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Liminally Positioned in the South: Reinterpreting Brazilian and Chinese Relations with Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article brings to fore long-standing intricacies and dilemmas in Brazil's and China's international positioning. It reveals the complex discursive repertoires shaping the Brazilian and Chinese sense of Self in the world, in the Global South, and, more particularly, in relation to Africa. It engages with the concept of "liminality" to highlight how constructing South–South relationships and invoking Southern identities have been ambiguous, indeterminate—thus liminal—endeavors in these countries' international affairs. By dissecting their diplomatic and corporate narratives towards Africa, our analysis demonstrates, notwithstanding tensions and contradictions, how Brazilian and Chinese actors have creatively acted upon this liminality to pursue foreign policy goals and economic projects. In doing so, the article stresses the floating, ambiguous nature of powerful constructs such as "South" (and "West"), and binary oppositions between them. It concludes by discussing how a liminality perspective allows us to understand the unfixed and multifaceted nature of roles and identities in international relations.

1. Introduction

It is now a familiar story: the post-2000s period saw a boom in South–South relations (Kragelund 2019). Surging commodity prices, disenchantment with traditional aid, and the "rise" or "graduation" of the so-called emerging powers prompted the establishment of growing ties among countries in the "Global South" (Erten and Ocampo 2013; Bergamaschi, Moore, and Tickner 2017). From finance lending through trade and investments, to technical transfers, development was increasingly levered under a common "South–South" aegis (UNDP 2013). As a result, the participation of Southern actors as donors and agenda-setters in development cooperation was posited as evidence of a more polycentric world order (Mawdsley 2019).

Across the literature, this momentum has been emblematically captured through analyses of Brazil and China as emerging donors and investors in Africa (Brautigam 2010;

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Gu et al. 2016; Scoones et al. 2016; Seibert and Visentini 2019; Alencastro and Seabra 2020; Cezne and Wethal, 2022). While works have acquired greater sophistication and critical contours, they frequently interpret this Africa outreach by assuming that Brazil and China smoothly identify with the "Global South". In this sense, Brazilian and Chinese entities are prominently appraised in terms of their Southern, non-Western, or post-Western identities and interests, along with their aspirations to challenge and rebalance parochial, Western-centric formulations of global affairs (see, for example, Alden, Morphet, and Vieira 2010; Carmody 2013; Stuenkel 2017; Kaczmarski 2017).

While we do not disagree, we seek to nuance such understandings. We suggest that Brazilian and Chinese ties with Africa can be more adequately interpreted by recognising these countries' *liminal*—rather than clear-cut—association with the Global South. Through this perspective, we build on Bahar Rumelili's (2012) concept of "liminality" in international relations, which describes processes of ambiguity, indeterminacy, and in-betweenness. We maintain that liminality "elude[s] the identity categories constituted by discourses on international politics such as Western/non-Western, developed/under-developed, democratic/non-democratic" (Rumelili 2012, 496). As such, it offers a theoretical tool to understand entities that fleet "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, conventional and ceremonial" (495). As we shall argue, Brazilian and Chinese relations with Africa reflect the enactment and manifestation of liminal positions in global affairs. They are also expressions of ongoing (re)constructions of how "Self" and "Other" are understood (see also Hall 2018; Neumann 1996) across space and time and, as such, evidence the fluidity and plurality behind seemingly neat global categorical constructs.

In doing so, we heed recent scholarly calls to unpack the complexities of the "Global South" meta-category and to engage with its persistent ambivalences (see Haug, Brave-boy-Wagner, and Maihold 2021). Our central argument moves beyond generic assertions about "the Global South being ontologically complex" though, to highlight how subject positions within this "Global South" are constituted and function through such complexity. In this sense, through a liminality lens, we recognise entities' fleeting, slippery, and ambiguous positionalities in ways that both extrapolate and hybridise binary structural oppositions between the North and the South, the West and the non-West, and so on.

Importantly, we do not suggest an abandonment of these meta-categories. We agree that, once established, identity constructions such as "the West" and "the South" enable distinct modes of thinking, speaking, and doing (Hall 2018; Hellmann and Herborth 2016). However, we seek to escape what Waisbich, Roychoudhury, and Haug (2021) call the "simplistic and rather static images" that reign over such conceptualizations of international structures if understood as substantive or fixed. In this article, we therefore consciously engage with the flawed, ambivalent nature of the "Global South" construct to propose analytically productive ways of understanding it, particularly in contexts of South–South relations.

In this vein, the article zooms in on long-standing intricacies and dilemmas configuring Brazilian and Chinese diplomatic, cultural, and economic narratives (and their intersections). It reveals the complex discursive and justification repertoires shaping these countries' sense of Self in the world, in the Global South, and, more particularly, in relation to Africa (see Dávila 2010; Cao 2017; Guimarães 2020). It observes how constructing South–South relationships and invoking Southern identities have been

ambiguous, indeterminate—and thus liminal—endeavors in Brazil and China's international positioning; each in its own, distinct ways. Notwithstanding inherent tensions and contradictions, Brazilian and Chinese actors have creatively acted upon this liminality in pursuing foreign policy goals, economic interests, and attempting to steer their ground-level Africa relations.

In the case of Brazil, we explore liminality by examining how alterations and hybridizations between "Western" and "Southern" identities have long and stubbornly characterised Brazilian cultural and political thought, leading to ontological fluidity and anxiety about the country's international position(alitie)s. On this account, engaging with categorizations of the country as a "bridge" in global affairs, we propose that Brazilian narratives and actions towards Africa reflect an ambiguous yet deliberate balancing act that combines cultural self-perceptions of Brazil as part of "the West" with claims to Third World credentials and African roots. Different from Brazil in this regard, we argue that China's liminal position stems from a lingering unease between great power and under-developed referents, reflecting the coexistence of different, historically contingent identities. Internal tensions within China's political discourse show how the country has floated between developmentalism, nationalism and moral cosmopolitanism, which allows for constructions of China as both part and partner of the Global South, different from "the West". The article demonstrates how Brazilian and Chinese actors have constituted and practiced their respective, distinct liminality in South–South relations, focusing on Africa in particular. We argue that this liminality straddles multiple dimensions of Brazilian and Chinese engagement with the continent, from coding official diplomatic discourses to shaping how corporate actors frame their contributions in economic projects.

In pursuing this line of inquiry, the article proceeds as follows. First, we justify the relevance of looking at the Brazilian and Chinese relationships with Africa, highlighting how such links have been posited in the literature as revelations of South–South relations' heightened role, particularly in the post-2000s. Second, we propose to engage with Rumelili's (2012) concept of liminality to productively nuance and broaden interpretations. Thereafter, we reveal in our analysis how Brazil and China, respectively, have claimed ambiguous—and hence liminal—positions in the "Global South". Viewing liminality as a discursive constitution, we do so by dissecting official Brazilian and Chinese diplomatic narratives towards Africa. We also stretch the argument to observe and account for how liminality is manifest in Brazilian and Chinese-led business engagements on the continent, where we pay particular attention to framings of corporate responsibility. Lastly, we conclude by identifying similarities and differences between Brazilian and Chinese uses of "the South" and their liminal positioning within and beyond this category. We stress the purchase of a liminality lens for understanding a changing international order, and ongoing (re)constructions of self/other formations—in various forms, in a less Western-centric world.

2. Re-visiting Chinese and Brazilian relations with Africa

At the turn of the twenty-first century, against the backdrop of political stabilisation and surging commodity prices, Africa offered vast opportunities: untapped natural resource reserves, infrastructure development, and a thriving consumers market. This was matched by Brazil and China's growing economic robustness, appetite for commodities,

and aspirations for international protagonism, which led not only to greater levels of diplomatic outreach but also to expanding flows of investment, trade, and development assistance towards the continent (Carmody 2013; Taylor 2014). While Brazil's and China's relations with Africa have been forged over a *longue durée* (Brautigam 1998; Shinn and Eisenman 2012; Dávila 2010), there was an unprecedented change of scale and intensity in the 2000s. In what Mawdsley (2019) has referred to as the boom of South–South cooperation, these developments nurtured hopes of a world in transformation, offering alternatives away from the West through promises of empowering, horizontal relations among developing countries.

This is now a familiar story, with Brazil and China as typical actors. China's trajectory on the African continent has been nothing short of remarkable. China–Africa trade has increased exponentially since 2000, with per annum increases of 28 percent, culminating in China becoming Africa's largest trade partner since 2011 (Strauss 2013). Although recently hindered by the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic (Brautigam, Huang, and Acker 2020), trade has been steadily increasing for the past 16 years, with a value of US $185 billion in 2018 and US$192 billion in 2019 (SAIS-CARI 2021). On the other hand, marked by a pronounced retreat in recent years (Alencastro and Seabra 2020), Brazil's trajectory on the continent has been less impressive and dwarfs comparatively to China. Importantly, however, Brazilian trade with the continent peaked at US$ 28.5 billion in 2013—a sevenfold increase since the early 2000s (Stolte 2015, 2)—and significant development, business, and civil society ties were forged with Lusophone Africa in particular (Alden, Chichava, and Alves 2017; Cezne 2019). Scholars have also called attention to the qualitative dimension of Brazil–Africa relations, observing how supposedly common historical-cultural ties and geographical similarities have been harnessed to further the appeal of interactions across the South Atlantic (Seibert and Visentini 2019).

Against this backdrop, Brazilian and Chinese African connections went from being a niche topic of a few specialist scholars (Saraiva 1996; Brautigam 1998), to becoming prime and well-studied examples within an established academic line of inquiry on the expansion of South–South relations (Gray and Gills 2016; Bergamaschi, Moore, and Tickner 2017; Kragelund 2019; Cezne and Wethal, 2022). Much ink has been spilled to make sense of Brazil's and China's drive to Africa: whether through presidential or summit diplomacy mechanisms (i.e. the FOCAC and ASA initiatives), the role of emerging power groupings such as the BRICS and IBSA, as big business, or by making sense of discursive and operational aspects of engagements (Burges 2012; Stephen 2012; Abdenur 2015; Scoones et al. 2016; Noort 2019; Dye and Alencastro 2020; Menegazzi 2020; Soulé 2020). Aided in recent years by growing field-based and critical research, texts have departed from overly ideational and affective accounts that stress Global South credentials, post-colonial solidarities, and mutual benefit in these relationships (Manning 2006; Woods 2008), to demonstrate their intricacies, difficulties, and contradictions (Bond and Garcia 2015; Power 2012; Gonzalez-Vicente 2017; Mawdsley 2020). Scholars have moved beyond state-centric frames of reference, extending the usual focus on the policies and interests of the Chinese and Brazilian governments to include sub-national, private, and civil society entities (Suyama, Waisbich, and Leite 2016; Gu et al. 2016; Driessen 2019), as well as the agency of African actors, particularly ruling elites, in shaping relations (Mohan and Lampert 2013; Phillips 2019; Cezne and Hönke 2022).

As such, the literature has made great strides in moving away from simplistic, catch-all understandings of the Global South and South–South relations, highlighting contextual nuances and their variegated nature. Still, despite this conceptual and critical enhancement, discussions tend to focus on the ways and extent through which North–South, West–non-West, or core–periphery inequalities have been balanced, revised, or disrupted. In other words, while the "Global South" has been unpacked and filled with complex meaning, most analyses implicitly or explicitly seek to make sense of this "Global South" within a framework of global (hegemonic) power structures, often predicated on binary oppositions. For example, from a geopolitical standpoint, Brazil and China are frequently deemed to represent and lead the South, acting "from the margins" to challenge developing countries' peripheral condition in global affairs. For instance, by forming "like-minded" coalitions and alliances in international fora (Hopewell 2015), acting as South–South cooperation locomotives (Gosovic 2016), or offering post-Western models and alternatives such as the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) or the New Development Bank (NDB) to Western-styled global governance regimes (see Stuenkel 2017). Critical scholars have in turn scrutinised and deconstructed these reformist presumptions, observing how the emergence of Southern states coupled with increased South–South economic flows have not necessarily represented emancipation from uneven, (neo)colonialist power hierarchies (see Shankland and Gonçalves 2016; Taylor 2016).

Notwithstanding, across all these debates, and more pronouncedly in "Northern" and English-speaking academic contexts, there remains a common inclination to read events along well-defined, categorical constructs of global difference, predicated on dichotomised demarcations between the North and the South, the West and the non-West, and so on (see Waisbich, Roychoudhury, and Haug 2021, 2088). Analyses of Brazilian and Chinese actions in and towards Africa, for the most part, have reflected such tendencies. Contacts, whether state-to-state or people-to-people, critically assessed or not, have been usually depicted within a "South–South" framework, underscoring actors' common positioning, belonging, and identification with(in) a Global South, perceived as distinct from or in opposition to a "North" or "West".

We do not reject these interpretations. The notion of a "Global South", despite accommodating increasing levels of complexity and incongruous realities, remains relevant and helpful as "a relational category that sensitizes us for the historically grown [and lasting] marginalizations within international hierarchies and their epistemological implications", as Berger (2021) puts it. Yet, we hold that it is analytically more productive to read the "Global South"—and, in our case, instances of South–South relations—in ways that extrapolate the limits and challenge the neatness of structural demarcations. This allows us to recognise and appraise the inherent tensions, fluidities, and complexities characterising entities' associations with and uses of structural meta-categories in international relations. As we detail next, the concept of "liminality" is helpful in this endeavour.

3. Towards a liminality approach

Bahar Rumelili's (2012) vocabulary of "liminality" in international relations provides a fruitful angle to conceptually tackle what the category of "South" does and how it is used in global politics (see also Mälksoo 2012; Neumann 2012). Linked to the works of renowned anthropologist Victor Turner on social transitions and rites of passage,

the notion of liminality speaks to the "betwixt and between" nature of transitional pro-cesses, whereby entities "are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the pos-itions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, conventional and ceremonial" (Turner, Abrahams, and Harris 2017, 95; see also Turner 1960). Based on Turner's understanding, Rumelili (2012) proposes liminality as a descriptive concept and theoretical tool to account for the limits and contradictions of international social structures, nuancing cat-egorizations that reinforce state identities and hierarchical demarcations. Rumelili exam-ines the role of Turkey as a global (liminal) actor, reflecting on its situatedness between Europe and Asia, the West and the Orient, and Christianity and Islam (see Rumelili 2003, 2007, 2012; Morozov and Rumelili 2012; Rumelili and Suleymanoglu-Kurum 2017). As such, liminality attends to a post-structuralist concern with examining marginal, border-line, and hybrid positions and spaces in international relations (see Derrida 2011; Der Derian and Shapiro 1989; Hönke 2013). At the same time, as noted by Mälksoo (2012, 483–484), it cautions against a constructivist essentialization of social categories, while seeking to widen post-colonial studies' narrow focus on the constitution of and responses to marginalisation.

A liminal reading of global affairs is thus attentive to inter-structural—rather than structural or anti-structural—situations, approaching how entities fleet and become ambiguously positioned between structures, as well as highlighting the cracks and incom-patibilities of these structures. Analytically, Rumelili's (2012, 496) conceptualisation stresses both discursive and practical aspects, inviting scholarly attention to "how dis-courses of international politics construct liminal spaces, position certain actors within those spaces, and how the actors constituted as liminals, in turn, practice their liminal-ity". This can be combined with Hansen's (2013, 37) methodological point that identity construction involves not only a single Other-Self dichotomy but rather a series of related yet slightly different juxtapositions along spatial, temporal, and ethical dimensions. We build on these understandings to re-interpret Brazil and China's African relations.

In following this line of enquiry, this article dialogues with and complements several strands of academic scholarship. For one, it draws inspiration from Hellmann and Her-borth's work on the "Uses of the West" (2016). Just like the West, the idea of the "South" is prone to many uses, which leads us to engage with recent scholarly calls to abandon the quest for neatness and move beyond the single story when approaching the "Global South" (Waisbich, Roychoudhury, and Haug 2021). As such, that does not mean that these meta-categories do not matter but rather that we need to understand how they work in different conceptual and empirical contexts. In addition, the article offers a useful supplement to analyses rooted in role theory, which tend to explore the social con-struction and stabilisation of roles and identities in international politics (see Harnisch, Frank, and Maull 2011), yet with little attention to how entities upset static statuses and float between different roles. Lastly, the article attends to Aslam et al.'s (2020) observation that the nature of *liminal* actors' roles and behaviour has yet to be systematically analyzed and theorised in international relations.

In doing so, the article contributes to empirically expand the literature on liminality, which has been prominently concentrated on cases like Turkey and the post-Soviet space and linked to issues of contested Europeanness (see Rumelili 2003; Mälksoo 2009). We decidedly explore liminality through a Southern frame, bringing insights from Brazilian and Chinese studies. To that end, our analysis focuses on how Brazilian and Chinese

foreign policy and corporate discourses depict and engage with the notion of the Global South in a liminal sense. For Brazil, we investigate and reflect on the country's positioning as part of, but also a "bridge" between, the West and the South and approach how such constructions have been deployed to frame corporate responsibility in Brazil's largest investment on the African continent, represented by Brazilian firm Vale's extractive operations in Mozambique. For China, we underline how contrasting portrayals of China's relation with/within the Global South are sustained by three counterbalancing repertoires, nationalism, developmentalism, and moral cosmopolitanism, evidencing the country's indeterminacy between great power and under-developed referents. These repertoires are also deployed by major Chinese construction firms, such as we show for China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) to frame its presence in Kenya in a liminal manner.

For both Brazil and China, our analysis of foreign policy discourses is thus combined with an examination of economic projects, notably by large multinational corporations with important links to the state, in the form of (partial) state ownership and public finance lending. To build on Lazzarini (2011), while privatised, Vale remains associated with the Brazilian state through a persistent "capitalism of linkages", whereby the government is the holder of golden shares, and the firm has long benefitted from favourable state policies, public loans, and diplomatic backing. Comparably, Chinese Road and Bridge Corporation is a large state-owned enterprise (SOEs) and a major contractor of China's flagship projects in Africa, financed through loans from the Export and Import Bank of China (see Foster et al. 2009). Moreover, while Brazilian and Chinese corporate engagement in Africa include a range of other players across different sectors, we focus on Vale's and the CRBC's framings of corporate responsibility and read them through a liminality lens. Unlike their national peers in Africa, both firms have to some extent officially reported on standards and practices of community relations, impact, and sustainability visions for projects on the continent, speaking explicitly about their envisaged approaches (see, for example, Vale 2019, 2020; CRBC 2016, 2018, 2019).

4. Brazil as a bridge between "the South" and "the West"?

4.1. Brazil's liminal position in the South

In a well-known article to *Foreign Affairs*, Brazilian President Jânio Quadros, whose short-lived government in 1961 initiated a policy of rapprochement towards an increasingly decolonised African continent, wrote:

> I believe that is precisely in Africa that Brazil can render its best service to the concepts of Western life and political methods. Our country should become the link, the *bridge*, between Africa and the west, since we are so intimately bound to both peoples. (Quadros 1961, 24)

Quadros' assertion propelled a discursive line that has been, ever since, routinely deployed by Brazilian policymakers and diplomats: one that constitutes Brazil as a kind of intermediate, interlocutor, and thus bridge-builder in global affairs. Socially, the country is diverse and miscegenated: it is home to the largest black population outside Africa and the destination of successive migration waves out of Europe.

Historically, it combines inheritances of Portuguese colonialism and Catholic Christianity with the lasting influence of the slave trade on its demography, culture, and society. Politically and economically, it displays the characteristics of a semi-periphery, possessing a large population and market size along with industrial and exporting capabilities but exhibiting "peripheral" dynamics linked to poverty, social inequality, and governance and democratic deficits (see Cooper and Flemes 2013). Geographically, it makes up—by territorial, demographic, and economic standards—one of the largest countries in both the Western and Southern hemispheres.

Thus, not in vain, a sense of ambiguity, indeterminacy, and in-betweenness—and therefore liminality, as we propose—has long pervaded Brazilian national and international thought and, by extension, its diplomatic discourse. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, the "West" served as the primary identity benchmark for Brazilian intellectuals. In this respect, as Guimarães (2020, 611) summarises, Brazilian diplomats, guided by a sense of inferiority and an aspiration to become a true Western country, have "allowed the most diverse sort of mimetisms of political and social models originated in Europe [and the United States] to correct Brazil's underdevelopment". For instance, Brazil's abolition of slavery in 1888 and its consequent replacement by European labour migrants was seen as a way "to bring to the tropics a Caucasian bloodstream that is vivacious, energetic and healthy so that we can absorb it here (Brazil)", as suggested by leading Brazilian diplomat and abolitionist Joaquim Nabuco (as cited in Guimarães 2020, 610; see also Santos 2002). The American republican system has in turn inspired the enactment of Brazil's own republican regime in 1889 and was regarded as a path to overcome inefficiency and backwardness (Preuss 2012, 100). Later in the Interwar Period, Brazil's international positioning was one of hesitant balancing acts between the rise of fascism in Europe and the US-championed liberal world order (Tota 2010; Pinto 2020).

President Quadros' above-cited assertion in 1961 emblematised a fundamental departure from strict Western-centric baselines. Geopolitically, on the heels of the Bandung Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement, evoking a Southern identity became especially meaningful: Brazil could leverage it to assert autonomy amid the Cold War's bipolar clout and help to consolidate diplomatic ties with an increasing number of decolonised states. Developmentally, under the influence of dependency schools of thought (see Prebisch 1949), breaking ground with an orthodox Westernism and embracing a "Third World" identity was a way to challenge the persistent and deepening inequalities associated with a North–South divide. Economically, particularly during the 1970s, under the shadow of successive oil shocks, associating and building trade relations with the developing world was needed to secure new energy suppliers (Saraiva 2011). Culturally, the works of renowned Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre, published over the 1920s–1930s and portraying the country's race relations as exceptional and benign (in other words, a "racial democracy"), were picked up to portray Brazil's African roots and miscegenation as a positive, distinctive national trait (Dávila 2010).

Tellingly, however, such developments did not reject Brazil's Western origins, giving rise to a renewed, intermediary cultural identity: one that evokes a "tropical symbology", alluding to the mixing—and hence also bridging—of European, Christian values with African and indigenous elements in tropical Brazil (see Schwarcz 2006). In this vein, Brazil is deemed part of an "essentialized" West: featuring Westernized cultural and

religious customs while subscribing to open market capitalism principles and—especially since the country's re-democratization in the late 1980s—to Western-styled civil and political liberties (Fonseca Junior 1998). As emblematically conveyed by Brazilian diplomat José Merquior, Brazil could be another kind of West—"poorer, more mysterious, even troublesome, nonetheless still Westerners" (as cited in Lopes 2020, 169). Yet, at the same time, it still belonged to the world's "periphery", enduring the legacies of colonialist structures in its socio-economic development and occupying a subordinated position in the international system (see Prashad 2013).

Such significations have in turn moulded a kind of liminal position(ing) in international relations, supporting Brazilian (self-)depictions as a bridge that is uniquely well-situated between the West and the South. In this regard, illustrating Rumelili's (2012, 503) proposition that some liminal actors respond to their ontological insecurity by seeking to mould and convert the ambiguities of their position into an asset, Brazil's ability to constitute itself as an intermediary and bridging ground offered three advantages:

> (a) controlling the flow of political and ideational interaction back and forth between the North and South; (b) exacting a 'toll' for traffic in each direction; (c) being indispensable to the international system because it is seen as the link between old and emerging powers. (Burges 2013, 578)

Such constructions have in turn allowed countries like Brazil, with otherwise limited hard power resources, to project and play a meaningful role in global affairs. Examples of this "bridge operationalization" include the Brazilian-led G20 coalition of developing countries at the World Trade Organization (WTO), which effectively brokered discussions with the US and EU over trade policies and subsidies (Hopewell 2013). Also relevant is the Brazilian proposition to reform the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) by balancing Western interventionism trends and developing countries' reservations to these (Tourinho, Stuenkel, and Brockmeier 2016). Similar considerations have been made in discussions about Brazil's role in the BRICS, where scholars such as Steiner, Medeiros, and Lima (2014) and Chatin (2016) suggest that the country, due to its non-nuclear status and Westernized traditions, is well-positioned to act as a link between the emerging and traditional powers. Although this "bridging" dimension has been relatively ubiquitous in Brazilian diplomatic thought and discourse since at least the 1960s, analyses often credit the Workers' Party (PT) administrations, particularly the Lula years (2003–2010), for more resolutely harnessing and acting on its potential —in a strategy that provided several results on geopolitical, economic, and development cooperation fronts (Burges 2013; Alencastro and Seabra 2020).

In more recent years, Brazil's "illiberal backlash" under President Jair Bolsonaro, has led scholars to question the country's long-standing conciliatory, consensus-creating approach in international affairs (see Hunter and Power 2019). Instead, Bolsonaro's narrative has resorted to Brazil's Christian identity and nationalistic constructions to promote greater political proximity and allegiance to politically conservative governments in the West, especially Trump's administration in the United States (Casarões and Farias 2021). Yet, from a liminality lens, it may also be argued that this move is not necessarily anomalous. In line with Lopes (2020), as the country seeks to reckon with imaginaries of itself as a Western and morally driven Christian nation, the Brazilian

"bridge" may be seen as momently tilted towards the (conservative) West. A liminality perspective thus allows to understand Brazil's international positioning as a function of domestic political architectures that are inherently unstable and wrought by tensions. This entails the very projection and performance of an ambiguous (and contingent) identity that floats between categories of Western and Southern.

This ambiguity linked to the functioning and operation of the Brazilian (liminal) bridge is perhaps best captured through the country's engagement with Africa. Predicated on culturally-flavored presumptions of historical, racial, and tropical affinities, Africa offered an ideal stage upon which projections of Brazil as the prime middle ground between the South and the West became interpreted. On the heels of President Quadros' above-cited assertion, this has nurtured a conventional imagination of Brazil's exceptional qualities to engage with the continent. To build on Dávila (2010), Brazil stood vis-à-vis Africa as a racially mixed and industrially emerging "tropical" power that could present itself as an equal, true brother and enable the continent's development. Although over-used, former Foreign Minister Celso Amorim's oft-repeated quote remains suitable to capture such perceptions: "for every African problem, there is a Brazilian solution" (see, for instance, Cabral et al. 2016, 47).

Whereas this choreography between the West and the South has long and stubbornly defined Brazil's sense of Self in the world and is well-reflected across historical and cultural works on Brazil–Africa relations (see Dávila 2010; Arenas 2010; Ribeiro 2020), it remains surprisingly overlooked in contemporary international relation analyses. It is on this note that we now proceed to demonstrate how Brazilian liminal perceptions and positionings as a bridge in international affairs, far from being constricted to the discursive realm of foreign policy, also transpired through corporate engagements in Africa. In this regard, our argument nuances prevalent readings in Brazil–Africa studies that suggest a capture by large Brazilian multinationals of supposedly public discourses— e.g. of South–South cooperation—for private interests (for examples of this treatment, see Bry 2015; Moldovan 2018; Dye and Alencastro 2020). Rather, we hold that this is less about the existence of a clear-cut transmission belt between a state's foreign policy and business interests, and more a reflection of a culturally embedded self-representation that casts Brazil (and thus the Brazilian bridge) as the dialectical synthesis of Western and African elements. In the below, we look at Brazil's largest investment to date in Africa, represented by mining giant Vale S.A. (henceforth Vale) coal operations in Mozambique, approaching the firm's articulation of corporate responsibility more specifically. We explore the "bridge liminality" through the reappropriation of a way of thinking that has long been in circulation and is sharpened for business needs.

4.2. Brazilian extractivism in Mozambique: bridging "the South" and "the West" towards an optimal corporate responsibility?

Formerly a Brazilian state-owned enterprise until privatisation in 1997, Vale is currently one of the world's largest mining companies and the foremost producer of iron ore and nickel, overseeing activities in 25 countries (Vale 2020, 42–43). Leveraged by the favourable winds of the commodities boom in the 2000s and diplomatically backed by the Brazilian government, Vale's expansion into Mozambique formally started in 2004, when the company was granted the concession rights to explore the Moatize coalfield in the central

Mozambican province of Tete. To increase export capacity, the firm was also behind the development of a 912 km rail link, known as the Nacala Corridor, connecting Vale's mine to its exclusive coal terminal at the deep-water port of Nacala-a-Velha on the Mozambican coast. Vale's extractive operations in Mozambique involved an investment of approximately US$8 billion and represents the largest investment to date of a Brazil-based firm on the African continent (Rossi 2013). It was also Mozambique's main foreign direct investment (FDI) by the end of the 2010s, with Vale being the country's major exporter and largest company between 2016 and 2020 (Macauhub 2019; EITI 2020).

Yet, over the years, as a host of works have documented, fluctuating coal prices, the detrimental effects of mining to local environments and communities, sub-optimal job creation, and revenue mismanagement, among other factors, contributed to frustrate much of the anticipated development dreams (Cezne 2019; Lesutis 2019a, 2019b). In 2021, after posting a series of losses and alleging a strategic move to streamline operations amid a climate-driven commitment to end coal production, Vale announced a roadmap to sell its assets and withdraw from Mozambique (Vale 2021). Nonetheless, and crucially for this article, Vale's (self-) articulations of corporate responsibility in Mozambique demonstrate how liminal rationales of Brazil (and Brazilians) as a "bridge" between the West and the South have also held sway beyond the state level, shaping corporate representations and practices on the ground.

According to Vale's yearly Sustainability Reports (see, for example, Vale 2019, 2020), observance to and collaboration with conventional frameworks on corporate responsibility is pledged. These include both broader business-oriented mechanisms and more niche, extractive industry-related platforms.[1] Overall, similarly to other publicly traded companies, Vale's commitment to global—albeit often Western-styled—responsibility frameworks contributes to aid self-projections of good and credible behaviour, providing an important backing to legitimation strategies in business activities (see Rathert 2016; Wiegink 2020).[2] Even when confronted with major reputational blows such as the catastrophic Brumadinho tailings dam burst in Brazil, which exposed the company's grave operational and human rights shortcomings, Vale has instrumentally resorted to such frameworks to convey an image of a responsible post-tragedy management, motivated by a "lesson learning" attitude (see Vale 2019, 2020). To draw on Salvioni, Gennari, and Bosetti (2016), whereas contradictions abound, this adherence to global responsibility mechanisms contributes, nevertheless, to set Vale apart from other emerging market-based resource firms, particularly vis-à-vis Chinese and Indian actors, whose compliance with international corporate standards remain either limited or predicated on alternative

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[1]Examples comprise, among others, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGP), the Principles for Responsible Investment (PRI), the International Council on Mining and Metals, the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), and the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights.

[2]While global in aspiration, a common reservation is that such instruments, along with the notions of corporate responsibility that they inspire, prominently reflect Western forms of normative and political thought (see Jamali and Karam 2018). Moreover, though oftentimes endorsed by wide-encompassing multilateral platforms such as the UN, considering these organisms' power, funding, and staffing structures, Western views tend to be privileged and advanced (see Pitt and Weiss 2019). Others yet suggest that blueprints devised to govern corporate behaviour offer a useful proxy to impose Western-preferred models of development, stabilisation, and state-building in poorer and fragile regions and states of the Global South (see Khan and Lund-Thomsen 2011).

understandings (see Narula, Magray, and Desore 2017; Bunskoek and Hönke, Forthcoming).

Nonetheless, Vale's commitment to Western-styled responsibility blueprints on human rights, good governance, and sustainable development is combined with qualities attributed to its Southern and Brazilian origins. As we discussed elsewhere (see Cezne and Hönke 2022), Vale executives and professionals have recurrently built upon narratives of Brazil's tropical and racial exceptionalism in South-South relations with Africa and Africans to project distinct visions and approaches to corporate responsibility and business-society interactions in Mozambique. Crucially, these visions have also been echoed in the firm's own communication products. For example, Vale's 2013 Sustainability Report classifies its Community Relations Guide as a "model that has already been deployed in Brazil and expanded to Mozambique in 2013, [promoting] a unified view of how to address critical issues related to territories" (Vale 2014, 18). In addition, suggesting the model's adequacy to Mozambique, the report mentions that it "also provides structured information to take decisions that enable mitigation of impacts and promote good relationships with stakeholders, such as local communities, governments, NGOs and other institutions" (18-19). All of which, as Vale reassures—bridging its Southern adequacy with conventional responsibility frameworks—"is based on the main international references on stakeholders' engagement, Vale's strategic pillars and the company experience" (18).

On this account, we observe how the articulation of Vale's corporate responsibility draws upon and remobilizes culturally-imbued depictions of a supposed Brazilian special aptitude to fuse together—and thus bridge—Western and Southern ingredients in forging a positively differentiated suitability to operate in Africa . To partake with Rumelili (2012, 503), this reveals how international "representational practices of liminal actors are often shaped by their own domestic discourses", with social and material consequences. Combining geographical and cultural dimensions within a particularistic identity discourse, the liminality of the Brazilian bridge is also prone to both public and private enactments, which may coexist to a certain extent—reinforcing state-business convergences and shared interests. As tellingly declared by former President Lula while accounting for Vale's involvement in Mozambique, Brazilian businesses were deemed to represent a sort of mid-way solution for Africa: "Brazil had to adopt a different policy than what Africans were used to. [Different] [f]rom the colonisers that go there to own the country. Or from what the Chinese were trying to do" (as cited in Rossi 2015, 328).

Yet such bridging aspirations have proven difficult to sustain overtime as Vale's operations in Mozambique have revealed the sorts of cracks, inequalities, and discrepancies, including dispossession, human rights abuses, and lack of local linkages, that have long characterised extractive dynamics in Africa and beyond (see; Wiegink 2018; Lesutis 2019a). Moreover, according to critics and anti-Vale activists, the Brazilian bridge operated by the firm was no more than a transfer device that enabled poor domestic business standards and practices to be exported and internationalised (Abelvik-Lawson 2014; Cezne 2019, 2021). This demonstrates how the articulation and implementation of a "liminal responsibility"—promoted as better-suited—was filled with complications, tensions, and misalignments. In this sense, the description offered by former Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2002) is perhaps a telling one: "the Brazilian

bridge operates more like a *pinguela*" (Becker and Resende 2017)—that is, a faulty, narrow, and unstable bridge.

5. China: between major power and developing country

5.1. China's liminal position in the South

Different from the Brazilian case, Chinese liminal positionality has little to do with bridging 'West' and 'South'. Rather, Chinese actors grapple with being "betwixed and in between" different historical and contemporary discursive registers that position them as part of, or rather a partner of, the Global South, developmentalism and great power ambitions with sinocentric flavours. Also, the notion of 'Global South' did not exist in Mandarin Chinese until the 2010s (see below).

Studies on China–Africa relations suggest that Chinese discourse towards Africa has remained relatively stable since the 1970s, with little alteration of the fundamental framing and key terms despite significant changes within the policy realm (Taylor 2007). As Strauss (2009, 2019) observes, however, new discursive layers have built upon, even though seldomly repudiated, earlier iterations when circumstances required different responses to new questions. Hence Chinese discourses consist of a multitude of policy elements articulated by different administrations, for example, "five principles of peaceful co-existence" put forwarded by Zhou Enlai in 1953,[3] "peace and development" under Hu Jinagtao's administration, "community of shared future" under President Xi Jingping, etc. (Cao and Chan 2013). Given how these policy catchwords are each interlocked with contingent identities rooted in different historical contexts (for other cases see Hansen 2013), we argue that the seemingly stable discourse is, in fact, *multivocal*, a chorus of Selves enunciating different registers, through which competing portrayals of China's relations with(in) the Global South are put forward. Liminality, in this view, refers to how different self-positionings produce contradictions—even within the very same policy texts.

An analysis of China's policy discourse towards Africa from 2000 to 2021 reveals two ideal-typical enunciations[4]: On the one hand, China is said to be a developing country, and hence part of the Global South, which upholds sovereignty-first principles, prioritises local conditions over universal models, and repudiates hegemonism and interventionism (see also Taylor 2007; Brautigam 2010). On the other hand, China establishes itself as a global power, albeit a different kind in comparison to the West, and partner of the Global South. It promotes its own development experiences, parallel institutions and initiatives, such as the One Belt One Road Initiative (BRI), alongside existing ones, hence pursuing expansive ambitions and visibility—if not centrality—in global affairs (Anthony 2020; Narins and Agnew 2020; Ali 2020).

These competing subject positions in the Global South are sustained by three counterbalancing repertoires, namely, developmentalism, nationalism and moral cosmopolitanism (see also Strauss 2019; Cao and Chan 2013). Developmentalism emphasises that

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[3]These were: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.
[4]The distinction serves the purpose of analytical differentiation. Empirically, the different narratives overlap and intermingle in nearly all policy documents.

China's experiences are applicable to Africa and can be transferred through people-to-people exchanges, training and showcases. Nationalism, in portraying China as one of the victims of foreign intervention, legitimises China's mode of governance. However, by extension it also endorsed a pragmatic approach according to which each country should find its own path of development. Moral-cosmopolitanism refers to the usage of culture-specific repertoires, which are rooted in China's thousand-year-old moral regime, to invoke a cosmopolitan cause for China's current overseas presence. It provides discursive legitimacy for China and a Chinese moral vision for the world, serving as the alternative to universal values put forward by 'the West', such as democracy and human rights.

Before we argue how developmentalism, nationalism and moral-cosmopolitanism put China in a liminal position vis-a-vis the Global South, it is important to clarify that there was no word-to-word translation of "global south" into Mandarin Chinese until the 2010s.[5] Even today, the notion remains absent from policy language. The way in which the word "South" has been incorporated into China's discourse is with the notion of "South-South" (南-南) as in "South-South cooperation" (南南合作), which stresses relationality more than particular entities.

Indeed, scholars of China's international relations have long observed that China's grand strategy is characterised by the doctrine of the "balance of relationship" and a quest for relational security (Benabdallah 2020; Shih et al. 2019). The emphasis on relationality can also be observed in the way China envisages to relate to the Global South despite ideological constraints. From 1949 to 1978, China's foreign relations with African countries have been mostly defined along ideological lines. Yet in 1978, the decision of the Politburo of the Central Committee to start working with different African ruling parties represented the beginning of the release of the CCP's foreign relations from some of these ideological constraints (Li 2006). Simultaneously, there has been a discursive retreat from the "Third World" as defined by the "Three Worlds" theory: the First World as the United States and the Soviet Union; the Third World as the countries of Africa, Latin America, and continental Asia including China; the rest of the industrial states belonging to the Second World, a middle zone and unitable power against a combined pole of capitalist and socialist imperialism (Chan 1985). Central to the notion of the "Three Worlds theory" is the united front strategy, the genesis of which can be traced back to the early years of the Chinese Communist Party when it joined its rival, the Nationalist Party for the common goal of defeating regional warlords (Yee 1983, 240). Self-identifying as a member of the Third World that formed the base of the united front, China claimed a leadership role in preventing the expansion of any of the superpowers in the Global South (Taylor 2007). The "Three Worlds theory" as a full-fledged elaboration of 'South-South' relations as anti-hegemonism granted China the kind of manoeuvrability to boost its international influence (Taylor 2007, 44), however, the "united front" connotation of the "Third World" was phased out in the 1980s.

Instead, two discursive moves brought "nation" and "national interest" to the centre. The first move was the Twelfth National Congress of the Communist Party in 1982 that established the non-alignment principle for China's foreign policy, although China was

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[5]"Global South" is often translated as "全球南方" or "南营".

not a member of the Non-Aligned Movement. Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping articulated for the first time that China's foreign policy should serve for "national dignity and national interest" (1982). This speech is generally considered in China to be *a turning point*, before which "national interest" was inconceivable and too *selfish* to be a legitimate driver for foreign policy (Yan 2019). This discursive move took place in the context of China being dependent on foreign loans and preoccupied with instrumentalizing relations with the superpowers to advance its economic modernisation programme (Yee 1983; Taylor 2007, 60).

The second move took place after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. China needed to respond to domestic and international expectations of filling in the power vacuum. Contrary to the previous ambition to lead the "united front" of the Third World, Deng responded that "it should be a fundamental strategy that China never claims leadership … because we don't have enough capacity and being the leader of the Third World will bring bad reputation as a notorious hegemon" (Deng 1993, 363). The message was that China should concentrate on internal development, prioritising "the domestic" over "the international" (Shen and Blanchard 2010).

How does nationalism function then in China's discourse and contributes to its liminal positioning vis-á-vis the notion of Global South—as part of it, or rather partner to it? In a sense, it allowed China to pull a distance *from the Third World* by putting the nation Self first, and before any responsibilities towards any broader collectives. Meanwhile, it also functioned through the logic of securitisation, presenting sovereignty and national dignity as referent objects threatened by external interference (Buzan et al. 1998). The latter though also allows China to speak on behalf of the Global South on the issue of autonomy and independence from the West. After the Tian'anmen square incident in 1989, for instance, Chinese leader Deng emphasised that "people who value human rights should not forget the rights of the state and national dignity. In particular, if the developing countries, like China, have no national self-respect and do not cherish their independence, they will not enjoy that independence for long" (Deng 1993, 344).

While nationalism led China to redefine its relationship with the Global South to some extent, developmentalism runs against this tendency. The phrase 'developing countries' has entered China's discourse since the 1970s, used interchangeably with the notion of 'Third World countries' in the 1980s and 1990s (Kim 1994, 128; Taylor 2007, 13), and completely replaced the latter in the policy documents since the early 2000s. Currently, Africa is described as the "continent with the largest number of developing countries"; whereas think-tanks and media cheerfully anticipate China to enter the ranks of high-income countries soon, the official discourse insists on China being "the largest developing country" to highlight its mutuality with Africa (for example, FOCAC 2000, 2015, 2018).

It should be noted that such instrumental usage of the label "developing country" is not entirely hypocritical, but rather reflects the discursive power of developmentalism in domestic political and public spheres. Developmentalism has resumed a dual function in China as both state policy and ideology, discursively resolving various post-reform tensions captured in binary language, such as socialism vs. capitalism, economic vs. political reform, and socialist China vs. capitalist West. Consequently, the ruling party's legitimacy has been shifted from Marxism to economic performance and social inclusion (Cao 2017; Chen and Naughton 2017; Ang 2016).

The sweeping influences of developmentalism are observed not only in China's domestic affairs, but also in how China proceeds to claim epistemic authority in international development by presenting its own experience as applicable to the Global South. For instance, Chinese experts often compare Africa to China in the 1980s and 1990s (Lin 2018). China proposes "industrial capacity cooperation" with African countries, suggesting that high-quality labour-intensive production capacity will be transferred to support import substitution and export-oriented industries in Africa in an "orderly manner" (FOCAC 2015). China will "set up *pilot and demonstration projects* in a few African countries, and send Chinese experts and economists to assist the formulation of *long-term industrial policy* with regard to host countries comparative advantages in the region" (FOCAC 2018, emphasis added). The vision regularly put forward is an African version of a developmental state that would provide "efficient and pragmatic governmental services to undertake Chinese industries transfers" as well as "create preferential policy, favorable conditions and environments to attract investment from Chinese enterprises" (FOCAC 2018).

However, these articulations do not add up to a single, well-defined "China model" and remain far from Brazilian claims to 'tropical technology' or 'solutions for any African problem'. Speeches delivered by different Chinese leaders and key policy documents unanimously state that there are no "one-size-fits all development models" and that "every country should choose its own path for development" (for example, Jiang 2000; Wen 2012; Xi 2013). Lower-rank bureaucrats also feature the "Chinese approach" as a pragmatic, adaptive and experimental one (Tang 2021; Brautigam, Xiaoyang, and Xia 2018), and hence not defined by any 'Southern' identity or substance.

As argued above, different policy traditions of the key elements in official discourse have carved out a liminal space with competing understandings of the self as being part/partner and insider/outsider of the Global South. Despite these contradictions, the Global South is *the* critical reference for China's positioning in both developmentalism and nationalism. Yet there is another on-going effort to construct China in ways for which Global South no longer serves as *the* critical point of reference: China as a major power in the world motivated by a sense of moral cosmopolitanism. In this case, the key repertoires are drawn from Confucianism and Daoism philosophical traditions, such as expressed in the notions of "peaceful rise", "harmonious world/harmonious international order" and "global responsibility". Many scholars term this discursive process of going-traditional as sinicization, or reinvoking a sinocentric universality (all-under-heaven) based on a oneness epistemology. Such a tendency has seeped into China's discourse toward Africa as into its foreign policy discourse towards other regions and international fora. For example, the Confucian concept "Da'tong" (大同), often translated as "Great Community", "Great universality" or "Great Harmony", is said to drive China–Africa relations into a new era of "Version 3.0".[6] In 2021, China's white paper on international development cooperation explicitly states that the programme "stems from the Chinese nation's concept of Da'tong" (SCIO 2021). Meanwhile, Chinese officials repeatedly portrayed the world as a "global village" or "extended family" in the early 2000s and recently the notion of "community of shared future". The phrase was added to the Constitution of

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[6]"China-Africa Relations Usher in a New Era of "Version 3.0." Xinhua Net. December 7, 2015. http://www.xinhuanet.com//world/2015–12/07/c_128506426.htm

the Communist Party of China in 2017 as well as the constitution of the People's Republic of China in 2018. Discourse in the political and public sphere hence, in some respect, moves past, and contradicts, its traditional reference point of South-South relations. (Hodzi 2020; Shih et al. 2019).

5.2. Chinese corporate social practices and local relations: liminality mobilised for an alternative model?

How do the contradictions of contemporary China's liminal positioning as within and outside the Global South transpire through Chinese corporate engagement in Africa? Focusing on corporate social engagement by major Chinese companies, we use the case of state-owned enterprise China Road and Bridge Corporation (CRBC) as representative case below, and one of their flagship projects in Africa in particular, the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) in Kenya, in order to answer this question, thus broadening the analysis beyond foreign policy discourse.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports are issued with a particular audience in mind. They are products of post-facto rationalisation. Binding together CEO's forewords, corporate principles, and showcase submissions from its overseas branches, we use CSR reports to critically examine the self-representation of a company's desired role in Africa. In the case of CRBC, in a nutshell, such corporate discourse replicates much of state-level discourse. At the same time, the corporate discourse adds yet another layer to the in-betweenness, and hence liminality, of the positioning of Chinese non-state actors-by turning nationalism and developmentalism into relational assets while demonstrating global competitiveness in a liberal world market as a multinational company.

The political meaning of the Kenya Standard Gauge Railway project (SGR) is nailed down by Wang Yong, Envoy of President Xi Jinping and State Councilor of China: "*SGR Phase 1 is vital to promoting the development of Kenya and regional development in East Africa, accelerating the industrialization of Africa and driving the Belt and Road Initiative to enter the core areas of Africa*" (CRBC 2018). As the contractor of SGR, CBRC proudly announced itself as an "active contributor to the realization of Kenya's Vision 2030 and Big Four Agenda" (2019). Given its elevated status, the flagship project is administered in a highly centralised manner. For example, the SGR project received more frequent inspections from the headquarters, and its senior managers are experienced professionals directly dispatched from the headquarters. Additionally significant is that SGR was CRBC's first project in Africa that adopted Chinese standards[7] and technologies for railway construction and operation. Hence CRBC presented itself as a pioneer that introduces "*Chinese standards, Chinese technologies, Chinese equipment and Chinese-style management*" to Africa (2016). In line with the discourse of developmentalism and nationalism, Chinese technical standards are framed here as superior to others. When designing the railway, it "*looked up to China's first-class railways standard to ensure quality*", reproducing China's self-projection of being both national and international and what it brings to Africa as better than what others have to offer. At the same time, they are featured as suiting local conditions: CRBC (2019) "considered

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[7]Chinese Railway Technical standard, Class I.

the local energy development progress and economic efficiency and put forward a most suitable plan for local conditions in Kenya".

The introduction of Chinese technical standards has direct implications to how CRBC carried out its local content policy. Two major supplier promotions in Nairobi and Voi were held at an early stage to show local suppliers how to get involved in the project. The company assisted local manufacturers to "improve the production process, and upgrade the Kenyan or UK standards to Chinese standards and meet the construction requirements" (CRBC 2016). All the cement and most of the steel required were procured locally, which was framed as a "win-win cooperation with local enterprises" (CRBC 2016). While politically connected local companies had better access to such opportunities, there were some trickle-down effects to local companies along the railway (Wang and Wissenbach 2019).

Unlike Vale's stable rhetoric on corporate responsibility, the narration of CRBC underwent some changes over time. At first, it reproduced state-level developmentalist rhetoric. The first SGR-CSR report defines CSR primarily as high-quality project construction that suits local conditions and Kenya's need for development, contributing to the industrialisation of Kenya (CRBC 2016). In the following reports, developmentalist rhetorics are still significant, however, they are no longer defining elements of "corporate responsibility". In addition, previous emphasis on "Chinese standards" disappeared in later reports. The narration of corporate responsibility as win-win cooperation of Kenya's development, which almost mirrors the state-level developmentalist discourse of South-South cooperation, was entirely replaced by a technical discourse that put forward instead CRBC's identity as a competitive multinational corporation. Responsibility, in the new narration, is regrouped into different practical issues under five banners—"Successful Delivery", "Efficient Operation", "Local Content", "Exchange and Mutual Learning" and "Environmental protection". The fourth banner further expands as "cultural exchange among Chinese and Kenyan employees" and "philanthropy", which refers to their engagement with local communities (CRBC 2018, 2019).

This switch in framing from South-South partnership and transfer of lessons learned within the Global South may also respond to numerous controversies during project construction (Carrai 2021). Controversies unfolded between local communities and the CSBC as well as among different local communities, ranging from disputes over wages, employment benefit, land compensation and environmental impact to supply contracts. For example, during the construction, the affected Maasai community in the area was unhappy that CRBC also provided jobs to other ethnic groups and communities and insisted that only the Maasai people should be entitled to jobs since the railway was being built on Maasai land (Liu 2019, 116). Nevertheless, the reports framed a different picture of "*building a community of shared future*" with the Maasai by showing how CRBC responded to the need of the Masaai community by building roads, repairing water cellars, and sending woods when the community was hit by a storm and couldn't pick firewood to cook (CRBC 2018, 2019).

CSBC's overall understanding of corporate responsibility and how it relates to a Global South identity is fundamentally different from that of Brazilian company Vale in two respects. First, unlike the Brazilian case where transnational ties are forged from below (Cezne 2019), the public in China has not "demonstrated much particular concerns and corresponding reactions to irresponsible overseas behaviour of Chinese

companies"—whether South-South or otherwise, as Chinese civil society and the market also focused on domestic CSR issues. Consequently, at least for state-owned enterprises, the Chinese state is the most important stakeholder—as both regulator and the largest investor—and initiator of any policies of corporate social engagement (Liu 2021). Hence, intertextual linkages in the CRBC reports reflect a series of top-down translations led by Chinese official and semi-official institutions.

Second, unlike Vale (at least) on paper, Chinese companies are hesitant to standardise any context-free "best practice" (or "tropical technology" as in the case of Brazil). This gives an upper hand to host-country governments as well as powerful local actors in shaping Chinese companies' local role—and hence South-South relations. This attitude is justified by corporate actors' interpretation of China's "non-interference" principle as not overriding local authorities. Moreover, repertoires are drawn from the Daoist tradition of thought in China, which emphasises the importance of non-interference and "going with the flow" (Bunskoek and Hönke, Forthcoming). Again, it makes corporate positionality relational, highly context-specific, and liminal.

6. Conclusion

This article has sought to nuance how Brazil and China relate, identify with, but also distance themselves from the "Global South". While a considerable amount of literature has considered Brazilian and Chinese entities to exhibit Southern, non-Western, or post-Western identities, prone to be harnessed to challenge Western-centric formulations of global affairs, we have argued that Brazilian and Chinese ties with Africa can be more adequately interpreted by recognising both countries' liminal, rather than clear-cut, association with "the Global South", using the concept of liminality and in particular Bahar Rumelili's (2012) work. We maintain that this in-betweenness challenges neat binary identity categories such as Western/non-Western, especially in the case of Brazil, and developed/under-developed, especially in the case of China. For both, it reveals how notions of a "Global South" or "South-South relations" can be productively analyzed as hybrid and contingent, in ways that transcend neat structural demarcations. We agree on the productive power that, once established, identity constructions such as "the South" (or "the West") unfold, and hence do *not* call for doing away with analytical attention to the work these categories do. Quite the opposite. We *have* argued for escaping the idea of stable identities or roles that remains implicit in many uses of "South", "West" or "South-South" relations.

More importantly than assigning such structural meta-categories, the paper shows, is to understand China's and Brazil's particular, ambiguous, and unsettled ways of engaging with such structures, as demonstrated through what is often referred to as South–South relations. A liminality perspective provided an opportunity to do so. Liminality, in both cases, was harnessed to project ideational and operational distinctiveness. Yet, while Brazil played up a Global South identity in recent decades, China has downplayed the "South" as a collective subject, with which it used to identify over the years, emphasising instead shared experiences and relations with developing countries. In both cases, their presence in Africa has been contested and liminality also offers an entry point to engage critically with the varying and flexible uses of the "South" category by emerging powers.

Further, liminality comes more strongly across as a "betwixt and between" positioning in the case of Brazil, which we capture with the "bridge" metaphor. For Brazil, based on culturally-imbued presumptions of historical, racial, and tropical affinities, Africa offered an ideal stage upon which projections of the country as the prime middle ground between "the South" and "the West" became interpreted. For China, the concept of liminality captures the coexistence of temporal and spatial identities and tensions among them: moving away from the joint struggle implied in the idea of "Third World" to being part of "the Global South" as a developing country; at the same time stressing a moral cosmopolitanism overlapping with a distinct (cultural) nationalism setting it above and apart from those other disadvantaged parts of the world. Different from Brazil, the latter undergirds an understanding of the Self that avoids defining itself in reference to the idea of a "West". Rather, liminality signifies a being in between an all-encompassing cosmopolitan globality in its own right, global power ambitions with nationalist flavours, and developmentalism. The different positionalities allow China to be "both old and new, national and international" and China's developmental model to be both "separate from and better than" what the West and the Soviet Union had to offer (Strauss 2009). This is manifested in China–Africa relations by a pragmatic approach avoiding predefined one-size-fits-all models.

This liminal positioning with(in) and apart from "the Global South" is reproduced at the, in this regard, much less studied corporate level. In the case of Brazil, Vale's (self-) articulations of corporate responsibility in Mozambique demonstrate how similar rationales of Brazil as a "bridge" have shaped corporate representations and practices on the ground. Relatedly, Chinese CRBC presents itself as a contributor to Kenya's development and pioneer implementing Chinese technical know-how, which reproduces China's self-projection of being both "national and international", part of and partner to the Global South, and what it brings to Africa as "different from but better than" what others have to offer.

Overall, this article has contributed to scholarship on liminal actors in international relations. Liminality allows to look beyond supposedly stable(izing) roles or identities and rather to understand how identity constructions may float constantly between different positionalities. The liminality literature has demonstrated this for Turkey and Eastern European countries, especially regarding contestations over Europeanness (Rumelili 2003; Mälksoo 2009). We have shown how China and Brazil are also liminally positioned, but in very different ways. For both, first, the project of a "Global South" is an important reference point. Interestingly in the Chinese case, second, it is with almost no reference to the "West" (let alone Europeanness) anymore as significant positionality. The notable exception are Chinese corporations as they, other than Chinese political discourses, seek to speak to "Western" norms and standards to operate in a liberal global economy, alongside reference to Chinese nationalism, developmentalism, and moral cosmopolitanism.

The ideas of the "Global South" and South-South relations, as we have demonstrated, are prone to many uses and works.

While labels of global difference are necessarily flawed, current geopolitical upheavals, not least the seismic shifts triggered by the war on Ukraine, have rekindled their importance and inevitability. Whether imagined or perceived, "North–South" and "West–East" demarcations continue to shape security narratives, influence bloc politics, and posit

complex balancing acts. The liminality perspective offered here provides clues to apprehend the co-constructed, performative, and dynamic nature of such labels in an ever-changing world. We hope this can help to equip future studies to displace ossified, normatively loaded readings of world ordering categories towards an understanding of their inherent intricacies and fluidity.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

Funding

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