



Chinese perceptions on Mahatma Gandhi: A brief historical review

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Dr. Yinghong describes the ways in which Gandhi's life and work were interpreted in China, over a period of time. He uses writings by Chinese scholars, as documented in newspapers, academic writings, political speeches and interviews. Through an analysis of the data procured from the mentioned sources and a thorough review of the same, there emerge three phases of interest in Gandhi: 1920-1949; 1949-1979; 1980-2013. These periodisations are based on the number of books, articles and/or theses that would have been written on Gandhi as the main theme. The three phases witnessed the most significant number of publications on the same, though the maximum number of books to be published at a time has been in the years from 2000 to 2013. The people's perceptions towards Gandhi in all the three phases, however, are markedly different in character.

In the first wave of work on Gandhi (1920-1949), the key actors who discussed his work were Sun Yat-Sen and Mao Zedong. The leaders sympathised with the independence movement but disagreed on the use of non-violent resistance. The Communist party, in fact, criticised him as a rightist, who was focusing on the political movement but no accompanying social transformation. However, there was a difference between the popular perception and the party line. Ceng Shengdi (1901-1984) considered himself a disciple of Gandhi. He translated *Hind Swaraj* into Chinese in 1935, and was popularly called the Chinese Gandhian. He died before he finished his biography on Gandhi. His translation is also, not very easily available and can be found only in the National Library.

The period also saw no less than sixty articles being written on Gandhi. The oldest and the most popular translation of Gandhi's autobiography, 'The Story of My Experiments with Truth' was written by Wu Yaozong in 1935. It has been reprinted four times since then. Romain Rolland's biography, written in 1924, was translated into Chinese in 1930.

The second wave of interest on Gandhi was after the civil war. Between the years 1949 to 1961, there were two books and eight articles written. Wu Yaozong's translation was reprinted in 1959. EMS Namboodiripad's 'Mahatma and the Ism' was translated in 1961 by Hexin. Most discussions in this phase concentrated on the khadi movement. Wang Cunhua wrote that the khadi movement was anti-colonial but was conceived within an economic thinking which was regressive in nature. Wang Chunliang wrote that the khadi movement was not only backward but also counter revolutionary. It might

have reflected the views of the peasant class, but only the interests of national bourgeoisie were served. This period saw merely six articles being written on Gandhi.

In the period after the skirmish of 1962, till 1979, there was no mention of Gandhi or any discussion of his work whatsoever. Only in 1980 do we see another wave of interest in Gandhi, especially under Marxist readings. With the coming of the Open Door Policy, there was a simultaneous shift in the way his work was viewed. He was being seen more as a leader with universal appeal rather than a leader of a specific national movement. This shift began to occur specially after 1987, when a symposium and a conference were organized under the Chinese Association of South Asian Studies. Approximately thirty articles had been written till then under the same association. The research was mostly according to class theories, but elements of humanist and historical readings were also present in these commentaries. The main issue under discussion was which class interest did Gandhi represent: the peasants of the national capitalists? Some key commentators were Jin Kemu, a poet and writer, and Liang Shuming. Jin was unique in the fact that he wrote on Gandhi's years in South Africa; read the assassination of Gandhi by Godse as a clash of two kinds of cultures; and located Gandhi within the non-violent and violent traditions in India. Liang Shuming wrote on Gandhi's self-discipline as purity and observed how it goes too far from the basic needs of a human body. He stated that Gandhi's power came from his purity and thereby, there was no balance between the mind and the body, due to the overt emphasis on the mind and spiritual upliftment that comes from that purity. In other writings, Liang describes how Chinese philosophy falls in the middle, between the East's esoteric knowledge of the after-life and the West's obsession with material life.

Between the years 1990 to 1999, the contents of Gandhi studies changed. More attention was given to his interactions with other leaders like Ambedkar and Nehru. This period saw the first doctoral thesis being completed on Gandhi. It was written by Shang Quanyu, and studied the interaction between Gandhi and Nehru. It was submitted to the South-East University on 1994. He also published a book on the same topic and wrote several articles. Twenty-three books were published in this period, most of which were biographies.

In the years 2000 till present, fewer scholars have attempted a Marxist approach to understanding Gandhi and increasingly more scholars are interested in exploring Gandhi's relevance to China. Ye Kungzheng has written 'The Gandhian Inspiration to Us', which was published in 2013. Xin Lijian wrote an article titled 'The Immortal Gandhi' in 2009 and Zhang Lixia wrote 'Salute to Gandhi' in 2010. All these writings were instances of how Gandhi was seen as someone who could change society and transform it, without resorting to violence. There has been no tradition of non-violence in China and therefore, to cultivate such an understanding, learning from Gandhi's experiences was important. Thus, 2006 and 2007 saw a rapid increase in interest on Gandhi. Till now, he was seen as a political leader who was integral to the Indian national movement, but now, was increasingly seen as a leader who practiced a unique form of non-violence.

China has seen violent revolutions to be the main way of attaining social transformation in various phases of its history: the Taiping rebellion (1851-64); the Hundred Day's reform (1898); Xinhai Revolution (1911) or the communist era (1920-1976). However, after the reform and opening of 1978, several voices questioned why radical revolutions entail significant loss of lives. The Cultural Revolution was the biggest example of how revolution meant complete destruction, which people stated was no longer tenable or sustainable. In this context, Gandhi's Satyagraha or nonviolent reform, comes across as a more democratic and liberal regime of change. The writings from 2000 felt that it was time for China to

emulate this method of reform. This was possible by introducing Gandhi's own work in Chinese. Till now biographies formed the major part of literature that was available on Gandhi.

In conclusion, studies on Gandhi do not form a major stream in China but are a major part of India studies in China. The perception of Gandhi changed according to the inner and outer politics in the country and particularly dependent on Sino-Indian ties over the years. Two waves of interest in him were before 1949 and after the reform of 1978. One significant period of total absence of studies on him was the period following the conflict of 1962. However, in the years after 2000, Gandhi may mean more for the Chinese society as he offers an alternate mode of social transformation of reform without total destruction.

One of the questions asked was whether the new interest in Gandhi could be from a re-orientation within people. To which the presenter answered that there is an overall increase in interest in philosophy. However, people access western philosophy more easily than Gandhi. Therefore, the interest in his work is picking up very slowly. There was a question of whether Gandhi's was compared to any Chinese leader, akin to Mira Sinha Bhattacharya's work on Gandhi and Mao. The presenter replied that comparisons have been drawn between Gandhi and Liang Xitao, the leader who first talked about democracy. Another question was whether the Chinese relied on western interpretation of Gandhi, given that most of the sources that have been translated in Chinese were written by European authors. The presenter did think that this was the case and also noted that till now even school text books in China hardly mentioned Gandhi, and even if they did, they relied on western translations. He observed that due to all the revolutions that occurred till now, there has been a growing fatigue towards violent transformations, which will be an important factor in reinterpreting Gandhi now.

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