

## India and China: An Interface

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### Introduction

The human mind swims in the dark waters of deluge and dissatisfaction and varied human frailties in search of Knowledge to dispel this darkness. The Vedic prayer of *Tamso ma jyotirgamaya* underlines this quest. *Om asto ma sadgamaya. Tamso ma sadagamaya mrityorya amrita gamaya. Om shanti shanti shanti..* Brhadaranyaka Upanishad (1.328)

Om, from falsehood lead me to Truth, From Darkness lead me to light, from death to immortality, peace in three states of life: physical, mental, and spiritual. This journey traverses across geographical and man-made boundaries and cross cultural interactions. This interface created a historical narrative enriching the corpus of all the disciplines of Knowledge.

A number of factors facilitated the interface between India and China. One of the significant factors has been the trade routes connecting the different geographical regions despite the existence of hazardous terrain. The well-known routes were the Silk route and the Sea route. There are references to both the countries in the ancient Indian literature—Vedas, epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata etc. and the Chinese records. The Indian monks as well as monks from Central Asia travelled to China and became instrumental in spreading Buddhism there through their translation works, establishment of monasteries etc. An attempt has been made here to present a detailed discussion on some of the monks who travelled to China and vice versa. The list is not exhaustive. The discussion is also about the Chinese monks who visited India. The travelogues have provided a lot of information about the geography of India, Buddhist Stupas and Monasteries, Indian culture, climate, and calendar etc.

The trade and commerce routes provided the accessibility to far off lands and helped not only the economic business transactions but also the cross cultural interactions including the religious ones. In some matters there is absence of authentic sources to verify the truth of events. "There is no work in all the literary treasures of the Brahmans, Buddhists and Jains comparable to the Book of Kings or the Annals of Livy or the Historians of Herodotus"<sup>[1]</sup>. This was not the reason that ancient India was known as a barren of deeds which were noteworthy to remember. On the other hand, from the time immemorial, it was filled with heroic achievements, great upheavals and dynastic vicissitudes. Unfortunately and even it is strange enough that whatever the incidents took part in ancient history did not find in a systematic record with due regard to chronology. This has included the lackadaisical the important branch of literacy activity of a systematic historical sense or to the indifference of the religious order or the controlled and advent of literatures, towards the fleeting mundane affairs of life. As a matter of fact, there is no gainsaying that the historian of ancient India suffers greatly from the initial difficulty of the want of genuine works of historiography.<sup>[2]</sup>

The deficiencies of the absence of authentic historical records of ancient Indian history can be filled with the help of Chinese literature. Quite a few Chinese notices are mentioned which refer to the plundering Central Asian tribes affecting India. The narratives of the noteworthy pilgrims

from China Fa-xian (C.E. 399-414), Yuan chuang (C.E.629-645) [The Si-yu-ki], and Yi ching (C.E. 673-695) offer a reliable source of information. These pilgrims came to India in search of knowledge and a compelling desire to worship at the sites of religious veneration in the memory of Buddha. A look into the works of the Tibetan lamas: Tarantha, the Dulva, and Tangyur, et.al can be additionally helpful in providing information. It is not easy to filter through the available unreliable sources and the gaps in information for creating a coherent and logical history of ancient India. The political events add another dimension to ancient Indian history. The northern region in India has been the centre of major happenings as the 'large empires here rose like waves in the sea and soon broke up into nothing'. It is relevant to observe that, "Aspirants to supreme dignity turned longing eyes across the Vindhyas, but never did India completely come under one sovereign umbrella, and even in the heyday of the Mauryas the extreme South remained outside the Imperial ambit"<sup>[3]</sup>. The political occurrences dominated the society eclipsing the religious and cultural developments. This scenario made ancient India an absence of political unity, despite the fact that it was incontestably a geographical as well as cultural division. Which resulted the weakest point of India's history, and, therefore, dynastic wars and territorial aggrandisements absorb our interest and attention to a greater degree than her achievements in the domain of religion, art, and literature.<sup>[4]</sup>

There is a lack of reliable information on the arrival of Buddhism in China except available translations. The information on the introduction of Buddhist doctrine in China is basically dependent on secular historical literature in China. The Chinese scholars were least interested in religious affairs unless there was a connection to politics or government coterie. This per force limited their attention to the Chinese issues and excluded religious practices of foreigners on Chinese soil.<sup>[5]</sup>

It is believed that on the request of Emperor Ming of Han dynasty (206 BCE-220CE) Indian scholars were invited to China. The authenticity of this source is not established, yet, it deals with the "official" introduction of Buddhism into China under Emperor Ming (58-75 C.E.). A dream is said to have inspired him to send a group of envoys (in the oldest versions headed by Zhang Qian, who died in the late second century B.C.E.) to the country of the Yuezhi in order to procure the sacred texts. The date of the mission is variously given as 60, 61, 64, or 68 C.E. after three (or, according to one version, eleven) years<sup>[6]</sup>. During the ancient period, a number of Indian perspicacious scholars from different parts of India travelled to China via Central Asian countries and also the sea route.

A notable contribution of Buddhism introduced into China from India (as part of its Indian Buddhist heritage) is that it initiated a new form of social organisation or Buddhist community (Sangha). Erstwhile inflexible class demarcations of medieval China developed fissures. This development facilitated the opportunities for people from varied origins to be able to be a part of intellectual activities.

### **Indian Perspective of "China"**

In the sense of calculation, India had a record earlier than China, since such a record is mentioned in Kautilya's Arthashastra<sup>[7]</sup>. China had its first census in the second century C.E.

From the Chinese historical perspective the prominent event was the introduction of Buddhism and since its inception it has been a major factor in Chinese civilization. The Chinese have

freely acknowledged their debt to India, often referring to her as the "Teacher of China," and Chinese Buddhists have pictured India as a Western Paradise, Sukhāvātī (the western pure land of the Buddha Amitābha).<sup>[8]</sup> This blossomed afresh to the Chinese philosophy after the impact of Buddhism. This was marked as both a response to and to borrow of Indian ideas. This resulted in the advent of Buddhism for many Chinese as a new way of life, and for all Chinese, a means of reassessing their traditional beliefs. Gradually, a new inception of the universe prospered. And the way of life was at a slow pace but unswervingly adapted entirely in China. Consequently, the change was so gradual and natural that a few Chinese people realized the actual occurrence. Historically, from the cultural point of view, India and China are two of the oldest civilizations having peaceful coexistence over a very long duration during the ancient period.

It is evident that culturally the impact of Indian scholars on China is more marked and significant than vice versa despite the fact that Chinese scholars also travelled to India. This is particularly true especially during the Kushan empires. Trade and commerce along the Silk Road and sea route between northwest India and adjoining regions flourished during the Kushan period. The term Kushan owes its origin to the Chinese word Guishang, which itself was a branch of Yuezhi—a loose confederation of Indo Europeans living in northwestern China. These people were forced to move away to the west by another group Xiongnu in BCE 176-160.

During the first century CE, Yuezhi moved forward to Bactria (northwest Afghanistan and Tajikistan). Kujula Kadphises (Chinese name Qiu jiu que) who was a Kushan prince is credited with unifying the heterogeneous tribes and gradually established control over the region defeating the Scytho-Parthians. According to Sri Lankan historian and numismatist Osmund Bopearachchi, Kujula Kadphises (Chinese name Qiu jiu que) was the first prince of the Kushans, who united the Yuezhi<sup>[9]</sup> confederation. The Yuezhi spread its control into the northwest Indian region known as Gandhara (now parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan) and established a capital near Kabul. India never welcomed the ideas, culture of any nation by military force nor from the neighbouring countries.

The augmentation of Indian culture into China is a monument to human understanding and cultural co-operation. i.e. the aftereffect unrewarded quest for learning. Whilst China almost completely suppressed other foreign religions, such as Zoroastrianism, Nestorian Christianity, and to some extent Manichaeism, she could not uproot Buddhism.

Sporadically, Buddhism was persecuted, but for two thousand years it continued as an Indomania Chinese life despite it had ceased to be a vital force in the homeland and thereafter it had lost its place as the prominent religion of China. These processes tagged "Indianization" and it became more powerful and effective after it was thought that Buddhism had been killed in China.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Various names of “India” given by the Chinese

Tracing the connections between India and China, the first reference is to a mission to Ta-hsia or Da xia (Bactriana) of a talented and courageous Chinese envoy, Chang Chien (Kien), around 138 B.C. He was detained by the Huns. He escaped his captivity after ten years. He returned to China after fourteen years. In his report to the Chinese Emperor, he mentions the country of Shen-tu (India) to the southeast of the Yueh-chih (Jou-Chih) country.

A number of traditional narratives mention earlier connections between China and India. The official substantiation of the Indian Chinese commercial exchanges is found in the reports of the Chinese diplomat Chang Chien who travelled across Central Asia to Bactria during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.E. 220 C.E). The reports contain reference to trade with India with south western districts of China along the overland route corresponding to the modern Yunnan road. Further, Chinese coins dated 138 B.C.E. have been found in Mysore indicating trade between the two countries through the sea route. This had given the evidence about the Chinese trade relations with countries through the China sea and Indian ocean as well as to the exchange of diplomatic missions. This reference is found in passages in a Chinese text. However, the reference is rather vague:

Arnold Hermann Ludwig Heeren (1760-1842) an Egyptologist and author<sup>[11]</sup> observes that: "the name China is of Hindu origin and came to us from India".<sup>[12]</sup>

Henry Rudolph Davies (1865 -1950) holds that besides Buddhism, Shaivism was also popular in Yunnan as is evident from the existence of the cult of Mahakala there.

"M. de Guignes says that Magadha was known to the Chinese by the name Mo-kiato, and its capital was recognized by both its Hindu name Kusumpura, for which the Chinese wrote Kia-so-mo-pon-lo and Pataliputra, out of which they made Patoli tse by translating putra, which means son in Sanskrit, into their own corresponding word, tse"<sup>[13]</sup>.

Zhang Qian (d. 113 B.C.E.) and Sima Qian (B.C.E.145-90 BC), the Grand Historians make references to "Shendu", which is probably the Indus Valley (the Sindh province in modern Pakistan), originally known as "Sindhu" in Sanskrit. When Yunnan was annexed by the Han Dynasty in the first century, Chinese authorities reported an Indian "Shendu" community living there. The impact of religious and cultural life has had a profound effect by the Hinduism and Buddhism found in China. Various similarities of early Chinese religion and Vedic Hinduism were based on nature and a pantheon of deities.<sup>[14]</sup>

This had given an impression for China to be seen as a religion in imagination, so beautiful and captivating in ritualism. It is dominant in cosmology and metaphysical practices.

By Chinese, India was known by various names, not one of which was abhorrent. It was called Yintu, the kingdom of the Hindus or Xī yù the Western land, for the Buddhist, it is called fu guo, the land of the Buddhas. Many historians speak of an earlier ready-made culture coming to

China with the Vedic culture along with the sacred scripts which were written in Sanskrit language.<sup>[15]</sup>

### Meaning of “China” from the different sources

The ancient Indian literature from the first millennium B.C.E., e.g. the Mahābhārata, Laws of Manu, as well the Puranic literature mentions the Chinas. Tracing the Indo China links and association including the cultural relations many references are found in Sanskrit texts, but their chronology is cursory. The Mahābhārata and in Buddhist work may have been derived from families ruling in western China under such titles as Jin/Chin at Fanzhou in Shanxi (1106-376 BCE) Chen in Honan (1122-479 BCE) Qin in Shanxi as early as the ninth century BCE. Thus, Mahābhārata mentioned China many times in contemporary times and a reference brought by the Chinese at the Rajasuya ‘Yajna’ of the ‘Pandavas’; also, the ‘Arthashastra’ and the ‘Manusmriti’. It would be appropriate to refer to the ancient Indian sources where there is a reference to China indicating Indo-China links. Chanakya (c. 350-283 B.C.E.), the prime minister of the Maurya Empire and a professor at Takshashila University, refers to Chinese silk as "cinamsuka" (Chinese silk dress) and "cinapatta" (Chinese silk bundle) in his book Arthashastra.

The word Chinas or Chīnaḥ are a people mentioned in ancient Indian literature from the first millennium B.C.E., such as the Mahābhārata, Laws of Manu, as well the Puranic literature. The Sanskrit epic work Mahābhārata written between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E. contains certain references to China, referring to its people as the *Chinas* tribe i.e. China (Cinaratha) in the Epic of Mahābhārata. The Chinese themselves felt proud of their civilization and looked upon the outside world with disdain. The tribes were called as “Hun slaves” in the North zone and Barbarians in the North west zone whilst when Japanese denominated by them, called as “Dwarf Pirates”.

“The Chinese, always proud of their civilization, looked upon the outside world with contempt. They called the tribes living to their North “Hun slaves,” and the tribes living to the North-West “barbarians,” while the Japanese were denominated by them “Dwarf Pirates.”<sup>[16]</sup>

China is mentioned as one among the northern kingdoms, a Mlechha tribe<sup>[17]</sup>: Mahābhārata, Book 6, chapter 9 (MBh.6.9). Here they were described as the protectors of sage Vashishtha (his cow against the attack of king Viswamitra). In the Mahābhārata, the Cinas appear with the Kiratas among the armies of king Bhagadatta of Pragjotisa or Assam.

In the Sabhaparvan (Book of the Assembly Hall) this king is described as surrounded by the Kiratas (referred to the people who lived in mountains particularly in the Himalayas) and the Cinas. In the Bhismaparvan, the corps of Bhagadatta, consisting of the Kirtas and the Cinas of yellow color, appeared like a forest of Karnikaras. It is significant that the Kiratas represented all the people living to the east of India in the estimation of the geographers of the Puranas. Even the dwellers of the islands of the Eastern Archipelago were treated as Kiratas in the Epics. The reference to their wealth of gold, silver, gems, sandal, aloe wood, textiles and fabrics clearly demonstrates their association with the regions included in Suvarnadvipa. Thus, the connection of the Kiratas and Cinas is a sure indication of the fact that the Indians came to know of the

Chinese through the eastern routes and considered them as an eastern people, having affinities to the Kiras, who were the Indo-Mongoloids, inhabiting the Tibeto-Burman regions and the Himalayan and East Indian territories, the word Kirata being a derivation from kiranti or kirati, the name of a group of people in eastern Nepal.<sup>[18]</sup>

In earlier times, the people of the east, Magadha and Videha, were in contact with Yunan, as the traditions of Purvavideha show. The two names, Purvavideha and Gandhara, seem to represent these two successive eastern and western streams of Indian colonial and cultural expansion in this region.

The epic, Ramayana, in the section of Kiskindha kanda, (the story of the kingdom Kishkindha and the meeting between Lord Rama and Lord Hanumaan ) referred to China as “Cinas” as well as “Parama-Cinas”. Cinas or Prama-Cinas associated with the trans-Himalayan tribes of Daradas, Kambojas, the Sakas, the Yavanas, the Kiratas, the Bahlikas, the Rishikas, and the Tañkanas of the Uttarapatha. The epic proclaimed that it was created by sage Vashistha through the divine powers of cow Sabala or Nandini (Kamdhenu).

Many interpretations on “China” are mentioned in the various Puranas such as in Vayu Purana and the Matsya Purana, the Cinas and several other tribes would be obliterated by king Kalika or Pramiti during kaliyug.

Matsya Purana mentioned the Chinas as to be unfit of performing Shraad and referred as *Vira-maru*. And another purana named Vayu purana (VY 43.24 p. 282: Vayu Puran-English Translation Part 1 of 2 by G.V.Tagare, 1960.), and Brahmanda purana mentioned China as “Cina-maru”. *Vira-maru* or China-maru was identified as the lands of Turkestan situated in Afghanistan.

Some references on Cinas also made in the Buddhist literature, in the Buddhista play, *Mudrarakshas*<sup>[19]</sup>, where they are listed with the same above-mentioned tribes. Buddhista text *Milindapanho*, referred to the location as in the western Tibet/Ladakh.<sup>[20]</sup> Besides China and Parama-China, there is also a reference to Mahachina in the *Manasollasa* mentioned in the text as the fabrics. It is probably referred as western Tibet or Ladakh, and Parama-China as Mainland China.

## **Routes from India to China in the Vedic Source**

Indications of a land-route can be perceived in the remark of the *Harsacarita* of Banabhatta that Arjuna conquered the Hemakuta region after passing through China. The route across Central Asia is perhaps an oblique reference in the itinerary of Carudatta from the Indus Delta to China across the country of the Hunas and the Khasas, described in the *Vasudevakindi*, and in all likelihood a reference to the sea-route, passing through Vanga, Takkola and Suvarnavdipa, in the *Milindapanho* of Buddhist literature.

China is consistently shown as a connection with India through a land route across the country of the Kiratas in the early Indian literature. In the Vanaparvan of the Mahābhārata, the reference were given that the Pandava brothers are said to have crossed the country of the Cinās in course of their trek through the territory of north Badri (Himalayas) and found the realm of the king Subahu in Kirata.<sup>[21]</sup>

The Cinās are brought into intimate relationships with the Himalayan people (Haimavatas) in the Sabhaparvan too. The land of the Haimavatas is undoubtedly the Himavantappadesa of the Pali texts, which has been identified with Tibet or Nepal. In the Sasanavamsa, this region is stated as Cinarattha. Thus, it is clear that China was known to the Indians as lying across the Himalayas and was accordingly included in the Himalayan territories. In the Nagarjunikonda inscription of Virapurudatta, China (Cina) is said to be lying in the Himalayas beyond Cilata or Kirata. These references to the proximity of China to the Himalayan regions, inhabited by the Kiratas, show that there were regular routes through the Tibeto-Burman territories, along which the Indians could reach China.<sup>[22]</sup>

## **Interaction with India**

During the second century BCE, the first record of interaction between China and India, Buddhism was transmitted from India to China by trade relations via the Silk Road acted as economic contact between the two regions in the first century C.E. This was also marked that China and India had a connection before the transmission of Buddhism. References to a people called “the Chinas”, are found in ancient Indian literature. The Mahabharata (c. 5th century BCE) contains references to “China”, which may have been referring to the Qin state which later became the Qin dynasty. Chanakya (circa. 350-283 BCE) connotes Chinese silks “cinamsuka” (Chinese silk dress) and “cinapatta” (Chinese silk bundle) in his Arthshastra.

Such records by the Zhang Qian, a remarkable diplomat of the western Han dynasty and Sima Qian, the father of Chinese historiography for the Shiji known as Records of the Grand Historian make references India as “shendu”, which perhaps referred to the Indus Valley, derived as “Sindhu” in Sanskrit language. When Yunnan was added by the Han dynasty in the first century, Chinese authorities reported an Indian “Shendu” community living there.

The Cholas maintained a good relationship with the Chinese. Arrays of ancient Chinese coins have been found in the Cholas homeland (i.e. Thanjavur, Tiruvarur and Padukkotai districts of Tamil Nadu, India). Under Rajaraja Chola and his son Rajendra Chola, the Cholas had strong trading links with the Chinese Song dynasty. The Chola navy conquered the Sri Vijaya Empire of Indonesia and Malaysia and secured a sea trading route to China. Many sources describe Bodhidharma, the founder of the Zen school of Buddhism in China, as a prince of the Pallava dynasty.

## Conclusion

The unfathomable ocean of Buddhist knowledge reached China through the India-China interface. The trade routes provided practical access to other countries. This has been marked as a boon to the transportation of Buddhist scriptures, ideas, and beliefs etc. to China. This was felicitated by the travels of Indian Buddhist monks to China. The footprints of these travels are found in the monasteries built in China through the royal patronage. This interface occurred over a long period of history. The significance of the oral method of communication in the field of Buddhism cannot be undermined. It may not be wrong to surmise that the oral method prepared a background for later written translation work of Buddhist texts etc. It is believed that about one hundred fifty scholars participated in the monumental task of translating the Tripitakas into Chinese language. This happened during the one thousand years from the second century to the twelfth century i.e. from the end of the Han dynasty till the end of the Sung dynasty. The colossal contribution made by Indian monks cannot be overlooked as seventy monks out of these one hundred fifty scholars were from India. The translation of umpteen number of Buddhist texts containing a wide variety of Buddhist subjects enriched the Chinese corpus of religion.

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## Internet Resources

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## Foot Notes

[1] Rama Shankar Tripathi, "History of Ancient History" Nand Kishore & Bros., Benares, 1942.

[2] Alberuni: "The Hindus do not pay much attention to the historical order of things; they are very careless in relating the chronological succession of things; and when they are pressed for information and are at a loss not knowing what to say, they invariably take to tale-telling" (Sachau, Alberuni's India, Vol. II, p.10). Ram Shankar Tripathi, History of Ancient India, Motilal Banarsidass Publisher, Delhi, 1992, p.1.

[3] Tripathi, op.cit., p.10.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Eric Zurcher, Buddhist Conquest in China The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China, Brill, Leiden, 2007, p.19

[6] Ibid., p.30.

[7] M.K.Agarwal, From Bharata to India: Volume 1: Chrysee the Golden, iUniverse, USA, 2012, p.381.

[8] Ibid., p.378.

[9] Yuezhi were an ancient Indo European people. They were nomads engaged in raising cattle in a dry area in the western part of the modern Chinese province of Gansu, during the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium B.C.E.

[10] Damodar P. Singhal, Buddhism in East Asia, Books & Books: 1984, p.100.

[11] Historical researches into the politics, intercourse, and trade of the Carthaginians, Ethiopians, & Egyptians, Vol. 2.

[12] Bhaktivejanyana Swami, Ithihaasa: The Mystery of His Story Is My Story of History, AuthorHouse, Bloomington, 2013, p.515.

[13] "Indian Presence in Ancient China." Historum, [historum.com/threads/indian-presence-in-ancient-china.33506/](http://historum.com/threads/indian-presence-in-ancient-china.33506/). Accessed 26 Oct. 2023.

[14] Swami, op.cit., p.515.

[15] Agarwal, op.cit., p.375.

[16] Swami, op.cit., p.524.

[17] The Indians referred to all alien cultures that were less civilized in ancient times as 'Mlechcha' or barbarians. Among the tribes termed Mlechcha were Sakas, Hunas, Yavanas, Kambojas, Pahlavas, Bahlikas, and Rishikas. The Amarakosha described the Kiratas, Khasas and Pulindas as the Mleccha-jatis. Indo-Greeks, Scythians, and Kushanas were also mlecchas.

[18]

<https://vedicgoddess.weebly.com/tirishulas-blog/china-cinaratha-in-the-epic-mahabharata-hindui-sm-the-forgotten-facts-fb>

[19] The Mudrarakshasa is a Sanskrit language play by Vishakhadatta that narrates the ascent of the king Chandragupta Maurya (B.C.E. 324 – 297) to power in India. Mudraraksha is a play and an example of creative writing, but not entirely fictional. (See Romila Thapar, The Past Before Us, Harvard University Press, 2013, p.403)

[20] F.Max Muller, Sacred Book of the East, Vol.xxxvi, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1977, p.204.

[21] Journal of the Greater India Society, Volumes 15-17, p.103.

[22] "China Cinaratha in the Epic of Mahabharata." The Hindu Forum, [thehinduforum.com/index.php?threads/china-cinaratha-in-the-epic-of-mahabharata.3709/](http://thehinduforum.com/index.php?threads/china-cinaratha-in-the-epic-of-mahabharata.3709/).

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