

From Diplomatic Rhetoric to People-to-People Connectivity: Language Capacity Building Through Chinese Film Dissemination in Bangladesh

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Abstract. China and Bangladesh raised their bilateral relations to a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership in 2024 under the Belt and Road Initiative. Although there is an emphasis on connectivity, mutual trust, and shared development, these themes do not always translate smoothly into practice because of comprehension challenges. This study adopts a qualitative case-based approach to examine how linguistic and communicative factors shape the functioning of the partnership. The dissemination of Chinese films in Bangladesh is studied as an illustrative example, showing how policy intentions interact with media routines and the communicative habits of local audiences. Drawing on policy texts, media accounts, and interview materials, the study explores how official discourse is translated into public understanding. The study pays attention to how language influences public interpretations of China and the broader aims of the partnership. Findings suggest that language capacity, including translation, media communication and cultural adaptation, plays a significant role in sustaining people-to-people connectivity and in supporting the effective implementation of policy initiatives, making it a strategic infrastructure for partnership realization.

Keywords: China–Bangladesh relations, Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership, language and discourse, Chinese film

1. Introduction

The elevation of China–Bangladesh ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership in July 2024 marks a significant stride in China’s evolving diplomatic engagement with South Asia. In their joint statement, the two nations highlighted a shared commitment to fostering mutual trust, advancing sustainable development, and deepening people-centered cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. This diplomatic change not only reflects the upgrade of bilateral relations, but also signals a shift from a predominantly economic focus toward a more integrated partnership, which weaves together political understanding, cultural affinity, and societal connectivity.

However, even though there are promising developments, there are still questions regarding the practical realization of the partnership. A member of a recent Bangladeshi delegation put it plainly: “China needs to provide clearer goals as for how to develop this relationship.” This call for clarity reveals a deeper issue: although official Chinese documents outline objectives, such as deepening connectivity, promoting green transformation and expanding cultural cooperation, these visions are too broad and abstract to be understood or contextually translated in Bangladesh. The challenge lies not in the lack of policy direction, but a gap in shared understanding.

This paper argues that the mutual comprehension gap stems from fundamental divergences in language, discursive practices, and communicative framing. Although terms such as “comprehensive,” “strategic,” and “cooperative” carry specific, nuanced meanings in Chinese diplomacy, their semantic and cultural resonances are not always transferred to Bangladeshi receivers. Likewise, the concept of “connectivity”, which is a core concept in the BRI, signifies mutual benefit and regional integration in Chinese official rhetoric. However, within Bangladeshi policy circles and media narratives, it is frequently interpreted through a different lens, one tinged with apprehensions of strategic overdependence, external influence, or even a perceived alignment with Indian hegemony, rather than a vision of collaborative partnership. These discursive disjunctures powerfully illustrate how language acts as a mediating force in the construction of bilateral relations, shaping the very conception and practical enactment of cooperation.

To address these challenges, the 2024 joint statement explicitly highlighted the importance of people-to-people and cultural exchange, including language education, media cooperation, film dissemination and so on. These humanistic dimensions are not peripheral; they are essential to the sustainability and legitimacy of bilateral cooperation. Cultural communication not only complements economic projects but also helps construct shared meanings, emotional resonance, and mutual trust—what Chinese policymakers refer to as “people-to-people connectivity.”

Within this framework, the dissemination of Chinese films in Bangladesh provides an illustrative case. Although bilateral relations are increasingly close, Chinese film resources remain limited in Bangladesh, accessible mainly through film festivals or embassy-sponsored events. This lack of visibility contrasts sharply with the strong presence of Hollywood and Indian films in Bangladeshi media space. The gap suggests that while political and economic cooperation has expanded, cultural and linguistic exchange has lagged behind. Exploring why Chinese films have limited reach in Bangladesh—whether due to translation barriers, distribution mechanisms, or audience preferences—can therefore shed light on broader issues of language capacity building and cross-cultural understanding.

This study investigates the role of linguistic and communicative dynamics in shaping the realization of the China–Bangladesh Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership. By examining policy discourse and the dissemination of Chinese films, the paper demonstrates that the development of language capacity transcends mere facilitation of information exchange. Rather, it functions as a strategic infrastructure that fosters mutual interpretation and enables the implementation of cooperative agendas. Ultimately, meaningful connectivity relies not only on physical infrastructure such as roads and bridges, but equally on negotiated understandings and reciprocal appreciation, which form the essential foundation of a comprehensive partnership.

2. Literature review

2.1. Strategic partnerships and the Belt and Road framework

The concept of a Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership (CSCP) reflects China's evolving diplomatic strategy under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As a scholar [1] notes, the terminology of “partnership” in Chinese diplomacy denotes a flexible yet hierarchical structure of relations, emphasizing mutual trust without formal alliances. The adjective “comprehensive” signals a multidimensional scope that includes political, economic, cultural, and security cooperation, while “strategic” implies long-term coordination aligned with shared development goals.

Since the launch of the BRI in 2013, China has progressively extended such partnerships to countries in South and Southeast Asia, framing them as mechanisms for win–win cooperation and shared destiny [2]. Bangladesh, a key node on the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, occupies an important position in this framework due to its geographic location and developmental aspirations. The upgrading of Sino–Bangladeshi relations to a CSCP in 2024 reflects both sides' intent to deepen collaboration in infrastructure, green energy, digital economy, and cultural exchange.

Despite the potential of these partnerships, their implementation in host countries can be marked by ambiguities [3,4]. Terms like “mutual benefit” and “connectivity,” central to the Chinese diplomatic narrative, may be perceived as excessively abstract by local actors seeking pragmatic directives. This discursive divide not only complicates local uptake but also highlights a fundamental challenge in cross-cultural diplomacy: the need to bridge the gap between visionary language and practical application. A case study in this paper of China and Bangladesh reveals the critical importance of tracing how semantic meanings are negotiated through various channels to transform lofty agreements into actionable collaboration.

2.2. Language capacity and international communication

Language plays a key role in international cooperation. As Nye [5] notes, the exercise of “soft power” relies not only on material resources, but also on the ability to shape narratives and communicate values. In this context, developing language capacity, which includes translation, intercultural communication, and discourse adaptation, provides a strategic basis for fostering sustainable partnerships.

Research on China's global communication [6,7] shows that differences in language continue to pose challenges for mutual understanding. Chinese diplomatic and media discourse, often informed by Marxist or Confucian frameworks, do not always translate smoothly into other linguistic and cultural contexts. Concepts such as “community of shared future” (人类命运共同体) or “connectivity” (互联互通) carry rich ideological and moral connotations in Chinese, yet their English or Bengali equivalents can lose subtlety or seem vague. As a result, audiences outside China may experience Chinese discourse as formulaic or difficult to interpret.

Research in the field of intercultural communication [8,9] underscores that effective cross-cultural communication demands a contextually-aware approach, that is to say, linguistic practices are carefully aligned with localized cultural expectations to cultivate relational trust. For Chinese corporations and institutions operating in international contexts, this necessitates the establishment of bilingual and bicultural teams capable of fluidly mediating between Chinese and host-country communicative conventions. Viewed from this perspective, language capacity transcends basic grammatical or lexical mastery, but encompasses what is termed discursive competence—the ability to create meanings that resonate with local message receivers.

In the South Asian context, this challenge is compounded by the region's linguistic diversity and the dominance of English- and Hindi-language media. Without localized communication strategies and trained personnel, China's messages risk being filtered through third-party interpretations. The resulting distortions can weaken the intended diplomatic impact, reinforcing the necessity of structured language capacity building as part of China's overseas engagement.

2.3. Film and cultural diplomacy in China's global engagement

Film, as an expressive and widely accessible medium, plays an increasingly significant role in China's external cultural communication. According to Dennison & Dwyer [10], cinema functions as both a cultural artifact and a soft-power instrument, capable of translating national narratives into emotional experiences. The Chinese government's cultural diplomacy framework—often described as telling China's stories well—positions film and television as key vehicles for enhancing China's image abroad and fostering people-to-people connectivity.

However, empirical studies reveal a persistent gap between state-driven cultural promotion and audience reception. Scholars [11] observe that while China has invested heavily in co-productions, film festivals, and cultural exchanges, the actual visibility of Chinese films in foreign markets remains limited. In South Asia, particularly in Bangladesh, Chinese films are typically screened only during embassy-sponsored events or international film festivals, with little presence in commercial cinemas or streaming platforms. The linguistic barrier—limited availability of Bengali subtitles or dubbing—further constrains audience engagement.

From the perspective of language capacity, film dissemination provides a lens through which to view the broader challenges of cross-cultural communication. Translating a film effectively demands much more than a literal, word-for-word conversion, it is an act of cultural interpretation that must carefully consider how the finished product will resonate with its new audiences. As Zhang, Sampurno and Ismail [12] observe, a film's success in a foreign culture depends on its narrative ability to connect with local sensibilities—its emotions, humor and the underlying values. Therefore, examining Chinese films into Bangladeshi market goes beyond cultural exchange, it reveals how communication strategy, which is rooted in linguistic skill, influence mutual understanding and trust.

In summary, the existing researches suggest three interconnected points. First, the success of strategic partnerships relies as much on sustained communicative engagement as on formal political agreements. Second, language capacity is pivotal to facilitating international cooperation and shaping national image. Third, the domain of cultural production, with film as a salient example, constitutes a practical arena for scrutinizing the complexities of global communication. Building on these perspectives, this paper examines how linguistic and cultural factors affect the implementation of the China–Bangladesh Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore how language capacity and cultural communication influence the implementation of the China–Bangladesh Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership. The case of Chinese film dissemination in Bangladesh was selected as an illustrative example because it encapsulates the intersection of diplomacy, media communication, and linguistic interaction. By analyzing textual data (official statements and policy documents), media data (Bangladeshi news coverage), and interview data (responses from Bangladeshi delegates

and students), the study seeks to understand how official discourse is translated into public understanding and how language mediates the perception of China in Bangladesh.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. How is the idea of the China–Bangladesh Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership articulated in official Chinese discourse?
2. How do Bangladeshi media and audiences interpret this concept?
3. To what extent do linguistic and cultural barriers affect the dissemination and reception of Chinese films in Bangladesh?
4. What implications does this have for China’s broader strategy of language capacity building overseas?

3.2. Data collection

Data for this study were drawn from three main sources:

1. Official Documents and Statements:

Government publications, press releases, and embassy announcements from China and Bangladesh between 2020 and 2025 were examined. These materials provide insight into how each side frames bilateral cooperation and how language reflects ideological orientations or communication priorities.

2. Media Reports and Cultural Coverage:

Articles from leading Bangladeshi media, including The Daily Star, Dhaka Tribune, and New Age Bangladesh, were analyzed to explore how Chinese initiatives, particularly cultural projects, are represented in local discourse. Special attention was given to reports on Chinese film screenings, festivals, and other cultural activities.

3. Interviews and Observations:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 international students from Bangladesh studying in China and 5 delegates from Bangladesh. These participants provided first-hand insights into how Chinese films are received, what linguistic barriers exist, and how translation or dubbing affects comprehension and emotional engagement.

3.3. Analytical framework

The analysis combines Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Intercultural Communication Theory.

CDA, following Fairclough [13], is used to uncover how power relations and ideological positions are embedded in language. It enables the identification of recurring patterns—such as the use of “mutual benefit,” “connectivity,” or “shared future”—in Chinese official texts and how these are reinterpreted or resisted in Bangladeshi media.

Intercultural Communication Theory [8] complements this by highlighting how meanings shift across cultural and linguistic contexts. It provides tools for analyzing translation strategies, discourse adaptation, and audience reception of Chinese films. Together, these frameworks allow for a holistic understanding of how linguistic choices shape diplomatic and cultural interactions.

3.4. Ethical considerations

Interviews were carried out in an ethical and respectful manner, with attention to participants’ privacy. Media and government materials used in this study were publicly available. The analysis

seeks to understand how language operates as a mediating force in international cooperation, without engaging in political evaluation.

3.5. Limitations

As a qualitative case study, the findings are context-specific and cannot be generalized to all BRI countries. However, the Bangladesh case provides valuable insights into how language and cultural exchange influence the realization of high-level diplomatic frameworks.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Semantic divergence and ideological slippage

The first major finding concerns the semantic divergence between Chinese official discourse and Bangladeshi interpretation. The term Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership (CSCP), as framed in Chinese diplomatic language, encapsulates political trust, economic collaboration, and people-to-people connectivity. However, Bangladeshi media coverage and interview responses indicate that the concept often lacks clarity and operational meaning for local audiences.

For example, while Chinese official statements emphasize “共建共享 (joint construction and shared benefit)”, Bangladeshi reports tend to focus on tangible outcomes such as investment, infrastructure, or employment. This difference reflects not merely a linguistic issue but an ideological translation problem. The Chinese discourse, grounded in collectivist and long-term development ideals, prioritizes process-oriented cooperation; in contrast, Bangladeshi communicative culture tends to value explicit commitments and measurable results.

This finding echoes Zhang, Afzaal, Omar, & Altohami [14] argument that the success of strategic partnerships depends on the legibility of diplomatic language. Ambiguous or abstract expressions—such as “mutual learning” or “shared destiny”—may not resonate in contexts where audiences expect concrete policy direction. In interviews, one participant remarked, “We know CSCP, but where should we go to realize the partnership?” Such remarks reveal a semantic gap that weakens the persuasive force of China’s narrative.

From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, this semantic slippage also reflects power asymmetry: the dominant discourse (China’s) seeks to universalize its values, while the receiving discourse (Bangladesh’s) filters them through its own pragmatic lens. Bridging this divide requires linguistic localization—the adaptation of official terminology into culturally intelligible and emotionally resonant language.

4.2. The language capacity gap and communication constraints

A second finding concerns the language capacity gap that constrains effective communication between Chinese and Bangladeshi actors. Despite the growing number of bilateral projects under the BRI, there remains a shortage of professionals who can operate bilingually—in Mandarin and Bengali—with sufficient intercultural competence.

Interview findings indicate that most translation in China–Bangladesh cooperation is carried out in English as a relay language. This dependence on English not only increases the possibility of meaning distortion, but also sidelines local linguistic perspectives. For instance, key concept “互联互通 (connectivity)” in BRI is often translated into English, yet seldom localized into Bengali in a way that fully reflects both practical and human aspects.

Moreover, both Chinese companies and Bangladeshi institutions acknowledge difficulties in producing bilingual communication materials. Chinese enterprises in Bangladesh often depend on Chinese-language documents translated mechanically into English, which can be awkwardly phrased and less persuasive. As one interviewee commented, “The materials sound like machine translation, formal but not meaningful.” This remark underscores the gap between linguistic correctness and effective communication.

The constraints in linguistic and translational capacity exert a direct influence on media portrayals. When reporting on Chinese initiatives, Bangladeshi news outlets frequently depend on English-language press releases disseminated by Xinhua News Agency or the Chinese embassy. This reliance, coupled with limited access to primary source materials or culturally-nuanced interpretation, often results in the replication of narratives that appear abstract or misaligned with local socio-political contexts. Consequently, strategic communications framed by China within a win-win paradigm can be perceived as mechanistic or overtly promotional, and therefore undermining their effectiveness in fostering authentic cross-cultural understanding and trust.

The implication is clear: to make partnerships actionable, China must invest in structured language capacity building abroad. This includes supporting Chinese language education in Bangladesh, training bilingual mediators, and encouraging localized translation practices that reflect Bangladesh’s linguistic ecology. Language, in this sense, is not an accessory to diplomacy but its infrastructure.

4.3. Chinese film dissemination as a cultural test case

The third finding examines Chinese film dissemination in Bangladesh as a microcosm of broader communicative challenges. Despite the expansion of China’s cultural diplomacy initiatives, access to Chinese films in Bangladesh remains extremely limited. Screening opportunities are mostly confined to embassy events, Confucius Institute film weeks, or international festivals. Commercial cinemas rarely feature Chinese productions, and major streaming platforms available in Bangladesh offer few Chinese titles.

This scarcity has both logistical and linguistic causes. Many Chinese films lack Bengali subtitles or dubbing, and English versions often circulate unofficially through fan-subtitled channels. As a result, local audiences experience Chinese cinema through fragmented or inconsistent linguistic mediation. In interviews, students expressed curiosity about Chinese films but noted that “it is hard to find them in a language we understand.”

This linguistic inaccessibility limits the cultural impact of Chinese cinema and, by extension, China’s soft power. As Bassnett [15] argues, translation is not a mechanical process but a site of negotiation between cultures. Effective film translation requires narrative domestication—the adaptation of humor, idioms, and emotional tone to local audiences. Without such adaptation, films risk being viewed as foreign curiosities rather than relatable stories.

Yet, this challenge simultaneously unveils a strategic aperture. Chinese cinema holds the potential to function as both a pedagogical instrument and a vehicle for cultural diplomacy, giving tangible, human dimension to the abstract visions of the CSCP. Collaborative endeavors, such as jointly-managed translation workshops, bilateral co-productions and university-facilitated dubbing competitions, can be reconceptualized as dynamic platforms for language acquisition and intercultural dialogue. Thus, the global circulation of film transcends mere content distribution, it emerges as well as a paradigmatic illustration of how synergistic linguistic and cultural engagement can transmute high-level diplomatic frameworks into a collectively inhabited and felt human narrative.

Films serve as a powerful vehicle for translating national narratives into personal emotional experiences, and thereby generating what Joseph Nye [5] identifies as a "cultural attraction"—a form of soft power grounded in resonance rather than persuasion. It follows, then, that enhancing the circulation and accessibility of Chinese films in Bangladesh does more than simply market cultural products, it actively facilitates the people-to-people connectivity that forms the ultimate foundation for a genuine and enduring partnership.

4.4. Discussion: language as the bridge of partnership

Synthesizing these findings, it becomes evident that the realization of the China–Bangladesh Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership depends as much on linguistic articulation as on political will. When language fails to convey intent clearly or align with local expectations, cooperation loses traction. Conversely, when communication resonates culturally and emotionally, partnerships gain legitimacy and sustainability.

The study suggests that China's global engagement would benefit from treating language as a strategic resource. Beyond translation, this means fostering green language competence—a capacity to communicate inclusively, contextually, and empathetically across borders. Chinese film dissemination, though limited at present, represents a promising frontier for testing and expanding this competence.

Ultimately, the path from partnership rhetoric to mutual understanding runs through the terrain of language. The CSCP framework can only be "comprehensive" if it includes not just economic and political cooperation, but also the shared labor of meaning-making.

5. Conclusion and implications

This study has examined how language capacity and cultural communication shape the realization of the China–Bangladesh Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership, focusing on the case of Chinese film dissemination in Bangladesh. Through discourse analysis, media review, and interview data, the research reveals that language is not merely a vehicle of diplomacy—it is a constitutive element of international cooperation.

The analysis yields three principal conclusions. First, a significant implementation gap exists in the CSCP framework, which, despite its conceptual inclusiveness, confronts semantic and ideological barriers in the Bangladeshi context. The Chinese narrative, heavily reliant on broad terms such as "shared destiny" and "mutual benefit", carries distinct connotations within its domestic political discourse but may fail to align with local interpretive frameworks. This fundamental misalignment in meaning-making processes illustrates the imperative of adapting both language and underlying narrative to specific cultures.

Second, the study identifies a language capacity gap that limits effective bilateral communication. The shortage of bilingual professionals, the dependence on English as an intermediary, and the underdevelopment of localized translation mechanisms all contribute to misunderstanding or indifference toward Chinese initiatives. Building language capacity—through training, academic collaboration, and professional exchange—should thus be treated as an integral part of the CSCP's institutional architecture.

Third, Chinese film dissemination in Bangladesh illustrates both the problem and the potential of language-based cooperation. Limited access to translated or dubbed films restricts audience engagement, but at the same time, film provides a promising platform for people-to-people connectivity. Joint translation projects, subtitling workshops, and university-level film studies

programs could foster not only cultural exchange but also practical language learning and mutual empathy.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the emerging field of language and diplomacy studies by demonstrating how linguistic mediation shapes the effectiveness of international partnerships. It supports the argument that discourse is a form of soft power—one that determines whether cooperation is perceived as equitable and credible. The findings also extend intercultural communication theory by highlighting how translation is both a linguistic and political act, shaping the moral economy of international relations.

Practically, the research suggests that China's future cooperation with Bangladesh—and by extension, other Belt and Road partners—should integrate language capacity building into policy planning. This could include:

1. establishing bilingual communication teams within overseas enterprises and cultural institutions;
2. supporting Bangladeshi universities in developing Chinese language and translation programs;
3. encouraging co-production and cultural translation of Chinese media content, particularly films and digital storytelling;
4. promoting public diplomacy initiatives that emphasize mutual learning rather than one-way dissemination.

Ultimately, the success of the Comprehensive Strategic Cooperative Partnership depends on more than economic connectivity; it relies on discursive connectivity—the ability to speak, listen, and translate across cultural borders. Language, in this sense, is not a supplement to diplomacy but its living infrastructure. By investing in language and culture, China and Bangladesh can transform partnership from an institutional promise into a shared human practice—one that sustains understanding, trust, and co-created development in the long term.

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