The Connections Are What Count

Reviewed by Nayan Chanda

ONE OF THE Earliest recorded accounts of technology transfer between India and China is a sweet story from the mid-seventh century. An embassy from the Tang emperor to the court of the Indian King Harsa returned home with knowledge of a special product the Chinese craved: sugar. Accompanied by eight monks, two “technicians” who knew how to turn sugarcane juice into crystal sugar traveled to China. Chinese Buddhist monks who made pilgrimages to India had carried home stories about this delicious product, prompting a request for the technology. Whether or not it was due to this specific technology transfer, in subsequent periods sugar became an important ingredient in Chinese cooking. Tansen Sen’s highly original book is not only packed with many such fascinating anecdotes, it opens up a new window into the millennia-old connections between the geographic area where modern China and India emerged.

Sen had broken new ground with his 2003 book, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600-1400*. With this current volume, a product of prodigious research into both objects of material culture and archives in multiple languages, he has introduced readers to a borderless world where traders, monks, diplomats and soldiers traveled long distances on camels, horses and sailing ships carrying goods, manuscripts, icons and ideas. But they did not carry a national identity. Sen points out that despite the title of the book referring to India and China, for most of the period before the emergence of these modern states, the connections were between people. By delving into the multi-hued texture of their relations spanning centuries, often with intermediaries of other ethnic and linguistic groups and locations, Sen has liberated the rich interaction in Asia from the national straitjacket. Very often interactions between Indians and Chinese (to simplify their identities) happened outside of their home regions and with the participation of other peoples, a Parsi opium trader, Jamsetjee Jejebhyo; a painter from Madras, George Chinnery and his Chinese student Lam Qua, who did portraits of opium merchants; and monk Kang Senghui, the son of a Sogdian (central Asian) merchant who lived in the area of today’s Vietnam are some of the characters Sen presents in his book.

Sen’s account ranges from 138 BCE, when Han China’s first envoy, Zhang Qian, came to the western edge of central Asia and reported about a country called Shedu (from the Indus or Sindh rivers), to the less heroic 20th century. By removing past relations from the shackles of national borders, he has widened his enquiry into how knowledge — from geography to astronomy and medicine, not to mention Buddhist doctrine — traversed borders freely. Cultural objects too were exchanged between these two areas. The first two chapters of his book deal with the circulation of knowledge, routes, networks and objects. Sen shows that geographic or religious knowledge transferred between the two people were also enriched by imagination. For Chinese devotees, Buddha’s birthplace was forbiddingly far away, but they imagined an incarnation of Bodhisattva — Manjusri — who lived in the Wutai mountains in Shanxi. Adorned with Buddhist objects and paraphernalia, it became a sacred place of pilgrimage, even for South Asian monks.

In his chapter on imperial activities, Sen explores the many different ways imperial powers — from China to the British Empire — deepened the connections. Colonial rule inflicted pain on Asians, but its geographic reach enabled the interaction of unlikely groups of people from far corners of the world, from the Caribbean and South America to Africa and Asia. Unlike the current Chinese government, Sen also does not take the romantic view that the seven maritime expeditions undertaken by the eunuch admiral Zheng He were peaceful trade missions. These expeditions, he says, were “manifestations of Ming imperialism across the Indian Ocean that led to the creation of new ports and choke points, militarized the maritime realm, contributed to the formation of a dual system of court-controlled and private commercial connections, and dictated court-to-court interactions in the entire Indian Ocean realm.”

With an armada of more than 250 ships including 60 large “treasure ships” and 27,000 personnel in his first voyage, Zheng He established Chinese hegemony over the countries he visited, persuading them to send tribute to the Ming emperor — and benefit from the resultant trading opportunities. In between visiting local rulers and collecting tribute, Zheng He also engaged in “pacification” of troublemakers. Informed that the ruler of Palembang in Sumatra (identified as a pirate) was planning to attack the Chinese armada, Zheng He launched a counter-offensive, killing 5,000 of the ruler’s men and capturing him, whereupon he was taken to the Ming court and beheaded. Persisted by Zheng He’s display of power, many South Asian monarchs sent tribute to the Ming emperor. The King of Bengal even sent a giraffe from his menagerie.

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With deep ties developed by people over the millennia. The bonhomie of the 1955 Bandung conference between Jawaharlal Nehru and Zhou Enlai and the slogan Hindu-Chini bhai-bhai (Indian and Chinese brothers) popularized by Nehru collapsed in the snows of the Himalayas in 1962.

With his deeply researched and well-written book, Tansen Sen has established himself as a contemporary authority on the connected histories of India, China and the world around them.

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Sen’s account offers insights into the various ways the Chinese and Indians came to bond in third countries, such as in the plantations of Guiana and Mauritius, under colonial masters and often in the most painful and humiliating circumstances. The colonial period and Japanese imperialism also inspired the likes of Rabindranath Tagore and Liang Qichao to promote “one Asia” solidarity, a theme that carried into the post-War era and the early years of Indian independence. The institution of Cheena Bhavana (China house) at Visva Bharati University, established by Tagore in Santiniketan, West Bengal, proved to be a remarkably fertile ground for research on India-China relations. But the political reality of sovereign states and their conflicting ambitions trumped the

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