



**India-China Cultural Interface in Contemporary  
China: Reinventing the Old, Identifying the New**

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Prof. Mitra is an Honorary Fellow in the Institute of Chinese Studies, and a member of the Editorial Board of *China Report*. She was the Chairperson of the Indian Expert Group that compiled the *Encyclopaedia of India-China Cultural Contacts* on behalf of the Ministry of External Affairs, GOI, in collaboration with the Chinese scholars. She is also a Member of the Joint Study Group of the BCIM Economic Corridor instituted by the Ministry.

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# India-China Cultural Interface in Contemporary China: Reinventing the Old, Identifying the New

## *Abstract*

*Existing documentation and scholarship show that in each phase in history the nature of the India-China civilizational interaction was unique and different from interactions during the other phases. This paper is an effort to explore the trajectory of India-China cultural relations in the second half of the twentieth century with a special focus on the India-China cultural interface emerging in China since she embarked upon the path of Economic Reform and Open-door Policy; while doing so, an effort has been made to identify the unique features of this relation in the modern, globalized, connected world of the present.*

**Keywords:** *Civilizational interaction, Cultural engagement, People, Cultural interface*

From the pre-historical perspective, human civilization in China, South Asia, and Southeast Asia began and developed around the rivers that flowed from the heights of Himalayas. The interconnectivity and intercourse that grew over millions of years in this vast region was of a sustained civilizational interactions and philosophical vibrations. Going by definition, civilizational interaction has two important components, cultural exchange and trade ties. These two components, with people-to-people exchange at the core, have frequently influenced each other, often becoming a shared experience. In fact the paleographic writing of the character 化 (hua) used in the Chinese word for culture 文化 (wenhua, shows two human figures facing each other in an inverse fashion, one standing on its feet and the other on its head. This vividly suggests a process of acculturation that can be summed up in three simple notions: 1) civilizations do not exist in isolation but they interact, 2) culture synthesizes diverse elements, through a process of conversion in which one side is active and the other is reactive, 3) culture and civilization manifest this entire process of give and take, acting and reacting, through mutual vibrations.

Existing documentation and scholarship show that in each phase in history the nature of the India-China civilizational interaction was unique and different from interactions during the other phases. For instance, if Buddhism was the driving force of the interaction in the ancient period, in the medieval period it became pluralistic with trade playing an important role; then again, from the turn of the twentieth century and even beyond the middle of the century, the anti-colonial anti-imperial sentiments and solidarity was central to this interaction. This paper is an effort to explore the trajectory of India-China cultural relations in the second half of the twentieth century with a special focus on the India-China cultural interface emerging in China since she embarked upon the path of Economic Reform

and Open-door Policy; while doing so, it would be interesting to identify the unique features of this relation in the modern, globalized, connected world that is throwing up multiple cultural formations.

### **Historical Connections and Connected Histories: *Shaping a Discourse***

In the ancient period, the interaction through Buddhism formed the foundation of the civilizational dialogue, and was reflected in the domains of philosophy, science, literature, art, social practice and so on. While there were Buddhist monks from China, Fa Xian, Xuan Zang, Yi Jing etc., who had undertaken pilgrimage steeped in spirituality and knowledge, on the Indian side there were Dharmaratna, Kashyapamatanga, Kumarajiva, Buddhahadra and many others who took the message of Buddha to China and spent their life disseminating his teachings. Through centuries, many cultural, social and linguistic practices from one side found echo on the other side. The examples and their range are truly astonishing; there were philosophical concepts and terms that were introduced through Buddhism, there were astronomical and medical discoveries that were transported and incorporated into the knowledge system, and then there was transfer of technological innovations and artifacts through trade, such as the fishing net, porcelains etc. In other words, these cases of encounters and linkages reinforce the notion of "connected histories" that have facilitated the mutual enrichment and growth of two cultures and societies of India and China through movement of people/ ideas/ objects, through different kinds of interaction at different sites, and, through processes of incorporation (acculturation/ adaptation/reaction). This then is the legacy of civilizational dialogue that India and China have shared through millennia.

Tagore had deeply appreciated this process and nature of mutual enrichment; to quote:

‘The most memorable fact of human history is that of a path-opening, not for the clearing of a passage for machines and machine guns, but for helping the realization by races of their affinity of minds, their mutual obligation of a common humanity. Such a rare event did happen and the path was built between our people and the Chinese in an age when physical obstruction needed heroic personality to overcome it and the mental barrier a moral power of uncommon magnitude. The two leading races of that age met, not as rivals on the battle field each claiming the right to be the sole tyrant on earth but as noble friends, glorifying in their exchange of gifts’ (Tagore 1937).

Yet, due to complex reasons of historical vicissitude, the link between these two great civilizations had been forgotten for some centuries, the footsteps of cultural pilgrims had gathered dust of time, until interest and curiosity in each other were gradually revived during the late colonial/semi-colonial period. As China was looking for a path of rejuvenation at the turn of the twentieth century, its young intellectuals, many of them trained abroad, turned their gaze outward, discovering

and learning from the social, political, economic and cultural churnings around the world. One such discovery was Rabindranath Tagore. His works and his international recognition through the award of Nobel Prize in 1913, caught the imagination of the Chinese intellectuals.

At the invitation of the Beijing Lecture Association (北京讲学社), Tagore visited China in 1924 to deliver lectures to Chinese students and intellectuals. Notwithstanding the excitement and ‘controversy’ generated by his visit in 1924, which in itself has been written about extensively by many scholars, it was no accident that the Chinese young intellectuals had decided to invite Tagore. After all there could be no other better representative in the East, who engaged with the West and yet was sure that West did not provide all the answers for human development of the world. Moreover, from his own experiences in a colonial India with its social and cultural debates, Tagore appreciated and empathized with the situation of China and the Chinese people. That Tagore’s visit to China in 1924 acted as an impetus of great significance is evident from the scholarly interest it has evoked; but what is relevant in today’s complex world that is obsessed with the geo-politics of bilateral relations is that its cultural impact has been acknowledged as such by the official discourse on India-China relations in the last few years. To quote:

‘The import of Tagore’s influence for the revival of India-China relations should not be underestimated, because it had waned after the Song dynasty and especially following the advent of the Europeans. Tagore was the first thinker of modern India to be invited by the thinking elite of China, along with the likes of John Dewey and Bertrand Russel, as the Chinese grappled with the question of China’s place in a modern world. In India, which was also facing pulls and pressures of different kinds, Tagore sought to revive the spirit of unity with China and enhance understanding of China. Even if Tagore’s outreach to China did not evoke the intended response during or immediately following his visit, his approach looks prophetic with the passage of time. Tagore said in his final lecture in China, ‘I have done what was possible - I have made friends.’ This was in many ways symbolic of the renewal of friendship between India and China and the awakening of their potential’ (Rao 2011: xvi).

Tagore had been pondering about many philosophical questions relating to human existence and human civilization from an early age. When Japan invaded China in 1937, Tagore’s concern for civilizational interaction assumed a different dimension; in the foreground of Japanese aggression on China, Tagore engaged in a deep philosophical debate with the Japanese poet Noguchi on issues facing human civilization and its universal values, and in doing so he stood firm on the side of the Chinese people. It can be argued that his solidarity with the Chinese people and in the way it was articulated was an intensely political act; in other words, it was an acknowledgement that the world is changing and that the civilizational dialogue must continue with a different end as promises must be kept in a changing world of nation-states. In 1937, Rabindranath Tagore set up *Cheena Bhavana*, a school of Chinese Language, Culture and India-China Cultural Studies which became a landmark event in the modern history of India-China relations; entrusted with the

task of providing intellectual leadership, Tagore's *Viswakarma* Tan Yun-shan<sup>1</sup> developed *Cheena-Bhavana* as the perfect repository of their shared dream.

In this connection it must also be mentioned that at the request of Zhu De, then Commander-in-Chief of Eighth Route Army, the Indian National Congress sent a Medical Mission to China on September 1, 1938; it was a team composed of five well trained Indian doctors led by Dr. Madan Mohanlal Atal who carried with them the goodwill of the Indian people and a substantial supply of medicines. They not only saved many Chinese lives and helped train the Chinese medical staff, one of the doctors, Dr. Dwarkanath Kotnis (柯棣华), lived in China and served the Chinese people till his last breath in 1942. Till today the selfless sacrifice of Kotnis remains exemplary in the history of Asian resistance against imperialist fascist forces, and he continues to occupy an iconic status in the hearts of Indian and Chinese people. The period between the end of World War II in 1945, and the establishment of diplomatic relations between Republic of India and the People's Republic of China in 1950, is often dismissed as unrealistic and untenable in the geo-political framework of contemporary world. Yet this is an extremely important period as in India-China cultural relations the period witnessed the beginning of a rich exchange of scholars who made an effort to understand each other's culture in the context of the age-old civilizational dialogue between India and China. Moreover, this period also witnessed an attempt by both Indian and Chinese scholars to steer away from Western training and framework to understand each other's culture as different threads of Asian tradition and heritage. Scholars such as Jin Kemu, Xu Fancheng etc, who made seminal contribution in studying the cultural traditions of Indian people and disseminating knowledge among the Chinese people and/or documenting India-China cultural interactions, actually came to India in the decade of the 1940s.<sup>2</sup> It is evident that cultural connections between these two peoples through the twentieth century had consolidated a world view that gave rise to a strong anti-colonial anti-imperialist discourse based on human values of progress. Such a discourse had civilizational framework at its foundation, which recognized the importance of engagement through people-to-people interaction and cultural affinity.

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<sup>1</sup> A native of Hunan province in China, Tan Yun-shan met Rabindranath Tagore in 1927 in Singapore; at the invitation of Tagore, he traveled to India the very next year, to join the International University (Visva-Bharati) in Santiniketan, and thus began the journey of lifelong interaction and commitment of mutual intellectual and cultural symbiosis, symbolic of a relationship of mutualism and of synergic growth. It is a fact that has been acknowledged by the eminent scholars of Tagore Studies, Bhudeb Chaudhuri, who referred to Tan Yun-shan as Tagore's *Visvakarma*, a world-worker, a true constructor of human culture. The name *Visvakarma* is taken from Hindu mythology which holds that *Visvakarma* to be the divine designer, architect and engineer who constructed the world.

<sup>2</sup> Ji Xianlin, regarded as the doyen of modern Indology in China, and a few others of his generation including Xu Fancheng were trained in the West in the 1930s; however from 1940s onwards, increasing number of Chinese scholars, such as Jin Kemu, W. Pachow, Wu Baihui, Yang Ruilin, Yang Yunyuan, and even Xu Fancheng, came to India to learn and also to teach.

## Contemporary Connections: Reconfiguring Cultural Ties

Following the establishment of the Indian Republic in 1947 and the People's Republic of China in 1949, the issues and challenges facing the young states were very similar. Yet due to systemic difference in their founding principles, the issues were sometimes perceived differently and therefore ways of resolving them were often different; especially so in China, which on one hand went through a turbulent period rejecting its own traditions, and on the other, through a process of using politics as the sole paradigm in all aspects of existence. It is true that the 1950s saw a lot of exchange in cultural field, but what is perhaps more important is that in that starkly bipolar world India and China chose to champion causes of the 'third world countries' and saw themselves 'non-aligned' to any super-power. It is possible to argue that such a choice was made on the basis of enduring values of human civilization that did not believe in 'claiming the right to be the sole tyrant'. However, due to a range of complex domestic, regional and international factors, the 1960s witnessed a significant gap in understanding and communication between India and China, resulting in a serious military and political misadventure, perhaps for the first time in thousands of years. For the same set of factors, that tended to emphasize the geo-political at the cost of the geo-civilizational, a pragmatic acknowledgement of ground realities and of each other's strength and compulsions were slow in coming. It took decades to remember if not entirely reclaim the geo-civilizational paradigm. To quote:

'Over the years, China as the "other" (of the western civilization) has come to dominate Indian perspectives on China, except that it is never certain if it is the "other" of Europe transported straight to India or it is the "other" of India, as Indian scholars, culture-experts and politicians see it. The discourse of the "other" is very attractive, nearly seductive, in our days and times. The important and more interesting exercise however, might be to take India and China as the "other" of western civilization' (Deshpande & Acharya 2001: ix).

## China's Economic Reform and Open-door Policy: A New Era

Following the fall of Gang of Four in China in 1976, new policies were introduced by the new regime that saw a shift of focus away from politics. Though it is the post-Mao period in the chronology of Contemporary Chinese history, its experiences were not a monolithic whole. There were very distinct stages within this period. In the late 1970s an outward looking leadership came into power with economic development and modernization as the most important priorities. A gamut of new policies was introduced which had profound social, political and economic implications. In the 1980s, the economic framework was further developed, on one hand to call for greater individual autonomy, to dismantle the collective ethos, and to pave the way for socialist market economy, and on the other hand, to keep pace with the opening to the outside world. With the deepening of economic reform, ushering in of the socialist market economy and increased pace of globalization (both economic and cultural) in the 1990s, the very fabric of Chinese society underwent immense changes. Compared to the 1920s, when Chinese society was



awakening to the political responsibility it had to shoulder, and even to the late 1970s, when politics ceased to be the only paradigm of Chinese life, by the second half of 1990s, Chinese society reflected a pluralistic, multi-layered, market-oriented dimension. It is only natural that all aspects of human development, including culture, witnessed this transformation, bringing in a variety of shades in creative production and theoretical debate.

No less important is the impact of Globalization on cultural processes and productions. On one hand, through global cultural production and world-wide dissemination (by means of media, entertainment and pop culture) there was a trend towards gradual homogenization of culture, and on the other hand there was a diversification of cultural production as there no longer existed an universal model or a monolithic framework. This tension between homogenization and diversification, in turn, has brought about interactions and polarizations of the global and the local, the center and the periphery, the developed and the developing. In case of China, this process has been hastened since the late 1980s; it has resulted in the emergence of new cultural tastes and new cultural formations which are the products of gradual acculturation between Chinese culture and cultures of other countries and regions.

### **Towards a New Policy Framework of India-China Relations: *Culture as Facilitator***

In the last few decades, especially since Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China in 1988, there has been a gradual and significant momentum in the India-China Relations with both sides attaching increasing importance to potential for cooperation in a wide range of issues. In this context it has been pointed out repeatedly that 'On one hand, Culture has the ability to go beyond the restraining framework of state-state relations by focusing on more broad-based people-to-people relations, and on the other, it can also help to establish and develop a dialogue irrespective of and parallel to political relation' (Encyclopedia 2014: xi). In other words, culture can immunize against temporary and time-bound difficulties of political relation. On the basis of this understanding, in the recent years, both the countries have taken advantage of the strategic importance of Culture by designing new mechanisms of cooperation and incorporating them into the policy framework of bilateral relations. The impact on each other through culture is abundantly visible as cultural awareness on both sides has graduated from films of the *Do Bigha Zamin* (两亩地) era of the 1950s to the mainstream Indian films since the 1980s, from Zhang Jun, who learnt Indian Dance forms under tutelage of Birju Maharaj and Leela Samson and went on to propagate her knowledge to several generations of Chinese youngsters, to Jin Shanshan, who has deeply imbibed the cultural and aesthetic ethos of India as a way and passion of life. However, barring some cases of such interaction in the domain of art and culture, such as Amitabha Bhattacharya, originally trained in the Santiniketan's Kala Bhavana before going to China for intensive training, there have not been many Indians who steeped themselves so in the Chinese cultural traditions. In fact, it can be argued that China had become

aware of the potential of using culture as a strategy much before the Indian initiatives were put in place. Even in the last decade before the turn of the millennium, the Cultural Section and of late the Press Department of the embassy of PRC in India had been extremely proactive in organizing a wide range of activities so as to reach out to the average Indian public. Their methods and efforts have been very interesting, ingenuous and engaging. Their activities had included organizing frequent exhibitions and programmes showcasing Chinese history, culture and socio-economic development, providing support to many Indian academic and cultural initiatives related to China, and organizing different outreach programmes of the China Radio International (through Overseas Radio Programmes) and other Chinese agencies with the objective of increasing awareness about China in the Indian hinterland. Similar Indian initiatives in China, however, were slow in coming and had taken off only in the last decade and a half.

In the Joint Statement issued by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, in April 2005, during the visit of the Chinese Premier H. E. Mr. Wen Jiabao to India, it was said, 'both sides expressed satisfaction with strengthened exchanges in the area of culture, and affirmed that the mutual understanding and cultural exchanges would facilitate development of cooperation in other areas as well' (Joint Statement 2005). Thus, Culture was officially assigned an important role in the India-China relationship by proclaiming it as one of the components of Strategic Cooperative Partnership between India and China; in other words, culture came to be incorporated into the range of mechanisms identified as facilitator of India-China bilateral relation.

The Joint Declaration issued on November 21, 2006, during the state visit of the Chinese President H. E. Mr. Hu Jintao to India, said: 'Both sides agree that the relationship between India and China, the two biggest developing countries in the world, is of global and strategic significance.' The statement went on to say, 'In order to promote the sustainable socio-economic development of India and China, to fully realise the substantial potential for their cooperation in a wide range of areas, to upgrade India-China relations to a qualitatively new level, and to further substantiate and reinforce their Strategic and Cooperative Partnership', India and China will follow a 'ten-pronged strategy', one of them being 'Revitalising Cultural Ties and Nurturing People-to People Exchanges' (Joint Declaration 2006).

A concrete reflection of the reinvented civilizational framework was found in the idea to compile the Encyclopedia of India-China Cultural contacts, first mooted in the Joint Communiqué of the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China issued on December 16, 2010, during the Chinese Premier H. E. Mr. Wen Jiabao's visit to India. Completed and released in 2014, it not only brought the history of many centuries of India-China cultural contacts into public domain easily accessible to people of both the countries, it also provided support to the effort to bring awareness about our shared cultural experience through history. Since then there have been several other projects undertaken under the aegis of the two states; for instance a project of translation, publication and dissemination of Chinese literary works into Modern Indian Languages and vice versa, has been under way for several

years and have recently borne the first fruits.

It is evident that in the new millennium there has been a sustained top-down effort to enhance cultural interactions in multiple areas; it is visible in deepening of academic exchange, training and scholarship, literary and artistic interactions and so on. In spite of the rich historical legacy of people-to-people exchanges, and that there exists an enormous scope, the range till the turn of the millennium was still limited, leaving out many unexplored avenues of engagement. But it is important to note the linkages at the popular level have been becoming more and more exciting in the last couple of decades and it is clear that interest and enthusiasm on both sides are growing rapidly. Some magnificent templates of cultural engagement that have emerged in the recent times have held the attention on both sides quite intensely. Of these, the most popular Indian cultural phenomena to have captivated the Chinese people are undoubtedly Yoga, Indian Dance and Indian Films.

## **New Templates of Cultural Engagement: YOGA, DANCE and FILMS**

### ***YOGA: Reinventing the Old***

Yog is a Sanskrit word with its origin in the verb *yuj* meaning ‘to bind, to combine, to integrate’. The word, popularly known across the world as Yoga, literally means ‘to unite or integrate the individual self with the cosmos; thus it has a unifying feature which has been stressed time and again by the scholars and practitioners of Yoga through many generations. As has been mentioned by Mahadev Desai in his introduction to *Bhagavad Gita According to Mahatma Gandhi*, ‘it thus means the yoking of all the powers of body, mind and soul to God; it means the disciplining of the intellect, the mind, the emotions, the will, which yoga pre-supposes; it means a poise of the soul that enables one to look at life in all its aspects evenly’ (B. K. S. Iyenger 2012: 36). The first treatise to systemize this knowledge into practical science was *Yoga Sutra* put together by a sage named Patanjali around 200 BC. The book is divided into four chapters dealing with different aspects, of which the second is called as *sadhana* or the practice, the means of attainment. The *sadhana* or the practice, in turn, has been conceived as having eight stages; the culmination of these stages is expected to attain the oneness of the individual self with the Universal soul.

The Chinese experts on Indian culture have regarded Yoga as an important philosophical tradition from ancient India which was conceived as a method of harmonious human development 5000 years ago. It is felt by many scholars that it may have travelled to China before Buddhism but practice and dissemination of Yoga have grown hand in hand with growth of Buddhism. Being a vehicle of spiritual elevation through the search of the good (善), Yoga connects the ‘Self’ with the ‘Supra-Self’, and has been imbibed by the Chinese practitioners; to quote: ‘促进人身、心、灵和谐发展的养生教育’ (It is a means of physical education that promotes

harmonious development of health in body, mind and soul) (Mao 2008: 388). One of the greatest Chinese scholar of Indian Philosophy in modern times, Xu Fancheng, who lived in Pondicherry, India, for twenty-seven years, systematically translated several of Sri Aurobindo's commentaries on Yoga, among other works.<sup>3</sup> These works were published in China starting 1987. While these were scholarly works, at a popular level also China became aware of Yoga in the 1980s of the twentieth century through the telecast of Zhang Huilan's Yoga practice; subsequently, articles of Yoga started to be published in journals such as *Qigong* and *Qigong and Science*. However, to begin with Yoga's popularity was limited to only several hundred at the most and then again was seen as a mystic religious practice and frowned upon by the mainstream Chinese population.

In the last few decades, especially since the pace of economic globalization has picked up the world over, the Chinese society and social practices have witnessed some changes; in the drive to achieve individual successes in a fast growing economy, Chinese society has come face to face with challenges such as social alienation and rupture of social fabric. Especially in the huge metropolises, need for a Mass Health Regimen has been perceived acutely; as a result Yoga has emerged not only as an art of body-building (健身术), but with diversification of different schools and styles, Yoga has become a Movement in China. Moreover, with steady rise of Yoga practitioners there has also mushroomed a substantial body of Yoga Literature and a wide range of Practice Materials, such as apparel etc. In other words, it is quite apparent that a whole new cultural market has come into existence and thriving.

It is evident that popularity of Yoga is rising in China by leaps and bounds. To the extent that the Chinese practitioners are attempting to chart their own course taking into account their specific need as well as the factor of adaptability to the Chinese cultural practices. It has been observed by many scholars both in India and China that there is an inherent similarity between the spirits and practices of Yoga and some of traditional Chinese cultural practices such as Taijiquan, Qigong etc. It has been argued that while this has helped in the process of Sinification of Yoga, the attempt since then has been to demystify Yoga by doing away with the religiosity associated with it. In other words, the objective of research on Yoga, is to carry out selective rejection of some aspects found in its original form; as such has been spelt out in the following quote, ‘-前提是我们必须对瑜伽过于神秘和玄奥的宗教思想及行为进行“扬弃”’ (-the precondition is that we must unravel, examine and

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<sup>3</sup> Grounded in Western and Chinese Philosophy, Xu Fancheng mastered the essence of ancient Indian Classics and Indian Philosophy when he lived in India for 33 long years. He is reputed for his translation of a large number of Indian texts and scriptures, including *Bhagavatgita*, *Meghduta*, *Upanishad* and several more. His contribution to modern Indology in China is enormous and his lifetime dedication in laying the foundation for India-China Comparative Philosophy and Culture Studies is incomparable.

abandon the excessively mystical religious thought and activities associated with Yoga’) (Mao 2008: 389). Therefore, it is natural to conclude that one of the factors that would help Yoga to endure and flourish in its adapted version was to understand the history, theory and practice of Yoga through systematic teaching and research. The turning point in the dissemination of Yoga in China was its entry into the institutions of Higher Education. This phase was stimulated partly by the factors of necessity and feasibility of organizing systematic teaching and formulating structured syllabus on Yoga, as it was dependent on the possibility of overcoming the myth around Yoga and exploring the mechanism of absorbing it into China’s social fabric. While Yoga had the inherent quality suitable for incorporation as an innovative component into the domain of Physical Education, there were several challenges, such as lack of specialized training, teaching materials and motivation that needed to be overcome. In this context, the (全国普通高校体育课程教学指导纲要) “Guidelines for the Teaching of Physical Education Curriculum in the National Colleges and Universities”, issued by Ministry of Education and the National Sports Bureau in 2002, was a milestone that emphasized the need for reforming conventional Sports Training and Teaching in China. It encouraged the experts and teachers in the discipline of Physical Education to explore the alternative wellness and body building practices from across the world. Yoga, given its cultural similarity with the Chinese traditional practices such as *Taijiquan* and *Qigong*, was a natural choice. No less important is the fact that Yoga had the potential to be adopted for use as a health regimen by the masses with minimal infrastructural and financial liability. With all this factors in focus, Yunnan Nationality University (YNU) established the first Yoga Department from the academic year 2014-15. After designing a comprehensive and holistic syllabus in Yoga Philosophy in Practice, YNU started the Degree Programmes in 2017 and is expected to start a Master’s Programme soon.

In the last few years several Chinese scholars have tried to explore the reasons of rising popularity of Yoga in China. In a number of research articles published in the academic journals, Chinese experts have explored several significant issues that throw light on the sociological implication of popularity of Yoga in China; one of the important observation was that when Yoga entered China in the 1980s, it was practiced by a handful of women and white-collar section of the urban society making it an exclusive even elite cultural formation imported from abroad. One prevalent misconception of the time was that Yoga was suitable only for women. However, as awareness grew with time, Yoga became a mass movement in contemporary China till it was officially recognized and accepted as a wellness regimen informally and as an academic discipline institutionally. Since then Chinese scholars, almost without exception, have appreciated and welcomed the incorporation and integration of this Indian cultural phenomenon into the Chinese society; to quote: ‘瑜伽作为印度传统文化，在短短的几十年里被世界熟知，俨然成为印度外交的名片’ (Yoga is an important component of traditional Indian culture, in the short span of a few decades the world has become familiar with it and it has gone on to become the calling card of Indian diplomacy) (Xie et al 2018: 15).

## **DANCE: *Enduring Passion and Long-term Commitment***

Since the introduction of Buddhism into China from India in the Han Dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), Indian music and dance began to be introduced into China. Research and historical evidence show that Indian dance left its mark on Chinese palace and folk dance forms during two thousand years of India-China cultural interaction. Since the Northern and Southern Dynasties (420-589 CE), kingdoms all over China began to imitate, absorb, transform and integrate Indian dance forms; subsequently, Chinese Buddhist dances emerged in different forms and styles, such as Dunhuang dance, Han folk dance, Tibetan Buddhist dance and so on. These dance forms continued to thrive and flourish through the Sui (581-618 CE) and Tang Dynasties (618-906 CE) till the Qing Dynasty (1636-1911 CE).<sup>4</sup> Even in present day China, during several traditional Chinese festival fairs, dance rituals and performances can be seen in Buddhist temples of Nantong, Hai'an, Xixiang etc. In fact the famous Peacock Dance, made popular across the world by contemporary Chinese dancers, such as Dao Meilan and Yang Liping, were also performed traditionally in the Buddhist festivals.

After India became independent in 1947 and China was liberated in 1949, both countries participated in a global humanist discourse, as it underscored the importance of people-to-people interaction across borders, at times on the basis of shared cultural heritage and at others on the basis of universal cultural values and manifestations. As a result, initiative was taken for the exchange of cultural delegations between India and China. The new leadership of both countries was very emphatic in encouraging cultural exchange and training; to this end as they went on to establish institutions such as the Kalakshetra and Kathak Kendra in India and Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble in China, they hoped these institutions will nurture cultural ambassadors committed to the cause of building bridges between peoples of different countries.

After the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and India in 1950, exchange of artists and cultural delegations grew steadily. In 1955, a cultural delegation with 51 members brought colorful music and dance programs to Chinese audience; they not only performed Bharatanatyam (婆罗多舞), Kathak (卡塔克舞) Kathakali (卡塔卡利舞) and Naga folk dances, but also trained eight Chinese dancers to perform Kathakali under their guidance. Since then China saw a steady stream of eminent Indian dancers such as Uday Shankar (1957), Mrinalini Sarabhai (1978), Rukmini Devi (1984), Leela Samson (1984, 2002 and several times after that), Singhajit and Charu Singh (1994), Birju Maharaj (several times since late

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<sup>4</sup> The dancing posture (*mudra*), costume, jewelry etc. seen in the dancing figures (*Apsara*) depicted in the Frescoes of Dunhuang Grottoes in China have provided evidence that Chinese dance had its roots in the Indian dance forms. For instance, the S-shape “small three musical form” in the dancing posture of Dunhuang figures is believed to have the same origin as the S-shape “big three musical form” seen in Odishi.

1980s), Rama Vaidyanathan (2012) and so on. This clearly indicates that over decades Indian dance forms have gained impressive popularity in China. What is more, some Chinese scholars have also made important/seminal contribution by introducing ancient texts of Indian aesthetics such as *Natyasastra*, as well as by translating articles by contemporary Indian dancers.<sup>5</sup>

Zhang Jun was the first to come to India in the 1950s as a keen student of dance; she was tasked by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai to build a cultural bridge between India and China. She was an integral part of Zhou Enlai's project that was rooted in the spirit of Bandung Conference; in 1961 she helped found the Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble, which was famed for the high technical skill of its elite members. She learnt Bharatanatyam from Leela Samson and Kathak from Birju Maharaj. Though proficient in a range of dance forms, from Myanmar and Cambodia to Vietnam, it was Indian dance forms that became her biggest passion, and Bharatanatyam her life's vocation. During her many trips to India, Zhang Jun met Uday Shankar, the father of modern Indian dance, and visited many Indian schools; she went on to become a legend who trained many generations of Chinese students and left behind a large following of Chinese dancers who are committed to their profession as they were aware of the priceless legacy. It is from these students of Zhang Jun that there rose some who took Zhang Jun's vision as their own to carry forward.<sup>6</sup>

Starting with Zhang Jun, who was the very first to be trained in India under many iconic dance gurus and then introduced Indian dances to China systematically, there were several others, namely Liu Youlan, Zheng Yun, Li Jiang, Su Baohua, Zhao Shizhong, Jiangdong and Merygure Ahmed who went to India to study dance in

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<sup>5</sup> In the last decade, Yin Xinan, a well-known Chinese scholar of Indian culture, has introduced at least two iconic treatise of Indian dance to Chinese readers: a commentary on *Natyasastra* and a transition *Abhinayadarpana*; These two texts written by Bharatamuni and Nandikesvara respectively, provide an extensive foundation for the classical Indian dance forms, and are compulsory readings for understanding and appreciating *Bharatanatyam*, so very popular in China. Even before that, Meng Zhaoyi, a senior scholar of Oriental and Comparative Literature, had introduced the Kathakali Dance dramas to China by publishing an academic paper. In 2016, yet another scholar Zhou Yun had published the translation of an important article by the reputed modern Indian dancer Chandralekha.

<sup>6</sup> Zhang Jun was a dancer of extraordinary talent, an educator of Indian dance forms and a visionary who, with the encouragement of the Chinese leadership, went on to capture the true spirit of Asian cultural interaction and affinity; through complete lifelong dedication, she mastered several classical Indian dance forms, revived some rare Chinese ethnic dance, mentored several generations of Chinese dancers, documented and compiled teaching materials for teaching Indian dance to Chinese students and helped to lay the foundation of an India-China dance interface that is reaping a rich harvest now. Through her life she has performed for dignitaries and connoisseurs and has received accolades; she been honored with highest awards in India and China for her commitment to India-China cultural interaction and friendship. Zhang Jun has been called "the founder of Indian Dance in China" by eminent Chinese Indologist Ji Xianlin.

the 1980s and 1990s. Zhang Jun taught Indian dance in several institutions such as Beijing Dance Academy, Oriental Song and Dance Ensemble etc. and trained the next generation of Chinese performers of Indian classical dance forms. She prepared an audiovisual teaching aid for Bharatanatyam in 1999, and published Bharatanatyam Dance Course in 2004. For the last several years, Jin Shanshan is running the first private Indian Dance School in Beijing that has a growing body of young Chinese students.

Zhang Jun's protégé Jin Shanshan is perhaps the only professional Bharatanatyam dancer of China who has trained extensively in India. She was introduced to Indian dance as a teen-ager about three decades ago by the famous Chinese dancer Zhang Jun, who succeeded in instilling in Jin the same intense passion that she herself possessed for Indian dance forms. An alumnus of Peking University, Beijing, and Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, Jin travelled to Kalakshetra in Chennai in 1998 to train under the tutelage of eminent dancer former Kalakshetra Director Leela Samson, who was both a teacher and associate of Zhang Jun. While it was Zhang Jun who opened the world of Indian Dance to Jin, it was Leela Samson who inspired her with 'the attitude one needs to have to become an artist'. Over the years Jin Shanshan continued to train intensively under Leela Samson and went on to become a part of Samson's performance tours across the world. Over the years she has performed in many national and international forums and had many creative ventures and training workshops organized in collaboration with eminent institutions of China and the world.

The fact Zhang Jun was diagnosed with a fatal disease perhaps strengthened Jin Shanshan's desire to realize her dreams and carry forward her legacy. In 2006, Jin founded *Sangeetham Indian Classical Art Centre* (乐舞婆娑印度古典艺术中心), a school to teach Bharatanatyam to young Chinese girls and expose them to the enduring beauty and richness of Indian aesthetics. Initially started as a modest venture to teach her own daughter and a few others, *Sangeetham* gradually evolved into an institution by itself, where dozens of students, young learners and professional dancers, train under Jin's rigorous regimen conducted according to the norms of *Kalakshetra School of Bharatanatyam*. Jin Shanshan is gradually succeeding in her goal, as most of her students belong to mainstream well-off families, with more and more Chinese parents enrolling their daughters into her class after watching Jin's performances. In recent years Jin Shanshan has led her students in scintillating performances on landmark occasions and under the aegis of reputed international festivals dedicated to propagation of world music and dance. It is also significant that in the last decade, her school has truly evolved into a seat of learning that has hosted eminent practitioners of other Indian art forms such as Kathak and Odishi (奥迪西舞) and have organized workshops for their promotion. Jin has received enormous appreciation both in India and China, for giving the ordinary Chinese audience an experience of Indian aesthetic taste and richness.

Apart from the Indian classical dance forms, over the last decades of twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, the people of India and China have



discovered other agencies of creative interaction. While China has been exposed to Indian, primarily Bollywood, films for decades, Indian films in post-reform China appealed to growing popular need for entertainment, perhaps primarily because of its robust body of song and dance numbers. In the late 1980s, one such Bollywood film song to become very popular was “*Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy, aa jaa, aa jaa, aa jaa*” of *Disco-dancer*, the popular Hindi film of the early 1980s; this song became so popular that Chinese kindergarten students were seen staging exciting dance performances to this popular number. This certainly indicated that India once again rose on the cultural horizon of ordinary Chinese people who were curious and fascinated by India. Over the decades, interest in Bollywood songs and dance sequences increased, as did the recognition that cultural formations, especially popular ones, had an entertainment value.

No doubt such a perception was facilitated further by the fact that by the 1990s, on one hand, the official Chinese discourse on culture broadened its utility to include entertainment and on the other, as a result of globalization, by the beginning of the new century China was becoming more and more exposed to cosmopolitan tastes of culture and aesthetics. As a result the Chinese people began to appreciate the Indian femininity that made headlines in the international beauty pageants; much of that appreciation was also reflected in the Chinese effort to update their expertise on ethnic cultural traditions of India. In fact during the visit of Premier Wen Jiabao to India in April, 2005, the visiting Chinese Song & Dance Ensemble in a scintillating performance showcased some popular Bollywood numbers and thereby won over innumerable Indian hearts. As the popular version of the Indian dance tradition became more and more widespread, the classical traditions such as Bharatanatyam continued to gain ever larger following and audience in China. Though the Cultural Centre of the Indian Embassy in Beijing is organizing classes, lecture-demonstrations and programmes, it was also due to the stupendous efforts of individual artists, such as Jin Shanshan that this classical Indian dance form has left an indelible imprint on the contemporary Chinese consciousness.

### **FILMS: *Identifying the New***

Indian Films have been screened in China since 1949 after the People’s Republic was established. With the changing ideological concerns, priorities and motivation of New China taking shape, the cultural and artistic choices of the Chinese people showcased the changing socio-cultural reality. Indian Films with socialist themes, such as *Awara* (流浪者) and *Do Bigha Zameen* (两亩地) representing the struggle of the working class conformed to the ideological foundation of the PRC and became popular. It must be mentioned that these films and some of their songs attained a cult status; *Awara* was said to be particular favorite of Mao Zedong. Their universal appeal and emotional content depicted with sensitivity and artistry have endured through time and were rediscovered in the post-Reform period of the 1980s. As exchange students to Chinese academic institutions in the late 1980s would testify, there were countless occasions when an Indian student was requested to sing the title song of *Awara*.

In the first phase of the PRC from 1949 to 1966 there was large scale import of foreign films, approximately 775 films from 32 countries, while only 1000 films were made in China. After a decade of turmoil as China opened its door again, TV networks gradually started to telecast foreign programs; by the 1980s Indian television serials and films became a regular feature. But it was only in 2002 that *Lagaan* (印度往事) became the first Indian film to be released independently. Since then many mainstream Hindi films were released independently making a niche for themselves amongst the Chinese viewers; to name a few, *My Name is Khan* (我的名字叫可汗) (released in 2010), *Three Idiots* (三大傻宝闹好莱坞) (released in 2011) *PK* (PK) (released in 2014). So much so that *Dhoom 3* (幻影车神3) (2013) released in 2000 screens in 2014 entered into the Top Ten chart. It became obvious in the last decade that Indian films are beginning to capture ever larger audiences, giving a tough competition to other foreign films including American films. In fact *Three Idiots* grossed more than two million dollars in less than three weeks though it was available on popular video sharing websites for about two years before official release in China.

It would be correct to state that the Chinese youth are increasingly attracted to Indian films; they are more popular in some provinces, such as Xinjiang and Tibet. Some Indian stars, such as Aamir Khan, have acquired serious and dedicated fan following, thus deepening the cultural interface. While most of Amir Khan's films, including the latest ones namely *Dangal* (摔跤吧！爸爸) and *Secret Superstar* (神秘巨星), have become hugely popular, any discussion on popularity of Indian Films in contemporary China would be incomplete without a reference to the success of *Dangal*. It was the first Indian film to reach the top of the Chinese Box Office pushing Hollywood's *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* to the second spot by middle of May in 2017; it was playing on more than 10,000 screens by end of June 2017, though it started with only 7,000 screens. Subtitled and later dubbed, *Dangal* achieved a gross of Rs. 723 crore in China by June 01, 2017, which is more than its Rs. 571 crore gross in India. There is no doubt that *Dangal* was by far the most popular Indian film in China since *Awara*.

It is true that Films, like some other cultural genres, have the ability to transcend cultural barriers through universal appeal of narratives. Ratings and responses of the Chinese film critics, ordinary movie-goers, and popular film-rating sites testify that it is not the technical innovation but the human content which is the primary reason for the phenomenal success of the Indian Films in China in the recent times. In fact, some Chinese scholars of Humanities in different universities in China have tried to study and analyze this phenomenon. For instance, in a research paper published soon after the release of *Lagaan*, the author has emphasized the fact that compared to older Indian films that became popular in China, such as *Do Bigha Zameen*, *Awara* etc., *Lagaan* has used a different method and style of storytelling; while *Lagaan* also depicts the typical lifestyle of a particular society at a particular historical juncture, its appeal lies in rich cultural and artistic innovation; what is more, the film reflected different cultural essence and values in a multilayered narrative. According to this author, music (songs) and

dance remain the artistic soul of Indian films, because music and dance, on one hand, replace dialogue/language in developing a storyline and are crucial to the portrayal of characters, and on the other, they strengthen the artistic sensibility of the film. Aamir Khan's sky high popularity in China as a hero is complemented by the fact that he is widely appreciated and acclaimed by cross-section of Chinese movie goers as a talented and skilled storyteller, focusing on the issues and themes that found echoes in contemporary Chinese society. Ranging from social and economic disparity to gender discrimination to inter-personal conflict, all his films are consistent in being socially relevant and responsible; it is this very quality that has not only appealed to the Chinese people, but has also helped greatly in enhancing their awareness about India.<sup>7</sup> Continuing this trend films of other Indian filmmakers are also making an entry into the Chinese film market; for instance *Toilet Ek Prem Katha* (厕所英雄) was released in June 2018 and did very well, though in 2019 Indian films were not that successful in China.

Looking at the last few years, it can be argued that cultural engagement through Films has opened up a new vista of inter-cultural transference and echo, especially relevant in the context of India-China interaction and mutual understanding. In 2016, Du Binghui, a young scholar from Department of Humanities in Guangdong Peizheng College, Guangzhou, published an article on the basis of her research findings of a survey she conducted online on reception of Indian films in China. She has primarily explored important relevant issues such as demographic breakup of viewers, channel of access and reception, attitude of viewers to Indian films etc. In her summing up, Du has concluded that while some iconic films such as *Three Idiots* etc. have been greatly liked by Chinese viewers, their attitude to Indian films is nothing special and Indian films are certainly nowhere near as popular as the Japanese and Korean films. But what is more interesting is that she concluded that since the release of *Three Idiots* Aamir Khan has indeed garnered a sizable fan following in China, however, his popularity still does not in any measure compare to the enormous "Raj Wave" (拉兹热) (referring to Raj Kapoor) witnessed in the 1970s and 1980s in China.

It is natural that Indian Film Industry has been eyeing the Chinese market with serious attention. But China, like many other countries including India, exercises restrictions on the number of foreign films that can be given permission for independent release. Though it is common knowledge that bypassing the official channel many films made in India reach the Chinese market through internet. On one hand, many films become available on video sharing sites and on the other, many films that are subtitled by unknown film buffs without permission and made ready for viewing, are sold in the thriving pirated DVD market. This creates the

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<sup>7</sup> As a sample of Chinese view on Aamir Khan, see 新浪博客GSuryani, "谁是神秘巨星", 2018-01-20 00:28, 阅读: 39. This view is corroborated in the media outside China too; please see Suparna Dutt D'Cunha, "India's Aamir Khan is the 'Secret Superstar' of China's Box Office", *Asia/ #Box Office*, February 12, 2018.

possibility of a divergence in the official and unofficial versions of Indian films available in China. Recognizing this problem and appreciating the potential of the Chinese market, Government of India made an effort to push for increase in the number of films exported to China. What is more, an Agreement of Audio-visual Co-production concluded in 2014 opened up a new possibility of joint production of films; this effort has reaped its first harvest through production of films on India-China cultural interaction, such as *Kungfu Yoga* and *Xuanzang*.

### **Conclusion: *Diversifying the Agency for a Renewed Engagement***

In It is evident that in the last couple of decades the top-down effort to enhance cultural interactions adopted by both India and China have gradually given way to diversification of agencies and avenues in multiple areas within the domain of Culture, which in turn has stimulated a more extensive, more creative cultural engagement at the popular level. Though this process of diversification of agencies had begun in the last few years - for instance, exchange of school students, literary and art festivals, increased academic and tourist traffic and so on have caught the interest of both peoples - the experience on the ground still falls far short of enormous possibilities that can be explored. It can be convincingly argued that increasing interest and rising passion of both the peoples in each other's cultural formations combined with the top-down initiative as well as concrete policy measures of both the states, can further enrich and strengthen the cultural interface.

No doubt the cases of Zhang Jun and then Jin Shanshan, spanning two generations of Chinese cultural workers, are examples of individual agencies, reflecting total personal commitment under completely different circumstances of their times. For instance, Zhang Jun was initiated into Indian dance through the agency of the state, but carried on with a steady dedication in spite of difficult personal and socio-political circumstances. Jin Shanshan, also availed of the state's facilities, but equally importantly, was nurtured by individuals passionate about Indian dance and its dissemination. Today, she is not only deeply involved in disseminating Indian dance forms in China, but is also considered a star performer of international repute in her own right. Yoga, on the other hand, is an example that travelled a different route. It started as an exclusive cultural interest for a small section of the Chinese society and then developed into a mass movement which was recognized and then strengthened by the policy decision and strategic initiatives of the Chinese state. Indian Films in China is yet another model which is as much rooted in cultural memory as it is stimulated by increasingly cosmopolitan cultural tastes of the Chinese population; no less important is the fact that there is a strong commercial dimension to dissemination and popularization of Indian films in China.

It is well-documented that people have been at the core of the civilizational interaction between India and China through millennia, forged through overlapping experiences of trade and culture. In the present context, the experience of Yoga, Indian Dance and Indian Films in China indicates that people on both sides are

once again recapturing that core. While the need of the hour is to reinvent the old classical ties by infusing new energy and to identify new templates of popular cultural interface, the experience discussed above indicate that people are more than capable of reinventing the cultural interface of the past, as well as of identifying new facets. In other words, to suit the current times, the rich legacy of People-to-People linkages must be used to strengthen existing templates and design new templates through pluralistic multi-stranded mechanism. At this juncture of history, given the enhanced connectivity and increasing global mobility of people, youth with a wide range of cultural interests and common human agenda must be mobilized to play a pivotal role in the effort to enhance cultural connections.

From a historical perspective it can be argued that if the “First Wave” of Globalization has shaped the discourse of India-China cultural interaction, the “Second Wave” in the second half of the twentieth century has reconfigured the relationship. In order to ride on and benefit from the “Third Wave” that is destined to become a mighty force, India and China must combine the experiences of the last two waves to achieve a balanced and rational approach. It is relevant to mention that the present leadership in India and China, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping, are not only appreciative of the potential of culture and importance of cultural engagement, they are also conscious of their civilizational legacies. The choice of sites for the Informal Summits between the two leaders, Xi’an (2018) and Mamallapuram (2019) testify to their effort at underscoring the historical linkages and shared legacy; moreover, the Press Release issued by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), GoI, after the Mamallapuram Summit reflect their desire to take the legacy forward in the context of the current global situation; to quote: ‘As important contemporary civilizations with great traditions, both Leaders deemed it important to enhance dialogue in order to foster cultural understanding between the two peoples. Both Leaders also agreed that, as major civilizations in history, they can work together to enhance greater dialogue and understanding between cultures and civilizations in other parts of the world.’ (Press Release 2019). Such a consciousness can be greatly helpful in showcasing the best of their respective cultural heritage, as well as in enhancing and deepening mutual cultural enrichment rooted in the oneness of enduring human values.

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