

History Matters: How China leverages the Past to Serve the Future

A book review of *How China Sees India and the World* by Shyam Saran

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In November 2021, the Communist Party of China (CCP) adopted a landmark resolution on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century. Prior to this, the CCP had approved only two resolutions on history. The first, approved in 1945, established Mao Zedong's unchallenged authority over the party; the second, under Deng Xiaoping, condemned Mao's 'Leftist' errors and permitted a pivot towards Reform and Opening Up.

In an explanatory note published alongside the third resolution adopted in 2021, General Secretary Xi Jinping was clear that the CCP's approach to history was not an academic exercise. Xi argued that the resolution was important both in "*a practical and historical sense.*"

The goal was to "*build a broader consensus and stronger unity in will and action*" among Party members and society. To do so, it was important to adopt a "*rational outlook*" for "*setting things straight, taking a clear-cut stance against historical nihilism, strengthening ideological guidance and theoretical analysis, and clearing up confusion and misunderstandings over certain major questions in the Party's history.*"¹

In other words, for the CCP, engaging with history is not necessarily about the past, but a purposeful political endeavour to shape future direction. In his new book, *How China Sees India and the World*, scholar and former diplomat Shyam Saran argues that this instrumental approach to history has been a hallmark of Chinese political life.

The book is a well-researched, extremely accessible account spanning a vast period of history and geopolitical twists and turns. The author traces this Chinese tradition of leveraging history as a political instrument back to the Zhou Dynasty (1046-256 BCE). Saran writes that the Zhou assumed power in a bloody, violent change of guard, but soon cloaked themselves "in the mantle of benevolent rule" and "rewrote the history of their violent overthrow of the Shang," initiating a tradition of dynastic history-writing. This tradition – of successor dynasties writing the histories of their predecessors to legitimise their reigns – is the impulse animating the CCP's approach to history even today.

A corollary to this is the idea that for Chinese rulers, "there is always a fear of the past to discredit the future." This has led to regimes constructing self-serving narratives and working to ensure that

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these stories are told and re-told, bestowing upon them the aura of fact. Saran's book engages with these stories that subsequent Chinese dynasties and now the CCP have told. He argues that doing so is critical to understand claims of legitimacy and external behaviour.

The central argument of the book is this: the narrative of China's history as one of the linear growth and expansion of a benevolent, civilising empire (an "eternal China" that merely experienced minor, episodic interruptions) and its existence as the Middle Kingdom (the centre of Asia, with tributaries acceding to its power) is a political construct that does not accord with facts.

In dismantling this narrative, Saran sometimes uses a scalpel, carefully slicing through the minute details of the past to identify inconsistencies and wilful mis-representations; and sometimes, he uses the pickaxe, bringing down the very edifice.

"There is little in history to support the proposition that China was indeed the centre of the Asian universe, its economic hub, commanding deference among less civilised states on its periphery...its contemporary rise is indeed remarkable, but history does not give it the centrality it claims," writes Saran.

For instance, he argues that at different times in the past, there existed multiple, independent power centres across Asia. These included Japan, the Chola empire in India, and Southeast Asian kingdoms like Majapahit and Srivijaya, to name a few. The author argues that when it comes to cultural influence, Indian civilisation had a far deeper impact on China and East Asia, through the export of Buddhism as compared to Chinese dynasties. Even when it comes to trade, he debunks the modern-day projection of the Belt and Road Initiative as a revival of China's centrality to the global economy, as was once the case through the ancient Silk Road.

Saran writes the Silk Road was a "network of intersecting caravan routes which connected several countries and along which several commodities were transported and traded." He argues that Chinese empires were never at the heart of these ancient trading routes. On the contrary, Indian trading communities (in the form of Gujarati and Tamil merchants), along with Arab and Central Asian traders, were key to exchanges along the routes. Chinese traders, in contrast, "rarely ventured too far from the Chinese heartland," Saran writes. *"The Road is not a revival of some historical role of China as a great trading power. An imagined history is being put forward to seek legitimacy for China's claim to Asian hegemony,"* Saran adds.

This notion of the Chinese heartland is also critical to the author's broader argument. Saran explains that a "distinctive Chinese identity" first emerged among communities settled in the middle reaches of the Yellow and Yangtze rivers, dating back to around 1500 BCE. This "civilisational core," he argues, expanded over time to encompass mountainous and forested terrain toward the south and south-west, and was settled by the Han people from the north.

Saran writes that the political ideas and experiences of the settlers in this heartland region were shaped by the difficult early encounters that they had with communities along the periphery. These comprised nomadic tribes associated with the Xiongnu, based in what is present-day Mongolia, to the Tibetan empire and Central Asian kingdoms in the west. The Hans, Saran explains, met these challenges through a mix of military coercion and diplomacy, which involved marriages for alliances,

tributes and grant of high honours. He argues that the history of coping with these constant threats led to a sense of the Middle Kingdom complex, “a sense of superiority over these ethnicities on the periphery.”

In other words, the Hans saw these communities as less civilised and their accommodation – often a decision in political expediency – was explained and internalised as a civilising activity. At this point, it is important to note that Saran views the Hans not necessarily as an ethnically homogenous group, but rather as a group united by cultural homogeneity, reinforced by shared attitudes and a unified script. This construct of cultural homogeneity was not only critical for subsequent Han-dominated dynasties to usurp the legacies of (what were essentially) foreign rulers, but is also at the heart of the present-day assimilationist policies of the CCP with regard to ethnic minorities.

The key examples that Saran offers are the eventual assimilation of the rule of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty and the Manchu Qing Dynasty as *Chinese dynasties*. The author argues that in both these instances, a massive empire was established incorporating different territories and multiple ethnicities, with the Chinese heartland being merely one of the territories within the empire.

Later-day Chinese nationalists and reformers during the late 19th and 20th century weaved this legacy of the Yuan and the Qing as essentially Chinese dynasties to construct a new national identity. In doing so, they also constructed a sense of historical territory linked to the lands controlled at different times by these empires.

This has implications for present-day territorial claims by Beijing. For instance, Saran argues that while Tibet did fall to Mongol rule under the Yuan dynasty in the 13th century, the Tibetan leadership’s relationship with the Mongol ruler was not one of a “Chinese-style tributary.” Rather, there was an “emperor-preceptor or patron-priest” relationship. Moreover, during the Yuan dynasty’s rule, “*Tibet’s relationship was with the Mongols and not with the Han. Tibet was part of the Mongol empire, as were China, Korea and Vietnam. When the Mongol empire ended, Tibet shed the Mongol yoke and became an independent kingdom under King Changchub Gyaltsen of the Phagmodru dynasty.*”

Likewise, during the Qing rule, while Tibet “was made a tributary state of the Qing empire,” it is important to note that the Qing was a Manchu empire. The author argues that “*neither the Mongols nor the Manchus considered Tibet as part of China. It was part of their empires, just as China and other countries on the periphery were.*”

This, Saran says, is obfuscated in the modern narrative from Beijing, which claims that Tibet since ancient times has been governed by political authority from the Central Plains or the political authority of the Chinese central government. Pointing to this, the author calls for a need for careful study and vigorous contestation of the Chinese narrative with regard to territorial claims, lest they begin to take hold in international discourse as something self-evident.

Apart from the above, as the title suggests, the book offers a fairly broad – yet remarkably detailed – overview of Chinese perceptions of India through the centuries. Saran discusses the deep, religious, cultural economic exchanges between the two civilisations, along with essential differences. For instance, the author points to the diversity of spoken languages in China existing with uniformity in written script, a situation that lent itself to a centralising impulse. In contrast, in India, “spoken Sanskrit was the same as courtly and written Sanskrit whenever it was used, but it could be written in

different scripts,” he writes. This led to the emergence of vernacular languages with their own scripts and created a diversity of literary forms and idioms unlike in China.

In addition, while Chinese culture has historically emphasised the importance of the written word, in Indian culture, the spoken word was per-eminent. This has had a significant impact in terms of the documentation of historical records. In fact, often in discussing early engagements between the two civilizations, the author relies on Chinese records of interactions.

The earliest documentary references to India date back to emperor Han Wudi (147 BCE-87) dispatching an envoy, Zhang Qian, to the west in order to seek an alliance against the Xiongnu. After a tumultuous trip of 13 years, which entailed being captured by the Xiongnu, Zhang returned with information about countries in the west, including one called Shendu. This began the process of cultural and religious exchanges, with Chinese monks travelling to India to learn and acquire Buddhist texts.

In these early records, historically, there existed a deep sense of admiration for India as a land of wisdom, spirituality, and learning. In addition, records of diplomatic and trade embassies point to Indian kingdoms being seen as thriving economic centres. But this sense of appreciation vanished over the centuries. A number of factors contributed to this. These ranged from the dwindling influence of Buddhism in India around the 11th and 12th centuries (which in turn led to China emerging as a key centre for Buddhism); the perception of colonised India as a weak, slavish nation; the encounters with Indian soldiers who were part of the British forces that launched campaigns in China through the mid- and late 1800s; the role of Indian trading communities in the opium trade; the perception of the Indian freedom movement being submissive rather than revolutionary; and view of post-independence India as an inheritor of Britain’s colonial legacy.

These perceptions, Saran argues, continue to play a role in modern-day Chinese political imagination, impinging on ties between the two countries even today. The present-day India-China relationship and geopolitical churn is the focus of the final few chapters of the book.

Examining Chinese diplomacy and discourse, Saran argues China today is simultaneously a deeply insecure and extremely confident power. He explains that on one hand, Beijing believes that the global balance of power began to shift in its favour following the 2008 global economic crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of populism in the West, and post-Trump political turmoil in the United States has accelerated this trend.

China is no longer defensive about its Communist ideology and authoritarian state. Rather, it believes that it can offer developing countries another option for advancement. This situation presents difficult challenges for India, given Beijing’s perception of its historic centrality in a hierarchical Asian political order. On the other hand, stability continues to be a critical concern for the CCP, particularly with growth decelerating and the sense of ideological contestation with the West intensifying.

In addition, the implications of Xi Jinping’s centralisation of power and authority has created fresh challenges. Sooner or later, there will have to be a transition of power. How that is managed will impact the CCP’s future rule. Consequently, it is useful for New Delhi and others to bear in mind that a China-centric world is not a given. It will take “sustained pre-eminence over a considerable time” to achieve such an architecture – which is not going to be easy, considering that significant power centres exist around the world and in Asia. For India, therefore, Saran argues that a return to

focussing on economic growth and constitutional values will allow it to compete effectively in shaping the regional order and safeguard its national interests.

How China Sees India and the World by Shyam Saran, Juggernaut, India, 2022. Pages 304. ₹640 (Hardcover); ₹608 (Kindle)

Notes

¹ An explanatory address was delivered by Xi Jinping on a landmark resolution on the major achievements and historical experience of the Communist Party of China (CPC) over the past century on 11th November 2021. [Full text](#)