Praise for the book

'India Versus China is a brilliant book that combines deep knowledge, analytical insight and elegant prose. Its conceptual framework – the four master categories of Perceptions, Perimeters, Partnerships and Power – is highly original. Written with assurance and authority, the narrative ranges widely over history, economics, politics, leadership, military strategy and social structure. The book is a model of its kind, taking the lessons of a lifetime of scholarship to the intelligent general reader. And on a timely and very important topic too.' **Ramachandra Guha**

'In *India Versus China* Kanti Bajpai, one of the most perceptive of India's international relations experts, traces the origins and development of the modern India–China relationship and astutely considers how the balance of power between the two giants has evolved and shifted with time. At a time when tensions are at a historic high, Bajpai's book is a lucid, timely and important intervention; policymakers and China watchers alike would do well to pay heed.' **Shashi Tharoor**

'At a time when Sino-Indian military conflicts have once again risen to prominence, Kanti Bajpai's *India Versus China* provides a superb overview of why their deep differences in visions, interests, affiliations and capabilities promise to persist, with troubling consequences for both states. There is no better tutorial on this strained relation than this book.' **Ashley J. Tellis**

'In this essential read Kanti Bajpai, a foremost Indian thinker on international relations, uses his scholarly insight to clarify the roots of India–China tensions and crises. Analysing the two countries' differences in perception, of power, on the border, and in their foreign policy practice, Bajpai writes in limpid language that often sparkles, about what is probably the most complex and consequential relationship in Asia. He concludes that India and China are unlikely to find their future less challenging than the present. A deep and readable book on India's greatest foreign policy challenge.' **Shivshankar Menon**

'Kanti Bajpai presents his deep knowledge of the subject with clarity, objectivity, eye-opening facts and acute insights. This book is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand the immense scale of India's China challenge.' **Prannoy Roy**

'Kanti Bajpai's insights as well as his incisive writing style makes this book both compulsively readable and exceptionally informative. He has a clear and precise view and communicates it pithily and forcefully. You will learn a lot from this book which will add immeasurably to your understanding of the India–China relationship.' **Karan Thapar**

'Kanti Bajpai, one of India's finest minds on international affairs, must be commended for producing a scholarly yet fluently written account of the conflicts that have bedeviled the relationship between India and China. In December 1988, the two countries had decided to intensify engagement while taking steps to manage these conflicts. Over the past year, however, that paradigm has been severely damaged. Why and how did this happen? Why is the India–China relationship so conflict prone? What lies ahead? Can cooperation and competition replace confrontation and conflict? These questions are uppermost in our minds and therefore Bajpai's latest offering is both timely and relevant.' **Jairam Ramesh**

India Versus China

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Why They Are Not Friends

Kanti Bajpai

juggernaut

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For Gayatri, Rudra, and the rest of my family

Contents

Introduction

India and China comprise nearly forty per cent of the world's population. Their relationship is vital for three billion people. It is also consequential for the countries in their neighbourhood and for the world at large. After the war of 1962, the two countries had managed to preserve a high degree of military stability along the Himalayan border. Then, in June 2020, a melee at Galwan in Ladakh left Indian and Chinese soldiers dead and injured. Both sides rushed military reinforcements to the area. Despite a series of negotiations, they were unable to disengage the nearly fifty thousand troops amassed on either side of the border – as many troops as they had deployed in the entire 1962 war. Six decades of relative calm between the two countries collapsed in a matter of weeks. The Ladakh crisis suggests that India–China relations are darker and more complex than most observers appreciate or acknowledge. It is tempting to ascribe the current difficulties between them to the memory of the war and to the unsettled border. Clearly, those do affect Delhi's and Beijing's thinking. Yet Galwan suggests that we need to dig deeper. Why did these two societies become locked into a conflict that has stubbornly refused to go away?

Post-imperial India and China started well. India was one of the first countries to recognize the communist government and support its right to a seat in the United Nations. From 1950 to 1953, Delhi mediated between Beijing and Washington during the Korean war. Jawaharlal Nehru, who would go on to be India's first prime minister, had twice visited China before India gained its independence and had helped arrange for a group of Indian medical personnel to go there in the late 1930s. In *The Discovery of India*, he recorded his admiration for Chinese society that continued after rising tensions in the 1950s: 'the vitality of the Chinese people astonishes me. I cannot imagine a people endowed with such bed-rock strength going under.'[1] In 1954, he made a highly publicized trip to China, was greeted by large crowds, and met Chairman of the Communist Party Mao Zedong and Prime Minister Zhou Enlai. When Zhou visited India in 1960, Indian crowds cheered, 'Hindi Chini bhai bhai!' – Indians and Chinese are brothers! – as he drove through the streets. Two years later, though, India and China were at war. India lost the war, and despite the withdrawal of Chinese troops from most of the areas they had captured, the relationship between Asia's giants never fully recovered. Countries fight and become friends, but India and China, sixty years after fighting a short war, are still not friends, as the bloody encounter in Galwan showed.

India and China are not friends for four key reasons: deep-seated differences over their *perceptions* of each other, their territorial *perimeters*, and their strategic *partnerships* with the big powers, as well as the asymmetry of *power* between them. The two societies' perceptions of each other, especially influential Chinese perceptions of India going back to the nineteenth century, have been negative. This may in part account for why India and China cannot agree on their perimeters – their borderlands. Negative perceptions of each other and profound differences over their

perimeters are compounded by the fact that they have never been strategic partners. They have both partnered the Soviet Union/Russia and the US at various times but have never been in partnership with each other and have no history of working closely together. Their differences might not have mattered had it not been for the power gap between them, which particularly since the early 1990s has grown relentlessly in China's favour. As a result of the gap, India cannot concede, for fear of appearing weak, and China will not concede, as it does not see the need to do so.

Are there other factors that bear on their relationship? What about a fifth P – Pakistan – which is often identified as a source of conflict? Pakistani Prime Minister Yusuf Gilani rather blushingly described his country's friendship with China as 'higher than mountains, deeper than the ocean, stronger than steel and sweeter than honey'. The quasi-alliance between the two powers clearly irks India, which sees Islamabad as a pawn in Beijing's geopolitical moves. In the end, though, the close China–Pakistan relationship is more effect than cause: it resulted from the India–China conflict, not the other way round. India and China are also divided by a number of other differences – growing Chinese influence among India's other neighbours in South Asia; India's coalition building with Japan and Vietnam in China's backyard; their diplomacy in other parts of the world and in multilateral forums; international status-seeking by both powers; India's huge trade deficit with China; and Chinese dam-building on the Yarlung Tsangpo/Brahmaputra river. These are important elements of the troubled relationship, but again they are more effect than cause. They are not the fundamental causes of their conflict. Rather, they have become additional points of friction driven by the four more basic causes.

This is a book about the India–China conflict examined through the two countries' perceptions of each other, their

differences over the border and Tibet, their partnerships with the Great Powers, and their growing power asymmetry. The two countries do also have a record of cooperation, primarily in preserving military stability along the borderlands. Despite serious confrontations in 1967, 1975, 1986–87, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2017, and 2020, the total number of Indian battle-deaths in these eight episodes is just over a hundred (the Chinese figures are not public).[2] For a 'live' border quarrel between such large countries, this is a small number. On the other hand, India and China have had five major confrontations in the last decade alone, after nearly twenty-five years of military stability, confrontations that could have escalated. In a paper I published on India's China policy in June 2018, I concluded with the thought that India was 'faced with the possibility of more Doklams around the corner' – this after the 73-day stand-off between the two militaries near the trijunction of India, China, and Bhutan in 2017.[3] The Ladakh crisis of 2020 was much more than a Doklam, but the prediction was correct in so far as it suggested that relations were increasingly brittle and prone to crisis. The 2020 confrontation may be resolved more or less peacefully, but it is a good bet that there will be more Ladakhs.

India Versus China makes four broad arguments. First, while India and China at various times looked up to each other until about the fifteenth century, their modern perceptions of each other, from the late nineteenth century onward, have been largely negative including during the Covid-19 pandemic. The influence of colonial thought on their mutual perceptions but also ignorance and racism on both sides have produced feelings of disdain and disrespect. When I say Indian and Chinese perceptions, I refer largely to elite perceptions. How ordinary Indians and Chinese regard each other is mostly unknown, though they are probably far more occupied with the challenges of everyday life, even

survival, than they are worried about trans-Himalayan realities. Elite perceptions matter, and it is vital that we understand them.

Secondly, differences over perimeters – the borderlands and Tibet – are at the heart of much of the India–China conflict. Some writers blame India and others China for the original quarrel. I suggest that Delhi's and Beijing's handling of the border problem between 1949 and 1962 suffered from mirror-image difficulties – hesitations in engaging on the issue; contradictions and inconsistencies when they engaged, leading to suspicions on both sides; and an inability to accept the other's basic principle on colonial boundaries (India thought colonially inherited boundaries were legitimate and China thought they were not). Differences over the border were compounded by doubts about the other's commitments on Tibet. India concluded that China had reneged on its commitments on Tibet's autonomy, and China concluded that India wanted to undo Tibet's post-1950 status. Each side also thought the other to be aggressive rather than defensive militarily. Differences over the border, Tibet, and military moves in the Himalaya continue to complicate relations.

Thirdly, if India and China had been partners internationally, they would have had a history of strategic collaboration to draw on, to balance against their negative perceptions of each other and their conflicts in the perimeters. They would have been better placed also to reassure each other when disagreements occurred. Instead, in seventy years of engagement, they have almost always been on opposite sides of world politics. They have never been partners against a common foe, though their interests sometimes ran parallel, particularly in resisting American hegemony. The moments of diplomatic convergence were ephemeral, and the two leaderships, civilian and military, have lacked robust structures of trust and communication. This pattern looks set to continue.

Finally, since the early 1980s, India has fallen increasingly

behind China in terms of economic, military, and soft power. While the economic power-gap is enormous and insurmountable in the foreseeable future, the military power-gap, while real, is tempered by geography: the intervening mountains and oceanic distances between India and China mean that war and the use of force will at best be limited. India can defend against an attack on its land borders. China lacks sufficient naval power projection to overcome India's natural advantages in the Indian Ocean. The military balance is not static though. If India does not galvanize its indigenous arms industry and if China forges even further ahead in the development of key emerging technologies, the current military balance will turn more decisively against India. As for soft power, China bests India. Overall, on a rough estimate, China may be seven times as powerful as India in terms of comprehensive national power.

Negative mutual perceptions, differences over perimeters, rival partnerships, and the power asymmetry affect each other. The book presents these four drivers of conflict as orthogonal – at right angles to each other, as unrelated – but as suggested above they are intertwined. To show how the four constantly interweave would be a massive task, well beyond the scope of what is intended to be a relatively succinct and accessible account of the relationship between India and China. The reality though is that in combination the four magnify each other and make the conflict even more complex and enduring. My sense is that mutual perceptions and the power asymmetry may be the most serious problems between the two countries. If India and China looked at each more respectfully and if they were on par in terms of capabilities, the border quarrel would probably have been resolved by now. Being in rival partnerships might not have mattered all that much. This is hard to prove of course; it is just an intuition.

It is important to say a few more words on what this book is

and what it is not. As noted above, it is about four key drivers of conflict between the two Asian giants. It is not a book about the latest developments in India–China relations, in particular the events in Ladakh since April–May 2020. We are too close to those developments. Also, while I argue that India must reduce the power-gap with China if the two countries are to move to a more accommodative stance, the book does not say much else about how they should resolve their deep and growing differences. Nor is it a book that assigns blame. Holding leaders, processes, and entire societies responsible for actions and inactions is justified, even necessary, and there are writings that do so – some very partisan, others more measured and careful. This book tries to explain how India and China got to be so fractious despite their attempts at cooperation. In doing so it is probably clear enough where I attach blame even if I do not raise a red flag.

Finally, this is a work of synthesis which draws on existing scholarship. I am particularly grateful to five authors: Ranjit Singh Kalha, John Garver, Srinath Raghavan, Tansen Sen, and Reshma Patil. Anyone writing on the India–China border will profit, as I did massively, from Kalha's encyclopedic *India-China Boundary Issues: Quest for Settlement*. John Garver's massive volume, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century*, is masterful in its measured, even-handed analysis. His article 'China's Decision for War with India in 1962', published in 2006, is invaluable as a source on Chinese decision-making. Srinath Raghavan's two chapters on the India–China conflict in his *War and Peace in Modern India: A Strategic History of the Nehru Years* are fluent, rich accounts, and informed the chapter on perimeters. If it is possible to write a single volume on the history of India–China relations from the earliest times to the present, Tansen Sen's *India, China, and the World: A Connected History* has set the standard. It was never far from my reach. So also,

on contemporary Chinese views of India and Indians, Reshma Patil's perceptive and often wry *Strangers Across the Border: Indian Encounters in Boomtown China* is indispensable. Time and again, I turned to these works for facts, stories, and interpretation, and I have done my best to acknowledge them. They of course bear no responsibility for how I deployed their information and insights.

1

Perceptions: From Regard to Disdain

A place to begin thinking about why India and China are not friends is their perceptions of each other. For a brief moment in the mid-1950s, the two countries seemed to celebrate each other in the slogan 'Hindi-Chini bhai bhai'. Since then, the tone has been more sober, at the best of times. In the worst of times, it has been harsh. The Himalaya limited India–China interactions, especially between the centres of political, social, and economic power, but Buddhism and trade above all brought them into contact. From the fourth to the eleventh centuries CE, it is fair to say that China looked to India culturally as a result of the spread of Buddhism. From the eleventh century CE to about the fifteenth century CE, the relationship was reversed: parts of India paid material and political tribute to the Chinese court. During the colonial period, their perceptions were filtered through the views of the imperial powers and the experience of subjugation, and in the late nineteenth century Chinese perceptions of India turned negative. India's perceptions of China also turned negative, most bitterly after 1962. Contemporary images of each other in many walks of life, in the media, in popular culture, and in surveys are

mixed, but negative, even racist perceptions abound. In addition, the two societies hold to a set of broad frameworks within which they cast themselves and their place in world history. These worldviews are not explicitly about India–China relations, but they have implications for how they perceive each other.

Pre-Modern Perceptions

Before the nineteenth century, India and China had limited contact but had respectful views of each other. The high point of contact was when Buddhism thrived in China. This was followed by a period of some Indian kingdoms paying tribute to the Chinese court: the relationship was reversed, and Indians looked up to China. With the coming of the European colonial powers to India, the relationship between the two societies came increasingly to be mediated through imperialism, and from it developed a Chinese attitude of disdain towards India.

China Looks Up to Buddhist India

While Buddhism first came to China from Central Asia and Iran, not directly from India, the golden period of India–China interactions resulted from Chinese Buddhist pilgrimages to northern India, starting in the fourth century CE and extending up to about the eleventh century CE. The flow of influence was not all one way. Chinese Buddhist ideas and practices flowed back to the land of the Buddha, but it is fair to say that India was looked on as the *Madhyadesha* or Middle Kingdom.

The origins of the relationship

As every Indian schoolchild learns, the Chinese Buddhist monks Faxian and then Xuanzang came to India in the fifth century and

seventh century, respectively. They are the best-known chroniclers among Chinese visitors, but hundreds of other Chinese monks and pilgrims came to India to venerate and to learn. The great era of Chinese pilgrimage came to an end in about the eighth century, though Chinese inscriptions discovered at Bodhgaya are dated as late as the eleventh century.[1] When Central Asia passed out of the hands of the Chinese, making travel difficult, and possibly also as a result of the decline of Buddhism in India, the pilgrimages ended.

However, in the meantime, Indian monks were invited or on their own decided to go to China. Indian missionaries probably arrived there in the first century CE. The most famous early Indian missionary – his father at any rate was of Indian descent, his mother was Central Asian – was Kumarajiva, who was taken prisoner to China from his home in Central Asia in 401 CE. Hundreds of Indian Buddhist scholars went to China carrying learning and texts not available there. Chinese records show that Kashmiri Buddhists played an important role, but other parts of India sent monks as well, sometimes by the sea route. The monks not only taught and preached, they also helped in the massive project of translating the texts they took with them. In the fifth century, Nalanda, the great ancient seat of learning, had opened its doors. By the seventh century, it was a major centre for Chinese scholars. The last Indian monks, according to Chinese records, came to China in 1036, by which time Buddhism in India was deeply in recession.[2]

Chinese responses to Buddhism

Contrary to the popular view in India, it was not all one way. Chinese Buddhism flourished and sometimes came back to influence Indian thought. Tansen Sen notes that 'localized

beliefs evolved to such an extent that they were transmitted back to India'. He gives the example of the cult of Mount Wutai in China's Shaanxi province that by the sixth century was attracting Indian monks.[3] The Cinacara ('practice of China') cult had Indian followers. Some Taoist influences may have come to India from Buddhist monks returning from China. Xuanzang apparently worked on a Sanskrit translation of the *Dao de jing* in the Tang period for the edification of an Assamese king.[4] Chinese scholarship was not just religious and philosophical. Xuanzang's accounts of his India days include a detailed description of the rule of Harshavardhana of Kanauj. Indeed, along with the writings of Bana, it is one of the key sources on those times.

The introduction of Buddhism in China had a great impact on Chinese society, but it was not all friendly and reverential. In his survey of China–India interactions from ancient times to 1939, Rudolf Wagner writes: 'The massive Chinese absorption . . . of basic Buddhist ideas and concepts, social institutions, and ritual practices was not to be accommodated within the existing system.'[5] Inevitably, there was resistance and repugnance in China. For one thing, Buddhism 'assigned it [China] a place as a "land at margin"'. India was the original (or co-equal) Madhyadesha or *Zhongguo* ('Middle Kingdom'). For China, this was difficult to accept. Buddhism, with its view of 'life as suffering', also went against 'a culture devoted to long life and prosperity'. China before Buddhism emphasized that young people should be 'productive, take care of their elders, and have children in order to continue the ancestor cult'. The new religion encouraged an existence marked by donations, a monastic life, and celibacy.[6] Chinese responses included creating a 'Buddhist narrative for China' or 'sidelining Buddhism' by older faiths and practices.[7] Daoism launched a strong attack, even arguing that its founder, Laozi, was the Buddha. In 842 CE, Emperor Wuzong declared Daoism as a true

Chinese religion and 'proceeded to a systematic suppression and expropriation' of all 'foreign' religions. As the state came to control religion, Buddhism became a Chinese faith alongside Daoism and Confucianism.[8] That Buddhism had more or less collapsed in India by this time only helped in the Sinification of the religion: the land of its origin had ceased to be an inspiration.

India Looks Up to Imperial China

From here on, for seven hundred years from the ninth to the sixteenth century, it was trade, especially maritime trade, that came to mark India–China interchange: the material came to replace the spiritual. China's growing naval reach peaked in the voyages of Zheng He to Asia and Africa from 1405 to 1433, and parts of India became tributaries or felt the sharp end of Chinese power.

Towards a new relationship

The asymmetry that marked cultural relations was supplanted by a perhaps more reciprocal relationship in the exchange of goods – 'perhaps' because we have no records of the volume of trade. Tansen Sen in his wonderful synoptic history of India–China relations from ancient to modern times presents a vivid picture of the material economy that replaced the spiritual economy. After the tenth century, an array of goods, beyond Buddhist relics and paraphernalia, went from India to China: exotic and other animals (including horses from Arabia), plants and plant products, spices and foods, drugs and herbs, precious and semi-precious stones, gold and silver objects, pearls, ivory products, incense, textiles especially cotton, and even slaves. In return, Chinese rulers sent silk and, in one case, slaves, musk, robes, jewels, quivers, and swords. They also granted traders the right to sell their wares in

China and offered tax exemptions. Chinese traders sold silk and other textiles, spices, and porcelain.[9]

Sen reminds us that Sanskrit texts of the pre-Buddhist period had contained references to products that are suffixed by the word 'cina' including *cinani* (peaches), *cinasi* (hides), *cinarajaputra* (pears), and *cinaka* (camphor) and of course *cinamsuka* or *cinapatta* (silk). However, this did not imply that the two societies knew a great deal about each other: most of the products that came from China were through intermediaries in Central Asia.[10] During the period of intense spiritual encounter, Buddhist paraphernalia were the mainstay of material flows. Later, diplomatic gifts were part of the flow. Later still, tributes to China from maritime polities in the Indic region including Ceylon dominated material exchange.

Indian tributes to China

These tributes did not necessarily signify subordination, though Song China and Yuan China under Kublai Khan tried to control maritime trade in the Indian Ocean – and Kublai Khan threatened and then sent punitive missions.[11] More famously, Admiral Zheng He, in the early fifteenth century, led seven expeditions into the Indian Ocean region including to the Malabar coast and Bengal.[12] Some contemporary Chinese interpretations portray Zheng He's voyages as a benevolent exercise in which a hegemonic navy controlled piracy, managed local conflicts from Southeast Asia through South Asia to the Gulf and east coast of Africa, and laid the basis for a cosmopolitan trading environment which worked to everyone's benefit. In other words, China delivered what economists call a 'public good'. More accurately, though, Zheng He was sent to enlarge tributary relations, to expand China's imperial and private trade, and bring home exotica of various kinds. Often enough, his navy intervened in local affairs, siding

with one ruler against a rival, and using the threat if not actual use of force to settle the matter – including in parts of Kerala and Bengal. This was Chinese imperialism, plain and simple. As Sen notes, 'many of the features of the Zheng He expeditions were similar to the activities of the European colonial powers subsequently'.[13]

By the early fifteenth century, interactions between India and China had declined. This was in part due to the Song dynasty's decision, at the height of its maritime imperialism, to discourage the voyages of Zheng He and other Chinese naval expeditions. Tribute to China continued sporadically, mostly from the South China Sea area and from parts of India and Sri Lanka through intermediaries in Southeast Asia. With the disappearance of Chinese maritime control, the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British in turn adopted and adapted Zheng Ho's network and maritime order. Chinese imperialism was replaced by European imperialism.

From the fourth to the end of the ninth century, with the spread of Buddhism, China – or at least some Chinese – had looked to India as a spiritual centre. From about the eleventh to the early fifteenth century, Chinese reverence for India was replaced by Indian reverence for China in the form of tributes from various Indian kingdoms. The next four hundred years saw the Portuguese, Dutch, and British insert themselves into the relationship. India and China no longer dealt with each other in the direct if limited sense that had marked the period from the fourth to the fifteenth century. Neither side looked up to the other or looked down at the other – at least until the nineteenth century when British interventions in China led to Chinese resentment and disdain towards India and Indians.

Perceptions in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

The commodities trade between India and China expanded and the nature of relations between the two changed during the colonial period. The Dutch linked India and China through the opium trade. They took opium from production centres in Patna and Malwa to China. From its original medicinal and aphrodisiacal uses, it became a recreational drug.[14] The opium trade would go on to have enormous consequences for India–China interactions over the next three hundred years or so. Under the British, Indian cotton and opium were increasingly traded for Chinese tea, silk, and sugar ('chini' or crystalline white sugar from China, as against the original dark sugar made in India). A financial system too sprang up, of credit bills, loans, and insurance. In addition, India–China economic interactions mediated by the British led to Indians working in China and the establishment of a Chinese community in India, around Calcutta mostly. As Chinese intellectuals reacted to the intrusions of the Western powers, they turned their attention to British rule in India, its antecedents and consequences. The interactions with Indians in China and the conclusions they drew about India were often negative.

Chinese Perceptions of India and Indians

Two sets of negative perceptions of India and Indians were formed as the two societies were interlinked by British rule. The first came out of Chinese encounters with Indians in China. The second grew out of Chinese intellectuals reflecting on India under British rule.

Perceptions of Indians in China

After the Opium Wars (1839–42 between China and Britain, and 1856–60 between China, Britain, and France), the Indian community in China grew substantially. Indians had largely lived in Guangzhou, Tibet, and Xinjiang, but after the wars, they spread out to Hong Kong and Shanghai as well. They were largely traders but also Sikh policemen and watchmen.[15] Their presence led to an increase in disputes and resentments. Parsi traders violated an agreement with Chinese authorities not to sell opium in 1839. They also helped finance the Opium Wars and loaned out ships to the British. In Xinjiang, Indians were involved in various commercial and fiscal disputes. In Shanghai, Sikh policemen and watchmen developed a reputation for being fierce and violent. They and other Indians attracted various racist descriptions referencing their appearance and colour. Indian soldiers under the British fought in the Opium Wars and helped suppress the Taiping and Boxer rebellions. They too attracted all kinds of invidious names and descriptions.[16]

Chinese intellectuals view India

This disdain was to become evident, too, at the level of China's intellectuals and its political elite in the late nineteenth century. The source materials for their knowledge of India came largely from European and Japanese writers (the latter's views often drew on European writings). Wagner in his survey of Chinese attitudes concludes: 'The trope of the unchanging Indian national character that was unable and unwilling to adapt to changing circumstances was already well established in the West by this time [i.e., the early nineteenth century] and became firmly established in the Chinese discussion.'[17] Chinese writers and thinkers got a picture

of a timeless rural population, 'divided into castes, addicted to ascetic superstition, religious suicide, and abstruse philosophy'.[18] Indians were feudal and disunited, unable to stand up to foreign invaders, and willing to serve anyone who ruled. Indian ('Hindu') servility came from a history of living under 'despotic' rule without rights and without regard for truth and honesty. This was an image that the British would propagate about China as well: the rulers of these Asian societies in effect had deserved to lose control of their territories to outsiders because they had failed to look after the security and welfare of their subjects.

By the 1890s, Wagner shows, the Chinese were getting 'a steady stream of mostly commercial and political news about India'. After China was defeated by Japan in the Sino-Japanese war, the British missionary journalist Timothy Richard wrote about the benefits of crown rule in India (when it supplanted the East India Company) – he had been asked to submit to the Chinese imperial government ideas about governance reforms. Robert MacKenzie's *The Nineteenth Century*, which reflected similarly on British rule in India, was made compulsory reading for Chinese officials in 1898.[19] Emerging Chinese intellectuals such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, fearful that a backward China would be partitioned after it was defeated by Japan, set up reform newspapers and became loud and critical voices for change.

Wagner's fascinating study of the period shows that the young reformers urged China to emulate Japan, Russia, and Germany in their reform process and not to go the way of societies like India. At the heart of their view was that internal weakness more than imperialism was the cause of Indian national decay. For Liang, China could avoid the fate of India (and others) because the 'yellow' races were as talented as the 'white' – by implication this was not the case with the other races. Liang and others also had access to Japanese writings about India. These writings,

too, blamed India's internal weakness, not imperialism, for its decline and colonization.[20] A group of Chinese students in Japan ran a series of articles on India in 1903, titled 'The Causes for the Demise of India'. Drawing on Japanese sources, the articles produced a damning picture of India. The tone of the writing is by turns contemptuous, exasperated, and melancholy:

> [T]he word 'India' is in fact nothing but a name from history. Aya! Their land is all smashed to pieces . . . this brown race will be forever enslaved . . . Looking at China today, it is like India in the past . . . As a matter of principle, it were the Indians who brought about the demise of India . . . The character of the race is chaotic, their languages topsy turvy, their religions all separate from each other . . . there is no unified spirit, no patriotic thinking, the elites are drowning themselves in song and dance, and know nothing of great purpose . . . Alas, India is lost![21]

For some in China, among the causes of India's decline was Buddhism, with its metaphysical abstractions and non-violence. In 1937, Hu Shi, a Kuomintang ambassador to the US, in a speech at Harvard University's 300th anniversary, attributed China's lack of resistance to the Japanese to the 'Indianization of China' which had seeped into its culture thanks to Buddhism. As Wagner points out, he made these remarks even as the Kuomintang was trying to cultivate Indian nationalist support against the Japanese invasion.[22]

Wagner shows that news and analysis of India during this period was extensive. Between 1872 and 1938, *Shenbao*, a leading Chinese-language newspaper, published 1629 news and lead articles on India. A number of them were from Reuters, the British news agency. This amounted to an average of 24 per year or 2 per month. From 1921 to 1938, the average was 71 per year or nearly 6 articles per month. The Chinese-language periodical press, in

addition, featured 9363 articles with the word 'India' in it. Initially, the reform press of Liang Qichao and Kang Youwei dominated India-related publishing. But after 1908, the more commercial press featured India materials. The average per year went up to 120 'dedicated articles' on India in the period until 1928 and then 540 articles per year thereafter.[23] This is quite extraordinary coverage and has probably never been repeated. Not all the coverage and commentary was negative: much of it may simply have been factual news of the day. Yet Wagner concludes, 'The increasingly rich and diverse knowledge about India available in China . . . was not able to undo the basic narrative of India being a country for the demise of which its own people were responsible . . . It had become a trope already by 1900, and it was revived time and again ever since.'[24]

It was in this context that Rabindranath Tagore visited China in 1924 after a trip to Japan. He was already famous for being the first Asian to get a Nobel Prize (in Literature) and arrived in China with his brand of non-violent, 'spiritual cosmopolitanism'. His reception was mixed. He had his admirers among intellectuals, artists, and students, but as in Japan, he came under criticism. The trip left him somewhat bitter and must be counted a failure if the intent was to propagate a sense of cosmopolitanism and non-violent emancipation.

Whatever Tagore's intent, he was roundly denounced and ridiculed, particularly by leftist/communist revolutionaries, old and young, including former admirers and translators of his work. He was seen as extolling traditional, feudal Asia and romanticizing the Orient against the material, industrial Occident. His critics argued that China had to emulate the West in respect of science and reason, not fall back into tradition and spiritualism. Ramachandra Guha quotes the Chinese scholar Wu Chih-hui's scathing and cruel judgement: 'Mr Tagore . . . a petrified fossil

of India's national past, had retreated into the tearful eyes and dripping noses of the slave people of a conquered country, seeking happiness in a future life, squeaking like the hub of a wagon wheel that needs oil'. Guha notes that in a poll of over a thousand students at Peking University in 1923–24, over 700 students wanted revolution in China. Nearly half admired Soviet Russia over the US. And in a list of international leaders that they most respected, Lenin got the most votes by far (227), with Tagore getting a mere 17 votes and Gandhi receiving only 9.[25]

Indian Perceptions of China and the Chinese

What about Indian attitudes towards China? The short answer is that we have no detailed picture of their perceptions of the Chinese in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On the other hand, we do have some evidence relating to the Chinese communities in India and of elite Indian views of China.

The Chinese in India

We know much less about Chinese communities in India than we do about Indian communities in China. In 1871–72, there were about 1100 Chinese in Calcutta and Bombay. By the Second World War, though, the numbers had grown to 15,000.[26] The largest number were in Bengal, around Calcutta, and in parts of Assam. The first immigrant came to Bengal as early as 1778. He brought tea and got a land grant in return for setting up a sugar mill. He then imported Chinese labour. Added to this were 'runaway sailors and indentured servants'.[27] By the early nineteenth century, the Chinese had built community life in a residential area in Calcutta's Bowbazar. The immigrants were tradespeople – 'shoemakers, opium-sellers, carpenters, cabinet

makers, and lard manufacturers'. By the end of the nineteenth century, their numbers had been fortified by new immigrants, and they established new businesses, associations, temples, and schools. In addition to carpentry and shoemaking, they set up tailor shops, tanneries, restaurants, tea stalls, dental clinics, pharmacies, grocery stores, and they sold silk and paper flowers.[28]

This suggests that Chinese immigrants led a reasonably productive and peaceful life in India. However, it was not all sweetness and light between the immigrants and host communities in Calcutta, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Assam. A nineteenth-century British official recorded that sections of the Chinese hated the local population 'in all intensity of Chinese hatred'. The Chinese apparently felt that they depended on British protection and that the colonials were 'better paymasters than the local Bengalis'. In his account of the community, Sen notes 'the preference to work for the British in India continued to be expressed by Chinese migrants up through Indian independence . . . indicating the uncomfortable existence of the ethnic Chinese among the Indians'. This would come back to haunt them in the late 1950s and early 1960s when India–China tensions sharpened.[29] Particularly from 1959, sections of the Chinese were spied on and eventually had to register with the police. Anyone who failed to do so lived under threat of deportation. According to the Chinese scholar Xing Zhang, bank accounts were 'confiscated', remittances to China halted, and 'Chinese shops were pillaged by mobs and forced to paste words against the Chinese government on their doors'. Not everyone was under suspicion or pressure. Xing tells us that some 'continued to flourish, open new businesses, and even came out in support of the Indian government' and donated to the National Defence Fund.[30] During the war of 1962, matters worsened, though, when many in the Chinese community were interned in camps and dispersed to places like Deoli in faraway

Rajasthan. In some cases, they were deported to China even if they were born and raised in India and were dispossessed of their properties without compensation. The travails of the Chinese community have been poignantly fictionalized in the Assamese writer Rita Chowdhury's *Chinatown Days.* Reflecting on the book, she writes: 'Those who were young during that turbulent time had all grown old now. The rest of them, deeply embittered by the dreadful memories of the time and its insufferable aftermath, migrated to different parts of the world . . . The agony that had maimed their psyche forever still ran deep in their spirits . . . What moved me the most was their unflinching love for Makum – the place of their birth [in Assam] . . .'[31]

Elite views of China

We will get a flavour of Indian elite perspectives on China and the Chinese when we deal with Indian worldviews later in the chapter. Suffice to say here that among the moderate-liberal nationalists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, China may well have appeared in the way that the British saw it: like India, it was big but brittle, internally divided and weak, and governed by aloof despots. Among the emerging Indian nationalists including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhas Chandra Bose, China was a fellow Asian victim of imperialism trying to oust the European powers and reform its own society – much as India was trying to do. It was also a potential partner in the project of Asian unity, along with Japan (at least until Japanese militarism reared its head) – this was most famously Tagore's message but is evident in Gandhi, Nehru, and Bose. Among Indian socialists and communists, China's growing revolutionary spirit was an example and inspiration, its society to be emulated and actively helped during a time of massive social and political transformation.

This is by no means a full picture of Indian attitudes to China and the Chinese during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – that would be another book. In any case, as things stand, Chinese attitudes towards India and Indians are better documented. On Indian attitudes, there has been much less research, though historians such as Sen have written about Tagore, his pan-Asianism, and his efforts at India–China artistic and intellectual collaboration at Cheena Bhavan.[32] Rahul Sagar's *Ideas of India*, a massive online archiving of Indian writings in English from 1825 to 1950, suggests that China did feature fairly extensively – unfortunately, I became aware of this trove too late to access its content.[33] On the whole, it is safe to say that the views of key Indian nationalist leaders and personalities were positive if not admiring of China's classical culture but also of its modernizing impulses, including its resistance to Western and Japanese imperialism.

Perceptions in More Contemporary Times

How do Indians and Chinese see each other in more recent times? The short answer is not very positively. Since 1962, Indian admiration and affinity for China has been replaced by a sneaking/fearful admiration of its rise to power mixed with a sense of betrayal/humiliation as a result of the war. In China, the negative views of India have continued: nineteenth-century disdain combined with a degree of indifference. The Chinese increasingly see their country as a great power with no peer except the US, and Americans are their main reference point. This mutual alienation between Indians and Chinese somewhat overstates feelings on both sides. There are those who see something to like and engage in the other, and there is curiosity, even respect. Yet, the negative

views of each other's society and at the same time ignorance of each other is palpable.

How can we access these views? First we turn to the insights of three Indian writers who lived and travelled in China beginning in the early 1980s (there do not seem to be equivalent writings by Chinese travellers except for Hong Mei's *The Farther I Walk, the Closer I Get to Me*, which is only available in Mandarin). Beyond these writings, two academic studies of Indian and Chinese attitudes in the mainstream and social media reveal the extent of racist and jingoistic views, particularly in China. A third source is survey and polling data of Indian attitudes which depict the extent of fear and mistrust towards China, especially after the Doklam confrontation in 2017. Finally, Indian dispositions towards the ethnic Chinese in India and towards China in the wake of Covid-19 show that racism and jingoism are alive and well south of the Himalaya too.

Chinese Perceptions of India: Through Indian Eyes

We can begin to get a sense of more contemporary Chinese views of India through three writers who spent time in China – Vikram Seth, the Indian novelist and poet, Anurag Vishwanath, an Indian scholar who travelled widely in the country as part of her doctoral and postdoctoral studies, and, Reshma Patil, an Indian journalist who reported mostly from the big Chinese cities.

'From Heaven Lake'

In 1981, Vikram Seth, the writer but at the time a doctoral student from Stanford University studying in China, hitchhiked from Xinjiang to Tibet on his way home to India. He records his

arduous journey and his encounters with ordinary Chinese people along the way in a candid, affectionate book, *From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Xinjiang and Tibet*.[34] It is a revealing account: the Chinese clap to Bollywood songs, are curious about India, soothe Seth over the 1962 war, and display a cheery ignorance about Indian society. In Turfan, Xinjiang, he is asked to sing an Indian song in front of a small audience. He sings the theme-song from the classic Bollywood film *Awara* and finds that the local musicians on stage immediately play the instrumental accompaniment to the song. Seth notes this is to have a happy consequence the next day when he applies for official permission for his trip to Tibet. Someone who was in the audience the previous evening is present during his application for the enabling permit. They get talking about *Awara* while the official considers the application. The local official knows Bollywood films and is drawn into the discussion, and Seth soon gets his permit.[35]

On a train ride, Seth is engaged in innocent and friendly conversations by curious fellow passengers. He is asked forthrightly about his marital status, a family photograph is examined, and questions are asked about his father's kurta and his mother's bindi. The 1962 war, he is told, was 'an unfortunate incident, the fault of governments, not of peoples, and anyway a very short period of hostility when looked at in the perspective of such a long friendship'. Discussion turns amiably to Raj Kapoor, Seth's job prospects, and India's birth control programme.[36] In Liuyuan, he tries to get a truck ride for the next stage of his journey. A rather comical exchange with a truck driver ensues, with the driver trying to guess Seth's nationality: Mexican, Sri Lankan, Pakistani, Nepalese, Iranian, Russian? He is playfully steered to the right answer. The driver clearly has no picture in his mind of the physical appearance of an Indian – or at least a north Indian.

Seth also describes an evening spent with a local official who had served in the army in the 1962 war. You can almost see the rueful headshaking of the man as he recounts: 'A strange task [being a border soldier in 1962]. You couldn't tell where the border was. One day it was here, another day there. We retreated, they [the Indians] occupied, and *vice versa*. We just did what we were told. I'm glad things have improved in our relations.'[37]

On the evening before India's annual Independence Day celebrations, Seth reflects on the two countries. It is 1981, China's extraordinary economic reforms and rise have not yet occurred, yet there is already much to be admired in China's development story: 'One overwhelming fact is that the Chinese have a better system of social care and of distribution than we do. Their aged do not starve. Their children are basically healthy. By and large, the people are well clothed'. Would it be better to be born Indian or Chinese, Seth asks himself? If he were among the lucky two-thirds on top of Indian society, he would choose India, 'But if I were born to the inhuman, dehumanising misery in which the poorest third of our [Indian] people live, to the squalor and despair and debility that is their life, my answer would not be the same.'[38] India has its assets – given the climate, Indians need less, they have more arable land and sunshine and (potentially) irrigation – and the country is democratic. Yet, it must be granted that the average Chinese is better off.[39]

What, then, of mutual feeling between the two countries? Seth concludes his book rather gloomily. Ignorance and lack of a shared history typify their relationship: 'friendship rests on understanding; and the two countries, despite their contiguity, have had almost no contact in the course of history . . . the heartlands of the two great culture zones have been almost untouched by each other . . . Unfortunately, I think this will continue . . . The fact that they are both part of the same landmass means nothing. There is no

such thing as an Asian ethos or mode of thinking . . . The best that can be hoped for . . . is a respectful patience on either side'.[40]

'Finding India in China'

Two decades later, the Indian scholar Anurag Vishwanath travelled to the remotest corners of China as part of her doctoral research on Chinese reforms and poverty alleviation. Based on fifteen years of travels, she penned an engaging book of encounters that she intriguingly titled *Finding India in China: Travels to the Lesser Known*.[41] In fact, though there are moments in China that evoke a memory of India, the book reveals the opposite: China and India seem economically, socially, and culturally miles apart. Mostly the book is about China and the matter-of-fact interactions she has with Chinese people in remote parts of the country. Yet here and there the narrative provides glimpses of not-so-positive views of India and Indians.

Among the places Vishwanath visited was Gansu province, widely regarded in China as one of its poorest – at least by Chinese standards. In a revealing aside, Vishwanath reflects on the province and Chinese attitudes to India: 'Gansu is generally considered *luan* – an oft-used Chinese word which narrowly means "chaotic" . . . Of course, it does not help that the average Chinese categorises India as *luan*, too – disordered, chaotic and not given to easy navigation.'[42] Vishwanath describes an encounter with a drunken local official who suddenly asks her, 'Are all Indians as black (dark skinned) as you?' She and the other Chinese at her table try to quell the offensive official 'but then there was no stopping his running tongue as he slid into a nasty diatribe on India as a place of filth and poverty'.[43] In *vino veritas* – in wine, truth? Probably not quite. Vishwanath's encounter is unusual – Indians in China are unlikely to experience something as nakedly racist and derogatory. Yet the

episode reveals an element of Chinese attitudes towards India: a *luan* place inhabited by dark-skinned people.

Later in the book, Vishwanath recounts more charming encounters. Among them is one in Inner Mongolia, in the town of Hohhot, with Professor Fun Wen, 'a die-hard fan of Rabindranath Tagore' who emotionally recites Tagore all morning long for her. She later dines with Fun Wen, a sociologist working on India, and the local Party Secretary, a 'dashing' man, and no mere party apparatchik. The functionary is knowledgeable about India and 'effortlessly' turns the conversation to Rahul Gandhi, among other topics.[44] These Chinese are not racist. They are admirers of Indian culture, or they are cool-headed interlocutors interested in India's modern development.

'Strangers Across the Border'

This duality is not uniquely Chinese. Every society harbours ambivalences about other societies. Reshma Patil, the *Hindustan Times* correspondent in China from 2008 to 2011, renders both the denigrators and admirers of India in her candid, perceptive book *Strangers Across the Border: Indian Encounters in Boomtown China*.[45] More than Seth in the 1980s or Vishwanath in the 'lesser known' in the 2000s, Patil deals with urban, developed China and Sino-Indian encounters in more upmarket settings. Here, ironically, the ignorance of and disdain for India is far greater than knowledge of and admiration for things Indian.

Patil's account opens with an encounter over cricket – the Indian game 'accidentally invented by the British', in the sociologist Ashis Nandy's famous quip. She finds herself among budding young Chinese players at Tsinghua University in Beijing. Their ignorance about and lack of engagement with India are rather baffling but also amusing. No one at the field shows any