

China in Nepal's Civic Space

Navigating Dynamics of
Chinese NGOs and
Soft Power

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Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
BASE	Backward Society Education
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCF	China Charity Federation
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CESIF	Center for Social Innovation and Foreign Policy
CFPA	China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation
CFRD	China Foundation for Rural Development
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia
CIKU	Confucius Institute Kathmandu University
CI @ TU	Confucius Institute at Tribhuvan University
CMG	China Media Group
CNIE	China NGO Network for International Exchanges
CNYP	Chinese Embassy Youth Pioneer Program
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPN	Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Center)
CPN (UML)	Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist)
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
EU	European Union
EXIM Bank	Export-Import Bank
GCI	Global Civilization Initiative
GDI	Global Development Initiative
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GONGO	Government Organized Non-Governmental Organization

GSI	Global Security Initiative
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
KU	Kathmandu University
LBU	Lumbini Buddhist University
MCC	Millennium Challenge Corporation
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NCDF	Nepal- China Dialogue and Development Forum
NCP	Nepal Communist Party
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NRSD	National Rehabilitation Society for the Disabled
PRC	People's Republic of China
RMB	Renminbi
RWDC	Rural Women Development Centre
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SHUPL	Shanghai University of Political Science and Law
SIRONET	Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network Forum
SWC	Social Welfare Council Nepal
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
UNSDCF	United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework
U.S	United States
USD	United States Dollar
USYC	United States Embassy Youth Council
WASH	Water Sanitation and Hygiene
WB	World Bank
YSB	Youth Sounding Board

Executive Summary

Chinese NGOs are going global, with operations in over 100 countries. They are an essential component of China's broader foreign policy and soft power strategy, playing a prominent role in Beijing's efforts to reshape global governance and international development norms.

Chinese NGOs are commonly structured as Government Organized Non-Governmental Organizations (GONGOs) and operate in a unique hybrid model. These NGOs are poised as civil society actors, but a closer inspection suggests that they are closely aligned to China's strategic interests. Nepal has recently seen a growing influence of Chinese NGOs, and this is reflective of China's aspirations to engage with its neighbours via soft power tools.

Nepal and China signed an MoU on Cultural Cooperation as early as 1999. This MoU paved the way for NGO exchanges between the two countries. Despite few early engagements, Chinese NGOs became active in Nepal only in 2015, beginning with post-earthquake recovery efforts. The China Foundation for Rural Development (CFRD) is the first Chinese NGO registered in Nepal. It has conducted its program in 60 districts across all seven provinces. The projects focus on grassroots-level development, in the areas of poverty alleviation, disaster relief, healthcare, education, and rural revitalization. Most of these activities are highly visible and small-scale initiatives, consistent with China's recent priority on "small but beautiful" projects under the BRI. These "small yet smart" projects are expected to deliver quick results, offer tangible benefits to the locals, and promote China as a benevolent development partner.

A key feature of China's NGO engagement in Nepal is the integration of Chinese technology into their programs. This is particularly evident in the field of agriculture, green energy, and sustainable development. Similarly, these NGOs facilitate China's soft power goal of shaping narratives and public perceptions. There are several events where Chinese organizations partner with Nepali think tanks, civil society organizations, and friendship associations. Usually, these events facilitate China-friendly narratives, promote the BRI, and reiterate support for One China Principle. Another key mechanism of soft power extension of China is via educational

institutions, scholarships, and cultural exchanges. Confucius Institutes, established in different universities across Nepal, promote Mandarin language programs and cultural exchanges. Geopolitically sensitive regions such as Madhesh, Lumbini, and Nepal's northern border areas have seen an increase in Chinese NGO activities. Chinese activities across these regions aim to bolster Beijing's presence and serve its larger geopolitical interests.

For Nepal, Chinese NGOs pose both opportunities and challenges. These NGOs can bring much-needed resources, technology, experience, and development assistance to Nepal's poverty alleviation and development efforts. The projects focused on grassroots-level development, disaster management, and rural revitalization have potential to offer tangible benefits to the local population.

However, concerns persist regarding transparency, accountability, and the alignment of these NGO activities with Nepal's national priorities. Chinese NGOs in Nepal often work with limited oversight. They tend to bypass bureaucratic mechanisms by partnering directly with local elected officials. This raises questions about governance, long-term sustainability, and political influence. Furthermore, the recent tendency of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to directly engage with Nepali political parties in its humanitarian support efforts, blurs the line between development support and political strategy.

Nepal should carefully manage the expanding role of Chinese NGOs and their increasing engagements across Nepal's civic space. While their contribution to Nepal's development landscape is valuable, there is a need for stronger regulatory frameworks to ensure transparency, prevent undue political influence, and safeguard Nepal's sovereignty. A balanced, cautious approach can help Nepal optimize the developmental benefits from Chinese NGO engagements while mitigating potential risks to its political and governance systems.

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1

NGO Engagements as a Tool of China's Global Ambitions

China has historically held a central role in global trade and influence. The Chinese name for the country, “Zhongguo,” translates to “Middle Kingdom.” The “Middle Kingdom” is a term that goes beyond mere cultural or geographical significance. It reflects China's deep-seated ambition to position itself at the heart of the world's cultural, political, and economic systems.¹

China lost its place as a global leader due to 100 years of hurt from imperialism and colonization.² The Chinese people, ever since, have aspired to regain their dignity and establish China's rightful place in global governance. The lost idea of the “Chinese dream” has been appropriated by the communist party, and they credit themselves for liberating China from imperialism.³ There's a consensus within China that this was crucial for the growth and prosperity they have since achieved, and the way forward is the extension of the Chinese Dream.

President Xi Jinping's vision of “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation”⁴ extends the concept of the Chinese Dream – and reinforces the age-old Chinese ambition to be the leader in global governance. China's global ambitions have grown significantly under the current administration. This reflects a shift from a historically passive foreign policy to a more assertive and proactive approach aimed at reshaping the global order.

Before Xi Jinping era, China was seen as a peaceful actor driven by its economic interests. They largely remained passive, avoiding confrontation with other actors and providing little commentary on major

global trends. However, as the world's second-largest economy and a military power with global reach, China is no longer content with merely participating in the international system; it seeks to redefine it.⁵

China's ambition to redefine the international system stems from its own experiences of poverty alleviation, economic growth, and development in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. This transformation coincided with the end of the Cold War, a period in which capitalism emerged victorious, and marked a start of a new world order. However, China, through reform and opening up—while retaining its socialist system and distribution-oriented economy—managed to lift close to a billion people out of poverty⁶ and establish itself as an economic powerhouse. This success has facilitated China's global ambitions. While its early international engagements were characterized by infrastructure support and economic cooperation, China's goal have now expanded beyond economic corridors and infrastructure projects. It encompasses soft sectors of influence, such as the export of culture, development models, and language. China shares a vision of establishing a development order with Beijing at its center.⁷ It realizes that soft power is a critical tool to shape global narratives and foster interdependence. In this context, Chinese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged as key players in Nepal and elsewhere.⁸ They are extending China's reach into the civic sectors of developing countries.

Chinese NGOs are emerging forces in global development. The earliest internationalization can be traced to the 2004 Tsunami in the Indian Ocean, where the Red Cross Society of China and the China Charity Federation donated USD 90 million to the victims.⁹ Since then, the intensity of internationalization has been significant, reflecting China's efforts to export its development model and soft power influence. As outlined in the 2016 White Paper on China's Progress in Poverty Reduction and Human Rights, China aims to "strengthen exchanges and cooperation with developing countries and international organizations in the fields of poverty alleviation and human rights."¹⁰ The Government Organized Chinese NGOs (GONGOs) have become an important tool of such engagements.

In China, these NGOs often operate under tight scrutiny, where they closely align themselves with the state's developmental and strategic priorities while retaining some autonomy. This hybrid model stems from China's governance approach, where civil society complement state

mechanisms rather than operating as independent entities.¹¹ The 2021 White Paper on Poverty Alleviation suggests that the state has provided strategic guidance for the social organizations to implement grassroots interventions for national priorities such as poverty eradication, rural revitalization, and community development.¹²

Chinese NGOs display some specific operational patterns that set them apart from their Western counterparts. First, their autonomy is defined by an intrinsic linkage with the Chinese state.¹³ Many of them are either state-sponsored or closely monitored, with activities in line with China's foreign policy objectives. This allows them to be effective in politically sensitive environments, often using state-backed resources and networks. Second, their modus operandi tends to be complementing China's bigger infrastructure-driven development and hard outputs.¹⁴ Finally, they tend to partner with local governments and community leaders rather than their non-governmental counterparts which reinforces their state-centric operational model.

The areas of focus for Chinese NGOs are humanitarian aid, agriculture, healthcare, and education. They also primarily focus on disaster relief, medical support, and infrastructure development.¹⁵ By March 2021, over 130 Chinese NGOs had contributed to more than 700 aid projects across 100 countries.¹⁶ They mostly respond to disasters such as the Nepal earthquake in 2015 and the COVID-19 pandemic, providing emergency relief. Beyond humanitarian efforts, they are engaged in long-term development initiatives by constructing schools and hospitals and donating educational materials and medical equipment to local communities.

China's Global Strategy

China's Global Initiatives

China's ambition to reshape global governance is evident in its efforts to promote initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI). These initiatives are designed to extend its influence and create a more favorable international environment for its rise.¹⁷

They are part of a broader strategy to position China as a leader of the Global South and as a champion of developing nations, countering what Beijing perceives as the hegemony of the U.S.-led international order.¹⁸ At its face value, these initiatives may look like mere economic or diplomatic endeavors. However, a closer look at them suggests that they are strategic tools through which China aims to project its influence, cultivate authority, and engineer a new global order that aligns with its vision.

The BRI, with its massive investment in infrastructure and connectivity projects across Asia, Africa, and beyond, is designed to position China at the heart of global trade routes, enhancing its economic leverage and strategic influence.¹⁹ The GDI, GSI, and GCI, on the other hand, represent China's broader ambition to shape the rules and norms that govern international relations. These initiatives are key pillars of China's foreign policy goal of building a "community of common destiny for mankind,"²⁰ a concept that envisions a world order where China's values and interests are central.

The GDI emphasizes development as the foundation for global stability. It seeks to promote China's model of economic growth as a blueprint for other countries, particularly in the developing world.²¹ The GSI seeks to establish a security framework that prioritizes sovereignty and non-interference.²² This initiative contrast sharply with Western-led security structures. The GCI aims to promote cultural exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations.²³ The initiative subtly advocates for a global order where Chinese culture and values play a prominent role.

These initiatives are part of a broader strategy to shift global governance in a direction that serves China's long-term interests. Chinese foreign policy, once characterized by the dictum of "keeping a low profile,"²⁴ has evolved under Xi Jinping to embrace a more proactive and ambitious role in shaping a favorable external environment. Another feature of Xi Jinping's presidency is marked by an assertive and multifaceted approach to increasing its influence within the existing global governance framework.

In this context, China is seeking to create an external environment that is conducive to its development and security while also challenging the liberal norms that have traditionally dominated global governance. This strategy seeks to elevate China's status as a global leader while

simultaneously challenging and reshaping the norms, institutions, and values that have long been dominated by Western powers, particularly the United States, signaling a shift towards a more multipolar world.

China's rising influence within the UN and beyond

China has strategically positioned itself within key global governance institutions, most notably the United Nations (UN), to assert its influence and promote its vision of a more multipolar world order. Since its recognition as the legitimate representative of China in the UN in 1971, Beijing has steadily increased its diplomatic and financial investments in the organization. This has been especially evident in the recent years, as China has become the second-largest contributor to both the UN's regular budget (15.25%)²⁵ and its peacekeeping operations (15.21%)²⁶, following only the United States. This financial commitment represents China's ambition to play a central role in shaping the global governance landscape.

China's influence within the UN is not merely financial but extends to its ability to shape policy, language, and norms across the organization. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), China wields significant veto power, which it has used to align with its strategic interests, often in concert with Russia.²⁷ Additionally, China has secured senior positions within various specialized UN agencies, allowing it to steer discussions and decisions in ways that reflect its priorities.²⁸

China's approach to the UN system has been to actively participate in and support those institutions and agreements that align with its goals, such as the World Bank and the Paris Agreement on climate change. However, in areas where Beijing diverges from established norms—particularly concerning human rights—it has sought to undermine existing values and promote alternative standards.²⁹ For example, China has been effective in using its influence within the UN to limit international criticism of its human rights record and to assert its “One-China policy” as a principle of international law.³⁰

China's more confident role in global governance is indicative of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) growing confidence in its domestic governance model and its desire to lead on the international stage. Xi's call for China to “lead the reform of the global governance system”³¹

reflects this ambition, as Beijing pushes for changes that align global institutions and norms with its values and interests.

President Xi introduced the Global Development Initiative (GDI) during the 76th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2021. He presented GDI as a strategy “to help revive global efforts to achieve the SDGs by 2030.”³² The goal of the GDI is to take the global development agenda under Chinese leadership and shape it in accord with Chinese ideas; which has already gained momentum within development circles as well as inside the UN system. The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres praised GDI and mentioned that it could become valuable to advancing SDGs.³³

Chinese NGOs are turning out to be key partners for the UN agencies both domestically and internationally in the promotion of development across many different sectors.³⁴ These collaborations occur under both GDI and independent partnerships. This development partnership reflects the increasing influence of the China within the UN. Similarly, the UN is playing an important role in China through the 2021-2025 United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF).³⁵ As China rises in influence within the UN system—becoming a leading contributor to peacekeeping, South-South cooperation, and development financing—the UN’s expanded role in China reflects a deepening partnership aimed at leveraging this influence to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) both domestically and globally.

It shows how China is playing a larger role in shaping global development agendas through these collaborations. Building on the wealth of experience that China has accumulated relating to poverty reduction, health, and disaster management, the UN is scaling up its impact and engaging more profoundly with Chinese NGOs as implementers of global development goals.³⁶

China’s strategy involves working within existing institutions like the UN but also promoting alternative mechanisms and alliances. This dual-track approach includes the sponsorship of regional institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA). Through these platforms, China seeks to create alternative governance mechanism that supports its

geopolitical goals while challenging the dominance of Western-led institutions and world order.

Despite its growing influence, China's strategy has not been without challenges. Its assertive approach has deepened divides with other major powers, particularly democracies committed to existing norms and institutions. This divide has raised concerns about the potential for two distinct systems of global governance to emerge, which could undermine multilateral cooperation and make it more difficult to address global challenges collectively.³⁷

China's global strategy under Xi Jinping represents a significant shift in the country's approach to international relations. By leveraging its financial contributions and diplomatic influence within the UN and other global institutions, China is effectively increasing its control over the global governance system. This strategy is driven by a desire to reshape the international order in a way that reflects China's values, secures its development and security interests, and positions it as a global leader in the 21st century. As China continues to assert its influence, the international community will need to navigate the complex dynamics of a world where Chinese norms and values play an increasingly central role.

Chinese NGOs and their role in China's global ambitions

China's NGO strategy has gained considerable momentum in recent years to become an essential element of its wider global outreach under the BRI framework. In 2017, President Xi facilitated the establishment of the "Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network Forum,"³⁸ a seminal event to institute cooperative relationships between NGOs from participating countries in the BRI. The aim was to facilitate people-to-people connectivity, a critical pillar of the BRI, parallel to infrastructure development and economic integration.

Chinese NGOs have gradually scaled up their international humanitarian operations in a phased manner since the last decade, as the sector began to take on an international role. This was happening simultaneously with the increasing focus on social, economic, and cultural integration within BRI. Even though the Overseas NGO Law of 2016 put a damper on international NGOs and their activities in China,³⁹ many Chinese NGOs—the ones closely affiliated with the state—have found avenues for

engagement in the Global South. These NGOs often cooperate with special state-owned enterprises⁴⁰ on issues pertaining to poverty reduction, education, health care, environmental protection, and other different areas, particularly their activities covering Southeast Asia, and East Africa.

CNIE: A state-aligned “Non-Governmental” actor

China NGO Network for International Exchanges (CNIE) has played a crucial role in China's NGO diplomacy. Since the launch of the China-Africa People's Forum in 2011, CNIE has facilitated non-governmental exchanges between China and African countries.⁴¹ President Xi Jinping's direct involvement, whether through direct participation or congratulatory letters, shows the strategic importance of these exchanges.

CNIE has spearheaded multiple initiatives in line with China's global ambitions. In 2017, in response to President Xi's Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, CNIE established the Silk Road NGO Cooperation Network to promote cross-border NGO collaboration.⁴² By 2019, the organization launched the Silk Road Community Building Initiative, which has fostered nearly 600 partnerships between Chinese and foreign NGOs and implemented over 300 livelihood cooperation projects.⁴³ These projects have significantly extended China's soft power reach.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, CNIE demonstrated its role in China's global humanitarian efforts. The “Joint Action for Defeating COVID-19,” initiated under the Silk Road Community Building Initiative, saw more than 60 social organizations and NGOs mobilized to support pandemic relief across over 60 countries, with donations totaling nearly RMB 200 million.⁴⁴

Founded in 2005, CNIE is a “non-profit social organization” and a consortium of civil society groups. However, its operations are directly overseen by CPC's International Liaison Department.⁴⁵ This agency is tasked with fostering relationships with foreign organizations and exerting influence globally. By prioritizing economic and social rights, CNIE aims to deflect criticism associated with other China-led initiatives. Most NGOs operating in Africa and elsewhere are the members of CNIE⁴⁶ and their activities closely align with its stated goals.

CNIE's role in amplifying state narratives

CNIE events often feature state-selected foreign participants who publicly praise China's global efforts. In a 22 January 2024 event organized by CINE in Geneva called "Putting Development at the Center of the Agenda: Safeguarding Economic, Social and Cultural Rights," a delegate from Nepal said that "Nepal commends China for the socio-economic progress achieved particularly in poverty reduction with positive impact on the broader realization of human rights."⁴⁷ This bolsters China's global reputation through international validation attempts.

CNIE promotes narratives that focus on state-led development. By foregrounding socio-economic achievements, it reframes China's governance model as a success story and sidelines the critiques of the Chinese state. Its integration into China's global strategy highlights the CPC's sophisticated use of civil society as a tool for international influence. By operating under the banner of "non-governmental" organizations, these entities advance China's political objectives, shape global discourses, and challenge the traditional role of independent civil society in promoting transparency and accountability. In doing so, they blur the distinction between genuine civil society engagement and the promotion of state-led agendas.

The Chinese government regards NGOs as strategic partners in implementing the BRI's aim for people-to-people connectivity.⁴⁸ They play a very crucial role in developing mitigation strategies to address the adverse social and environmental impacts of BRI projects. However, concerns exist regarding their credibility and independence, especially for those NGOs that are closely allied to the government. While these organizations are taking an increasingly important role in China's global development endeavors, their presence is often controversy-laden due to their affiliations with the state.

Chinese NGOs in Africa

Many Chinese NGOs operating in Africa are government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs). These GONGOs differ significantly from traditional NGOs in terms of structure and autonomy.

As highlighted by scholars, GONGOs like the China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA) and the Soong Ching Ling Foundation were initially led by individuals with close ties to the Communist Party.⁴⁹ Their personnel and financial resources were historically controlled by government ministries. This blurred the line between the state agency and civil society organizations. Even after organizational reforms, such as the CFPA's separation from government control in 1999, the influence of the state remains deeply embedded, making these GONGOs qualitatively different from independent NGOs.⁵⁰

This interrelated relationship with the Chinese state positions GONGOs as diplomatic tools that serve geopolitical interests as much as, if not more than, the needs of local communities. These organizations work to facilitate better relations between the Chinese and African governments. They often align their work with China's corporate and political interests. As Liu Hongwu, director of the Institute of African Studies at Zhejiang Normal University, noted, while there are approximately 100 Chinese NGOs working in Africa, the majority are GONGOs.⁵¹ This suggests that Chinese NGOs in Africa are the drivers of China's state agenda, raising concerns on their independence and genuine humanitarian intent.

Chinese NGOs in Africa are also closely linked to the corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts of Chinese companies. Zadek (2011) emphasizes the potential for Chinese NGOs to improve relations between Chinese enterprises and African communities, particularly in regions like the Zambian copper belt, where conflict between Chinese companies and local workers has been prevalent.⁵² By working with African NGOs, Chinese NGOs can help mediate these tensions and foster better communication between local communities and Chinese businesses. However, this raises the question of whether Chinese NGOs are prioritizing long-term development goals or simply supporting corporate interests.

These NGOs often focus on short-term projects that serve the business interests of Chinese companies rather than pursuing more sustainable development initiatives.⁵³ The involvement of Chinese NGOs in Africa can be seen as an calculated effort to uphold China's reputation by engaging in projects that minimize the negative externalities of China's infrastructure engagements, including the environmental damage and several protests that have erupted in the region.⁵⁴ In this sense, the primary function of Chinese NGOs may be to act as a buffer, addressing

immediate social and environmental issues that arise from Chinese investments while leaving deeper, structural problems unaddressed.

A significant critique of Chinese NGOs is their top-down approach. There is a limited engagement with the African civil society.⁵⁵ While Western NGOs often emphasize partnerships with local organizations and communities, Chinese NGOs and GONGOs tend to operate with little input from African stakeholders.⁵⁶ This tendency limits the sustainability and effectiveness of their projects. As noted by scholars, the presence of GONGOs across the social realm in China has historically been an extension of the state's influence rather than a means to foster grassroots participation and empowerment.⁵⁷ This approach, when transferred to Africa, risks sidelining local voices and perpetuating dependency rather than fostering local capacity.

Limited meaningful collaboration with African NGOs and civil society organizations also weakens the potential for long-term development. Without sustainable engagement with the local actors, Chinese NGOs may deliver short-term results but fail to contribute to long term development. As Bosshard argues, if Chinese companies and NGOs continue to engage in vulnerable sectors without addressing social and environmental problems in partnership with local civil society, they risk undermining China's efforts to promote "harmonious relations."⁵⁸ The Chinese government, he suggests, must extend its concept of a "harmonious society" to a "harmonious world" by encouraging Chinese NGOs to work more closely with civil society groups to address the complex challenges facing African communities.

Chinese NGOs in Africa operate in a space where humanitarianism, corporate interests, and state diplomacy intersect. While these organizations contribute to healthcare, education, and poverty alleviation, their close ties to the Chinese government and corporate entities suggest that their primary purpose may be to advance China's strategic interests rather than support African-led development. Their top-down approach, limited engagement with local civil society, and alignment with Chinese business interests raise concerns about the long-term sustainability of their projects and their true impact on African communities.

Research Significance

China's global infrastructure and economic engagement has received significant scholarly attention. There is substantial literature available on Chinese infrastructure, foreign aid, and related contributions. Most scholarly works are focused on the hard sectors of China's foreign engagement. Even in Nepal, Chinese engagement across infrastructure and economic sectors has gained traction, with little emphasis on China's extension of soft power influence. This study interrogates an under-researched area in Nepal regarding China's engagement in Nepal's civic space with a focus on Chinese NGOs. There is a critical gap in understanding Chinese NGOs' operational mechanisms, thematic focus, and strategic intentions, despite its global proliferation. Since 2015, Chinese NGOs have progressively engaged in grassroots-level initiatives in Nepal, especially in the areas of disaster relief, agriculture, healthcare, education, and poverty alleviation. These "small but beautiful" projects offer a newer dimension to the bilateral relations, traditionally dominated by collaborations on large-scale infrastructural endeavors, through direct community-level impact and soft power projection.

This research is significant as it studies the working dynamics of Chinese NGOs in Nepal. It explores their engagement with the governmental bodies, local elected officials, local partners, and examines issues around transparency and accountability. By doing so, it raises important questions regarding transparency, accountability, and the potential politicization of development assistance. This study, ultimately, advances scholarly understanding of China's soft sector engagement and offer insights into how these strategies shape Nepal's socio-economic development and the broader geopolitical landscape.

Methodology

This study follows a qualitative research approach to examine the role, operation modality, and impact of Chinese NGOs, China-funded Nepali NGOs, and China's soft power influence in Nepal's civic space. The research began with an extensive literature review to understand existing studies on China's NGO engagement, foreign aid, infrastructure projects, and soft power strategies. While there are several research on China's NGO engagement in Africa and Southeast Asia, studies focusing on its

soft power and NGO activities in Nepal are limited. This gap informed the focus of the study.

Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews with key informants (KIIs), including officials from Chinese NGOs, local partner organizations, government agencies such as the Social Welfare Council, community leaders, experts on Nepal-China relations, and the local beneficiaries

The research also includes case studies of Chinese NGO and their local partners. Field visits were conducted in several districts where Chinese NGO activities are concentrated, including districts in Madhesh, Lumbini, Gandaki, Bagmati, and Koshi provinces. Direct observations during these visits helped assess project implementation and community engagement patterns

Additionally, focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with project beneficiaries and other stakeholders to gather their perceptions on the effectiveness and impact of Chinese NGO initiatives in Nepal.

Research Limitations

This research acknowledges several limitations. First limitation of the study is the availability of data related to Chinese NGO and soft power operations. The opacity of Chinese NGO operations restricts the availability of comprehensive and verifiable data. Many Chinese organizations in Nepal operate with limited transparency, and official records often present inconsistencies that may affect data reliability. Despite efforts to triangulate multiple data sources, access to certain governmental and internal NGO documents was limited. This may constrain a more holistic understanding of the strategic intentions and broader impact of these engagements. Second, the research is based on in-depth interviews with key informants and focus group discussions. These methods are rich in insight; however, the key informants may also be influenced by political sensitivities or personal biases, especially given the delicate nature of China-Nepal relations.

Third, while this research provides snapshot of China's engagement in the contemporary time period, it may not account historical trends. Additionally, there are limited existing literature and quantitative studies

on this topic. Quantitative data on Chinese NGO operations, funding, and impact in Nepal is scarce, and existing statistics often lack transparency and reliability. This research fills a gap in qualitative analysis, but there remains a need for more robust, data-driven research to complement these findings.

2

Chinese NGOs in Nepal

China's engagement in Nepal has a long history characterized by deep-rooted exchanges, mutual respect and cooperation. On August 1, 1955, diplomatic relations between the two countries were formally established, opening a new vista for bilateral cooperation.⁵⁹ Over the years, the bilateral relationship is shaped by mutual interests, geopolitical considerations, and evolving regional dynamics.

The countries have shared cultural, religious, and economic exchanges for several centuries. The early exchanges were facilitated by the Silk Road, while the influence of Buddhism further strengthened these relations.⁶⁰ However, the modern relationship began in the 20th century amidst sweeping geopolitical changes within Asia and political changes in both countries.

The first phase of Nepal-China relations was marked by China's support for the sovereignty and development of Nepal in return for the latter's recognition of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Through the 1960s and the 1970s, China granted economic aid and technical assistance to Nepal, which focused primarily on infrastructural projects such as the construction of the Araniko Highway, joining Kathmandu with Tibet.⁶¹ This period formed the bedrock of friendly relations and cooperation.

Over time, Nepal China relations have undergone significant evolution. While the early decades were characterized by state-led initiatives and infrastructural investments that cemented diplomatic recognition and economic cooperation, the relationship is increasingly shaped by diversified engagements. As Nepal's development challenges have shifted

and China's global footing has increased, recent engagements suggest that China has intensified its engagements through the civil society and non-governmental channels, setting the stage for deeper, multifaceted collaboration in the modern era.

As a part of its evolving strategy, China has expanded its influence in Nepali civic sector in the later decades. Chinese NGOs are an important tool for such influence. From poverty alleviation and disaster management to agriculture and governance, these NGOs have expanded their reach in Nepal, aligning with Beijing's broader goals under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Nepal and China signed MoU for NGO exchanges as early as 1999.⁶² In the initial years, over a thousand Chinese volunteers arrived in Nepal to contribute to various sectors, including Mandarin language education, healthcare, and other community services. The China NGO Network for International Exchanges (CNIE) had early collaborations with organizations in Nepal.⁶³ In 2014, CNIE donated 5 metric tons of rice at the Chinese Buddhist Monastery in Lumbini. In collaboration with Arniko Society, an alumni society of students who studied in China, CNIE provided free health checkups and medicine in Kathmandu's outskirts. Former Vice President of Nepal, Parmanand Jha in 2014, met the CNIE delegation and acknowledged their role in improving people's livelihoods through increased NGO cooperation.⁶⁴ Despite this early cooperation, Chinese NGOs made a more formal entry into Nepal only in 2015.⁶⁵ China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA), now China Foundation for Rural Development (CFRD), officially registered with the Social Welfare Council (SWC) Nepal in 2015.⁶⁶

In 2018, an MoU between SWC and CNIE was signed, allowing 30 Chinese NGOs to start their operation in Nepal.⁶⁷ However, due to COVID-19 restrictions and other unspecified reasons, those NGOs haven't been operational in Nepal. So far, CFRD is the only Chinese NGO registered in Nepal. However, China has intensified its activities in Nepal's social sector through non-governmental organizations and people-to-people exchanges. CFRD and local CFRD funded Nepali NGOs have conducted their activities in more than 60 districts of the country, participating in various social development projects including education, healthcare, nutrition, agriculture, and development of community infrastructure.⁶⁸

The presence of Chinese NGOs in Nepal represents a new dimension in the bilateral relationship. While these NGOs contribute to development and social welfare in Nepal, their activities also reflect China's broader strategic interests in the region. As Nepal navigates its relationship with China, understanding the role and influence of Chinese NGOs will be crucial in shaping a balanced and mutually beneficial engagement. The increasing engagement of Chinese NGOs in Nepal has raised concerns and debates about their transparency, working modalities, and their role in enhancing the political relationship between Nepal and China.

Similarly, China launched the "Silk Roadster" program in 2023 under BRI in Nepal. The program emphasizes collaboration with Nepali political parties and social organizations.⁶⁹ It prioritizes grassroots-level development through projects like technical skills training, vocational education, cultural exchanges, and healthcare services. In an event organized to announce Silk Roadster in Bhaktapur in July 2023, representatives from eight different political parties including Dev Gurung, the general secretary of CPN (Maoist Center) and several Nepali NGOs working with Chinese entities attended the program. The Friends of Silk Road Nepal facilitated the organization of the event.⁷⁰ Initially branded as a mega infrastructure project, BRI is branching out to micro-level social projects as well. On 5 March 2025, China announced its plans in the Government Work Report to prioritize "small and beautiful" projects under the Belt and Road Initiative.⁷¹ This signals a shift toward more civil society and community-level engagements in BRI partner countries. The focus will be on small-scale projects that improve public wellbeing and deliver practical benefits.

Chinese NGOs are strategic instruments in China's broader geopolitical and economic agenda, particularly through initiatives like the GDI. This policy has encouraged Chinese NGOs to expand their operations abroad, including in Nepal. Chinese NGOs in Nepal have also collaborated with several international bodies such as the United Nations.⁷²

Most of the activities of Chinese NGOs closely align with the Chinese government's interest in Nepal. They facilitate China's soft power by fostering goodwill and strengthening bilateral ties. However, the transparency of their operations and their true objectives have been subjects of scrutiny. Unlike NGOs from other countries, which often operate under stringent oversight and regulations, Chinese NGOs have

opaque operation modality. This has led to suspicions about their actual intentions and the extent of their influence on Nepal's political landscape.

During interviews with local partners of Chinese NGOs, many were reluctant to discuss details of their operations, their relationship with China, and their future plans. This reticence further fuels concerns about the transparency and inherent motives of these organizations. Additionally, one interviewee criticized the micromanagement of projects by Chinese NGOs. The informant also questioned the sustainability of their current strategies in Nepal. They said, "It would be more fruitful to invest in more sustainable infrastructure such as school building over bags that we are currently distributing."

Moreover, the strategic role of Chinese NGOs in implementing China's global initiatives raises questions about their autonomy. There is a growing perception that these NGOs might be more aligned with state interests rather than purely humanitarian or development objectives. This perception is compounded by China's domestic policy, where NGOs have increasingly taken on roles in social service delivery as part of a government shift towards a procurement model.⁷³ This procurement model refers to the government's approach of contracting NGOs to provide social services and integrating them into state-led welfare initiatives rather than allowing them to operate independently. Despite their enhanced roles, institutional constraints on NGOs within China have not necessarily eased, suggesting that these organizations might still operate under significant governmental influence.

The presence of Chinese NGOs in Nepal represents a new dimension in the bilateral relationship between the two countries. While these NGOs contribute to development and social welfare in Nepal, their activities also reflect China's broader strategic interests in the region. The challenge lies in ensuring transparency and accountability in their operations to foster genuine development partnerships. As Nepal navigates its relationship with China, understanding the role and influence of Chinese NGOs will be crucial in shaping a balanced and mutually beneficial engagement.

Year	Activity
2015	Chinese NGOs, including CFRD, Cihong Charity Foundation, Tibet Shan-Yuan Foundation, Pundarika Charity, and the Enlai Foundation, officially started their activities in Nepal in 2015 for post-earthquake recovery.
2015	China Foundation for Rural Development became the first Chinese NGO to officially register with the Social Welfare Council.
2018	MoU between the Social Welfare Council Nepal and China NGO Network for International Exchanges was signed allowing 30 Chinese NGOs to start their operation in Nepal.
2025	So far, CFRD is the only active Chinese NGO in Nepal registered with the SWC.

Nature of China's NGO Engagement in Nepal

This section highlights how China is engaging with Nepali NGOs and the broader civic sector through strategic collaborations. The section examines the operations of Chinese NGOs and how China's strategic NGO activities could shape public discourse, influence governance, and alter the power dynamics within Nepal's civil society.

Case Study I: China Foundation for Rural Development

The China Foundation for Rural Development, then China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation (CFPA) was established in 1989. It is one of China's largest charity organizations focused on poverty alleviation. CFRD is registered under the Ministry of Civil Affairs and operates in China and internationally, with offices in Beijing, Chengdu, Myanmar, Nepal, and Ethiopia. In China, CFRD runs programs in healthcare, nutrition, education, economic development, disaster relief, and public advocacy. It has expanded its work to less developed countries, including Ethiopia, Colombia, Myanmar, Nepal, and Uganda.⁷⁴

The first Chinese NGO in Nepal, CFRD, (then China Foundation for Poverty Alleviation), started its activities post 2015 earthquake.⁷⁵ CFPA initially entered Nepal for disaster relief and rehabilitation, collaborating

with other Chinese NGOs, the United Nations in Nepal, and local volunteers in early response efforts. However, its involvement deepened when the now-country director, Ms. Zhou Zhiqing, extended her stay. In 2015, CFPA formalized its presence by signing an agreement with the Social Welfare Council (SWC), allowing it to expand its activities beyond disaster relief.

CFRD has been actively engaged in rural development initiatives. They currently focus on health, education, drinking water and sanitation (WASH), agriculture, skill development for youth and women, and the distribution of school meals and warm kits. However, CFRD seems to prioritize distribution projects that promote visibility and reach to a larger population. They have conducted activities in over 60 districts⁷⁶ of all 7 provinces of Nepal – most of which were school meals and warm kits distribution projects.

The activities of CFRD are consistent with Xi Jinping's announcement of "Small yet Smart" or "Small but beautiful"⁷⁷ livelihood programs under the BRI to meet the immediate local needs. Recognizing that large-scale infrastructure projects alone are insufficient to build favorable public opinions across the world, China has identified the need to become a leader in poverty alleviation and development through grassroots initiatives.⁷⁸ By portraying itself as a benevolent global power and sharing its successful experiences in lifting people out of poverty, China leverages these efforts as a tool for soft power, strengthening its influence and image on the world stage. The shifting Chinese priority is simple – lower investments and higher visibility.

CFRD's activities are strategically devised to connect the Chinese state with general populace in Nepal. A report produced by BASE Nepal, one of the NGOs working with CFRD, portrays a success story of the CFRD wherein a 10-year-old girl proudly displayed her new bag with the big logos of CFRD and China Aid. She says that prior to this support, she didn't know much about China, but thanks to the support, she has come to know about the country and about its contributions. This success story underlines how China strategically uses its humanitarian efforts to make it more visible in Nepal and how it creates a brand association with its name through humanitarian support. The little girl's acquaintance with China shows precisely how soft power silently but effectively gets embedded among the public.

CFRD claims that they have spent over USD 10 million in Nepal since 2015, benefitting over 650,000 individuals.⁷⁹ However, this information cannot be verified independently. The documents available from SWC⁸⁰ account for approved budget of just over USD 1.9 million over 2018-2023. One of the key informants at CFRD mentioned that there have been 250,000 direct beneficiaries as of July 2024. This inconsistency in information signals a border pattern of the opaque nature of the Chinese NGOs operating in Nepal.

CFRD's local partners and their engagement patterns

CFRD's operations in Nepal are carried out through collaborations with local partners, as mandated by Nepali law. The law requires INGOs to implement projects only in partnership with local NGOs. In its early years, CFRD primarily collaborated with two local NGOs—National Rehabilitation Society for the Disabled, Nepal (NRSN), and Safa Sunaulo Nepal. According to an interview with a member of these organizations, the same individuals effectively managed both institutions.

A notable trend in CFRD's operations is their preference for working with a consistent set of Nepali organizations. A CFRD representative confirmed that they issue calls for collaboration through the government-owned newspaper- *Gorakhpatri*, as required by regulations introduced by the SWC. Despite this formal process, CFRD tends to engage repeatedly with the same pool of organizations for projects across Nepal. Many of these partners are based in the Kathmandu Valley—Safa Sunaulo Nepal, NRSN, NCV Nepal, Global Cooperation for Development, and New Light Foundation. These organizations have implemented CFRD projects all over Nepal.⁸¹ From projects in Tarkeshwor Municipality in Kathmandu to Matihani Municipality near the Indian border in Madhesh Province, it is implemented by the same pool of trusted local partners. The CFRD representative also suggested that CFRD finds it easier to work with familiar partners.

Another discernible pattern is CFRD's inclination to collaborate with organizations that already have established credibility in specific geographic regions. For instance, in Lumbini Province, CFRD has worked with Backward Society Education (BASE) Nepal and the Rural Woman Development Centre (RWDC).

Backward Society Education (BASE) Nepal is a prominent NGO founded in 1990, with roots in the Tharu community's struggle against bonded labor, particularly the Kamaiya system. BASE is committed to fighting illiteracy, poverty, and social discrimination among marginalized communities in Nepal. Today, BASE operates in 17 districts, focusing on rights advocacy, education, sustainable development, and the preservation of indigenous cultures.⁸²

Rural Women Development Centre (RWDC) is a grassroots organization founded in 1993 under the leadership of Aasmani Chaudhary, dedicated to empowering rural women in Lumbini Province and mid-western Nepal. RWDC focuses on social justice advocacy, gender equality, and socio-economic development, with programs spanning reproductive health, education, land rights, and climate change.⁸³

CFRD's strategic collaboration with reputable NGOs like BASE Nepal and RWDC in Lumbini Province appears to be a calculated move to enhance their legitimacy and influence, capitalizing the credibility of already influential local NGOs. Furthermore, CFRD's activities are strategically targeted to the areas of geopolitical importance to China. Lumbini, as the birthplace of Buddha, holds symbolic value, and exerting influence here through BASE and RWDC aligns with China's broader cultural and diplomatic objectives in South Asia. By partnering with established organizations with deep community ties and credibility, CFRD ensures the smooth implementation of their projects and leverages these NGOs' reputations to bolster their own standing in the region. This approach allows CFRD to navigate local complexities more effectively while reinforcing its presence in an area where China is keen to expand its influence.

They have also partnered with larger organizations like GP Koirala Foundation and Himani Trust. However, one of the key informants indicated that these prominent institutions often overshadow CFRD. This has led them to prefer collaborations with local organizations that provide greater visibility of CFRD's work.

The local implementing partners generally have limited influence over the execution of program activities. Some partners have stated that they execute projects where CFRD directs them to do so. Decisions about project design, target areas, and key priorities are often made by CFRD, with limited consultation or input from local organizations. Additionally,

CFRD exercises a higher level of oversight compared to Western NGOs. Typically, CFRD itself assigns a project officer who is actively involved in the day-to-day execution of the project, working closely with the partner NGO. This approach contrasts with Western NGOs, as one implementing partner noted, “The Western NGOs don’t care about your everyday work as long as you implement the project, but CFRD is involved in everyday activity and controls most of the project.”

Post Covid Engagement in Nepal

In 2020 and early 2021, CFRD was largely inactive due to COVID-19. The organization’s activities were minimal, and there are no records of approved funds for these years in the SWC database. However, post-COVID19, CFRD has slowly resumed its activities in Nepal and has been more visible than earlier. They have increased their local partnerships, expanded to all 7 provinces of Nepal, started over 15 development aid projects, conducted multiple seminars and trainings, and interacted with several political leaders. They have organized at least 82 different events of public engagement since July 2021.⁸⁴

CFRD has launched its major activities through Smiling Children program, Panda Pack distribution program, and various other projects focused on agriculture, health, and WASH, as key components of China’s broader public engagement strategy in Nepal. Notably, the Smiling Children program in Kathmandu and the “Support to Schools and Communities in Remote Areas for Pandemic Prevention and Green Recovery” project in the Sarlahi district of Madhesh Province were selected as part of the first batch of the Global Development Initiative (GDI) Project Pool.⁸⁵ This shows CFRD’s role as an instrument of China’s global development ambitions, extending its influence by involving in the Nepali social sector. By aligning these projects with the GDI, China is using these initiatives to project soft power vis-à-vis its commitment to Nepal’s “rural development.”

CFRD Nepal office’s close relationship with the Chinese state is evident through its frequent collaboration with the Chinese Embassy and high-ranking officials. The Chinese Ambassador is a regular presence at major CFRD events. This highlights the organization’s direct connection to the Chinese government. Additionally, Liu Jianchao, Minister of the International Department, Central Committee of the CPC, participated in

event of the Smiling Children program in July 2022.⁸⁶ This further shows the political backing behind CFRD's activities. The Chinese Ambassador has also publicly announced forthcoming CFRD initiatives in Madhesh,⁸⁷ including projects like "clean drinking water" and "lightening the villages," emphasizing the embassy's involvement in guiding and endorsing CFRD's efforts.

Moreover, the funding for the Smiling Children program is sourced from the Chinese government's Global Development and South-South Cooperation Fund⁸⁸, reinforcing the notion that CFRD in Nepal is instrumental in extending Chinese interests. This relationship suggests that CFRD is not merely a separate NGO but rather a strategic extension of China's state apparatus, advancing Beijing's development and soft power objectives in Nepal.

Trends of engagement of CFRD in Nepal

Since its inception in Nepal, CFRD's priority has been health, education, livelihood, and disaster management. Most investments in the early years seem to be in these sectors. However, their engagement is gradually shifting towards green agricultural projects.

China internally is prioritizing green technology focusing on reduced greenhouse gas emissions. This is evident through Xi Jinping's Dual Carbon commitment – "to peak carbon dioxide emissions before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060" in the United Nations General Assembly in September 2021.⁸⁹ In China, "dual carbon" has become one of the most talked-about terms among public sector employees and savvy business professionals. Most cities now boast a government-funded "dual carbon lab." Similarly, China took a loan worth USD 345 million from the World Bank⁹⁰ to implement the "greening of agriculture and rural development in Hubei and Hunan provinces in central China" project.

CFRD seems to follow this shift – prioritizing sustainable projects in agriculture through green technology and promoting the use of Chinese technology worldwide. The projects such as the *Nepal Tea Project*, being implemented in Kimtang village of Nuwakot district as a part of the 2023 Oversees Rural Revitalization Innovation Projects of CFRD headquarters, *Sustainable Development Experimental Village*, being implemented in Tarkeshwor Municipality, where CFRD has integrated

agriculture, drinking water, and vocational training support programs, and the future plans such as agriculture projects in support of Chongqing Government, hint CFRD's focus on introducing Chinese technology into Nepali agriculture and development sector.

Furthermore, CFRD has strategically increased its engagement in Nepal's geopolitically critical regions, notably Madhesh, Lumbini, and areas along the northern border, through targeted developmental aid and infrastructure projects.

In Madhesh Province, several Chinese initiatives have been implemented. A significant project in the region is *International Bicycle Project*. In January 2025, CFRD, in collaboration with Hello Inc., distributed 1,000 bicycles to students from nine community schools across Bara and Parsa districts. This stated aim of this initiative is to empower students and promote green travel.⁹¹ Similarly, CFRD collaborated with UNDP, with funding from China Aid, for "Support to Schools and Communities in Remote Areas for Pandemic Prevention and Green Recovery." Over 3000 students directly benefited from the program across Rautahat and Bara district of Madhesh Province.⁹²

Another significant project launched in Nepal is *Lighting the Future*. Launched in November 2024, this charity project aims to illuminate 500 households in remote mountainous areas of Nepal with solar lamps. Initially, 90 households in Mindupa and Sim villages of Kavrepalanchok District in Bagmati Province were covered, with 80 households already benefiting from the installation.⁹³

China has also increased its NGO engagements in Lumbini, the birthplace of Lord Buddha and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. China has been actively participating in the development of Lumbini's infrastructure, including the construction of the China-funded Gautam Buddha International Airport. Chinese organizations have been organizing cultural exchange programs and events in Lumbini to promote cultural ties and mutual understanding between the two countries.⁹⁴ They frequently collaborate with Lumbini Buddhist University (LBU) for several events.⁹⁵ In March 2025, CFRD, with Alibaba Philanthropy launched the "Panda Pack Sports Kit" in Lumbini with the stated goal to "inspire Nepalese youth with the Olympic spirit."⁹⁶

Collaboration with the local government

CFRD directly liaises with elected officials at the local level, usually mayors or their key contacts in the municipalities in which it works. This direct liaison enables CFRD to fast-track project implementation and largely reduce bureaucratic bottlenecks. While this may seem efficient in face value, it bypasses several layers of governance mechanisms. As mentioned above, the mayor of Tulsipur Sub-metropolitan City mentioned that the was in continuous dialogue and consultation with CFRD regarding the launching of its activities in the city. However, a bureaucrat within the same municipality stated that the bureaucracy isn't part of the decision-making process.

Similarly, in Barahthawa and Tarkeshwor Municipality, CFRD directly coordinates with the representatives of the local governments. As a representative verified from CFRD, "Local governments are crucial in terms of orienting projects according to the needs of the local people. That's how CFRD shapes its activities to meet the demands at the grassroots level in consultation with the local governments." In this regard, it appears that the political identities of the local officials have little or no impact on the partnerships of CFRD. They work with whoever representatives are in office—at the same time, they focus on building personal connections with them to streamline the project execution

One striking feature of the CFRD's approach is its tendency to dodge the provincial governments altogether. Provincial authorities are seldom consulted either in project planning or implementation. A minister from Madhesh Province, despite admitting that they are aware of the activities being carried out by CFRD, said no formal consultation has been made with the provincial government. The same approach is evident to bypass the bureaucracies of local governments. For example, a bureaucrat involved in projects with CFRD mentioned that the role of bureaucracy is only to process the paperwork associated with projects already approved by the elected representatives. This bureaucrat, who spoke on condition of anonymity, verified that CFRD works directly with the mayors and other elected officials, and thus bureaucracy is only a secondary stakeholder.

CFRD's local-level engagements directly through elected representatives might appear effective initially but the lack of provincial oversight,

minimal bureaucratic involvement, and selective partnerships with local representatives raise critical questions about the inherent motive, sustainability, transparency, and real impact of these projects. In interactions with several local leaders and beneficiaries, they highlighted concerns about the effectiveness of CFRD's programs. They criticized their "massive branding" for "minimal impact."

CFRD's disaster relief contribution to political parties

In September 2024, Nepal was hit by flooding and landslide, resulting in damage equivalent to 1% of country's total GDP.⁹⁷ The International department of the Chinese Communist Party collaborated with CFRD for a relief initiative targeted to the victims of the disaster. This initiative, however, was executed in an unprecedented manner. CPC donated NRS 19.7 million directly to Nepali political parties, including the Nepali Congress and CPN (UML), to distribute flood relief to affected families.⁹⁸

Nepal doesn't have a precedent of political parties receiving donations directly from the foreign political parties. While humanitarian assistance during the time of crisis is welcome, channelization of such funds through political parties, bypassing the state mechanisms introduces risk to the political process. Nepal has adopted a "one-door" policy to streamline the relief efforts through state institutions.⁹⁹

The precedent of foreign donations to Nepali political parties raises concerns about other foreign powers to follow suit. Political parties from other countries could use similar methods to influence Nepali politics. This could further complicate Nepal's geopolitical environment and domestic policy choices. The legitimacy of Nepal's political system depends on the autonomy of its institutions and leaders, free from undue foreign influence. This precedent places Nepal in a precarious position; Nepal's political process could be open for external manipulation, potentially weakening its sovereignty and stability.

However, this is not an outlier in China's approach. Strengthening party-to-party relations is a strategic policy China employs to create friendly relations with political parties abroad. This is evident through initiatives such as the "Silk Roadster."¹⁰⁰ Silk Roadster explicitly emphasizes party-to-party exchanges between China and South and Southeast Asian countries. Similarly, during his Nepal visit Chen Gang, Xi Jinping's envoy

in 2024, stated that strengthening party relations is important for China. He said, “We will not interfere in the internal affairs of any country, but we will give importance to the relationship between parties.”¹⁰¹ During his visit, Chen also briefed Nepali political parties on the third plenary session of the 20th CPC Central Committee. These are all indicative of China’s approach to strengthen party-to-party relations and a strategic move to create a more favorable environment for China within Nepali political parties.

Case Study II: Amity Foundation via Transform Nepal

The Amity Foundation is an independent Chinese social organization established in 1985 by Chinese Christians. Despite not being registered in Nepal, the Amity Foundation has funded projects through a local NGO, Transform Nepal. The foundation is currently supporting a Rain Harvesting project, aimed at creating a rain-harvesting system and WASH facilities, the Chepang Housing and Community Development Project, aimed to provide shelter for the nomadic indigenous group, a Community Health Education Project, and the Living Water Project. All of the projects are being implemented in different regions of Sarlahi District in Madhesh Province. In an interview, the Managing Director and Chair of Transform Nepal confirmed that the Amity Foundation was financing these initiatives.

The Living Water Project in Lalbandi Municipality focuses on providing water supply infrastructure such as pipelines, water tanks, and taps, as well as delivering community health education on sanitation, health, and hygiene. One of the key informants mentioned that the project has benefitted over 60 families in the ward number 14 of Lalbandi Municipality. Notably, the Living Water Project in Sarlahi was executed in collaboration with the local government, Nepal Khanepani Sansthan, and the Amity Foundation via Transform Nepal.

However, there are critical issues concerning the transparency and awareness of the involved parties in project execution. In a statement released on October 18, 2023, during the Chair’s Statement of the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation,¹⁰² the Living Water Project was cited as a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), alongside the Panda Pack Project. Despite this, the implementing partner, Transform Nepal, was reportedly unaware of the project’s connection to

the BRI. When followed up with this information, Transform Nepal denied having any knowledge of the project being linked to the BRI, raising significant questions about the clarity and communication between the organizations involved in these projects.

Transform Nepal had previously collaborated with the China Foundation for Rural Development (CFRD) to distribute Panda Packs. However, a member of Transform Nepal mentioned that they discontinued this collaboration due to concerns about the sustainability of such distribution programs. The organization expressed concern that CFRD was not prioritizing sustainable and long-term projects, deviating from Transform Nepal's focus.

Chapter Summary

While the presence of Chinese NGOs in Nepal appears to be beneficial for local communities to some extent, its activities raise concerns about transparency, accountability, and political influence. CFRD's priority of highly visible, short-term projects—such as school meals and warm kit distributions—has made little impact to address Nepal's long-term needs. These projects are part of China's global soft power strategy and prioritize branding and visibility to shape favorable perception about China.

The trend of developing close relationship with the elected local officials and their tendency to bypass bureaucracy and provincial authorities raises critical governance concerns. This approach limits oversight and accountability and makes it difficult to assess the real impact of these NGOs' activities. There's a need for stronger oversight from Nepal government to ensure that their activities align with national development priorities and is executed in a transparent and accountable manner.

Moreover, during the 2024 floods, in which the CFRD channeled disaster relief through political parties, underlines the risks of foreign involvement in Nepal's political process. This tendency to bypass existing state institutions and directly deal with political parties has set a very dangerous precedent with respect to external influences in domestic politics.

Similarly, there are critical concerns about transparency in project implementation. For example, although the Living Water Project was cited as part of the BRI during the Third Belt and Road Forum in 2023,

the implementing partner, Transform Nepal, was reportedly unaware of its connection to the initiative.

To genuinely contribute to Nepal's development efforts, Chinese NGOs should shift the focus from 'high visibility, low impact' projects toward high-impact projects that should rightly benefit Nepal's agenda of prosperity. Further, Nepal has to be careful to ensure that the foreign assistance strengthens rather than compromises its political and governance systems.

3

Friendship Groups, Alumni Societies, and Civil Organizations

Several China-Nepal friendship groups, alumni societies, and civil organizations, alongside government-organized NGOs like the China Foundation for Rural Development (CFRD), actively advance China's interests in Nepal. Prominent among these are institutions such as Friends of Silk Road, the Nepal-China Friendship Forum, The Arniko Society, and the Nepal-China Dialogue and Development Forum (NCDF), among others. These groups actively promote a favorable image of China through events, dialogues, and discussions that consistently highlight China's role in Nepal's development and bilateral relations.

They organize a wide range of events, such as *"China's Belt and Road Initiative at Ten: Nepal's Experience,"*¹⁰³ the *"Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the CPC: Sharing Development Opportunities with Nepal,"*¹⁰⁴ and *"Belt and Road Initiative in Lumbini Province,"* along with discussions on *"China's Development Model: Promoting Growth & Safeguarding Livelihoods"*¹⁰⁵ and *"Transforming Nepali Agriculture."*¹⁰⁶ These forums often attract participation from key Nepali figures—politicians (notably from leftist parties), bureaucrats (former and existing), former ambassadors, and other influential individuals capable of shaping public perceptions. A common theme in these events is the emphasis on Chinese model of development, Chinese technology, and Chinese investments as crucial for Nepal's development. They present collaboration with China as an important tool for Nepal's growth and highlight the strengthened ties with northern neighbor as a key to secure an equitable position in the border geopolitical landscape.

In addition to hosting events, these organizations maintain an active presence on social media, promoting Chinese initiatives in Nepal, key decisions by the Chinese Communist Party, and China's development model. Their strategic objective is to cultivate a network of Nepali elites who are aligned with China's interests, thereby strengthening bilateral relations and fostering a favorable environment for China's initiatives in Nepal.

Some of the friendship groups officially facilitate the implementation of Chinese initiatives in Nepal. For example, the launching event of Silk Roadster program under BRI focused on "small but effective" programs in Nepal was facilitated by Friends of Silk Road Nepal.¹⁰⁷ In an interview with a local newspaper, the chairperson of the same organization said that the Chinese side wishes to share its high-quality technical advancements, innovation, and new technologies in areas like agriculture, renewable energy, and hospitals.¹⁰⁸

Network of Friendly Elites

China has successfully created a network of friendly elites in Nepal. This is consistent with the broader Chinese strategy of creating a favorable environment led by the local leaders to promote Chinese interests.¹⁰⁹ China has recognized elite control as an important tool to further its interest globally.

Friendship groups, alumni societies, and civil organizations are instrumental in developing the networks of friendly elites. These organizations consist of individuals who have professional and personal ties to China, including bureaucrats, politicians, journalists, businesspeople, and students. Many have developed such connections through scholarships, exchange programs, and professional visits to China. This network of "friendly elites" actively promotes Chinese interest in Nepal.

An important component of Belt and Road Initiative is "people-to-people exchanges." China uses people-to-people diplomacy to foster soft power influence through extension of personal and professional relationships. Many Nepali students, bureaucrats, journalists, and politicians are often invited to China on exchange visits, where they are taught about socialism with Chinese characteristics, the Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese

development model, and China's technology. These exchange programs also include tours around China to witness China's transformation in agriculture and infrastructure, as well as China's unprecedented achievement in poverty alleviation. These programs aim to align Nepali elites' interests with Chinese objectives and create a favorable impression of China. People back from such exchanges collaborate with the existing network of friendly elites and promote Chinese objectives and play a significant role to shape public discourse regarding China. Their advocacy often aligns with Beijing's strategic goals, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and they use their platforms to amplify China's developmental model, investments, and diplomatic overtures.

Political Influence

Many Nepali politicians, especially from left-leaning parties, have developed close ties with China. These political leaders advocate for stronger Nepal-China relations.¹¹⁰ They view China as a reliable partner in development and an alternative to traditional Western and Indian influence. Their alignment with Chinese policies has led to a noticeable shift in Nepal's foreign policy discourse. The joint communique issued during former PM Pushpa Kamal Dahal's visit in 2023¹¹¹ and PM KP Oli's official China visit in 2024¹¹² reinforce such shift. Nepal recognized Tibet with its sinicized name "Xizang" and incorporated a sentence "firmly supports China's efforts to achieve its national reunification and opposes "Taiwan independence." Even though, Nepal has always firmly supported One China Policy, the explicit incorporation of such phrase shows rising shift in Nepal's foreign policy to incorporate China's growing strategic interests. Additionally, top Nepali politicians generally maintain a positive outlook towards the BRI and promote China's presence in Nepal's infrastructure, energy, and technology sectors. Any discourse against BRI is seen as "Western influence" and political parties on the left seem keen to "deconstruct" the "illusions."¹¹³

Influence on Bureaucracy and Diplomatic Front

Some senior bureaucrats and former ambassadors also play a key role in promoting pro-China sentiment. Their extensive experience in diplomacy and governance positions them as influential voices capable of shaping policy decisions. Many of these elites have participated in China-sponsored seminars, forums, and study tours. Some have also worked as ambassadors to China. This connection further deepens their affinity

toward Chinese policies and practices. Similarly, China offers education and training exchange programs to serving bureaucrats as well. In 2019, China offered 850 training slots to Nepali civil servants.¹¹⁴ These connections provide China with a strategic network of allies who advocate for policies that favor Chinese investment and influence.

Intellectual and Academic Alignment

Nepali academics have increasingly engaged in dialogues that emphasize the benefits of China's development model for Nepal. These intellectuals contribute to creating a favorable narrative around Chinese investments and projects, framing them as opportunities for Nepal's economic growth. Publications, opinion pieces, and research papers produced by these individuals frequently echo Chinese talking points. This reinforces the idea that China's rise offers Nepal a strategic pathway to modernization and prosperity.

Media and Public Discourse

Pro-China elites also influence Nepal's media landscape. They use their platforms to promote a positive image of China. Through social media, articles, and interviews, they emphasize China's contributions to Nepal's infrastructure and economic development. A common theme includes downplaying or ignoring the potential geopolitical risks of deepening dependence on China. For example, China Radio International (CRI), which operates a Nepali language service, has been spreading content that aligns with Chinese geopolitical interests. A video posted on the Facebook page of CRI's Nepali service, which criticized the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) grant agreement between Nepal and the United States, garnered significant attention, with 431,000 views and widespread engagement on social media.¹¹⁵ A month later, CRI posted another video on Facebook against MCC, this garnered over 280,000 views, 15 thousand likes, and 77 comments.¹¹⁶

This media influence helps shape public opinion; it frames China as a benevolent power that can help Nepal achieve stability and growth in a region dominated by competition between India, China, and other global powers.

Chapter Summary

Friendship groups, alumni societies, and civil organizations play a crucial role in advancing China's interests in Nepal. Through different events, people-to-people exchanges, and regular media publicity, these organizations have created a network of pro-China elites comprising politicians, bureaucrats, intellectuals, and media figures. This curated network actively promotes China's development model, investments, and diplomatic initiatives. They frame initiatives like Belt and Road Initiative as essential for Nepal's growth and stability.

China has successfully strengthened its influence within key segments of Nepal's leadership and public discourse through personal and professional connections. Many of these elites, recipients of Chinese scholarships, exchange programs, and professional visits advocate for stronger bilateral ties. They also dismiss critiques of China's influence as being shaped by Western narratives. This close alignment of the elites with the Chinese policies reflects the strategy of elite capture employed by China that aims to foster long-term support for Chinese geopolitical and economic objectives in Nepal. With these elites continuing to influence Nepali policy and public perception, China's role in Nepali political, economic, and social landscape is likely to deepen even further.

4

Confucius Institutes

The first Confucius Institute in Nepal was established at Kathmandu University, following an agreement between the Chinese Embassy in Nepal and Kathmandu University on 5 February 2007.¹¹⁷

KU and Hebei University of Economics and Business in collaboration with the Office of Chinese Language Council International have jointly been running the Confucius Institute KU (CIKU) since 13 June 2007.¹¹⁸ Kathmandu University's Confucius Institute offers four Confucius classes, nine teaching stations, and six linked colleges for Chinese language studies. It also works with three non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Nepal.¹¹⁹

The Confucius Institute at Tribhuvan University (CI @ TU) was formed following an agreement between President Xi Jinping of China and President Bidhya Bhandari of Nepal during President Xi's visit to Nepal in 2019.¹²⁰ The agreement focused on collaboration in higher education and the promotion of language. CI @ TU operates in collaboration with three universities: Tribhuvan University, Qinghai Minjtu University, and East China University of Technology. Although CI @ TU was established in 2020, due to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it officially started operations on 16 August 2022.

There have been ongoing efforts to establish the Confucius Institute at Lumbini Buddhist University. In 2023, a group from Lumbini Buddhist University met with Pan Mutian, deputy secretary of the Party Committee

of Shanghai University of Political Science and Law (SHUPL), and secretary of the Commission for Discipline Inspection to discuss the cooperation for the establishment of the Confucius Institutes.¹²¹ The LBU established a World Confucianism Center in 2024. It is focused on research related to Confucianism and Buddhism. Additionally, the center also runs Mandarin classes and facilitates cultural exchanges.

The Confucius Institutes in Nepal, as part of a broader network of Confucius Institutes globally, serve as a key instrument in China's soft power strategy. By fostering educational and cultural exchanges, these institutes aim to promote Chinese culture, language, and values internationally. However, while there are undeniable benefits of such initiatives, the rising influence of Confucius Institutes in countries like Nepal also raises important questions about sovereignty, cultural autonomy, and the long-term implications of such engagements.

In Nepal, the establishment of CI @ TU is the result of high-level diplomatic engagement. This signals the importance China places on educational diplomacy as a tool for strengthening bilateral relations. The institute not only offers language courses but also facilitates scholarships, cultural exchanges, and academic discussions on topics ranging from Confucian philosophy to Chinese medicine.¹²² This aligns with China's broader soft power agenda, where cultural diplomacy is used to create a favorable image of China, promote mutual understanding, and cultivate a network of goodwill in the host country.

In an interview, the current director of CI @ TU, mentioned that he is trying to establish a Department of Chinese Language Studies at Tribhuvan University. The establishment of the said department would significantly bolster China's soft power in Nepal. By institutionalizing Chinese language education within Nepal's premier university, China can embed its cultural narratives deeply into the academic fabric of the country. This initiative is more than just an educational advancement; it strategically aligns with China's broader goal of expanding its influence in South Asia. Through this department, China aims to cultivate a generation of Nepali students and future leaders who are linguistically and culturally attuned to Chinese perspectives, shaping Nepal's intellectual and policy landscapes in ways that favor closer Sino-Nepali ties.

This effort is already consistent with what China already does through public diplomacy. Former Nepali ambassadors to China, prominent

politicians, and high-level former bureaucrats are often the most vocal advocates for stronger ties with China. China uses people-to-people and cultural exchanges to cultivate more grassroots and intellectual support for China within Nepal.

Through Confucius Institutes, China aims to counterbalance the influence of other regional powers like India and Western countries, who also engage in cultural diplomacy in Nepal. The proposed department would serve as a long-term investment in cultural diplomacy, normalizing Chinese viewpoints and fostering a base of goodwill that China can leverage in various diplomatic and economic contexts. Thus, while it enhances educational opportunities in Nepal, the near-future goal of creating this department also represents a calculated effort by China to solidify its soft power in a strategically important region.

From an educational standpoint, Confucius institutes provide valuable opportunities for Nepali students and scholars. Over 400 students have enrolled and taken classes from CI @ TU. These institutes have been facilitating Nepali students with scholarships, language training, and exchange programs, thereby opening doors for academic growth and cross-cultural understanding. Students who participate in these programs gain insights into Chinese culture and society, which can be beneficial in an increasingly interconnected world. Additionally, the promotion of Nepali language courses in China, as mentioned by the director of the center, suggests a level of reciprocity, potentially fostering a mutual exchange of cultural knowledge.

Furthermore, the collaboration between Tribhuvan University and Chinese universities could lead to enhanced academic research and partnerships, benefiting both countries. The potential establishment of a Department of Chinese Language Studies within Tribhuvan University represents a long-term investment in language education that could contribute to the intellectual and cultural landscape of Nepal.

However, the increasing influence of Confucius Institutes also warrants critical examination. While these institutes are ostensibly educational and cultural in nature, their operations are often closely linked to the foreign policy agenda of the Chinese government. This raises concerns that these institutes might serve as tools for Chinese agendas, subtly shaping favorable narrative around China in host countries like Nepal.

Chapter Summary

Since 2007, Nepal has seen an intensification of Chinese cultural diplomacy through a series of Confucius Institutes. The journey began at Kathmandu University, where an agreement with the Chinese Embassy led to the establishment of a center that introduced Mandarin language courses and set up multiple teaching stations.

The next major development was the launch of the Confucius Institute at Tribhuvan University, following high-level diplomatic engagement between China and Nepal. Initiated in 2020 and officially operational in August 2022 after pandemic-related delays, the institute partnered with Chinese universities to broaden its scope. Beyond language education, it now offers scholarships, cultural programs, and academic forums that have attracted over 400 Nepali students. Efforts to expand China's educational influence are further evidenced by initiatives at Lumbini Buddhist University, including establishment of World Confucianism Center and a proposed Department of Chinese Language Studies at Tribhuvan University.

These institutions are key components of China's soft power strategy. They are designed to embed Chinese cultural narratives into Nepal's academic landscape while promoting mutual understanding and strengthening bilateral relations. However, alongside the educational and cultural benefits, there are growing concerns regarding the soft influence these institutes may have on Nepal as they serve as channels for advancing China's broader geopolitical interests.

5

Chinese Embassy Youth Pioneer Program (CNYP)

The Chinese Embassy Youth Pioneer Program (CNYP) is an initiative launched by the Chinese Embassy in Nepal in 2024. The stated purpose of the initiative is to engage and empower young Nepali professionals through leadership training, community engagement, and cultural exchange.¹²³ The program seeks to build a network of young individuals who can contribute to Nepal's economic and social development while fostering stronger ties between Nepal and China.¹²⁴ It is portrayed as a prestigious opportunity for aspiring leaders and influencers in Nepal who are interested in international cooperation and development.

Recruitment and Selection Process

CNYP primarily targets young Nepali professionals, university students, and recent graduates who demonstrate leadership potential, an interest in China-Nepal relations, and a willingness to participate in various cultural and developmental initiatives. Preference is given to individuals with backgrounds in politics, international relations, business, media, and social development. Applicants typically undergo a rigorous selection process, including an application review, interviews, and assessments on their knowledge of China's development model, foreign policy, and bilateral relations with Nepal.¹²⁵

This recruitment strategy ensures that CNYP members are the capable young leaders who are likely to hold influential positions in Nepal in the future. By selecting participants from key fields such as journalism, politics, and academia, the program aims to build a network of Nepali professionals who have a positive outlook on China's development

strategy and political philosophy and envisions to create a network of influential youths who could as a bridge between China and Nepal. The Embassy has recently recruited the first batch of participants for the program in 2024.

Cultural Exchange and Training Programs

A core component of CNYP is its cultural exchange initiatives, where participants travel to China for study tours, short-term training, and workshops on governance, economic policies, and development strategies. These programs would provide the members firsthand exposure to China's rapid modernization, infrastructural advancements, and socio-political framework.

Participants are expected to learn China's achievements in poverty alleviation, economic development, and technological innovation. The exchange visits are expected to include meetings with Chinese officials, tours of industrial zones, and interactions with Chinese universities and research institutions. The participants often highlight the visits and post it in social media.¹²⁶

In Nepal, the recent first batch recruits of CNYP participated in programs such as cultural festivals,¹²⁷ Buddhist seminars, dialogues, and more.¹²⁸ These activities promote Chinese culture and values and provides an outlook to the world order centered around China.

Political and Soft Power Implications

While CNYP is framed as a cultural and leadership development initiative, it serves a broader geopolitical function as part of China's soft power strategy in Nepal. The program enables China to cultivate goodwill among Nepal's future leaders and influencers, fostering a generation that is more sympathetic to Chinese policies and perspectives.

Influencing Nepal's Future Leadership

By engaging young professionals who are likely to assume important roles in Nepal's government, media, and academic institutions in future, CNYP aims to groom individuals who have been exposed to and influenced by China's governance model and economic philosophy. These individuals,

in turn, may shape public discourse and policy decisions in ways that align with China's interests, particularly in areas such as trade, infrastructure, and diplomatic relations.

Countering Western Influence

China's engagement in Nepal, including through programs like CNYP, is also viewed as a counterbalance to Western influence in the region. US Embassy has been running a similar program called "United States Embassy Youth Council" (USYC),¹²⁹ and the European Union has a program called "Youth Sounding Board."¹³⁰ These institutions have been working with Nepali young leaders for a long time as part of their public diplomacy. Many claim that CNYP is a response to such programs.

By introducing influential youths to alternative narratives and developmental models, China aims to portray itself as a role model for Nepal's economic growth and modernization among future leaders. The expected presence of CNYP members in key sectors in the future would help reinforce these narratives, presenting China as an ally rather than a geopolitical competitor.

Strengthening Bilateral Relations

CNYP is expected to play a role in strengthening diplomatic relations between Nepal and China by fostering people-to-people ties. As participants build relationships with Chinese officials, organizations, and peers, they develop personal and professional networks that can facilitate long-term cooperation. These connections may lead to increased collaboration in trade, education, and infrastructure development, further solidifying China's influence in Nepal.

Soft Power through Cultural Diplomacy

The strong emphasis of the program on cultural exchange allows China to project a positive image of its nation, countering criticisms of its political system and foreign policies. By showcasing its economic success and technological advancements, China aims to inspire admiration and ideological alignment among Nepali youth. This approach also helps mitigate potential resistance to China's growing presence in Nepal, as individuals who have participated in CNYP are more likely to view China as a benevolent partner rather than a dominating force.

Chapter Summary

The Chinese Embassy Youth Pioneer Program serves as a case study of China's increasing engagement in Nepal's civic space. While it offers tangible benefits such as leadership training and cross-cultural collaboration, it also functions as a strategic tool for China to expand its influence among Nepal's emerging leaders. Through targeted recruitment, cultural exchanges, and professional networking opportunities, CNYP aims to foster a pro-China sentiment among young Nepali professionals, shaping the future of Nepal-China relations in favor of Beijing's interests.

6

China's Influence in Nepali Media

In recent years, the growing influence of China in various sectors globally has been a subject of considerable debate and concern. One of the most notable areas where this influence has manifested is in the media sector,¹³¹ particularly in smaller nations like Nepal. China's strategy to influence Nepali media is part of a broader geopolitical agenda aimed at expanding its soft power in South Asia.

Over the last few years, the media sector in Nepal has become a critical sphere for Chinese influence. CESIF's previous research on China's influence in Nepali media highlights that China's influence in Nepali media is a strategic effort to expand its soft power through financial investments, partnerships, and direct content control. China Media Group (CMG) and affiliated entities fund local media, promote pro-China narratives, and counter Western influence. Key allies in Nepal including Capital Media Group and Ray Media Group, receive substantial Chinese funding, shaping editorial agendas.¹³² Exchange programs have trained over 7,000 Nepali journalists, fostering pro-China sentiment. Foreign investment restrictions in the media sector are bypassed through indirect channels leading to financial opacity.¹³³ This growing influence threatens Nepal's media independence and sovereignty, necessitating stricter regulations to ensure transparency and editorial autonomy.

Impact on Traditional Media and Sovereignty

While Chinese influence is pervasive in newer media ventures like Capital Media Group and Ray Media Group, traditional mainstream media in

Nepal has remained considerably free of direct Chinese investment. However, this does not mean that traditional media is immune to Chinese influence. China has sought to expand its presence in mainstream media through indirect means, such as advertising and partnerships with established media houses.

For example, *China Daily*, a Chinese state-run newspaper, was printed and distributed in Nepal through a partnership with Himal Media Pvt Ltd, although this initiative was eventually suspended. This effort to infiltrate traditional media highlights China's strategic approach to broadening its influence in Nepal's media landscape.

The impact of China's influence on Nepali media is multifaceted, affecting not only the content produced but also the broader political and social landscape of the country. One of the most significant impacts is the erosion of media independence. A key informant mentioned that journalists working for Chinese-funded outlets have reported restrictions on their ability to cover stories that are critical of China. They have been explicitly instructed not to publish negative news about Chinese nationals or the Chinese government.

Furthermore, Chinese-funded outlets have increasingly dominated the narrative on key geopolitical issues. For instance, China Radio International (CRI), which operates a Nepali language service, has spread contents that align with Chinese geopolitical interests. A video posted on the Facebook page of CRI's Nepali service, which criticized the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) grant agreement between Nepal and the United States, garnered significant attention, with 431,000 views and widespread engagement on social media.¹³⁴ A month later, CRI posted another video on Facebook against MCC, which garnered over 280,000 views, 15 thousand likes, and 77 comments.¹³⁵ The promotion of such pro-China and anti-Western content has contributed to a polarization of public opinion in Nepal, particularly on issues like the MCC and the BRI.

CMG's influence in Nepal was starkly demonstrated when it formally objected to an article published in *The Kathmandu Post* on 18 February 2020, entitled "China's Secrecy Has Made Coronavirus Crisis Worse." The article, which featured an image of Chinese leader Mao Zedong wearing a mask, was originally published in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *Korea Herald* and was republished by *The Kathmandu Post*. In response,

CMG's Nepal head, Yue, released a video message criticizing the article and accusing it of insulting China and its citizens.

The response to this article was not limited to CMG. The then-Chinese Ambassador to Nepal, Hou Yanqi, also wrote a threatening letter to the then editor-in-chief of The Kathmandu Post, Anup Kaphle, condemning the publication of the article and accusing him of consistently publishing biased content on China-related issues.¹³⁶ The letter sparked outrage among Nepali journalists, leading 17 editors to issue a joint statement defending press freedom and condemning the ambassador's actions.¹³⁷

Chinese Ambassador's Controversial Media Presence

The recent altercation between Chinese Ambassador to Nepal, Chen Song, and Editor-in-chief of Taksar magazine, Gajendra Budhathoki, over the loan terms for the Pokhara International Airport has once again highlighted China's aggressive diplomatic posture in Nepal. This incident, marked by a public spat on social media, underscores a familiar pattern of behavior from Chinese diplomats, who seem increasingly willing to cross the boundaries of acceptable diplomatic conduct in their pursuit of influence and control.

The controversy erupted when journalist Gajendra Budhathoki claimed that the actual interest rate for the USD 215.96 million loan provided by the Export-Import Bank of China (Exim Bank) for the construction of Pokhara International Airport was five percent, contrary to the widely reported figure of 2 percent. Budhathoki's assertion, backed by what he claimed to be a signed document, prompted a furious response from Ambassador Song, who accused the journalist of spreading lies and demanded an apology via social media X. This incident is emblematic of the tensions surrounding the Pokhara airport, a project that has become a symbol of China's ambitious but controversial infrastructure initiatives in Nepal.

Ambassador Song's handling of the Pokhara airport controversy in social media is not an isolated incident but rather part of a broader pattern of behavior by Chinese diplomats in Nepal. In recent years, Chinese ambassadors have frequently overstepped diplomatic norms, engaging in activities that would be considered inappropriate or unacceptable by established standards. Ambassador Song's attempt to intimidate a Nepali

journalist through public shaming and demand for an apology is a troubling development. It raises concerns about the pressure on Nepali media to align with Chinese interests.

Role of Pro-Chinese Political Figures to shape Public Perception and Media Influence

Nepal communist party led by Netra Bikram Chand “Biplab” organized an interaction program titled “BRI–Realities and Illusions” on 18 July 2024, Nepal Academy, Kathmandu. Biplab-led communist party is the splinter group of the then-CPN (Maoist). The members of the party were part of Nepal’s Maoist movement and split with the mainstream Maoist citing that the revolution isn’t over and the leaders of CPN (Maoist Center) have failed their revolution.¹³⁸

The primary goal of the interaction program was to push a positive narrative about the BRI, whose clandestine terms and controversial provisions (on loan) have generated protracted criticism of the initiative globally. The speakers of the event collectively agreed that the BRI was an essential project for Nepal and Nepal can leverage its benefit to meet its developmental aspirations. The event highlighted efforts to present a more positive image of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Nepal. Speakers argued that much of the negativity surrounding BRI stems from Nepal’s internal political challenges, misunderstandings, or deliberate misinformation. Several emphasized that BRI represents a shift toward a multipolar global order and offers Nepal important opportunities for economic development and connectivity. Projects like the Kathmandu-Keyrung railway were described as crucial for bridging regional development gaps and promoting more balanced demographic distribution, especially in Nepal’s less developed areas.

The discussion also framed BRI as a strategic alternative to Nepal’s reliance on traditional international lenders such as the World Bank, IMF, and ADB. Implementing BRI was portrayed as an assertion of Nepal’s sovereignty and a way to reduce overdependence on neighboring countries, particularly India. Some participants dismissed the “debt-trap” narrative as unfounded propaganda and stressed the importance of effective project planning and implementation.

A noticeably important feature of the interaction program was the organizer’s emphasis on media coverage. According to a brief interaction

with one of the organizers, journalists from over 27 media houses were present at the venue covering the event, which suggests that the event's focus was on visibility and to promote favorable public perception. The media engagement was an effort to influence public opinion and generate support for the BRI. Furthermore, the event was covered in a special program by Ray TV.¹³⁹

A majority of the participants were NCP cadres and young students. The program didn't feature any speaker with a critical view on the BRI, and its format lacked an open Q&A session for participant engagement. Instead, the speakers largely dismissed concerns over BRI, framing them as Western propaganda. This unified stance of speakers to shut out any genuine concerns on BRI, indicates a strategic approach to counteract any negative perceptions and promote a more favorable view of the initiative.

Chapter Summary

China's growing influence in Nepali media through direct financial investment, strategic partnerships, and control over content poses a threat to independence of Nepali media. Pro-China views are churned out by agencies like China Media Group and its local partners, who simultaneously suppress critical perspectives. Their influence even goes so far as to shape public opinion on vital initiatives like BRI.

There is also a notable imbalance in coverage, as Chinese events receive high visibility in Chinese supported outlets while critical discourses are often absent. One key reason for the high media visibility of Chinese events is the priority placed on them by both Chinese organizers and certain Nepali media outlets. Chinese events often see a flurry of invitations extended to journalists, with extensive access and incentives provided to ensure coverage. Often, these one-sided narratives sideline independent analysis and leave little room for critical discourses and alternative perspectives.

Furthermore, China-sponsored exchange programs for Nepali journalists deepen the bond between the local media with Chinese interests, creating conflict of interests that promote favorable coverage about China while discouraging critical reporting. This distorts public discourse and undermines Nepal's democratic processes because media is used as a tool for advancing foreign geopolitical interests

Nepal government must enforce stricter regulations on foreign (indirect) investment and influence to ensure transparency and safeguarding editorial freedom to preserve media independence and sovereignty. Without such measures, there is a risk of Nepal losing its media as a watchdog and a vital democratic institution and becoming a tool for foreign geopolitical interests. That would call for a collective responsibility from the government and civil society for media freedom, with the aim to ensure that media remains a lead carrier of inclusive and independent voices.

7

Major Trends and Patterns of Chinese Engagement in Nepali Civic Sector through NGOs and Beyond

In recent years, China's engagement in Nepal has expanded beyond traditional diplomatic efforts, through NGOs and other channels including friendship forums, Confucius Centres, civil society organizations, and the media. These entities including Chinese NGOs, often backed by China, are active in sectors like poverty alleviation, healthcare, education, and rural development. Their presence aligns with China's broader geopolitical strategy, particularly under the BRI. This section highlights the major trends and patterns of their engagement.

Chinese Influence in Nepali Civic Space is Rising: Chinese influence in Nepali Civic space has increased manifold over the last few years. Often with ties to the Chinese state, these NGOs have started working in Nepal, focusing on rural development, poverty alleviation, disaster management, and healthcare. An increase in activities by Chinese NGO coincides with China's larger geopolitical ambitions, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative.

The Chinese organizations aim to promote China's geopolitical interests by focusing on socio-economic sectors to create good will at grassroots levels, bolster their visibility, and establish dependencies within key sectors of Nepali society. Many of them bypass traditional bureaucratic procedures and work directly with local governments and elected officials to expedite projects aligned with China's long term strategic goals in

Nepal. These activities and influence has become particularly poignant in geopolitically critical regions such as Madhesh, the northern border areas, and Lumbini, where China has been trying to embed itself through developmental aid and projects.

The rise of China's influence within Nepali civic space is not limited to traditional development projects but extends to intellectual and advocacy spaces through active engagement with think tanks and civil society organizations. These think tanks often act as vanguards to advance narratives in line with China's strategic interests, such as support for the BRI and the "One China Principle."

Further, the establishment and promotion of Nepal-China friendship organizations serve to cement ties with influential sections of Nepali society through periodic cultural and academic exchange events. A vital streak of Chinese influence is its constant and resolute effort to shape its positive image by promoting China-friendly narratives through various development projects, frequent interactions with the local media, academic institutions, and public forums, painting it as a benevolent global power. Different friendship organizations and think tanks backed by China often organize seminars, conferences, and cultural events aimed at depicting the close Nepal-China ties as beneficial for the countries. Furthermore, their inherent motive is to shape public perception to portray China as a reliable partner in Nepal's development journey.

Creation of "Friendly Elites" to Promote China's Interests: A key Chinese strategy to exert influence in Nepal is the cultivation of "friendly elites"—people in politics, academia, media, and civil society who are amenable to China's positions. By investing in educational exchanges, scholarships, and direct engagement with the local elites, China constructs an intellectual and political environment that is in favor of its interests.

These elites, in turn, emerge as powerful advocates for China-friendly policies, including BRI projects and adherence to the One China policy. This is visible even in the field of education, where China-backed institutions, like the Confucius Institutes, have come to the forefront in creating a pro-China narrative. Moreover, the China-funded NGOs also act as a bridge that further cements the relationship between the local leaders with the Chinese actors, thereby further promoting and advancing China's interest in Nepal's domestic and international policies.

Promotion of Chinese Technology in Nepal: In line with its broader development and geopolitical ambitions, China has been promoting the application of its technology within Nepal—particularly through green technology projects. Chinese NGOs often promote such technology in projects they implement.

Projects such as the Nepal Tea Project and the Experimental Village for Sustainable Development in Tarkeshwor Municipality represent China's interest in the integration of its technological solutions within Nepal's agricultural and rural development sectors. Through these projects, China aims to showcase itself as a global leader in sustainable development and environmental stewardship.

China's general engagement in promoting sustainable development in Nepal is part of a larger ambition to establish itself as a global leader in environment friendly development efforts. In Nepal, this is reflected in an increasing number of Chinese-funded projects with a focus on green technology, renewable energy, and sustainable agriculture.

China's ambition of exporting its technology is a key strategy to assert its role in global advancements, and Nepal is no exception. This trend reflects not just China's economic interests but also a geopolitical objective of gaining a foothold in the critical sectors of Nepal's economy. Additionally, by promoting Chinese technology, China can build dependencies that further consolidate its influence within Nepal's civic and economic space.

Engagement through Small-Scale Development Projects: Chinese NGOs and China funded Nepali NGOs are increasingly involved in small scale development projects across Nepal, particularly in areas related to education, healthcare, disaster management, and rural development. This engagement is strategic, as it allows China to gain influence in local communities and showcase its commitment to Nepal's development. For example, in regions like Madhesh Province and in Lumbini, Chinese NGO and China-funded NGOs have funded educational infrastructure, healthcare services, and rural development programs, which have garnered them positive visibility.

More importantly, the priority of small-scale development projects is consistent with China's "small but beautiful" approach with the BRI. Following the criticisms about environmental damages and debt

sustainability, China is globally prioritizing such projects now. In Nepal, Chinese NGOs are following the suit. Despite pledging a 100 billion Nepali rupee grant since 2013,¹⁴⁰ China has yet to disburse the amount to Nepal. Its large infrastructure projects in the country have faced criticism for delays and failing to deliver expected returns.¹⁴¹ Against this backdrop, China appears to be shifting its focus towards softer areas of influence. Through “small but beautiful” projects and greater NGO engagement, China is prioritizing grassroots-level development and people-to-people ties. It aims to strengthen its presence and soft power in Nepal in more visible and less contentious ways.

Focus on Geopolitically sensitive region: Chinese NGOs and China-funded Nepali NGOs have increased its engagement in Nepal's geopolitically sensitive regions. Areas like Madhesh, Lumbini, and the northern border have become key targets for its development projects. These regions hold strategic importance for China's broader geopolitical interests. CFRD has implemented projects that provide visible benefits, such as bicycles for students, solar lighting for villages, and safe drinking water for schools. Through such activities, China strengthens its presence and builds influence at the community level.

CFRD's partnership with UNDP for pandemic prevention and green recovery in remote areas of Madhesh province further demonstrates this trend. These initiatives are often concentrated in locations critical for connectivity and cross-border relations. In Lumbini, China's involvement supports cultural diplomacy while promoting infrastructure and tourism. This is a strategic approach to expanding influence through humanitarian and development aid.

Increasing Presence in Nepali Education landscape: China has stridently expanded its reach in Nepal's education sector through the Confucius Institutes at Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu University, and Lumbini Buddhist University. The institutes provide language and cultural exchange programs, to solidify China's soft power influence.

In embedding Mandarin language programs into Nepali universities, China is not only fostering cultural exchange but is also subtly introducing its political narratives to young Nepali students. The Confucius Institutes have more often than not been regarded as Chinese state instruments that advocate the version of Chinese history and culture that the state deems appropriate.

Besides collaboration through Confucius institutes, there are several MoUs signed between Nepali and Chinese institutions.^{142,143,144,145,146,147} These extensive collaborations with Nepali institutions including KU, TU and LBU, reflect China's strategic efforts to make inroads into Nepal's academic circles. These MoUs encompasses collaboration for digitization of university, research partnerships, student exchanges, faculty exchanges, and cultural exchanges. These are part of the larger push to shape intellectual landscape of Nepal, such that the future generations of Nepali leaders would become more familiar and even sympathetic with Chinese views on a range of critical issues, such as BRI and regional geopolitics.

Promotion of Mandarin Language and Cultural Initiatives: China's focus on educational exchanges, cultural initiatives, scholarships, and the promotion of Mandarin language programs are key components of its soft power strategy in Nepal.

By offering Nepali students opportunities to study in China or participate in cultural exchanges, China is subtly shaping perceptions of itself among Nepal's youth. This influence extends beyond language education; it also includes the sponsorship of cultural festivals and events that celebrate Chinese traditions. There are frequent events such as Dragon Boat Festival,¹⁴⁸ celebration of Spring Festival,¹⁴⁹ and more. These initiatives are designed not only to foster cultural goodwill but also to embed China's political and cultural narratives within the Nepali society.

The long-term goal is to create a generation of Nepali citizens who are culturally and politically attuned to China, thus laying the groundwork for deeper bilateral ties. Such soft power efforts complement China's more direct forms of influence, such as economic and political engagement, helping to create a multi-dimensional approach to influence-building in Nepal.

8

Conclusion and Way Forward

China has steadily gained foothold in Nepal's civic sector. Over time, Chinese NGOs have increased their engagement in Nepal, and further intensification is expected in the coming years. Although their activities experienced a temporary slowdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, current trends suggest a more robust resurgence particularly in grassroots initiatives such as poverty alleviation, disaster management, healthcare, education, and rural revitalization.

These organizations have the potential to assist Nepal's developmental goals. By leveraging their technological expertise, innovative approaches, and experience in poverty alleviation, Nepal can benefit significantly. Moreover, increasing collaboration between Chinese NGOs and UN agencies offers additional opportunities for Nepal, especially to advance its Sustainable Development Goals.

However, it is important to recognize that Chinese NGOs also function as strategic soft power tools for the Chinese state. Their operations are often closely aligned with Beijing's geopolitical ambitions. They prioritize high-visibility and high-impact projects, often with heavy branding, to foster public image of China as a benevolent and supportive partner. In many cases, these NGOs bypass traditional bureaucratic channels and engage directly with locally elected leaders. While this tactic may accelerate the swift implementation of its initiatives, it also undermines established local governance frameworks. Similarly, the expansion of NGO activities in critical southern border regions bordering India, such as Madesh and Lumbini, could stir subtle geopolitical tensions in these sensitive areas.

Besides engagement via NGO, Nepal has also seen a flurry of China's soft power programs. They are designed to shape favorable narratives and enhance Beijing's influence both locally and globally. China's strategy involves promoting Chinese culture, technology, and cultivating a network of influential individuals, who advocate for Chinese interests in Nepal. This dual role means that Nepal has to navigate these engagements carefully. To ensure maximum developmental gains and minimum risk, Nepal must ensure that the projects are strictly aligned with its national priorities. Proactive involvement of local partners in planning and execution, along with the implementation of stringent regulatory frameworks, is essential to address discrepancies in operational practices and to enhance transparency and accountability.

While Chinese NGOs hold potential as catalysts for socio-economic change in Nepal, their inherent role as instruments of soft power demands careful navigation. Strengthening oversight mechanisms and fostering genuine partnerships with local stakeholders will be critical for Nepal to harness the full potential of these engagements. Nepal needs to be cautious if these engagements align with Nepal's long-term developmental needs and its pursuit of diversified partnerships.

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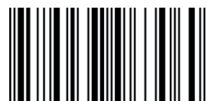


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