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Charm Offensive: Shaping Chinese Perceptions in Nepal

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Abstract

In recent years, much of the focus of China's new engagements in Nepal has been on converging interests or increasing Chinese economic and political influence in the country. But little attention has been devoted to analysing China's cultural diplomacy, which seeks to reinforce a positive image of China in Nepal, and how it shapes public narratives in the country. This chapter carries out a qualitative analysis of China's soft power influence to show how Beijing positions itself as a 'good neighbour' to Nepal. It uses select case studies to analyse China's preferred semiotics and visible public diplomacy in the years since 2008. In doing so, this chapter explains how China has attempted to forge a favourable narrative in Nepal that upholds its interests.

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Introduction

China's increasing political and economic influence in Nepal has been the subject of several studies in recent years, especially following the undeclared 2015 Indian 'blockade', Nepal joining the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2017, and the proposed trans-Himalayan railway network connecting Tibet to Kathmandu. However, a wider study on how China is perceived in Nepal, and how it shapes public narratives in the country via its diplomatic mission's public outreach programmes, has not yet been conducted.

In this chapter, using select qualitative case studies, I argue that China has expanded its soft diplomacy efforts in Nepal since 2008 in a bid to create a narrative that is favourable to its goals. Similarly, the semiotics around China's definition of bilateral ties inform us of its efforts to include Nepal within its international narrative. Finally, China's outreach programmes in Nepal with respect to Tibet seek to emphasise its position in and sovereignty over Tibet in a neighbouring country with a large number of Tibetan exiles (and which has previously witnessed large-scale demonstrations by such exiles). Seen together, these soft diplomacy efforts intend to promote a positive image of China in a country that only became an immediate neighbour in 1950. As such, these efforts must be regarded as complementary to China's wider influence in Nepal.

A focus on cultural outreach

In an interview in June 2007, the then Chinese ambassador in Kathmandu, Zheng Xianglin, began by saying, "China doesn't speak out regularly about Nepal's politics, but when it does, it does not mince its words". One of the questions put to the ambassador was, "Why does China conduct a low-profile diplomacy in Nepal as compared to other influential

nations?" (Sharma, 2007). In 2021, such a question would elicit extreme surprise. In 2020 alone, the current ambassador, Hou Yanqi, gave at least six interviews to the Nepali press¹ and wrote at least five articles for Nepali newspapers.² Chinese diplomacy in Nepal is no longer regarded as low profile, especially since the ambassador's visits with Nepali political leaders during the crisis in the Nepal Communist Party in 2020 were widely covered by both domestic and international media.

Ambassador Hou's term, which began in December 2018, is marked by a new scrutiny arising from China's perceived influence on Nepali political actors and institutions as well as Kathmandu's professed policy of non-alignment. Such scrutiny is natural. The global US–China contest has left its mark on Nepali internal politics, giving rise to much discussion on the US' Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Compact and Nepal's involvement in China's BRI. Similarly, high-level Indian authorities have alleged that Nepal's protests against a new Indian road in the contested territory of Kalapani were encouraged by China, especially because Nepal has been perceived as growing closer to China since the 2015 'unofficial' Indian blockade.

Prior to 2020, however, Ambassador Hou's public presence was distinguished by her activities in the sphere of cultural diplomacy. In March 2019, on International Women's Day, the ambassador and her colleagues danced to a Nepali song while wearing traditional Nepali attire (Hou, 2019b). In December 2019, she asked Nepalis to follow her and retweet her post about a Chinese film festival to win free tickets (Khabarhub, 2019). Then, on the last day of 2019, she posted several pictures of herself at various tourist sites in Kathmandu to promote the Visit Nepal Year 2020 campaign. She wrote, "Beautiful Nepal with history, diversity and nature deserves a visit" (Hou, 2019c). On Dashain, Nepal's biggest festival, the ambassador released a video of her and

¹ The ambassador's interviews were carried by the *Naya Patrika*, *Annapurna Express*, *Online Khabar* (in both English and Nepali), *Gorkhapatra*, ABC Television, Nepal Television, and Radio Nepal.

² In *Republica*, *Annapurna Post*, *Naya Patrika*, and twice in *Gorkhapatra*.

her colleagues singing the popular Nepali folk song, “Resham Firiri” (see Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2020).

Ambassador Hou’s push for cultural initiatives is, in many ways, a continuation of earlier Chinese moves towards cultivating soft power in Nepal. Her predecessor, Ambassador Yu Hong, had similarly launched books (Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2018b), attended a Nepal–China literature seminar (Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2018c) and the launch of the Nepal Tourism website in the Chinese language (Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2018e), and joined the opening ceremony of a Chinese language training course (Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2018d). As Yu wrote in August 2018,

“China held seven China Festivals and eight China Education Fairs successfully in Nepal. The exchanges of literature, publication, music and fine arts between the two countries are frequent... The Governance of China (Volume I) written by President Xi Jinping was translated into Nepali language and widely welcomed in Nepal”. (Hong, 2018)

Such public diplomacy comes into renewed focus with President Xi Jinping’s emphasis on cultural cooperation and people-to-people exchanges as a key element of Beijing’s foreign policy, especially in neighbouring countries. In 2013, Xi said,

“We should well introduce China’s domestic and foreign policies to the outside world, clearly tell China’s story, spread China’s voice, and integrate the Chinese dream with the desire of the people of the neighbouring countries for a good life, and with the prospects for regional development, letting the awareness of community of common destiny take root in the neighbouring countries”. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2013)

With respect to Nepal, Chinese public diplomacy emphasises the shared histories of the two countries and places the overall bilateral relationship within a framework of mutual respect, while also underlining the

importance of Nepal in Beijing’s worldview. Chinese diplomacy makes itself visible to the common Nepali through cultural diplomacy tools and raises Nepal’s prestige via efforts such as choosing Nepal to be the theme country at the Beijing International Photo Exhibition in October 2020 (RSS, 2020).

Such public outreach tools have increasingly been used by the Chinese mission in Nepal since 2008, when Kathmandu witnessed months-long protests against the Beijing Olympics by Tibetan exiles. This was also a year when China lost its “permanent friend” in the country—i.e., the monarchy—after Nepal became a republic (for more on this, see Mulmi, 2021). The then ambassador, Zheng Xianglin, urged the interim Nepali government under Girija Prasad Koirala to “honestly carry out its commitment and not allow these anti-Chinese activities to happen so rapidly in Nepal” (cited in Human Rights Watch, 2008, p. 58). While China has engaged widely with political and security establishments via aid and agreements, its efforts to change the way Tibet is viewed in Nepal have not been studied much.

In 2009, the *Tibet of China: Past and Present* photo exhibition was organised in Kathmandu on the “50th anniversary of democratic reforms” to show “the process of Tibet from darkness to brightness, from poverty to prosperity, from autocratic rule to democracy, and from self-seclusion to opening up” (Sitaula & Zang, 2008). The exhibition was among the first of its kind and sought to shift the narrative on Tibet to align more closely with Beijing’s views. The then Nepal minister for information and communications, Shankar Pokharel, said that the exhibit “unveiled the bitter truth of past as well as glimpse of prosperous present of Tibet” (Sitaula & Zang, 2008). Thereafter, although the scope of exhibitions has widened to include Chinese book fairs (in 2014), intangible culture (in 2017), and Tibetan embroidery and arts (in 2017), the emphasis has been on Xi Jinping’s new neighbourhood policy push for cultural cooperation as well as the need for China to promote its own narrative in Nepal.

These select instances, and an analysis of the semiotics of China in Nepal, allow us to grasp the Chinese view of Nepal and China's success in shaping a positive perception of Beijing in the country. As former Nepali ambassador to China, Leela Mani Paudyal wrote in July 2020 on the 65th anniversary of Nepal–China diplomatic ties,

A prosperous China is an opportunity for Nepal. The two countries maintain similar views on almost all regional and international issues, and cooperate on matters of world peace and regional stability. Because of growing ties and trust in each other, Nepal and China share an unbreakable bond, and are today trustworthy and excellent friends among neighbours. (Paudyal, 2020a, translation mine)

The former ambassador also hailed the elevation of ties to a “strategic partnership” during Xi Jinping’s short but effective state visit in October 2019 as “historic”: “The strategic partnership will address contemporary needs. As a rising global economic power, China will fully assist the Nepali people’s aspirations for development and prosperity” (Paudyal, 2020a, translation mine).

Further, bilateral ties between the two countries are posited as “problem-free” and “everlasting” by Nepali diplomats; the countries are dubbed “good neighbors with mutual political trust” by Chinese envoys (see Maskey, 2020; Hou, 2019a).

A former Nepali ambassador to China, Mahendra Bahadur Pandey, even went so far as to call reports suggesting that Nepal and China do not share good relations any more “fake propaganda”. In his words, “We don’t have any reason not to have very good relations with China... We have different political culture[s], but we still share many similarities” (Xie & Bai, 2020). China is regarded as a “true friend at the time of need” (Maskey, 2020), and Chinese aid is seen by Nepali diplomats as being implemented “without strings of political covenants and policy interventions” (Paudyal, 2020b). Such conceptions of the relationship, and the possible benefits Nepal can derive from growing closer to China, shape the narrative in distinctive ways, allowing China to be seen as a “good neighbour”. This positioning contrasts Nepal’s relations with other powers such as the United States (US) and India.

In recent years, Chinese foreign missions have become increasingly active on social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter, although both are not officially allowed in China. The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (@MFA_China) joined Twitter in October 2019 and Ambassador Hou Yanqi joined in June 2019 (@PRCAmbNepal). The mission in Nepal joined Twitter in December 2021 (@PRCSpoxNepal). An Associated Press investigation revealed that “Chinese diplomatic accounts have more than tripled on Twitter and more than doubled on Facebook since mid-2019” (Kinetz, 2021).

In a developing country like Nepal, where internet penetration is rapidly rising, social media channels allow foreign missions to convey their ideas directly to the population. At least 24 million Nepalis, or 82.79% of the population, have access to the internet today (RSS, 2021). Around 60% of users access the internet via mobile networks. While accurate statistics on social media usage are difficult to come by, a report suggests that 13 million Nepali users are active on various social media channels, with this number growing by 30% annually (Kemp, 2021).³

The number of followers of various diplomatic social media pages is as follows [dated 16 May 2022]:

Facebook

- Chinese Embassy in Nepal: 20,000 followers (Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2020)
- US Embassy in Nepal: 4.4 million followers (US Embassy, Nepal, 2010)
- Indian Embassy in Nepal: 4.4 million followers (India in Nepal (Embassy of India Kathmandu), 2011)
- UK Embassy in Nepal: 85,000 followers (UK in Nepal, 2011)

Twitter

- US Embassy in Nepal [@USEmbassyNepal]: 439,445 followers (US Embassy Nepal [@USEmbassyNepal], 2009)
- Ambassador Randy Berry [@USAmbNepal]: 244,895 followers (Ambassador Randy Berry [@USAmbNepal], 2015)
- Indian Embassy in Nepal [@IndiaInNepal]: 85,370 followers (Indian Embassy in Nepal [@IndiaInNepal], 2012)
- Ambassador Hou Yanqi [@PRCAmbNepal]: 65,430 followers (Ambassador Hou Yanqi [@PRCAmbNepal], 2019)
- Chinese Embassy in Nepal [@PRCSpoxNepal]: 1,530 followers (Chinese Embassy in Nepal [@PRCSpoxNepal], 2021)
- UK Embassy in Nepal [@UKinNepal]: 38,930 followers (UK Embassy in Nepal [@UKinNepal], 2012)
- Ambassador Nicola Pollitt [@NicolaPollittUK]: 12,419 followers (Ambassador Nicola Pollitt [@NicolaPollittUK], 2019)

³ The total number of users may not correlate with the number of unique individuals because of the existence of multiple accounts and pages.

The semiotics of China in Nepal

In October 2019, before Xi Jinping visited Kathmandu, his essay highlighting areas for future cooperation was published in several Nepali newspapers, both in English and Nepali. China, he wrote, wanted to “deepen strategic communication”, “broaden practical cooperation”, “expand people-to-people exchanges”, and “enhance security cooperation” with Nepal. The op-ed cited the historical and cultural linkages between the two countries centred around Buddhism as examples of “lasting friendship between our peoples” (*Xinhua*, 2019). Xi called the growing bilateral relationship an example of “good brothers who always stand alongside each other”, listing the aid and effort provided by Nepal in the aftermath of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake and the rescue, relief, and reconstruction provided by China after the 2015 Nepal earthquake as “shining examples of how China and Nepal look out for each other like brothers do”.

By framing its policy to include Nepal within the ambit of kinship ties, and by subsequently creating an imagined community, Beijing allows for a closer—but more hierarchical—imagination of the relationship. The semiotics associated with China’s presence in Nepal, although yet to replicate the “gift of development” vocabulary seen in Tibet, emphasise the long-lasting friendship between the two nations. Geographer Emily Yeh (2013) documents this relationship as “a series of acts of altruism and generosity, bringing benefit and generating positive sentiment” (p. 14). This shared goodwill has been further cemented in the form of the Kalanki underpass built as part of the Kathmandu Ring Road expansion, a Chinese aid project that cost NPR 5.13 billion (Ojha, 2019).

In a November 2020 op-ed, amid reports of Chinese border encroachment in the far-west district of Humla and restrictions on cargo traffic at the two land border points of Rasuwagadhi and Tatopani, ambassador Hou acknowledged the Nepal–China border as bearing “testimony to peace and friendship between the two countries” and “a bond for

win-win cooperation” (Hou, 2020). Suggesting that China had operated freight functions at the land border-crossings “to our best”, the ambassador ended the essay by calling for the border to become “a bond to build a shared bright future for China and Nepal”.

A description of the border as “a bridge for mutual assistance” gains significance when viewed within the context in which the op-ed was published. Several reports have highlighted, and continue to highlight, the erratic and unilateral disruptions to the movement of cargo traffic due to China’s concerns about Nepal’s handling of the Covid-19 pandemic, and traders equating the situation to an “undeclared blockade” (Prasain, 2021). Further, the ambassador described Chinese infrastructural developments in the Himalayan regions as benefiting Nepalis across the border. This was also repeated in the Chinese Embassy’s letter to the Nepali Congress after claims of border encroachment by a Congress MP from Humla (Basnet, 2020). In a February 2021 interview, ambassador Hou refuted all claims of an “undeclared blockade” and compared the ties between the two countries to “sailors in the same boat” (Pandey, 2021, translation mine). When asked why the passage of goods from China had become erratic, the ambassador cited the Covid-19 pandemic and the geology of the region, stating that China had never imposed a blockade on Nepal in the past or present and would not do so in the future either—here, the subtle reference to China’s position in contrast to India’s was not lost.

Beyond these superlatives, however, one of the most important takeaways from official Chinese semiotics in Nepal has been the pivot to the north, especially in terms of connectivity and economic worldview. During his 2019 visit, Xi Jinping said: “[China] will help Nepal realize its dream of becoming a land-linked country from a land-locked one” (Sharma, 2019). Beyond addressing Nepal’s insecurities of being a “land-locked” nation that is economically reliant on India, the Trans-Himalayan Multidimensional Connectivity Network, as posited under the BRI, will also open up new

vistas for Nepali policymakers. As former ambassador Paudyal wrote in April 2019:

“Nepal can take advantage of the BRI to join the global economy via China and the latter’s growth in tourism. We have an opportunity to make our economy globally competitive by utilising China’s rapidly growing foreign investment in our infrastructure development, modernising agriculture, and enhancing industrial and services production and productivity... Nepal can take advantage of the recently inked transit agreement and China’s extensive rail network from Southeast Asia to Europe to connect it to the global economy and diversify our foreign trade”. (Paudyal, 2019, translation mine)

While the train from Tibet is one of the most discussed markers of this proposed network, smaller projects such as the optical fibre network from China, which became operational in January 2018, are also viewed as part of the connectivity network and as reducing Nepal’s dependence on India (Nepal was solely reliant on India for its internet bandwidth until then). Further, the imagination of Nepal as China’s gateway into South Asia via these connectivity projects looms large. As Xi wrote, “a trans-Himalayan connectivity network will serve not just our two countries but also the region as a whole” (*Xinhua*, 2019).

“Friendship across the Himalayas”: Nepal joins the Beijing narrative

Following Xi Jinping’s statement about the bilateral relationship being a “friendship across the Himalayas”, Chinese officials have increasingly begun to refer to Nepal–China ties as a “friendship across Mt. Zhumulangma”, the Sinicised name for Mount Everest,⁴ as Ambassador Hou did in her November 2020 op-ed. After the joint announcement of the new height of the peak in December 2020,

the Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson referred to the height as “a new milestone for China–Nepal friendship”, the “new height of China–Nepal cooperation”, and a “new level of human spirit”. Further, in connection to the Covid-19 pandemic, the spokesperson also said,

“No matter how high Mt. Qomolangma is, it can be climbed. No matter how great the difficulty is, it can be overcome... As long as countries work together in good faith as China and Nepal do, we will finally defeat the virus”. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2020c)

China’s quest for driving the narrative on Everest—which it calls Qomolangma, a variation of the indigenous Tibetan name for the peak—began in the early days of its relationship with Nepal. The naming of the peak after the British surveyor-general George Everest is “unacceptable” to China, which regards the name “Everest” as a colonial relic (*China Daily*, 2002). It cites a 1958 paper by Lin Chao titled “The Discovery and Name of Qomolangma” which highlighted the Qing dynasty surveys in Tibet in the eighteenth century:

“Those who discovered Mount Qomolangma first were Tibetans living in southern Tibet and they so named it. And those who first recorded the peak on a map using scientific methods were Chinese surveyors Shengzhu, Churbizanbo and Lanbenzhanba, who conducted the survey in Tibet between 1715 and 1717”. (*China Daily*, 2002)

The mapping of the peak, according to China, precedes British attempts by at least 130 years. “The British approach to the name of Qomolangma was to insist on calling it Everest despite the fact that it had already had a Tibetan name. This was ridiculous” (*China Daily*, 2002; also see *Xinhua*, 2020).

⁴ Also spelt “Qomolangma” and “Chomolangma”.

Chinese insistence on the name was also evident during the 1960 border discussions between the then Nepali prime minister, B. P. Koirala, and Mao Zedong. When China claimed Everest entirely, Koirala countered Mao's assertions. Mao replied, "But you do not even have a name for it in your language, and you call it Mount Everest". Koirala writes,

"I remembered at that time, or someone had reminded me, that it was known as 'Sagarmatha'. Even though I was new to that term, I replied, 'You do not have a name for the peak either. 'Chomolongma' is a Tibetan name'. Mao replied, 'Tibet is China'". (Koirala 2001, p. 227)

Eventually, in 1961, a political decision was reached to share the summit as an international boundary line between the two countries.

The recent joint announcement of the new height was the culmination of a 15-year quest from the Chinese side. In 2005, Chinese surveyors measured the peak at 8,844.43 m. Nepal disagreed; it considered the height to be 8,848 m. In 2017, the Nepali Department of Survey began its own measurements, but it could not announce the results because the joint statement issued after Xi Jinping's 2019 visit to Kathmandu declared that both countries would announce the height together. The department had not been informed of the agreement (Giri, 2019). In December 2020, the new height was jointly announced by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Nepali counterpart, Pradeep Gyawali (evidently, the peak had risen by 86 cm).

Gyawali called it a "special moment" and said that the Nepal-China relationship "will develop further as high as Mount Qomolangma"; his Chinese counterpart said the new height "not only represents the significant importance to the development of China-Nepal relations attached by both sides, but also the traditional friendship and mutual strategic trust between the two countries" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2020b).

China's insistence on the joint announcement is part of its quest to shape its own international narrative, which it believes is not favourable. As noted by researcher Nadege Rolland, the phrase "huayuquan", translated as "speaking rights" or "international speaking rights", "reflects Beijing's aspirations not only to have the right to speak on the international stage but also to be listened to, to influence others' perceptions of China, and eventually to shape the discourse and norms that underpin the international order" (Rolland, 2020, p. 7).

China seeks to establish its position in the international discourse around the peak, by insisting, since at least 2012 according to a report, that both countries agree on the height of Everest and that the name be internationally rejected in favour of the Sinicised Tibetan name (Khadka, 2020). China's need to shape international discourse was most pressing during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the US accused China of mishandling the pandemic.

As international opinion on China grows more partisan, China's response to the US's accusations suggests that it will ask its bilateral partners to endorse China's positions publicly. As with Everest, Nepal has joined the Beijing narrative on other issues. As early as April 2020, Nepal congratulated China "for successfully containing the spread of Covid-19", and said that "China's efforts and progress in outbreak control have set a fine example for the world" (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2020a).

In July 2020, at a meeting between the foreign ministers of China, Nepal, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, China announced that the four countries would "reject politicizing the pandemic", a direct riposte to American charges; this statement was also repeated at the April 2021 meeting of the five ministers (Ministry of Foreign of the People's Republic of China, 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nepal, 2021). Nepal further supported the new Hong Kong security laws (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Nepal, 2020) and was among

the 50 signatories to a letter supporting China's policies in Xinjiang at the United Nations in July 2019 (Putz, 2020).

Imagining cultural ties: Tibet, China, and Nepal

In November 2019, I visited China's Tibet Trade Fair in Kathmandu, where Tibetan and Chinese sales representatives were selling bottled mineral water from a glacier below Everest (on the Tibetan side), pitching real-estate construction projects, and selling various herbal medicines. The emphasis on "China's Tibet" was immediately perceptible. That Tibet is an inalienable part of China continues to be a core feature of the One China policy, and Nepal's adherence to this is repeated in every joint statement by the two countries. Taken together with other cultural diplomacy efforts such as the March 2019 photo exhibition in Kathmandu marking the 60th anniversary of democratic reforms in Tibet, these public exhibitions seek to explicitly underline China's sovereignty over Tibet and to showcase a narrative on Tibet that is entirely different from that led by the Tibetan government-in-exile, especially after the 2008 protests by Tibetan exiles in Kathmandu.

While China's outreach to the political and security establishment after the 2008 protests drove home its primary interest in securing the border to curtail the passage of Tibetans into Nepal and prevent any Tibetan political expression within the country, its cultural diplomacy efforts intended to take its message, in line with the earlier quoted mission of "huayuquan", to the larger population. In March 2009, an exhibition in Beijing sought to dispel the "western fabrications" around Tibet. The then Nepali ambassador, Tanka Prasad Karki, who was among the 150 diplomats who visited the exhibition, said,

"Tibet has undergone a massive transformation for the better. You cannot believe that so much transformation has already taken place in such a short period of time. The life of Tibetan people has already changed so much for the better".

(National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, 2009)

The 2009 *Tibet of China: Past and Present* photo exhibition in Kathmandu, one of the first such outreach programmes after the 2008 protests, aimed to show that "Tibet is in its best period of historical development after its 50-year reform" (Sitaula & Zang, 2008). A Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist-Leninist) leader said, "The old picture of Tibet has changed now" and that Nepal "should not be the playground to plot anti-China activities". The official China Central Television (CCTV) report also quoted a Grade 12 student who said, "[A]fter visiting this exhibition I came to be informed about the drastic change in Tibet socially as well as economically" (Sitaula & Zang, 2008).

Similarly, in 2014 and 2016, Nepali delegates were part of the Forum on the Development of Tibet, China. In the Lhasa Consensus document released after the 2014 forum, the emphasis on steering the narrative on Tibet closer to Beijing's version was clear (Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2014). In 2018, the Chinese Embassy in Kathmandu held a reception to celebrate the Tibetan Losar New Year. During this event, Ambassador Yu Hong said the "support of the patriotic overseas Tibetans in Nepal contributes a lot to the development of China–Nepal relations" (Chinese Embassy in Nepal, 2018a).

What is most noticeable in these cultural outreach programmes is the absence of the Dalai Lama and any elements associated with him. These exhibits are grounded in China's quest for sovereignty over the Tibetan plateau. It is also evident that while the Tibetan geography shapes contemporary discourse via infrastructure projects that intend to connect Tibet with Nepal, and that ancient Tibetan history with Nepal is recalled to give continuity to bilateral relations, the emphasis on "China's Tibet" ensures that these exhibits—and other cultural diplomacy efforts—are in line with Beijing's version of Tibet. Thus, China shapes its relations with Nepal via the ambit of Tibetan geography and history, but not via the Tibetan identity.

Conclusion

Much of the recent focus on the Chinese influence in Nepal has centred on its rising strategic, political, and economic clout in the country, contrasted with Nepal's geopolitical sandwiching between its two giant neighbours and its immediate tensions with India since the 2015 blockade. However, a study of China in Nepal only along these lines misses the crux of the matter: China's rising influence in the country is predicated—unlike in other developing nations—not on its economic investments (which are still fewer and smaller in value compared to those in other South Asian nations) but on it offering a greater political counterweight to India.

Bilateral ties, as we have seen, are regarded as problem-free, and China has been called an “all-weather friend” by Nepali leaders (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Liberia 2021; *The*

Kathmandu Post, 2017). The Trans-Himalayan Connectivity Network is posited as being replete with opportunities for development and investment for Nepal and as being a pathway to reduce Nepal's economic reliance on India by shifting its focus north. At the same time, China is equally keen to win the hearts and minds of the Nepali people, as its semiotics in the country clearly reflect. China positions itself as a neighbour that respects Nepal's sovereignty; moreover, its insistence on an international narrative that claims Nepal as a partner strengthens its position in the global contest for influence while according Kathmandu respect. At the same time, Beijing's cultural outreach programmes emphasise Chinese sovereignty over the Tibetan plateau, manifesting its insecurities even as it tries to draw attention away from them. Above all, such efforts in the public sphere create an imagination of China that is distinctive from how Nepal views its relationships with other countries.

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