

India- China: Ancient Trade Routes

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Abstract: *India and China are one of several old cultures with a history of more than twenty centuries. Through time, India and China's interaction has passed through various. Most of these phases have been positive interaction between the two civilizations. In the current research I have tried to analyze the interaction, between these two current contenders of Asian supremacy in various aspects and in light of the historical relations between the two countries. The underlying patterns have been studied and attitudes inherent in each civilization and their specific attributes highlighted. The introduction provides a glimpse into the ancient relationship between India and China.*

Keywords: ancient, trade, routes, central Asia, Pamirs, Kashgarh, Assam- Burma

Introduction

India- China relations were created by the generous Buddhist monks of two India and China who undertook to take the signal of love what Buddha has given, for the suffering mankind. The inspirational relationship for both great countries was primarily started through the Chinese, hence, source materials of its history are to be found in Chinese only. Unfortunately, Indian history has not recorded the great achievement of those Indian scholars such as Kashyapa Matanga, Dharmaraksha, Sangbhadra and Sangadeva, Kumarjiva, who gone to China with a completely missionary zeal and whose titles are interlaced thereby history of Buddhism in China. They were the torch-bearers of Indian civilization. The Chinese not only preserved the names of those Indians, but also have preserved the record of the Chinese monks who went out to India looking for the Law of Buddha.

After the establishment of Buddhistic views in China, the Buddhist intellectual encountered a serious problem regarding the interpretation of Buddhistic Sutras about their greatly specialised language. Be able to promote the new faith and rescue the doctrine, from

initial vagueness and removing doubts, the sacred books should be done accessible to the community. Public should be provided an opportunity to obtain right information of the philosophical thoughts of Buddhism and also have an idea of the controversial issues. The main concentration of the Buddhist community in China, therefore, was on the translation and explanation of Indian Buddhist texts.¹

At the beginning of the third century BC, when India was united under Mauryas, China was still divided among various small Kingdoms. The chief of one of these principalities was called Qin, successfully destroyed a number of feudal states and established a central government which in a short time united the whole of China under one roof (Qin Dynasty, 221- 206 BC). Towards the end of the third century BC, a new dynasty named Han (206 BC- 220 BC) was established. They tried to maintain the same boundary of the empire as established by the previous dynasty, but they were faced with problems in this regard in the western part of the empire due to barbarian hordes Xiong nu (hun), who were hereditary enemies of Chinese. Northern frontiers were secured against their attacks by building the great Wall in 244 BC. China was now to be protected against its attack from the western side. For realizing this aim the Han emperor thought about aligning further west such as with Yuezhis, the Sogdians, the Tokharians and others. This way pressure on Xiong nu could be brought from both sides.

In 138 BC, Emperor Wudi dispatched a task headed by Zhang Qian to Yuezhis in Central Asia about the aspire to form allies opposite the Xiongnu. As soon as he crossed the Chinese frontier, he was arrested by Xiongnu and set to forced work.² After staying among them for ten years, he escaped and proceeded on the route to the west. He eventually traveled up to Bactria but his negotiations with Yuezhis, did not lead to any immediate success and he returned to China in 126 BC. Despite not being successful his expedition played a significant role in opening up China to the outside world. The report submitted by him to the emperor gave valuable and accurate information about western countries like Da-yuan (Ferganah), Anxi(Parthia), Taxia (Bactria), etc. He made an important discovery; he found material like bamboo and cotton stuff from south-western provinces of China, in the markets of Bactria.

According to what he heard from local traders, these materials were bought by Indian caravan through Afghanistan.³

In 119 BC, Emperor Wu, sent Zhang Qian go down to his second journey to the west, hoping that of making an federation tackle the Xiongnu together wondering clan, the Wusun. The Wusun alive in a trough north of the Tarim Basin, in exactly is today's Xinjiang region of north western China. Though the task was in order to create a military union was unsuccessful, Zhang Qian dispatch his deputy to meet other nations in the area and effectively determined and kept good politic links with lot of countries in the Central Asian region. Zhang Qian's two tremendous travelling to the Western Regions secured much of the nations in Central Asia and Western Asia (the Middle East), comprising Bactria (Afghanistan), Sogdiana (Uzbekistan), Ferghana (eastern Uzbekistan) and India.⁴ Impressed by Zhag Qian's report the Emperor woke up to the need for opening routes to western countries and India. Soon enough routes to west through Central Asia were opened by displacing Huns from western regions and their territory annexed to the empire.

Routes

This formed the basis of building a safe passage through Central Asia, for traffic of all kind, like Buddhist monks, trade etc. and exchange between China and outside world begins in right earnest. The travellers who had the maximum effect, on interaction between China and India were Buddhist monks. Buddhism brought India and China together and their relations from first to eleventh century primarily revolved around it. The exchange of Buddhist monks, Buddhist ideas and other material exchanges not only occurred through central Asia, but also through other routes though primary was the central Asian route. This region has been named Ser-India. This region is bounded on the north by Tianshan or the celestial mountains. The boundary between this region and Tibet is marked on the east by extension of Kunlun ranges known as Nanshan, on the west is the Pamirs called by Chinese as Conglin or the Onion Ranges. The Pamirs connect Tianshan with Hindukush. From these mountains some of the major rivers flowed towards Taklamakan deserts which gradually dry up due to contact with hot sands and

heat from the sun. The Kashgar River rises from Tianshan and Yarkand River from the Pamir. Flourishing colonies were established along the banks of these rivers by the people coming from various regions. It was in the first century AD that Buddhism was spread to these areas and people from Kashmir and North-West India visited the region of Khotan and Kashgar and set up small colonies with kings who claim descent from Indian royal families.⁵ This also facilitated the movement of Indian monks through this region. The route maintained its pre-eminence for about one thousand years. The route which started from the north-western India, proceeded along the Valley of Kabul River, crossing Hidda, Nagarahara, and Bamiyan before crossing Hindukush. Bamiyan is a valley on the mouth of important passes, in this region. It is mentioned as Fan-yen-na in old Chinese records.

Further to the north beyond the hills, the route reaches Bactria, which was known to the Chinese as *Fo-Ho* and to the Indians as *Balhika*. This region is basically Iranian, but the local culture came under the influence of Indian and Hellenic culture, due to the expansion of the Greek empire. Buddhism reached here in around the first century BC and it remained the region's main religion till seventh century AD. During this time it came under the political sovereignty of Greeks, Sakas, Yuezhi, and Huns successively. Bactria was the meeting place of two different roads leading to Central Asia and China. One passed through ancient Sogdiana which is northward from Bactria. It reached Uch-Turfan through Jaxartes and then Tashkhend, after that, it crossed mountain passes of Tianshan. The second was a shorter and more frequently used route which passed through Takharians, Badakhshan and then through passes of Pamirs, it reached the plain of Kashgar. There is another short route that joined Kashgar with the upper valley of Indus, bypassing through Gilgit and Yasin valley. Kashgar was thus an important intermediate point in the journey up to China. By 650 AD, Kashgar and Yarkand were home to hundreds of monasteries. From Kashgar, there were again two routes up to the border of China, one along southern fringes of Tarim basin and other along the north. The two routes coming from South and North of Tarim desert met on Chinese frontier at a place called Yumenguan or the Jade Gate. Not far from it, Dunhuang is situated, where one of the biggest establishments of Buddhist learning was once situated

Other routes

There are two other overland routes between India and China in ancient times. They were more difficult to traverse and pass through uncivilized countries, so they were less used than the Central Asian route. One of them left India at Assam and then passed through upper Burma and Yunnan. The second route was through Nepal and Tibet. In addition to difficult geography, unhealthy conditions, scarcity of food, insecurity due to absence of any established government structure, added to the inaccessibility of these routes, but as given in the Zhang Qian's report that Chinese articles like bamboo were bought by Indian caravan as far as Bactriana and Chinese goods were carried to Gangetic plain through eastern India, for export through sea in first century AD. Despite all the hurdles the two routes were well frequented. It is also likely that Buddhism reached South China through the Assam Burma route at the start of the Christian era. Assam Burma route started at Pataliputra, which was the capital of the Maurya Empire and then passed through Champa, Kajangala, Pundravadhna and proceeded to Kamarupa in Assam.⁶

From Assam to Burma there were three routes, one was through the valley of Brahmaputra up to the passes of Patkoi Range and thereafter crossed up to upper Burma. The second route was through Manipur up to Chindwin valley, while the third was through Arakan up to Irrawaddy valley. All three routes finally met at Bhamo on the Burmese frontier and then they passed to the valleys to Yunnanfu (Kunming), which was the chief city of South China. The second route which is mentioned above passed through Tibet. This route was relatively late in coming into frequent use. It opened in the first half of the seventh century when Buddhist monks converted the first King of united Tibetan empire Srong-btsan Sgam-po. He allied himself with both China and Nepal by marrying into the royal families of two countries. This resulted in Indian and Chinese missionaries pouring into Tibet and the growth of Tibetan Buddhism. This also facilitated the movement of Indian missionaries into China due to the security of a friendly Tibet. A Chinese pilgrim Xuanzao who comes to India in 627 AD by this route, has left a short account of his journey. On leaving frontiers of China he crossed the desert, passed by iron gate (Darbend), passed through Tokharestan and then the country of barbarians (Hun) and after that

reached Tibet. There he met Tibetan queen and by her orders had a safe passage through Tibet up to Julundhara in Punjab. This route was not followed by the Chinese in the eighth and ninth centuries due to strained relations between the two countries. In tenth century a Chinese traveller named Jiye seems to have taken this route on the way to China from India.

Sea route

In addition to these three overland routes, there was also a sea route from India to China. People of the coastal regions of India were known as the crude means of sea transport from prehistoric times. With the spread of Aryan civilization, this art of navigation improved steadily. That Asoka could send his Buddhist missionaries to Suvarnabhumi by sea, was proof of this ability. Suvarnabhumi seems to be referring to the entire peninsular portion of the Far East on the Bay of Bengal. The classic Greek geographer Ptolemy knew about this land and called this land as Chryse peninsula and Chryse Island. They also knew in the first and second century AD that it was possible to reach this land by sailing along the coast and the land of Thinae(China) was not far from there. Ptolemy even mentions China's important seaport of Kattigara which is still not identified. During the first few centuries AD a number of kingdoms are founded by Indian in the Far East. Prominent among them were Funan, Champa, Srivijaya. Funan is Christian name of the kingdom, whose original name cannot be traced.

The earliest reference regarding India China contacts can be found in Arthasastra, dated probably from fourth century BC. Chinese silk was recorded, denoting that silk commerce among India and China so far present. Fabrics through Shu (Sichuan) and Qiong bamboo cane was moved to Bactria via India, via the Yunnan- Burma route.⁷ (sometimes also known as Southern Silk Route).

In the south western China, the "Dian-Mian Road" (Yunnan-Burma), had present for while like path to India over which private commerce actions made conducted. Furthermore, in the second century BC, just there additionally a sea route among China and India, that was noted to as "South Sea Road." In the part on Geography in *Han Shu (Book of Han Dynasty)*, a open sea route from Guangdong to Kanci (now Kanchipuram in South India also a particular shipping

plan was documented. At this moment, products sent to India chiefly covered gold and silk textiles and such purchased from India chiefly appeared of crystal, glassware and gem.⁸

Return journey is most probably first through Ceylon and then Malacca strait to Vietnam. The maritime intercourse between India and China in the second century BC was also confirmed by the find of a Chinese coin at Mysore. This coin also probably belonged to 138 BC.⁹

Chinese Sources

Land contacts is mentioned in Han Annals (Han Shu Xiyu Zhuan; Han annals: Accounts on Western regions) for the first time with a kingdom with the political and cultural center in the present-day Kashmir and which is mentioned by the name *Jibin*. The king named as Wulaotou, started killing the Han envoys and looting their belongings. Other contacts during this period include the arrival of a guest from the vicinity of Kunlun- Karakorum in Han capital who presented the emperor Wu three perfume balls. At first, these balls did not attract the emperor's attention but then, a severe epidemic broke out in the capital. The guest asked the emperor to burn those balls and the perfume was said not only to spread to an area of 50 km but also stopped the epidemic and lasted for about three months.¹⁰

Another account by name of *Shiji* (Records of the Historian: Foreigners in the southwest) was compiled by *Sima Qian* or Si Maqian (145 to 86 BC), records Chinese history from the very beginning, based on oral tradition and literary accounts. It was divided into three main parts *benji*, *zhi*, *liezhuan* which dealt with the rulers, political and economic affairs and biographies of eminent personalities. This book presents many instances of early trade and diplomatic contact between India and China up to 1st century BC. The record narrates that Zhang Qian who was Han envoy in the western region returned to the court in 122 BC. He reported to the Han Emperor Wu Di (BC 140- BC 87) that while he was in Bactria, saw clothes made in Shu (another name of Sichuan province) and walking bamboo sticks. When asked where these things came from, the people answered, "these are from Shendu (Sindhu for India) several thousand *li* (1/2 km) from here in the southwest, we bought at the Shu merchant's market

there.”¹¹He proposed that the emperor must send trade missions to India but envoys sent by the emperor were killed by rulers of Yunnan and the linkage could not be established. According to the same work, around the same time General *Huo Qubing* obtained a metal statue of Buddha as booty, after defeating the Xiangnu king *Xiutu*. The statue was later presented to emperor Wu and he worshipped it as an idol. It the one of the first recorded Buddhist imagery in the Chinese court. A second official attempt by emperor Wu for establishing diplomatic contact with India was in 119 BC when *Zhang Qian* was again sent to the Western region by emperor Wu, with a delegation of about 300 members. He made his headquarter at *Wusun* and sent his representatives to India and other countries. Later Ban Gu (32AD- 92AD) writes about Kashmir (*Jibin* state) in his book *Qian Hanshu* (Early Han Annals), about the state of affairs there, its weather and products like pearls, corals and lapis lazuli, etc. The same book mentions about the sea route connecting India and China. Other diplomatic contacts include missions sent by the government of newly established province *Jiuquan* in 104 BC. There is a book by *Xu Jian* and *Wei Shu* in 725 AD under the orders of Tang emperor *Xuanzong* named *chuxue ji* which incorporates data from many earlier works. It mentions that *Yuezhi* (Kushanas) kingdom presented magic incense to the imperial court of the Han dynasty.

Indian Sources

As far as Indian sources are concerned, the earliest references to China are found in Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Manusmriti among others.¹² There is a passage in Ramayana in which it mentions as 'The Chinese, the greater Chinese (*cinanparamacinangsa*), *Tukharas*, the *Barbaras* and *Kambojas* are covered with golden lotus.' In *Sabhaparva* (the court chapter) of Mahabharata, when the third Pandav Arjuna, went to conquer Prayagjyotish (Assam), Bhagadatta, the King of Assam fought against him with an army comprising *Kirata* Chinese soldiers who lived beyond mountains. Chinese deer skins are also mentioned, and the skill of Chinese is also noted. In *Vanaparva* (the forest chapter), Krishna spoke to Yudhisthira when the latter was in the forest, banished by Kauravas, thus “I saw *Hara-Hunas*, the Chinese, the *Tukharas* and people of *sindh* (*Harahunanagsca Cinangsa Tusaran Saindhavangstatha*)

invited to your sacrifice.¹³ In another context, Yudhisthira and his brothers went to capital of kirata king after crossing the Himalayas and passing through several countries such as China, *Tukhara* and *Darada* (cinang-stusarandaradangsca sarvan).

In *Udyogparva*(preparation of war), the king of Pragyajyotish, Bhagadatta presented to Duryodhana ‘an army of one *aksauhini*’ (consisting of 21,870 elephant, 21,870 chariots, 65,610 horses and 1,09,350 infantry). It consisted of Kirata and Chinese soldiers and looked as if it was clothed in gold. That invincible army appeared as charming as forest of Karnikara.

In *Bhismaparva*, there are two references: ‘in the north, there are other *malechhas* (who speak foreign tongue) tribes, such as *Yavanas*, the Chinese, the *Kambojas*. They are terrible and cruel (*Yavanascinas*)’ and there are the *Ramanas*, Chinese, *Dasamalikas* (*ramanascinas tatha ca Dasamalikah*).’ These are some the of references among many others to the Chinese in Ramayana, as a race on the periphery of *Aryavarta* and which take part as a minor actor in great epic of Mahabharata.¹⁴

Conclusion: Thus we can see from the above examples, that Indian and Chinese interacted before Christ and that too frequently, because both Ramayana and Mahabharata are works from that period, Ramayana is dated around 3rd century BC and Mahabharata around fourth century BC, its final form emerging between 300 BC and 300 AD. This interaction was largely positive as is evident from description of Chinese belonging to a highly skilled warrior race, high enough in social hierarchy to be invited to the Yajna and allowed to serve food. There are several Chinese routes to India which has been used by the Chinese to travel India for various purposes whether it was for the trade and religion. They are also very frequently travelled and were very busy routes.

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