

Tansen Sen: India, China and the World; A Connected History (OUP India, 2018)

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I have truly **enjoyed reading this book**.

It is a truly valuable addition to the **growing body of scholarly literature** on India and China. By **focusing on ideas of circulation and connections**, and doing so in a very different way from early and mid-twentieth century historians, Tansen reminds us of the depth and multidirectional nature of the circulation of cultural goods and knowledge. He then brings his examination forward to the connections that enabled Asia in the age of classical imperialism **to engage in new ways** — between artists, poets, journalists, traders, politicians and philosophers, and, more lately, diplomats and soldiers too) — **and in new places** —Africa, the Caribbean and the New World — through “imperial connections” (Chapter 3).

The book’s **basic argument** is that:

1. **Pre-twentieth century** interactions between the regions that later became India and China should **not** be construed **within the framework of modern nation-states**.
2. Connections between these two regions have been **intimately linked to people living in several other regions**, including locations outside the Asian continent.
3. The **presence of European powers** did not terminate these connections. Instead exchanges witnessed a **significant growth and intensification**.
4. The formation of **territorialised nation-states** in the mid-twentieth century **created wedges** in relations that ultimately led to the armed conflict on 1962.

What stands out in this account is the **contribution of Buddhism** in connecting most of Asia, the **role of commercial exchanges** in connecting the “Afroeurasian region”, the notable **impetus** to global circulations brought about **by the expansion of imperial powers**, and the **disconnect** that ensued from the creation of **nation-states** in the mid-twentieth century.

It is a **joy to wallow in the complexity**, the sheer multiplicity, and in many cases the unpredictability, of the connections and contacts. This is a fantastic story that you couldn’t make up if you wanted to. And **what characters!** Just think of Kang Senghui, a Sogdian monk, born in what is now north Vietnam, active around Nanjing, flourishing c. 250 CE, whose ancestors traded horses between India and China before settling in Jiaozhi (now in northern Vietnam). And we talk of globalisation and third culture children as though we have discovered them! This book is a useful reminder that the story of India-China relations is no simple narrative (p 479).

By reminding us of the multifaceted nature of these connections, of a time when borders and boundaries were so much more fluid, and by situating them in the larger context of world history, Tansen shows that **this is not just a bilateral India-China story, but has connections that were central to Asia and the wider world**. He emphasises the role in these relations of people from neither region, from neither India nor China. The chapters on imperial connections and pan-Asianism make fascinating reading.

The other valuable service this book performs is that it **rescues the story of India-China connections from the nationalist framework** in which earlier scholars and today’s politicians and journalists have confined it.

While that framework may have served a purpose in its time during our freedom movement, Tansen reminds us that the modern nation-states of the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China are relatively recent creations and that it is wrong to look at earlier interactions through that prism or to ascribe earlier connections to the "nations" or entities that we now know as India and China. Here I agree entirely with him. Tansen **breaks out of the nationalist periodisation of India-China connections into Buddhist intimacy in the first millennium, colonial forced separation for most of the second millennium, followed by Tagorean revived brotherhood**. As he so usefully reminds us, the imperial encounter actually provoked deeper and newer connections between Indians and Chinese in much more intense ways than before, building on the commercial and other networks which already existed after the 9-10th century shift to commercial contacts, described in his earlier book "Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade".

What also struck me when reading the book was that **Tansen has a problem with authority**. His distrust or dislike of the state and nationalist narratives leads him to ignore or downplay the role of the state or other authority structures as facilitator or motivator of connections and exchanges between India and China in history (p 478). Ming imperial sponsorship of the Zheng He expeditions is the most obvious instance, on which Tansen has a fascinating account based on deep original research. While it is inaccurate to speak of modern nation states before the late 19th century, **there were multiple authority structures** — city states, republics, kingdoms, empires and, at other levels, guilds (*śreni*), the Buddhist sangha and so on — all of which **performed** many of the **functions that we now associate with the state** and government and who made this connected history possible. Theirs is a role worth exploring.

Tansen, following the historian's dharma, rightly disassociates from the pan-Asianist, nationalist and civilisational projects. But, as someone who belongs to none of the above categories, I was left with a **dilemma about historical accuracy and the uses that history is put to**. Take **Zheng He for instance**. After reading Tansen's history, one tends to view his voyages as imperial, colonial projections of power, and as attempts to impose trading monopolies in important commodities like pepper and porcelain. On the other hand, the present official Chinese projection of Zheng He's voyages is an idealised picture of a peaceful trading and civilising mission. The ultimate fiction of this kind of bowdlerised official history is of course "2,000 years of China-Pakistan relations"! My question is: As a practical person **which would you rather have present day Chinese believe, the truth about the violent nature of the Zheng He expeditions — by one account he died fighting and was buried at sea off the Malabar coast — or the peaceful and harmonious version?** That is my dilemma. Which would you rather have Chinese believe and, one expects, act upon now that they have so idealised Zheng He in China?

Tansen's account of Zheng He's voyages is fascinating also in for its resonances in today's Chinese statecraft and the BRI. For instance, he makes the point that Ming China and Portugal did not seek to occupy territory, (that came later), but to economically and politically control sea lanes, ports and nodes through which trade flowed in the Indian Ocean region. Tansen argues that Zheng He set the pattern that the Portuguese and others stepped into and used. But that overestimates his impact and underestimates how ephemeral Zheng He's interventions in local politics were; Cochin was under Calicut's control, Majapahit controlled Malacca, and the wrong king with the same name was in power in Sri Lanka (and was accepted by the Chinese under the misapprehension that he was their nominee!) within a few years of the voyages.

The **least satisfactory** portion of the book, from my point of view, is **Chapter 5** on "The Geopolitical Disconnect". I will **leave** what Tansen has to say about **Chindia (p 453) to Jairam Ramesh**, the father of the term. My problem is with the rather **one-sided choice to describe the treatment of the Chinese migrant community in India with hardly a mention** (two paragraphs) of how the **sizeable Indian community in China** was treated after 1949, or after the worsening in relations after 1959. Tansen gives a

detailed account of the case of Chang Xiufeng, a Chinese artist in Shantiniketan who was deported in 1961, (p 381, 411 ff), and argues that this shows the rising tensions in the relationship after 1959. But Indians in China had similar experiences in the early and mid-50s, which the book describes as a period of bonding. **Neither India nor China can be proud of what they did to migrants and nationals of the other country in the second half of the 20th century.**

The same chapter also **uncritically accepts Bertrand Russell's views and the Chinese version of the fate of the Colombo powers proposals**, which China never accepted in full. **Tansen suggests** that the only way forward on the boundary question is to accept **neutral arbitration**. Quite apart from the problem in agreeing what is neutral, **India had suggested** at one time that it may be willing to take the issue to the **International Court of Justice** but China was not ready to subject her claims to outside judgement.

I suppose that what I am saying is ultimately what Mao said: **Politics in Command**. My **fear** is that **this outstanding work of scholarship** on a topic which deserves widespread attention and dissemination in India, **will also be subject to political scrutiny and use**. That would be sad, for this is **an original and remarkable work of historical research, that only Tansen could have written, and that deserves a very wide readership**.