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Bridging Civilizations: India-China Cultural Exchanges during the Maurya-Satavahana Dynasties and the Qin-Han Dynasties (2nd Century BCE – 2nd Century CE)

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Abstract

China and India, two of the world's oldest civilizations, have shared a rich cultural heritage for over 5,000 years. As neighboring nations with vast territories, abundant resources, and deep-rooted traditions, their historical interactions have significantly shaped global cultural landscapes. The Indus and Ganges rivers nurtured Indian civilization, while the Yellow and Yangtze rivers gave rise to Chinese culture, both contributing to humanity's intellectual and spiritual wealth. This study examines the diverse cultural exchanges between India and China during the Maurya and Satavahana Dynasties in India and the Qin and Han Dynasties in China (2nd Century BCE – 2nd Century CE). It explores the transmission of Buddhism from India to China through monks and travelers along the Silk Road, the exchange of goods and the influence of Indian astronomy, and philosophy on early Chinese thought. By analyzing historical texts, this research highlights the profound impact of these interactions on both civilizations and their lasting significance in shaping Asian cultural history.

Keywords: India-China cultural exchanges, Maurya Dynasty, Satavahana Dynasty, Qin Dynasty, Han Dynasty, Silk Road, Buddhism

Introduction

The cultural exchanges between India and China during the Maurya & Satavahana dynasties and the Qin & Han dynasties (2nd century BCE – 2nd century CE) represent one of the earliest and most profound instances

of cross-civilizational interactions in the world history. Despite the geographical obstacles of the Himalayas and the Central Asian deserts, these two major civilizations each with its own unique character, government, and traditions developed close and enduring ties. Trade, religious exchanges, diplomatic missions, and intellectual interactions served as the cornerstones of this connection, shaping not only their own historical paths but also the larger cultural and economic fabric of Asia.

There are many speculations in the academic circle about when the exchanges between China and India originated, but no definite conclusion has been reached. The earliest record of the exchanges between China and India can be found in the “*Records of the Grand Historian: the Southwest Barbarians*” by Sima Qian. From the “*Records of the Grand Historian*”, we can learn that trade between India and China had already existed before Zhang Qian’s mission to the Western Regions around 140 BC. This trade was formed through long-term contact and exchanges based on mutual trust. Besides the Record of India in ancient Chinese history, some ancient Indian texts contain the record of China. From the classical records of both sides, it can be seen that the exchanges between these two ancient civilizations have a long history.

China and India were both going through major political and economic changes at this time. Under the leadership of Ashoka and Chandragupta Maurya, the Maurya Dynasty in India established a sizable empire and aggressively pursued international ties, while the Satavahana Dynasty carried on India’s growth of both land-based and marine trade. The Han Dynasty became a dominant force in China via territorial expansion, administrative innovations, and a vast trading network, while the Qin Dynasty provided the framework for imperial centralization. With the help of established channels like the Silk Road and marine trade paths, these advances paved the ground for further exchanges between the two civilisations. Trade played a fundamental role in linking India and China, with silk from China and spices, textiles, and gemstones from India forming the backbone of commercial exchanges. Chinese historical records from this era, such as those by Sima Qian and Ban Gu, provide evidence of India’s significance as a trading partner, highlighting the demand for Indian goods and the presence of Indian traders in Chinese territories. These economic interactions not only enriched both civilizations but also created an avenue for cultural and intellectual exchanges.

Among the most significant aspects of India-China interactions during this period was the transmission of Buddhism. Emerging in India during the 5th–4th century BCE, Buddhism gradually spread beyond its homeland, reaching China by the early centuries CE. The patronage of Emperor Ashoka played a crucial role in sending Buddhist emissaries to foreign lands, including China, where the faith found fertile ground. The translation of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit and Pali into Chinese, along

with the movement of scholars and monks between the two regions, marked the beginning of a deep philosophical and religious connection that would shape Chinese spiritual traditions for centuries.

Beyond trade and religion, diplomatic missions and intellectual exchanges further strengthened ties between the two civilizations. Chinese envoys traveled westward in search of knowledge, while Indian scholars and traders contributed to the exchange of political thought, astronomical knowledge, and medical advancements. The intellectual curiosity exhibited by both cultures fostered a spirit of learning and adaptation, allowing them to incorporate elements of each other's traditions into their societies. This period also saw the exchange of artistic and architectural influences, as seen in the fusion of Buddhist iconography in Chinese sculpture and temple designs.

The foundation for centuries of Indo-China contacts was established by the cultural and commercial ties that were forged during this time, impacting subsequent exchanges during the Tang, Gupta, and Ming eras. These interactions show that civilizations flourish via meaningful interaction, collaboration, and ongoing idea sharing rather than developing in a vacuum. Gaining knowledge of the historical ties between China and India can help one better appreciate the influence of cross-cultural communication and its enduring influence on world history. This era's exchanges demonstrate the universality of human curiosity, respect for one another, and the quest of knowledge by all civilizations.

China in Ancient India

In ancient India, China was referred to as "Chin," a name that appears in prominent Indian epics such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Manusmriti. When China imported Sanskrit Buddhist sutras from India, the need for translation arose, leading Buddhist monks to transliterate the name "Chin" in Chinese. Some scholars believe that "Chin" is derived from "Qin," the name of the Qin Dynasty (221 BCE-206 BCE). However, historical evidence suggests that the term "Chin" was already in use in India before the First Emperor of Qin founded the dynasty.

In the Arthashastra, by Kautilya (Chanakya) during the early Maurya Dynasty in the 4th century BCE, there is a reference stating that "silk and silk garments are produced in the land of Chin," indicating both the existence of this name and the silk trade between India and China before Qin Shi Huang's reign. Additionally, India and China were often collectively referred to as "Indo-China." With the spread of Buddhism, the term "Chin" gained prominence across Central and Southeast Asia and eventually influenced Western Europe.

India in Ancient China

The historical connections between India and China date back to ancient times, long before the invention of paper and printing. Despite these early

periods, both civilizations documented each other in their historical records. Ancient Chinese texts mention India under different names, just as Indian texts reference China. These records provide insights into the deep-rooted cultural, commercial, and diplomatic ties between the two civilizations. Despite geographical distances and linguistic differences, India and China shared a dynamic relationship through trade, diplomacy, and the exchange of cultural and intellectual traditions. These historical texts serve as invaluable resources for scholars studying the enduring legacy of India-China interactions. This discussion will highlight some ancient Chinese texts that reference India.

Sima Qian, in his *Records of the Grand Historian* (Shiji), mentions India as “Shenduguo” (derived from Sindhu) while documenting the Biography of the Southwest Barbarians and the Biography of the Dayuan. (Wang 2013) Similarly, Ban Gu, in the *History of the Han Dynasty* (HfN), refers to India as “Shenduguo” while chronicling the Biography of the Southwest Barbarians, along with accounts of the Cantonese and Koreans. The content of this work closely aligns with *Records of the Grand Historian*, further reinforcing India’s presence in Chinese historical records. Additionally, Ban Gu references Zhang Qian’s explorations of the Western regions.

Another significant historical source, the *History of the Later Han*, was compiled by Fan Ye, a historian from the Liu Song period of the Southern Dynasty. This work, spanning ten Basic Annals, eighty Biographies, and eight Chronicles, documents 195 years of history from Emperor Liu Xiu (25 CE) to Emperor Liu Xie (220 CE). In his detailed accounts of the Western regions, Fan Ye mentions India under two different names: “Tianzhu” and “Shendu”. (Xue 2010)

Buddhism and Buddhist culture spread to China

Buddhism originated in India, which is a well-known fact. There is also debate over when Buddhism was introduced to China. Some scholars say it was during the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE-9CE), while others claim it was during the Eastern Han Dynasty (25CE-220CE). Therefore, a compromise is made by referring to the period of introduction as “the time between the two Han Dynasties” or “the juncture of the two Han Dynasties”. It spread to countries like Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and Mongolia through China very quickly, exerting a huge influence on them. Buddhism was introduced during this period. This was not only a significant event in Chinese history, but also a major event in the history of cultural exchanges between China and India. (Xue 2010)

The word “Futu” mentioned in the “Biography Western Regions” chapter of the “History of the Later Han Dynasty” means “Buddha”. Similarly, in the “Biography Western Rong” chapter of “Wei Lue”, Yu Huan also mentioned that “Futu” and “Futu” have the same meaning as “Buddha”. From these two pieces of information, it can be known that the time when

Buddhism was introduced to China was during the Han Dynasty.

According to the record of the History of the Later Han Dynasty (Hou Hanshu), Emperor Mingdi of the Eastern Han Dynasty had a dream about a golden man with an aura on his head. The next day Emperor Mingdi asked the ministers and learnt that the man in his dream resembled a religious figure known as the “Buddha” in the West (India). (Xue 2010) The emperor gave order to travel to the Western regions, in order to bring well-known Buddhist monks to China. Two Indian monks named Kashayapmatang and Darmaraksa, rode white horses thousands of kilometers to Luoyang (Capital of Eastern Han Dynasty) in AD 67 with Buddhist texts and pictures of Buddha. This was the first visit to China by Indian missionaries. Later, Emperor Ming built a Monastery in the capital Luoyang, and named it “White Horse Monastery”, where two monks translated Buddhist sutras, beginning the large-scale spread of Buddhism in China. The White Horse Monastery was the first government-run Buddhist Monastery in China. (Bagchi 1944)

With the introduction of Buddhism into China, the Bathing Buddha Festival also spread to China. Bathing Buddha Festival, also known as Buddha’s birthday, is the eighth day of the fourth month of the lunar calendar of China every year, which is the birthday of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha. In the late Han Dynasty, there was a man named Ze Rong who converted to Buddhism, and his men also converted to Buddhism. He was very active in promoting Buddhism and he also promoted a Buddhist festival called Bathing Buddha Festival. In the Brahmanism of India, there was a custom of bathing the statue. With the spread of Buddhism in China, the Buddha’s birthday (that is, the Bathing Buddha Festival) has become an important Buddhist festival in China. The festival traces its origins to Buddhist scriptures, which describe how celestial beings and dragons bathed the newborn Buddha with fragrant waters. This symbolic act represents purification, renewal, and spiritual awakening. The ritual of bathing the Buddha statue with scented water is believed to cleanse one’s soul, eliminate misfortunes, and invite blessings.

Symbolic and Material Exchanges between India and China

Throughout history, India and China have shared a rich tapestry of cultural and material exchanges that shaped their civilizations. From mythical narratives like the “Legend of the Rabbit on the Moon”, which echoes in both traditions, to the movement of valuable goods such as Sichuan products to India, these interactions extended beyond mere trade. The exchange of exotic animals, including Indian lions and rhinos transported to China, further highlights the deep interconnectivity of these regions. These symbolic and material exchanges not only influenced art, folklore, and commerce but also strengthened diplomatic and cultural ties between the two ancient civilizations.

The legend of the rabbit on the moon

There is an old legend in India that there is a rabbit on the moon, and there is the same legend in China. There is a saying in Qu Yuan's Tianwen of the Warring States period called "Gutu in service", which means that there is a rabbit in the moon, and there is also a legend in India that the old man sent the rabbit to the moon. Prof. Ji Xianlin said: "It is reasonable to say that the story originated in India, considering its ancient origin, widespread and numerous records in ancient books." According to Prof. Ji Xianlin, the story was transmitted from India to China. The story of the rabbit on the moon can be said to be an early result of the India-China cultural exchange. The story of a rabbit on the moon reflects ancient Indian and Chinese observations and imaginations of celestial bodies.

Sichuan products from China were introduced to India

According to the 'Biography of Dayuan' and the 'Biography of Southwest Barbarians' of the Records of the Grand Historian, Sichuan products from the Warring States period had already spread to India in the second century BC. In 140 BC, Zhang Qian went on a mission to the Western Regions (Bactria Today's Afghanistan region), and returned to China 13 years later. During his mission to the Western Regions, he saw Shu cloth and Qiong bamboo sticks made in Sichuan, China. He asked the locals, who told him that these products came from a country named "Shendu", "Shendu" refers to India, which is the transliteration of the word Sindhu in early China. The Qiong bamboo sticks and Shu cloth that Zhang Qian saw when he passed through the Bactrian Dynasty were obtained from the country of Shendu, and these things were Chinese, indicating that China and India had trade contacts. (Wang 2013)

Indian lions and rhinos carried to China

Lions and rhinos once inhabited southeastern Europe, the Middle East, India, and the African continent. Consequently, these animals were introduced to China from India. The Huangzhi State in southern India is mentioned in Chinese geographical annals. Ban Gu noted in the "Pingdi Ji": "a South Indian Kingdom (Huangzhi in Chinese) presented a rhinoceros." According to the record of Zhang Di in the Book of the Later Han dynasty, the Yuezhi Kingdom sent an envoy who offered a lion. The Yuezhi Kingdom referred to here was the Kushan Empire in India at that time. In addition to lions and rhinos, elephants from India were also introduced to China.

Conclusion

One of the oldest and most important examples of cross-civilizational connections in history is the cultural interchange between India and China during the Maurya-Satavahana and Qin-Han dynasties (2nd century BCE–2nd century CE). Despite vast geographical distances, rugged terrains, and linguistic barriers, the two civilizations engaged in extensive

trade, religious exchanges, intellectual discourse, and diplomatic missions that shaped their historical trajectories. These interactions not only facilitated the transmission of material goods but also fostered a deeper exchange of ideas, philosophies, and artistic traditions, leaving a lasting impact on both societies. Chinese historical texts from this period highlight India's significance as a major trading partner, demonstrating the high demand for Indian goods in Chinese markets. This commercial interconnectivity laid the foundation for economic cooperation that would persist for centuries.

Beyond trade, the spread of Buddhism from India to China was one of the most profound cultural exchanges of this era. While Buddhism originated in India, it found fertile ground in China, where it evolved into a major spiritual and philosophical tradition. The translation of Sanskrit Buddhist texts into Chinese, the journeys of Chinese monks to India in search of original Buddhist scriptures, and the adoption of Buddhist practices in Chinese society are testaments to the deep spiritual connections that were established. The role of Indian scholars and Buddhist emissaries in shaping Chinese religious thought is a prime example of how knowledge and wisdom transcended political and geographical boundaries. Diplomatic engagements and intellectual exchanges also strengthened Indo-China relations. These interactions highlight an era of mutual curiosity and respect, where knowledge was shared and adapted to local contexts. The parallel developments in political philosophy, such as Confucianism in China and Arthashastra-based governance in India, reveal striking similarities in their approaches to administration, law, and ethics. The cultural synthesis resulting from these exchanges had a profound influence on artistic and architectural developments in both regions. The impact of Indian Buddhist art can be seen in the evolution of Chinese sculpture and iconography, while Chinese advancements in paper-making and silk production influenced Indian craftsmanship. These exchanges contributed to the formation of distinct yet interconnected artistic traditions that would later shape the broader Asian cultural landscape.

The significance of these early exchanges between India and China extends beyond historical curiosity; they serve as a reminder of the power of cultural dialogue in fostering understanding and cooperation. The bridges built during this period paved the way for future interactions, influencing later dynasties such as the Tang and Gupta empires, and ensuring that the legacy of this early Indo-China relationship endured through time. These exchanges underscore the idea that civilizations flourish not in isolation but through meaningful engagement with one another, embracing diversity while finding common ground.

Reflecting on this rich history, it is evident that India and China have long shared a deep and dynamic relationship rooted in trade, religion,

diplomacy, and intellectual exchange. The cultural bridges formed during the Maurya-Satavahana and Qin-Han periods laid the foundation for a sustained and evolving relationship that continues to shape interactions between these two nations in the modern era. By studying these historical connections, we gain valuable insights into the importance of cooperation, the exchange of knowledge, and the enduring impact of shared cultural heritage. The story of India-China exchanges during this period is not just a historical account but also a powerful narrative of how civilizations thrive through interconnectedness, mutual respect, and the continuous pursuit of learning from one another.

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