



## Studying China\*

**Shivshankar Menon**

Chairman, Advisory Board, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi

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Former National Security Advisor and Foreign Secretary  
Government of India

**T**he All India Conference of China Studies is a significant occasion. It is an opportunity for those studying China in India to review our work with our peers, to meet our colleagues, and to review China studies in India. What I would like to do is to mention how China studies look to an interested Indian layperson today.

### China Studies in India Today

**J**udged by the quality and the relevance of the academic work on China that we see in India today, there is clearly a vast improvement on the past, even though we may wish to do much more. I do believe that you can be proud of what has been achieved so far. The quarterly journal of the Institute of Chinese Studies, *China Report* is over 50 years old, and not many countries in the world can consistently produce an academic

journal of this quality devoted to China studies.

In effect, we are building upon the foundations laid by our predecessors. Every generation of Indian scholars of China has contributed to expanding and improving our knowledge of China. Naturally, like the rest of the world, we have brought our own interests and biases to the study of China. Throughout history, China has been used by foreigners to press their own points of view and critique their own societies and disciplines. We saw this with the first generation of the European Enlightenment, when Voltaire and others used an idealized portrait of a supremely rational and wise China to seek change in their own societies.

In India, the first generation of China scholars in modern times, like P. C. Bagchi and others, concentrated on ancient China. They found comfort and solace in India's

and China's great and common classical past at a time when their nations' colonial degradation was at its height. The links between India and China in the first millennium, and their historic contributions to human civilisation and progress, reinforced national movements and pride in both countries.

The second generation of China scholars in India did their work when the two nationalisms were trying to find their own internal balance in their own new states, and when they were working out their relationship with each other and the rest of the world, each in their own way. Scholars like Mira Sinha Bhattacharjea, Giri Deshingkar and Manoranjan Mohanty studied/study these shifts. While influenced by their domestic preoccupations, these scholars were/are able to introduce an empirical and objective basis to their studies, and to add a development dimension to China studies in India.

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What about the present generation? We are at a moment of transition for China studies in India. As the India-China relationship becomes more important as a result of the rise of both countries, the potential impact and significance of China studies becomes ever greater.

However, we now have a more complicated environment to cope with than our

predecessors. India and China both cooperate and compete in the world and in our common periphery. India and China have much more to do with each other than ever before – China is our largest trading partner in goods, and over 11,000 Indian students now study in China. The growth of departments of Chinese studies around the country means that we are slowly building a critical mass of scholars and students who are equipped, in terms of language skills and knowledge of their disciplines and of the two countries.

As India and China have more and more to do with each other – bilaterally, in the periphery we share, and on the world's markets and the global political arena – institutional and sectoral interests also come into play, and begin to affect scholarship.

The most extreme instance of sectoral or institutional interests is that of the media. The Indian media looks at China as a source of breaking news, and nothing so catches the attention as conflict – real, potential or imagined. So their narrative is one of eternal and inevitable conflict. And it is those scholars who feed this narrative who get published, disseminated and known. This narrative also serves the interests of those bureaucracies that deal with hard security issues.

The more China matters, government too, increasingly looks for the sort of studies that have direct or immediate policy relevance. And this poses a dilemma for the scholar, since he or she is guided by a different set of considerations in the choice of topics to research. As a consequence, truly academic studies of China are less and less connected to the political and intellectual life of the government and the general public.

## The Way Forward

What is the way forward for us in this complex environment?

I would suggest that we need to widen the lens of our scholarship on China, and not only aim at an academic audience.

China scholars need to be public intellectuals. And we need to choose topics that are of broader interest to government and society at large. This does not mean a running commentary on every ship visit to the South China Sea.

Let me suggest a few concrete instances of what I do mean. We might disseminate widely our work on trans-border ethnicities; we could consider China's behavior in our periphery and how it really affects Indian interests; we would study Qing scholarship on India, particularly that provoked by the Qianlong Emperor's personal interest in frontier policy after annexing Dzungaria; and, we might compare the retreat of the elephant and the role of the warhorse in both countries as pegs for comparative environmental, social and military history.

I mention these just as illustrations that there are topics that have academic validity that would also attract popular interest. Many of them are indeed already the subject of work by younger Indian scholars, and such studies would demonstrate that there is more to China and India-China relations than the headlines suggest. It is sad that the inspiring story of the spread of Buddhism from India to Central Asia, China and other countries is today being told by Western and Chinese scholars and popularisers rather than by Indians.

## Why Understanding China is Important

Let me tell you why I think your work is really important at this time.

I have just returned from ten days in China, half of them traveling in the interior of Gansu province and the other half in Beijing. No matter where I went I was struck by how China has changed. The change was not just in terms with which we have become familiar in the last few years – the physical changes brought about by three decades of 10 per cent plus GDP growth, the size of the economy, the accumulation of hard power, the urbanisation, the active and self-declared pursuit of national interest abroad, and so on.

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The greatest change that I saw was in the way that Chinese people, strangers and friends, looked at the world and at themselves, in their confidence and openness in discussing everything under the sun, and in the behaviour of ordinary Chinese that I met and saw on the street, such as, individual acts of kindness to old people and children.

As someone who has read about and followed China since the mid-sixties, spent about 20 per cent of my life in China, and visit regularly, I was struck by the fact that what we read or hear about China outside China does not actually convey a sense of the nature or magnitude of this change. (The

Chinese themselves, being in the midst of change, seem unaware of it. I daresay the same is true of India, perhaps to a different degree.)

And yet I cannot think of a time when it was as important that we understand the reality of China, and when the consequences of a gap between our perception and the reality of China carried greater risks.

Why do I say so?

When there is a gap between perception and reality, as we see increasingly in the world's understanding of China, it can be dangerous. Individuals, communities and states act on the basis of their perceptions. If the gap between their perceptions and reality is wide, they act foolishly, and reality ensures that the outcome of their actions is very different from their intent. My worry today is that some Indian perceptions of China may be remote from reality.

*To realize their potential it is essential that both countries understand each other and the reality and perceptions that guide their actions*

We saw an extreme example of this phenomenon in 1962 when India and China went to war. Consider what happened in the 1950s and during the buildup to the conflict. Each country operated on the basis of an idealized construct of the other which was quite distinct from reality. Besides, throughout the 1950s the gap between scholarship and policy in both India and China grew wider and wider. The result was the conflict, which some Chinese now call a 'misunderstanding'. If it was a

misunderstanding, it was a misunderstanding of epic proportions, and it had epic consequences. Both sides underestimated its consequences. Mao Zedong reportedly told the Politburo that the effects of the war would only last 30 years at most, before India forgot it as a minor episode. 53 years later we are still trying to come to terms with 1962 and to deal with its consequences.

It is not my point that we are in a similar situation today.

Far from it. In fact, I am convinced that we are at a moment of opportunity for India-China relations as a result of the rapid development of both countries in the last 30 years, of what we have achieved bilaterally in this period, and of the evolution of the international situation in the last few years. I would go to the extent of saying that both countries could benefit in their core interests if they worked together.

However, to realize their potential it is essential that both countries understand each other and the reality and perceptions that guide their actions. To my mind, that should be the primary purpose of Indian scholarship on China today, if it is to be socially relevant and historically significant.

I suppose that what I am asking for is, at root, a study like Harold Isaacs' *Scratches on Our Minds: American Views of China and India* (1958), of how we look at China and how China sees us, and then to apply our academic disciplines to understanding and explaining why we do so, so as to align them with objective reality.

The fact that today there are opportunities to be grasped if we understand China, and risks if we do not, makes your work as China scholars even more important. It is you, the

scholars, who help to create and sustain our narratives and shape the way in which Indian public opinion understands China.

That is why your study of China is so significant.

**\*Based on the text of the Keynote Address delivered on 5 November 2015 at the 8<sup>th</sup> All India Conference of China Studies organized by the Institute of Chinese Studies at the Sikkim Central University, Gangtok, Sikkim.**

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*The views expressed here are those of the author and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies.*

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8/17, Sri Ram Road, Delhi - 110054, INDIA  
Tel: +91-11-2393 8202 | Fax: +91-11-2383 0728  
[info@icsin.org](mailto:info@icsin.org) | <http://icsin.org>  
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