

From Cinema to Algorithms: China's Visual Narratives and India's Strategic Communication in the Indo-Pacific

Aamir Khan¹, Rajesh Kumar^{2*}

¹Department of Political Science, Pandit Prithi Nath PG College, Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, 96/12, Mahatma Gandhi Marg, Kanpur 208001, Uttar Pradesh, India.

Email: kamir755@gmail.com

²Department of Political Science, Pandit Prithi Nath PG College, Chhatrapati Shahu Ji Maharaj University, 96/12, Mahatma Gandhi Marg, Kanpur 208001, Uttar Pradesh, India.

***Corresponding Author:**

Rajesh Kumar

Email: guptakrajesh2001@gmail.com

Abstract

This article reflects on the evolving dynamics between visual culture, digital platforms, and competition in geopolitical narratives in the Indo Pacific. It proposes that rather than remaining in a cinematically oriented mode of concentrated spectacle, China's strategic visuality has transitioned into a media ecology of interconnectedness characterized by blockbuster films, state-media communication, short form video and platform-based recommendation systems that all interact with each other to ensure the visibility of the narrative. Through the two films, *Wolf Warrior II* and *Operation Red Sea*, the article explores the construction of Chinese national power in contemporary Chinese action films, namely as embodied heroism, maritime mobility, technological competence, and as the competent provider of security beyond its borders. It then explores how these components of this visual grammar might be replicated and repurposed in platforms and how there is a difference between content going viral and being demonstrably algorithmically amplified. The article then explores India's strategic visual communication in four aspects: civilizational narratives, Project Mausam, Indo Pacific diplomacy, and maritime humanitarianism and digital platform governance. The article does not view China and India as morally opposed communicative systems, but as competing models of strategic visuality: one a Chinese cinematic-to-platform model, which focuses on modernization, technological competence and protecting state capacity; the other an Indian civilizational-network model, which emphasises historical connectedness, pluralism, partnership, and resident maritime legitimacy. Finally, drawing on the notion of computational mise-en-scène, the article looks at how platform architectures come into play in shaping political meanings especially in relation to the traditional audiovisual decisions.

Keywords: *China; India; Indo-Pacific; strategic narratives; visual politics; cinema; digital diplomacy; platformization; algorithmic culture; strategic communication*

Introduction and Theoretical Framework: The Visual Turn and Algorithmic Geopolitics

1.1 The Visual Turn in International Relations and Screen Studies

International politics is not only created by the material power, formal institutions, and formal diplomatic communication. Images, film, maps, photographs and digital audiovisual artefacts are part of the process of creating political meaning and can help participants understand security, sovereignty, identity and international order. This visual turn in International Relations (IR) thus questions the notion that visual culture is illustrative or secondary to material politics. Bleiker (2018) claims that visual artefacts contribute to the perception and interpretation of the international events and Callahan (2020) shows that visual practices can perform and organize the international politics without merely reflecting the existing political reality. This is especially relevant for the Indo Pacific, where material and competing conceptions of maritime space, connectivity, development, security and regional order converge.

The visual turn is also a productive one which is able to link IR with screen studies. The political relations do not simply have to be made intelligible through film; film is a form that can make political relations intelligible: frame, edit, construct characters, organize space, sound, and spectacle. Film theory thus offers analytical methods to the question of how power becomes visible and how it can be emotionally intelligible. Mulvey's (1975) classic analysis on cinema spectatorship, which was based on the concepts of gaze and gender, highlights the wider analytical value of the study of how formal structures regulate looking. The subject of the present study is how cinematic techniques structure the viewer's perception of national power, military skill, weakness and geographical scope.

1.2 From Cinematic Spectacle to Platformized Visuality

This is not the main idea of this article, that cinema has been supplanted by algorithms. Instead, the viscosity of cinema is situated in a wider media system that brings together theatrical movies, television, state-media output, social-media content, short films, and platform recommendation algorithms. The change is thus from a concentrated visual system to a more diffuse and pervasive visual circulatory system.

Analytical expression of the contrast. The theatrical blockbuster is usually a long, mostly sequential story that is spread through a fairly focused production and distribution model. The platformized feed, on the other hand, structures audiovisual content into smaller, more modular, and more visible segments, which are governed by platform architecture, signals of engagement and moderation, and recommendation systems. Striphas (2015) refers to this more global change as algorithmic culture: algorithms are taking part in the sorting, classification, and hierarchization of cultural products. Gillespie (2018) also demonstrates how platforms are not neutral. They engage in moderation and visibility choices that impact public discussion. The upshot for strategic communication is that the geopolitical story is not just being created by what the actor produces, but is also being lived by the infrastructures with which the audience experiences, resounds with and understands this content.

1.3 Theoretical Triangulation

The article brings together three strands of analysis. Conceptually, visual IR is the first approach to conceptualize images and audiovisual artefacts as integral parts of international politics. (Bleiker, 2018; Callahan, 2020). Secondly, film semiotics and screen studies offer means of analysing the form of film - its mise-en-scène, camera movements, positioning of characters, spectacle and organising of spectatorship. Third, the study of platforms and algorithms focuses on the infrastructures that shape the visibility, searchability, recommendability and repeatability of content rather than the content of the image itself (Gillespie, 2018; Striphas, 2015).

These levels are linked with strategic narrative theory. Miskimmon et al. (2013) view strategic narratives as communicative frameworks and instruments that are used by political actors in order to influence perceptions of international order, identity and action. This article takes such an approach one step further by posing the questions how strategic narratives come to be visual narratives and, in turn, how visual narratives are disseminated in platformized environments. The resulting analytical order is: visual representation → narrative construction → platform circulation → geopolitical meaning.

1.4 The Indo-Pacific as a Contested Visual Space

The Indo Pacific is not only a geographical box but also a political and visual representation among states of the Indo Pacific region to carve out a space, connectivity and order in the region. In recent years, China's strategic communication is beginning to tie together the ocean with development, infrastructure, connectivity, technological capability, and a sense of China as a maritime actor. These are important elements in creating these narratives and a validation of China's presence in the region through visual representation of ships, ports, infrastructure and maritime routes (van Noort, 2020, 2021). India, on its part, has conceptualized Indo-Pacific from its core interest of the Indian Ocean to a broader geography also including the Pacific and along with that, maritime security, connectivity, partnership and a rule based regional order have become integral to India's strategic thinking (Scott, 2019).

The significance of these competing representations lies in the ability of maps, maritime visualizations, infrastructure images, naval visualizations, diplomatic and cultural photographs, and symbols to render geopolitical projects spatially and emotionally comprehensible (Callahan, 2020).

1.5 Research Questions and Argument

The article discusses three questions:

1. What are the ways that contemporary Chinese blockbuster films build visual narratives of national and maritime power?
2. What are the possibilities of replicating and remediating aspects of this cinematic visual grammar for uses in platformized short-form communication, and what are the limits of assertions of algorithmic amplification?
3. How does India develop an alternative strategic 'visuality' by means of civilizational discourse, digital diplomacy, maritime communication and platform governance?

The article proposes that the strategic viscosity of China has evolved from focussed cinematic spectacularism to an integrated interconnected media ecology where cinematic imagery, state communication, and visual circulation via platforms can support each other. India has a set of options, ranging from civilizational memory to maritime partnership, diplomatic pageantry to digital governance. It is thus not just a question of Chinese hard power vis-à-vis Indian soft power but various modalities of how geopolitical order is made visible.

1.6 Research Design and Methodology

A qualitative interpretive research design using visual-semiotic analysis, comparative case analysis and analysis of official policy and communication documents is used. *Wolf Warrior II* (Wu, 2017) and *Operation Red Sea* (Lam, 2018) are chosen as illustrative cinematic cases because they are two closely related but also different forms of contemporary Chinese visuality of action and militaryness, namely, individualized national power and institutionalized military capability. It is not an attempt to do a quantitative content analysis, but rather look at elements which are repeated across the visuals. These involve character-building, spatial composition, nautical representation, military know-how, national signs, as well as stories about rescuing and rescuers and the entwinement of agency and capacity.

The digital mode is handled more cautiously. The article does not attempt to assert the existence of private algorithms for recommending content or demonstrate the algorithmic reinforcement of particular state discourses, but aims to describe conditions for the circulation of short-form visual communication within a platform. This distinction is methodologically relevant: platformization can be seen in the structuring of communication and distribution while the causal impact of a recommendation algorithm on attitudes towards geopolitical issues comes from other empirical evidence.

2. The Epic Screen: Chinese Blockbuster Cinema and Maritime Power Projection

2.1 The Evolution of the Main Melody Blockbuster

The origins of the main melody (zhuxuanlü) tradition can be used to partly explain the contemporary Chinese blockbuster. In the past, main melody productions had close links with patriotic education and a depiction of revolution history (Han, 2020; Yang, 2020). Modern blockbusters still have a lot of patriotic story elements, but they also incorporate commercial elements of the action film, high-quality special effects, worldwide settings, and dazzling displays of military prowess (Gao, 2026; Liang & Gao, 2025). The significance of this shift is that national power can be expressed not only in political messages designed to be explicitly instructive but also in the contexts of entertainment.

The resulting visual grammar connects the movement with a nation's strength, technological skills, discipline and, crucially, the ability to keep its citizens safe beyond Chinese territory. The story thus shifts from the notion of a historically victimized nation to a nation that is an increasingly capable provider of security. Not all blockbusters are necessarily propaganda for the state. Instead, commercial entertainment and national narrative can overlap to create what could be termed a hybrid space of popular nationalism and geopolitical imagination (Han, 2020; Naftali, 2024).

2.2 *Wolf Warrior II: Embodied Sovereignty and the National Body*

Wolf Warrior II (Wu, 2017) is significant step in that transformation. The movie is about Leng Feng, an ex-Chinese special-forces man in an unspecified African war. Its geopolitical relevance is not so much that it represents the Indo Pacific as that it is building an extraterritorial Chinese protective capacity (Gao, 2026). Hu and Guan (2021) call this form of representation the “man-as-nation” as the male protagonist's body reflects Chinese national rejuvenation and strength. The first scene in the movie set underwater is particularly important.

The scenes set underwater convey the Chinese military prowess in an aquatic setting, and connect the hero to the technological and physical capabilities of the nation. The sea is no longer portrayed as an uncontrollable external space but as an environment where Chinese agency is able to act effectively. The climax of the film, in which the protagonist's body is made a symbolic extension of the state by the use of the Chinese flag. The same story is repeated in the sequence of issuing passports, which is related to the state's capacity to provide protection for its citizens overseas. The consequence is a visual story of extraterritorial sovereignty: the state is portrayed as being materially and morally able to reach citizens beyond the national territory.

2.3 *Operation Red Sea: Institutionalized Maritime Capability*

Operation Red Sea (Lam, 2018) places the focus on the military institution rather than the heroic individual. The movie, which is loosely based on the evacuation of Chinese and foreign nationals from Aden, Yemen in 2015, features a Chinese naval special-operations unit in a foreign fighting arena. Thus, the story focuses on the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and its special forces in an international security mission.

The difference with *Wolf Warrior II* is instructive. The first movie's theme is that the great man is the symbol of the nation's power. National power is spread in *Operation Red Sea*, with a professional unit, naval platforms, communications, weapons tech and coordinated command. The visuals focus on the ships, tactical displays, military equipment and coordinated rescue operations create an image of technologically competent and institutionally organized state. The film thus creates a sense of institutional sovereignty whereby China's presence in the world is established as legitimate, as it is acting to safeguard civilians and ensure security.

Notably, these movies are not in any way to be seen as representations of the Indo-Pacific directly. They're mainly located outside that area. Rather than temporal, it is spatial and ideological: they are part of a larger visual stock that allows China to be seen as a state able to function, defend and take responsibility outside of its immediate territorial sphere. The movies, in turn, provide a normalisation of an enlarged idea of the mobility and security provision of the Chinese.

2.4 From Heroic Body to Maritime System

Taken together, the two movies demonstrate a shift from personal to institutionalized images of power. Wolf Warrior II associate's national rejuvenation with the extraordinary physique of the martial hero and Operation Red Sea associate's national strength to organized military capability and technologies. The overarching theme, though, is the same: China is depicted as becoming more and more capable of safeguarding its people and interests in far-flung environments.

It is a repertoire of cinema that can serve as useful reference for understanding subsequent platformized communication. The images are very modular, they are ships, uniforms, rescues, military technology, national flags, and amazing infrastructure. They can be adapted, abridged, edited and broadcasted outside of the context of the original story. Thus, the move to platforms is not the end of cinema, but rather the greater mobility of the visual grammar of cinema.

3. The Algorithmic Feed: Platformization and Ambient Strategic Visuality

3.1 From Epic Narrative to Micro-Visuality

The platformized feed changes the temporal structure of political communication. A feature film requires the audience to spend time inside the movie's world of the story. Short-form platforms, on the other hand, show users a series of audiovisual snippets that are presented in a fluid, dynamically-generated sequence. This results in what might be termed an ambient strategic viscosity: geopolitical meaning can be found again and again in the absence of one apparent geopolitical argument.

The key transformation is hence to move from narrative concentration to that of narrative accumulation. One short video doesn't necessarily deliver a full political message. But multiple scenes of contemporary ports, high-speed trains, naval maneuvers, humanitarian aid, technological advances, or thriving urban existence can add up and create an image of national prowess. This aligns with Striplas's (2015) theory of algorithmic culture, where algorithmic processes increasingly become involved in the sorting and classification of culture.

3.2 Aesthetic Tropes of Platformized State Communication

Blockbuster's visual language diverges from the platform's, with some thematic overlap. Short-form communication can emphasize the scale of technology, infrastructure, landscapes, humanitarian work, military exercises, cultural heritage, or daily success. The political message is thus less reliant on the explicit and more reliant on repetition, familiarity and affective association (Zhao & Zhang, 2024).

This distinction is especially significant when it comes to the analysis of Chinese communication. There are other commercial creators and ordinary users, and China-related content is not necessarily state communication. The analysis has to be done, then, not on the basis of lumping them all under a single name, but on the basis of distinguishing official communication, state linked communication, and broader platform circulation.

3.3 Platform Affordances and Algorithmic Visibility

Platformization adds an extra layer of power since visibility is always determined by technical and institutional configurations. Recommendation systems, moderation policies, interface design, engagement metrics, and ranking systems can significantly influence whether content becomes more visible and other content is less likely to circulate. Gillespie (2018) highlights how platforms have consequential editorial and classificatory power in the form of moderation and governance. Striplas's (2015) also points to the increased importance of computation for cultural selection.

Recent empirical evidence from China also shows that recommendation systems can be used to disproportionately promote content produced by the state. By analyzing 119,064 trending/recommended videos on Bilibili, the researchers were able to identify that there were positive correlation between the recommendation of state created videos with state created trending videos, especially for news and political videos (Lu et al., 2026).

The term "algorithmic" is used, therefore, in a qualified manner in the present study. It is not saying that the Chinese government has the ability to control the recommendation algorithms of all the platforms that Chinese subject-matter is featured on. Nor does it take for granted that exposure leads to persuasion. It is rather that the algorithmic communication is communicated as a communication environment that has a growing level of

visibility that is mediated by computational systems. This distinction avoids the danger of mixing the presence of algorithms and evidence of successful geopolitical influence.

3.4 Empirical Evidence from Chinese Short-Form Video

There is empirical research on Chinese short-form video that helps to explain that how the visuality of the film has shifted to a platformized one, rather than relying on the platform theory alone. Zhao and Zhang (2024) analyzed a total of 2,852 highly engaged Douyin videos published in the four months between March 2018 and July 2023 from four major Chinese news outlets: People's Daily, CCTV News, The Paper, and Sichuan Observation. The study utilized visual and textual coding, and reported high inter-coder reliability, equal to Scott's π .881 for a randomly selected reliability sample.

The findings provide direct empirical support for the paper's claim that the short-form visual communication is an essential part of the modern Chinese political communication. Military, police and firefighting content were especially tied to the central-level accounts, while international diplomacy another important thematic category. The study also notes some contrasts between central and the local accounts that is the accounts of the central place are likely to focus on the more politically salient institutional actors, while the accounts of the local are more likely to focus on more everyday life and less explicitly political figures (Zhao & Zhang, 2024).

In two respects, these findings qualify the cinema-to-platform argument. First, they show that the visual political communication is not just a shift from one medium to another, but that the political system has evolved a differentiated short-video ecology, where central and local actors employ different visual registers. Second, they suggest that four visual motifs that have been detected in the cinematic cases, military personnel, institutional efficacy, national security, and technological expertise also have plausible parallels in China's short-form political communications. The evidence thus points towards continuity of visual repertoire without the need for the bolder and empirically unproven claim that cinematic images are directly reproduced by recommendation algorithms.

3.5 From Visibility to Reception: Evidence from Chinese Public Diplomacy

The article further needs evidence of audience reception, which must be differentiated from visibility. Mattingly and Sundquist (2023) ran a randomized study of 4,677 Indians who were exposed to authentic social-media messages from Chinese diplomats. Their findings reveal that while negative messages highlighting issues of sovereignty and security drew stronger negative reactions compared to perceptions of China during the pre-territorial conflict era, positive messages focused on aid and friendship had modest positive effects even in the immediate aftermath of the 2020 India-China border clash. On the other hand, messages denouncing the US and tougher criticism failed to achieve any effect, and during the crisis period, could elicit a counter-attack.

The significance of this is that strategic visibility does not necessarily result in persuasion. Even if a message is popular and pervasive, it may not enhance the reputation of the sender. An empirical distinction with four stages is thus indicated: production of a narrative; circulation of a narrative; visibility of a narrative; reception of a narrative. Influence is not an automatic by-product of visual or algorithmic communication but, rather, a later result. The content analysis of Douyin was combined with the Indian public-diplomacy experiment to offer complementary evidence. Zhao and Zhang (2024) show the size and thematic structure of Chinese short-form political visuality, whereas Mattingly and Sundquist (2023) show that the impact of Chinese digital diplomacy on foreign audiences is tailored to the type of message and political context. The results provide a cautious interpretation of the concept of algorithmic geopolitics: platforms are broadening the scope of visibility and circulation, but audience control is not a given, and exposure does not necessarily lead to control.

It is best to understand the relationship between cinema and platforms in terms of portability. The filmic images can be transferred to short form visual segments: the naval vessels, the flag, the act of saving, the technologically advanced city, the disciplined soldier, or the infrastructure project can each operate as a communicative fragment. When separated from the feature-length film, the images can be packaged with new music and captions, subtitles, hashtags, and platform-specific editing.

The outcome may not be a direct state-to-audience transmission. Instead, it is a more intricate ecology where official communication, commercial media, user generated content and platform architecture are in play. That is why the shift from film to algorithms should be thought of as a transformative shift in the conditions of narrative circulation, not a mere technological replacement.

4. Strategic Visuality: India's Digital and Civilizational Counter-Framing

4.1 A Different Visual Repertoire

The strategic visual communication of India is not like that of the Chinese blockbuster. Its repertoire is institutionally more fragmented and more reliant on civilizational imagery, diplomacy showmanship, maritime alliance, democratic identity and cultural ties. That doesn't mean that Indian communication doesn't have

militarized or technologically advanced imagery. Instead, its strategic visibility often attempts to legitimise itself by projecting India as an active, plural and cooperative player in the Indian Ocean and the larger Indo Pacific region.

This distinction cannot be simplified into a moral conflict between an allegedly coercive Chinese visibility and an intrinsically 'good' Indian visibility. Selective representations are used in both states to promote desired narratives of regional order. The analytical gap is the symbols and space images that are used in the construction of legitimacy.

4.2 Project Mausam and Civilizational Cartography

Project Mausam offers a helpful illustration of India's alternative maritime imaginary. According to the Ministry of Culture, the project is an attempt to explore the Indian Ocean through its historical cultural, commercial and religious connections with the countries of East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (Government of India, Ministry of Culture, 2016). In this sense, the project builds maritime space, not just contemporary infrastructure, but by routes, cultural space, shared histories, and even monsoon systems.

Project Mausam is not, however, officially declared as a counter to China's Maritime Silk Road. The Ministry of Culture (2016) has clearly indicated that the project is not a response to China's Silk Route strategy. It is, however, analytically important because of the different spatial vocabulary it offers the Indian Ocean, one that is based on historical connections and shared cultural landscapes. Hence, it would be best considered an analytical comparison rather than a policy equivalence between the Maritime Silk Road and Project Mausam.

4.3 Digital Diplomacy, Summitry, and Maritime Humanitarianism

Today, India's strategic communication is largely transacted via digital diplomacy. Digitalization is not just about adding social media accounts on top of the traditional diplomatic lines of communication, but, as Manor (2019) puts it, it is about the speed, reach, institutional practices, and audiences of diplomacy. Diplomatic photos, short videos, leader-to-leader imagery, cultural engagement, naval exercises and humanitarian aid can all serve as visual elements in foreign-policy communication for India.

The grammar of maritime security is of special importance. Humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, anti-piracy, evacuation missions and naval cooperation can be showcased as examples of Indian capabilities to be a security partner (Upadhyaya, 2022). The narrative is not the same one as the cinematic rescue hero, legitimacy is created through partnership, service, institutional cooperation and not through the action hero alone.

4.4 Platform Governance and Information Sovereignty

The strategic response to digital influence in India also takes place at the platform level. On 29th June 2020, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology blocked 59 mobile apps such as TikTok and WeChat, for threats to the sovereignty and integrity of India, defence, security of the state and public order (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2020). Data-security and privacy concerns were also cited as the official justification.

What's important for the purposes of this article is that the episode does not prove that India was specifically targeting TikTok because of narratives that it was spreading from China; this was not stated in the notification. Instead, what the episode as a whole shows is how digital platforms can be the targets of geopolitical governance. There is a natural association of the platform infrastructure with sovereignty, data security and national security. The Indian digital approach is thus not just about communicating outwards, but also regulating the infrastructures that enable communication.

4.5 The Limits of India's Counter-Visibility

The visual landscape in India is nonetheless constrained structurally. It has a communication system that spans from government ministries to diplomatic offices, military units to cultural institutions, political figures to commercial communication platforms. This diversity can enrich, but it can also make it more challenging to express an overarching strategic narrative. It's not just about a lack of content, then. It is the relationship between narrative coherence, institutional coordination, technological capacity, audience segmentation and credibility.

4.6 Empirical Grounding of India's Counter-Visibility

There is also a visual repertoire that is alternative to India, that is not a result of general descriptions of Indian diplomacy, but based in primary policy material. The Project Mausam is thought of by the Ministry of Culture as an attempt to document the diversity of cultural, commercial and religious interactions across the Indian Ocean, East Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, the Indian subcontinent, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (Ministry of Culture, Government of India, 2016). Importantly, the government categorically made it clear that Project Mausam was

not meant to be opposing the Silk Route strategy of China. Thus, in this article the project is considered as a kind of alternative spatial imaginary instead of being labeled as an anti-China instrument.

This separation is an important element to reinforce the comparative argument. The state capacity that appears in the Chinese cinematic and digital repertoire mentioned above is manifested in the form of mobility, infrastructure, technology, and protection. Project Mausam weaves maritime space using historical routes, monsoons, culture exchange, and common heritage. The point is not that it is a Chinese versus an Indian strategy, but rather that it is different strategies of intelligibility of Indian Ocean as a political/cultural space.

The second empirical dimension is India's platform-governance response. On 29th June 2020, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology made an announcement to block 59 mobile applications, including TikTok and WeChat on the grounds of threats to sovereignty and integrity, defence, security of the state, and public order and data security and privacy issues (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2020). The notification does not make that argument: that this policy was conceived specifically to counter narratives coming from China. It does however, offer direct evidence of foreign digital platforms being governed as objects of national-security and sovereignty.

The Indian evidence should therefore be analysed in two related, but distinct, ways: firstly, in terms of narrative construction and, secondly, in terms of platform governance. The first is related to the civilizational, diplomatic, and maritime representation of India and Indo-Pacific, and the second is related to the regulation of the infrastructures that allow the circulation of foreign digital communication. Together they illustrate that strategic visibility and digital sovereignty are growing intertwined facets of geopolitical communication today.

5. Synthesis, Comparative Analysis, and Conclusion

5.1 Comparative Strategic Visibility

Dimension	Chinese cinematic-to-platform model	Indian civilizational-network model
Primary visual repertoire	Blockbuster cinema, state media, short-form visual communication	Cultural heritage, diplomacy, maritime communication, digital diplomacy
Dominant spatial imaginary	Modernization, infrastructure, mobility, protective state capacity	Historical connectivity, maritime partnership, plural regionalism
Representative visual subject	Hero, soldier, naval unit, technological system	Leader, partner, cultural landscape, humanitarian actor
Strategic narrative	National rejuvenation and capable international protection	Resident partnership, connectivity, pluralism, and shared maritime space
Platform logic	Interaction among official communication, commercial media, creators, and platform systems	Distributed diplomatic communication plus platform governance
Primary challenge	Converting visibility into durable legitimacy	Converting dispersed communication into coherent strategic narrative

The comparison does not imply that the number of images created by each state is the only difference. It has to do with the arranging of narrative force. Chinese film tradition offers a national performance that can be modularized for later dissemination. Indian communication depends more on a network of cultural, diplomatic, maritime and political images that are dispersed. The Chinese model thus has the stronger continuity between the entertainment spectacle and the state-capacity narratives while the Indian model has the diversity of its cultural and diplomatic resources.

5.2 Theoretical Implications: From *Mise-en-Scène* to *Computational Mise-en-Scène*

The comparison allows for the more general theoretical claim. In conventional film analysis, *mise-en-scène* is considered as the arrangement of the visual elements within the frame in terms of setting, lighting, costume, movement, composition and other formal aspects. For platformized communication, however, there's an extra layer. The ways in which an audiovisual artefact comes before an audience are influenced by recommendation systems, regimes of moderation, interface structures, metrics of engagement, and conventions of the platform (Gillespie, 2018; Striphas, 2015; Lu et al., 2026).

This article thus presents the notion of computational *mise-en-scène*. With computational *mise-en-scène*, I mean the state in which the political visibility and circulation of audiovisual material is co-produced by conventional cinematic choices and computational/platform infrastructures. The idea is not that the algorithms produce

mechanical meaning. Instead, it emphasizes a second-order layer of mediation, which is the image produced or framed by the filmmaker or communicator, but which may or may not be seen as a result of a system of ranking, recommending, moderating, and user interaction.

This proposition goes in two directions in visual IR. It's not just about the artefact as a visual object, but about the infrastructure through which the artefact circulates. Second, it moves from visual geopolitics to platform studies, and considers digital feeds as political space and not as neutral channels. In this way, geopolitical competition plays out in both a physical and a mediated visibility.

5.3 From Narrative Production to Narrative Visibility

The analysis further implies that strategic communication in the present day must differentiate the production of a narration and the visibility of the narration. A state could have a cohesive story but lack the institutional, technological or platform capacity to make that story consistently visible. But highly visible content is not necessarily persuasive or legitimate. Strategic communication thus requires a relationship between narrative coherence, aesthetic impetus, credibility, dissemination, audience decoding, and repetition.

The question for China is how to turn a series of images and technologies of production into lasting international legitimacy. The problem for India is the reverse, that is, how to translate vast cultural, diplomatic and civilisational assets into a more cohesive and technologically agile strategic narrative. Neither model should be assumed to guarantee influence.

5.4 Conclusion

The shift from cinema to algorithms is not so much a replacement of one medium for the other as the arrival of a new media ecology in which visualities of the cinema, digital and computational media, are all in play. The Chinese blockbuster movie is an especially telling point of departure as it transforms the nation's power into the individually heroic, institutionally military, technologically capable, and extraterritorially protected.

Such cinematic stories are not made algorithmic influence. Portability of the visual grammar is what matters in their significance. Images of the heroic soldier, naval vessel, rescue operation, technological system, flag, or infrastructure can spread through various media contexts as well as take on new meanings in the platformed communication. The algorithmic dimension is thus not about an assumed technological control, but about the varying conditions of visibility and circulation.

India provides an alternate strategic visual tool kit. Project Mausam, building the Indian Ocean through historical linkages and shared cultural space, and digital diplomacy and maritime communication showcase India as a resident power that can help the region with its security and cooperation. Questions of narrative space also increasingly overlap with questions of digital sovereignty, as seen in the governance of foreign digital platforms.

The larger point is that the new geopolitical leverage in the Indo-Pacific region now relies on the capacity to create, repeat, and render stories politically palatable and emotionally engaging across many media channels and platforms. Thus, naval power, infrastructure, diplomacy and communication are all conducted in parallel visual and material registers. The state to win in the new information landscape may not be the state to make the most images, but the state to create a narrative coherence with credible political practice and adaptive modes of circulation.

References

1. Bleiker, R. (Ed.). (2018). *Visual global politics*. Routledge.
2. Callahan, W. A. (2020). *Sensible politics: Visualizing international relations*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190071738.001.000>
3. Gao, M. (2026). National identity and global imaginary in China's 'citizen evacuation' films: from *Wolf Warrior 2* (2017) to *Home Coming* (2022). *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2026.2683783>
4. Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media*. Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300235029>
5. Government of India, Ministry of Culture. (2016, April 25). Project Mausam of M/O Culture. Press Information Bureau.
6. Han, X. (2020). Production of main melody film in post-socialist China: A deconstruction of *Wolf Warrior 2*. *The Political Economy of Local Cinema: A Critical Introduction*, Bern: Peter Lang Publishing, 139–62.
7. Hu, T., & Guan, T. (2021). "Man-as-nation": Representations of masculinity and nationalism in Wu Jing's *Wolf Warrior II*. *SAGE Open*, 11(3), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440211033557>

8. Lam, D. (Director). (2018). Operation Red Sea [Film]. Bona Film Group; Emperor Motion Pictures; Film Fireworks Production; Star Dream Studio Media.
9. Liang, J., & Gao, M. (2025). Main melody films as national cinema: Re-envisioning national identity through the 'National Day Celebration' trilogy (2019–2021). *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508061.2025.2576321>
10. Manor, I. (2019). The digitalization of public diplomacy. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-04405-3>
11. Mattingly, D. C., & Sundquist, J. (2023). When does public diplomacy work? Evidence from China's "Wolf Warrior" diplomats. *Political Science Research and Methods*, 11(4), 921–929. <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2022.41>
12. Ministry of Culture, Government of India. (2016, March 9). Project 'Mausam' of M/O Culture aims to explore multi-faceted Indian Ocean 'world'. Press Information Bureau. <https://www.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?lang=2®=48&relid=137516>
13. Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology. (2020, June 29). Government bans 59 mobile apps which are prejudicial to sovereignty and integrity of India, defence of India, security of state and public order. Press Information Bureau. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1635206&lang=2®=48>
14. Miskimmon, A., O'Loughlin, B., & Roselle, L. (2013). Strategic narratives: Communication power and the new world order. Routledge.
15. Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16(3), 6–18. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/16.3.6>
16. Naftali, O. (2024). 'Military Entertainment, Gender and the Nation', *Mobilising China's One-Child Generation: Education, Nationalism and Youth Militarisation in the PRC* (Edinburgh, 2024; online edn, Edinburgh Scholarship Online, 22 May 2025), <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781399519410.003.0005>.
17. Scott, D. (2019). India and the Indo-Pacific Discourse. In H. V. Pant (Ed.), *New Directions in India's Foreign Policy: Theory and Praxis* (pp. 195–214). chapter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
18. Striphas, T. (2015). Algorithmic culture. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18(4–5), 395–412. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549415577392>
19. Upadhyaya, S. (2022). Naval humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HA/DR) operations in the Indo-Pacific region: need for fresh thinking. *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 18(3), 282–294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19480881.2023.2198887>
20. van Noort, C. (2020). Strategic narratives, visuality and infrastructure in the digital age: the case of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 33(5), 734–751. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2020.1741513>
21. van Noort, C. (2021). The Aesthetic Power of Ships in International Political Communication: Why Ships Matter in China's Communication of the Maritime Silk Road Initiative. *Global Society*, 36(4), 516–537. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2021.1942801>
22. Wu, J. (Director). (2017). Wolf Warrior II [Film]. Beijing Dengfeng International Culture Communication Company.
23. Yang, A. (2020). Main melody recomposed: Deconstructing the Wolf Warrior phenomenon. *Center for the Humanities*. <https://humanities.washu.edu/news/main-melody-recomposed-deconstructing-wolf-warrior-phenomenon>
24. Yingdan Lu, Xinyi Liu, Carl Zhou, Recommending the state: How social media algorithms curate state-created content in China, *Journal of Communication*, 2026;, jqag010, <https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqag010>
25. Zhao, J., Zhang, D. (2024) Visual propaganda in chinese central and local news agencies: a douyin case study. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 11, 588. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03059-5>