

Soft Power Contestation in South Asia: Analyzing Bollywood and Chinese Cinema as Strategic Tools in the India-China Rivalry and Their Impact on Cultural Diplomacy and Regional Identity

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Abstract : This paper explores the use of Bollywood and Chinese movies as soft power instruments within the larger context of India-China contention in South Asia. As India and China compete for influence in South Asia, they have increasingly relied on cultural diplomacy, using cinema to change perceptions, promote goodwill, and build cultural linkages. Bollywood, with its long-standing popularity and cultural resonance, has been a powerful instrument for projecting Indian ideals and identity throughout South Asia. In contrast, China has made concerted attempts in recent years to promote its own films, showing Chinese culture and values in a positive manner to offset Bollywood's effect. This study examines the ways in which Chinese and Bollywood films influence public opinion and appeal to South Asian audiences while also supporting their respective countries' soft power goals. To learn about this, we take a mixed-methods approach that incorporates content analysis of popular Bollywood and Chinese films released in South Asia, focussing on issues such as cultural identity, nationalism, and social values. In addition, we use sentiment analysis and surveys to map how these two cinematic traditions are received in various South Asian countries. This study takes into account government activities and cultural policies that promote each country's cinema industry as a diplomatic instrument. The present study uses case studies from Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Bhutan to demonstrate the subtle ways in which Bollywood and Chinese movies influence regional attitudes. For example, in Nepal and Bangladesh, Bollywood's deep cultural ties have historically given India an advantage, but China's growing economic relations and media presence have presented Chinese cinema as an alternative cultural influence. In contrast, Sri Lanka exemplifies a complicated relationship in which Bollywood's cultural attraction is strong, but Chinese state-backed media diplomacy is making inroads, altering the cultural landscape. Due to limited cultural interchange and Bhutan's historical alignment with India, Chinese cinema has a small presence in the country. The findings highlight cinema's significance as a soft power tool in India and China's regional ambitions. Bollywood's emotional resonance and cultural familiarity have long bolstered India's prominence, but Chinese cinema's expansion reflects China's desire to shift cultural narratives in its favour. This paper closes by presenting insights into the broader implications of cultural diplomacy within the India-China competition, arguing that as India and China continue to compete for influence in South Asia, film will play an increasingly crucial role in defining the soft power environment.

Keywords : soft power, China, India, Bollywood, Chinese cinema

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