India China cultural relations: background and prospects

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Introduction

India and China are two giants in the Asia. Unfortunately they have maintained a long history of political conflict. Though they also have an impressive history of cultural interaction, in the contemporary age this interactive force has assumed a critical importance. Role of cultural interaction in the International Politics has its value. India and China cultural relations are no exception in this respect. Cultural relations have played an important role in defining the political relations since ancient time. They carry tremendous value even in the present context when both countries have aimed to improve their relations after a negative history of relationship.

The role of cultural is now recognized in the International Politics. At the theoretical level this aspect is now termed as soft diplomacy when cultural relations are employed to serve the national interest.

India and China both are skilled to employ the soft diplomacy but their application of it in their bilateral relation is minimal. In fact they have a developed base of the cultural relations where the scope for new cultural activism can be enhanced. Hence soft diplomacy can play an important role in the improvement of relations between both countries. Cultural relations can support the improvement in political relations, in consequence if the political relations are improved, the cultural relations will be spontaneously boosted. This interactive chain reaction is caused due to deep interaction of the politics and culture activities. This aspect needs to be analysed with respect to India-China relations.

Situating the culture in the International Politics
Culture plays an important role in defining the political relations between the countries. Theoretically it can be stated that in "international relations in the new world, situation can no longer be understood or navigated only in terms of the narrow economic self-interested concerns for profit or political concerns for power. Rather there is need to take account of values and cultures. As these are essentially differentiated between peoples, this entails a trend toward pluralism. Hence the new search must be for complementarity and, more deeply for the basis of cooperation between cultures."  

The importance of culture as an important component in defining the political and economic relations has been recognized recently. This realization has opened a new avenue of bilateral and multilateral relationship pattern among the countries. "The influence of the cultural factor in contemporary international relations has caught the attention of quite a few scholars. Lawrence Harrison published his book entitled Who Prospers? How Cultural Values Shape Economic and Political Success? in 1992; Samuel Huntington published his article, entitled "The Clash of Civilizations?," in 1993; Thomas Sowell published his book, Race and Culture: A World View in 1994; Francis Fukuyama published his book Trust: The Social Virtue and the Creation of Prosperity in 1995. Works like these have illuminated the impact of culture on international relations."  

These scholarships have shown that cultural relations can be utilized in highly positive manner to enhance the relations between the countries.

After the demise of USSR on 25th December 1991 many changes occurred in the International Politics. New trends appeared, but simultaneously the role of cultural component was also accepted as an important force in developing the country to country relation. For this reason new theoretical postulates also emerged, particularly "after World War II, especially in the post-Cold War era, there have been dramatic changes in the domain of international political studies. The function of traditional 'international politics' theories has become weaker and weaker in explaining post-Cold War international relations. On the contrary, culture, a traditional variable in international relations, after being long neglected and covered, has revealed itself and become the third dimension for researching state behavior, foreign policy, international security and so on. Constructivism studying interaction between culture and society in international relations has also become an international relations theory running neck and neck with neo-realism and neo-liberalism. Its core concepts include culture, norms and identity. Collective identity is not only a logical starting point for culture explaining international relations but also an important medium for the cultural factor playing a constructive role in international relations. Therefore, in some sense, a new international relations history can be almost annotated from the cultural perspective."  

This particular development has concluded that
the role of culture in defining the relations among the nations is highly impactful and no country can now avoid it any more.

**Buddhism initiates cultural interactions in ancient age**

In the ancient India-China at the cultural level came into close contact with the advent of Buddhism in China where many dynasties supported it. It was thought that Buddhism could provide immortality. Buddhists texts and scholars were respected. Buddhism in that age had influenced many adjoining countries of India. “Although during the first few centuries of Buddhist missionary activities in China the lead was generally given by the Buddhist scholars of Iran and of countries in Central Asia, Indian Buddhist scholars did not fail to make their presence felt in the various centres of Buddhism in China and create amongst the Chinese an interest in Buddhism and Indian culture in general which would not have been otherwise possible. The first two Indian scholars who came to China in 68 A.D. during the reign of Mingti, Kasypa Mitanga and Dharmaraksa, translated five Buddhist texts into Chinese. These were resumes of the legends of the birth and childhood of Buddha, a resume of his predication, a short treatise on the main principles of Buddhism, a sutra on the purity of monastic life and a sutra on the principles of ascetic life for those who wanted to follow the way of spiritual perfection. Four of these works were judicious selection. The "Sutra of 42 sections" which has been preserved up till now is clearly a catechism for the use of missionaries intending to preach the Buddhist religion in foreign countries. The original text did not belong to the Buddhist Canon. It had been compiled in order to give a general idea of the religion and its practices. The first Buddhist monastery in China Po ma sse, the "White Horse Monastery" was built at Lo-yang for these two Indian missionaries” and “Dharmakala, Sanghavarman and Dharmasatya were all Indian monks. They translated a number of Vinaya works towards the middle of the 3rd century A.D.’’

A major fillip in cultural interaction took place when “the sea-route between China and India was probably opened up in the 2nd century A.D. South China in this period included Kiao-che (Tonkin) which had come into contact with India in the 2nd century A.D.”

It is not so that Buddhism made its imprint in China so late, many centuries back Buddhism had emerged as a major religion in India; it is quite likely that Chinese would have known about it as Indian Kings were interested to disseminate the teachings of Buddha to far and wide.
In the fourth century AD Indian scholars had based themselves in China. “Kumarajiva was living in China in Leang-chou since 385 A.D. where he had been brought by General Liu-kuang after his conquest of Kucha. Kumarajiva now came to Ch'ang-ngan on an invitation from Yao-hing. It is said that he was born of a Kuchean Princess and an Indian father and was educated in Kashmir. He was a man of rare genius and during 12 years of his stay in China performed the most important work in the cause of Buddhism. He was the first to introduce in a systematic manner the Mahayana in China. In order to facilitate this work he translated some of the fundamental texts of Mahayana (and) Kumarajiva was the first to introduce in China a more profound knowledge of Indian Buddhism. He found out that the texts translated earlier into Chinese were more or less diffused and full of mistakes. His translations were made in good Chinese. His works are sometimes condensed and abridged in regard to the form but their meaning is very explicit. It is admitted by all that he was one of the best translators. Kumarajiva died in 413 A.D. but his school continued to do great work up to 417 A.D.”

In the fifth and sixth century the influence of Buddhism was still prevalent but some decline was about to set in due course as “towards the end of the Wei rule, Bodhiruci a famous Indian monk came to Lo-yang to continue the work of translation. He also worked at Ye where the wei capital was transferred for a short while (508-536). He translated in all 36 volumes. During the Wei period the Chinese Buddhist monks felt so much need of coming into contact with India directly that a number of Chinese monks had gone up to India. The most famous amongst them were Fa-hien and Song-yun. The Northern Ts'i succeeded the Wei in 550 A.D. and reigned till 577 A.D. Buddhist literary activity was not very intensive in this period. We get the name of one Indian scholar Narendrayasas who translated a number of texts into Chinese. The rulers of the Ts'i dynasty however were great patrons of Buddhism.”

but “the Chou dynasty succeeded the Wei in 557 A.D. They do not seem to have been quite well disposed towards Buddhism. Some able Indian scholars Jnanabhadra, Jinagupta, etc. came to China in this period but they were not much encouraged by the Chou rulers in their work.” Although interaction continued as “the Song rulers were great patrons of Buddhism. During their reign 210 volumes of texts were translated into Chinese and in all 1913 Buddhists temples were built throughout the empire. Amongst those who conducted the work of translation there were some famous Indian scholars Dharmamitra, Gunbhadra, Gunavarman, etc.”

This interaction although regenerated after the continuous use of sea routes by the travellers. “Under the Leang dynasty (502-556) Buddhist activities continued with equal success. Indian scholars were coming to South China by the sea route. The most famous amongst them was
Paramartha who was a native of Ujjayini. He was at first educated in the Brahmanical schools and was afterwards converted to Buddhism. He translated a large number of texts into Chinese and amongst them there were also texts of Brahmanical philosophy in which the Chinese Buddhists were getting interested."\textsuperscript{11}

These interactions had profound impact on the minds of the Chinese people. The Buddhism had received the royal patronage; hence the impact on the common people was quite much. It also laid the basis of the cultural diffusion in China.\textsuperscript{12}

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Information about Indian culture, geography, and languages constantly trickled into China through the translation of Buddhist texts and in the diaries of Chinese monks making pilgrimages to India. Subsequently, India was portrayed to the Chinese public as a mystic land by Buddhist religious sermons and roadside storytelling. Thus, for the majority of Chinese laity, unable to visit India and judge the objectivity of apocryphal texts and religious sermons, the Buddhist world of India was no doubt mystifying.
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The use of sea routes and travels by the monks from both countries continued to nurture the cultural relations in effective measure. It is well evident that “the epithet "Golden Age" is commonly used to describe the thriving religious and secular exchanges between India and China during the Tang period (but) a string of political upheavals and socio-economic and intellectual changes within the two regions and in the surrounding areas prompted discernable shifts in the interactions between India and Tang China. In the seventh century, for example, religious, diplomatic, and commercial exchanges between the two countries were centered on the Gangetic region. During the eighth century, the focal point of Sino-Indian diplomatic relations shifted to the southern Hindukush area. And from the ninth century onward, the maritime exchanges between coastal India and China began to grow rapidly. Changes are also evident in the role and position of Buddhism in the three centuries of Tang-India interactions. While the seventh century is epitomized by the pilgrimages of Chinese monks to India and translation activities of Indian monks in China, the eighth century reveals an orchestrated use of Indic paraphernalia to establish a Buddhist realm in China. The ninth and tenth centuries, on the other hand, indicate the gradual, but potent, trend toward the eventual sinification of the Buddhist doctrine in China. Similarly, important variations can be discerned in the styles and motifs of Buddhist art transmitted from southern Asia to Tang China. While in the first half of the Tang period Buddhist art in China was intrinsically linked to the stylistic features originating in northern India, especially from the Swat valley and Kasmir (Kashmir), during
the second half of the Tang period, Chinese Buddhist imagery indicates an increased interaction with Nepalese and South Indian art."

These interactions helped Chinese to develop a particular type of the religious orientation. This was caused by the direct impact of Buddhism. “It is also important to remember that the implanting of Buddhism in China produced a typically Chinese form of Buddhism that was found in all the Chinese schools and was not inferior to Indian forms. This typically Chinese Buddhism is particularly evident in Zen, the most successful of all the schools in terms of adaptation to Chinese culture. The uniqueness of Chinese Buddhism resulted on the one hand from the influx of ancient Chinese ideas, especially the wisdom of Taoism, and on the other hand from the influence of Mahayana teachings from India. “

This development suggests that China was overwhelmed with the diffusion of Indian Buddhism and it laid the base of cultural relationship between both countries. From Chinese side travelers visited India to learn Buddhism and Indian knowledge but these were mainly confined in the centre of knowledge. They although awakened India about the existence of a country with which it was going to develop a special type of relationship in the years to come.

**Cultural interaction in medieval age**

During this phase the cultural relations declined to a certain extent due to control of India by the British colonial power. British foreign policy had different goals in which China was treated in a different manner. It affected the India-China relations but many Indian states had developed contacts with China and its impact was visible on their political-administrative life. In this respect many evidences exist. “Since early medieval times some of the Hindu Stales in India started appointing official annalists to keep historical records of the reigns of their rulers. This is first noticed in Kashmir and Nepal. The *Raiatarangini* and its supplement are systematic annals of the kingdom of Kashmir. The *Vamsavalis* of Nepal go back to about the 9th century. The treatment of historical data is more accurate in these Vamsavalis than in the Kashmir chronicles as they irritate the dates of the reigns and the events occurring during a particular reign. In the East the Ahoms introduced the practice of writing such annals which are called *Buranjis*. The practice of writing dynastic annals is so new to kitten trillion that one is tempted to attribute it to Chinese influence. In China alone this tradition was developed since very early times. In India it was followed mostly in the outlying kingdoms which were in close contact with China for several centuries."

The relations although were too deep due to the bases developed during the ancient time. In fact at the people to people level, contacts continued by different means. Thus alignment between both the
countries at the cultural level continued. “Schafer conjures the world of luxury goods and the enthusiasm that surrounded them in the Tang. And while India was by no means the only or even the primary source of exotic goods at the time, India was certainly well known as a source of finery and wonder among the Tang elite. Xinru Liu's study of trade between ancient India and China and Tansen Sen's study of Chinese-Indian relations in the medieval period both explore Chinese speculation about India while at the same time relating concrete historical exchanges between the two cultures, demonstrating that the two—physical objects and fantasies, real people and clichés—are ultimately inseparable.”

This inseparation could be observed in different fields. Art and culture, folk culture of China had clear imprint of the Indian influence. “The figure of Nezha/Nalakobara was brought to China by Tantric ritual masters who had harnessed the powers of the Hindu gods to fight evil spirits ranging from the demons of disease to foreign armies. Hence, the history of the impish Nezha might illustrate the significance of Tantric Buddhism (also known as esoteric Buddhism) as an agent for the Indian gods' impact upon the Chinese image-nation. Tantric Buddhism had served as a vehicle for the transmission of the Indian pantheon of divinities into China.”

This proved a great cultural impact as Indian Gods Krishna and Yaksha were transformed as Nezha and a vast section of the Chinese society as a myth developed it in its particular form affecting Chinese folk life. This was different from the Buddhism because its penetration was at the common people level and daily culture of the common individuals was influenced. It had no royal patronage and still has exercised its role in the life of the common people.

The Nezha's activism has its own magic, in due course it has emerged as a cult form in the Chinese life. “As impressive as the numbers associated with the Nezha cult may be, the true measure of the mischievous god's significance in Chinese culture is provided by the prevalence of his myth. As early as the thirteenth century, Nezha's adventures were celebrated in a large body of Yuan-period zaju plays. During the late-Ming he figured in two of the most influential novels on the supernatural, The Journey to the West (1592) and the Investiture of the Gods (ca. 1620), and by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries he became the subject of a vast body of oral literature and drama in a wide range of regional dialects.”

This makes the cultural relations between both countries highly interactive even in the middle age. This suggests that India and China were never separated in cultural terms though the political relations had started to affect their close cultural encounter in this phase of existence. British impact was visible but both countries enjoyed their unique cultural relationship. This proves that India and China were close cultural friends with deep roots since ancient days.
Cultural interaction in modern age

Modern age is not bereft of close interaction between India and China. Many Chinese came to India to settle. Most belonged as dental surgeons, Chinese women took grooming work in India and Chinese food was introduced which exercised its major impact after 1980s in Indian cities. Cultural interaction was still operative at another level. Rabindranath Tagore had visited China in 1924. “The Jiangxueshe (Beijing Lecture Association) invited Rabindranath Tagore in 1923 to deliver a series of talks. This Association, established in September 1920, was one of the many institutions that mushroomed in China in the wake of the May Fourth Movement.’ Its main objective was to invite foreign scholars and to arrange lectures by them for Chinese intellectuals. The Association had earlier invited John Dewey (1859-1952), Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) and Hans Driesch (1862-1941).”

The visit was profitable in many ways though a section in the Chinese intellectual community exhibited hostility against the visit but impact of Tagore’s visit was profound as it helped to bring both countries to understand each other in a cultural framework, a structure which was already in place but had become obscure due to the then global realities. India was a colonial state and China was attempting to rediscover itself.

This understanding was exhibited by Tagore himself, “before sailing for China, Tagore told the press that when he received the Chinese invitation he felt that it was an invitation to India herself and as her humble son he should accept it. He hoped that his visit would re-establish the cultural and spiritual links between the two civilizations: We shall invite scholars and try to arrange an exchange of scholars.” His visit regenerated the cultural spirit of union between both countries.

The outcome of visit was noteworthy achievements in the age of colonialism. India expressed itself as an independent cultural country. “Tagore's visit, especially Beijing celebrating his 63rd (in the Chinese tradition the 64th) birthday by all walks of life on 8 May, was an outstanding event in international inter-course. The most significant programme in the birthday celebrations was Liang Qichao's speech, translated into English by Hu Shi (1891-1962), conferring the Chinese name ‘Zhu Zhendan/Chu Chen-dan’ on Tagore. This was also a great episode in the annals of the Sino-Indian cultural intercourse. For, not only was it brimming with the cordiality between two internal countries, but it also had a high value of the geo-civilizational spirit.”

In the conference Chinese intellectuals emphasized the cultural contribution of Indians in their life. “The 'valuable gift' alluded to by Liang Qichao included the two prime, 'jueduide ziyou'
Tagore’s visit had rekindled the old cultural relations which were already in existence between the two countries. India and China had maintained close contacts. The role of Chinese scholar Tan Yun-shan is also noteworthy in this respect. He was also associated with Tagore and attempted to establish the cultural fusion of both countries. “Tan Yun-shan was a Chinese scholar who ‘personified the deep and abiding ties of the civilizations of India and China’, in the words of the president of India, Mr K.R. Narayanan, in a message on the centenary of his birth. He was born in October 1898 and grew up in a village in Hunan, China. What is of particular interest is his meaningful choice of a different path, after initially participating in various ways in the Chinese revolutionary movement along with his one-time schoolmate Mao Zedong. Tan Yun-shan went to the British colony of Malaya to offer his services to the education of the Chinese overseas. From there, electrified by a keen admiration for the great Indian poet, Tagore, he proceeded to India. Writing in 1931-2, Tan Yun-shan said: China and India are two sisterly countries. I have always borne this in mind since I began my education. I always feel that India is a place one must not miss, India is a nation one must not ignore, while India-China relations are particularly important among the specially important . . . I firmly believe if the two nations of China and India do not sincerely unite and struggle hard together, we shall not be able to carry out and achieve our goals whether it is in the cause of world peace, or in the cause of world revolution, or in the cause of amity of the humanity . . . (p. 35).” The statement of Tan Yun-shan is policy directive that both countries should come together in order to achieve their objective of growth and development.

**Conclusion**

The recent studies have explicitly suggested that role of cultural bond is important in developing closer political relations. India and China are no exception. Equally true is that cultural bond is often overpowered by the political realities. India and China also show it. Albeit there are many examples in the diplomatic history where culture has bound the countries. Scandavian countries are its one example where they have collaborated on the firm base of cultural understanding.
India and China may not have homogenous culture but they have encountered each other since ancient time not by conquest but by cultural interaction. They need to recognize this fact and refashion their approach to each other with a cultural framework in mind. Political conflicts lose their relevance when countries recognize that they have roots of friendship in ancient time and togetherness will bring more benefits than conflict. Policy makers in both countries need to dig the cultural bonds and establish foreign policy projections accordingly. One important cause leading to detoriation of India-China relation lie in the rise of Chinese nationalism about which Bal Gangadhar Tilak had indicated quite early, “commenting on the Sino-Japans war of 1894-95, he had predicted that the defeat of China would lead to a patriotic awakening of that big country.”

This prophecy proved correct as China thereafter developed a particular type of nationalism which outclassed the cultural bonds. Now the time has come to return to cultural platform where both countries stood in the ancient age. Nationalism in both countries need to be tempered with the cultural understanding.

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