# How China Sees India and the World

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juggernaut

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*I would like to dedicate this book to my wife Anita, a most supportive and indulgent companion, and to my children Nakul and Indrani, their spouses Geertje and Seth, and my grandchildren Sami and Zev, all of whom continue to be my dedicated team of cheerleaders.*

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# Introduction

Soon after I joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1970, I was told I would be sent to Hong Kong to learn Mandarin, the standard Chinese spoken in Beijing. I was not particularly enthused. I knew little about China and even less about the language of that country. But I did know that China was in the throes of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution that had unleashed widespread political violence in the country. Our own embassy in Beijing had been attacked, as had the British embassy. India's relations with China had remained frosty since the unfortunate border war of 1962. I was apprehensive about being thrown into this maelstrom of conflict once I had concluded my language studies.

My entire outlook towards China and the Chinese changed when I arrived in Hong Kong in 1971 and took up the study of Mandarin at the British Ministry of Defence School. My Chinese teachers were among the best, but more than their professional skills, what impressed me were their patience, consideration, and, over time, even affection. I learnt more Chinese from them outside the classroom than inside, spending weekends with them, going out to restaurants or just sightseeing in Hong Kong in their company. Learning Mandarin opened a whole new and fascinating world for me. I was coming face to face with a civilization with a long and varied history, a philosophical and cultural heritage of enormous richness, and a view of the world quite distinct and indeed different from others'. There were elements that were recognizably Asian – for example, the

central role of family and kinship ties. But some were uniquely Chinese, like the language itself, made up of ideograms and without an alphabet. I discovered that China had a vast, almost inexhaustible store of written and documented history going back 3,500 years, with precise dating of events that occurred a long time ago. India had nothing comparable.

I spent a total of six years serving in China, first during the last phase of the Cultural Revolution (1974–77) and then during the early years of economic reform and liberalization (1983–86). On my first posting, I witnessed a China that had closed its doors on the world and embraced a drab and austere life while creating a 'socialist paradise', rejecting its own rich culture and traditions as obstacles to its modernization. In the words of China's leader Mao Zedong, who wanted to wipe the slate clean so that a new China could be built:

> On a blank sheet of paper free of any mark, the freshest and most beautiful characters can be written; the freshest and most beautiful pictures can be painted.[1]

And yet, reminders of China's long-standing history, the richness of its culture and its complex and sophisticated aesthetics, were present everywhere. There was an extraordinarily rich cuisine that one could savour in Beijing's famed restaurants, and there were hidden alleys where precious antiques could be found for sale.

Our sources of information were sparse. There was virtually no access to Chinese officials, except to those assigned to deal with diplomats. There was only official media – the *People's Daily*, the *Guang Ming Daily* and *Red Flag* magazine. Diplomats who knew Chinese had to read their weighty offerings with great care and attention, trying to discover political messages being conveyed through cryptic language or through reference to some bygone event in history. Contemporary political characters could be attacked through a campaign of criticism against some philosopher or ruler in the past. For example, when the radical leftist leaders allied to Mao Zedong's wife Jiang Qing wanted to sideline Premier Zhou Enlai in 1975, they launched a mass campaign to criticize the ancient Chinese

philosopher Confucius. From the context it was obvious that their real target was Zhou. This was confirmed later when Jiang Qing herself was arrested and removed from all her Party positions after Mao's death in September 1976.

With the Reform and Opening-Up Policy launched in 1978, China began to undergo a rapid and far-reaching transformation. When I arrived for my second assignment in Beijing in 1983, it was to a China that was truly unrecognizable. There was something of a Wild West atmosphere as people were taking Deng Xiaoping's slogan, 'To get rich is glorious', with utter seriousness. Chinese officialdom had become more accessible, and it was now possible to meet Chinese scholars and artists in informal settings. Flea markets had sprung up all across the city, selling counterfeit designer clothes and a whole range of consumer goods. There were weekly antique markets where one could still find some rare and beautiful objects. Five-star hotels had begun to sprout in most cities, and there were many more foreign-brand cars on the road.

But all this gave no indication of the forty-year sprint that would bring China to where it is now – the world's second largest economy after the US, and already a leader in new-age technologies like artificial intelligence, quantum computing and space exploration. India is a retreating image in China's rear-view mirror.

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Despite being two long-standing Asian civilizations, India and China have for centuries been strangers to one another. During the first millennium, the people of the two countries did come into contact with one another. The connections happened through three main channels – the caravan trade through Central Asia, the trade route through Nepal and Tibet and the maritime trade between peninsular India and the east China coast. The spread of Buddhism to China led Buddhist monks and pilgrims like Xuan Zang to make the long journey to India, to obtain authentic Buddhist scriptures and study at the famous universities of Nalanda and Vikramshila. Several Indian monks also travelled to China

and served as priests and translators in the country's monasteries. But such encounters were confined to a relatively small group of Indians and Chinese. And while Buddhism did provide a link between the peoples of the two countries, it was mostly one-way traffic. Even during the first millennium, we see little curiosity in India about China and its people. India may have left an impression on China during this period, but we do not see any similar impact of China on India. After 1000 CE, even these limited engagements faded away over the subsequent centuries with the waning of Buddhism in India and in the wake of the Muslim invasions of the Indian subcontinent. Geography too played a role – the two countries were separated by the vast, cold desert of Tibet rimmed by the high peaks of the Himalayas, and equally by the vast ocean spaces that lay between India's coastal cities and China's east coast. While trade relations continued, these were never of a scale to leave behind a deep impression in either country of the other.

It was only during the period of British colonial rule over India that China encountered India once again, and this was not a pleasant experience. In the various British military assaults against China in the nineteenth century, it was Indian soldiers who served as the shock troops for the British. It was Indian opium traders who flaunted their wealth in the new urban centres of Shanghai and Hong Kong. The negativity that one encounters in Chinese attitudes towards India draws quite largely from this recent history.

During their dealings with China over the colonial period, the British accumulated a large amount of information about the country, its history and culture, but this did not percolate down to their Indian subjects. There were only a few Indian scholars during the colonial period who showed an interest in China, and a couple of Chinese scholars accepted Rabindranath Tagore's invitation to stay and teach in Santiniketan.[2] This meant that when India and China became, for the first time in history, next-door neighbours after China's occupation of Tibet in 1950, neither country had any close familiarity with the other.

The pathways to India's independence and China's liberation, respectively, traversed very different trajectories and aroused mutual

admiration and scepticism in a complicated and variable mix. The geopolitical contestation, inevitable between two rising powers in Asia, was sharpened by the deep differences between the political systems each country chose. While independent India chose a liberal parliamentary democracy as its political dispensation, China became a one-party communist republic. This only compounded the lack of mutual understanding. Neither side invested enough in getting to know the other's history and culture and the drivers of their respective world views. For example, there was little appreciation in India that the revolt in Tibet in 1959 and the grant of asylum to His Holiness the Dalai Lama changed Chinese threat perception regarding what had been until then limited skirmishes on the India–China border. A careful reading of the long history of Tibet's relations with China may have led to a more nuanced posture on India's part, even while it granted refuge to the Dalai Lama.

Since the border war of 1962, the focus in India has been narrowly on the study and analysis of Chinese foreign and security policies without appreciating that these can only yield useful insights when set in the larger frame of the country's world view.

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During the forty years and more that I was engaged with China in different capacities, I became increasingly aware of how little we really know about a country which is now a contiguous neighbour, a powerful adversary and a challenge which manifests itself in multiple dimensions – political, economic, technological and even cultural. This book is an attempt to create among Indians a broader understanding of China and the history and culture that have shaped its ethos and world view through the centuries, down to the present day. It is not enough for India to have a handful of Chinese-knowing diplomats and a small group of China scholars possessed of a relatively deep familiarity with China. The larger constituency of educated Indians must also have such familiarity. This is because there are now many more points of contact between the

two countries, and given China's growing regional and global profile, our engagement with many other countries is also impacted by China's presence in them. This presence is not only of the Chinese state but of a number of other actors, such as Chinese businesspeople. Moreover, we need to be familiar not only with how China looks at India but also with how China shapes its relations with those countries which are important to India, such as our immediate neighbours in the subcontinent. The China factor will keep popping up in many of our foreign policy calculations.

Though this is not a book about India–China relations, it does attempt an Indian perspective on the China story. It also provides, wherever possible, a comparison between Indian and Chinese cultural traits. It looks critically at Chinese narratives about its own history, and questions interpretations of that history which serve a contemporary political purpose. For example, this book shows that while China looked upon India as a 'slave nation' ruled by a foreign power during the British colonial period, it ignored the fact that China itself was ruled by alien, non-Han dynasties for nearly half of its recorded history. It examines China's claim to Tibet having been a part of China 'since ancient times' and shows that there is no historical evidence for this claim. Similarly, China's claim that through most of recorded history it was the dominant power in Asia, with other countries in subordinate positions, is, as this book reveals, an artfully constructed narrative with no basis in historical fact.

China would like to see India slotted into a subordinate role in an Asia dominated by itself. India will resist a hierarchical order in Asia and a world dominated by China. However, this resistance becomes more difficult as the gap between the economic and military capabilities of the two countries continues to expand in favour of China. To meet this challenge, India's strategy will need to be based on a deeper understanding of this rising power, including its history, its perceptions of India and the world, and its likely trajectory in the foreseeable future.

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic will have its own impact on the geopolitical landscape in Asia and the world. Will it reinforce Chinese power or diminish it? Will there still be areas where India and China could find common ground, or are we condemned to a period of enduring

hostility? Are there ways in which India may be able to constrain the unilateral assertion of power and influence by China, and are there potential partners to support such a countervailing strategy? I hope the pages that follow, which examine these questions and issues, will help identify markers from history that may serve as reference points in making well-considered projections and decisions on them.

I hope too that this book will bring the story of China to a more general readership in India and evoke in them a wider interest in China's fascinating past as well as its contemporary development. My aim has been to provide a frame of reference for interpreting Chinese behaviour in different settings and to offer some insights into China's unique philosophical and cultural traditions and the major currents of its history, which have formed the prism through which it views India and the world. I believe some understanding of these is essential to understand China's self-image, its current geopolitical ambitions and world view, and its perceptions of India.