

China's Cultural Diplomacy in South Asia

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Abstract

This paper examines China's cultural diplomacy in South Asia with a particular focus on Nepal. Drawing on soft power theory and the broader framework of cultural diplomacy, this study examines the rationale, strategies, and key initiatives of China's cultural engagement. Through a qualitative analysis, the paper maps the key instruments of China's cultural diplomacy in Nepal, including language promotion, educational exchanges, Confucius Institutes, youth programs, sister city relationships, and tourism. The study finds that China's cultural presence in Nepal reflects a long-term strategy aimed at cultivating a benign and cooperative image in the South Asian region. While acknowledging the inherently political nature of cultural diplomacy, the paper argues that China's cultural engagement in Nepal is associated with its broader vision of regional stability through harmony, cooperation, and people-to-people exchanges.

Keywords: China's Cultural Diplomacy; Soft Power; Confucius Institutes; China–Nepal Relations; Education Exchange

Introduction

It is China's political belief that political power grows out of its cultural values as much as it does with its hard power (D'hooghe, 2015). Indicative of this is the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), at which the Chinese President called for Chinese culture to be brought to the global stage (Hu, 2012). The 19th National Congress expressed its ambition to become a "global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence" (Tobin, 2020, p. 2). Cultural diplomacy then acts as a bridge in China's ambition for international influence. Culture has always been the basis of cultural diplomacy for China. However, only since the 1940s has the emphasis on promoting national values through cultural tools been a defining feature of China's practice of cultural diplomacy (Zhu, 2022).

Cultural diplomacy is a crucial instrument of soft power in international relations that serves as a way for states to project influence and shape perception, especially through cultural engagement. For China, this operates at different levels, including multilateral, regional, nation-to-nation, and people-to-people (Zapata, 2023). Contemporary Chinese foreign policy, both at the global and regional levels, has been its attempt to portray China as a peace-loving, cooperative, confident, and responsible power. For such a projection, softer ways of engagement, Beijing believes, will not only enhance its global status but also ensure peace and stability in the region (Palit, 2017). This is why China's economic engagement is also marked by its cultural influence globally, including in South Asia. Pal (2021) observes that from a policy level, Chinese external engagement can be explained by a twofold approach: the first was that it built its economic might through which it spread its strategic footprint on the global scale, and the second was Beijing's effort to vigorously promote Chinese language and culture as a tool of its cultural soft power.

In this regard, China's cultural diplomacy can be categorized under three broader domains: deepening interactions with international institutions, promoting the global export of cultural products, and integrating cultural dimensions within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Under the first domain, China has increased its influence through platforms such as the Beijing Culture Forums, Confucius Institutes (CI), China Culture Center, and China Radio International. As of 2024, there were a total of 500 Confucius Institutes with 763 Confucius Classrooms (CC) in 161 countries worldwide. In 2024, CI and CC offered multi-level and multi-category courses in Chinese language and culture (CI, 2025). Similarly, in 2023, President Xi also put forth the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), where China advocates for the importance of diverse civilizations and civilizational dialogue for closer international people-to-people exchange and cooperation (Yang, 2025). Since then, a comprehensive Global Research Program for Inter-Civilization Exchanges and Mutual Learning has also been unveiled under it (Xi, 2025).

Under the second domain, China has promoted the global export of cultural products, including films such as *Ne Zha*, games such as *Genshin Impact*, and the global success of the toy monster Labubu. Under the third domain, the people-to-people exchanges facilitated by BRI include scholarships, academic partnerships, cultural festivals, and tourism initiatives, which create opportunities for BRI countries to engage with China beyond the economic and infrastructure front and to strengthen cultural ties.

Within the South Asian region, China's cultural engagement has deep roots that date back to before the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The initial interactions between the two civilizations consisted of cultural and religious exchanges, trade, pilgrims, travelers, and scholars such as Xuan Zhang and Fa Xian. This initial cultural interaction has since transformed into engagement at the political, economic, and even strategic levels. Thus the primary aim of the research is to investigate China's cultural diplomacy initiatives within the South Asian context.

Methodology

This study seeks to analyze the Chinese rationale for cultural diplomacy, its motivations, major initiatives, and strategies. The theoretical parameters of the research are the efforts made by the Chinese government to promote Chinese culture in Nepal within the framework of Cultural Diplomacy. The research also relies on the theory of soft power and delves into China's foreign policy strategy to understand the interests driving China's cultural diplomacy in Nepal.

Methodologically, the research is exploratory, explanatory, and interpretive. It takes a qualitative approach and relies on various official documents and policies from China's official sources, as well as scholarly literature including journal articles and books.

Results

Cultural Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics

Cultural diplomacy operates within the context of foreign policy practices of nation-states as well as within cultural discourses. Scholars like Cummings (2009) associate cultural diplomacy with the exchange of ideas, information, arts, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding. Villanueva R (2018) sees it as a part of public diplomacy where culture is utilized as a method or tool to promote national image as well as make a country attractive to foreigners. Cultural diplomacy can also be summed up in phrases such as telling a nation's story to the rest of the world, winning over the hearts and minds of others, or promoting understanding amongst the people of the world (Cummings, 2009). The major ambition of a country's cultural diplomacy is to project soft power.

D'Hooghe (2015) writes that the idea of soft power of winning the hearts and minds of the people has been around in China for more than two millennia. Mengzi (372–289 BC), whose text is attributed to the philosophy of Confucius, reflects this understanding of the power of attraction: "There is a way of getting the world: if you get the people, you will then get the world. There is a way to get the people:

if you get their hearts, you will then get the people. There is a way to get their hearts: that which you desire, share with them in accumulation, and that which you dislike, do not inflict on them. People turn towards benevolence like water flowing downwards” (D’Hooghe, 2015, p. 94–95). This is a testament to the fact that ancient Chinese philosophy had long understood the importance of attraction instead of coercion in dealing with people.

Nye (2005) explains that a country’s soft power is reliant on three basic resources: its culture, its political values, and its foreign policies, where such soft power is utilized not to coerce but to attract others into doing what you want them to do. Essentially, all these elements are utilized to influence a state or another actor in a non-coercive manner. While Chinese scholars and leaders have embraced the framework of Nye and his idea of soft power, the Chinese discourse has also included elements like education, the psychological and physical condition of people, technological culture, social cohesion, and socioeconomic development as the sources of soft power (Sun, 2023). The new cultural diplomacy announced at the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party in 2012 therefore calls for the formation of a collective cultural self-image of China through the adaptation of traditional national culture for contemporary global political discourse. In practice, China engages in teaching the Chinese language, mass media projection, and cultural activities such as exchanges of high-level and provincial visits by governmental officials, journalistic exchanges, student exchanges, and the establishment of sister and friendship cities.

China’s Cultural Engagement in South Asia

The growing engagement of China in the South Asian region is associated with and analyzed differently across the literature. Literature that points to South Asia as the backyard of India sees rising Chinese engagement in the region as a threat to India’s control, with which India now faces stiff competition. This perception of India as the regional power or hegemon of South Asia stems from its asymmetry in territory, its demographic size, its military dominance in the region, and its economic potential, where India perceives its neighboring countries as a major part of its national security (Wagner, 2016).

Researchers like Malik (2001) argue that one of the key features of Beijing’s South Asian policy has been India-centric, contending that China’s central objective is to prevent the rise of peer competitors or as he calls it, a real Asian rival to challenge China’s status as the sole middle kingdom. To weaken India’s similar ambitions, he argues, China arms its neighbors’ military arsenals through means that fall within the purview of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.

There is, however, another set of interpretations, one that sees China's engagement in the region not as geostrategic competition with India but as related to Beijing's comprehensive concept of security. Researchers like Freeman (2017) argue that the Chinese idea of comprehensive security interlinks economic development and security into a common thread, meaning that Beijing's engagement with South Asia to boost regional development would essentially serve its own security interests. In other words, stability in the region achieved through economic development and the prevention of external and domestic threats is valuable to China's own security. Similarly, Li (2007) further argues that a stable regional environment would not only create a precondition for smooth economic activities between China and its neighbors, but that the absence of conflict also allows China to focus on its internal affairs.

For smaller South Asian countries, China's greater engagement in the region has provided an alternative to India. India's increasing perception of China through the lens of strategic rivalry acts as an opportunity for states in the region to act more independently and play competing powers off against one another (Freeman, 2017). Furthermore, China is a relatively new player in the South Asian region compared to Southeast Asia and Northeast Asia, which means there has been less accumulated public or elite caution regarding China as a regional hegemon.

Chinese leaders have time and again emphasized friendly relations with South Asian states. Premier Li Peng noted that, together with South Asian countries, China is ready to write a new chapter of friendly relationships and cooperation (Palit, 2017). In 2006, President Hu Jintao remarked that a peaceful and prosperous South Asia was in the common interest of China, and that China hoped for a politically stable South Asia living in harmony and seeking common development (Hu, 2006). More recently, President Xi Jinping in 2014 emphasized the principles of Chinese diplomacy with its neighbors: peaceful coexistence and development, sincerity, reciprocity, and inclusivity, reaffirming China's desire to live in harmony with all countries in the South Asian region (Xi, 2014).

One extension of this friendly posture has been the way China has conducted cultural diplomacy with these countries. While the debates and narratives as to why China has advanced its engagement in South Asia have given rise to various contending narratives, one thing is certain: China's engagement in the region relies not on military tactics but on softer modes of engagement. China employs various approaches for cultural soft power, including promoting its arts, entertainment,

educational initiatives, cultural institutions, and youth exchange mechanisms, which are explained in the section below.

China's Cultural Diplomacy in Nepal

The history of China–Nepal cultural relations can be traced to the introduction of Buddhism in China in 67 AD. The 5th century was the period when Buddhist monks from Nepal were engaged in promoting Buddhist teachings in China. Buddhist scholar Buddhahadra was sent to China in 406 AD at the request of a Chinese monk to spread Buddhism there. Buddhahadra spent 21 years of his life in China translating Buddhist manuscripts from Sanskrit to Pali and Chinese (Nyaichyai & Adhakari, 2023). Similarly, Chinese traveler Fa Xian also stayed for 15 years in Nepal and India, learning and teaching Buddhist knowledge. The formal diplomatic relationship between the two countries began in 1955.

While China already has deeper economic involvement in Nepal, it is consistently making efforts to diversify its relations. The section below looks at the various modes of China's cultural engagement in Nepal.

Language Promotion

Promotion of the Mandarin language has been one of the cornerstones of China's cultural diplomacy in Nepal. During the 2024 state visit of Nepali Prime Minister Oli to China, the two countries signed an MoU to introduce volunteer Mandarin teachers into the Nepali public school system (Bhattarai, 2025). Chinese is taught in around 80 to 85 community schools, a figure expected to further expand. With the signing of the Chinese Teacher's Programme, many schools inside the Kathmandu valley have been provided with Chinese teachers to teach students basic Mandarin. The school does not pay the teachers but is required to provide a small stipend and accommodation (Lal, 2019).

Film Festivals, Book Fairs, and Other Cultural Festivals

China has also been promoting its films, art, and culture through the organization of various festivals. On January 9, 2025, Nepal marked its first China Film Day to promote cultural exchange between the two film industries (China Film Day, 2025). China has also helped Nepal organize the South Asian International Book Fair in 2023 and 2025, supported by the China International Communications Group. These book fairs have introduced China's development and culture to Nepal. At the 2025 South Asian International Book Fair, the Vice President of the China International Book Trading Corporation announced the organization's commitment to strengthening cultural exchange and fostering friendly relations between the

two countries (Book Fair, 2025). Similarly, various programmes such as Chinese Language Day, cultural exchange programs, and summer camps are routinely organized by Confucius Institutes established at different universities in Nepal.

Youth Initiatives

The Chinese Embassy Youth Pioneer Program was launched in 2024 to promote leadership development, social progress, community-based projects, and cultural exchange between Nepali youth and China. One of the outcomes of the program is that these young leaders become cultural ambassadors, promoting mutual understanding and cooperation between the two countries (Youth Pioneer Program, 2024). The Confucius Institute also arranges various youth initiatives, including the Outstanding Nepalese Youth Delegation to China in 2023, organized by CI at Tribhuvan University. In 2024, CI at TU also organized a summer camp, which was part of the China Bridge Communication and Cultural Exchange Program. These trends reflect China's eagerness to connect and engage with Nepali youth, and can be seen as a new dimension in Nepal–China relations (Bhattarai, 2025).

Education

Higher education has been one of the major aspects of Nepal–China cultural relations. An increasing number of Nepali students are now pursuing their higher education in China for their career prospects. China has introduced scholarship programs as well as short-term and long-term training programs and institutional collaborations to further encourage the movement of students to Chinese universities. In the academic year 2023/2024, a total of 71 Nepali students were awarded Chinese government scholarships to study at various Chinese universities (Huaxia, 2023), enrolling in a wide variety of disciplines including STEM, Chinese language courses, Chinese politics, and international economy. Apart from government scholarships, there are other options such as Confucius Institute Scholarships, South–South Cooperation Scholarships, and BRI scholarships, depending on the program to which students apply. There are also university scholarships and city government scholarships that cover a portion of study costs for self-financed students (Xavier & Jacob, 2023).

Nyaichyai and Adhakari (2023) found that many scholarship programs have encouraged Nepali students to pursue higher studies in China, contributing to greater familiarity with China, its language, its society, and its cultural values among Nepali youth. Special online classes aimed at helping students learn how to apply for Chinese scholarships are also provided in Nepal.

China has also been working to attract youth through academic exhibitions. In 2024, the China Scholarship Council and the Chinese Embassy in Nepal organized a China higher education exhibition in which 31 Chinese universities participated, aimed at bridging the information gap for Nepali students wishing to study in China. There are currently more than 2,500 Nepali students studying in China (Huaxia, 2024). Chinese Ambassador Chen Song notes that cultural exchange and cooperation between the two countries are an important cornerstone in building a closer China–Nepal community with a shared future (Huaxia, 2024).

In recent years, various Chinese universities have signed MoUs with key Nepali institutions, including Lumbini Buddhist University. In 2024, Beijing Language and Culture University and Lumbini Buddhist University signed a collaboration agreement on cultural exchange, language teaching, and research initiatives. In the presence of Prime Minister KP Oli, the two universities also agreed to establish the Nepal Institute of China in Beijing and the China Institute of Nepal in Lumbini (Nepal China University Collaboration, 2024).

Confucius Institutes

The Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu and Kathmandu University entered into an agreement to establish the Confucius Institute in Nepal. According to this agreement, KU and Hubei University of Economics and Business were co-partners of the Chinese Language Council International (Hanban) (CIKU, 2007). Since the establishment of CIKU in 2007, it has been engaging in various activities and participating in numerous programs. There are more than 199 activities categorized into three approaches to cultural diplomacy of CI: language, culture, and academic initiatives (Nyaichyai & Adhakari, 2023). Regular events include the celebration of various Chinese festivals organized by CIKU, as well as participation in festivals arranged by other Chinese officials in Nepal and co-hosting festivals with Nepali organizers.

The Confucius Institute at Tribhuvan University, Nepal's second such institution, was officially inaugurated in Kathmandu in 2020. It is a collaborative initiative between East China University of Technology (ECTU) and Qinghai Minzu University (QMU). Its primary goals are to offer Chinese language instruction, support Nepali educational institutions with Chinese language courses, and foster bilateral communication in language and culture between China and Nepal (TU Central Department of Management, 2023).

According to Hou Yanqi, the then Chinese Ambassador to Nepal, over 30,000 students are enrolled in the Confucius Institutes at Kathmandu University and

Tribhuvan University, providing a valuable workforce for Nepal's tourism, infrastructure, business, and trade sectors (China.org, 2022). Hou expressed hope that the two institutes would serve as a showcase for Chinese culture, promote cultural exchanges, and strengthen the China–Nepal relationship.

Sister City Relationships

China has expanded its cultural exchanges through the establishment of sister city relationships. Kathmandu and the Chinese city of Chengdu became sister cities in 2016, while Siddharthanagar (Bhairahawa) and the Chinese city of Baoji established a sister city relationship in 2017. Through this elevated relationship, the two cities are expected to strengthen cooperation across multiple areas and establish friendly ties (Xinhua, 2017). At the provincial level, Gandaki and Hainan Province established a sister province relationship in 2018, aiming to work bilaterally on development, tourism, trade, energy, and culture, as well as providing scholarships for 20 Nepali students to study in China (Sharma, 2018).

China Cultural Center and China Study Center

The China Cultural Center (CCC) in Nepal was established in 2012 through a bilateral agreement to enhance cultural ties between the two nations. Since its inception, the CCC has hosted numerous programs to promote Chinese culture, including performances by the Tianjin Symphony Orchestra, New Year concerts, and courses in conversational and traditional Mandarin (Gautam et al., 2021). The China Study Center (CSC), a non-governmental organization founded in 1999 by Nepali intellectuals, focuses on China's affairs and fosters cultural collaboration. In 2008, a high-level delegation led to the creation of 30 China Study Centers across Nepal, which facilitate socio-cultural activities including Mandarin instruction for Nepali youth (Gauttam et al., 2021).

Tourism

A 67 percent increase in Chinese tourists was observed in 2024, with around 101,879 Chinese tourists visiting Nepal. Beijing has also declared 2025 as Visit Nepal Year in China the first time China has committed to promoting another country's tourism at the national level. The Chinese Ambassador has announced several initiatives to encourage Chinese tourists to visit Nepal, including cultural exchange programs, attractive packages, and expanded flight options (Prasain, 2025).

China has launched several programs and festivals to encourage tourism and cultural exchange. The Dragon Boat Race Festival, jointly organized by Gandaki Province, Pokhara Metropolitan City, the Chinese Embassy in Nepal, and the Nepal Tourism

Board in 2024, included cultural performances and a food exhibition representing both countries (Kafle, 2024). The Second Lumbini International Peace Festival, organized by the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation in collaboration with the Chinese Embassy and other groups, included the Lumbini International Peace Marathon and the Lumbini International Peace Concert. Chinese Ambassador Chen Song noted that through this festival, cultural, sports, and people-to-people exchange between the countries will be strengthened (Lumbini Peace Festival, 2025).

Discussion

The use of education, cultural exchange programs, scholarships, and cultural institutions to increase student mobility and promote culture abroad plays a key role in international relations as a tool of soft power under cultural diplomacy. These activities promote cross-cultural communication and facilitate the exchange of perspectives between countries, leading to a deeper appreciation of the other's culture and helping reduce misunderstanding and negative stereotypes. In the contemporary world, almost all major powers, including China, have spent considerable resources promoting such interactions in order to win the hearts and minds of the global public.

However, such methods have not gone without criticism. For China, voices from the West have argued that cultural instruments like CI pose a threat to Western democratic values and serve to justify Chinese authoritarian rule, attaching host countries to a string of state propaganda. It is worth noting, however, that the cultural tools any state deploys will inevitably carry a political undertone. The political dimension in cultural diplomacy is not a unique characteristic of China's approach. Liu (2019) points out that cultural diplomacy has never been apolitical, even when it claims or appears to be so. More precisely, cultural diplomacy is a political activity designed to serve the national interest in cultural guise. Nye (2005) argues that China's cultural diplomacy aims at achieving dialogue between cultural connections; it does not seek to negate the hegemonic culture, nor does it replace it with a new hegemony. Many Western scholars, however, tend to believe that China's rise is coming at the expense of the already established powers.

The expansion of China's cultural diplomacy is also associated with its rise in the international system. As China became less reticent about its growing power, the international community began debating the China threat theory. China's previously low profile had allowed fears over its growing material might to cultivate a negative

international image (Suzuki, 2010). As a remedy to this, China sought to soothe its neighbors' fears through the good neighbor policy, which proved effective. China's increasingly accommodating foreign policies towards its neighbors led to a lively domestic discussion about the creation of soft power as a means of projecting a non-threatening image one that would allow China to be accepted as a global power (Suzuki, 2010).

In this context, CI in Nepal, as a reference for critical analysis, reveals that they have become a way to cultivate goodwill and have faced little criticism within Nepali academia. By refining their management systems, Confucius Institutes have improved their teaching quality and made a broader impact (Rana, 2021). This highlights both the increasing influence of CIs in Nepal and Beijing's effort to project a positive image through these institutes.

Confucius Institutes in South Asia, and particularly in Nepal, Sinha Palit (2022) argues, appear to be broadly in line with Beijing's soft power strategy. Such strategies often include achieving goals such as harmony, cooperation, and collaboration. While CI might be used in a more coercive way in the future, for now they serve as vital channels through which states in South Asia engage with China. Cultural activities at CI such as celebrating Chinese festivals, trying Chinese foods, and learning to sing and dance in the Chinese language are ways in which Chinese culture is disseminated abroad. It is through these activities that China first interacts with the world through CI, paving a sense of goodwill among those involved. As China's role in Nepal increases, these institutions help build a positive perception of China, which in turn attracts more youth a mutually beneficial outcome for China.

Liu (2018) further argues that study tours and scholarships for university students have proven to be an effective remedy for alleviating misperceptions of China, and this has been the case for Nepal. The number of students studying in China has been increasing yearly, and with various scholarships including CI scholarships, students gain a greater understanding of and affinity for the host country. Nyaichyai and Adhakari (2023) found that 66% of Nepali students reported knowing China better after studying there. Initially bewildered by the scale of Chinese infrastructure, students over time developed positive impressions, coming to view Chinese people as hardworking, cooperative, and helpful. This positive shift reflects how China's soft power effectively builds a favorable image through direct interaction. Sinha Palit (2022) further argues that educational exchange programs play a crucial

role in cultural promotion and international relations as a form of soft power, by fostering communication and the exchange of ideas between countries with diverse cultural backgrounds. Major powers like the US, UK, and China invest heavily in education programs and institutions to win the support of foreign citizens (Nye, 2005). Similarly, primary-level Mandarin classes for young students are less about teaching the language and more about familiarizing children with Chinese characters, songs, dances, customs, and culture. Parents are drawn to the perceived value of Mandarin for their children's futures, while China benefits from building a positive cultural impression at a young age (Lal, 2019).

Conclusion

The Chinese government has utilized various cultural methods of cultural diplomacy in Nepal, including Chinese teaching programs, cultural festivals, youth initiative programs, Confucius Institutes and other cultural institutions, the establishment of sister cities, and the promotion of tourism at the national level. The rationale behind such increasing cultural engagement in South Asia, this paper concludes, is the Chinese desire to project a benign and cooperative image of itself in the region. Evidence of the results of such efforts can be seen through the increasing number of students choosing to learn Chinese from the primary level through to higher education, boosted by the relatively easy availability of scholarship options, the presence of various Chinese scholarships, and an array of youth-targeted programs and training initiatives. The national-level declaration of Visit Nepal Year 2025 can be seen as another milestone in this trajectory. Taken together, these developments can be understood in the light of China's broader goal of fostering cooperation, harmony, and cultural exchange between the two nations.

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