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India as Teacher by Negative Example: Chinese Perceptions of India During the British Colonial Period and Their Impact on India-China Relations

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Abstract

The history of ancient civilizational links between India and China, including the spread of Buddhist religion and philosophy from India to China, are often cited as the enduring basis for India-China friendship. However, contemporary India-China relations have been much more influenced by Chinese encounters with British imperialism, with Indians playing the role of subordinate instruments of British depredations in China, including the dumping of opium on China. India was held up by Chinese intellectuals as a teacher by negative example, its easy subjugation by the British being the result of its stagnant and stratified society, its fragmented and disunited polity and a slavish temperament among its people. China would need to avoid these dangers if it were to regain its full independence and modernisation. These perceptions persist and influence Chinese policy towards India in contemporary times and need careful analysis.

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India and China enjoyed more than a thousand years of uninterrupted trade and cultural exchanges during the first millennium CE. This enduring engagement flowed across the Central Asian bridgehead, through the Tibetan plateau and the maritime links connecting peninsular India with the eastern seaboard of China. The spread of Buddhism in China became the prism through which China perceived India. India was the western paradise, the birthplace of Buddha and a centre of advanced knowledge and philosophy. This challenged the notion of Chinese centrality and was for this reason rejected by intellectuals at times as an alien influence but this did not prevent its embrace by the populace as a comforting faith. These inter-connections were often interrupted by political turmoil and transitions in both countries as well as in intermediary realms. However, during the second millennium CE, these interruptions became more extended and relations more distant. Engagement continued but at a lower pitch and often through their peripheries. Even during the 16th century Jesuit missionaries such as Matteo Ricci passed themselves off as monks visiting from India or Tianzhu guo (the western treasure country) since India was still esteemed in China as a civilized and sacred land. They even dressed in Buddhist robes. During the medieval era, the port of Calicut maintained a flourishing maritime trade with China. It was described as a pivot point for the 7 voyages undertaken by the Ming dynasty admiral Zheng He who died

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in Calicut in 1433 at the end of the last voyage. There are interesting descriptions of Calicut and Cambay ports in the chronicles of Ma Huan, who accompanied Zheng He on the voyages, entitled "The Triumphant Visions of the Ocean's Shores". They are testimony to the great wealth and cosmopolitan character of these great cities. The Ming emperor then forbade further maritime expeditions and China descended into studied insularity which continued under the ensuing Qing dynasty under the Manchus. The Qing harboured inherited notions of India as a land of Buddhism lying to the west, but could not reconcile this with reports about a Mughal empire then ruling in that geography. So, the geography itself was adjusted to locate India to the south of what was now the Mughal empire. The fall of the Mughals in mid-18th century and the emergence of British colonial rule in India, with all its implications for China, was only vaguely understood. This is covered in fascinating detail by Matthew Mosca in his landmark book, "From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy, The Question of India and the Transformation of Geopolitics in Qing China".

It is with the Opium Wars of 1839-42 and 1856-60 that the China was deeply shaken by its vulnerability to a British empire now firmly established on the Asian continent which drew its power and resources from its colonial empire in India. The opium which drained China of silver and enfeebled its citizens and the Indian soldiers who served as the shock troops during the humiliating wars, led the Qing court and Chinese intellectuals to examine the reasons behind Chinese weakness. Associated with this was an exploration of the Indian condition and its role as a springboard for the painful assault on China. There emerged, in parallel, a deeply negative popular perception of Indians from their role as streetside enforcers of British rule in the foreign concessions. There was also the deep resentment of the prominent Indian traders who flaunted the wealth gained mainly from the opium trade in cities like Shanghai.

India was regarded as a teacher by negative example, a failed and fallen country which had been subjugated and enslaved virtually without resistance from its people.

Chinese intellectuals, whether conservative reformers like Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao or more radical figures like Chen Duxiu, Lu Xun or Liang Shuming saw India as a "worst case scenario" for China. India's past as a brilliant and sophisticated civilisation was acknowledged but its more recent history was of special relevance to China if it were to be successful in confronting the powerful Western challenge. Interestingly, though Japan had defeated China in 1894-95, it was seen in China as having succeeded in becoming a modern nation and, therefore, a model to be emulated. Several Chinese students and scholars headed to Japan around the turn of the century to learn from its example. In contrast India was regarded as a teacher by negative example, a failed and fallen country which had been subjugated and enslaved virtually without resistance from its people. As pointed out by the Japanese scholar, Shimada, "reformers and radicals alike shared the anxiety that China not follow in the footsteps of India."

Youwei advocate Kang was an of constitutional monarchy with the Meiji Restoration of Japan as the model. He became an advisor to the Guangxu emperor and is associated with the "100 Days of Reform" but fell victim to the powerful reactionary clique around the Empress Dowager, Cixi. He went into exile to escape execution and it is during his exile that he visited India during 1901-03 and again later in 1909. It is from India that he criticised the move by some reformers for Guangdong Province to declare independence, adopt radical reforms and then seek to overhaul the reactionary Qing monarchy at the centre. He wrote to his student, Liang Qichao,

"My 4 million compatriots, if you wish to become a fallen nation of slaves, then quickly support the fight for independence in all provinces like the Indian people have done. But if my compatriots, you do not wish to become a fallen nation or an exterminated race, then you should deem useless India's fight for independence in all its provinces."

Here Kang sought to compare Guangdong with Bengal, which had fallen prey to the British because of the failure of various princely states of India to present a united front under a strong central authority.

Other Chinese intellectuals sought to explain India's plight as a colonised country on the inherent character of its people. In his earlier writings, Zhang Taiyan argued that Indian people were especially susceptible to British occupation after the experience with the Mongols and then Mughals.

If the Indians were themselves responsible for falling prey to alien rule then were the Hans during the Ming dynasty also responsible for falling prey to the Manchus?

"By the time the Mughals unified the land the Indian people had already pledged their allegiance to a different people. To be owned by the Mughals and then to be owned by the British what difference did it make to them."

The weather in India was also cited as reason for Indian laziness and lack of vigour.

"Don't you know in the tropics people do not go cold and hungry therefore people become lazy and things go easily rotten. They are weaker than you (Kang) saw."

These scholars did not see the irony of their blaming Indian's supposedly deficient character for becoming prey to foreign rule and ignoring their own country's history of being conquered and ruled by the alien Mongols in the 12th and 13th centuries as the Yuan dynasty and later by the Manchus during the 17th to the 20th century as the Qing dynasty. In fact, for nearly half of its recorded history China was ruled by non-Han dynasties including the Liao, the Jin and the Xia before the advent of the Yuan and the Qing. The extensive territories it now claims as its own are mostly a legacy of its conquered past. It has been more expedient to bask in the reflected glory of the conqueror than to identify with those who suffered from conquest just as the majority Han people did. If the Indians were themselves responsible for falling prey to alien rule then were the Hans during the Ming dynasty also responsible for falling prey to the Manchus? Were there similar character faults at play? These questions never surfaced in the Chinese discourse.

During this phase, even the positive history of Buddhism as a factor of affinity between the two countries was re-interpreted negatively. Liang Shuming, for example, said that for the reinvigoration of China Indian influence must be eliminated and not a trace of it be allowed to survive in China. Some years later, Hu Shih took up this theme and argued in an address at Harvard University in 1937 that Chinese weakness in confronting Japanese aggression was due to the "Indianization of China." Hu Shih said,

"India conquered and dominated China culturally for 20 centuries without ever having to send a single soldier across her border."

But he meant this as a baneful influence on China to be exorcised rather than to be celebrated. It is often mis-interpreted in India as a grateful Chinese acknowledgement of its cultural debt to India when it is the opposite in intent. Rajnath Singh, the Indian Defence Minister in October 2017 approvingly quoted Hu Shih's remarks as evidence of China's cultural debt to India only to invite a prompt and angry refutation by the Chinese paper, Global Times!

Eastern civilisation as the Chinese saw it, did not include India though perhaps it may include Japan. Rabindranath Tagore's visit to China in 1924 has been described as a milestone in India-China relations. The suggestion that it rekindled a sense of affinity between the peoples of the 2 countries and promoted solidarity in the struggle against Western imperialism is an exaggeration. He may have been received with polite courtesy and enjoyed respect as a Nobel laureate but his notions of a rejuvenated Eastern Civilisation prevailing over a materialistic and spiritually bankrupt West found no resonance. Eastern civilisation as the Chinese saw it, did not include India though perhaps it may include Japan. Left wing intellectuals such as Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Shen Yanbing, Chen Duxiu and Qu Qiubai were all critical of Tagore's ideas even though they admired his scholarship and poetry. Shen Yanbing said,

"We are determined not to welcome the Tagore who loudly sings the praises of Eastern civilisation, nor do we welcome the Tagore who creates a paradise of poetry and love and leads our youth into it so that they might find comfort and intoxication in meditating."

Qu Qiubai was more even more dismissive describing Tagore as a man of the past whose advice was irrelevant. The claim made by the Japanese scholar Shigenobu Okura had greater resonance among the Chinese, when he said, "Of the nations of Asian civilisation today, I consider Japan to be the greatest. Next is China. As for the people of Babylon and India, even though their cultures could be admired in bygone days, now they cannot even be compared."

The Chinese audience might have contested the Japanese claim to be number one but would not have disagreed with his proposition on India.

Individual Chinese interactions with Indians sometimes produced a more favourable impression. Zhang Taiyan became interested in Buddhism during the three years he spent in prison. His extended conversations with an Indian friend in Tokyo led him to believe that Indians and the Hans should work in solidarity to rid their peoples of British and Manchu alien rule and that China could draw inspiration from India's own struggle for freedom. There were other Chinese individuals who were deeply influenced by Tagore and accepted his invitation to live and teach at Santiniketan. They included well known scholars like Tan Yunshan and Wu Xiaoling and artists like Xu Beihong.

The Chinese republican leader, Sun Yatsen avoided the open disparagement of India but argued that the British were a threat to China only because they had colonised India -

"after occupying India they can enjoy the benefit of China which after occupying China they cannot enjoy the benefit of India at the same time."

Chiang Kaishek, China's wartime leader was sympathetic to the Indian independence movement but was disappointed that the Congress Party was not ready to support the Allied counter-offensive against Japan in China. He paid a visit to India in February 1942 and met both Mahatma Gandhi and Nehru despite dissuasion from the British. He was conscious of the British instigating Hindu-Muslim division. In his diary, he wrote that Jinnah was "dishonest" and that "it's not true that Hindus and Muslims can't get on." He thought that "truly patriotic Muslims" would stay with the Congress.

The idea of non-violence and satyagraha was considered not revolutionary and high spirited enough

Chiang's long meeting with Gandhi was a disappointment. He observed later that "Gandhi knows and loves only India and doesn't care about other places and peoples." In his view it was India's "traditional philosophy has made him this way. he only knows how to endure pain, and has no zeal - this is not the spirit of a revolutionary leader." One wonders how Chiang misjudged Gandhi and his ideas but clearly the idea of non-violence and satyagraha was considered not revolutionary and high spirited enough. Even in a sympathetic Chinese leader we see echoes of a weak and even submissive Indian.

Chinese popular attitudes to India and Indians during this period was influenced by the use of Indian soldiers and policemen in the British depredations in China.

When Chiang's Kuomindang (KMT) forces were defeated and Mao established the People's Republic of China, India's prompt recognition of the new regime in Beijing soured whatever goodwill may have remained. And despite the Indian gesture, PRC leaders remained suspicious and initially dismissed India as remaining under western influence despite its independence.

Wherever there were opportunities for direct engagement and conversations the more prejudiced notions could be contested. Unfortunately, much of Chinese and Japanese readings of India during the first decades of the 20th century were derived through translations of British colonial literature which were openly and crudely racist in their depictions of India and its people. It is these mediated perceptions which have remained entrenched in Chinese attitudes.

As pointed out earlier, Chinese popular attitudes to India and Indians during this period was influenced by the use of Indian soldiers

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and policemen in the British depredations in China. In a Chinese novel from 1904, quoted by T.H. Barrett, we have the following passage,

"Shibao looked closely at these people and they all had faces black as coal. They were wearing a piece of red cloth around their heads like a tall hat; around their waists they wore a belt holding wooden clubs. Shibao asked the old man: are these Indians? The old man said yes, the English use them as policemen. Shibao asked, why do they not use an Indian as the chief of police? The old man answered: Who ever heard of that? Indians are people of a lost country; they are no more than slaves."

Later in the story some of those wearing red hats are seen to be Chinese and this was warning of what may happen to Chinese people were they to fall prey to foreign rule.

Another example of India serving as negative example.

Did things change after India gained independence in 1947 and China achieved liberation in 1949? Did these attitudes from the early decades of the 20th century persist or was there a change in the Chinese discourse on India? In reviewing India-China relations over the past seven decades we see the following pattern. When India-China relations are in a positive phase, for whatever reason, there is an Before the Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai phase in the early 1950s, India was considered as an instrument of western imperialism.

invariable harking back to the shared Buddhist heritage and the history of dense trade and cultural exchanges. There may be references to mutual sympathy and support during the more contemporary period of India's struggle for independence and China's liberation though the evidence for this is more limited. However, whenever relations have become strained and contentious, the disparaging and negative narratives of the more recent past surface not only in Chinese media but also in records of Chinese leaders' conversations with foreign interlocutors.

Negative media reports concerning India and Indian leaders are well documented. Before the Hindi-Chini bhai-bhai phase in the early 1950s, India was considered as an instrument of western imperialism. Its independence and non-alignment were said to be only in name. The Tibet crisis in 1959 led to another phase of very negative reporting on India including the infamous People's Daily article, attributed to Mao himself entitled "On Nehru's Philosophy". But it is in the record of several private conversations which Chinese leaders had with foreign interlocutors that the attitude of contempt against India comes out most clearly. I will cite here some of Zhou Enlai's observations about India and Nehru in conversations with Kissinger in 1972:

Zhou referred to Nehru's Discovery of India, saying that Nehru was thinking of a great Indian empire, but "actually India is a bottomless hole."

Zhou: India is a highly suspicious country. It is quite a big country, sometimes it puts on airs of a big country, but sometimes it has an inferiority complex.

Kissinger: It has been governed by foreigners through most of its history.

Zhou: Yes, that might be one of the historical factors.

Zhou:Nehru invited me to a tea party in his garden among the guests were two people in costume. There were two Tibetan lamas and suddenly there appeared a female lama. Do you know who she was?

Kissinger: Madame Binh?

Zhou: Madame Gandhi (laughter). She was dressed up entirely in Tibetan costume. That was something that Nehru was capable of doing.... I was speechless confronted with such a situation. It was impossible for me to say anything.

For Zhou, Mrs Gandhi donning a Tibetan costume while he was present was proof that India coveted Tibet! That India, too, is home to communities who share Tibet's culture and way of life may have been difficult for Zhou to understand. This exchange just goes to show that it is not India which is a highly suspicious country but China.

The authority of the state was indispensable to political stability and he (President Ma Hong) wondered whether this was not a weakness in India.

During my second tenure in China from 1983-86, relations between the two countries had already taken a positive turn. There were exchanges of high level visits, a regular dialogue on the boundary issue and an expansion of trade and economic relations. It was in 1984 that the first ever visit to India by a high-level delegation from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences took place. It was led by its then President Ma Hong, a most distinguished economist credited with the introduction of market oriented reforms in China. His delegation was in India for nearly two weeks visiting several cities. He also made a pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya. I had invited him and some senior members of his delegation to dinner on his return and sought to learn of his impressions of India. While he praised India's development and gave high marks for its economic self-reliance, he could not resist remarking that, on the surface, India appeared chaotic and disorderly. He and his colleagues were puzzled, he said, how the country was still functional. He narrated an incident that INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES DELHI . OCT 2020

occurred on the delegation's car ride from Patna to Bodh Gaya. Their car had to stop as there was an angry demonstration blocking the road. The police in the patrol car accompanying the delegation begged and cajoled the demonstrators to give way to their vehicles and they grudgingly agreed because there was a foreign delegation travelling. The demonstrators were not at all afraid of the police. This, Ma Hong said was unthinkable in China. The authority of the state was indispensable to political stability and he wondered whether this was not a weakness in India

A more positive reflection was about the strength of Indian culture. Despite the fact that India, unlike China, had been open to the world, its classical music maintained deep roots and its women still favoured the elegant saree. With the recent opening up of China, there had been a wholesale rush towards Westernization, he complained. Chinese children wanted to learn how to play the violin and the piano, not the Pipa or the Qin.; Chinese women wanted to wear western skirts, not the traditional qipao. On India's economic prospects he conveyed scepticism because of bewildering diversity and lack of its community spirit. Even in these observations, politely conveyed, we see echoes of the earlier perceptions and critiques of India.

Post the clashes in eastern Ladakh we again notice a relapse into abusive language. One recent article, translated by our colleague at ICS, Hemant Adlakha, calls Indians "big time thieves". The author goes on to make blatantly racist comments:

"While talking their gestures such as shaking of head, gesticulating, touching mouth, shaking eyebrows, making signs etc and so on, however without harmful intentions these are no doubt unnerving".

The same article makes a strange and utterly false claim concerning the 1962 border talks:

"During the early negotiations in 1962, the Indian side even proposed Tibet belonged to India, that Sichuan province be declared a demilitarized zone and last but not the least they even demanded the Indian Army be permitted to be stationed at Chengdu in order to monitor the implementation of the demilitarized zone. The Chinese representatives were stunned"

Indeed, so are the Indians!

We see that a line runs through the negative and derogatory perceptions of India and Indians that took hold during the British colonial period. While India's past glory as a great civilisation was conceded, in contemporary times it became an example of a failed and fallen country. The reason for this decline was said to be the slavish character of its people and the lack of a strong central political authority to mobilise the people to resist foreign aggression. The depictions of Indians bordered on being racist.

India's present then was the future that would await China if it did not reform and modernise, if it did not unite and maintain a strong central authority.

These impressions were also derived by translations into Chinese or Japanese of writings by British colonial authors who justified British colonial rule as a civilizational mission of redeeming a race which had lost any civilizational attributes it may once have had and lacked any ethics or scruples. India was thus held up as a teacher by negative example. India's present then was the future that would await China if it did not reform and modernise, if it did not unite and maintain a strong central authority. These negative attitudes persist and surface whenever relations start to worsen. During more positive phases, these attitudes are masked and the rhetoric harks back to the ancient period of civilizational engagement between the two countries though even in this case the spread of Buddhism in China from India was regarded by some as a baneful external influence which must be thoroughly exorcised to allow the true Chinese spirit to emerge. There are positive strains of thinking about India particularly among those who have had more sustained encounters with its people

but they do not constitute the dominant category.

In dealing with the China challenge India needs to analyse these deeper strands in Chinese perceptions of India and the prism through which the Chinese mind interprets Indian foreign policy behaviour. These perceptions are mediated through third party sources not direct experience of India and Indians over an extended period of time. Indian perceptions of China are also coloured by images and imaginings purveyed by others but in the main the English language discourse on China. This is a discourse which has at times romanticised the China story and at times disparaged it. Currently we find that China is increasingly assessing India through the prism of its fraught and worsening relations with the U.S. India is not regarded as having independent agency. For the Chinese pessimist, the future could relive the past in which India became the platform for an assault on China and hence needs to be neutralised well in time. Its people and leaders cannot be trusted because they are by nature (and not by calculation) given to petty intrigues and trickery. Sometimes, as we have seen, history may be rewritten or reinterpreted to fit preconceived notions about an adversary's character.

This points to the need for more intensive China studies in our country in particular on its history, its culture and society and the patterns of thought that are ingrained among its people. This exercise has 2 advantages. One it points the way to slowly but steadily removing the sludge of prejudice which animates much of Chinese behaviour towards India. Two, it opens the way for chipping away at our own prejudices and uninformed notions about China and the Chinese people thereby making a more productive India-China engagement more likely even if not inevitable. Both sides need to shed the stereotype images they harbour about each other.

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From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy: The Question of India and the Transformation of Geopolitics in Qing China by Matthew Mosca Ambassador Shyam Saran is a career diplomat born on September 4, 1946. Since joining the Indian Foreign Service in 1970, he has served in several capitals of the world including Beijing, Tokyo and Geneva. Currently, he serves as Chairman, Research and Information System for Developing Countries, which is an autonomous think tank specializing in studies on economic and trade related issues. He is also a Senior Fellow with the Centre for Policy Research, a prestigious think tank which covers a wide range of political, social and economic issues, including foreign policy related issues.

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