



Celebrating the ICS Annual Day

Workshop on
‘Why Study China’

Vasant Valley School, Vasant Kunj
28 August 2015

‘Catch them young’ is a phrase that one often hears in management circles. At ICS, this axiom received a fillip as ICS celebrated its Annual Day with a two-hour workshop on ‘Why Study China’, at the Vasant Valley School in Vasant Kunj. It was the first time that an event was organised at the school level. This is an extension of the Institute’s mandate to engage with young minds¹ and to foster informed and critical understanding our most important neighbour and the fastest rising power in the world today.

The presentations included an introduction to five aspects in the study of China –History, Language, Contemporary Politics, India-China relations and Opportunities for a Career in Chinese Studies. The presentations were organised in a way as to impart a comprehensive overview, and generate interest without an overload of information. About 40 students of Standard 12, along with some members of the staff, attended the workshop. The presentations were heard with attention and interest, which was reflected in the rich question and answer session. It is interesting that six students from the batch had visited China, Hong Kong and Macao. Below is a summary of the workshop.

Introduction

The workshop began with a brief introduction to the theme of the interaction by Ravi Bhoothalingam, Honorary Fellow, ICS. He began by discussing the Chinese geography and went on to explain the meaning of the character Zhong Guo.

Chinese History

The presentation on Chinese history was made by Tshering Chonzom, Associate Fellow, ICS. She provided a bird’s eye view of the 4000 year long Chinese history and civilisational legacy, and its contributions to world in the form of many important inventions. In the process she introduced the students to a fundamental dynamic in the study of History, viz, its constantly changing character. Illustrating her point with the skilfull use of maps of the geographic extent of the various dynasties of China she underscored the fact that history has always been a battleground for differing narratives. She discussed the upcoming 70th anniversary of the end of the 2nd World War and how this is being celebrated by the Chinese

¹ ICS had earlier conducted a full day workshop titled ‘Focus China’ for students of Political Science at the Lady Shri Ram College, New Delhi, on 26 March 2015.

with a massive parade to mark the surrender of Japanese forces. However, the Japanese, as well as, many world leaders have refused the Chinese invitation to attend it. The issue, she explained, is deeper than that of the parade and this brief episode goes on to show how history is a contested terrain even today. The Chinese have not forgotten the Sino-Japanese war that began in 1937 and continue to seek apology from the Japan for the crimes committed by Japanese imperial forces in Nanjing/Nanking. She provided the example of museums and textbooks as important sites for historical contestation. She concluded with the statement that history is a narrative, often written by the victorious, and always changing.

Chinese language

This was followed by a presentation on Chinese language by Manju Hara, Assistant Professor, CLL&CS, JNU. She explained how Chinese writing was derived from pictorials and how the current form – *pinyin* – is a simplified version of the classical Chinese language which is still being used in Taiwan and Macao. She explained how the ideographic script of the Chinese language is completely different from other alphabet-based languages and showed the evolution of a select number of characters such as woman, child, peace, mountain and so on. She also discussed some idioms in China that were similar to ones used in India, to show the commonality in thinking and culture.

Chinese Politics

The presentation on Chinese Politics by P K Anand, Research Associate, ICS, touched upon the following issues: the nature of China's Communist Party-led political system, one-party rule, "socialism with Chinese characteristics", the parallel government and Party structures with three most important portfolios – General Secretary of the Party, President of the country and Head of the Central Military Commission – vested in one single leader. He further discussed some important events in Chinese politics during Mao era such as the Cultural Revolution to show how youth were mobilised as Red Guards during the period to rebel and protest. He then went on to highlight various important benchmarks in Chinese economy given the fact that the Party's legitimacy hinges on economic performance. He discussed a few challenges such as social unrest owing to land acquisition, minority problems and the current slowdown in the Chinese economy.

India-China relations

The next presentation was on India-China relations by Prof Alka Acharya, Director, ICS. She provided a brief introduction to the ancient and historic ties dating from Xuanzhang's journey into India. She next gave a quick overview of the development of India-China relations in the modern period, beginning with the '*hindi'chini bhai bhai*' period, to the souring of the relations leading to the conflict in 1962 owing to the dispute over the boundary, the resumption of ties, the road to normalisation post Rajiv Gandhi's visit to China in 1988, the quickening of relations after Vajpayee's visit to China in 2003, which resulted in the opening of the Nathula border trade route. The agreement signed in 2005 during Wen Jiabao's visit to India was seen as an important one as far as the border issue is concerned. She further discussed prominent aspects of the current relations with reference to Xi Jinping's visit to India and Modi's visit to China in 2014 and 2015 respectively. She next went on to discuss the issue of trade deficit as a challenge in India-China relations – the fact that India is importing more and selling less to China is because of the limitations of our own economy and the more advanced nature of Chinese economy. She emphasized the need to have a broad and comprehensive perspective when looking at these issues rather than say that we will not

import or import less. Highlighting the complementarity of both economies in terms of Modi's push for 'Make in India' and India's young workforce, she hoped that better economic relations might give a push to greater confidence and reduction of political sensitivity on political issues.

Why study China?

The closing presentation was by Ravi Bhoothalingam again, who sought to kindle the interest of the students in studying the Chinese language. He pointed out that Indians have a natural advantage compared to the Americans or the British because, they are introduced to more than one or two languages early on in life in their homes and families. This is an important edge that Indian youngsters have and can be leveraged to our benefit. Given the fact that India and China are both considered important economic players, there is a lot of opportunity in pursuing either the Chinese language or Chinese studies as a career option for Indian students.

Discussion

There were a varied set of queries from the students – ranging from what is it that interests China the most about India, to the future of the one-party system and the durability of the current political system in the face of its internal problems, such as Xinjiang. Further, what is the likelihood of China transforming into a democracy and would increasing closeness in India-Japan relations adversely affect India-China relations.

A student representative of the class had the final word who, on behalf of the class, expressed gratitude to the ICS for the workshop.

ICS would be taking this initiative to many more schools and colleges in the days to come.