Preface and Acknowledgements

The present volume is one of a number of outputs of the international research network Soft Power, Cinema and the BRICS (2015–18), funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The network built on the connections established, and the research findings of a World Universities Network-supported project entitled Film Policy, Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power, which ran from 2012 to 2014 and which brought together scholars working on cultural policy issues relating to soft power (the power of nations to attract in contradistinction to coercing) in a number of countries, including the UK, China, South Africa and Brazil, with a focus on how policymakers seek to achieve soft power objectives, and how they negotiate artistic, economic and political networks. A key output of this initial project was a seminar entitled Film Policy, Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power, held in Leeds in 2013. The kinds of policymakers we engaged with at the seminar were linked to tourism, film institutes and government-linked thinktanks.

From our discussions at that seminar it became clear that nations such as Brazil and South Africa had a very different ‘story’ to tell, compared to countries such as the UK and China, and those tasked with communicating the stories were also very distinct. Thus, in our follow-on AHRC research network project, our focus shifted to the relationship between both state and non-state actors in the cultural industries of the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and national soft power strategies, with a particular focus on the nature and function of the film industry. We looked comparatively at the engagement by filmmakers, producers, Ministries of Culture and so on, with the soft power and nation-branding agendas of their country, in order to ascertain whether this engagement is explicit or implicit, what forms it takes, and with what results. We wanted, then, to investigate the competing pressures across the BRICS that shape the ways its members understand film as a vehicle of soft power, and exploring the role that soft power plays
along the industry’s entire value chain, from production to consumption, as well as the way it influences the types of films that audiences around the world get to see.

Individual members of the BRICS group, most obviously China and Russia, had already been discussed in some detail in relation to their (widely criticised) attempts to wield soft power in order to increase their profile on a global stage. However, the diverse and often competing ways that the group as a whole engages with film as a medium of artistic expression, on the one hand, and as a soft power ‘resource’, on the other, along with the wider implications for world cinemas of its members’ very different, and dynamic, positions within the global media landscape, remained to be investigated comparatively. Thus we felt the time was right to explore in greater detail the employment of soft power strategies by emerging nations, in order to nuance discussions on what successful soft power ‘looks like’ in different parts of the globe, and by providing analysis from the perspective of film culture.

Our ambition was and remains to steer World Cinema research in a new direction, taking as a starting point an analysis of both on- and off-screen stories. And it is both on-screen and off-screen stories that are captured in the essays in this edited volume. Many of the ideas developed in the individual chapters were first presented at an academic conference in 2017 in Leeds entitled Cinema, Soft Power and Geo-Political Change, which, while continuing to focus on BRICS nations, took discussions to other filmmaking contexts, such as the UK. We are grateful to all the network members and conference and event attendees across the life of the research network for their input and contribution, either directly or indirectly, to this volume.

An earlier version of Chapter 1 was delivered as a keynote speech at the conference on ‘Cinema, Soft Power and Geo-political Change’ at the University of Leeds in June 2017; the version here was presented, in brief, at the conference on ‘Transmedia Storytelling: Digital Creativity in TV, Film, Internet and Multi-Media’ at Seoul National University in June 2019 and at the conference on ‘Affect and Critique: Language, Body and Politics in Modern Literature and Culture’ at Taiwan’s Academia Sinica in December 2019. Song Hwee Lim would like to thank Stephanie Dennison for inviting him to the Leeds conference and to act as a steering committee member on the AHRC international network ‘Soft Power, Cinema and the BRICS’, and JaeHo Kang and Yu-lin Lee for their respective invitations to Seoul and Taipei. Thanks also to his colleagues Chung Peichi and Tan Jia for their helpful feedback on the chapter; his research associate Roberto Castillo for collating and digesting scholarship on China’s soft power;
research assistants Chen Zhengheng for summarising materials on affect theory, Lu Xin for compiling information on China’s film industry and cultural policies and Zhang Zongyi for sharing his knowledge on Chinese leaders’ use of cinema as a diplomatic tool. The work described in this chapter was substantially supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, China (Project No.: CUHK 14606815).

Rachel Dwyer would like to record her thanks to the AHRC for funding this project; Dr Shashi Tharoor (Lok Sabha) and Dr Swapan Dasgupta (Rajya Sabha), the latter serving on the committee for Report (2016a) which the former chaired, for granting interviews about India’s soft power today (see Chapter 9 for references).

Stephanie Dennison and Chris Homewood would like to thank the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies of the University of Leeds for supporting research trips in relation to this book to South Africa, Brazil and China.

The following people have supported this project in a variety of ways and we extend our gratitude to them: Lorraine Blakemore, Michael Dwyer, Alessandra Scangarelli, Daya Thussu, Dunja Fehimovic, Ashvin Devasundaram, Cesar Jimenez Martinez, Xiaoning Lu, Yanling Yang, Juily Mangharmalani, Russell Hlongwane and Rafael Luna. Thanks also to Richard Strachan and staff at Edinburgh University Press for their assistance in bringing this volume to fruition.