

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Issues and Factors
Shaping Chinese
Research on Indian
Literature*

REPORT

Speaker :
Bihu Ghosh

27 March 2024

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Speaker: Dr. Bihu Ghosh, Assistant Professor, Department of East Asian Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Delhi.

Chair: Dr. Madhavi Thampi, former Associate Professor, Department of East Asian Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Delhi; and, Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Venue: Zoom Webinar

India and China, two of the world's oldest civilisations, have shared a long history of cultural interaction, with literature and art as significant realms of exchange. The Seminar titled "Issues and Factors Shaping Chinese Research on Indian Literature," featured Dr. Ghosh, who offered a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of Chinese research on Indian literature from 1950 to 2010. The session was chaired by Dr. Thampi, who highlighted the importance of this field and the speaker's expertise.

Dr. Ghosh began her presentation by situating the topic within the broader framework of India-China relations, emphasising that cultural and literary interactions have fluctuated in intensity, been shaped by political movements in China and shifts in bilateral relations. The initial decades after the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) saw significant political campaigns and influenced attitudes toward foreign cultures and determined the boundaries of literary creativity. The policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) set the tone for translation and publication activities, including those related to Indian literature.

The speaker identified three key periods in the development of Chinese research on Indian literature: the Mao era, the early reform and opening-up period, and the post-reform era. During the Mao period, particularly in the 1950s, India-China relations were marked by optimism and frequent cultural exchanges. The Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, articulated in 1954, facilitated cultural cooperation. This period witnessed the translation of classical Sanskrit texts, Buddhist scriptures, and modern Indian authors such as Tagore, Mulk Raj Anand, and Premchand. Pioneers like Ji Xianlin and Jin Kemu established academic programmes and produced foundational research, mentoring subsequent generations of Indologists in China. However, the 1962 border conflict and the Cultural Revolution (1966–

1976) disrupted these exchanges. Literary production and academic contact with India were severely curtailed, and research was limited to topics that conformed to prevailing political ideologies. Despite these constraints, some translations and studies continued, albeit sporadically.

The reform era initiated by Deng Xiaoping marked a turning point in India-China bilateral relations. The Chinese government encouraged intellectual openness, sending students abroad and promoting the translation of foreign literature. The range of Indian works studied expanded significantly, with translations increasingly sourced from original Indian languages. The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a resurgence of interest in Indian literature, with over 300 works published and a more systematic approach to research. Indian English writers such as Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai gained popularity, and collaborative projects between Indian and Chinese scholars flourished.

Institutional support played a crucial role throughout these decades. Departments of Hindi and Indology at leading Chinese universities produced a steady stream of research and translations. Successive generations of scholars built on the foundations laid by their mentors, ensuring the continuity and growth of the field. The speaker highlighted the enduring influence of Tagore, whose works have been consistently translated and studied in China with his international stature and thematic resonance as key factors in his sustained popularity.

The seminar also addressed the impact of literature in dispelling misconceptions about India among Chinese readers, particularly through student exchanges and the growing accessibility of Indian English literature. The Q&A session explored the influence of cultural similarities, the critical reception of Indian works, and the scope for future research. Dr. Ghosh noted that while political relations have sometimes posed challenges, academic and literary engagement has generally persisted and even grown in recent years.

The Chair concluded by emphasising the significance of the speaker's analysis, particularly the identification of productive periods and the interplay between domestic Chinese policy and bilateral relations. She encouraged further research into the influence of Indian literature on Chinese literary discourse and the critical analysis of Indian works by Chinese scholars, highlighting the area's rich potential for future study.

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