

Is There a Need for China Studies in India?

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We need to understand China in a more complex, globalised, and intrinsically connected world, not only because of security concerns, but also due to issues such as the economy, the environment, and the scarcity of resources. Against the backdrop of the recent policy document entitled “Nonalignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty First Century”, this article argues that there is little interest within the Indian government, the leading think tanks, or the private sector in developing China studies in India at present.

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A recent policy document entitled “Nonalignment 2.0: A Foreign and Strategic Policy for India in the Twenty First Century” released by the Delhi-based think tank Centre for Policy Research remarked that,

China will, for the foreseeable future, remain a significant foreign policy and security challenge for India. It is the one major power, which impinges directly on India's geopolitical space. As its economic and military capabilities expand, its power differential with India is likely to widen.

The document goes on to recommend various ways in which India should respond to possible territorial and economic conflicts with China.

Leaving aside the soundness of the predictions and the policy recommendations on dealing with China outlined in the document, I was confounded by two issues when reading it. First, I did not see names of any China scholars from India involved in drafting the report. This could either mean that there are no competent China scholars in India to

contribute to the report, or that the drafters of the report thought that they possessed enough expertise on China and India-China relations to make the necessary policy recommendations.

The second issue that perplexed me was the fact that given the importance of (and the perceived threat from) China, as repeatedly underscored in the document, the drafters of the report did not find it necessary to recommend the development of research infrastructure in India on China and Chinese affairs. This could also mean one of two things. Either the drafters are satisfied with the current state of China studies in India, or that they believe that there is no need for a cohort of China academics, beyond the diplomatic corps, journalists, op-ed writers, etc, to play a role in the deliberations of India's China policy. For them, scholars of China in India seem to be irrelevant to any kind of policy-related discourse. The document clearly indicates that there is no need for China studies in India.

Lack of Interest

I have wondered the same things about the Indian government's interest (or lack thereof) in consulting China scholars and investing in the field of China studies in India. This is in stark contrast to the Title VI programme (sometimes also

called Foreign Languages and Area Studies grant) of the United States (US), established under the National Defence Education Act of 1958 as a response to the launch of Sputnik 1 by the Soviet Union. Under the Act, grant from the US government supported (1) instruction of fields and topics that provide full understanding of areas, regions or countries; (2) research and training in international studies; (3) work in the language aspects of professional fields and research; and (4) instruction and research on issues critical to current world affairs.

For some, the India-China war of 1962 was a significantly bigger and consequential “Sputnik moment” for India. If the Indian government had considered a long-term strategy to engage with China and undertaken in-depth analysis of a country that was clearly already a “significant foreign policy and security challenge for India”, it could have invested in scholars and educational institutions doing research on China. In fact, the reverse seems to have taken place with the decline of Cheena-Bhavana (Institute of Chinese Language and Culture), Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, West Bengal and whatever expertise that institution may have developed with regard to China. Were it not for the financial support from the Congress for Cultural Freedom and the Ford Foundation, the Institute of Chinese Studies in Delhi and the associated publication called *China Report* may not even have been established. To its credit, the Indian government eventually decided to support the Institute in the 1990s and continues to be its leading funding organisation.

However, China studies, including the teaching of Chinese language, in India is in dismal state. Leading universities, such as the Calcutta University, have no permanent position for Chinese language faculty or anyone who specialises on China. Books on China published in India rarely use Chinese language sources and are seldom peer-reviewed by competent scholars. These are not only indications of the neglect of the China studies field, but also the lack of an effort to competently understand and analyse a strategically important region.

I will here attempt to highlight three aspects, which I believe are important for the establishment and development of China studies programmes at Indian universities. These three aspects are: (1) infrastructure, which includes financial support from government and the private sector, access to language labs, textbooks, research materials, etc, and the presence of first-rate teachers and researchers; (2) curriculum, which integrates language study, disciplinary expertise, and imparts analytical tools; and (3) employment opportunities.

Employment Opportunities

Let me start with one of the most important reasons students decide to major in a field of study at the college and university level. Job prospects after graduation is the primary concern of a majority of students entering colleges. With regard to China studies in India, there were very few job opportunities before the 1962 war, but there were vibrant official and commercial exchanges between the two countries, which offered some employment options to students. Government scholarships made it possible for Indians to study in China and return to teach at places such as the Cheena-Bhavana, universities of Calcutta, Allahabad, Benares, Gorakhpur and the School of Languages in Delhi. The 1962 war put an end to these exchanges and led to the decline of many of the China studies programmes in India, even though new departments offering courses in Chinese language and studies were established at Delhi University (DU) and Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi.

When educational exchanges between the two countries resumed in 1978, only two Indian students were sent to China. The numbers increased in the 1980s, but the concern about eventual employment remained due to limited opportunities in the private sector. The situation changed dramatically in the second half of the 1990s with the economic reforms in India and an increase in India-China commercial relations. These developments resulted in the creation of new avenues of employment. The tourism sector, for example, attracted many young graduates, who were

engaged in interpretation and served as guides for travellers coming from Taiwan and other Chinese-speaking regions. Some of these graduates also tried to set up tourist agencies for Indian tourists planning to visit Mainland China. The establishment of Indian companies in China and the general increase in trade between the two countries had a similar impact. In fact, the demand for Chinese-knowing individuals has increased to such an extent that there is now a dearth of qualified people. Competency has emerged as the main problem in recent years as students with only two years of Chinese language training are already getting lucrative job offers. To meet this demand, Indian universities and colleges have to restructure existing curriculum, by introducing new courses and providing analytical tools needed to undertake original research on China. This brings me to the problems with existing Chinese language and China studies curricula.

Curricular Woes

Some of the problems with China studies (including language) curricula in India were pointed out in a report written by Madhavi Thampi in 2006. The report noted the fact that there were few interactions between the China studies departments and the other major discipline departments at Indian universities:

As a consequence, the report points out, “the depth and rigor of the research done on China, and the methodology used, has often suffered. It is important to break down this ‘Chinese wall’ between the study of China and the different disciplines” (Thampi 2006).

While the report recommended that such interactions must be established, it did not specify the ways to accomplish the goal, especially given the rigidity of the overall Indian university system. The problem with the curriculum of China studies has also been highlighted in a recently published book titled *On China by India: From Civilisation to Nation State* (Shih et al 2012), also without any recommendations about how to address the shortcomings.

In 2012, I attended a round-table discussion on the teaching of Chinese language at the Centre for Chinese and Southeast Asian Studies at JNU. Students

there repeatedly noted the need for various courses to meet the demands of the job market and for pursuing further research on China. It was clear that there was not only a need to revamp the existing Chinese language curriculum, but also to introduce courses that would provide students with the analytical tools of humanities and social sciences so as to develop their research and writing skills.

To revamp the existing curricula on China studies, there are three things that need to be accomplished. First, there should be an annual faculty development programme for those already teaching China-related courses at Indian universities and colleges. A majority of the current faculty most likely did not receive training in research methodology and critical analysis of Chinese-language sources or did not take courses that are now needed for private-sector employment. Therefore, it would be difficult for these faculty members to create new courses or revamp the curriculum without first receiving proper training.

Second, a serious attempt has to be made to integrate language teaching, disciplinary training, and the required research and writing skills. I was surprised to find that final year MA students at JNU had never written a book review, a term paper, or a research proposal. How can we expect them to pursue doctoral research and produce academic work at later stages of their career? At the same time, new courses on simultaneous interpretation, classical Chinese, Chinese migration, etc, must be offered to students. In an ideal situation the possibilities of dual or joint degrees should also be considered. The aim should not be to just prepare a student for the Indian market, but a student graduating from an Indian university or college must be able to compete globally with other students.

Third, in order to achieve the above two goals, at the initial stages a nodal institution should take charge of coordinating, facilitating, and overseeing the revamping of China studies curricula nationally. Here I think the Institute of Chinese Studies in Delhi could play a significant role. It already organises

an annual meeting on China studies. Panels during these meetings could be devoted to faculty development programmes and curriculum development. This institute should also play an active role in exploring the possibility of dual degrees and joint programmes. All these proposals, however, will be dependent on good infrastructure. In addressing this issue, I return to the unfathomable neglect of China studies after India's "Sputnik" moment.

Infrastructural Issues

There are no Indian institutions in the list of the top 100 global universities. To expect China studies in India to be globally competitive is perhaps expecting too much from the cracking infrastructure and other problems within the Indian higher education system, especially with regard to humanities and social sciences. However, given the importance of China to the strategic and economic affairs of India, it is imperative that the Indian government devotes sufficient resources to developing the field of China studies.

Perhaps following the Chinese pattern of establishing centres of excellence throughout China, India could also set up similar centres focusing on China studies. During the first phase, these teaching and research centres could be located in the four major metropolitan regions of India and be closely associated with local universities. It is imperative to staff these centres with scholars from around the world. While there is a dearth of good scholars of China in India, there are a few who are outstanding academics who need a proper intellectual environment, encouragement and nurturing in order to bring them on par with international academic standards. Interactions between foreign trained scholars and local scholars could perhaps be of mutual benefit.

These centres of excellence should also take charge of reviewing and developing China-related curricula, conducting faculty development programmes (both for scholars of China and teachers at Indian colleges who teach relevant courses), undertaking innovative research, and producing policy papers. With

regard to research, these centres, in addition to working on traditional issues and topics, could also develop niche areas such as in-depth study of China's relations with south and south-east Asian countries.

Indeed, developing such an infrastructure will require substantial funding, which should come not only from the government, but also the private sector. It is unfortunate that the private sector in India has made very little investment in humanities and social sciences. Even the fact that China is India's leading trading partner, something that is trumpeted repeatedly, does not seem to have made the private sector take an interest in developing China studies. Perhaps they too, similar to the drafters of the Nonalignment 2.0 report, are satisfied with those who are not trained as China scholars. Clearly, for them also, there is no need for China studies in India.

Concluding Remarks

There is no genuine interest from the Indian government, the private sector, or the leading think tanks in developing China studies in India at present. If the status quo is fine with them, then – at least as far as they are concerned – there is indeed no need for China studies in India. It thus may be a waste of time for students to pursue research in a field that has no future in India, no matter how obsolete or updated the curriculum is at Indian universities. It is useless for the few outstanding Indian scholars of China to strive to do research and publish if their contributions are not recognised even within India. Resources should perhaps also not be spent on conferences and seminars that offer no new insights into China.

There is a great need to develop China studies in India and to revive what was started at Cheena-Bhavana in the 1930s. At that time the goal was to pursue China studies within the pan-Asian, anti-colonial context. Now, the need is more pressing. We need to understand our neighbourhood in a more complex, globalised, and intrinsically connected world, not only because of security concerns, but also due to

issues such as the economy, the environment, and the scarcity of resources. It is time to draft a plan and execute it within the next 10 years. If nothing has taken shape within that period, we should frankly acknowledge that

India cannot, and perhaps should not, have an internationally recognised China studies programme. That will be a very sad day for all of us who are concerned about the state of China studies in India.

REFERENCES

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