



A Critical Assessment Of Nepal–China Cultural Connect And Its Impact On India–Nepal Ties

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Abstract: This paper examines the emergence of Nepal–China cultural connections and their implications for India–Nepal relations. It addresses the central question: How does the deepening cultural diplomacy between Nepal and China affect India’s traditional influence and strategic interests in Nepal? The study synthesizes historical and contemporary evidence to show that Chinese cultural diplomacy – encompassing Confucius Institutes, language programs, scholarships, media presence, tourism promotion, and Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) symbolism – has intensified in Nepal since the 2000s. These efforts form part of China’s broader soft power strategy in South Asia (Kumar, 2025) (Jiadong & Thapa, 2026). While China’s cultural outreach has increased its visibility and influence, India’s deep-rooted religious, linguistic, and people-to-people ties still underpin strong Nepali affinity toward India (Singh, 2022) (The GreatNepalTreks blog, 2024). The analysis finds that China’s cultural connect is reshaping the regional power balance: Nepali public surveys and experts suggest India’s primacy is subtly challenged but not yet displaced (Singh, 2022) (Republica, 2019). By examining case studies (e.g. Kathmandu’s Confucius Institute, Sino-Nepal cultural events, high-level visits), and by comparing Chinese and Indian cultural instruments, the paper critically assesses constraints on China’s influence and Nepal’s own agency. Nepal has adopted a “multi-alignment” approach: it leverages both neighbors to advance its development and sovereignty. Finally, the paper also forwards some policy recommendations for all the players. These findings integrate realism, soft power, and constructivist perspectives. The study uses qualitative analysis of treaties, official documents, media reports, and scholarly sources.

Keywords: Nepal–China relations, cultural diplomacy, soft power, India–Nepal ties, Belt and Road Initiative, Confucius Institute.

Introduction and Research Objectives:

Nepal's unique geopolitical position—bordering both India and China—makes it a focal point of regional influence. Historically, Nepal's cultural and political orientation has been closely tied to India, sharing religion, language, and open borders (Treaty of Peace and Friendship, 1950) (Gurung & Joshi, 2020). In recent years, however, Nepal has cultivated a growing relationship with China, marked not only by infrastructure and economic projects under the BRI but also by “cultural connect” initiatives. This paper asks: What cultural diplomacy instruments are China and Nepal deploying, and how are they affecting India–Nepal relations? The objectives are (1) to outline the historical evolution of Nepal–China cultural ties; (2) to catalog and analyze contemporary instruments (institutes, language programs, scholarships, media, festivals, symbolism); (3) to evaluate impacts on India–Nepal cultural, political, economic and security relations; (4) to present case studies (e.g. Confucius Institute, BRI cultural framing, state visits); (5) to assess the limitations of China's cultural influence and the scope of Nepali agency; and (6) to recommend policy responses for the three countries. This comprehensive assessment is timely, as China's soft power strategy in South Asia intensifies amid Sino-Indian strategic competition (Kumar, 2025) (Singh, N. 2022). The analysis integrates multiple theories: realism (great-power competition over influence), soft power (Nye's concept of attraction and persuasion), and constructivism (cultural identity shaping preferences).

Methodology: This study is based on qualitative analysis of scholarly literature, government sources, and media reports. Primary sources include official MOUs (e.g. 1999 Cultural Cooperation, 2009 Youth Exchange), Belt and Road agreements, and Nepali foreign ministry statements (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026). Secondary sources include peer-reviewed articles and think-tank reports. Surveys (e.g. Nepali public opinion) are incorporated where available. Tables and charts summarize quantitative indicators (e.g. Confucius Institutes count, scholarship numbers, tourist arrivals).

Theoretical Framework:

This study uses three theoretical lenses. Realist theory sees Nepal as a strategic buffer state; it predicts that major powers (India and China) will seek maximum influence, making Nepal a competitive arena. Indeed, China's “cultural incursion” in Nepal can be interpreted as part of great-power competition for leverage (Kumar, 2025). Soft-power theory (Nye) emphasizes attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. China's Confucius Institutes, scholarships, cultural festivals and media aim to win Nepali hearts and minds, complementing its hard investments. Soft power contests in Nepal are shaped by narratives and symbols – from shared Buddhist heritage to China's image as a friendly donor – which India must counter with its own cultural appeal (Singh, 2022) (Bhusal, 2025).. Constructivism highlights the role of identity, norms and discourse. Nepal's self-image as a Hindu-Buddhist nation with “ancient ties” to India shapes public affinity (Singh, 2022) (Gurung & Joshi, 2019). Yet Nepalese identity is evolving amid democratic politics

and globalization; China's promotion of shared Asian or Buddhist values (e.g. Silk Road heritage) challenges Indian-centric narratives (Bhusal, 2025) (Jiadong & Thapa, 2026). The interplay of these theories helps explain why Nepal can strategically adopt both Chinese and Indian cultural influences without fully allying with either.

Historical Background (Pre-1950s to Present):

Nepal–China relations draw on centuries of cultural exchange. The 7th-century transmission of Buddhism from Nepal into Tibet (and then China) exemplifies long-standing people-to-people links (Kumar, 2025) (Bhusal, 2025). Historical trade routes (Silk Road, Tea Horse Road, Himalayan salt routes) connected Himalayan regions (Bhusal, 2025). Notably, the Shakya clan (Buddha's family) had ties to China. However, modern diplomatic relations only began in 1955 when Nepal, seeking alternatives to excessive Indian dependence, formally recognized Communist China (The Annapurna Express, 2019).. Since then, relations have seen steady growth.

Key early developments: In 1950 Nepal and India signed the Treaty of Peace and Friendship, reflecting Kathmandu's cultural affinity to New Delhi (Gurung & Joshi, 2019). Soon after, China extended economic aid: in 1956 China pledged Rs 60 million (then substantial) to Nepal (The Annapurna Express, 2019). The 1961 Sino-Nepal border treaty peacefully resolved frontier issues, and China built the Arniko Highway (linking Kathmandu to the Chinese border), physically connecting the two cultures (The Annapurna Express, 2019). These projects broke Nepal's dependence on India for access. High-level visits from the 1960s onward (e.g. Zhou Enlai, Deng Xiaoping, Chinese premiers and Nepali monarchs) helped institutionalize ties (The Annapurna Express, 2019) (Republica, 2019).

Recent history: From the 1980s onward, Nepal balanced India and China diplomatically. India remained a dominant cultural-political partner (e.g. Hindi films, Nepali in India's parliament, millions living across the open border) (Gurung & Joshi, 2019), but Nepal's multiparty politics and the 1990 People's Movement invited Beijing to engage more. Since the mid-2010s, Chinese aid and investments surged. China's robust post-earthquake aid (2015) and assistance during India's 2015 blockade of Nepal cemented ties (Jiadong & Thapa, 2026) (Gurung & Joshi, 2019). In 2017 Nepal joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal, 2026). In the last decade, Kathmandu hosted numerous Chinese cultural and diplomatic missions, and Beijing's domestic emphasis on "civilizational continuity" meshed with Nepal's pride in its Buddhist heritage (Bhusal, 2025). Throughout, Nepal has sought to maintain sovereignty by "balancing" both neighbors.

While China's relations are younger than India's, they rest on different features. Indian influence in Nepal has been historical and non-institutional ("shared Hindu culture, Hindi films, free movement") (Singh, 2022) (The GreatNepalTreks blog, 2024). Chinese influence has grown through formal channels

(embassies, MOUs) and infrastructure. The chart above and table below outline milestones of cultural engagement.

Contemporary Cultural Diplomacy Instruments:

China's modern cultural diplomacy in Nepal has expanded rapidly. Key instruments include:

- **Confucius Institutes (CIs):** Chinese government-funded centers that teach Mandarin and promote culture. Nepal opened its first CI at Kathmandu University (2007) and a second at Tribhuvan University (2022) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal, 2026). A smaller “Confucius Classroom” was also set up at LRI International College (DigMandarin, 2023). Together, these institutes offer language classes, cultural events (like Chinese festivals), and outreach. They serve as visible symbols of China's cultural presence (Kumar, 2025) (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal, 2026). (By contrast, India has few comparable cultural institutes in Nepal; Indian cultural diplomacy has been less formalized).
- **Language and Education Programs:** China provides up to 100 full scholarships annually for Nepali students to study in Chinese universities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal, 2026). In tourism, China trained 200 Nepali tour professionals (40/year during 2016–18) in Mandarin (Kumar, 2025). In 2024, Nepal and China signed an MoU to bring volunteer Chinese language teachers to Nepal (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal, 2026). These initiatives aim to foster a pro-China constituency. In parallel, joint academic programs emerged: for example, Lumbini Buddhist University and Beijing Language and Culture University agreed on cultural and linguistic exchange in Dec 2024 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal, 2026).
- **Scholarships and Youth Exchanges:** Beyond university scholarships, China supports cultural and youth exchange programs. A 1999 MoU on Cultural Cooperation and a 2009 Youth Exchange MoU formalized this partnership (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal, 2026). Each year, China hosts youth delegations (e.g. student or cultural troupe visits), sports exchanges, and provides cultural grants. These programs nurture Nepali youth familiarity with China.
- **Festivals and Events:** Chinese-themed cultural festivals have become common. China co-organizes events like the annual “Nepal-China Friendship Day”, Chinese New Year celebrations in Kathmandu, and Lumbini Peace Concerts featuring Chinese artists (South Asia Network TV, 2026). In Dec 2023, the 3rd International Peace Festival Concert in Lumbini showcased Nepali and Chinese musicians together (South Asia Network TV, 2026). China's embassy and cultural center in Kathmandu actively promote joint cultural events and exhibitions, underscoring “civilizational links” (e.g. Buddhist conferences in Lumbini, cultural heritage seminars). (By contrast, Indian festivals in Nepal, such as Diwali or Bollywood film events, largely rely on organic community ties rather than government sponsorship).

- **Media and Information:** Beijing has amplified its media presence. Chinese state outlets (Xinhua News Agency, China Radio International) publish Nepali language content and operate bureaus in Kathmandu (Kumar, 2025). The China Global Television Network (CGTN) also broadcasts to Nepal. Chinese-run social media pages and local joint publications promote tourism and China-Nepal friendship. This contrasts with India's media influence (e.g. Hindi TV shows) which pre-existed but is not a centralized diplomatic tool.
- **Tourism Promotion:** China actively markets Nepal to its tourists. Initiatives like "Visit Nepal Year" (launched with China as partner), joint Buddhist pilgrimage programs (e.g. Lumbini–Mount Wutai Festival), and e-visa facilitation for Chinese nationals boost people-to-people links (Jiadong & Thapa, 2026) (Pokharel, 2026). As a result, Chinese visitors to Nepal grew from under 5,000 in 2002 to over 169,000 by 2019 (Pokharel, 2026), though they dipped to ~96,000 by 2025 due to unrest (Pokharel, 2026). Tourism partnerships, often framed around shared Buddhist heritage, serve as informal cultural exchange. India, by comparison, remains the largest tourist source overall (especially land border crossings), but China is now a top two air-market for Nepal (Pokharel, 2026) (The GreatNepalTreks blog, 2024).
- **Belt and Road Cultural Symbolism:** Chinese infrastructure projects often include cultural elements. For instance, Chinese-funded buildings (temples, government complexes) sometimes incorporate Chinese architectural styles. In Kathmandu's new hospitals and schools (built with Chinese grants), plaques emphasize "Sino-Nepal friendship" and quotes from leaders. During the 2017 BRI MOU signing and the 2024 Framework Agreement, Nepal highlighted cultural cooperation as a BRI objective (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal, 2026). Chinese delegations regularly point to heritage restoration projects (Durbar High School, temples) as evidence of "cultural friendship" (Jiadong & Thapa, 2026). These symbolic acts reinforce soft power. India's equivalent (e.g. funding Hindu temples or promoting yoga) is mostly non-governmental and diffuse.
- **Sister-city and Academic Ties:** Several Nepalese and Chinese cities/universities have twinning arrangements, facilitating student exchanges and cultural visits. For example, Kathmandu-Beijing has sister city status, and scholars from Nepali universities (like IFA) sign MOUs with Chinese institutions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal, 2026). These sustained links foster long-term networks.

Table 1 below summarizes major cultural-diplomacy instruments of China in Nepal, with available quantitative data.

Instrument	Chinese Initiative	Scale/Indicators
Confucius Institutes	Institutes at Kathmandu Univ (est. 2007) and Tribhuvan Univ (2022); classroom at LRI	2 institutes; Chinese-funded; language & culture classes
Language Training	Scholarships (≤ 100 Nepali/year); Mandarin training for 200 tour operators (2016–18)	~100 students/year in China; 200 tourism pros trained
Scholarships & Exchange	China-Nepal Cultural Cooperation MoU (1999); Youth Exchange MoU (2009)	Delegations (students, youth, artists) annually; 6-month tours
Festivals/Events	Lumbini Peace Concerts (2022–23); Nepal–China Friendship Day; Chinese New Year galas	3rd Peace Concert (Dec 2023); dozens of events/year
Media	Xinhua, CRI Nepali bureaus; China Cultural Center Kathmandu broadcasts	(Output): Nepali articles, radio programs; Center sponsors concerts
Tourism Promotion	Visit Nepal Year (partnered with China); Buddhist pilgrimage ties	Chinese tourists: 169,543 in 2019; 101,874 in 2024; 95,480 (2025)
Heritage & Aid	Post-2015 earthquake reconstruction of temples (e.g. Durbar School)	China pledged large reconstruction aid; rebuilt key sites
BRI Symbolism	BRI MoU (2017) & Framework (2024) include culture; tourist corridor	2017 MoU signed; BRI projects (rail, roads) under planning
Academic Ties	MoUs: IFA–China Foreign Affairs Univ (2015); Lumbini Univ–Beijing LCU (2024)	Joint research; faculty exchanges; language programs

Table 1: Key Cultural Diplomacy Instruments in Nepal–China Relations (1999–2025). Sources: Nepal MoFA, Kumar 2025, Republica 2026, and others.

In sum, China’s cultural engagement in Nepal is multifaceted and state-driven, with growing institutional backing. The Nepali government acknowledges these initiatives in its foreign ministry reports (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal, 2026). Importantly, China’s cultural diplomacy is closely linked to infrastructure and aid: e.g. Chinese aid pledges to restore a historic temple (Jiadong & Thapa, 2026) are framed as preserving “shared heritage.”

Impacts on India–Nepal Relations:

The deepening Sino-Nepal cultural connection influences India–Nepal ties across several dimensions:

- **Cultural Dimension:** India’s longstanding cultural affinity (Hindi language, Hindu religion, social ties) remains strong. Surveys show Nepalis still feel closer to India culturally: one study found 70% of Kathmandu residents see India as more “visible” in daily life, vs. 26% for China (Singh, 2022). Familial

and religious bonds (pilgrimages to India, intermarriages) continue (Singh, 2022) (Gurung & Joshi, 2019). Chinese culture (Mandarin, Confucius events) is unfamiliar to most Nepalis, and concerns exist about “cultural incursion” (Kumar, 2025). However, China’s increased visibility – through schools, media, tourism – is gradually raising its profile, especially among urban youth. For example, Nepali students taking Chinese courses or attending cultural festivals may develop sympathetic views towards China. But broad public affinity to India remains dominant (Singh, 2022) (The GreatNepalTreks blog, 2024).

- **Political Dimension:** Politically, China’s cultural outreach strengthens its geopolitical foothold in Kathmandu. Nepali elites see China as a reliable partner that “respects sovereignty” (no political strings) (Jiadong & Thapa, 2026), unlike perceptions of India’s past influence (e.g. 2015 blockade episode). The Indian government faces criticism in Nepal for interfering (e.g. trade treaties, border disputes). In contrast, China is praised for grants and aid (including cultural projects). This shifts Nepal’s strategic calculations: policymakers feel freer to lean towards Beijing without immediate backlash. At the same time, India’s diplomatic influence has dipped: meetings and joint statements show more cautious Delhi rhetoric recently. For instance, India publicly welcomed Nepal’s BRI signing (avoiding a direct challenge), reflecting its delicate position as China’s influence grows (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal, 2026) (Gurung & Joshi, 2019). Culturally, India’s soft power in Nepal (films, education) remains intact, but official Indian cultural diplomacy has not matched China’s recent push; some analysts warn this could gradually erode India’s traditional predominance in Nepal’s worldview (Singh, 2022) (Kumar, 2025).

- **Economic Dimension:** Chinese cultural diplomacy is intertwined with economic ties, which indirectly affect India-Nepal economics. As China builds trust through scholarships and festivals, it solidifies economic partnerships (railroads, hydropower). For instance, when Nepal welcomed Chinese investment (Pokhara Airport, hydel projects) (Gurung & Joshi, 2019), the Chinese narrative emphasized civilizational friendship. This contrasts with India, which remains Nepal’s larger trade partner (\$8.2B vs China’s \$1.56B in 2017/18) (Gurung & Joshi, 2019) but has been perceived as less generous. Indian economic projects often come with less fanfare, limiting soft-power gain. The quantitative rise of Chinese tourists (2019 peak) showed cultural outreach converting into economic benefits; the later slump (2024-25) reflects political tensions, underscoring the fragility of this route. India still supplies most essential goods and hosts millions of Nepali workers (Gurung & Joshi, 2019), which reinforces its economic tie and, by extension, cultural influence. But the fear is that if Nepali business and student orientation shifts gradually to China, Indian businesses and universities could lose ground.

- **Security Dimension:** Cultural connections have subtle security implications. Nepal’s commitment to the One-China policy (acknowledging Tibet as part of China) and willingness to suppress Tibetan advocacy at Beijing’s behest (Gurung & Joshi, 2019) partly stem from confidence in Chinese support. China’s cultural ties with Nepalese army (e.g. PLA assistance, cultural exchanges between militaries) give Beijing influence in Nepali security circles. Indian security interests (border management, insurgency

concerns) are therefore complicated by China's cultural inroads: e.g. Nepali police now receive training influenced by Chinese doctrine, which some Indian analysts view warily. Conversely, Indian cultural ties (e.g. training of Nepali military in India, shared drills) have weakened as Nepalis join Chinese joint exercises instead. Politically inspired protests (like the 2015–17 Madhesi and Gen-Z movements) showed Nepal sometimes siding against India, indirectly benefiting Chinese interests. Overall, cultural affinity to India remains high among citizens, which tempers overt security realignments. But India is aware that Chinese soft power in Nepal can presage greater Chinese influence over strategic decisions (e.g. allowing Chinese border patrolling, railways to Tibet) (Gurung & Joshi, 2019) (Kumar, 2025).

Public Perception Case: A survey of Kathmandu residents revealed that despite China's visible infrastructure projects, Nepalis still expressed more personal affinity to India (Singh, 2022). For example, 60% felt India more relevant to their economic development (vs 39% for China) (Singh, 2022). Moreover, 56% of respondents said Nepal should cultivate relations with India and China equally (Singh, 2022), indicating Nepal's balancing preference. This suggests that Chinese cultural diplomacy has not yet overcome India's longstanding soft power. India's strategic interest group including media, civil society, and diaspora therefore remains influential. As one Nepali scholar noted, India's local development projects (schools, hospitals) resonate more subtly with the public than China's grand infrastructure (Singh, 2022).

In summary, China's cultural connect has introduced new elements into India–Nepal relations: it undercuts India's exclusive hold on Nepali sentiment and creates room for Nepal to negotiate. But it also reinforces Nepal's inclination to pursue an “equidistant” policy. India sees China's cultural tools (festivals, language, aid) as soft encroachments that must be met by greater Indian people-to-people engagement. The strategic implications are that India must revitalize its cultural ties (education exchanges, cultural centers, Bollywood outreach) to remain competitive.

Case Studies:

1. Confucius Institute at Kathmandu University (2007): Nepal's first CI exemplifies early Chinese cultural penetration. Established in 2007 with Chinese funding, it offers Mandarin courses to Nepali students and organizes cultural events (e.g. Chinese New Year celebrations). Nepali reactions were mixed: some welcomed the chance to learn Chinese for career prospects, while critics warned of undue “propaganda” influence (Kumar, 2025). India's analogous initiative – the late opening of an Indian Culture Centre in Kathmandu (1992) – never matched such scale. Over time, the CI expanded with donated facilities and Nepali staff. Its success encouraged a second CI in 2022 at Tribhuvan University (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal, 2026). This case illustrates how China used academic diplomacy to seed grassroots influence. India responded by bolstering scholarships (e.g. Indian Council for Cultural Relations quotas) but still lacks a similar nationwide language program.

2. BRI Projects with Cultural Framing: Chinese infrastructure in Nepal often comes with cultural narratives. For example, the 2020 project to renovate the historic Dharahara Tower (destroyed in 2015 quake) was financed by China with Chinese architectural input, emphasizing “revival of shared heritage” (Jiadong & Thapa, 2026). Similarly, plans for a Pokhara International Airport (Chinese-funded) include Buddhist-inspired design motifs. In July 2023, Nepal and China co-hosted a “Lumbini–Mount Wutai Buddhist Cultural Festival” (drawing pilgrims from both nations), tying a major BRI project (rail connectivity) to Buddhist linkages (Jiadong & Thapa, 2026). These case studies show China deliberately frames development as cultural cooperation. For India, which initiated the Kailash Mansarovar pilgrimage circuit involving Nepal, this overlapped cultural-economic diplomacy. However, in contrast, Chinese-led cultural framing has occurred more quickly under the BRI’s umbrella, signaling to Nepalis that Chinese roads and rails can also honor their heritage.

3. High-Level State Visits (2019 Xi Jinping visit): In October 2019, President Xi’s state visit to Kathmandu showcased cultural diplomacy. Among the signed agreements were cultural exchanges and increased scholarships. Public events included a gala where Xi and Nepali President Bhandari jointly pressed a digital “Nepal-China Friendship” capsule. Chinese media highlighted this as a symbol of “ancient friendship” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nepal, 2026). Indian media noted that no comparable Indian leader visit occurred at that time, raising concerns in Delhi. The visit’s soft power impact was subtle but significant: it broadcast on Nepali TV and newspapers, reinforcing China’s image at the top level. The case underscores how diplomatic choreography (speeches, gifts, joint press communiqués) reinforces cultural ties. India, which had conducted many Nepali PM visits to Delhi, saw its own cultural prestige wane as China gained comparable high-profile engagements.

4. Cultural and Educational Exchanges (Youth Festivals): In 2022–23, Chinese embassies in Nepal sponsored youth festivals (art, sports) with joint Nepali-Chinese teams. For instance, during the “Nepal Year of China” campaign (post-COVID reopening), cultural troupes toured multiple Nepali provinces, performing Chinese opera and martial arts. Local schools began adopting optional Mandarin classes (with Chinese teachers). In contrast, India’s youth exchange programs in Nepal, though longstanding, are less visible (some NB’s ICCR scholarships and youth delegations but no large-scale cultural spectacles). These exchanges directly influence younger Nepalis’ perceptions. A Nepali student attending a Chinese poetry contest might come to view China positively. These grassroots programs complement higher-level diplomacy and indicate China’s effort to build a new generation of Nepali elites more China-friendly. The long-term case study will be whether these students maintain ties (like alumni networks) and if Indian soft power can match them.

These cases illustrate that Chinese cultural diplomacy in Nepal is strategic, well-funded, and sometimes assertive. They also show Nepal’s pragmatic reception: Nepali leaders welcome whatever resources advance development and prestige, often playing both sides.

Limits of Chinese Cultural Influence and Nepal's Agency:

Despite China's vigorous efforts, there are clear limits. First, India's cultural foundations in Nepal remain deep: Hinduism, Buddhism, Nepali language (an Indo-Aryan tongue), Bollywood films, and familial ties are part of daily life (Singh, 2022) (Gurung & Joshi, 2019). Surveys confirm Nepalis retain personal affinity to India's culture (Singh, 2022). Indian cuisine, festivals, and education in Sanskrit/Hindi schools still flourish. China cannot easily displace these organic connections. Second, many Nepalis view Indian culture as more "authentic" to their heritage; Chinese culture is sometimes seen as foreign. Incidents like protesting Chinese "history maps" or Tibetan activism suppression illustrate Nepali sensitivity. For example, in 2021, massive online campaigns in Nepal erupted when China objected to a Nepalese textbook map (Thomas, 2022). This backlash shows Nepal's population will resist perceived Chinese overreach.

Nepal's Agency: Importantly, Nepal is not a passive target; it skillfully maneuvers between India and China. Nepali foreign policy is officially neutral and multi-aligned. Kathmandu uses Chinese offers to leverage better deals from India (e.g. when China promised alternate transit, India responded by ensuring gas supplies). Kathmandu also emphasizes its sovereignty and cultural heritage: Nepal invests its own funds in cultural preservation (e.g. restoring temples after earthquake) so as not to be seen as ceding influence to foreigners. In educational policy, Nepal still mandates Nepali language and textbooks have not included Chinese propaganda.

Nepalese domestic politics can check Chinese influence: e.g., nationalist parties have criticized accepting large Chinese loans or questioned unilateral Chinese projects. The 2025 protests (Gen-Z movement) against what some saw as government capitulation (even if not directly cultural) showed Nepali citizenry demands accountability; these protests led to flight cancellations from China (Joseph, 2025). Thus public opinion can limit Chinese soft power impact.

China's Self-Imposed Limits: In some cases, China itself voluntarily avoids controversy. Chinese diplomats in Nepal often publicly respect Nepal's sovereignty and refrain from harsh criticisms on local issues (contrasting India's occasional moralizing tone). This "non-interference" stance (Jiadong & Thapa, 2026) is attractive to Nepal but also means Chinese cultural messaging avoids topics like democracy or human rights (thus limiting its persuasiveness with liberal youths).

Finally, India's responses matter. Recent years saw India launching its own cultural revival: increased Hindi programmes in Nepali radio, Bollywood film festivals, and temple restoration projects in Nepal (e.g. Guru Purnima celebrations, infrastructural aid to temples) have been steps to reaffirm Indian presence. If India intensifies such programs, it could blunt China's gains.

In summary, China's cultural connect, though expanding, competes against entrenched Indian influence and Nepali nationalism. The Nepali government and society retain significant agency: they can welcome Chinese aid yet maintain traditional identity, and shift alliances as national interests dictate.

Policy Recommendations:

Given the analysis above, we propose the following:

- **For India:** Reinvigorate cultural diplomacy to underscore shared heritage. India should increase scholarships for Nepali students (beyond existing quotas), support Nepali cultural sites (e.g. temple renovation, academic chairs in Buddhist studies), and promote exchange programs. Indian media outreach (e.g. Nepali-language programming on DD or All India Radio) should be enhanced. Crucially, India should listen to Nepali concerns (e.g. over border treaties) to rebuild trust. Working with Nepali civil society (e.g. interfaith initiatives, educational partnerships) can counterbalance Chinese initiatives. Maintaining open attitudes at border crossings and facilitating Nepali pilgrims will continue to sustain people-to-people ties. In essence, India must match China's soft power investment to prevent erosion of its "natural cultural linkage" (Singh, 2022).
- **For Nepal:** Continue pursuing balanced relations. Nepal should carefully manage Chinese projects to ensure broad benefits (e.g. local employment, cultural preservation clauses). Kathmandu can maximize benefits by negotiating cultural conditions in BRI projects (scholarships, heritage co-operation) while avoiding debt traps. Nepal should also diversify its partnerships (e.g. with western or other Asian countries) to avoid overdependence. Preserving its open border with India and respecting cross-border communities will maintain cultural pluralism at home. Nepalese authorities might consider their own "soft power" initiatives abroad (showcasing Nepali culture in China and India) to assert agency. Politically, Nepal should align with whichever partner aids its development goals without compromising sovereignty.
- **For China:** Continue cultural engagement but with transparency. China should increase joint cultural projects that have local input (e.g. co-managed Buddhist festivals), rather than one-sided displays. Public diplomacy efforts should address Nepali concerns (e.g. on Tibet issue) and avoid provoking nationalist sentiments. Sustaining aid to heritage sites should involve Nepali stakeholders. China could fund more Nepali-led cultural institutes (e.g. scholarships for Nepali researchers in Buddhist studies). Being sensitive to Nepal's internal politics (not favoring one party) will help its soft power. In sum, China's approach should be "helpful partner" rather than overt influencer, respecting Nepal's desire to engage with both neighbors.

Conclusion:

Nepal–China cultural connect has grown substantially since the late 20th century and plays an important role in the emerging regional balance. China’s extensive use of soft-power tools (language institutes, scholarships, media, festivals, cultural aid) has increased its visibility in Nepal and offered Kathmandu alternatives to its traditional reliance on India. This cultural diplomacy is not incidental: it is part of Beijing’s geostrategic aim to expand influence in South Asia.

However, India’s cultural influence in Nepal – rooted in shared religion, language, and history – endures as the backdrop. Public opinion surveys confirm that most Nepalis still feel a stronger personal affinity to India (Singh, 2022). Thus, China’s cultural gains in Nepal, while significant, coexist with a persistent Indian footprint. The net effect on India–Nepal ties has been to introduce competition and necessitate reengagement by India, but not to sever the deep India–Nepal cultural bond.

The future trajectory will depend on continuing developments: whether Chinese tourists resume growth, how effectively India counters with its own soft power, and how Nepalese domestic politics navigate these influences. Data gaps remain (e.g. the qualitative impact of joint festivals on perception), and further research could involve field interviews in Nepal. For now, the evidence suggests that Nepal, as a sovereign actor, will strategically balance both neighbors. India–Nepal ties will likely remain strong in cultural terms, but India must not take this for granted; it must actively participate in Nepal’s cultural sphere to maintain its traditional role.

In conclusion, the Nepal–China cultural connection is reshaping but not overturning the Himalayan cultural landscape. It underscores the importance of soft power in South Asian geopolitics. By critically assessing these dynamics, this paper contributes to understanding how culture diplomacy intersects with national interests, and offers policy insights for maintaining stability and mutual benefits in the India–Nepal–China nexus.

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