID-19

pandemic, State Grid Brazil Holding Company donated medical supplies, including hospital beds and test kits, which were warmly welcomed by the Brazilian public (Chen, T. T., Wu, M., Jin, Y. & Xu, R., 2020, pp. 25-39).

Localization has enabled State Grid Brazil Holding Company to integrate more quickly into Brazilian society. By using Brazilians to manage Brazilians, the company has significantly reduced the barriers to cross-cultural social integration. On the other hand, the company's active participation in Brazilian social welfare activities, combined with its advanced technology and strong financial backing from China, has strengthened its social image. This has further bridged the gap between the company and the Brazilian public, driving the company's rapid growth and development.

(2) TCL: Breaking the Deadlock through Win-Win Cooperation, Winning Hearts with a Football Strategy

Before 2016, TCL primarily entered the Brazilian market as an Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM). Facing the vast Brazilian market, TCL encountered significant challenges due to competition from local companies and the unfamiliarity of Brazilian consumers with the brand. However, with the national "Going Global" strategy and in line with market development trends and TCL's own global electronic development philosophy, the company proactively formed a joint venture with one of Brazil's largest appliance manufacturers, SEMP. By fully leveraging SEMP's offline sales channels and manufacturing capabilities, TCL broke through the barriers set by local competitors. The company also intensified its brand marketing efforts by heavily investing in popular events such as football and selecting renowned Brazilian football star Neymar as its brand ambassador. Through a product matrix of smart technology offerings, including televisions, air conditioners, and mobile phones, TCL aimed to create a smart home ecosystem for Brazilian consumers, establishing a high-end, comprehensive product image in the minds of the public and further integrating TCL into the daily lives of Brazilians. Through strong partnerships, TCL fully leveraged the advantageous resources of its Brazilian partners, enabling the company to overcome the challenges posed by a "new environment, new market, and new employees". By utilizing Brazil's most significant element, "football", TCL further bridged the gap between its brand and the public, enhancing brand recognition and breaking through the barriers to cross-cultural integration. From 2016 to 2019, TCL surpassed Samsung to become one of the most important and fastest-growing players in Brazil's television industry.

(3) Huawei: Leading Development through Advanced Technology, Facing Challenges Amid Political Turbulence

Huawei began its foray into Brazil in 1998 and has deeply integrated into Brazilian society over the past 20 years. The company has actively collaborated with Brazilian telecommunications operators to leverage advanced technology, successfully enabling two-thirds of the Brazilian population to achieve connectivity. Through the "Cloud Services Data Center Project", Huawei has assisted the Brazilian government, financial sector, and energy industry in achieving digital transformation. The company has also ensured smooth and stable live broadcasts of major events and activities in Brazil through high-speed and reliable network systems. Over the past two decades, Huawei has played a significant role in the construction of Brazil's 3G and 4G communication networks, with six out of the seven major Brazilian operators utilizing Huawei equipment (Peng, H., 2019).

By enhancing its leadership in advanced technology, Huawei has bridged the gap with the Brazilian government and leading industries, deeply integrating into various aspects of Brazilian life. The company has even hired former Brazilian President Michel Temer as an advisor. After over 20 years of

development, Huawei has become an important pillar of Brazilian society. However, in recent years, a coalition of Western countries led by the United States has sought to encircle and restrict Huawei internationally, even stating that limiting Huawei is a prerequisite for entering “NATO”. Coupled with the pro-American stance of the Brazilian president, Huawei’s international development has been severely affected. On March 15, 2021, during the auction ceremony for 5G licenses, the Brazilian government officially announced that Huawei would not be included among the suppliers of 5G equipment in Brazil (Cheng, Y., 2021).

Overall, a group of Chinese-funded enterprises in Brazil, represented by State Grid, has adapted to and integrated into Brazilian society, becoming leaders in their respective fields. While creating substantial profits, they also showcase the national image of China. On the other hand, companies like Xiaomi, ZTE, and Lenovo have faced numerous setbacks in their investments in Brazil. The underlying reasons for these challenges warrant further exploration. At the core of these issues lies the problem of social integration, which is a crucial element; only by genuinely integrating into Brazilian society can companies ensure their development potential.

3. Analysis of Barriers to Social Integration for Chinese-Funded Enterprises in Brazil

When discussing the barriers to social integration faced by Chinese-funded enterprises in Brazil during their operational management, three specific levels of issues can be identified. First, there are differences in management styles; Brazilian managers prefer to conduct work deployments through informal meetings, whereas Chinese managers favor formal and rigorous meetings. Second, there are differing philosophies in management approaches. The Chinese corporate culture emphasizes the authority of leadership, where command across levels is often effective. In contrast, Brazilian managers and employees tend to emphasize equality and opportunity, with each level being accountable only to their immediate superiors. Third, there are differences in employee personalities. Chinese employees are often highly skilled professionals influenced by traditional Confucian culture, tending to be more reserved and moderate, which contrasts sharply with the freedom and enthusiasm of Brazilian employees.

It is evident that these three levels of barriers span from the management level to ordinary employees, permeating the entire management process of the enterprise. Ultimately, they stem from the differences between Chinese and Brazilian cultures, the differing values of the Chinese and Brazilian peoples, and the poor communication and interaction between individuals in the corporate environment.

1) Cultural Differences

The development of multinational corporations is inherently influenced by the national culture of the host country, an influence that persists throughout the corporation’s entire course of operation. Due to differing historical paths, China and Brazil have developed two distinct cultural landscapes. Chinese culture, with its deep historical roots, has endured the tests of war and upheaval yet remains continuous, forming a highly inclusive culture centered on Confucian philosophy with “harmony” as its core. Brazil, in contrast, has undergone significant cultural transformation through the periods of Portuguese colonial rule, independence, and waves of immigration, ultimately shaping a diverse society that integrates elements from Portuguese, indigenous, and African cultures. Using data collected from over 116,000 IBM employees across more than fifty countries, Hofstede’s cultural model, along with Michael Bond’s research on Confucian values, analyzes these cultural differences between China and Brazil along five key dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus

collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and long-term versus short-term orientation (Zhang, Y., 2013).

Table 1. Hofstede's National Culture Model (China-Brazil)

	power distance	uncertainty avoidance	individualism versus collectivism	masculinity versus femininity	long-term versus short-term orientation
China	80	30	20	66	118
Brazil	69	76	38	49	65

Power distance refers to the extent to which less powerful members of society accept unequal power distribution, addressing fundamental issues of human equality. Uncertainty avoidance reflects the level of anxiety individuals feel toward uncertain or ambiguous situations. Higher scores in this dimension indicate a stronger emphasis on social norms and reliance on laws, regulations, and specialized knowledge. Individualism vs. collectivism describes the relationship between individuals and groups within a society, while masculinity vs. femininity reflects the extent of overlap in gender roles within a society.

Overall, significant cultural differences between China and Brazil are observed in uncertainty avoidance and long-term vs. short-term orientation. Brazilian employees tend to rely more on a structured, well-defined management system. They often find gray areas between management rules and practical scenarios challenging and have a strong desire for clarity in their interactions. Face-to-face communication is typically preferred, allowing for gradual rapport-building rather than immediate, close relationships. In contrast, Chinese culture—rooted in tradition, etiquette, and social expectations—places a greater emphasis on interpersonal relationships within the bounds of formal rules, a concept that Brazilian employees may find difficult to grasp. Moreover, as contemporary challenges like the pandemic and economic crises arise, Brazilian society increasingly demonstrates a short-term orientation, focusing on enjoying the present and paying less attention to long-term planning. This shift is also reflected in Brazil's slower lifestyle, where interpersonal connections and major decisions are approached with patience rather than urgency. China, on the other hand, is typically regarded as a long-term-oriented society. Chinese individuals often emphasize goal-setting and continuous effort, exhibiting patience, tolerance, and persistence in pursuit of future objectives.

2) Differences in Values

Values refer to an individual's overall assessment and viewpoint on the significance and importance of the people, events, and objects around them. Due to the cultural differences between China and Brazil, Chinese and Brazilian employees often exhibit distinct working styles and approaches to interpersonal relations. In China, there is a strong emphasis on human-centered values, prioritizing relationships, harmony, ethics, stability, and conservatism. Chinese employees tend to operate in a relationship-oriented environment, often characterized by hierarchical structures, where the "official position" carries significant weight. Risk aversion is common, with a focus on stable decision-making and a general reluctance to embrace failure. Motivation tends to be more spiritual or moral, and the

incentive structures are often less flexible. Decision-making is usually top-down, with leaders making decisions collectively or individually, while subordinates are generally expected to defer to their superiors' opinions. In contrast, Brazilian employees are typically warm, valuing freedom and the joy life can bring. They advocate for individual rights and tend to rely more on legal and regulatory frameworks to guide their actions. Symbols like soccer, samba, and Carnival embody a vital aspect of Brazilian identity, reflecting a broad mindset that cherishes life's pleasure and spontaneity. Family is central to Brazilian life and remains a core social value. Although Brazilian employees generally respect authority, they are highly conscious of protecting their legal rights and expect a work environment that recognizes and respects these rights.

In practice, these differences can lead to friction within Chinese firms operating in Brazil. Chinese employers often find it challenging to manage Brazilian staff, expressing concerns over what they perceive as low work enthusiasm, frequent absences, and numerous labor disputes. Brazilian employees, on the other hand, often criticize their Chinese employers for chaotic management, frequent policy changes, high work pressure, and comparatively low salaries. These frustrations reflect the vast value differences between the two cultures. Bridging these divides is essential to fostering unity and harmony within the organization, thereby enhancing the company's creativity and competitiveness.

3) Language Barriers

Due to the influence of colonial rule and waves of immigration, Brazil has developed a complex demographic structure primarily consisting of white and mixed-race individuals, with Black, Asian, and Indigenous populations representing a smaller proportion. The linguistic environment is similarly intricate, with Portuguese as the official language; however, Brazilian Portuguese has diverged significantly from other Portuguese-speaking countries, evolving its own unique characteristics and colloquial expressions, commonly referred to as "Brazilian Portuguese". This distinct linguistic adaptation poses considerable challenges for Chinese personnel in Chinese-funded enterprises operating in Brazil.

Most Chinese employees selected for assignments in Brazil, aside from dedicated interpreters, generally lack proficiency in Portuguese, relying heavily on translators for daily communication. This reliance on translation results in three key challenges: First, routine communication requires two-way translation, which adds layers to the interaction process and complicates direct dialogue, increasing the risk of misunderstandings. Second, translators may have limited familiarity with Brazilian culture, potentially leading to less precise translations and occasional cultural misunderstandings. Third, with heavy reliance on translators, Chinese and Brazilian employees may become segmented into two separate groups, inhibiting cohesion within the organization (Sun, J., 2018, p. 150, p. 153).

Although China has increased its focus on training internationally oriented language professionals, Portuguese is still classified as a less common language, with limited annual graduates specializing in Portuguese and even fewer entering related fields. High-quality business translation requires not only technical language skills but also a deep cultural understanding, which is developed gradually and cannot be achieved overnight. This shortage of skilled Portuguese translators further restricts the development of Chinese enterprises in Brazil.

Furthermore, while China has actively promoted cultural outreach, particularly through the global expansion of Confucius Institutes, only limited numbers of Brazilians with fluent Mandarin skills are available. Since the first Confucius Institute was established in São Paulo in 2008, over ten institutes now operate in Brazil as of 2022, cultivating a sizable cohort of Brazilians interested in Chinese culture

and proficient in Mandarin. However, the number of fluent Mandarin speakers remains very limited, presenting an additional barrier to effective cross-cultural communication for Chinese enterprises in Brazil.

4. Recommendations

As the China-Brazil “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” continues to strengthen, an increasing number of Chinese enterprises are entering Brazil. However, social integration issues arising from differences in language, culture, and values have become significant obstacles to the development of these companies in Brazil. To effectively address this issue, it is essential to focus on cultural differences, value disparities, and communication barriers among employees. Specifically, the following measures should be implemented: first, Chinese enterprises in Brazil should avoid rigidly imposing their own practices and instead actively engage with the cultural context of Brazilian society, establishing avenues for mutual cultural understanding among Chinese and Brazilian employees; second, there should be a reinforced emphasis on corporate culture construction, aiming to create a corporate culture that is widely recognized in Brazil and does not conflict with Chinese traditions, thereby enhancing employees’ sense of belonging and cohesion; third, a variety of learning opportunities should be created, incorporating both verbal and non-verbal communication methods to effectively break down communication barriers.

(1) Promoting the Integration of Chinese and Brazilian Cultures to Foster Emotional Connections among Employees

The conflicts among employees and the formation of small groups can largely be attributed to cultural differences. Therefore, after overcoming communication barriers, it is crucial to focus on resolving issues of cultural identity, which can be approached through three main strategies:

First, regular training sessions should be organized, wherein Chinese employees are encouraged to visit important historical sites in Brazil to gain a deeper understanding of the country’s history. Additionally, scholars from China who specialize in Brazilian studies should be invited to conduct online and offline lectures, enhancing employees’ awareness and appreciation of Brazilian society and culture. Furthermore, Brazilian employees should be encouraged to watch Chinese films, and Brazilian scholars should be invited to conduct lectures on Chinese culture. Exceptional employees could be rewarded with trips to China, after which they would share their experiences through presentations.

Second, cultural festivals should be organized based on both Chinese and Brazilian holidays, such as a Chinese Culture Festival during the Spring Festival, featuring presentations by teachers from Confucius Institutes. Brazilian employees should be encouraged to bring their families to participate. Similarly, a Brazilian Culture Festival could coincide with Carnival, inviting Chinese employees to engage in the festivities. These cultural events would serve as opportunities to facilitate communication and strengthen relationships between Chinese and Brazilian staff.

Third, promotional materials showcasing the distinct features of both Chinese and Brazilian cultures should be displayed in common areas such as hallways, dining rooms, and meeting rooms. Additionally, elements of Chinese cuisine should be incorporated into meal provisions. However, it is essential to recognize that Brazilian employees prefer to tailor training programs based on their individual needs, reflecting a bottom-up feedback mechanism that differs from the traditional training approaches commonly found in China.

(2) Focusing on the Construction of a Distinctive Sino-Brazilian Corporate Culture to Overcome Value Gap

Corporate culture must be explicitly documented and detailed; it cannot be merely verbal or perceived through sensory experience. Additionally, it should be linked to employee performance evaluations to effectively guide daily work activities. Each company possesses its unique corporate culture; those without one lack vitality and competitiveness. For Chinese enterprises operating in Brazil, adopting a long-term overtime policy would violate Brazilian labor laws, which stipulate that regular employees may not work more than two hours of overtime in a single day and a maximum of ten hours in a week. However, it is also challenging for Chinese companies to fully align their corporate culture with Brazilian norms. Therefore, the primary objective for Chinese enterprises in Brazil should be to blend Chinese and Brazilian cultural elements, retaining the essence of Chinese corporate culture while removing components that do not align with the social realities of Brazil. Instead, these components should be replaced with values that are widely accepted in Brazil and do not conflict with Chinese corporate culture. This can be approached through three specific strategies:

First, it is essential to establish clear regulations that set forth work rules, creating a robust framework for accountability and ensuring that there are definitive guidelines for employees to follow, which must be adhered to consistently.

Second, enhancing the incentive system is crucial. Given that Brazilian employees typically show little willingness to work overtime, linking their performance to measurable outcomes and reinforcing the reward mechanism can significantly boost team morale and efficiency.

Third, it is important to strengthen employee engagement. The Brazilian populace is known for its warmth, so fostering a culture of mutual greetings and concern among colleagues is vital. Regularly organizing celebratory activities (such as barbecues, outings, etc.), facilitating internal soccer matches, holding simple birthday celebrations, and exchanging gifts during Christmas and New Year can enhance camaraderie. Notably, soccer, as a source of pride and passion for Brazilians, can serve as an effective entry point for engagement. By constructing a strong corporate culture, a positive work environment can be cultivated, enhancing team cohesion, improving work efficiency, increasing employees' sense of belonging, stabilizing the team, and ultimately contributing to the vitality of the enterprise.

(3) Integrating Verbal and Non-Verbal Communication to Overcome Employee Communication Barriers

Communication methods can primarily be categorized into two types: verbal communication and non-verbal communication. Verbal communication, which involves exchanging information through conversation, is the simplest and most effective form of interaction. However, it is often complicated by cultural differences between the two countries and varying levels of translation accuracy, which can lead to misunderstandings and inaccuracies in message delivery. Therefore, it is recommended to enhance the Portuguese language proficiency of Chinese employees (especially management) in Brazil through intensified training and regular assessments. This will help meet the basic communication needs and encourage focused learning on Brazilian traditional culture, including its underlying values and cultural nuances. Emphasis should also be placed on understanding cultural taboos to reduce conflicts and misunderstandings. For Brazilian employees, proactive guidance in learning about and understanding Chinese traditional culture will further facilitate smoother exchanges between both parties.

However, achieving effective communication through language is not a quick process; it must be deeply integrated into the corporate culture and requires long-term effort. Thus, non-verbal communication should also serve as a supplementary method. Non-verbal communication includes six forms: body language, eye contact, interpersonal distance, time management, physical objects and environment, and para-language (Wilbur, M. P. & Wilbur, J. R., 1980, pp. 197-209). Before the advent of spoken language, humans relied heavily on non-verbal forms of communication. This method transcends language barriers and can be more vivid and illustrative, fostering closer relationships. Therefore, in corporate management, it is essential to encourage interaction between Chinese and Brazilian employees by establishing a communication framework centered on verbal communication, supplemented by non-verbal methods. This will help bridge the distance between them, break down language barriers, and create a cohesive environment. However, during the process of guiding this interaction, it is crucial to be mindful of cultural differences. For instance, the universally recognized “OK” hand gesture can have a vulgar connotation in Brazil.

5. Conclusion

The differences in management styles, philosophies, and employee personalities between Chinese and Brazilian leaders have created significant obstacles for Chinese enterprises operating within Brazilian society. The root of these challenges lies in the disparities across three primary dimensions: social culture, public values, and language communication. To effectively overcome these barriers and enable Chinese companies to truly integrate into Brazil for mutually beneficial cooperation, it is essential to approach the situation from the perspective of these differences. Specifically, efforts should focus on fostering the mutual integration of Chinese and Brazilian cultures, guiding employees toward emotional commonality, supporting the construction of a distinctive corporate culture that reflects both Chinese and Brazilian values, and combining verbal and non-verbal communication to break through communication barriers. By leveraging the momentum of the “Belt and Road Initiative”, Chinese enterprises can create greater economic benefits while simultaneously cultivating a more authentic and impressive image of China.

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