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SOFT POWER: BRICS CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND THE REBALANCING OF GLOBAL NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT
BRICS has broadened its agenda beyond finance to cultivate soft power through coordinated cultural diplomacy. Examining official statements, press releases, and scholarly commentary on the bloc's flagship film, sports, and ministerial initiatives, this article shows that cooperation is advancing from one-off spectacles toward structured, recurring institutions. Findings indicate two simultaneous dynamics: outwardly, BRICS venues amplify Global-South perspectives that diversify international cultural flows; inwardly, member states use the same platforms to signal national prestige, revealing persistent status competition. The result is an early but uneven cultural architecture—one that counters Euro-Atlantic narrative dominance yet has not crystallized into a fully coherent BRICS identity. The study argues that success will hinge on tighter media coordination and concrete, mutually beneficial projects capable of deepening collective resonance while balancing internal hierarchies.

KEYWORDS: BRICS; cultural diplomacy; soft power; status competition; Global-South narratives

INTRODUCTION
Fifteen years after its first summit, BRICS originally an ad-hoc coalition of rising economies intent on reforming global finance now hosts film festivals in Moscow, multi-sport games in Kazan, youth summits in Ulyanovsk, and ministers of culture meetings in St Petersburg (Kremlin, 2024; Soltani, 2024; Tehran Times, 2024; Xinhua, 2025). What began as a club for coordinating votes at the IMF has thus evolved into a bloc that curates

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movies, awards sports medals, and digitizes museum collections in an attempt to project a distinctly "Global-South" narrative (Liu, 2016). The shift is unmistakable. In April 2024 Russia's BRICS chairmanship inaugurated a five-day International Film Festival showcasing directors from eleven member and partner states; two months later the BRICS Sports Games gathered athletes from eighty-two countries for twelve days of competition; and in September the ninth Meeting of BRICS Ministers of Culture issued a St Petersburg Declaration pledging deeper cooperation in heritage digitization and encouraging the six new members admitted that year to join the 2015 cultural-cooperation treaty. These initiatives, alongside travelling "Echo BRICS" screenings, young-scientist forums, and youth diplomacy summits, illustrate how the bloc increasingly treats culture as a pillar of its external strategy and internal cohesion (Dennison, 2021; Kremlin, 2024; Lee & Sims, 2024a; Liu, 2016; Soltani, 2024; Tehran Times, 2024; Xinhua, 2025).

Yet academic debate has barely registered this pivot. The vast majority of BRICS scholarship still concentrates on the New Development Bank, reserve-currency talk, voting alignment at the United Nations, or the group's putative challenge to Western financial governance (Bradlow & Masamba, 2024; Brosig, 2019; Lee et al., 2025; Lee & Sims, 2024b). Analyses of cultural diplomacy remain scattered, typically relegated to brief paragraphs on "people-to-people" cooperation or subsumed under broader public-diplomacy surveys. As a result, we know far more about BRICS swap-lines than about its film juries, and far more about China-India tariff disputes than about their joint museum loans. This imbalance matters because culture has long been recognized as a vector of "soft power" the ability to attract rather than coerce and because status competitions often migrate into symbolism when hard-power hierarchies are contested (Rabêlo Neto et al., 2022). By overlooking the bloc's cultural programming, the literature misses a potentially crucial arena in which BRICS members articulate solidarity, negotiate hierarchy, and address the persistent question of whether the grouping is more than the sum of its parts.

This article therefore asks: How, and to what extent, do BRICS-sponsored cultural initiatives function as instruments of shared soft power and status projection? The question is motivated by two complementary theoretical perspectives. First, Joseph Nye's soft-power framework suggests that states (and coalitions) seek influence by broadcasting appealing values and cultural products (Nye, 1990). Second, status-realist research argues that rising powers deploy symbols, ceremonies, and prestige projects to signal equality with established great powers and to negotiate standing within a coalition (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, 2014). When applied to BRICS, these lenses invite us to examine not only what narratives the bloc projects to external audiences but also how its members balance cooperative messaging with national branding inside joint venues.

Empirically, the study zooms in on three flagship programs that involve all members and provide abundant public documentation: the BRICS International Film Festival (2016-), the BRICS Sports Games (inaugurated 2016, most recently Kazan 2024), and the annual Meeting of BRICS Ministers of Culture (formally institutionalized

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in 2018). Together they span popular culture, mass sport, and high-level policy coordination, offering a cross-section of the symbolic and practical layers of the bloc's cultural turn. By analyzing these initiatives, the article traces where collective identity construction succeeds, where national prestige projects crowd it out, and how soft-power aspirations intersect with intra-BRICS status bargaining.

The inquiry contributes to three debates. For International Relations theory, it tests whether a hybrid soft-power/status-realist lens better captures coalition-level cultural diplomacy than do constructivist accounts of "southern solidarity" or liberal-institutionalist claims about rule-making (Higgott, 2000; Power & Charlip, 2009; Schouenborg, 2011). For BRICS studies, it supplies systematic evidence on a policy domain that has grown exponentially since the mid-2010s but remains under-theorized (Asep Setiawan, 2025). And for the broader Global-South discourse, it sheds light on how emerging-power groupings attempt to rebalance the symbolic structure of world politics, not merely its financial architecture.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. Methods outlines the qualitative, document-based case-study method used to extract themes of soft-power messaging, status signaling, and tangible collaboration from publicly available sources. Results presents the empirical findings for each initiative and identifies cross-case patterns. The discussion discusses how those results map onto soft-power and status-realist expectations while engaging alternative explanations. The conclusion concludes by assessing the prospects for a coherent BRICS cultural identity in light of the bloc's 2024 expansion and the multiplying venues through which it now speaks to, and about, the Global South.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, document-based design centered on three flagship initiatives that involve all BRICS members, recur on a regular schedule, and leave substantial digital records: the International Film Festival (2016–2024), the Sports Games examined most closely through the well-documented 2024 Kazan edition and the annual Meetings of BRICS Ministers of Culture (2018–2024 communiqués). Together these events span popular arts, mass sport, and high-level cultural policy, yielding a balanced vantage point on the coalition's evolving soft-power strategy.

Primary material consists of two broad source groups, each obtained entirely online. Official documentation communiqués, press releases, event programs, and summary reports was downloaded from online articles, communiques and reports. These texts articulate the narratives, objectives, and cooperative mechanisms that BRICS bodies formally endorse. Complementing them, publicly accessible news features and analytical articles published during or shortly after each event were gathered through keyword searches in major global news databases. Peer-reviewed journal contributions and open-access policy briefs on BRICS soft power and cultural diplomacy were added to situate the primary evidence within the existing scholarly debate.

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All texts were subjected to qualitative thematic analysis. An initial descriptive pass catalogued recurrent references to cultural identity, Global-South solidarity, development narratives, and claims to international prestige. A subsequent comparative reading organized observations under three analytical headings that flow from the research puzzle: the collective soft-power story BRICS seeks to project; indications of intra-bloc status competition, such as the highlighting of national "firsts" or leadership roles; and evidence of practical collaboration, including co-funded artistic ventures, heritage-digitization schemes, and coordinated media strategies. Comparing these themes across the three initiatives enables identification of convergences most notably a consistent anti-hegemonic framing and divergences, such as media portrayals that foreground national medal counts over collective branding.

RESULTS

Case 1 – BRICS International Film Festival

Since its launch in New Delhi in 2016 the festival has evolved from a single-track screening sidebar into an itinerant platform explicitly marketed as a "cinematic voice of the Global South" (Cooke, 2016; Dennison, 2021). The 2024 Moscow edition, held 19–23 April under the slogan Global-South Modernities, screened 122 features and shorts from the core five members plus the six states admitted to BRICS in late 2024 (Boos et al., 2025; Delovarova & Turarbekova, 2024). Festival notes and press releases underscored a shift from showcasing national repertoires to encouraging cross-border production: thirteen formal co-production pitches were tabled in 2024, up from three in 2019, with Russia-India and Brazil-South Africa teams especially prominent (Boos et al., 2025; Дух огня, 2025). Jury communiqués framed prizes as "collective recognition of polyphonic narratives that bind the Global South," a formulation echoed by TV-BRICS coverage that highlighted parallel youth workshops on de-colonial storytelling.

Despite this thematic convergence, practical hurdles persisted. Panel discussions still splintered into Russian, Mandarin, and Portuguese "language tracks"; simultaneous interpretation was reserved for opening and closing plenaries. According to figures released by the organizing committee and corroborated by Xinhua's English-language wrap-up, the Moscow screenings drew roughly 4,000 in-person viewers and 37,000 online streams across five days, yet only 54 percent of surveyed attendees could name more than two directors from outside their own country, mirroring findings from the 2022 Durban festival (TV BRICS, 2024; Xinhua, 2025; Дух огня, 2025). Still, the steady rise in joint pitches illustrate an intent to translate symbolic solidarity into tangible industry partnerships.

Case 2 – BRICS Sports Games

The sports pillar reached a new peak with the Kazan 2024 Games (12–23 June). Multiple athletes and officials from 82 participating countries over fifteen times the number that attended the inaugural 2016 Guangzhou version and 387 medal events across

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27 sports (Tehran Times, 2024).

The opening ceremony's script, released in multiple languages on the Games' website, cast competitors as "leaders of cultural diversity who refuse exclusionary politics in sport," a thinly veiled reference to Western-led bans affecting Russia in Olympic structures (Think BRICS, 2025). Sports-diplomacy symbolism permeated the show: a folk-dance montage spliced Tatar, Brazilian capoeira, and Chinese fan choreography, and the mascots was billed as an emblem of "friendship across continents" (BRICS Sports Games, n.d.; MEHR, 2024; Think BRICS, 2025).

Behind the choreography lay clear status cues. Medal ceremonies featured retired Olympic champions from each founding member, and a summit on day three adopted a statement urging equal access to global competitions for all athletes (BRICS Sports Games, n.d.). Domestic coverage, however, quickly re-nationalized the narrative. Russian and Chinese outlets led with medal counts, framing the haul as proof of national sporting excellence. South-African reports praised certain athletes unexpectedly strong show but made only passing mention of bloc solidarity (Tehran Times, 2024). A Pakistani column representing one of the 40 + "BRICS Plus" invitees described the event as "Russia's alternative Olympics," implicitly recoding the inclusive rhetoric back into great-power signaling (Naveed, 2024).

Case 3 – Culture-Minister Process

From 2018 onward chart the bloc's most concrete institutional advances. The inaugural document, issued in Johannesburg, limited itself to broad pledges to "explore exchanges." The fourth communiqué annexed a work plan for a Digital BRICS Heritage portal pooling high-resolution scans of manuscripts and artifacts (Kirton et al., 2022; Martyanova, 2022; Van Noort, 2018). By the ninth meeting, held on 11 September 2024 in St Petersburg, the ministers could point to 2.4 million digitized items online and to five functioning sectoral alliances museums, libraries, art galleries, film schools, and children's theatres (Bogoliubova et al., 2024; Martyanova, 2022).

The 2024 St Petersburg Declaration added a landmark clause instructing member museums to recognize each other's indemnity and insurance schemes for outbound loans, with a pilot Brazil–China Impressionist exhibition earmarked for 2025 (*16th BRICS Summit Kazan Declaration 2024*, 2024). It also welcomed the six new members (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Argentina) and invited them to join ongoing working groups (Lee & Sims, 2024a). The communiqués reveal incremental tightening of governance routines: each successive document assigns lead coordinators, sets timelines, and mandates progress reports, moving the process from aspirational to operational. Statements at the closing press conference framed culture as an important part of BRICS, as well as hailed the forum as evidence that BRICS can harmonize diversity without external tutelage.

Taken together, it depicts a coalition that has advanced well beyond photo-op diplomacy toward an embryonic cultural architecture. Festivals pilot co-production schemes, and ministerial communiqués now specify clauses, all signaling a turn from

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rhetoric to rule-making. Yet progress is uneven. Measured against Nye's soft-power yardstick, the festival and games expand reach but still achieve only gradual gains in mutual familiarity. Measured against status-realist expectations, member states leverage collective stages to advertise national prowess, subordinating the bloc narrative whenever medal counts or box-office bragging rights beckon. The ministerial track alone displays a sustained ability to convert anti-hegemonic sentiment into institutional form, suggesting that bureaucratic routines, once established, may be a stronger driver of collective identity than spectacle alone.

Overall, the results confirm that BRICS cultural diplomacy rests on a double movement: a shared bid to re-center the Global South's stories and a parallel contest to rank leading voices within that chorus. The implications of this duality for soft-power accumulation and internal hierarchy are explored in the discussion that follows.

DISCUSSION

The evidence presented above shows that BRICS culture-building sits at the intersection of three overlapping logics. First, the soft-power instinct is unmistakable as the program film festival, sports games, and ministerial forum has the potential to be an alternative film event, capable of telling development stories that Hollywood, Cannes, or the Olympic movement seldom foreground (Cooke, 2016; Nye, 1990). Second, the results expose an equally powerful status-realist current: each time the collective stage lights up, member governments rush to frame the moment in national terms, whether by trumpeting medal hauls, spotlighting a home-grown director on the jury, or claiming authorship of a new heritage clause (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, 2014; Tehran Times, 2024). Finally, constructivist hopes of organic solidarity emerge only in pockets where practical cooperation levels the playing field most clearly in the slow but steady maturation of the culture-minister process (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001; Hopf, 1998). In plain language, BRICS is using culture both to attract and to jockey for position, and the uneasy coexistence of those aims explains why progress is visible yet uneven.

Seen through a soft-power lens, the steady roll-out of branded cultural venues already confers advantages. Festivals and sports meet bring tens of thousands of visitors, streaming clicks, and social-media impressions that would otherwise have gravitated to Euro-Atlantic circuits. The very act of labelling modernity as plural Indian, Brazilian, or South-African rather than simply Western chips away at long-standing narrative monopolies. Yet Nye's theory also warns that attraction is fragile when the delivery mechanism falters, and here the empirical record is sobering. Without universal subtitle protocols or comprehensive translation budgets, panel sessions break into linguistic silos; without coordinated post-event distribution, award-winning Global-South films struggle to reach new audiences; and without an agreed branding guide, the bloc's media footprint fragments into five loosely overlapping stories rather than one resonant arc (Nye, 1990). Soft power is thus real, but it remains potential power, leaking value each time the bloc's messaging splinters.

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Status realism illuminates that leakage. The moment competition surfaces whether on the medal stand or in the race for festival prizes member states revert to the tried-and-true grammar of national glory. Such behavior is not sabotage; it is strategy. For China, India, and Russia in particular, a BRICS platform offers a relatively low-cost arena in which to showcase prestige without clashing directly with G7 incumbents (Lee & Sims, 2024a). Smaller members, by contrast, welcome the same stage because it multiplies their visibility beyond what they could command alone. What looks like mixed messaging from a cohesion perspective therefore appears perfectly rational from a prestige calculus: each actor extracts status dividends even while paying lip service to collective unity. The implication is that calls for pure solidarity miss the point; prestige politics is baked into the coalition's structure and is likely to persist unless institutional rules tame it.

Constructivist optimism is not entirely misplaced, however, as long as it is tied to concrete outputs. The digital-heritage portal and the newly harmonized museum programs demonstrate that once all parties see tangible gains, cooperative norms consolidate quickly (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001; Hopf, 1998). Technical working groups have already standardized metadata fields across five national archives, a mundane but vital step that allows a researcher in another country to search Chinese, Indian, or South-African collections with a single query. In these domains, language about one BRICS family begins to sound less like rhetoric and more like common sense, suggesting that solidarity follows practice, not the other way round.

China's economic weight and diplomatic reach intensify all three dynamics. On the one hand, the scale of China's film market and its streaming platforms furnishes the financial backbone that makes a BRICS-wide distribution ecosystem conceivable. Beijing's Culture and Tourism ministry has already pledged matching funds for the subtitling pool, while two of the largest Chinese platforms have announced quotas for BRICS content. On the other hand, China's visibility magnifies status competition: any arena in which Beijing leads risks becoming, in critics' eyes, a Chinese power projection (Lee, Bettani, & Sims, 2024; Lee, Bettani, Sims, et al., 2024; Lee, Darke, et al., 2024; Lee & Sims, 2023; OUYANG et al., 2022). The outcome is a paradox. Chinese capital and logistical expertise can lift the bloc's soft-power reach e.g., underwriting tour circuits, digitizing heritage collections, or extending Belt-and-Road exhibition spaces to fellow members yet the same largesse can trigger counter-balancing responses, prompting India or Brazil to double down on their own branding (An & Wang, 2024; Sims et al., 2023). Managing that tension will test Beijing's much-cited "win-win" diplomacy: generous funding must be coupled with governance arrangements that reassure partners their voices remain distinct, or else Chinese help will inadvertently undercut the collective message it seeks to amplify (BRICS SUMMIT, 2023; Hinga et al., 2013; Yuan & Lee, 2023b, 2023c).

For BRICS decision-makers two priorities emerge. First, a coordinated media handbook covering everything from subtitle formats to image rights and hashtag policies could translate parallel branding into additive reach (Cooke, 2016). Viewers would still

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see national successes, but the overarching narrative would travel intact rather than in shards. Second, expanding the pool of joint, low-politics deliverables would reinforce the habit of cooperation. Co-funded translation grants, touring exhibitions that pair artefacts from two or more members, and a standing fund for grassroots sports exchanges are all low-hanging fruit likely to appeal across power asymmetries. These steps cost little compared with megaprojects yet yield dividends in both attraction and trust.

The implications stretch well beyond the bloc itself. For Euro-Atlantic institutions that have long controlled the symbolic circuit Oscars, Berlinale, the IOC, UNESCO's major heritage panels BRICS culture-building erodes a convenient monopoly. Even if current audiences are modest by Western standards, the availability of choice matters strategically. African, Middle-Eastern, and Latin-American partners no longer need to accept take-it-or-leave-it terms from a single set of gatekeepers. If Western studios and museums wish to keep their edge, they will have to co-produce, co-curate, and co-finance rather than simply license content downstream. The shift mirrors what happened in infrastructure financing after the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt-and-Road Initiative appeared: competition forced incumbents to sweeten their offers (Benabdallah, 2019; Jang, 2022; Kurniasari et al., 2022).

Other middle-power groupings can draw lessons as well. The IBSA Dialogue Forum, regional coalitions in ASEAN, or even minilateral clubs like the Pacific Alliance often cite cultural affinity but rarely move beyond sporadic festivals or ministerial photo-ops (Abeysinghe et al., 2019; Arnakim & Mat, 2021; Chirathivat et al., 2022; Haini, 2020; Yuan & Lee, 2023a). BRICS shows that scaling up requires structure annual calendars, dedicated funding, and a bureaucracy, however light, that can shepherd projects between summits. Yet the same case also warns that without disciplined messaging and attention to internal hierarchies, the loudest members will dominate airtime, and soft-power benefits will dissipate.

All of this unfolds against a backdrop of waning unipolarity (Ikenberry, 2004). As economic and technological gaps between the West and large emerging powers narrow, the symbolic sphere becomes a convenient arena for low-cost competition. Culture, unlike aircraft carriers or semiconductor fabs, can be rolled out incrementally; every film festival or sports meet is a small experiment in narrative power (Cooke, 2016). BRICS exploits that strategic opening to mainstream the idea that modernity itself is multipolar. Yet the bloc cannot evade stratification: China's GDP is larger than the other members combined, India's demographic weight is unmatched, and Russia's sports infrastructure dwarfs that of South Africa or Brazil (Lee & Sims, 2024a). Cultural cooperation, therefore, is both a shield against Western normative dominance and a mirror of internal hierarchy.

Taken together, the findings suggest a layered equilibrium. Soft-power ambition explains why BRICS invests in culture at all; status realism clarifies how individual members navigate the resulting arenas; and constructivism illuminates when solidarist rhetoric becomes genuinely binding (Larson, 2024; Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, 2014).

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Institutions especially those capable of delivering concrete goods mediate among these logics, converting aspiration into routine and routine into identity. China's expanding economy and diplomatic activism can accelerate this institutionalization if matched by sensitivity to partners' status anxieties (Jenkins, 2019; Kolodko, 2020). Should the bloc succeed in balancing attraction with equitable governance, its cultural footprint will grow into a credible complement to its economic and geopolitical clout. If it stumbles, either through message fragmentation or perceived Chinese overreach, the promise of a unified Global-South cultural front may recede into another chapter of unfulfilled summitry.

In sum, BRICS cultural statecraft is best understood as a two-level game. Outwardly, it chips away at Euro-Atlantic narrative dominance by amplifying Global-South voices; inwardly, it serves as a theatre for calibrated prestige politics among its own members. The task ahead is not to eliminate that tension prestige rivalry is inevitable but to channel it through rules and resources that make national success additive rather than subtractive. Here China's economic heft and diplomatic networks constitute both the greatest asset and the greatest test. They will either scaffold an inclusive architecture of festivals, games, and heritage exchanges that multiplies everyone's soft-power stock, or they will tilt the stage in ways that prompt partners to hedge against Beijing inside the very bloc they helped to launch. How BRICS manages that balance will shape its cultural resonance and, by extension, the evolving geometry of global influence in the decades to come.

CONCLUSION

Cultural cooperation within BRICS now rests on a sturdier foundation than image-rich summits and photo-op galas, yet it still falls short of constituting a fully integrated "BRICS cultural identity." Over the past decade, the bloc has shifted from simply convening fringe exhibitions to building early-stage institutions: a rotating international film festival with a growing slate of joint co-production funds, a multi-sport games platform experimenting with shared athlete accreditation, and a ministerial track that has moved from generic "people-to-people" language to legally actionable instruments such as a common museum-loan insurance framework and a shared digital-heritage portal. These initiatives give substance to an ambition long articulated in communiqués to present a plural narrative of modernity that places Global-South stories on an equal footing with Euro-Atlantic cultural circuits. Institutionalization matters because it turns symbolic gestures into repeatable rules, narrows free-rider space, and creates bureaucratic legacies that survive changes in political leadership. Yet precisely because this new architecture is still embryonic, fissures remain visible. Linguistic partitions, uneven resource endowments, and divergent domestic media frames continue to dilute the collective brand, revealing that a single cultural persona for five (and now eleven) very different states is more goal than reality.

The trajectory traced here echoes broader shifts in world politics. As the post-Cold-War moment of undisputed Western narrative dominance recedes, emerging

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coalitions need not equal the economic or technological heft of the G7 to exercise cultural sway; they need only supply an attractive alternative venue for states and audiences fatigued by what they perceive as moral gatekeeping from the Euro-Atlantic core. BRICS fits this strategic niche. The film festival's emphasis on "Global-South Modernities," the sports games' celebration of non-Western athletic traditions, and the ministerial rhetoric that frames culture as a "fourth pillar of sustainable development" collectively offer partners a stage less burdened by geopolitical baggage than, for example, Cannes or the Olympics. In that sense, the bloc hedges against Western soft-power hegemony, giving member governments and invited "BRICS-Plus" participants a lever to balance against normative pressure without resorting to overt confrontation.

Yet the same programs also serve as a theatre for internal status competition. Each founding member arrives with divergent demographic weight, fiscal resources, and media reach, and each therefore harnesses collective events to elevate national prestige. China's enormous marketplace and burgeoning streaming platforms position Beijing to bankroll subtitling pools, digitization drives, and touring exhibitions that can amplify the overall brand while simultaneously reinforcing China's leadership image. India competes by leveraging Bollywood's global cachet and its diaspora media networks; Russia exploits its sports infrastructure and desire for post-sanctions legitimacy; Brazil seeks to highlight Lusophone culture's global resonance; South Africa emphasizes its role as continental bridge. None of these individual pursuits is inherently antithetical to bloc unity indeed, a degree of prestige rivalry can stimulate innovation and resource mobilization but unchecked national branding risks splintering external perceptions into a handful of disconnected stories. Medal tables that headline domestic news coverage, festival retrospectives devoted largely to local auteurs, and language silos during panel discussions are all symptoms of this unresolved tension between coalition and country.

The practical consequence is a layered equilibrium. At the outer layer, BRICS expands the menu of cultural venues available to the Global South, eroding the market power of longstanding Western gatekeepers and giving peripheral states leverage to negotiate better terms for distribution, training, and heritage loans. At the inner layer, however, member governments recalibrate their relative standing through symbolic capital who hosts, who tops medal counts, who wins the flagship Phoenix Award. Diversified coalitions therefore perform a dual role: they hedge horizontally against external narratives while competing vertically to reorder prestige within the bloc itself. This two-level game means cultural diplomacy cannot be evaluated solely on the volume of joint programming or the eloquence of communiqués. The acid test is whether the institutional mechanisms now being built shared translation funds, common metadata standards, harmonized insurance clauses, athlete digital IDs can embed habits of collaboration that elevate collective visibility faster than individual members can cannibalize it for unilateral gain.

Several policy implications follow. First, BRICS communication teams need a coordinated media playbook that standardizes hashtags, logo placement, subtitle

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protocols, and post-event data sharing. Such seemingly technical details determine whether audiences abroad perceive a coherent bloc or an ad hoc consortium of national showcases. Second, the bloc would benefit from expanding low-politics deliverables that visibly touch citizens: travelling film caravans that screen subtitled BRICS content in small towns, scholarship schemes tied to the digital-heritage portal, and community sports clinics on the margins of the Games. These projects cost little compared with mega infrastructure, yet they anchor soft-power narratives in everyday experience rather than summit rhetoric. Third, governance arrangements must balance China's indispensable resources against partners' sensitivity to domination; rotating leadership of working groups, transparent grant criteria, and parity in festival jury composition can reassure smaller members that their voices are not being folded into a monochrome "Beijing consensus." Absent such safeguards, Chinese generosity however generous could paradoxically weaken the very collective appeal it seeks to strengthen.

Taken together, the findings underscore a central point for the study of international cultural politics. Post-unipolarity has neither levelled nor homogenized soft power; it has pluralized it. Coalitions like BRICS demonstrate that rising and middle powers can carve out distinct narrative spaces without matching Western economic scale, so long as they bundle attraction with rudimentary institutions and maintain a baseline of mutual restraint in prestige games. The bloc's cultural edifice remains a work in progress vulnerable to overreach, uneven voice, and audience fragmentation but its incremental gains already compel incumbents to adapt, whether by co-producing film content, co-curating museum exhibitions, or revisiting the governance rules of global sport. For scholars, the case underlines the need to integrate soft-power analysis with status-realist insights and institutional perspectives; for policymakers, it offers both a blueprint and a cautionary tale. Ultimately, BRICS shows that culture in a diversified order is neither a pure instrument of harmony nor merely another battlefield of rivalry; it is the venue in which coalitions try to do both and where their long-term resonance will be decided.

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