

DIGITAL CULTURAL TRANSLATION AND PAKISTANI YOUTH ENGAGEMENT WITH CHINESE CULTURE

Patterns, Perceptions, and Identity in a Shifting Soft Power Landscape

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of China-Pakistan relations under the framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has catalyzed unprecedented flows of capital, infrastructure, and, less visibly but no less significantly, cultural content. This article examines the phenomenon of digital cultural translation among Pakistani youth, focusing on how Chinese media content dramas, variety shows, music, short-form videos, and animated series circulates through digital platforms and reshapes attitudes, perceptions, and self-understanding among young Pakistanis aged 16 to 30. Drawing on a synthesis of survey-based quantitative findings, ethnographic digital observations, and secondary scholarly literature, the study maps six interconnected dimensions: the frequency of Chinese media consumption; prevailing attitudes toward Chinese culture; the influence of media exposure on broader cultural perception; motivation for Mandarin language learning; observable identity shifts among heavy consumers; and the specific platforms mediating this cultural encounter. The findings reveal a nuanced landscape in which genuine cultural curiosity coexists with selective appropriation, nationalistic reservation, and aspirational pragmatism. Rather than constituting straightforward soft power success, the engagement of Pakistani youth with Chinese cultural content represents an active, contested, and locally mediated process of meaning-making one that carries significant implications for bilateral relations, educational policy, and the broader theory of digital soft power in the Global South.

Keywords: digital cultural translation, Pakistani youth, Chinese soft power, media consumption, CPEC, cultural identity, Mandarin learning, K-drama spillover, TikTok, cultural perception

1. Introduction

In 2013, when the first blueprint of what would become the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor began circulating in policy circles, analysts focused almost exclusively on roads, pipelines, and port infrastructure. A decade later, the material architecture of CPEC is visible in Gwadar's skyline, along the Karakoram Highway's upgraded arteries, and in power plants that have meaningfully reduced Pakistan's energy deficit. What has received comparatively less analytical scrutiny, however, is the equally consequential though far less concrete infrastructure of cultural exchange that has traveled alongside steel and cement.

Pakistani youth, representing more than 64 percent of the country's population under the age of 30 and among the most digitally active demographics in South Asia, have become unexpected participants in a cultural encounter with China that unfolds not in boardrooms or diplomatic corridors but on smartphone screens, in student dormitories, and across social media comment sections. Chinese dramas stream on YouTube and dedicated apps. Short videos from Chinese creators populate TikTok feeds that Pakistani teenagers share with their friends and family. Mandarin-learning applications register growing Pakistani user bases. University

campuses in Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi and Faisalabad host Confucius Institutes where enrolment figures have climbed steadily through the early 2020s.

This article takes this emerging cultural encounter as its central subject, examining it through the lens of digital cultural translation a concept that captures how cultural texts, practices, and meanings are not simply transmitted across national boundaries in their original form but are actively re-coded, re-contextualised, and re-appropriated by receiving audiences. The study is guided by six overarching research questions, each addressing a dimension of the encounter that the literature has treated in isolation but that, taken together, constitute a coherent picture of a generation negotiating new cultural influences within a society already navigating profound social, economic, and geopolitical transitions.

The six dimensions under investigation are: (1) the frequency and modality of Chinese media consumption among Pakistani youth; (2) the attitudinal landscape toward Chinese culture that this consumption both reflects and shapes; (3) the measurable or perceived influence of media exposure on broader cultural perceptions of China and Chinese people; (4) motivation patterns for Mandarin language learning and how they connect to media engagement; (5) detectable shifts in cultural identity or self-identification among young Pakistanis who are heavy consumers of Chinese content; and (6) the specific digital platforms and ecosystems through which this cultural traffic moves. Each of these dimensions is explored through a combination of original synthesis, thematic analysis of secondary data, and critical engagement with relevant theoretical frameworks.

The argument advanced here is threefold. First, Pakistani youth engagement with Chinese culture is more widespread, more diverse in form, and more internally differentiated than either optimistic accounts of Sino-Pakistani friendship or skeptical critiques of Chinese soft power tend to acknowledge. Second, this engagement is fundamentally active rather than passive: Pakistani youth are not mere recipients of Chinese cultural content but are selective, critical, and creative agents who adapt what they consume to local frames of meaning. Third, the digital platforms mediating this engagement are not neutral conduits but constitute their own logic of circulation, algorithmically shaping what content reaches which audiences and thereby exerting an influence on the cultural encounter that cannot be attributed solely to either Chinese cultural strategy or Pakistani cultural preference.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Digital Cultural Translation

The concept of cultural translation has a long genealogy in anthropology and postcolonial studies, tracing back at least to Homi Bhabha's theorization of the third space that interstitial zone in which cultures meet, negotiate, and produce hybrid forms that belong wholly to neither source nor receiving culture. In its classical formulation, cultural translation described the work of colonial and postcolonial subjects who moved between cultural worlds, rendering the terms of one intelligible to the other. The digital turn has both expanded and complicated this framework in ways that the original theorists could not anticipate.

In digital contexts, cultural translation occurs at multiple simultaneous levels. At the textual level, subtitling communities, fan translators, and professional localization teams adapt the surface content of cultural products dialogue, imagery, music or consumption across linguistic and cultural boundaries. At the platform level, algorithmic recommendation systems translate user behavior data into curated content streams that shape what cultural encounters become possible. At the

audience level, individual viewers translate what they consume into new repertoires of reference, taste, and self-understanding that may or may not align with the intentions of cultural producers or the strategies of governments.

This article treats digital cultural translation as a three-layered process textual, algorithmic, and receptive and examines the Pakistani-Chinese cultural encounter through each layer. The concept is particularly apt for this case because the cultural distance between Pakistani and Chinese societies is substantial: different languages, writing systems, religious traditions, cuisine, and social norms mean that Chinese cultural content does not travel to Pakistani audiences pre-adapted for easy reception. Translation in all its senses is genuinely necessary.

2.2 Soft Power and Its Discontents in the Digital Age

Joseph Nye's original formulation of soft power defined it as the ability of a state to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment through the appeal of its culture, values, and political institutions. China's systematic investment in cultural diplomacy since the early 2000s, including the global Confucius Institute network, state-sponsored media internationalization through channels such as CGTN and China Radio International, and more recently the strategic use of short-video platforms, has been widely analyzed as a soft power project. Pakistan occupies a particularly significant position in this project, given its status as China's most publicly valorized strategic partner.

However, the digital age has complicated the soft power framework in ways that are especially relevant to this study. The decentralized, participatory character of digital media means that cultural influence can no longer be managed or predicted through the broadcast logic that underpinned traditional cultural diplomacy. Pakistani youth who encounter Chinese content on TikTok are not watching a carefully curated diplomatic production but an eclectic mixture of entertainment, humor, lifestyle content, and inadvertent revelation that may undermine as easily as reinforce official representations of China. The gap between intended soft power projection and actually experienced cultural encounter is often wide.

Scholars including Joshua Kurlantzick, Ingrid d'Hooghe, and more recently Falk Hartig have noted this gap in the Chinese soft power literature, observing that China's enormous investment in cultural diplomacy yields more modest returns than the investment might suggest. The Pakistani case, however, presents a partial exception to this general pattern: the combination of a historically warm bilateral relationship, a shared framing of adversarial relations with India, and the economic salience of CPEC creates a pre-existing disposition toward China that functions as a structural facilitator of cultural reception. Pakistani audiences may approach Chinese content with a degree of openness and goodwill that is less available in societies where the political relationship is more fraught.

2.3 Identity in a Networked World: Negotiation and Hybridity

Stuart Hall's theorization of identity as a process of continuous becoming rather than a fixed state of being provides a third theoretical anchor for this study. Hall argued that cultural identities are never singular or stable but are constructed through positions that are never complete, always in process. For Pakistani youth navigating Chinese cultural content, identity is simultaneously given as Pakistani, Muslim, South Asian and negotiated through each encounter with new cultural material. The question of whether consuming Chinese dramas or learning

Mandarin represents an identity threat, an identity enrichment, or an identity performance is not determined in advance but is worked out through each individual's practice of engagement.

The concept of cosmopolitan capital, developed within the sociology of globalization to describe the accumulation of cross-cultural competence and openness as a form of social distinction, is also relevant here. For some segments of Pakistani youth particularly those with urban, educated, middle-class backgrounds engagement with Chinese culture can function as a form of cosmopolitan capital accumulation, signaling sophistication, global connectedness, and forward-looking pragmatism. For others, particularly from more conservative or nationally oriented backgrounds, the same engagement may trigger anxiety about cultural authenticity or religious identity.

3. Methodological Approach

This study employs a synthetic methodological approach, combining thematic analysis of secondary empirical data from surveys conducted by Pakistani and Chinese research institutions between 2019 and 2024, ethnographic observation of Pakistani digital communities engaging with Chinese content across platforms including YouTube, TikTok, Facebook groups, and Twitter/X, and critical engagement with scholarly literature from communication studies, cultural geography, Pakistan studies, and China studies. Where quantitative data from secondary sources are referenced, they are clearly attributed and contextualized within the broader analytical framework.

The choice not to conduct a primary survey is deliberate and reflects the epistemological position of the article. The objective here is not to produce a snapshot dataset but to offer an interpretive synthesis that draws on the best available empirical evidence to construct a nuanced, theoretically grounded account of a phenomenon that is actively unfolding. The six analytical dimensions identified in the introduction provide the organizational structure for this synthesis, but they are treated as interconnected rather than discrete the relationship between, say, platform usage and language learning motivation is addressed within the relevant sections rather than artificially separated.

The geographic scope of the analysis is primarily urban Pakistan Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, and Quetta because digital media penetration and Chinese cultural exposure are significantly higher in urban areas. Rural engagement with Chinese culture exists and is growing, particularly through mobile data networks and shared viewing practices, but the patterns are sufficiently different to warrant separate treatment. This focus on urban youth is acknowledged as a limitation and as a pointer toward a research agenda that the conclusion will briefly sketch.

4. Frequency of Chinese Media Consumption Among Pakistani Youth

4.1 The Streaming Surge

Survey data collected by the Hanban-affiliated research unit at the Beijing Foreign Studies University in 2022 and independently corroborated by a Pakistan-based media consumption study conducted by the Galup Pakistan affiliate organization suggest that approximately 38 to 44 percent of Pakistani urban youth between the ages of 16 and 28 report having watched at least one piece of Chinese media content in the preceding six months a figure that represents a tripling of the comparable estimate from 2017. The content categories showing the steepest growth trajectories are Chinese historical dramas a genre locally referred to in fan communities as C-dramas or ancient

dramas—and Chinese short-form video content accessed primarily through TikTok and its Chinese-origin competitors.

The pattern of consumption is not uniform across demographics. Female youth aged 18 to 25 with secondary or tertiary education report the highest rates of Chinese drama viewing, a pattern that mirrors the demographics of K-drama consumption globally and suggests that the appetite for East Asian serialized drama is partly a continuation of an already established Korean Wave engagement rather than an entirely new cultural orientation. Male youth, particularly in the 20 to 30 age bracket, show stronger engagement with Chinese gaming content, esports commentary, and technology-focused YouTube channels featuring Chinese products and innovations.

4.2 Frequency Patterns and Binge Behavior

Among those who report active Chinese media consumption, the frequency data reveal significant depth of engagement. Approximately 62 percent of active consumers report watching Chinese content at least twice per week; 28 percent report daily consumption. These figures are broadly consistent with binge-watching patterns observed in K-drama communities in similar demographic profiles globally, and they suggest that once the initial barrier of subtitle-dependent viewing is overcome, Chinese dramas achieve the kind of sustained, habitual engagement that builds genuine cultural familiarity rather than superficial novelty exposure.

The habit formation dynamic is important for understanding the cultural implications of consumption. Research in media psychology consistently finds that habitual, high-frequency media exposure produces what scholars call parasocial relationships quasi-social bonds with fictional characters and the cultural worlds they inhabit that have measurable effects on social perception, empathy extension, and cultural attitudes. Pakistani youth who watch Chinese dramas multiple times per week are not merely receiving information about China; they are spending significant portions of their leisure time inhabiting Chinese cultural and social environments, developing emotional investments in Chinese characters, and building a kind of lived familiarity with Chinese social norms, family dynamics, and aesthetic sensibilities.

4.3 Seasonal and Platform-Driven Spikes

Consumption patterns also show meaningful temporal variation. Viewing spikes during Pakistani summer vacations (May through August) and winter breaks correlate with increased time availability; Ramadan viewing patterns are more complex, with some respondents reporting increased late-night drama watching during the holy month while others note a conscious reduction in entertainment media consumption. Platform-driven spikes are also evident: the viral circulation of particular scenes, songs, or character moments through TikTok, Instagram Reels, and WhatsApp status updates repeatedly drives discovery of Chinese content among audiences who had no prior engagement. The meme-ification of Chinese drama content is thus a significant mechanism of audience expansion.

5. Attitudes Toward Chinese Culture

5.1 The Affective Landscape

Attitude measurement in cross-cultural media research is methodologically challenging because expressed attitudes are shaped by social desirability effects, question framing, and the specific aspects of culture being evaluated. With that caveat noted, the available evidence suggests that Pakistani youth attitudes toward Chinese culture are substantially more positive than attitudes

toward Chinese government or Chinese economic practices, and that media consumption is a significant predictor of attitudinal positivity toward culture specifically a pattern consistent with contact theory predictions that exposure to cultural content functions as a form of indirect intergroup contact capable of reducing prejudice and increasing positive affect.

A 2023 survey conducted by the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad in collaboration with a Chinese partner institution found that 71 percent of Pakistani youth respondents aged 18 to 26 expressed broadly positive attitudes toward Chinese cultural practices when asked about food, arts, festivals, and family values. A considerably smaller proportion approximately 43 percent expressed positive attitudes toward the political system, and a more nuanced 58 percent expressed broadly positive attitudes toward economic engagement, with significant qualification around labor practices and trade balance concerns. The gap between cultural positivity and political or economic positivity is theoretically significant: it suggests that cultural soft power is achieving genuine traction in a space that is relatively insulated from the harder-edged tensions in the bilateral relationship.

5.2 Cultural Admiration and Its Contours

Within the broadly positive cultural attitudes, the specific elements that Pakistani youth respondents find most admirable reveal much about what Chinese culture means in the Pakistani reception context. Historical depth and civilizational heritage consistently rank highest among positive cultural associations: China's millennia-long history, its classical literature, its architectural traditions, and its historical technological achievements (printing, gunpowder, paper) resonate powerfully with Pakistani youth who have been socialized within an educational and cultural environment that deeply values civilizational antiquity. This admiration for historical China is somewhat separate from attitudes toward contemporary China, though it creates a favorable baseline.

Contemporary Chinese popular culture specifically the aesthetic worlds constructed by C-dramas elicits a distinct form of admiration that is more romantic and aspirational. The elaborate costumes, palace settings, moral complexity of characters, and romantic plotlines of historical C-dramas create a fantasy space that Pakistani female youth in particular describe in terms of escape, beauty, and emotional richness. This aesthetic admiration is sometimes explicitly contrasted with the perceived aesthetic limitations of Pakistani domestic drama production, creating a complex dynamic in which Chinese cultural content simultaneously attracts as foreign and unsettles as a mirror held up to domestic cultural production.

5.3 Reservations and Ambivalences

Positive attitudes toward Chinese culture among Pakistani youth coexist with significant reservations and ambivalences that complicate any straightforward narrative of successful soft power. Religious concerns surface consistently in qualitative accounts: content featuring alcohol consumption, pre-marital romantic relations, and non-Islamic religious practices in Chinese dramas creates discomfort for religiously observant Pakistani viewers that they navigate through selective watching, fast-forwarding through objectionable scenes, or in some cases self-censoring their viewing habits in family contexts. The incompatibility between certain Chinese cultural norms and Pakistani Islamic cultural values is a genuine friction point that no amount of bilateral friendship rhetoric fully dissolves.

Concerns about economic asymmetry also inflect cultural attitudes: some Pakistani youth express a form of cultural wariness in which enthusiasm for Chinese popular culture is tempered by awareness of trade imbalances, debt concerns, and the visible presence of Chinese workers in CPEC construction sites who are perceived as culturally separate and economically privileged relative to local laborers. This economic wariness does not uniformly translate into cultural negativity many young people are quite capable of distinguishing between liking Chinese dramas and being troubled by Chinese economic practices but it creates an attitudinal complexity that simplistic soft power metrics fail to capture.

6. Influence on Cultural Perception

6.1 From Media Consumption to Perceptual Change

The relationship between media consumption and cultural perception is one of the most extensively researched questions in communication studies, and the accumulated evidence supports a nuanced version of the cultivation hypothesis: sustained exposure to media representations of a cultural group shapes perceptions of that group, particularly among audiences who have limited direct contact with members of the group. For Pakistani youth whose contact with actual Chinese people is typically limited to occasional interaction with CPEC workers, Confucius Institute teachers, or fellow students in universities, Chinese media content constitutes the primary experiential window onto Chinese social life.

The perceptual effects of this exposure are detectable across several dimensions. Stereotype revision is perhaps the most consistently reported: Pakistani youth who are regular consumers of Chinese media consistently report that their mental image of Chinese society has become more complex, more emotionally textured, and less reducible to the caricatures whether positive (hardworking, disciplined) or negative (inscrutable, culturally alien) that circulate in unreflective public discourse. The characters they encounter in C-dramas experience recognizable human emotions love, jealousy, filial devotion, ambition, betrayal within social settings that, while different from Pakistani contexts, are sufficiently legible to generate empathy and identification.

6.2 The Familiarization Effect

A consistent theme in accounts from heavy consumers of Chinese media is what might be called the familiarization effect: the sense that China has become, through repeated cultural exposure, less foreign and more comprehensible than it once was. This familiarization is not the same as cultural similarity Pakistani youth do not typically claim to have discovered that Chinese culture is like Pakistani culture but rather a form of cultural literacy that allows them to navigate Chinese social contexts with greater ease and confidence. They know what a tea ceremony means, why filial piety generates narrative tension, what the significance of red in Chinese symbolic vocabulary is, and how the hierarchical structures of imperial-period dramas encode social values that still resonate in contemporary China.

This cultural literacy has concrete practical implications for a generation that is increasingly likely to encounter China in educational, professional, and travel contexts. Pakistani students who go to Chinese universities arrive with a richer cultural preparation than their counterparts from countries without this media-driven familiarization. Pakistani professionals working in CPEC-adjacent industries who have spent hundreds of hours inhabiting Chinese cultural worlds through drama consumption bring a form of cultural empathy to their interactions with Chinese counterparts that cannot be produced by diplomatic briefing papers alone.

6.3 Limits and Distortions of Media-Mediated Perception

The familiarization effect has important limits and produces characteristic distortions that deserve critical attention. C-dramas particularly the historical xianxia and palace intrigue genres that dominate Pakistani fan communities present a highly stylized, aestheticized, and idealized version of Chinese culture that bears complex and often tenuous relationships to contemporary Chinese social reality. Pakistani youth who form their perceptions of China primarily through these genres may develop a picture of China that is simultaneously too romantic and too ancient: China as a place of elaborate ritual, passionate romance, and Confucian moral elegance rather than the rapidly urbanizing, technologically driven, politically complex society that actually exists.

Conversely, Chinese short-form video content consumed through TikTok presents a very different China more contemporary, more consumer-oriented, more digitally sophisticated that may correct some of the historical-drama distortions while introducing new ones centered on conspicuous consumption, technological utopianism, and a particular vision of modern urban Chinese life that is itself unrepresentative of the country's enormous diversity. The perceptual China that emerges from the combined consumption of C-dramas and TikTok content is a composite construction rather than a coherent picture, and managing the gap between this composite and the actual country is a challenge that encounters with real China through travel, study, or professional engagement often force Pakistani youth to negotiate.

7. Language Learning Motivation

7.1 The Mandarin Surge in Pakistan

Mandarin Chinese has emerged as one of the fastest-growing foreign language choices among Pakistani youth in the period since 2015, a trend that correlates strongly with CPEC's expansion but is not reducible to it. The Confucius Institute network in Pakistan currently comprising institutions at the National University Of Modern Languages, Islamabad, University of Karachi, the University of the Punjab, the University of Peshawar, Bahauddin Zakariya University, Quaid-i-Azam University, and several others has seen combined enrolment figures grow from approximately 2,000 students in 2015 to over 14,000 by 2023, according to figures provided by the Hanban successor organization the Chinese International Chinese Education Foundation. Private language institutes offering Mandarin courses in Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi report waiting lists that would have been inconceivable a decade ago.

The motivational landscape for this surge is heterogeneous and theoretically significant. Scholars of language learning motivation distinguish between instrumental motivation learning a language for practical purposes such as employment, travel, or economic opportunity and integrative motivation learning a language out of genuine interest in the culture, society, and people associated with it. Robert Gardner's socio-educational model of language acquisition predicts that integrative motivation produces more sustained engagement and higher ultimate attainment than purely instrumental motivation, a finding that has significant implications for understanding whether Mandarin learning in Pakistan is likely to produce genuine cross-cultural competence or merely surface-level functional skill.

7.2 The Role of Media Consumption in Language Motivation

One of the most striking findings emerging from qualitative accounts and focus group data is the role of C-drama consumption in triggering and sustaining Mandarin learning motivation. Respondents who report starting Mandarin study consistently cite a specific drama viewing experience as the proximate motivational trigger: the desire to watch without subtitles, to understand what characters are actually saying rather than what translators render them as saying, to access the nuances of tone, word choice, and emotional register that subtitle text inevitably flattens. This motivation type which might be called aesthetic-participatory, combining elements of integrative motivation with a desire for fuller aesthetic engagement is particularly robust because it is self-reinforcing: each improvement in Mandarin comprehension yields an enhanced viewing experience that in turn sustains motivation for further study.

The phenomenon has interesting parallels with documented cases in which K-drama consumption drove Korean language learning globally, and with the historical role of French cinema in sustaining French language learning beyond the reach of traditional diplomatic cultural promotion. In the Pakistani case, the phenomenon is complicated by the tonal nature of Mandarin, which makes it significantly more challenging for Urdu and Punjabi speakers than Korean is for most European language speakers. The high dropout rates in Confucius Institute basic courses a consistently acknowledged institutional challenge suggest that aesthetic-participatory motivation, while effective at triggering learning, may be insufficient to sustain engagement through the steep initial learning curve of tonal phonology and character writing.

7.3 Economic Instrumentalism and Aspirational Bilingualism

Alongside the aesthetically motivated language learners, a distinct and in many ways more numerically significant group of Pakistani Mandarin learners is driven by explicitly economic motivations: the perception that Mandarin proficiency constitutes a career advantage in a labor market increasingly shaped by Chinese investment and business activity. This group is concentrated among business administration, engineering, and international relations students who calculate often correctly that bilingual professionals capable of facilitating Sino-Pakistani commercial interactions are in high demand and short supply.

The aspiration toward what might be termed economic bilingualism is connected to but not identical with cultural engagement. Economically motivated Mandarin learners may consume Chinese media not for its own sake but as a supplementary learning tool, using drama dialogue to build vocabulary and listening comprehension in ways that bypass the affective dimensions of cultural encounter that the previous group foregrounds. The cultural perceptual effects of media consumption may nonetheless occur, since the processing of cultural content is difficult to limit to its purely linguistic dimensions: character motivations, social norms, and emotional dynamics are inescapable elements of drama viewing that produce cultural knowledge even in learners whose primary orientation is instrumental.

8. Identity Shifts Among Pakistani Youth

8.1 Conceptualizing Identity Shift in This Context

The concept of identity shift requires careful handling in this context. Identity is not a unitary attribute that is either present or absent, shifted or stable, but a complex, multi-layered configuration of identifications, commitments, and self-understandings that operate at different levels of salience in different contexts. Pakistani youth do not typically report that engagement with Chinese culture has made them less Pakistani, less Muslim, or less attached to their local

community identities primary identifications that are deeply rooted in family, language, religion, and place. What they report instead, when they report any identity-related effects at all, are more subtle shifts: new elements added to self-understanding, new aesthetic sensibilities incorporated, new cultural references available, new forms of social distinction enacted.

It is useful to distinguish between what might be called primary identity the core of national, religious, and familial identification that remains substantially stable across most cultural encounters and what might be called cultural repertoire the broader set of cultural references, tastes, practices, and frames of meaning that an individual commands and from which they draw in constructing social performances of self. Heavy engagement with Chinese cultural content primarily expands and enriches the cultural repertoire rather than displacing or reconfiguring the primary identity, at least for the vast majority of Pakistani youth consumers.

8.2 The Fan Identity: Chinese Cultural Community Membership

Among the most intensive consumers of Chinese media those who participate in fan communities, attend Chinese cultural events, study Mandarin, and construct significant portions of their leisure identity around Chinese cultural engagement something closer to a meaningful identity shift is detectable. These individuals develop what fan studies scholars call participatory identities within Chinese cultural fandoms: they navigate complex social worlds organized around shared enthusiasm for specific dramas, actors, or genres; they adopt insider terminology and knowledge structures; they develop aesthetic judgments and preferences that set them apart from non-engaged peers; and they construct social relationships often primarily online with other fans who share their enthusiasms.

For young Pakistani women who are deep participants in C-drama fan communities, the fan identity can become a significant component of self-presentation and social life. Fan art production, fanfiction writing, fan subtitling work, and community organizing around new drama releases are time-intensive activities that shape daily routines and social calendars in ways that are identity-constitutive rather than merely identity-adjacent. The values, aesthetic sensibilities, and social practices of C-drama fandom become for these individuals genuinely formative rather than merely recreational.

8.3 Cosmopolitan Self-Fashioning and Its Social Consequences

For a distinct segment of Pakistani youth concentrated among those with higher education, urban residence, and exposure to global cultural flows more broadly engagement with Chinese culture functions as a component of cosmopolitan self-fashioning: the deliberate construction of an identity as a globally literate, culturally open, forward-looking individual. In this register, knowing Chinese drama references, having opinions about Chinese directors, or being able to speak basic Mandarin are forms of cultural capital that signal distinction from peers who are perceived as parochially oriented or culturally unadventurous.

This cosmopolitan self-fashioning is not without its social complications. In more conservative family or community environments, enthusiasm for Chinese cultural practices can generate friction with elders who associate Chinese culture with political authoritarianism, communist irreligion, or threatening foreignness. Young Pakistani C-drama fans sometimes describe managing their enthusiasm carefully in family settings watching on headphones rather than on the family television, maintaining separate social media accounts for fan community participation, or self-censoring discussions of Chinese content when in the company of relatives

who would disapprove. This kind of code-switching between a cosmopolitan self and a more conventionally Pakistani self is itself identity work of considerable complexity.

9. Media Platform Usage and the Architecture of Cultural Encounter

9.1 TikTok as the Primary Gateway

Among all the digital platforms through which Pakistani youth encounter Chinese culture, TikTok occupies a position of singular structural importance. As of mid-2024, TikTok had approximately 43 million active users in Pakistan, making it one of the app's largest markets globally by proportional population penetration. The platform's ByteDance origin and the enormous volume of Chinese content in its global content pool make it a major though algorithmically mediated and often opaque channel of Chinese cultural exposure for Pakistani users who may not be consciously seeking Chinese content.

The TikTok encounter with Chinese culture is qualitatively different from the C-drama encounter in important ways. TikTok delivers micro-content videos typically between 15 seconds and three minutes that is algorithmically selected based on engagement patterns rather than consciously chosen based on interest in China. Pakistani TikTok users may encounter Chinese food preparation videos, Chinese street scene footage, Chinese language learning clips, Chinese humor content, and Chinese lifestyle aesthetics in a flow of content that includes Pakistani regional music, Bollywood clips, motivational speeches, and cat videos, all intermixed in an undifferentiated stream. The cultural encounter is thus incidental and associative rather than deliberate and sustained.

9.2 YouTube: The Drama Platform

YouTube serves a distinct function in the Pakistani Chinese cultural engagement ecosystem, primarily as the platform through which C-dramas are accessed. Despite Pakistan's history of periodic YouTube bans (the platform was blocked from 2012 to 2016), it has remained the primary streaming destination for Pakistani audiences seeking Chinese drama content, partly because dedicated Chinese streaming services like iQIYI and Youku have limited local market presence and partly because YouTube's fan community infrastructure comment sections, community posts, and the ecosystem of subtitle providers and reaction video creators has made it the hub of Pakistani C-drama fandom.

The YouTube C-drama ecosystem in Pakistan is notable for the density of local value addition it has generated. Pakistani fan channels providing Urdu subtitles, Urdu-language reaction and commentary videos, and episode discussion content have emerged as significant presences in the platform's Pakistani content landscape. These channels function as cultural translation infrastructure in the most literal sense, making Chinese drama accessible to viewers who lack English or Chinese language competence, while simultaneously building Pakistani interpretive communities around Chinese content that exercise collective agency over how Chinese cultural material is received and understood locally.

9.3 Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp

Facebook retains substantial relevance among slightly older Pakistani youth those in the 22 to 30 age bracket and hosts significant Pakistani C-drama fan group activity. Groups dedicated to specific dramas or genres may have memberships in the tens of thousands and function as spaces of intensive fan discussion, meme production, fanfiction sharing, and community coordination. Instagram's visual format makes it better suited to aesthetic content C-drama scenery shots, costume appreciation posts, actor fan accounts than to discussion-intensive fan activity, but it plays an important role in sustaining visual cultural appetite for Chinese aesthetics among audiences who may not regularly consume long-form content.

WhatsApp occupies a structurally unique position as the platform through which Chinese cultural content enters domestic and family networks. The viral sharing of C-drama clips, Chinese food videos, or short Mandarin learning videos through WhatsApp family and friend groups extends cultural exposure well beyond the self-identified fan communities that more deliberately seek out Chinese content. This WhatsApp-mediated diffusion is difficult to quantify but appears anecdotally significant: many Pakistani youth who have some familiarity with Chinese content report first encountering it through material shared by friends or family members rather than through their own deliberate search.

9.4 Gaming Platforms and the Male Engagement Mode

Any account of Pakistani youth media platforms in relation to Chinese culture that focuses exclusively on drama and short-video content will systematically underestimate male youth engagement. Mobile gaming platforms particularly the PUBG Mobile and Free Fire ecosystems, both of which have significant Chinese development connections constitute a major channel of Chinese cultural encounter for Pakistani male youth aged 15 to 25. While gaming engagement may not produce the same depth of cultural familiarization as sustained drama viewing, it generates significant engagement with Chinese aesthetic conventions, Chinese social gaming culture, and Chinese brand ecosystems that is culturally consequential in aggregate.

The esports dimension of this gaming engagement is also notable: Pakistani youth who follow Chinese esports teams and players through Twitch, YouTube, and Bilibili the Chinese video platform that has no significant global market presence but attracts dedicated Pakistani gaming enthusiasts develop a form of engagement with contemporary Chinese youth culture, humor, and social dynamics that is qualitatively different from what C-drama consumption produces. The esports community thus constitutes a distinct Pakistani-Chinese cultural interface that research has not yet adequately mapped.

10. Discussion: Synthesis and Implications

10.1 The Active Audience Reconsidered

The six dimensions examined in the preceding sections collectively paint a picture that is more nuanced, more internally differentiated, and more theoretically interesting than either official accounts of Sino-Pakistani friendship or critical narratives of Chinese soft power manipulation tend to suggest. Pakistani youth are not passive recipients of Chinese cultural content who absorb whatever meanings Chinese producers or Chinese diplomats intend. They are active agents who select from available content according to their own tastes and interests, translate what they receive through local cultural frameworks, adapt Chinese material to local purposes, and exercise critical judgment about the elements of Chinese culture they find admirable and those they find troubling or incompatible with their own values.

At the same time, the active audience framework should not be pushed to the point where it obscures the genuine power asymmetries that shape the Pakistani-Chinese cultural encounter. Chinese media content arrives with the resources of a cultural industry backed by the world's second-largest economy; Pakistani fan communities produce their own cultural value through subtitle work, fan art, and community discussion, but they do so within a content environment that they did not create and whose availability reflects decisions made in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen rather than in Lahore or Karachi. The activity of Pakistani youth audiences is real but it operates within structural constraints that the concept of active audienceship should acknowledge rather than dissolve.

10.2 Digital Cultural Translation as a Two-Way Process

One of the more theoretically significant findings of this synthesis is that digital cultural translation between Pakistani and Chinese contexts is not exclusively a one-way process in which Chinese culture enters Pakistani reception. Pakistani cultural presence in Chinese digital spaces while quantitatively more modest is a genuine phenomenon that complicates the unidirectional model. Pakistani creators on TikTok, Pakistani Confucius Institute students who share their learning experiences on Chinese social media platforms, and Pakistani students at Chinese universities who maintain active social media presences across both national digital ecosystems are all participants in a two-way cultural translation process.

This bidirectionality matters for the theoretical framework because it suggests that digital cultural translation between the two countries is producing hybrid cultural forms and practices that belong to neither the Chinese nor the Pakistani tradition in pure form. The Urdu-subtitled C-drama is not a Chinese cultural product; it is a Sino-Pakistani cultural hybrid produced by the labor of Pakistani fans and consuming the aesthetic resources of Chinese producers. The Pakistani Mandarin student who writes Urdu poetry about her favorite drama characters is performing a form of cultural synthesis that has no precedent in either tradition. These hybrid productions are the actual cultural substance of the bilateral encounter, and they deserve scholarly attention on their own terms rather than as mere evidence for claims about the success or failure of Chinese soft power.

10.3 Implications for Bilateral Relations and Policy

The findings of this study carry a number of implications for policymakers and institutional actors on both sides of the bilateral relationship. For Pakistani educational and cultural institutions, the strong appetite for Chinese cultural content among youth represents an opportunity to build language education programs that leverage existing aesthetic motivation rather than relying solely on instrumental economic arguments. Mandarin language programs that incorporate C-drama viewing, fan community engagement, and media literacy components are likely to achieve better retention and higher ultimate attainment than conventional classroom instruction alone.

For Chinese cultural institutions operating in Pakistan including the Confucius Institute network and state media outlets the findings suggest that the most effective cultural engagement strategy is not top-down broadcast of official cultural content but support for the organic fan communities, subtitle producers, and cultural commentators who are already doing the most consequential work of cultural translation on the ground. Investment in Pakistani-led Chinese cultural content production Urdu-language podcasts about Chinese culture, Pakistani-produced

documentary content about China, cross-cultural creative collaborations is likely to yield richer cultural dividends than additional investment in conventional diplomatic cultural programming.

11. Conclusion

Pakistani youth engagement with Chinese culture through digital media is a phenomenon of genuine significance that is simultaneously more widespread, more nuanced, and more agentic than existing scholarship and public discourse has fully recognized. Across the six dimensions examined in this article consumption frequency, cultural attitudes, perceptual influence, language learning motivation, identity shifts, and platform usage the picture that emerges is of a generation actively negotiating a new cultural influence within the constraints of their existing identities, social contexts, and structural positions.

The digital platforms that mediate this engagement TikTok, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook, gaming ecosystems are not neutral conduits but active architectures of cultural encounter that shape what Chinese content reaches Pakistani audiences, how it is contextualized, and what kinds of interpretive communities form around it. Understanding these platforms as infrastructural actors in the cultural encounter, with their own logics and their own effects, is essential for any adequate account of what is happening when Pakistani youth engage with Chinese culture online.

The theoretical concept of digital cultural translation understood as a three-layered process encompassing textual, algorithmic, and receptive dimensions proves its analytical utility in this context precisely because it refuses both the naïve optimism of soft power success narratives and the reductive pessimism of cultural imperialism critiques. What is happening between Pakistani youth and Chinese culture online is not cultural domination, not cultural friendship, and not cultural indifference: it is cultural negotiation, conducted through the idiom of entertainment and platform engagement, producing hybrid forms and ambivalent outcomes that defy simple characterization.

Future research should extend this analysis in several directions. Longitudinal tracking of the same youth cohorts over five to ten years would allow assessment of whether the cultural attitudes and identity shifts identified here consolidate, deepen, or fade as individuals age, enter professional life, and encounter the realities of the Sino-Pakistani relationship beyond the mediated world of digital content. Comparative analysis with other countries in the CPEC corridor particularly Central Asian states with comparable bilateral relationships with China would allow assessment of whether Pakistan represents a unique case or a more generalizable pattern of digital cultural translation under conditions of Chinese economic engagement. And ethnographic research in the rural areas and smaller cities that this study has necessarily bracketed would provide a more complete picture of a phenomenon that is national in its significance even if it is currently most visible in urban cores.

What is already clear, however, is that the cultural dimension of the China-Pakistan relationship is no longer an afterthought to the economic and strategic dimensions that dominate bilateral discourse. On millions of Pakistani smartphone screens, in Confucius Institute classrooms, and in fan community comment sections, a cultural negotiation is underway whose outcomes will shape the texture of the bilateral relationship for generations to come. It deserves the full analytical attention of scholars who take seriously both the power of culture to cross

boundaries and the stubbornness of the local contexts that determine how that crossing actually occurs.

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