The power of Bollywood: A study on opportunities, challenges, and audiences’ perceptions of Indian cinema in China

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Abstract
India has long been known for its prestigious Mumbai-based film industry, namely Bollywood, and remains by far the largest producer of films in the world. With the growing global reach of Indian cinema, this study looks at an intriguing Indian-film fever over the last decade in the newly discovered market of China. Through examining key factors that make Indian films appealing to Chinese and exploring the opportunities and challenges of Indian cinema in China, this article draws upon insights gained from the narratives of local audiences. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews with 32 Indian-film audiences residing across 14 different cities in mainland China. Thematic analysis identified the following five appealing factors, which explain why the Chinese enjoy Indian films: content-driven story, social values, star power, audience reviews and cultural connections. While a comprehensive list of opportunities was derived showing the potential future of Bollywood in China, results found that China’s unique institutional context and an ongoing India–China geopolitical tensions also present challenges, which in turn add to the overall complexity of films’ success in the Chinese market. This article argues the powerful role of Bollywood in bridging cultures and improving India–China ties, as Indian films have made Chinese people more aware of India in a favourable way.

Keywords
Bollywood, China–India relations, Chinese audiences, cross-cultural studies, cultural globalisation, film studies, Indian cinema, soft power

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Introduction

Popular Indian cinema, or Bollywood, is one of the largest film industries in the world. Cinemas are said to be ‘the temples of modern India’ (Mishra, 2002, p. 3), with Bollywood producing more than 1000 films per year that are almost double the production of Hollywood (Diwanji, 2020). A simple search of Bollywood online will come up with hundreds of results that reveal how this popular Indian cinema has made its way into global mainstream consciousness (Schaefer & Karan, 2012). Today, Bollywood has expanded its market beyond its traditional territories in South Asia, bringing unprecedented scholarly interest and media attention to the world’s largest producer of films (Roy, 2012). An interesting development over the last decade is the growing engagement of Chinese audiences with Bollywood films (Razdan, 2019). Nowadays, whenever people across China encounter an Indian, their conversation usually starts with Bollywood.

China’s growing interest in Bollywood has taken Indian filmmakers and officials by surprise, making them scramble to find out the secret of success in the world’s second-biggest box office with more than 1.4 billion potential audiences (Laskar, 2018). Past research on the travels of Indian films to Fiji (Mishra, 2002), to Australia (Hassan & Paranjape, 2010), to Africa (Ebrahim, 2008), to the United States (Schaefer & Karan, 2012), and Malaysia (Devadas & Velayutham, 2012) have demonstrated the presence of and enthusiasm towards Bollywood films often in places with a certain number of Indian diaspora and South Asian population. Thus far, to the best of the researcher’s knowledge, the Chinese interest in Indian films is new and has remained underexplored.

The power of Bollywood is driving India as a ‘soft power’ that is not only promoting Indian culture, its songs, dances, values and beliefs, but is also drawing huge revenues into the country. In 2019, Indian cinema box office revenues were over US$2.5 billion (Diwanji, 2020), in the services sector which accounts for more than 50% of the Indian economy (Dastidar & Elliott, 2020). Box office aside, films including Bollywood films as a type of art form are thought to play a role in the creation of soft power because it is strongly affected by a country’s culture, ideology and institutions (Nye, 2006; Thussu, 2013). Hence, the Chinese acceptance of Indian films is seen to be the first step of crossing the cultural bridge, connecting people and improving India–China ties, given political, territorial, economic and diplomatic frictions between the two adjacent nations. Despite the significance of Bollywood, we have limited knowledge of why audiences in China enjoy Indian films and their perspectives on Indian cinema. While Chinese audiences may not understand Hindi or other Indian languages, this has not stopped some Chinese from loving Indian films.

This study hopes to explore the unforeseen growing popularity of Indian films in China, which in turn, helps the globalised world to better understand the Chinese market and its audiences. The first aim is to identify those factors that make Bollywood films appealing to Chinese audiences. Specifically, to explore the opportunities and challenges of Bollywood in China, the researcher synthesises Chinese audiences’ self-reported experiences with Indian films. The second aim is to discuss the role of Indian films in breaking down cultural barriers and bringing two countries closer. Noting the growing popularity of Bollywood in China and its promotion as India’s soft power, this study attempted to further examine the extent to which Chinese audiences think and are aware of Bollywood as a representative of India’s soft power in China.

The overarching research questions (RQs) are the following:

RQ1. What is the appeal of Bollywood films among Chinese audiences?

RQ2. What are Chinese audiences’ perceptions on the opportunities and challenges of Indian cinema in China’s market?
**RQ3.** What are the opinions of Chinese audiences on the use of Bollywood as ‘soft power’ to promote Indian culture to China?

**India’s Bollywood**

Bollywood, a neologism of ‘Bombay’ and ‘Hollywood [the home of American film industry]’, traditionally referred to the popular Hindi film industry and the movies made in the city of Mumbai, earlier known as Bombay (Gokulsing et al., 2005). The origin of the industry can be traced back to the first silent feature film made in India being recognised as *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913. The 1920s and 1930s witnessed the rise of filmmaking in India. Major studios scattered all over the country, of which the renowned one was *Bombay Talkies*, which presented many stars and filmmakers after India’s independence from British colonial rule in 1947 (Ganti, 2004). Among the most prominent names were producers and director Subhash Ghai, and Yash Chopra, whose production house *Yash Chopra Films* established a significant international reputation today. Raj Kapoor was another actor and filmmaker from that time who had a global presence (Mazumdar, 2012).

In the early days of post-Independence, the domestic market in India was the primary target of filmmakers due to the lack of state support, which is also why Hindi became Bollywood’s preferred language since a large percentage of India’s population spoke Hindi (Chitrapu, 2012). The context of the Indian market is different from China’s monolithic national market, but rather a diverse centre of production where films are made in different languages, such as Hindi, Marathi, and Telugu, and target to different linguistic regions (Chitrapu et al., 2009). Arguably, large number of Hindi speakers and larger size of the economy of the state in which Hindi is spoken support more film production and larger film budgets than other Indian states (Chitrapu, 2012). Thus, it comes as no surprise that Bollywood representing films made in Hindi-language became dominant among Indian-film exports.

Later, scholars advocated a broader meaning of ‘Bollywood’ emphasising an emerging cultural industry that was global in scope, and oftentimes, available in pirated format (Rajadhyaksha, 2016), which Vasudevan (2011) believed started from the classic Indian film *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) onwards. More recently, ‘Bollywood’ has become standardised as a term to refer to ‘[all] films produced by filmmakers from India’ (Roy & Huat, 2012, p. 4). Given the contested nature of its signifier, some studies hazily claim that Bollywood reaches new heights in countries like Japan, which probably refers to the Japanese audiences’ enthusiasm over Telugu or Tamil cinema, in particular, the cinema of Rajinikanth (South Indian star), rather than Hindi films (Vasudevan, 2011). Others suggest that even a Bollywood-inspired-Oscar-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) – directed by a British director, produced by the British production company, could qualify as a Bollywood film (Roy & Huat, 2012). As this study is only concerned with popular Indian films, it will continue to use the term ‘Bollywood’ signifying an intriguing ‘Indian cinema influence’ – that is, Bollywood has flourished internationally in terms of its popularity over the recent decades.

**Rising interest in non-Hollywood films – cultural globalisation**

Bollywood’s ascent to global popularity could be attributed to the overall process of cultural globalisation. Many theorists compare cultural globalisation with the concept of cultural imperialism (Tomlinson, 1997). The latter, critical of hegemonic Western culture and its dominance of
international media flows, suggests a centre-periphery model of cultural transmission, with the third world and its cultures at the periphery of the model and first-world industries such as Hollywood as agents of centre (Mazumdar, 2012), which predicts one-way flows of culture from ‘centre’ to ‘periphery’. However, cultural globalisation not only challenges this idea of cultural imperialism, but also offers a direction for understanding the rise of regional production centres, such as Bollywood. Curtin (2007) points out that ‘Bollywood has increasingly emerged as a significant competitor of Hollywood in the size and enthusiasm of its audiences’ (p. 3). Although still far distant from Hollywood in terms of gross revenue – Bollywood earned only 5% of global film revenues (Loria, 2020), the Indian-film industry has embraced dramatic changes since India’s liberalisation in the early 1990s (Rajadhyaksha, 2016). From economic liberalisation to the deregulation of media, from the removal of quotas to the establishment of industrial status and from strategic marketing to the spread of the Indian diaspora (Bose, 2006), these developments eased the Indian-film exports, which coincided with the success of Bollywood films such as Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (1998) and Dil Se (1998) in overseas markets. Recently, as a study has evidenced in the report of the 2016 Bollywood film Dangal (2016), Bollywood films surprisingly outperformed many Hollywood blockbusters such as Marvel’s Black Panther and have huge markets in developing countries where piracy – or a process which Roy (2012) refers to as ‘leakage’ – is prevalent (Rajadhyaksha, 2016). This growing demand has demonstrated the distinct potentials of Bollywood in offering unique entertainment forms, generating substantial influence in competitive markets and challenging Hollywood’s hegemony in the filmmaking world (Bose, 2006).

Bollywood penetrating the Chinese film market

In contrast to Bollywood’s popularity in the major export territories such as Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North America that have a large Indian expatriate community, China is a ‘truly foreign market’ that has remained underexplored. Despite China being the world’s second largest film market after the United States (Loria, 2020), it has never been an easy thing to enter the Chinese market under current China’s quota system that allows only 34 foreign releases annually, including average less than two films from India (Zheng, 2018). However, China has become the largest overseas market for Bollywood over the recent years, with a string of successful films, notably Bajrangi Bhaijaan (2015; roughly US$46.6 million), Dangal (2016; roughly US$196.89 million), Secret Superstar (2017; roughly US$124.4 million) and Andhadhun (2018; roughly US$47.9 million) (see Figure 1 for their box office in China). According to Maoyan (a leading movie ticketing platform in China), in 2018, a total of 10 Indian films were released in China, in comparison with five Indian films in 2017 and only two in 2016. Besides, it is even not surprising to see top Chinese online streaming sites such as Youku and iQiyi now having special sections dedicated to popular Indian films. Evidently, Bollywood has become increasingly popular in China during the past few years.

In fact, this is not the first time Indian films have set off a boom in China. Back in the early 1980s, the film genres were quite limited, Indian films were widely loved by Chinese people. A retired education official, speaking of Awaara (1951) starring the legendary Indian actor Raj Kapoor, told China Global Television Network:

I watched the movie with my wife in a nearby theatre; it was the time of nation-building, [Kapoor’s] film and music offered a promise of hope. My favourite song ‘Awaara Hoon . . . ’ (I am a vagabond) from the movie was a huge hit at that time. (Razdan, 2019, para. 2–4)
While Indian films represented by *Awaara* and *Caravan* (1971) were the first foreign films to be shown in China after its reform and opening-up policy in 1978, ‘subsequent Chinese censorship laws restricting the entry of foreign films led to the dwindling of the Chinese interest in Indian films’ (Roy, 2012, p. 36).

After almost four decades, Indian-film fever has risen again in China. Perhaps, even more intriguing is that the contemporary Chinese interest in Indian films stemmed from audiences who were not exposed to strategic marketing from India’s side. Audiences’ love towards Bollywood films could be traced to the breakthrough success in 2010 of pirated versions of *3 Idiots* (2009) starring an Indian actor Aamir Khan, which was not initially released in Chinese theatres until 2011 (Laskar, 2018). Even though the Bollywood blockbuster *3 Idiots* was being released 2 years after its Indian debut, it played a significant role in opening the Chinese market to other Bollywood films.

Soon afterwards, Bollywood films such as *Dhoom 3* (2013), *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* (2017), *Padman* (2018) and *Hindi Medium* (2017) were released in China (see Figure 1), with modest performance at the box office. The most successful star of Bollywood in China is Aamir Khan (Sen, 2018). His film *Dangal* was the highest-grossing Bollywood movie outside of India of all time, grossing a total of roughly US$196.89 million in China alone and breaking the impressive record previously held by *PK* (2014) starring the same actor (Diwanji, 2020). The Chinese movie-ranking site Douban (2017) rated the movie 9.2 out of 10, making *Dangal* the highest rated foreign movie in 2017. Subsequently, Khan’s movie *Secret Superstar* about a talented young girl living amid domestic abuse but striving to become a singer-songwriter, was another huge success. Even

### Figure 1. Box office of popular Indian films in China (2010–2020), by Chinese currency.
Source: [https://www.endata.com.cn/BoxOffice/MovieStock/movies.html](https://www.endata.com.cn/BoxOffice/MovieStock/movies.html)
China’s President Xi told Indian Prime Minister Modi at a summit in 2017 that he ‘loved’ the Aamir Khan-starrer and hoped to see more such movies (e.g. Dangal) in China (Ryan, 2017).

The unprecedented list of successful films not only rekindled Chinese audience interest in Indian films but also made Aamir Khan the face of Bollywood in China (Gao, 2018). Aamir Khan, affectionately called ‘Mǐ Shū’ meaning ‘Uncle Mi’ (Mi, a shortened version of Aamir), is now a household name in China, with his films and a television show, Satyamev Jayate (Truth Alone Prevails, focusing on the pressing issues facing Indian society), is being described as the ‘India’s second greatest cultural icon in China since the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore’ (Sen, 2018). Such commentary sounds quite dramatic, but it is fair to argue that Aamir is one of the very few Indian public figures loved by the Chinese.

However, when looking back other highly rated Indian films that released in China during the past decade like My Name is Khan (2010; only about US$80,000) starring Shah Rukh Khan, Kaabil (2017; roughly US$5.4 million) starring Hrithik Roshan and 102 Not Out (2018; roughly US$4.64 million) starring Amitabh Bachchan and Rishi Kapoor, it is puzzling to see that they failed at the Chinese box office (see Figure 1), while receiving quite high ratings and positive reviews from Chinese viewers on Douban (a Chinese version of IMDb). These Bollywood film stars including Shah Rukh Khan as ‘King of Bollywood’ are more ‘global’ in nature, but it turns out Aamir Khan, whose films are actually ‘local’, such as Dangal that tells an inspiring story happening in a rural Indian area and uses dialects, has crossed the India–China border and won the hearts of millions (Sina, 2017). Arguably, the Chinese market has the world’s biggest audience with foreign films accounted for average 51% of total revenues each year (Curtin, 2007; UNESCO, 2018), and offers a great opportunity but surely not for every Indian film. Since Bollywood penetrating the Chinese market is a recent phenomenon and is thus in an early stage of research, the first part of this study attempted to understand the appeal of the Bollywood audiences in the country and ask their perceptions on the opportunities and challenges of Indian cinema in China.

**Bollywood as India’s soft power**

Following the changing trends of Indian films in China, this study also hopes to further examine the extent to which Chinese audiences are aware of and believe that Bollywood represents a component of India’s soft power. Coined by Joseph Nye (2006), soft power, as a country’s ability to achieve global influences through attraction rather than coercion (Keohane & Nye, 1998). In other words, soft power is the power of attractiveness that involves intangible power resources, such as culture. As identified in the early sections, several factors including the influence of cultural globalisation, Indian liberalisation policies, the rapid expansion of Indian-film exports, increasing global ‘leakage’ and notably, the spread of diaspora audiences, which all have led to the increased popularity of Bollywood films among foreign publics and, therefore, contributed to a rise in India’s soft power.

Films are thought to play a significant role in soft power, because it speaks with the language of universality and is strongly influenced by a country’s culture, ideology and social practices (Thussu, 2013). Nye (2006) argues that American cultural products such as Hollywood and Microsoft helped generated American soft power. Thus, Indian policymakers have been inspired to include India’s Bollywood in the promotion of its soft power. As India’s former diplomat Shashi Tharoor (2007) noted in an article that Bollywood had the potential to make the most of India’s soft power, where foreign audiences ‘may not understand Hindi but catch the spirit of the films and look at India with
stars in their eyes as a result’ (para. 6). More recently, the Prime Minister of India launched an initiative, namely ‘Change Within’, in 2019 at the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, which aims to popularise Gandhi’s ideals through the Indian-film industry, using the power of films to empower people not only in India but around the world: ‘our film and entertainment industry are diverse and vibrant. Its impact internationally is also immense. Our films, music and dance have become very good ways of connecting people as well as societies’ (Modi, 2019).

Rajadhyaksha (2016) has suggested that from its beginning under British colonial rule through to the heights of Bollywood, Indian cinema represents India’s future. These films have not only raised awareness and challenged social issues, such as education system, discrimination, gender inequality, domestic violence and poverty, but also have successfully promoted Indian culture and values to the world. Hence, the Chinese reception of Bollywood films is seen as a positive signal of improving India–China ties, given the sometime fractious relationship between these two countries (Khanna, 2007). Hollywood films have contributed to America’s soft power through their popularity among global audiences. Likewise, if Bollywood films are being referred to as India’s emerging soft power, playing a role in promoting India’s unique culture while attracting the largest audiences, hence, bringing huge revenues back India, the rest part of this study, therefore, sought the opinions of Chinese audiences on the use of Bollywood as ‘soft power’ to promote India to China.

Methodology

This study adopted a discovery-oriented qualitative research approach where a list of semi-structured and open-ended questions was sent to all participants in electronic format initially, and then, the researcher followed them up with individual interviews over the WeChat (a popular Chinese social media app) and face-to-face meetings when necessary. Open-ended questions allowed the interviewer to deeply explore the participants’ narratives and perspectives on their experiences of Indian films in China, while the semi-structured format functioned to clarify the purpose of the study to participants and keep the interview process flexible and flowing (Kvale, 1996). All data collection was conducted in Chinese: the information sheet, consent form and a copy of the questions provided to the participants were in Chinese characters; and the oral communication was in participants’ preferred language, Mandarin. Interview transcription and data analysis were also completed in the Chinese to ensure the minimal loss of meanings in translation. Only key quotes cited in the subsequent sections were translated into English after completing data analysis.

Sampling and participants

Purposive and snowball sampling strategies were used to recruit participants (N = 32) in this study. The researcher contacted potential interviewees through various Indian-film fan groups, Chinese social media like Weibo (a Chinese microblogging site), and through personal contacts. There was no restriction on age, gender and professions when recruiting participants, as long as the interviewee had watched Indian films. Eventually, a convenience sample of 32 Chinese people agreed to participate in the study, with the youngest participant aged 19 and the oldest 82 years old, and a majority of participants at the age between 19 and 36 (M = 23.60, SD = 3.61 if removing ‘outliers’). The two ‘outliers’ aged 57 (Participant #10) and 82 (Participant #18) were included
because they provided useful data on Indian films in China, notably, they watched every Indian film to be shown in China during the early years including *Awaara* (1951).

Of the 32 participants, 8 were males (25%) and 24 females (75%), were born in mainland China. To ensure a variety of opinions for the research questions, participants consisted of people from 14 different provinces and regions across China, including Beijing, Shanghai, Xinjiang, Henan, Hebei, Shandong, Changsha, Taiyuan, Dalian, Nanjing, Wuxi, Ningbo, Shenzhen and Hangzhou. They work in a wide range of professions such as accountants, media practitioners, engineers, teachers, company planners and some are university students.

**Interview questions and procedures**

Semi-structured interviews covered three aspects surrounding the research questions on the growing popularity of Indian cinema in China. The set of interview questions fell into the following three categories: (1) appeal of Indian films, (2) opportunities and challenges of Indian cinema and (3) Bollywood as India’s ‘soft power’, and other comments (see Supplemental Appendix 1). Responses to those questions provided in-depth opinions on what Chinese audiences think of Indian films, whether they find them enjoyable or not, and how Bollywood has played its role in connecting the two oldest civilisations in the world.

The 32 interviews were conducted from May 2020. The researcher initially planned to interview all participants through online conversations. However, two older participants wanted to be interviewed in face-to-face settings. As a result, two interviews (6%) were conducted face-to-face at participants’ residences; 30 interviews (94%) were conducted over WeChat. Online interviews like video calls made it possible to retain interviews as effective as face-to-face meetings. Each interview was audio-recorded lasting from 12 to 40 minutes, with an average length of 20 minutes; they were transcribed verbatim in Chinese characters by the researcher for analysis. To protect confidentiality, each completed interview transcript was assigned a number (e.g. #01, #07), and these numbers were used to identify extracts but were not able to be linked to any individual.

**Data analysis**

To analyse the transcripts of semi-structured interviews, this study employed thematic analysis with an inductive approach, in which the researcher placed the participants’ opinions at the centre of study. Thematic analysis method has been proven effective in identifying emerging topics, ideas and patterns of qualitative data such as interview transcripts where the focus is on individual perspectives towards everyday experiences (Boeije, 2002). The coding was involved in a recursive process and conducted by the researcher, who is of Chinese origin and a native Mandarin speaker. Following the basic phases raised by Clarke and Braun (2013), I first immersed myself in the data through repeatedly reading each interview transcript; second, I captured both semantic and conceptual meanings of the transcripts, highlighting relevant data extracts using participants’ own words; third, I constructed a set of codes by using the researcher’s words based on most informative answers identified at the previous steps. For example, the codes like ‘content’ and ‘star power’ were assigned to transcripts where responses relating to factors make films appealing for Chinese audiences, and the broad categories ‘opportunities’ and ‘challenges’ were applied when comes to the second research question. Thereafter, through constantly reviewing and refining the salient themes derived from steps 1 to 3, I ensured that themes provided further insights into Indian
cinema in China and its impact on Chinese audiences. As a validity check, interpretations of some responses were returned to and double-checked with the participants to ensure accuracy, which, in turn, reduces the concern of relying on one researcher’s interpretation without peer-review on the results.

Results and discussion

Viewership of Bollywood films

The researcher asked the participants to self-indicate their level of interest in Bollywood films: 8 (25%) self-reported as ‘neither like nor dislike’ (5–6/10), 11 (34%) self-reported as ‘like’ (7–8/10), 13 (41%) self-indicated as ‘very like’ (9–10/10), none self-reported as disliking Indian films, with an average score of 7.81 out of 10. Given that a majority of the participants aged between 19 and 36, most of them have watched Indian films since their school days: some even said they had come across Indian films when they were only 4 to 5 years old. However, the frequency of viewing for 23 (72%) participants was either ‘hardly’ or ‘not often’; eight (25%) participants said ‘often’, while one Bollywood aficionado watched two to three films per week.

Interestingly, 19 (60%) participants recalled with ease that the first Indian film they watched was *3 idiots* (2009), while the rest responded with other films. Among the participants, eight (25%) watched first Indian film with classmates in their secondary schools, ten (31%) watched online, six (19%) watched on television, one bought DVD (3%), and seven (22%) went to a movie theatre. Generally, the preferred mode of viewing for the participants was through online streaming platforms, such as Youku, and went to a movie theatre.

According to the participants, Indian films are increasingly popular in China among Chinese audiences during the past few years. As illustrated in Table 1, in response to the question ‘do you think that Bollywood films are becoming popular in China?’ 22% of the participants answered ‘certainly’ and 44% thought ‘somewhat’. The popularity of Indian cinema was particularly true in a province called Xinjiang located in the northwest of China, as mentioned by participants #20 and #32. In terms of viewership, 78% of the participants stated that they have other Chinese friends who are interested in and watch Bollywood films. This further proves the prospect of China’s market for Bollywood is undoubtedly large.

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**Table 1.** Popularity and viewership of Bollywood films in China.

| Do you think that Bollywood films are becoming popular in China? | Number | %  |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|--------|----|
| Not Really                                                    | 6      | 19 |
| Somewhat                                                      | 14     | 44 |
| Certainly                                                     | 7      | 22 |
| Do not know                                                  | 5      | 15 |
| Do you have friends who are interested in and watch Bollywood films? |        |    |
| Yes, many                                                   | 7      | 22 |
| Yes, but not many                                            | 18     | 56 |
| No/do not know                                              | 7      | 22 |
Bollywood’s top five appealing factors

The following five key themes emerged from the interviews pointing to factors that make Indian films appealing to Chinese audiences: content, social values, star power, audience reviews and cultural connections.

**Good content-driven films.** Participants noted that Bollywood has recently moved from its clichéd genre of song and dance romances and is focusing more on the stories of its films. This shift has unprecedentedly helped Indian cinema making its way into China. As they expressed, ‘If the story is bad, it will not work [in China]’. (#14), ‘all kinds of cultural obstacles or whatever, if the story is good enough, people will naturally go and watch [the film]’ (#16). The thought of placing the story itself as a priority for any films was echoed among several other participants (#04, #08, #12, #15, #18, #20, #21, #27, #28, #29). One participant, who has been watching Indian films since 2012, well-acknowledged,

[people say] there are more than 1,600 languages in India, and at every 10 kilometres dialect changes, but a good film, a good story has no borders, no language, and no ethnic boundaries. (#01, aged 22, female, Hangzhou)

Such perspectives powerfully showed that Chinese audiences are specifically attracted to good content-driven films. More than half of the participants were appreciative of the topics, generously engaging and entertaining storylines, and finesse of the Indian films. Nevertheless, a university student in Hangzhou (#03) honestly revealed that most Chinese audiences initially did not hold any expectations of Indian films as they often lack knowledge about Indian cinema while assuming its low-cost production. However, recent imported Bollywood films bring ‘a sense of surprise’ to the Chinese with their profound stories. In particular, the storytelling of Bollywood packed a strong emotional punch appeal to Chinese audiences, as one participant described her experience of watching *Secret Superstar* in the theatre with her friends:

[the film] was very heart-warming. We were deeply touched by the story and cried while watching it, and the young girl in that film sings beautifully . . . not sure if I had the wrong impression, but I felt Indian movies always like using some of the family-bonding scenes to move us. (#12, aged 22, female, Henan)

An interesting point made by this participant was that both Chinese and Indians share similar emotions and beliefs about the family. This resulted in the Indian characters or stories often can successfully resonate with the Chinese audiences.

**Beyond entertainment: finding social values, optimism and hope.** The impact of Bollywood films on Chinese audiences was not just restricted to entertainment; to a large extent, they also increased awareness about similar social issues existing in both India and China. Numerous participants complimented Indian films for conveying social messages and highlighting real-life cases that resonate in the context of China, such as educational pressure in movies like *3 idiots, Hindi Medium, Taare Zameen Par,* and *Super 30* (#11), domestic violence in *Secret Superstar* (#03, #29), women’s rights and empowerment in *Padman* and *Toilet* (#07, #31), gender equality and a spirit of patriotism in *Dangal* (#01, #06, #23). As one participant put it, Indian films often ‘go straight to the heart of our social matters’ (#13).
Arguably, each society faces its issues, but Indian films showed that storytellers can play their roles in tackling such issues and creating changes through the power of cinema. For example, one participant from Shanghai (#14), who talked about her favourite film *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* (a story about a Hindu man helps a speech-impaired little girl to return her home in Pakistan), ‘I like the message from that movie, that is, we should be kind to one and another, and we should not let religions and races isolate love or create conflicts’. While the concept of religion might be new to many Chinese who are raised in a country with a large proportion of atheists, the language of love is shared. Meanwhile, when asking the most appealing part of Indian films, an interviewee shared her view:

[Indian films] often combine humorous colours when dealing with a very miserable thing, and in such a way that exerts a subtle influence on audiences and makes people more willing to accept their messages. (#02, aged 21, female, Taiyuan)

Participant #03 further highlighted the positive effects of Indian films, ‘[India’s stories] most bring me with joy. I often feel very happy when watching Indian movies. I like the colorful lights, the dancing, and I like their dramatic characters’. This could partially be due to the Indians’ natural sense of optimism about all that life can be. Most interviewees viewed dramatic Bollywood stories and dancing as an expression of happiness and an escape from harsh reality. Overall, Bollywood movies that ‘reflects social problems’ (#08), ‘cultivates independent thinking’ (#20) and ‘encourages people’ (#01, 05, 21) have fared well in China. Many participants expressed great admiration for India’s honest attitude towards its issues. More often, they emphasised that the truly appealing part of Indian cinema is not just showing what the society is, but what the society can become.

**Star power: the brand of Aamir Khan.** Star power is another recurring factor during interviews driving Chinese interest in Bollywood films. When the researcher asked the participants about their favourite Indian film, 22 (69%) participants indicated a movie starring Aamir Khan, including *Dangal, 3 idiots* and *Secret Superstar*. A 21-year-old participant (#16) from Hebei even replied by saying, ‘I love all Aamir Khan’s film . . . I think the biggest impact of Indian films on me is this actor’s personal charisma’. All participants recognised Aamir Khan – the 55-year-old Indian actor and filmmaker – mostly because of his ground-breaking film *3 idiots* and the unprecedented success of *Dangal* in China. This Indian actor seemed to have won over audiences of all ages. For example, the 82-year-old participant (#18), who is a retired primary school principal, highly praised his films and stellar performance, while showing the actor’s autograph she got during Khan’s promotion trip in China. Another participant (#02) humorously described Aamir Khan as ‘India’s panda’ representing a national treasure:

[. . .] most Chinese think of Bollywood – it is all about him [Aamir Khan], and then his films. If an Indian film that he was involved in producing, for example, whether he was a director, a producer, or a lead actor, we will think that is going to be good.

This Indian actor has largely changed the Chinese audience’s impression of India:

As soon as Aamir Khan comes out, we suddenly realise that India also has such a great side – aha! his name is now equivalent to a reputation, credibility or a brand of Indian films, and Chinese audiences are willing to pay for his movies. (#07, aged 22, male, from Wuxi)
Other Chinese participants straightforwardly attributed Khan’s achievements in China to India’s democracy, which protects the freedom soil of creation regarding sensitive topics: ‘when China has limited opportunities to reveal these [topics], Indian films like Aamir Khan’s films were speaking out for us’ (#17). Aamir Khan’s popularity showed that Chinese audiences interested in his films, which provides thought-provoking perspectives into the society beyond the usual Bollywood romance.

Positive word-of-mouth reviews. Furthermore, the importance of word-of-mouth among Chinese filmgoers was found in participants’ justifications for deciding to go to a movie theatre for an Indian film. These included friend recommendations, families or relatives’ invitations, high audience ratings on movie app, positive news spread of an Indian film, good reviews circulated within friend circle and on social media like Weibo. For example, one participant (#01) recalled that the film Dangal was on the Weibo top trending searches for 2017, and her friends initially recommended this film to her. Indeed, as one participant argued that ‘good stories can only be influential if they are promoted through the audience word-of-mothes, especially in a country like China with such a large population’ (#06). This revealed that positive audience reviews play a crucial role in making an Indian film successful in China.

Cultural connections between China and India. As mentioned earlier, Indian films struck a chord with Chinese audiences largely because both the countries have many shared emotions and cultural elements. Although Hollywood films considering its advanced technologies and global appeal enjoy a greater advantage than Bollywood films in China, the participants reported that they experienced greater similarity with Indian films than western films. Examples are observation of traditional values (e.g. family-oriented and having a sense of patriotism (#20)) and beliefs (e.g. philosophical concepts (#11)), and celebration of traditional festivals (#16). One of the interviewees (#12) succinctly compared the difference between Indian and western films, while recognising the commonality of China and India:

[Both countries] as the world ancient civilisations, have rich cultural heritages. We share so much. For example, Indian movies have a lot to do with family or community, and then the Chinese also feel that family and standing united are very important; but such relationships are unlike those portrayed in most western films.

Other participants appreciated the traditional ways of gracefulness in dressing (#18), the purity of stories (#15) and the absence of nudity and kissing in Indian films (#07), which makes Bollywood appeal to Chinese audiences of all ages. This thus showed that Indian cinema to some extent enjoys an additional cultural proximity advantage among Chinese audiences. Although other attractive factors such as interesting translations (#03, #06, #24) and good-looking Indian actors and actresses (#18, #20, #32) have been mentioned during the interviews, those five were the most common reasons.

Opportunities and challenges of Indian cinema in China

Opportunities. All participants affirmed the potential future of Indian cinema in China. From the participants’ responses, it seemed that increasing global cultural exchanges, rising demand for social responsibility, a more inclusive market environment, greater spending power of Chinese
consumers, well-established reputation of prior Bollywood films, increasing online access and enhanced film format are some overarching opportunities for Bollywood in China.

While recognising the advantage of similar values and internationalised content, Chinese’s interest in Bollywood films is often related to its success in featuring so-called ‘incredible Indian’ content – glamorous song-and-dance sequences, extravagant dress and sets, bright colours and elaborate depictions of Indian traditions and history. Although the recent Bollywood’s music and dances might not be able to form very large-scale popularity in China like the popular songs and dances of *Awaara* and *Caravan* in the 1980s described by participant #10, and agreed by #18, the melodious songs of Indian films still appealed to Chinese audiences. For examples, participant #20 shared that the theme songs from *Dangal* and *Secret Superstar* have been covered in both Chinese and Uighur (an ethnic minority in China) languages. Participant #15 reinforced that the unique song-and-dance sequences are what make Indian cinema fascinating. Although some participants commented that sometimes the songs and dances in films are irrelevant (e.g. #01, #04, #10), a majority of the participants still loved them and believed that songs and dances are important parts of Indian film characteristics. This is also evidenced by the popularity of the ‘Aankhen Khuli’ song from the film *Mohabbatein* (2000) in China (#15). One interviewee further stated that the ‘movies with distinctive Indian characteristics are more popular in China because we all have a sense of curiosity’ (#04). Another added, ‘Indian movies related to the two major epics of India, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and interesting stories, mythologies etc., that is culturally strong and exciting to me!’ (#20). In general, Bollywood films were not only a source of learning about India, but four of the participants also were influenced by them to visit India.

In terms of social and economic opportunities in China, participants mentioned include increasing online access to Indian films, a rising number of imports and economic growth leading to greater spending power. At the same time, the Chinese have become more open-minded, culturally tolerant and gradually risen demand for films to fulfil social responsibility that are in line with the development of Indian films. In the words of a participant,

> Chinese audiences are very inclusive of content. They enjoy movies from Europe, America, Japan, Korea, Spain, Iran, and other minority language films. Most Chinese love good films regardless of regions that comes from. Thus, I think that high-quality Indian films with a social message have a bright future in China. (#20)

Another participant quoted Confucius’ words – ‘I will not be afflicted at others not knowing me; I will be afflicted that I do not know others’ – to indicate her willingness to ‘embrace different things in [Indian films], to understand their ideologies’ (#11). These led to many medium-to-small budget films like *The Lunchbox* (2013) and *Hichki* (2018), which were also getting opportunities to connect with Chinese audiences. Arguably, Indian cinema has taken a big step forward in the Chinese market, especially in earning at the box offices, striking a chord with the youth who seek spiritual consolation, winning positive word-of-mouth, conveying social messages, and featuring outstanding actors, which all laid a solid foundation for the future growth of Bollywood in China.

**Challenges.** While Bollywood has numerous opportunities in China, its continued presence also has been accompanied by several challenges. After the interviews, challenges were categorised at the content, managerial, cultural, social and linguistical level. When analysing the challenges, the researcher found that challenges mainly result from Bollywood’s different target audience from the Chinese market, biased media report, current India–China geopolitical tensions, China’s strict
in institutional context and regulations, the dominance of local cinema, Hollywood and other popular cultures such as Japanese animation industry, as well as the shortcomings in Hindi–Chinese film translation.

Results first included the challenges faced by Indian films in terms of content and quality. One of the challenges originates from Bollywood’s primary target audiences – Indian audiences – whose preferences, habits and backgrounds are distinct from Chinese. This led to the following unappealing points noted by the participants, including generally exaggerated characterisations, unrealistic scenarios, overloaded song-and-dance scenes, signified formulaic plots and long film duration of Bollywood films. However, several participants reported that imported Indian films often reflected the negative sides of India, which somehow reinforced Chinese people’s biased opinions towards India. Examples given by the participants were the film Mom (2017) revolving around a tragic rape case, Hindi Medium (2017) indicating corruption in the education system, Toilet: Ek Prem Katha (2017) showing the shortage of toilets in India, and others reflecting such as the poverty of slums and low-social status of Indian women. A participant aged 27 from Shanghai (#14) who defended for India:

[India] is not as exaggerated as presented in some of their films, especially the film Toilet, because I have been to India and I don’t think the toilet situation in India is that bad, but most Chinese see it, and they probably imagine that is a real India.

Bollywood has presented Chinese audiences with many excellent stories and actors. However, with its similar inspiring stories and a few same faces, a growing number of Chinese viewers had ‘aesthetic fatigue’. Often, Indian films repeatedly emphasised the same issues as one interviewee argued, ‘the more you see, the less surprise you get’ (#03).

Second, challenges at the managerial level included inappropriate scheduling for Indian films, few India–China co-productions, and low attendance rate resulted by lack of promotions, while heavily relying on word-of-mouth, and high piracy levels in China. Using a survey of Chinese college students as evidence, Bai and Waldfogel (2012) found that three-quarters of their film consumption is unpaid. Similarly, in this study, 8 out of 10 participants who watched 3 idiots are pirated versions and 95% of the participants have watched at least one Indian film through pirated channels. An interviewee (#14) further remarked,

A lot of investors or distributors in China bought the copyrights to remake high-rated Indian films, such as the blockbuster wūshā [a remake of Indian film Drishyam (2015)], but the original one never had a chance to enter Chinese theatres. Even if it entered the Chinese market, the commercial potential is no longer as great as before, and the pirated version is more likely to be shared through the internet.

Results also suggested some cultural challenges. First, Chinese audiences hold certain stereotypes against India due to biased media reports, such as high crime rate and poverty. This has led to a distrust of Indian production by Chinese. Second, Bollywood films mostly appeared as the ‘second option’ for Chinese audiences because of the dominance of mainstream cultures, such as Hollywood blockbusters and Japanese anime. Third, India’s unique cultural characteristic presents an opportunity, but also a challenge. Several participants suggested that the risk of ‘cultural discounts’ on imported films. Their comments ranging from the lack of understanding towards India’s religious beliefs, humour, caste system and traditional rituals, to disagreement on some expressions, values
and behaviours portrayed in the films. These demonstrated the need for film producers to carefully consider the potential cultural conflicts before releasing their films in China.

Furthermore, against the growing popularity of Bollywood in China are policy and social challenges. When the film industry is subject to a complex government regulatory system involving import quotas, censorship and prohibited topics, many Indian films were either failing to pass China’s censoring process or facing plenty of cuts in shots and film duration. According to Article 25 of The Regulations on Administration of Movies (The State Council, 2001), this is because parts of film content are not in line with the social harmony and ideologies or simply not in conformity to the national standards. Taking the film My Name is Khan (2010) as an example, according to some participants, the version released in China was cut down to the point where the plots were incoherent, while this film was given high ratings and positive reviews by a majority of Chinese viewers who watched through pirated online channels. Besides, since this study was conducted during the global coronavirus pandemic, all participants agreed on its negative impacts on film industries, and some expressed their concerns regarding the case of ‘rising India-China geopolitical tensions’ (Goldman, 2020). The leading force of politics cannot be ignored, for instance, if the border clashes and diplomatic friction continued, the imports of Indian films, India-China’s co-production agreements and the like would suffer.

Finally, language is an important ingredient in audiences’ selection of a film. While many participants complimented about good translations of some Indian films, there is still a number of linguistic challenges pointed out by other participants, including bad translations of film titles and lyrics, weird Chinese dubbing, being unfamiliar with Indian accents, the lack of Hindi–Chinese translators, and language differences diminishing audience interests. Interestingly, several interviewees coincidentally raised the same experience of almost missed out a great movie – 3 idiots – because of its terrible title translation.

The challenges identified often co-existed with the opportunities. For example, the ‘just-perfect’ song-and-dance sequences are features, but superfluous song-and-dance scenes are burdens. Participant #06 added, ‘Bollywood films are facing a double-edged situation in China, people who like [Indian films] love them very much, and those who don’t like them just nodded off when they see singing and dancing’. Similarly, participant #07 said, ‘some films are wonderful, but others are awful. Thus, there is a collective responsibility of Bollywood to maintain quality’.

**Bollywood’s growing popularity as India’s soft power**

All participants agreed with the statement regarding the use of Bollywood as India’s soft power to promote India to China. This open-ended question generated various responses, ranging from Bollywood represents the rising power and future hope of Indian society, the popularity of Indian stars and songs, the contribution to the growth of tourism in India, the growing economy through generating box offices, the improvement of India–China relations, and Bollywood emerging as a component of India’s soft power that allowed the country to find its presence in China. Some of the other participants stated, ‘I totally agree with [the statement]. Bollywood is the most influential India’s soft power in China. Film is the best mean to promote cultures. I even thought about visiting India someday since Indian films changed my previous views of India’ (#12); ‘I studied Hindi because of Bollywood . . . I travelled to India and visited numerous well-known locations in Mumbai that are seen in the Bollywood films’ (#20); ‘Yes, Bollywood music and dances are becoming increasingly popular that can be considered as India’s cultural outputs’ (#15); ‘I agree.
America has Hollywood, China has Li Ziqi [a country-life blogger and YouTube celebrity who promotes traditional Chinese cultures], material arts or philosophy . . . and now India has Bollywood’ (#03); ‘Bollywood has done a good job of promoting a positive, beautiful aspect of India, proving India to the world’ (#05); and ‘Indian films make Chinese more aware of India’ (#19).

However, many found that Bollywood has not yet truly penetrated China rather than a cult culture with limited fan bases, and others argued that Aamir Khan might be better referred to as India’s soft power in China. One participant (#20), who had the privilege of being as an accompanying interpreter during both Aamir Khan and Shahrukh Khan’s trips in China, shared that both Indian actors were surprised by their popularity in China. In addition, Bollywood’s increasing popularity in China is also being attributed to its gaining attention through international films made under the context of India, as two participants (#05, #17) respectively thought that Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) and *Lion* (2016; an Australian film received six Oscar nominations) are Bollywood films. This, in turn, can be considered as proof of Bollywood’s growing global influence.

**Conclusion**

Through exploring the growing popularity of Bollywood as a form of what Joseph Nye coined as ‘soft power’, this study provided insights into Indian cinema in China from the perspectives of local audiences while identifying five factors that make Indian films appealing, including good content-driven story, having social values, the use of star actors, positive word-of-mouth and an additional cultural proximity advantage enjoyed by Indian films among Chinese audiences. Moreover, several opportunities were derived showing the potential of and the motivations for Bollywood films crossing the great wall, specifically ranging from unique Indian characteristics, Chinese’s rising demand for socially relevant films, to greater spending power, established reputation of Indian films, growing online access and future opportunities of collaborating through cinema. While Bollywood represents the best chance for India to promote itself, this study found that it also faced numerous challenges at the content, managerial, cultural, political, social and linguistic level. These challenges are often co-existed with the opportunities, which need more attention from the filmmakers and distributors. Arranging a better scheduling time for films (e.g. avoiding a clash with Hollywood films), making efforts in reducing piracy, implementing strategic marketing and having a better film title translation, are sometimes even more important than film quality. Taking many factors into consideration – unique institutional context, customs, languages – adds to the complexity of a film’s success in China.

These opportunities and challenges are general in nature and do not specify to any one film. In this sense, the diverse genres of Indian films might have different opportunities and are confronted with different challenges. For example, a ‘Tollywood’ (Telugu-language film industry based in Hyderabad, India) epic *Baahubali* favoured by a participant (#07) is certainly distinct from most Bollywood films. Hence, further research into a border ‘Indian cinema’ beyond ‘Bollywood’ in China and case studies focusing on specific genres of Indian films could provide further insights into Indian cinema in China.

The final research question examined the opinions of Chinese participants on Bollywood as parts of India’s emerging ‘soft power’. It was interesting to note that a Bollywood actor – Aamir Khan – was considered as India’s ‘soft power’ in China to many participants, while all participants...
agreed that Bollywood was emerging as an aspect of ‘soft power’ in promoting India’s culture, traditions and tourism to China, and as a way of cushioning bilateral relations; as a participant (#19) stated, ‘Indian films make Chinese more aware of India’.

Since the study used a purposive and snowball sampling method, it is important to acknowledge that the sample may not meet the criteria that each member of the larger population has the equal opportunity of being heard (Witte & Witte, 2017). Future studies should ensure that participants can be more representative of the target population. While the relatively small sample may limit extensive data analysis, the findings still highlighted many significant opportunities and challenges relating to perceptions of Indian cinema in China held by local audiences. Participant responses have also pointed to the future direction of research; in particular, in areas such as the influence from various distributors, genres, transnational elements, language, and cultural aspects of Indian cinema.

Arguably, the important role of Bollywood in bridging cultures goes without saying. Despite current geopolitical affairs, the two most promising Asian economics – India and China – are neighbours. Geographically, they share more than 4000 kilometres of borders (Kurian, 2014); historically, they share more than 2000 years of cultural relations and both countries used to send best thinkers to each other, such as Xuanzang. At present, China–India relations still face many challenges, but the strength that Indian films offer in promoting cultural understanding and cushioning mutual distrust should never be underestimated. India and China deserve better, and it is only can start by knowing each other better. The findings of this study demonstrated that Bollywood could be the most powerful and effective factor that plays its part in connecting India and China.

Acknowledgements
Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of The University of Queensland on 23 April 2020 (Ethics ID number: 2020000638). The author is grateful to the reviewers for their kind feedback, to the participants for giving their time and effort to this study, and to her lifelong idol – one of her favourite Indian actors, Shah Rukh Khan, for being her inspiration.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Supplemental material
Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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