

**Report of the Workshop on
“Assessing recent initiatives to promote China studies in India”**

organised by

**Institute of Chinese Studies
in collaboration with
India International Centre**

Thursday, 23rd January 2020

Inaugural Session

The Inaugural session was chaired by the Director of ICS, Amb. Ashok Kantha, who remarked that the workshop was part of the activities commemorating the 50th anniversary of the ICS. It was also part of a regular stocktaking exercise that ICS conducts, and the last event of this kind was held in 2006. The objective of the workshop hence was to focus on the developments in Chinese studies in India in the period since then. China remains the primary strategic challenge to India, but its growing importance is also an opportunity for India that is usually undervalued. Given the widespread negative public perception about China, a better understanding of the country would go a long way in clearing doubts and mitigating issues.

Prof. Patricia Uberoi, the Chairperson of ICS, presented the keynote address. She pointed out that traditionally, Indians have shown little interest in studying other societies. At the same time, she pointed to the example of the “learned societies” which emerged here in the 19th century, and said that these did act as a “gateway to the east”, providing early insights into eastern cultures. However, this tradition had, in the post-independence era, given way to professionalization, bureaucratization and methodological nationalism. The lack of global standing of Indian China scholars has meant that scholarship on China here continues to be influenced by the West. The dependence on government funding moreover has led to an overemphasis on the policy relevance of China studies. Other problems include the lack of disciplinary training and the gap between Chinese language and Chinese studies. She further pointed out that although being in India should give one an inherent standpoint of comparison with China, this is largely ignored in the scholarship on China undertaken here.

The convener of the workshop and Honorary Fellow of ICS, Dr. Madhavi Thampi, presented what she felt were some of the major changes that had taken place in the field of China studies in India in the last ten to fifteen years. These included an increase in the number and diversity of “stakeholders” in this field, which now included private universities, private foundations and trusts, the media, business, and so on. Several new China centres had sprung up in different parts of the country, perhaps reducing the “Delhi-centredness” noted in the earlier 2006 Conference. There was an increase in the number of Indians familiar to some degree with the Chinese language, and a greater number of scholarships available for Indians to study in China or Taiwan. There was also a willingness to engage with newer topics of research, although International Relations, and contemporary India-China relations in particular, continue to dominate. She pointed out that all this change did not however necessarily translate into better research or a more nuanced understanding of China or provide an adequate eco-system for the study of China. Critical problems, like underfunding, shortage of trained teachers and infrastructure, as well as inconsistent policies and bureaucratic impediments, continue to hinder the development of China studies here. She concluded by explaining the objectives and format of the workshop. This time the organisers had decided to adopt a thematic framework in structuring the workshop, as it was felt that focused discussion on certain common themes faced by all stakeholders in China studies here would lead to more productive and energetic discussion.

Session 1: Scaling Up, Ensuring Quality

The first session was chaired by Prof. Sreemati Chakrabarti, Vice-Chairperson of ICS. In her opening remarks, she pointed to the introduction of the Masters program in East Asian studies at Delhi University as a major new initiative in this period, which sought to address some of the lacunae in the earlier programs. She noted that while under this program the language training imparted to students of China had significantly improved, the field continued to be heavily skewed in favour of International Relations.

The first speaker of this session, Prof. Tansen Sen of NYU-Shanghai, spoke specifically on the quality of academic research on China. He emphasised the importance of looking at Chinese sources and the opinions of Chinese scholars critically. He further noted the importance of the role of advisors and supervisors in exposing students to new ways of thinking and methodology. He gave the example of the project examining the Nehru papers on China, on which he is currently working in collaboration with various universities and scholars. He argued that such collaboration is vital, in order to promote independent research which is not only qualitatively rich but also enhances new perspectives in the study of China in India rather than state-sponsored narratives. He remarked that the aim of China studies is not to build India-China friendship, and that questioning the existing narratives is essential.

Prof. Elizabeth Perry, Director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute, elaborated on the role of funding and collaboration in scaling up the quality of research. She discussed the initiatives taken by HYI in promoting China studies and attracting scholars and researchers from different Asian countries to hone their study of China, including the doctoral fellowship for scholars from India in collaboration with ICS and several universities in China. While initiatives like the HYI-ICS fellowship abound, the placement of research scholars in universities in India has remained a problem. Prof Perry pointed out the scope for engaging in India-China comparative studies that challenge conventional wisdom and established narratives.

The next speaker, Mr. Ashish Dhawan, pointed to the new initiatives being undertaken by the China India Foundation that he heads. He focused on the efforts of private sector organizations and institutions, which are driving new areas of study, and can help in the development of China studies in India, including by absorbing trained research scholars into their faculty. He spoke in particular about the post-doctoral fellowship programs that CIF plans to introduce, and the efforts to introduce China studies in several private universities. He said it was necessary to take risks to achieve outcomes, and he added that funding would come into this field if the programs are of good quality, and that the onus was on us to mobilise the funds.

The final speaker of the session, Prof. Mark Frazier of the India-China Institute at the New School in New York, spoke of the various initiatives undertaken by his Institute to promote comparative India-China studies, and to enhance the engagement of scholars from the one country in the experience of the other. He focused on improving comparative methodology in studying China and India. India-China comparative studies can point to solutions for some

of the pressing problems faced by both societies. At the same time, he emphasised that the benefits of comparative studies go beyond the contribution to policymakers.

A lively discussion followed, with interventions from the floor and responses from the panelists. Issues that were picked up for further discussion included the intellectual curiosity (or lack thereof) of Indians and Chinese about each other, the possibilities of doing comparative research (including in fields such as public health), the potential for collaboration between public and private universities and more generally the need for partnerships in the field of China studies, and how to overcome the language deficit in studying China.

Session 2: Bridging the gaps

The second session was chaired by Prof. B.R Deepak of JNU's Centre for Chinese and South East Asian Studies, who explained that this session would focus on how to overcome gaps in existing knowledge systems. As China studies has become one of the most productive fields of scholarly inquiry in India, these gaps should be viewed as opportunities to improve. He further elaborated on the kinds of gaps in the study of China in India. In conclusion, he pointed out the problems related to perception – for example, the highly problematic tendency to view the India-China relationship through the binary of friendship or enmity and through the lens of the boundary dispute, at a time when India-China relations have expanded into many areas.

The first speaker, Mr Ravi Bhoothalingam, Honorary Fellow at ICS, put forward what he termed a 'business' approach to Chinese studies. He presented China studies as a 'product', and those people wanting to know China as 'consumers'. He said that it is important to know what the consumers want, and to address their different requirements, in the process creating a community of supporters for the whole corpus of knowledge and study of China here. He pointed out that there are now 'interlopers' in the area of generating knowledge about China in India, in the form of consultancies, businesses, etc., apart from the traditional academic institutions. There should not be a hierarchy of knowledge or demand for China studies. He talked of the need to seed intellectual curiosity about China, and also about the importance of partnerships to provide a multiplicity of 'products'.

The second speaker, Dr Jagannath Panda of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, highlighted how China studies is being pursued in Indian think tanks. He pointed out that most think tanks are based in Delhi, and few have specialised China studies centres in them. Resource constraint is a problem in further developing China studies in these. He pointed to the dominance of the national security perspective in the studies conducted in many of these think tanks, which can act as a constraint on what one can write. Working in defence-related think tanks further poses specific problems when it comes to being able to visit China, he said, while pointing out that countries like Japan that also have major security concerns when it comes to China nevertheless have produced sound and comprehensive scholarship on China. He stressed the need to build public awareness about China.

The next speaker, Prof. Alka Acharya of the Centre of East Asian Studies at JNU, pointed out that China studies has to face the challenge of nationalistic presentations of history and of restrictions on free interaction among academics at this time. She pointed out that the kind of niche research being done at ICS and elsewhere does not find encouragement from the government and other sponsors. Turning to the traditional centres of China studies, she remarked that there has been a situation of ‘stasis’ with no major change in more than twenty years in terms of courses or methodology, with the possible exception of the new Master’s program in Delhi University. She said that the Chinese language vs Chinese studies barrier remains as wide as ever, while underscoring that competence in Chinese language is a must for serious scholarship on China. As pointed out by others, Chinese studies in India is dominated by IR, but in her view large numbers of students gravitate to IR not so much because of real interest in the subject but because of the greater prospects of employment that it offers.

The last speaker, Ms Sowmiya Ashok of the Indian Express, talked about studying China from the standpoint of the media. She highlighted the phenomenon of Indian media mostly covering China from a position of tension or aggression. Additionally, the language barrier as well as the resource constraints that prevent media houses from basing reporters in China, hinder better reporting on the subject. She presented some of the dilemmas she faced in her own experience of reporting on China. She concluded by saying that reporters can bring to the wider public the products of academic research.

During the discussion that followed the panelists’ presentations, it was pointed out by one of the participants that the job of the university and that of the market is not the same. It was also stated that while the real academic dynamism is in the public universities, they were also much more subject to bureaucratic control because they were government-funded. Another participant said that India-China studies should not be viewed as the same as China studies, pointing out in this context that in interacting with Chinese academics, Indian scholars of China tend to interact mainly with Chinese scholars of South Asia. There was also some discussion on what interests young Indians in China, with one participant pointing out that they are by and large not as stuck on the 1962 war as the older generations.

Session 3: Major Challenges

Prof. Anita Sharma, Pro-Vice-Chancellor of KR Mangalam University, played the role of Moderator of this session. She highlighted the major challenges faced by China studies in India today as inadequate human and material resources, lack of employment opportunities in academia, and the difficulty of making China Studies a priority for universities and other institutions, among other things.

The first panelist, Dr Sonika Gupta of the IIT-Madras China Studies Centre, spoke about the specific considerations guiding the teaching of China studies in a primarily science and technology university. The main issue here is familiarising the students with China, and approaching China as a global issue. She proceeded to discuss some of the problems that ail

China studies in India more generally, including the dominance of IR, poor public perception of China, resource constraints, a lack of quality faculty for Chinese language training, and paranoia about China to the extent that those working on China are subject to inquiries by the government and intelligence agencies. She said that in her Centre, they are working on India-China from the perspective of a 'Himalayan zone', focusing on the movement of water, people, goods, etc. She also drew attention to the important Tibetan studies programme initiated there.

The next speaker of the session, Dr G Venkat Raman of IIM-Indore, highlighted that lack of employment opportunities for qualified scholars is a sizeable obstacle to the development of China Studies in India. He underscored this point by sharing the difficulties he faced in finding employment after completing his Ph.D in economics from Peking University. He highlighted the problem of institutional resistance to China studies programs in universities, saying that there is too much dependence on individual faculty or individual administrators to introduce or sustain China studies in these institutions. All of this had resulted in an environment of pessimism and a sense of negativity among those already enrolled as well as prospective students with interest in studying China. He concluded by recommending that ICS and others should take it on themselves to convince the leadership of academic institutions of the importance of China studies.

The next speaker was Dr C Vinodan, from Mahatma Gandhi University in Kottayam, Kerala, which has the only UGC-sponsored public university program on China studies in South India. He introduced the kinds of courses, projects and collaborations with other universities that his Centre has. Despite these collaborations, and some (though reduced) funding under the UGC Area Studies program and from the Kerala Government, he said that the Centre faces major difficulties in running its programs due to financial constraints, shortage of trained faculty (especially those qualified to teach Chinese language), and so on.

The final speaker, Mr Prashant Kaushik from the Central University of Gujarat, began by saying that he strongly feels that the role of public universities should not be underestimated, but only five of these universities in India offer bachelors' degree programs in Chinese. He pointed out that lack of enough faculty has at times led to suspension of admissions. More senior faculty is needed to adequately represent the concerns of the Chinese studies programs at the higher echelons of the universities. Apart from the general concerns about lack of funds highlighted by many other participants, the speaker specifically emphasised the need for greater access to course materials and research materials to keep abreast of the subject. Referring to what drives students to take up the study of Chinese, he felt that the major motivation seems to be earning higher salaries.

The frank critiques presented in this session were particularly appreciated because they reflected the experience of faculty in the newer centres of China studies that have opened across India in the last few years. In the discussion session, participants in the workshop highlighted that even the facilities and resources formerly available to China studies scholars and programs have come down. For instance, it was reported that the number of Chinese language scholarships available in the exchange scholarships sponsored by the Governments

of India and of the PRC has been reduced to just one, while all but three UGC-sponsored Area Studies programs are being closed down. In this situation, some participants suggested the possibility of approaching private companies to fund higher level training in Chinese studies, as well as taking recourse to e-learning Chinese where trained faculty here was not available. There was some discussion as well on the possibility of interesting business schools to take the study of China more seriously.

In conclusion, the Convenor of the Workshop thanked all the participants and those who helped to organise the workshop. She said that the discussions in the Workshop would provide valuable inputs into the final assessment of the recent initiatives to promote China studies in India that ICS is undertaking, and which should in due course be available to all in the form of a monograph.