

**Materials related to Republican-era China in
the National Archives of India**

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Madhavi Thampi is an Honorary Fellow at the Institute of Chinese Studies. She was an Associate Professor at the Department of East Asian Studies in Delhi University, where she taught Chinese History. Her publications include the monograph *Indians in China, 1800-1949* (2005). She has co-authored (with Brij Tankha) *Narratives of Asia from India, Japan and China* (2005), as well as a book entitled *China and the Making of Bombay* (with Shalini Saksena, 2009).

She is also the editor of the volume *India and China in the Colonial World* (2005, 2010). She recently coordinated a project to catalogue materials related to modern China in the National Archives of India, and is also a member of the Expert Group involved in compiling the *Encyclopaedia of India-China Cultural Contacts* jointly sponsored by the Government of India and the Government of the People's Republic of China.

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Materials related to Republican-era China in the National Archives of India*

Abstract

This paper presents an overview of the relatively unexplored holdings in the National Archives of India (NAI) related to China in the first half of the twentieth century, and particularly Republican-era China (1911-1949). It may come as a surprise to many to learn that there are literally thousands of documents there that throw light on diverse aspects of China's modern history and Sino-Indian relations in the modern period. If properly utilized those files could do much to expand, deepen and modify our understanding of modern Sino-Indian relations in particular.

Keywords: *National Archives of India, China, India, Republican era, colonial India*

Since India was under British colonial rule for most of this period, the bulk of the documentation on China from this period in the NAI naturally reflects to a great extent the concerns of British administrators and policy makers. However, as Robert Bickers has perceptively noted about the Sino-British relationship, “...there were, in fact, always at least three countries in this bilateral relationship. In brief, the British relationship with, and presence in, China always operated in the shadow of British India...” (Bickers 2015: 58) Moreover, the NAI also holds documents and papers of important Indian organisations and individuals who had some connection with China. These include the papers of the Indian National Army and Indian Independence League, both of which had branches in China during World War II, as well as of Subhas Chandra Bose. There is also much related to China in the papers of the exiled political activist Raja Mahendra Pratap and the diplomat-scholar K.M.Panikkar, India's ambassador at the end of this period.

This paper first briefly identifies the main holdings related to modern China in the NAI. It will also refer to useful guides and websites that can help a researcher wanting to consult them. The second part of the paper explains the context in which this abundance of documents related to China were accumulated in India, by referring to major developments in India-China relations in the modern period. Thirdly, it indicates some of the kinds of documentation that can be found that are really waiting for serious researchers to work on. Lastly, we share some thoughts on why it is important for us to study these materials and see what they can add to our understanding of modern China and in particular the modern era interactions between India and China.

* This paper was presented at the 11th All India Conference on China Studies at Bengaluru from 15-17 November 2018.

Holdings related to Republican China in the NAI

For the period from 1911 to 1949, there are, as mentioned above, many thousands of files in the NAI related to China. For instance, for the six year period of World War II from 1939 to 1945 alone, there are nearly one thousand files concerning China in just the proceedings of the Foreign & Political Department. The collections in which files on China can be found in the National Archives of India are:

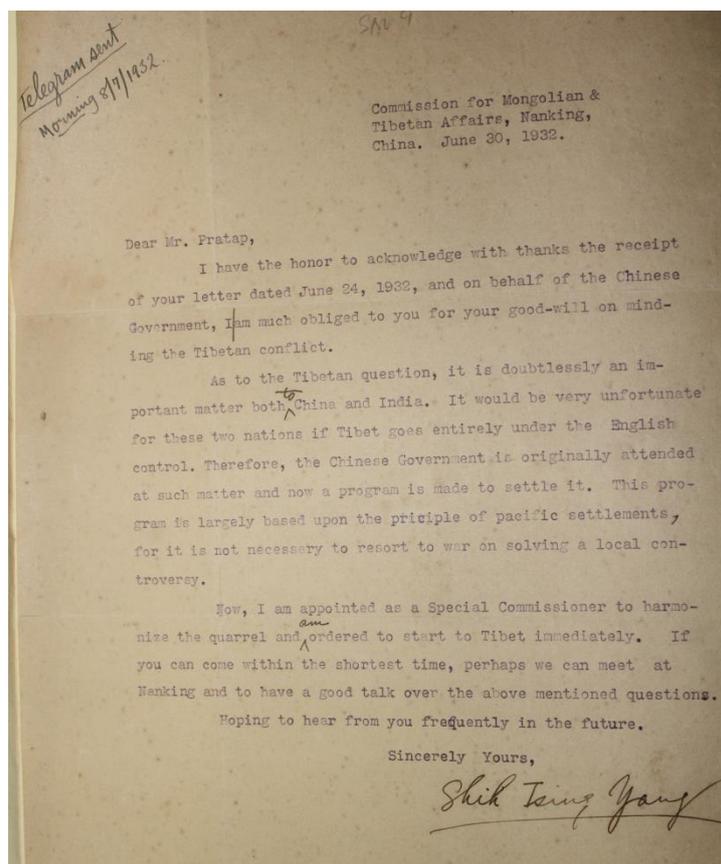
1. The proceedings of the Foreign & Political Department, which became the External Affairs Department and then the Ministry of External Affairs from 1948. These contain the main set of documents related to China.
2. Supplementary official proceedings, which include the China Papers (but only for the period 1839-1855), the Confidential Records (1880-1920), and the records of the Home Political Department (before 1947), the Commerce and Industry Department, the Army Department and the Military Department.
3. The Special Collections section of the NAI.

Difficulty in accessing these files has probably been one of the main reasons why they have not been sufficiently utilized. Some of these difficulties arise from the following: restrictions placed on consulting files considered important for national security; inadequate indexing; files listed in the indexes not actually getting transferred to the NAI. My own doctoral research on the Indian community in China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was greatly frustrated by the blanket ban that existed at that time on consulting any files related to China from 1914 onwards. Happily that has been lifted in recent years, but access to China-related files is not yet completely open, and is unlikely to be as long as there is a live dispute over the India-China boundary.

In 2012, thousands of declassified files from the Ministry of External Affairs began to be listed on the NAI website “Abhilek Patal”(<http://www.abhilek-patal.in/jspui/>). Many of these have been digitized, and one can consult them therefore without having to step into the Archives. Of course, only some of these are related to China. Around the same time a couple of initiatives were launched to catalogue the files related to China in the NAI. Under the auspices of ICS, two annotated catalogues of the files in the Special Collections section (Thampi and Sharma 2013) and from the External Affairs Department (Thampi and Sharma 2015) covering the World War II years have come out and can be viewed online on the ICS website as well. Both have detailed indexes so that those doing research on a particular individual or place or organization can directly access the file number as well as see a short description of the concerned file. Further, in connection with a

From the early decades of the nineteenth century, the pace of development of the connections between India and China began to pick up, particularly as Indian cotton and opium began to flood Chinese markets and as India became the main base from which Britain launched its military expeditions against China. The documents in the NAI dating back to the nineteenth century throw light on these developments.

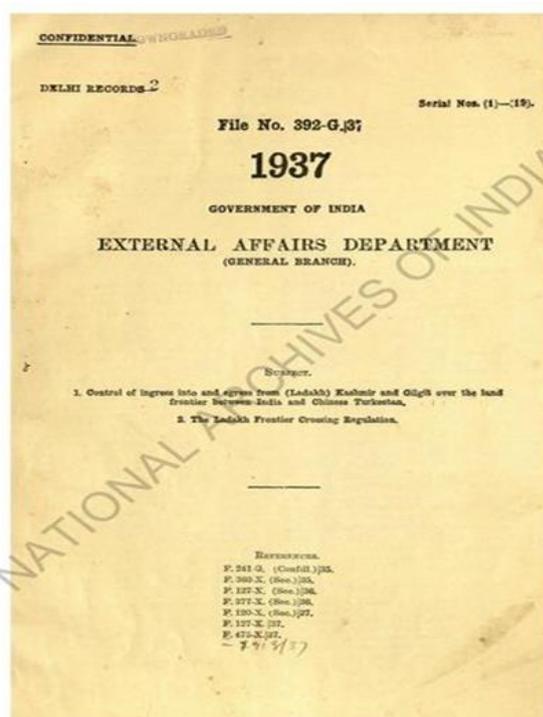
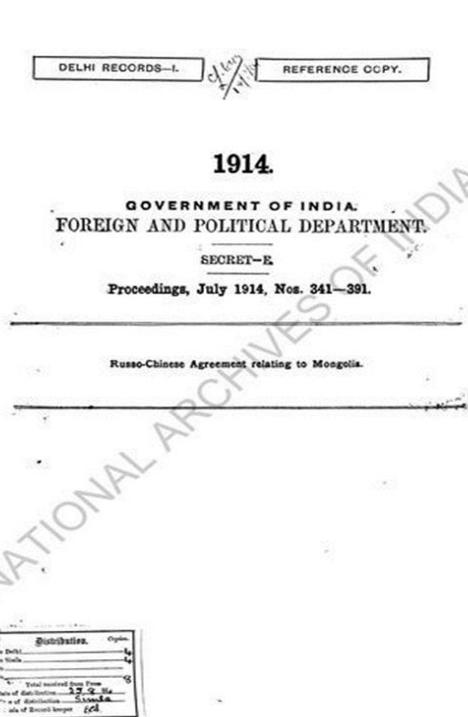
However, from the later part of the nineteenth century, new concerns came to the fore. As the British Empire in India attained its full territorial scope and began to push against the frontiers of the Qing Empire, developments in Xinjiang and Tibet in particular became of great interest to the Government of India. The Indian authorities were particularly concerned about the growing Russian interest in Xinjiang and Tibet. Equally, they were alarmed by the determined efforts of late Qing officials to re-establish the authority of the Qing Empire over these regions. As a result, the Government of India began to take note of the centuries-old overland trade between northern India and Xinjiang, which had hitherto been of little interest to British policymakers.



Letter from Shih Tsing Yang to Raja Mahendra Pratap (Source: NAI, New Delhi)

The period that falls within the purview of this paper, 1911-1949, was a time of expanding scope and quickening tempo in India-China interactions. The downfall of the Qing Empire in 1911 and the return of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama to Lhasa in 1910 from India increased British activity with respect to Tibet. The British sought

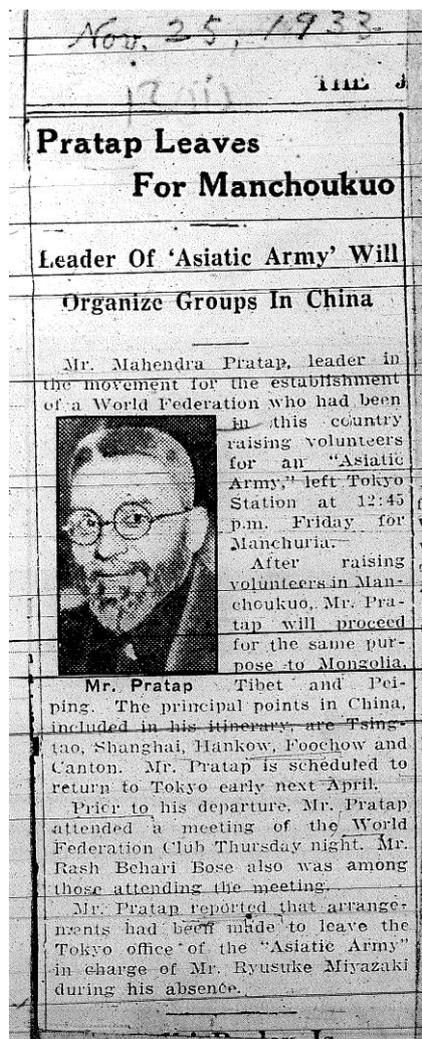
to counter Chinese influence in Tibet and consolidate Tibet as a “buffer zone” friendly to Britain which would help to strengthen the security of their Indian empire. As is well known, the Simla Convention of 1914 was the immediate outcome of this policy. In the case of Xinjiang, the 1917 Russian Revolution initially seemed to have dealt a crushing blow to Russian ambitions in Xinjiang. There was correspondingly a temporary boost to British India’s trade and political clout in that region. But by the later 1920s, the revival of Soviet Russia’s influence in Xinjiang, and the determined Chinese efforts to reestablish control over both Xinjiang and Tibet, again heightened the Government of India’s anxieties about these regions. Thus the changing conditions in both Tibet and Xinjiang are major themes in the documents from this period in the NAI. It is a good place to find information on the old trade of India with Xinjiang, the working of the consulate at Kashgar (which was under the Government of India), and developments in Tibet.



Russo-Chinese Agreement Relating to Mongolia 1914 The Ladakh Frontier Crossing Regulation 1937 (Source: NAI, New Delhi)

The next theme prominent in documents from this period is related to Indian nationalism or what the British called “Indian sedition”. Rising nationalism and a shared sense of anti-imperialism opened up a new dimension in the Sino-Indian relationship in this period. Indian nationalists and revolutionaries in exile found a congenial environment in the unsettled conditions of early Republican China to take refuge and carry on their campaigns against British imperialism. Particularly in the first two decades of the Republic, several Chinese political leaders and military strongmen offered moral as well as practical support to them. Indian and Chinese political activists also met and linked up with each other in anti-imperialist gatherings in other countries, like Japan. The files of the Intelligence

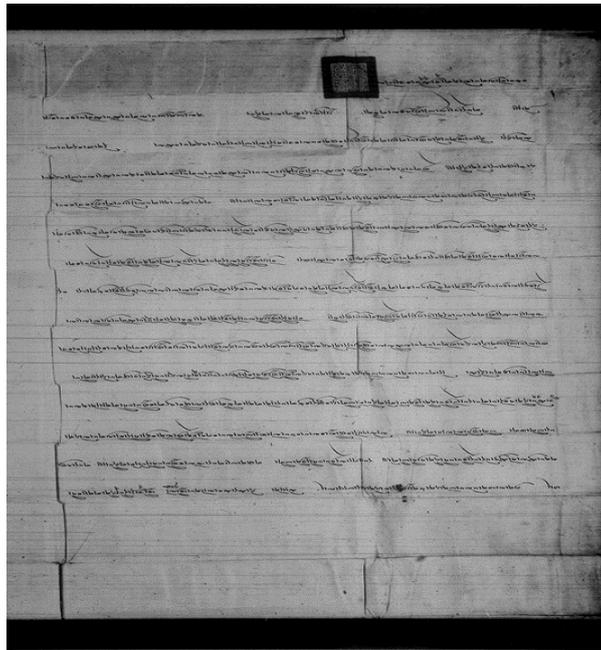
Branch, Home Department, and Foreign & Political Department are replete with details about their activities. This indicates that China had now become a factor in the *internal* security as well as the external security of the Indian empire. The papers of the exiled Indian nationalist Raja Mahendra Pratap are very revealing on this subject. So are the numerous reports on “Indian sedition”. However, many of these files seem to be “missing” from the collection in the NAI, though they are listed in the indexes.



Newspaper Report on the Raja Mahendra Pratap's Movements in China (Source: NAI, New Delhi)

The next major development in Sino-Indian relations was World War II. This was in many ways a transformational moment in India-China relations. China's dogged resistance to the Japanese was seen as vital to the security of Britain's Indian empire; similarly, India became crucial to China's war effort as its gateway to the outside world when Japan cut off China's access to other countries through the sea and mainland South East Asia. As China and India became allies in a single theatre of war, new connections were forged between the two at a breakneck pace across a range of spheres. These included diplomatic ties, enhanced road, air and postal connectivity, banking ties and the revitalization of trade routes through Tibet and

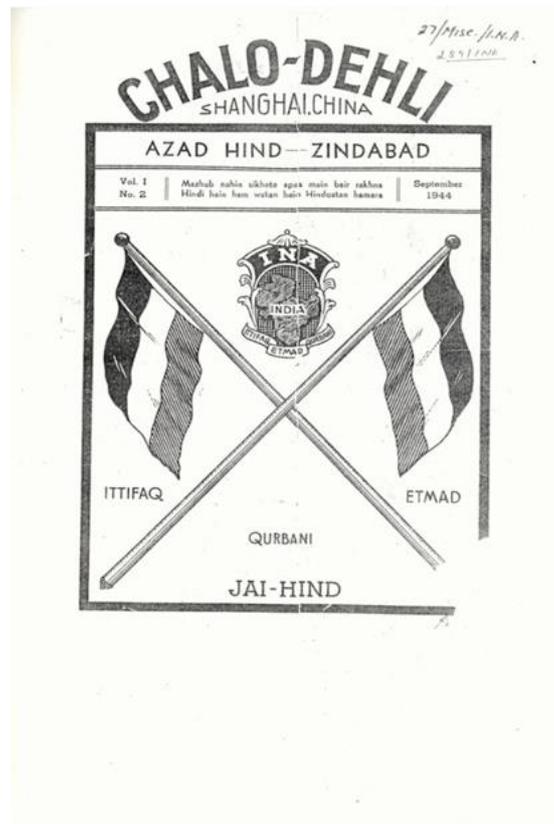
Yunnan. It also included new scientific and technological as well as educational and cultural exchanges. Military cooperation between India and China, an altogether new phenomenon, was also a feature of this period. There was even a Chinese Army in India stationed at Ramgarh during the later years of the War. This tremendous expansion of official ties between India and China during the War has not received the scholarly attention it deserves, probably because of the later rupture in these ties following the 1962 Sino-Indian border conflict.



Letter from the Dalai Lama to Raja Mahendra Pratap, 1926 (Source : NAI, New Delhi)

At the same time, along with the new closeness and expansion of ties between the two allies, new tensions and fault lines also appeared and old ones deepened. In the decade prior to 1939, relations between the Indian National Congress and the Guomindang had steadily expanded, culminating in Jawaharlal Nehru's visit to besieged Chongqing in 1939. However, during the War, the strategies of the INC and the Guomindang Government somewhat diverged. The INC demanded immediate independence from British rule as the price of India's participation, while the Guomindang Government wanted India's full participation in the war effort. Although they continued to express sympathy and support for each other, their relations came under strain. Meanwhile tension over Tibet also increased. Both Britain and China attempted to consolidate their respective positions there in competition with each other, even though their contention was held in check by larger considerations of the wartime alliance. Relations between India and Xinjiang too were rocky in this period. The Indian trading community faced perhaps the greatest pressure it had ever experienced there, due to the impact of political turmoil in Xinjiang and harassment by the local authorities. India's centuries-old trade with Xinjiang came to a virtual standstill, and in fact never recovered.

Meanwhile, during the War in eastern China, the Indian community had given solid backing to the Indian National Army. When the history of the INA is discussed, we are rarely made aware that there were very active branches of the INA in China. But the upshot of the activity of the INA in China was that at the end of the War, many Indians, including those who had been settled in China for generations, were rounded up and persecuted by the Chinese authorities as Japanese collaborators. The documents on the INA in the NAI are extremely valuable and not duplicated anywhere else.



Cover Pages of *Chalo-Delhi* Magazine (Source: NAI, New Delhi)

Another cause of increased suspicion of China on the part of the authorities in India was the increasing presence of Chinese in India. During the War, the footprint of China in India expanded, through the wartime influx of migrants, traders and refugees, as well as military and assorted other personnel. Many Chinese were suspected of being fifth columnists acting on behalf of the Chinese Government and the Guomindang, or of the Chinese Communists.

1/

INDIAN SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITIES IN CANTON.

1. The Indian Independence Revolutionary Forward Block, Canton, is the outcome of Japanese pressure on the local Indian hoodlum element. In the winter of 1939/40 the Indian Muslim Association was formed with the following office bearers.

President Ghulam Mohi-ud-Din
Vice President Sahali Khan
Secretary I. R. Malik
Treasurer Hayat Khan
Mohhan Din and Karan Dad were named as members (of the Committee).

Money was collected and deserters from Hong Kong were welcomed. The money was squandered by the office bearers except for one such publicised donation of \$ 150 to the Japanese Gendarmerie Headquarters in March 1940.

This Muslim Association in due course developed into the I.I.R.F. Block.

In July 1941 it was reported that 30 disaffected Indians hiding in Japanese-occupied Canton had formed themselves into a group called the Indian Independence Revolutionary Forward Block, Movement in South China. The members of the movement subscribed each month to a fund which was to be used in (1) assisting disaffected Indians who might desert from Hong Kong to go to Canton (2) defraying expenses incurred in printing and distributing anti-British pamphlets. Meetings were held weekly at the Qi Kwan Hotel, Canton, and were attended both by Indians and Japanese. Of the Indians who took prominent part in the movement's activities a few are (1) Ghulam Mohi-ud-Din S/O Ghulam Mustafa Khan, an eye specialist, (2) Nadar Khan S/O Mohammed Khan (3) Mohhan Din S/O Khan Mohd (4) Chaman Singh (Ex P.C.B. 700 H.K. Police) (5) Dr. Latif Ahmed Khan S/O Shamsud Khan and (6) Mohd Rashid Malik.

The most important Japanese who attended was a SHIBUTAKA SAOJIMA, chief of the Intelligence Department, East-Asiatic.

--- Japanese Expeditionary Forces who is said to be a self-professed believer in the Muslim faith.

2. The printing and distribution of pamphlets had already started, and a deserter of the H.K.S.R.A. had left Canton for Shanghai about the middle of May 1941 with some pamphlets. Although other distribution lines had not been opened it was proposed to send ZAMIR AHMED - ex-Gunner deserter of H.K. S.R.A. - to Malaya and Rangoon, travelling by Japanese steamer to Bangkok and thence to a distribution centre near the Burma Road. Pamphlets for Hong Kong were said to have been despatched to Macau and sent to the New Territories boundary via Sham Chun and the coasters by this route were reported to be two clean shaven Sikhs named (1) Asher Singh S/O Ghulam Singh (2) Bhanu Singh and (3) Kesar Singh S/O Barkit Ali S/O Jarnagan Singh, who had then arrived in Canton from Shanghai. Later it was reported that they had left for Bangkok via Indo-China on 15-7-41 on instructions received in a telegram from Japan.

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Intelligence report on subversive activities of Indians in Canton during World War II (Source: NAI, New Delhi)

After the War was over, another issue leading to tension was an unacknowledged rivalry over leadership in post-war Asia. The defeat of Japan and the fatal weakening of colonial structures in Asia on account of World War II created a power vacuum in the region. There were two main contenders for Asian leadership: China, which though triumphant at the end of the war rapidly descended into civil war thereafter; and India, which achieved independence only in 1947 but under the leadership of Nehru saw itself as a pivotal power in Asia right from the outset. Despite the officially cordial relations between the Nationalist Government in China and the new Indian government headed by Nehru, wrangling over Tibet and other issues revealed that all was not well between them.

In this paper the focus has been only on documentation related to modern era India-China relations. But it must be noted that there are also hundreds of files that throw light on various other aspects of China's modern history, including political developments, its larger international relations, Chinese nationalism and so on. Many of these would be duplicated in other libraries and archives in China and the West, but for Indian scholars of China's modern history, the files located in New Delhi will certainly be easier to access than those abroad.

Why should we look into these files on China in the NAI?

From the exploration of unutilized or under-utilised sources comes the possibility of finding new information and developing new perspectives that may help us to achieve a better understanding of history. Of course, it will take serious effort on the part of a number of scholars delving into the materials outlined above in the National Archives of India to know if and how these can contribute to producing a richer, more nuanced understanding of modern China and particularly of its relations with India.

Nevertheless, even at this stage it is clear that these documents help to dispel certain misleading ideas about India and China in the modern period. The first of these is the notion that India and China really did not have very much to do with each other in the modern period prior to India's independence. What we can see from the archival material is that connections in fact developed on many fronts. These included maritime and overland trade, cross-border contacts, a diversity of political ties, movements of people, state-to-state ties including military cooperation and diplomatic exchanges, exchange of visits by scientists, artists and other cultural figures, and so on. Looking at this period from the vantage point of the material contained in these archives, we can see that the possibilities for an expanding Sino-Indian relationship were many. Sino-Indian interactions flourished even during periods of external war and domestic conflict. Ironically, it took the consolidation of the modern nation-states of India and China, and ultimately the outbreak of war between the two, to stop many of these developing connections in their tracks.

The material in the Archives also helps to explain the many ups and downs in India-China relations in the modern era. Initially, in the nineteenth century, India's role as an imperial auxiliary, in the opium trade and in Britain's deployment of troops in China, acted as a roadblock to closer sympathy between these two countries both of which had suffered at the hands of Western imperialism. This role gradually became less important, and in the early twentieth century the developing currents of pan-Asianism and anti-imperialism appeared to have lifted India-China relations out of this phase. However, what we can see is that geopolitical imperatives and issues of territorial sovereignty and national interest, which came to the fore in this period, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, again brought the India-China relationship into a tricky terrain. Pan-Asianism and anti-imperialism could go only so far and no further in moderating potential areas of dispute between the two neighbouring states. The documents from this period in the NAI would help to document the vicissitudes in Sino-Indian relations, while at the same time countering simplistic notions that the two countries were always either natural allies or natural enemies.

One reason why the subject of Sino-Indian relations in the colonial era has been insufficiently studied is because of the assumption that these relations were only a

subset of Sino-British relations. Based on the copious materials related to China in the National Archives of India, however, it is possible to perhaps revisit this view and see Britain's relations with China as a subset of its concerns in India, to reiterate the point made by Robert Bickers cited earlier. Many of Britain's policies towards China were dictated by the geographical, territorial and security imperatives of their Indian empire. These concerns were then inherited by the successor states of British India - that is, independent India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and also Myanmar. There is much in common in the way the British colonial rulers of India looked at Chinese nationalism and Chinese resurgence in the first half of the twentieth century, and the way the governments of independent India have also looked at China. It makes one think that 1947, in the case of India, and 1949, in the case of China, were not such sharp dividing lines, and that many of the concerns and preoccupations of the earlier period extended into the later years.

This discussion challenges young Indian researchers in particular to utilize this treasure trove of material on China in our own country to bring forth new and original perspectives and fresh data on China and its relations with India. It is important to keep in mind that archival materials are not repositories of Truth, and should be handled with caution, using proper methodology. But the rewards of doing this work can be many.

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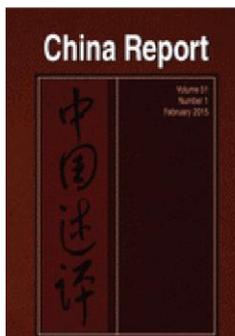


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