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Nepali Students in China: A Source of Soft Power for Beijing?

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Abstract

With growing momentum in Nepal-China diplomatic ties, it is important to look at the scholastic exchanges through history, notwithstanding the political turmoil of the Tibet-China Wars, harsh weather conditions in the Himalayas, and China's 'closed-door policy'. Educational ties waxed and waned until the Cultural Revolution, which led to the establishment of China as a republic in 1949. The 1950s saw Nepalis starting formal education not only in Beijing but also elsewhere in the vast Chinese geography. Initially, many Nepali students pursued science, technology, engineering and mathematics and especially medicine. With increased Chinese government scholarships available to Nepalis and some institutions also teaching in English, there was a steady rise in the number of Nepalis heading to China. By 2019, China was the fifth most sought-after destination for Nepali students while English speaking countries and India have historically been major destinations for them. In 2020, China's zero-Covid policy forced thousands of Nepalis to pursue online classes from home, which led to a serious compromise of their academic and career pursuits. This chapter traces the chronology of educational exchanges between Nepal and China, explores the volume of Nepali students there and why it has grown over the years.

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Introduction

The reach of Beijing's soft power in Nepal can be explored by tracing the evolution of educational ties between the two countries. From a handful of students on government scholarships in the 1960s and a hiatus during the Cultural Revolution, the number of Nepali students in China steadily increased after 1978.

After the Deng era, two milestones bolstered China's attractiveness as a major education destination for young Nepalis. In 2008, the year Beijing hosted the Summer Olympics, Kathmandu saw large numbers of pro-Tibet protests—probably more than in other parts of the world combined—in terms of the frequency of the protests.¹ It was a wake-up call for Beijing. China began engaging with Kathmandu on multiple fronts. This was also the year that Nepal became a democratic republic. China discarded its traditional approach of treating Nepal's monarchy as the centre of political power. This marked the beginning of the cultivation of intimate relationships between the political parties of both countries, most notably between the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the two leading communist parties of Nepal—the Communist Party of Nepal–Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN–UML) and the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre).

In 2017, Nepal became a signatory to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as part of which China offered more scholarships for Nepalis. China now views young returnees—on scholarships as well as self-funded programmes—from its modern universities and institutions as ambassadors to expand its footprint in the geopolitical neighbourhood. Additionally, China has also demonstrated that it has the resources to challenge the traditional influence of India and western democracies on Nepal's administration and public life. By all accounts, China will continue to be a major destination for Nepali students in the years to come. However, for the foreseeable future,

India and English-speaking democracies (Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States) remain the leading destinations for Nepali students because of cultural and linguistic familiarities as well as the immigration opportunities they offer.

Methodology

To trace the evolution of Nepal's educational ties with China, one of the best empirical approaches would be to analyse official figures on Nepali students in China over the years, but they are scant and sketchy. As a result, my methodology includes drawing from books, academic and research papers, websites, and a wide range of interviews.

I interviewed 32 students, past and present, from various age groups, backgrounds, and disciplines. Most medical students, for example, were between 17 to 19 years of age, either in their final year or had taken a gap year due to the Covid pandemic, which had kept them out of China. Two of the medical students interviewed had studied in China in the 1960s during the Cultural Revolution.

In recent years, some students have been on Confucius scholarships, studying 'Chinese as a Second Language' (non-degree courses) for five years so that they can become Chinese-language teachers in Nepal. A mid-career Nepali government officer was enrolled in a master's programme in Public Policy (2017–2018) at Peking University.

Several interviewees, mostly enrolled in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects (aged 19–23 years), suffered from the discontinuity of stipends and were interviewed through WeChat groups for Nepali students. Around 10 of the students interviewed felt they were victims of unclear application processes and university requirements. Four undergraduate students, who were enrolled in social science courses, were self-sponsored and later received

¹ As reported by a senior officer in Nepal Police in an interview.

scholarships, either from the university to cover tuition fees or through city scholarships. The latter covered tuition fees but also offered an 'extra amount'.

There were six interviews with officials, three of them Chinese. A Nepali academic based in China offered important insights that filled in some gaps. Several rounds of extensive interviews were conducted with Aneka Rajbhandari, a master's student in Chinese politics at Renmin University in Beijing and now a member of 'The Araniko Project', which provides commentary and analyses on current events related to China with a focus on Nepal and South Asia.

China's soft power through education can be best understood by exploring the trends in the numbers. How many Nepali students have travelled to China since 1978 and which cities and provinces have been their major destinations? However, the minimal and almost non-existent documentation on the part of the Nepali government and vague explanations on the part of the Chinese government makes the task difficult. Though we came across many Nepalis who knew someone studying in China during the interviews, no accurate public records of a) how many students are currently studying there and where, b) the ratio of students on scholarships versus self-funded programmes, and c) the overall breakdown of their disciplines was found. China annually releases a "Statistics of International Students" notice that enumerates the total number of international students and provides further information on students from the top 15 countries that send students to China; Nepal is not one of them. Among countries that made it to the top 15 in 2017 from South Asia were Pakistan and India, with 18,626 and 18,717 students respectively. (Ministry of Education, 2016).

The most recent figures released by the Chinese government put the total number of foreign students in Higher Education Institutions in China as of 2019 at 1,72,571, with 1,40,637 being graduates (Ministry

of Education, 2019). According to a Nepal Embassy official in Beijing, finding the exact number and location of students is "tricky" because the numbers change constantly (for example, when a student graduates and returns home and the embassy is not informed, as there is no mandatory provision for reporting this). Given the lack of accurate figures, this chapter focuses on trends and dynamics: the geopolitical, cultural, and educational background of Nepali students in China and what has been observed over the years in the media, official communique, scholarly journals, and personal interviews conducted with Nepali and Chinese officials and Nepali students who studied in China.

Education as an enabler of China-Nepal ties

Given Nepal's relatively small population of less than nine million, poor literacy, and the Rana rulers' reluctance to educate the population, only the elite got to pursue higher education during their more than a century of rule. Under the Rana regime, until 1951, Nepalis rarely received formal education and the literacy rate was under 5%. After the collapse of the regime, when American aid allowed the public education system to expand rapidly, Nepali students also began travelling to China on Chinese government scholarships (Whelpton, 2005). According to Dong and Chapman (2008), the Chinese government started providing scholarships to international students in 1956 and provided financing to cover the daily expenses of only 50 recipients from around the world. In the same year, China offered 30 seats in self-financed courses for students from western countries but this was met with little interest. By 1960, this number increased to approximately 2,000 international students from 40 countries (Dong & Chapman, 2008).

In 1966, Mao Zedong launched the infamous Cultural Revolution. A Nepali medical student then, interviewed for this chapter, said he was sent home from his university based in a major Chinese city during that period and

was recalled after the revolution. Nepal sent very few students to China during that period, and those who went did so on government scholarships. “Those were ‘cold times’ in Nepal-China ties and the Nepali students who were sent home were not sure when and if they would be invited back to complete their studies,” said another China returnee, now a senior doctor in Kathmandu.

When Deng Xiaoping came to power, China made dramatic changes in its foreign policy in an attempt to undo the damage of the Cultural Revolution. It also worked at re-building its relationship with its neighbours. This meant opening its doors to foreign students. In 1980, 52 academic majors in 42 Chinese higher institutions were deemed eligible to receive international students. By 1986, the number had grown to 300 majors in 82 higher institutions (Dong and Chapman, 2008). Since then, Nepal has seen a steady increase in the number of students looking to China as a viable option for higher education.

The 1980s saw a rapid growth of international student enrolment in China. By 1986, 300 majors in 82 higher institutions had already been approved for receiving international students (Dong & Chapman, 2008). From that period onwards, there was a marked increase in China’s engagement with Nepal on various fronts. A major factor behind China’s strong overtures was its security concern regarding Tibet—its soft underbelly bordering Nepal. In the runup to the Beijing Olympics in 2008, Nepal saw a sharp increase in pro-Tibet protests. Chinese surveillance and influence in Kathmandu grew as the Nepali police continued to receive funding and orders to quell pro-Tibet activities in Kathmandu (The Economist, 2012).

The year 2017 was another turning point. Nepal officially joined the BRI, Chinese President Xi Jinping’s ambitious project to reconfigure infrastructure and trade routes to connect Asia,

Europe, and Africa. This gave Nepalis access to more Chinese Government Scholarships, such as those under the Silk Road Programme. Thereafter, one can witness a steady increase in the number of Nepali students opting to study in China, reaching more than 6,400 in 2018 (Nepali Times, 2019)². The students are enrolled in a wide variety of disciplines, from STEM to Chinese-language courses, Chinese politics, and international economy.

Today, Nepalis see the relationship between the two countries as that of an ever-growing economy—now the world’s second largest—and a small neighbour who has faced constant economic struggles. As much was conveyed in 2018 by a senior CPC official, who urged a group of visiting Asian journalists to see his country as a civilization-state and not as a nation-state. He suggested that they read Martin Jacques’ *When China Rules the World*, “though we don’t agree with everything in the book.”³ The CPC official wanted the journalists to carry home a strong message: China’s rise as a world power was inevitable, and Asian societies would do well to study and appreciate the long history of their civilizational ties with China.

Nepali students can currently apply to more than 100 universities across China, most of which are in Beijing (19), followed by the coastal Jiangsu and Guangdong provinces and Shanghai, while only one university is located in the north-western province of Xinjiang, which mostly receives foreign students from Central Asia. Significantly, no academic institution from Tibet has been enlisted on the Chinese Embassy website thus far. Though in low numbers, Nepali students have been enrolled in universities across China, from Heilongjiang and Xilin provinces in the northeast to Guangdong province and Hong Kong in the southeast to Yunnan and Sichuan provinces in the southwest and the central province of Jiangsu (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in Nepal, 2004a).

² The number of Nepali students in the US was 13, 270 in 2019. (US Embassy in Nepal, 2018).

³ The author was part of the Asian journalists’ delegation at the CPC headquarters in July 2018.

Why Nepali students choose China: cost of attendance, proximity, and scholarships

The average tuition fee of a Chinese university classified as ‘affordable’ ranges from RMB 5,000 (CUCAS, n.d.a) to RMB 35,000 per year (around US\$ 750 to US\$ 5,250). The fees differ according to the level of education and subject areas. In Ningbo University (Zhejiang province, eastern China), the average tuition fee for a first-year undergraduate programme ranges from RMB 18,000 to RMB 25,000 per year (around US\$ 2,700 to US\$ 3,750). However, an MBA programme at the same university costs RMB 32,500 per year (around US\$ 4,800) (CUCAS, n.d.b.). Similarly, a master’s programme at Yunnan University costs between RMB 8,000 to RMB 12,000 per year (around US\$ 1,200 to US\$ 1,800) (CUCAS, n.d.b.). On the other hand, universities classified as top-tier in the standout urban hubs cost upwards of RMB 50,000 per year (around US\$ 7,500). For example, an MBA from Fudan University in Shanghai costs RMB 165,300 per year (around US\$ 25,000) (Fudan University, n.d.). The same programme at Tsinghua University in Beijing costs RMB 198,000 per year (around US\$ 30,000) (Tsinghua School of Economics and Management, n.d.).

To put this in perspective, 1 RMB is close to 19 Nepali rupees (NRs) or 12 Indian rupees and the gross salary range for a typical Nepali household is between NRs 16,000–54,000 per month or RMB 900–2,900/US\$ 126–430 (CEIC, n.d.). Given these statistics, one can infer that only middle-class and upper-middle-class Nepalis can afford self-financed programmes in Chinese universities. Among the self-financed students who were interviewed, many agreed that Chinese universities were far more affordable than studying in countries such as Australia and the United States and that the fees could be

covered with their family income and savings.⁴ An obvious reason why Nepali medical students—among the largest segments of Nepalis enrolled in Chinese universities—choose China is affordability. A five-and-a-half-year MBBS course in Nepal costs around US\$ 68,000 (NRs 87 lakh) (RMC, a) while in China, a six-year programme costs only around US\$ 31,000 (NRs 39 lakh) (RMC, b).

Low-income households, on the other hand, rely solely on scholarships, and they are willing to travel to remote regions and little-known universities to access them. Some students even said that they had enrolled in programmes arbitrarily, in relatively backward regions, because they had received generous scholarships. Many of these students were looking to emigrate in search of better lives and use China as a transit point. As a significant share of Nepali students rely on Chinese scholarships to secure a better life, Nepalis will remain dependent on China for the foreseeable future.

However, China does not provide permanent residency easily. Only 1,576 permanent residency permits were granted in 2006 (The Economist, 2020). Unsurprisingly, Nepalis studying in China do not consider it their end goal. Instead, they opt for opportunities in high-income countries, such as Australia, which has a sizable Nepali population and offers higher wages and far better access to education for their children and a better quality of life. An interviewee said that some of his Nepali classmates who have managed to find jobs in Beijing could not afford international schools for their children and “the best they could afford are far less expensive Pakistani schools.”⁵

Since Nepal and China are neighbouring countries, travelling between them is fairly easy and affordable. An undergraduate interviewee said that they would need to save for just two to three months to be able to afford a round-trip

⁴ After Australia, the leading destinations for Nepali students are Japan, Cyprus, China, Canada, United States, New Zealand, South Korea, and UAE, with the numbers fluctuating from year to year.

⁵ The interviewee pursued their masters in China.

ticket. This helped them maintain connections with their family, community, and culture.

There was a consensus among the students interviewed that the scholarships provided by the Chinese government were what attracted them most. In 2004, the CGS offered 6 undergraduate seats and 14 postgraduate seats to Nepali students. There were 45 Chinese government scholarships for Nepali students in the 2007/2008 academic year, with the majors being School of Basic and Biomedical Sciences, electronics, construction, and education (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Nepal, 2007a).

According to the Nepal government, China currently provides scholarships annually for Nepalis “not exceeding 100 students” (MFA, n.d.). A student explained that this number may look smaller than expected as CGSs are not the only scholarships provided by the Chinese government. Other scholarships include the Confucius Institute Scholarship and South-South Cooperation Scholarship depending on the type of programme. Still others start as self-financed students and later (after a semester or a year) apply for scholarships at the university or with the city government, which then covers a portion of their costs if not all.

Meanwhile, one interviewee claimed that in Nepal's case, “most scholarships” are awarded to those within the intimate network of Nepal's communist parties—mostly the two leading communist parties, CPN-UML and CPN-MC. The interviewee also claimed that the recipients, often the kin of senior communist leaders, receive the most lucrative scholarships, up to RMB 12,000 per month.⁶ These scholarships are neither publicised nor documented. This in part explains the strong party-to-party relationships between the CPC and Nepal's communist parties.

One such programme that has admitted many Nepalis is “a full scholarship set up by China's

Ministry of Education to support prestigious Chinese universities to recruit outstanding international students for graduate studies in China” (Myanmar Study Abroad, n.d.). The BRI Scholarship is available to students from the 146 member countries (Green Finance & Development Center, n.d.). The Economist (2019a) mentioned how the number of foreign students in China grew fourfold while those from BRI countries expanded eightfold between 2004–16: “In 2012, the year before BRI was launched, students from those countries on Chinese government scholarships were less than 53% of the total number of recipients. By 2016 they made up 61%. China says it reserves 10,000 of its scholarships every year for students from BRI countries.”

The scholarship for BRI countries, also marketed as the Silk Road Programme by provinces in China, is affiliated with many universities. The eligibility criteria for each of these universities are different. Most scholarships offered by the Chinese government—the BRI, Ministry of Commerce, and Jiangxi Provincial Government Scholarships—have an upper age limit ranging from 25 years to 40 years and require the applicants to be in “good health condition.” (Wuhan University, 2022) Here, we begin to understand that China looks to educate a younger, more productive cohort of Nepalis, perhaps also in the hope that they are a long-term investment.

“In countries such as Britain, Australia and America, foreign students are welcomed mostly because universities can make more money out of them than out of locals,” argues The Economist (2019a). “In China, it is the opposite. Foreign students enjoy big subsidies. Often, they are more generously treated than local students” (The Economist, 2019a). In 2020, there was a brief uproar on Weibo, a Chinese microblogging platform, when a Nepali student received RMB 13,000 (approximately US\$ 1,955) as a monthly stipend. A Weibo user posted, “This is a

⁶ The interviewee is a China returnee currently working in a major media outlet in Nepal.

letter of admission from a Chinese university awarded to a Nepalese student. What do you think of this special treatment?” One of the comments on the post stated, “Subsidies (scholarships) for foreign students should be completely cancelled and funds should be spent on Chinese students instead.” A second Weibo user pointed out that “China has 600 million people earning less than 1,000 RMB per month, which means less than 12,000 RMB per year. China gives Nepalese students 13,000 RMB per month.” (Weibo, 2020)⁷

The Chinese government is perhaps looking at these scholarships not only as an investment in fostering friendly relationships with other countries but also as an investment in its economy—as a means of ensuring a steady flow of productive and healthy youth into their universities and potentially also into its workforce, at least in the short- and medium-term. By offering substantial scholarships, China follows in the footsteps of India, the West, Japan, and the Gulf countries, which have attempted to establish themselves as cultural and educational hubs for Nepalis. However, unlike the aforementioned countries, China has gone a step further in establishing soft power through higher education. It is looking to not only buy influence but also construct a Sino-centric world. Xi Jinping’s regime attempts to re-establish China as a “civilization-state” and educational exchanges are designed to legitimise the CPC’s historico-cultural narratives (Pan & Joe, 2014).

Obstacles: language barrier and the pandemic effect

Many of the scholarships require candidates to meet certain Chinese-language proficiency levels or take a language course before their programmes commence. Many of these programmes, especially master’s courses, require a high level of language proficiency. Most of the universities designated for scholarships offer courses only in Mandarin. On the other hand, the Chinese Government

Scholarship-Great Wall Program, funded by UNESCO, includes degrees that are fully in English and, hence, do not have a language requirement. By insisting on language proficiency, the government of China limits scholarship opportunities to foreigners. This means that students who do not have any background in or experience in learning Chinese do not have access to the scholarships. In doing so, China discourages a move toward diversifying its society.

For Nepali students, who can potentially qualify for Indian or western universities that offer English-medium studies, studying in China can be an ordeal, primarily because of the linguistic barrier in the classroom and outside the campus. Navigating provincial cities can be a nightmare without fluency in local dialects. Inside the classroom, one needs an even greater proficiency in Mandarin to keep up with fellow Chinese students, especially in master’s and PhD programmes in the social sciences and humanities, which call for both sound understanding and nuanced expression—both in verbal participation in the classroom and in written papers. Competitive Chinese universities provide conditional offers to international students: they first need to become proficient in Mandarin to get a confirmation of enrolment. A student currently in a university in Beijing found herself wondering even before she arrived in the Chinese capital, whether it was worth the risk, as even after learning Mandarin for two years, she could still be denied entry into the core humanities programme of her choice.

Despite all the facilities Chinese universities offer, this in part explains why another immediate neighbour, India, is still the number one destination for Nepali students. Additionally, India does not require a student visa, offers courses in English, and Nepalis are far more comfortable with Indo-Nepali cultural and linguistic similarities. Close to 65,000 Nepalis were enrolled in India in 2018, according to the All-India Survey on Higher Education carried out by the Indian

⁷ The information from the post and comments have been translated by Aneka Rebecca Rajbhandari.

government (New Business Age, 2020). This is 27% of the total foreign students in India for the year, making Nepalis the largest bloc of foreign students. The figure is 10 times the number of Nepali students in China in the following year. (*Xinhua*, 2019)

If a Nepali citizen wants to prepare for studies in China, access to Mandarin classes is limited, though there are Confucius Centres across Nepal that are funded by the Chinese government. The Confucius Institute at two of Nepal's leading universities, Kathmandu University and Tribhuvan University, are high-level Chinese language and culture institutions, cooperatively established by Hebei University of Economics and Business and Kathmandu University. They offer short-term vocational courses in Nepal. Each year, they train 40 Nepali tourism professionals in a six-month Chinese-language course. The agreement, which came into effect in 2018, will only remain valid for five years. China has also sent many language teachers to Kathmandu, with many schools now adopting Mandarin as one of their required courses, though according to government regulations, schools are not allowed to make any foreign language other than English mandatory (Zhang, 2019). Still, many schools have chosen to ignore this as China offers to pay the salaries of Chinese-language teachers. A small number of private schools are now paying for these teachers, some of whom are Nepalis (PTI, Kathmandu, 2019).

According to the former Indian ambassador to Nepal, Ranjit Rae (2021), China has established 26 'China Study Centres' across Nepal, aimed at strengthening cultural and educational interactions. According to Rae, many Nepali students study in Chinese universities, and there is a steady exchange of delegations and study visits between the two countries (Rae, 2021). In recent years, Confucius Centres have been dismissed for being propaganda machines of the CPC. China has now opened China Cultural Centres (CCCs) around the world. In 2015, the most recent year for which

data are available, the Culture Ministry spent 360 million RMB (US\$ 57 million) on these CCCs (The Economist, 2019b). The CCC in Nepal is "still in the stage of preparatory work and will be inaugurated soon" according to their website (China Cultural Center, 2015).

Students reported that some universities in China do not clearly state their eligibility requirements regarding language proficiency and entrance exams. International students are currently attending online classes while their Chinese counterparts are at university. International students who are new to the language and culture are often caught off-guard by impromptu class announcements, even though the classes are broadcast live or are recorded, said a student. The linguistic and cultural barrier also affects the admission process. Some students shared that they had to change their programmes after their first year of the Chinese-language course. A student who wanted to study psychology at a Beijing university eventually had to settle for international relations. Studying psychology required a higher level of mathematics (equivalent to the mathematics classes required to graduate with an engineering degree), and the student claimed she was not made aware of this.

Since the first COVID-19 cases broke out in Wuhan, over half a million international students from 196 countries have been sent home (Khadka, 2021).⁸ The Nepali government sent in an aircraft to retrieve nearly 180 Nepalis in February 2020. This was a month before the WHO declared COVID-19 a pandemic. The swift action by the Nepali government was praised widely by the public, but the students who were aboard the flight were unable to return and resume classes in person for more than two years. An IT student at a university in Wuhan said he would graduate while still in Kathmandu and had given up on the idea of any Chinese exposure altogether—a factor that had primarily driven him away from a similar programme in Australia four years ago.

⁸ In the US, the number of international students dropped from 1,075,496 to 914,095 between the academic years of 2019/20 to 2020/21. (Open doors, 2021).

While the world adjusted to a new sense of normalcy, holding in-person events, classes, and even graduation ceremonies, China's strict zero-COVID policy left no room for foreign students to return to campus life and experience the cultural immersion that they had expected out of their programmes in China. Many were also deprived of invaluable opportunities upon graduation. (Chitrakar, 2021)

Students enrolled in humanities programmes mentioned a lack of engagement after being outside the campus for more than two years. STEM students, who require a high degree of in-person experience and mentorship, seem to be the most aggrieved. They are unsure how they will be able to sit for their practical tests or if they will be able to do so at all. This cohort seemed most worried about their long-term career prospects.

Trapped in Nepal, medical and engineering students were not able to secure internship opportunities, initially due to the pandemic, and because the Nepali government refused to provide them with an alternative career path without completing their internships (Sangroula, 2020). While no official explanation has been given, the interviewed students think that it may be because of the scarcity of internship positions and a preference for students who studied in Nepal. Additionally, those who study in China need to go through a tedious academic equivalency process.

Many of these students also saw their stipends discontinued abruptly in mid-2020. While they have been promised that the accumulated amount will be paid once they return to China, they juggled jobs in Nepal and online classes in China. Unsurprisingly, this has forced some to drop out of their programmes altogether while others have opted for a gap year. However, taking a gap year is not an ideal situation, as the students risk losing their scholarships. The CGS covers a fixed period of five years (one year for the Chinese language course and four years for the degree), and when students on scholarships take time off, it means that they will be required to fund the gap year themselves.

Numerous WeChat groups (with a capacity of 500 students per group), created by the Embassy of Nepal in Beijing to communicate COVID-19 evacuation processes in 2020, are now being used to share various signed petition campaigns and to organise protests. These issues were also raised by the Foreign Minister of Nepal, Narayan Khadka, to the Chinese leadership when China's Foreign Minister, Wang Yi, visited Nepal in March 2022. Wang assured that the return of Nepali students to China was one of his government's immediate priorities and agreed to start the process at the earliest (Giri, 2022). It is still unclear what Beijing will do to address the concerns. In her interview in April 2022, the Chinese ambassador to Nepal, Hou Yanqi, said that the foreign ministries of the two countries were working on plans to ensure the students' return to their universities. However, she also said that to prevent the spread of the pandemic, the Nepali side had "unilaterally" announced the suspension of international flights with most countries, which led to the suspension of direct flights between Nepal and China (Ghimire, 2022). On July 6, 2022, the ambassador said, "The Chinese side has promptly reviewed and approved the application of the first batch of Nepali students to return to universities in China. Some students have already arrived in China to continue their studies" (Hou, 2022).

Conclusion: a picture with mixed messages

This chapter explores the rise of Chinese influence, often described as soft power, through enhanced educational ties with Nepal. While only a handful of elite Nepali students were enrolled in Chinese institutions until the 1960s, the number steadily picked up after Deng Xiaoping came to power and China worked at re-building partnerships with its neighbours. Nepali students can currently apply to more than 100 universities across China in both self-funded and scholarship programmes. Between 2004 and 2016, the number of foreign students in China grew fourfold while those from BRI countries expanded eightfold. In

2016, China saw a total of 40,000 international students, marking a 35 percent increase from 2012 – 5,160 of those were Nepali students, out of whom 733 studied in China for less than six months and 4,427 students studied for more than six months (ChinaPower, 2016). The Chinese government is perhaps looking at these scholarships not only as an investment in friendly relationships but also in its economy over the short- and medium-term. These students are also seen as future leaders who will help China establish strong connections with Nepal's academia and institutions. By offering substantial opportunities to Nepalis, China follows in the footsteps of India, the West, Japan, and the Gulf countries who are attempting to establish themselves as cultural and educational hubs for Nepalis.

Even so, the message from Nepali students returning from China is mixed. Most of the students interviewed seemed happy with their choice and the exposure they had received in China (Zuo, 2022). Some students had carried on with master's programmes in China after completing their undergraduate studies, while medical students had come back to establish successful careers in Nepal (Kharel, 2013). However, there are reports of students applying to China after failing their MBBS entrance exam to get into medical colleges in Nepal. A student suggested that the reason behind the "consistently weak performance" by Nepali

students who had graduated from Chinese medical schools is because of Nepal's systemic laxity for students seeking to study abroad, particularly in China.

A parallel can be drawn between the current situation of Nepali students who have been pushed out of China due to the zero-COVID policy and those who were sent back to Nepal during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. The ebb and flow of these movements offer a metaphor for the Nepal-China relationship at large: though there have been many problems along the way, ties have evolved and have remained fairly stable. In keeping with Nepal's growing relationship with China and the latter's rise as a world power, there has been a significant increase in the number of Nepali students in China after the Cultural Revolution. After 1978, as China opened itself to the world and witnessed unprecedented economic growth, its doors were flung open to foreign students. This growth and renewed Chinese sensitivities over Tibet have been decisive in shaping China's growing engagement with Nepal. This has also meant a strong emphasis on people-to-people ties and China opening its doors to Nepali students. China now views the young returnees from its modern universities and cities as new ambassadors poised to help expand its footprint in the geopolitical neighbourhood.

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