

International workshop
“Chinese Studies and Indian Studies in Contemporary Times”
Peking University
November 6, 2017

Welcome Address by Shri Amit Narang, Charge d’Affaires
Embassy of India, Beijing

Prof. Jiang Jingkui,

Professors and experts from Peking University and other institutions in China,
Acclaimed researchers and experts who have joined us from different parts of
the world,

My dear colleagues from India,

Distinguished friends and students,

I am honoured to be present at today’s event taking stock of China studies and India studies together.

My felicitations to Beijing University and in particular to Prof. Jiang who heads the Centre for South Asian Studies for organizing this event.

This event is very timely and important. We often have events on China studies, and likewise we have events on India studies. But it is very rare to have a comparative perspective on India studies and China studies in which we have the presence of experts not just from China and India, but also experts from different countries.

This is therefore a unique gathering and I warmly welcome everybody who is here.

Distinguished colleagues,

I am not an expert on these issues. I am at best a student of China, a practitioner of India-China good relations. So, I thought I will focus my remarks on the status of how India and China have studied each other. I am doing so of course in the full understanding that I may not actually be able to do justice to this topic as it is a very rich academic discipline.

From my perspective when I see India studies and China studies - and see them in comparative perspective - the general perception that I observe is that India and China are old civilizations, longstanding neighbours. This is of course true.

But as serious academicians would know, the reality of our relationship is a little bit more nuanced.

It will not be an exaggeration to say that these two countries are still *distant neighbours*. We are very close to each other geographically, but perhaps we are still at great distance from each other. This is also the context in which this conference is being held – how do we bridge that distance.

We all know that India and China are the two fountainheads of culture in Asia. These are not just among the most ancient civilizations, but more importantly they are the two most resplendent cultures in the world, spawned by the brilliance of human imagination on either side.

It is also true that in the past few centuries ever since the so called East and the West met, both the Chinese and Indian cultures have captured the imagination of the West. Western scholars have spent enormous amounts of creative energy to understand the depth of these two cultures.

It can also be said that the discovery of the East by the West itself played a role in the rediscovery of East by itself.

Going back to the question of how India and China have studied each other, the historical exchanges between these two cultures are rather well known.

In ancient times, the thread that bound the historical exchanges for well over a millennium was the spiritual thread of Buddhism.

The exchanges of mutual learning that happened between these two civilizations because of Buddhism or through Buddhism have been beautifully captured by Prof. Lokesh Chandra in his book in the following words – *“The rustling breeze of Buddhist fragrance awakened the mindscape of both countries, endowing them with the web of thought, the harmony of art, the magnificence of murals and sculptures, incarnating a new life and sinking into the sensitivities of deep-reaching muscles of mystery dredged in the intimacy of mind”*.

These beautiful words do justice to the rich exchange that happened for almost a thousand years between our two countries under the rubric of Buddhism.

The exchanges between these two civilizations have been mutual. What we had were two parallel and intersecting roads, connecting India and China.

Chinese ingenuity travelled outwards to the west and came to India through the redoubtable ‘Silk Road’. Several Chinese inventions reached India either directly or indirectly through other parts of the world. This is ample evidence that India has always had China in its popular imagination for centuries.

Even today, there are several daily things we associate with China. The stable drink of India is *Chai*, which came from Chinese *Cha*. The white granulated sugar is even today called *Cheeni*. We also have many other examples like *Cheeni Mitti* (porcelain) and what Kautilya called in his Arthashastra, the *Cheenum-suka*, or the silk. All of these are named after 'Cheen' or China. There are several such examples.

On the other hand, Indian ingenuity and intellectual sophistication travelled to China on the other road, called the 'Dharmaratna Marg' or the spiritual road.

It is well documented how much of an impact Indian philosophy, art and thought had on the effervescence of the Chinese culture itself. Countless Indian thinkers, monks and travellers came to China over centuries and brought the best of Indian thought and along with it the best of Indian art, Indian culture, Indian music, Indian mythology, Indian philosophy and left an indelible mark on Chinese culture.

Prof. Jing Dinghan in one of his essays has said that the unique nature of this exchange was that China learnt about India more on a spiritual side; India learnt more from India on a material side.

It is also a fact however that this brilliant history of exchange and learning between India and China almost withered away after the decline of Buddhism. It was not until the early years of 20th century that this contact was revived.

This is the nuanced reality of our exchanges.

While we had initial exchange of brilliant mutual learning for a long period, almost a thousand years, these cultures became almost unaware of each other and rediscovered each other only in the early years of 20th century.

Interest in each other revived in the early years of 20th century when both our countries were still not independent, when both were fighting colonialism. That was the time when the two brothers rediscovered themselves.

This was also the time when the first efforts to institutionalize China studies in India and India studies in China happened. This was the time of great scholars and doyens of culture on both sides. Rabindranath Tagore's visit to China in 1924 reignited an interest in India in China. In China, great scholars like Ji Xianlin, Xu Dishan, Jin Kemu, Xu Fancheng studied Sanskrit and carried out translations of Indian classics.

This was also a time when India studies in China came out of the shadows of Buddhism and transcended into the wider Indian culture. Great Indian classics like Ramayana, Shankuntala, Meghdootam etc were translated for the first time during this era.

This great revival continued into the first years of our Independence. Our first Prime Minister Pandit Nehru himself was a Sinophile who promoted China studies in India in a big way. The founding of China Bhavan in the Vishwa Bharati of Rabindranath Tagore and the time spent by Prof. Tan Yunshan are too well-known.

There then followed a gap of few years in the sixties and seventies due to some unfortunate events, after which area studies revived in 1980s. From the 1990s onwards, of course the rise of India and China as growing economic powers has given a new perspective to a revival of interest in each other's cultures.

Language remains a key to understanding cultures, and we are delighted that in China today, around 15 universities have courses teaching Hindi and other languages. There are in addition 7 institutions doing research in Sanskrit. It is no surprise thus that the 2nd Conference of Indologists was held in 2016 in China, because you have such a large corpus of expertise on Indian culture and Sanskrit available in China.

In India too, as I said, the interest in China has reignited in the last 10-20 years Interest in learning Chinese has also grown. Chinese language is now being offered in many of our universities. Many of our youngsters are pursuing courses in Chinese and on China. Many of our think-tanks, apart from Universities, are also focussing on China.

This is all very good. Yet the story still remains that the mutual understanding between the two countries remains below potential.

Distant neighbours we remain.

What should or could be done more then?

One, clearly there is a need to train more scholars in both countries on respective studies. We need to increase the quantum as well as quality of both Sinology and Indology in India and China respectively.

Two, we need to focus more on language, and I think we need to see more students in China learning Hindi, Tamil, Sanskrit because there is really no short cut to understanding a culture without language. Likewise in India, we need to do much more and we need to promote Chinese language as an alternative for Indian students.

Three, there is a need to make China- and India-studies more multi-disciplinary; focussed not only on the history and culture but above and beyond. Today India and China's rise has changed the nature of our societies completely. And these changes deserve to be studied because these have

implications for our relations. We need to make these studies more broad-based and go into newer areas, for example urbanization.

Fourth and lastly, a comparative perspective will be useful and that is indeed the objective of this conference. How do others study India and China? Can these perspectives enrich our studies of each other? Such a cross-disciplinary and cross-area perspective can enrich our efforts.

To conclude, serious academic research remains indispensable to promote mutual understanding between these two ancient cultures and modern economies. Much has been done, we have come a long way since the last 90 or 100 years, but there is a potential to much more.

I do hope that today's event is one of those events which will spark interest in India studies and China studies and promote a greater enrichment of efforts on both sides.

Thank you.
