3 Relations between the Republic of China and India, 1937–1949

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The early twentieth century was one of the most vibrant phases in China–India interactions. The introduction of steamships, the global trade in cotton and wool, and the formation of migrant networks fostered connections between the two regions. The fall of the Qing Empire in 1911, the discourse on Tibet among the British, Chinese, and Tibetan representatives in 1913–1914, and the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore’s visit to China in 1924 catalyzed these connections. Diplomatic exchanges took place not only between the Guomindang (GMD) and the British Indian government, but also between GMD representatives and the leaders of the Indian National Congress (INC). Tagore’s visit led to the creation of educational networks that nurtured interactions among Indian and Chinese intellectuals, students, and artists. The period witnessed brisk commercial dealings, albeit beset with vicissitudes, that ranged from border trade to long-distance maritime commerce. At the same time, migrant communities tried to carve out new livelihoods for themselves in foreign lands, some of whom actively engaged in the political developments that were taking place in their ancestral homelands.

This chapter focuses on four facets of China–India relations from the beginning of the full-fledged Japanese military expansion into East and Southeast Asia in 1937 to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, covering the political, cultural, and economic aspects, as well as the experiences of the migrant populations. It demonstrates the multifaceted and intricate nature of the China–India relationship during this brief yet critical period, which set the stage for their more complicated relationship in the second half of the twentieth century. In fact, several areas of contention between the Republic of India (ROI) and the PRC, including with regard to the status of Tibet, emerged during this period. Similarly, some of the cultural exchanges that took place in the 1950s had precedents in the contacts established during the 1930s and 1940s. In other words, the decade or so leading up to the formation of a new regime in China and the Indian independence is essential for understanding the bilateral relationship that ensued during the 1950s and beyond.

The political sphere

The Republic of China (ROC) and British India both faced a series of domestic challenges and encountered external turmoil during the second half of the 1930s. The expansion of fascism in Europe, the launch of a Japanese military offensive in East Asia, the civil war in China, and disagreements within the INC influenced and shaped relations between China and India. Multiple networks of political consultation and collaboration emerged during this period of uncertainty that centered specifically on
joint responses to the Japanese military threat and the issue of Indian independence. The GMD and British government officials in India, members of the INC, and leaders of the Muslim League took part in such exchanges in the 1930s and the early 1940s. The visit of Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) to China in 1939 and Chiang Kai-shek’s (Jiang Jieshi, 1887–1975) tour of British India in 1942 highlighted these political interactions, in addition to other official visits and goodwill missions also promoting anti-Japanese solidarity. Furthermore, issues related to the setting up of educational and cultural exchange programs and the promotion of trade formed part of the agenda for some of these visits and exchanges. The end of World War II and the British decision shortly thereafter to grant independence to India led to a significant shift in the political discourse between the Indian and Chinese leaders. This is evident from the differences between the GMD and the provisional Indian government with regard to the status of Tibet that surfaced at the Asian Relations Conference held in Delhi in March–April 1947. This event and the exchange of official communications between the GMD and Indian officials from 1947 to 1949 indicate the existence of potent fissures in the relationship between China and India that remained unresolved at the time of the founding of the PRC and continued to define China–India relations thereafter.

In the October 1937 issue of *The Modern Review*, Subhas Chandra Bose (1897–1945), who a few months later became the president of the INC and then, in 1943, led an anti-British movement with the support of the Japanese, wrote an insightful essay detailing the impact of Japan’s invasion of China. He concluded the piece by expressing his sympathies for China. Japan should be credited for putting “the Western imperialist powers on the defensive—not only in the military but also in the economic sphere,” but he argued that

> with our admiration for Japan, where such admiration is due, our whole heart goes to China in her hour of trial. China must still live—for her own sake and for humanity. Out of the ashes of this conflict she will once again rise phoenix-like as she has so often done in the past.

(Bose 1937: 376)

Such sympathies, which were expressed by all the top INC leaders, characterized the political relationship between the INC and the ROC until the end of World War II. These considerations led to the dispatch of a medical mission from India to China to aid in the Chinese war effort and the declaration of a “China Day” in support of the Chinese struggle against the Japanese. For its part the GMD funded the establishment of the first major institution dedicated to China Studies in India, which was actively engaged in educational and diplomatic exchanges between China and India (see below).

However, there was more to war-time politics than the mutual expression of sympathies and support. Subhas Chandra Bose’s Indian National Army’s (INA) collaboration with the Japanese in the war, China’s frustrations with Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948), Nehru, and other INC leaders over their refusal to support the British in their war efforts, and British suspicion of the GMD espionage network in India were among the facets that made the triangular relationship between the GMD, Indian political leaders, and the British government extremely complex. Only three aspects of these multilayered connections in the political sphere are outlined here in order to demonstrate the changing nature of the relationship in the brief twelve-year period examined in this chapter. The first relates to the interactions between the GMD and the INC leadership;
the second focuses on the emergence of Tibet as a major bone of contention between China and India; and the third recounts the events leading up to the eventual recognition of the PRC by the Indian government.

**The leadership networks**

The political interactions between the INC and the GMD in the 1930s and 1940s were entangled with two key personal relationships, one between Jawaharlal Nehru and Soong Ching-ling (Song Qingling, 1893–1981), the wife of the late Sun Yat-sen (Sun Zhongshan, 1866–1925), the other between Nehru and Chiang Kai-shek. While the former relationship resulted in multiple forms of cultural initiatives between China and India that continued even after the establishment of the PRC, the latter was marked by mutual admiration and shared concerns—at least until the Asian Relations Conference in 1947. In addition, Nehru established contacts with the Chinese Communist leaders, including Mao Zedong (1893–1976) and Zhu De (1886–1976). The GMD, at the urging of the British, similarly made certain that it included members of the Muslim League, especially Mohammed Ali Jinnah (1876–1948), when reaching out to the Indian leadership. There were also frequent interactions between British officials in India and the GMD. The objective of many of these interactions between 1937 and 1945 concentrated on ways of opposing Japanese expansion into East and Southeast Asia.

Nehru’s first direct encounter with Chinese officials took place at the Congress Against Colonial Oppression and Imperialism organized by the World Anti-Imperialist League in Brussels in 1927. In the report he submitted to the INC after his return to India, Nehru indicated his admiration for the “energy and enthusiasm” of the Chinese delegates. The Indian and Chinese delegations jointly drafted a declaration criticizing British imperialism and blaming the British for disrupting the exchanges between China and India. It demanded the prevention of “Indian money and man-power from being used for the enslavement of the Chinese people” (Nehru 1927: 156). Nehru and Soong Ching-ling, the latter in absentia, were among the five members appointed as the honorary presidents of the General Council of the League. It was not until later the same year that Nehru and Soong met for the first time in the Soviet Union. Although Nehru invited Soong to visit India, the British refused her a visa on two occasions. The contacts between Nehru and Soong Ching-ling thus took place primarily through an exchange of letters, which, in the late 1930s, were focused on providing medical supplies and other support to the China Defence League (later called the China Welfare Institute), an organization Soong had founded in Hong Kong in 1938.

A request for medical help also came from the Chinese Communist general Zhu De in November 1936. In his letter to Nehru, Zhu De thanked the INC leader for organizing events and expressing support for China’s war against the Japanese, and requested financial, military, and medical help, including medical supplies, doctors, and nurses (Nehru [1958] 1988: 260–263). At Nehru’s urging, within a year the INC had organized a group of five doctors, who reached China in September 1938 with two ambulances, medical equipment, and medicines (Yang 1974: 39). The medical mission, under the leadership of Dr Madanlal Atal, worked in several regions of China, moving from Hankou to Sichuan, Chongqing, and eventually to the Communist base in Yan’an. Although the mission encountered financial and health issues, the rigors of war, and infighting among its members, it has remained one of the most enduring legacies of China–India collaboration, one that transcended political rivalries between the GMD
and the Communists in China, as well as the later border dispute between the ROI and the PRC.\(^6\)

Meeting members of this medical mission may have been one of Nehru’s objectives when he visited China in 1939 (Nehru 1940: 22). Nehru was steadfast in his desire to make the trip despite concerns expressed by his associates and even his daughter Indira (Samarani 2005: 11). Letters to V. K. Menon written on 10 July 1939 and to the Chinese Consul-General in Calcutta dated 5 August 1939 suggest that Nehru even drafted his own itinerary, which initially included a meeting with Soong Ching-ling in Hong Kong (Nehru 1972: 10.73–74). On 6 August, Nehru wrote to Mao Zedong expressing his desire to meet the Communist leader during his planned trip. When his trip was confirmed, Nehru explained, “I go to China because China is the symbol today of magnificent courage in the struggle for freedom, of a determination which has survived untold misery and unparalleled disaster, of unity before a common foe” (Nehru 1940: 18). He also underscored the shared history and the prospect of the two countries working together in the future “for their own good and the good of the world.”

Departing from Calcutta (now Kolkata), Nehru reached Kunming on 22 August 1939 via Bangkok, Saigon, and Hanoi. After a one-night stay in the city, Nehru arrived at the ROC war-time capital of Chongqing, where he met Chiang Kai-shek, several high-ranking GMD officials, the Communist general Ye Jianying (1897–1986), and one of the doctors representing the Indian medical mission. He also experienced five air raids, went into the war “dug-outs,” and visited local refugee camps, orphanages, schools, factories, and universities.\(^7\) However, he expressed regret at being unable to travel to Yan’an and see the other members of the Indian medical mission and the Chinese Communist leaders due to his “rapid return to India” (Nehru 1972: 10.112–113). In Chongqing, he broadcast a message in Hindi that offered support and sympathies to the Chinese people on behalf of the Indians. Nehru emphasized that the Chinese war against the Japanese would affect “our country and the world.” He added, “With this war is associated our independence” (Nehru 1972: 10.101). Nehru also drafted “A Note on the Development of Contacts between China and India” in Chongqing (Nehru 1972: 10.102–108). Outlining comparable historical experiences and the prospects of a shared future, Nehru proposed seven avenues of cooperation between India and China: (1) initiating “an efficient and regular service of information between the two countries”; (2) promoting the exchange of experts in the areas of cottage industries, cooperatives, and agrarian problem; (3) establishing cultural contacts between universities in the two countries; (4) setting up direct mailing services; (5) admitting Chinese representatives to the annual meeting of the INC; (6) drafting a “common policy vis-à-vis big European and world changes”; and (7) creating specialized organizations that would foster “direct contact with each other in China and India” (Nehru 1972: 10.106–108).

Although Nehru’s visit to China was cut short due to the outbreak of war in Europe, his connections with the GMD leadership were now firmly established. Keen on fostering these connections, the GMD had prepared several documents outlining the war-time situation in China. These were translated into English for Nehru. The above-mentioned note written by Nehru was also rendered into Chinese for the GMD officials (AH 00208010600071001). Contacts between the Chinese and Indian leadership accelerated over the next few months, with visits to India by Dai Jitao (1891–1949), the head of the Examination Yuan, and Buddhist and Islamic goodwill missions led, respectively, by the monk Taixu (1890–1947) and Ma Tianying (1900–1982).\(^8\) The main objective of these Chinese visits was to seek the support of the Indian leaders in the war against the Japanese.
However, Mohandas Gandhi’s and Jawaharlal Nehru’s persistent refusal to support the British in their war plans frustrated the GMD leadership. In 1942, Chiang Kai-shek made one final attempt to persuade Gandhi and Nehru when he visited India (Yang 2015: 131).

Chiang’s arrival in Delhi on 9 February 1942 triggered a three-way discourse between the British, the INC leadership, and the GMD official on the Indians’ refusal to cooperate with the British in the war against Germany and Japan, as well as the issue of Indian independence. Chiang met various British officials, including the Viceroy of India and the Governor of Bengal, INC leaders such as Gandhi, Nehru, and Maulana Azad, and Jinnah. Chiang found that the INC leaders were still adamantly opposed to cooperating with the British, while the latter were unwilling to discuss the plans for Indian independence. Chiang’s efforts to mediate between the Indian leaders and the British did not yield any results. However, after the visit, Chiang and his wife Soong Mei-ling became adherent supporters of Indian independence. In his “Letter of Farewell,” Chiang wrote: “I firmly believe that our ally Britain will promptly grant Indian people substantive political power” (Yang 2015: 135). Although Chiang was disappointed with Nehru’s and Gandhi’s positions with regard to non-cooperation with the British, he continued to press for Indian freedom with British officials and even Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the United States. For her part, Soong Mei-ling advocated Indian independence among civil-society organizations in China and the United States, often drawing contempt from British officials. In August 1942, both Chiang Kai-shek and his wife called for Nehru’s and Gandhi’s immediate release when the British government in India arrested the pair. Their support for Indian independence continued through to the end of World War II. Eventually in 1946, when the British allowed the formation of an Indian provisional government, the GMD quickly recognized it and appointed its first ambassador to Delhi.

The war-time political collaboration between the GMD and British officials did not mitigate the disagreements the two regimes had with regard to Tibet. Although shortly after Chiang’s visit to India the British tried to convince the Tibetan Cabinet (Kashag) to facilitate transportation of goods between India and China through their territory, “mutual mistrust,” as Hsiao-Ting Lin (2006: 126–132) points out, prevented any productive relationship between the GMD and the British when it came to Tibet. During the post-war period, Tibet was a key part of the GMD’s plans to consolidate its frontier territories but the negotiations between the Tibetan representatives and senior GMD officials in the late 1945 and 1946 failed to yield any concrete results. For Chiang and other GMD officials the formation of the Indian provisional government might have seemed like an opportunity to make inroads with the Tibetans without any interference from a third party. If so, such expectations quickly dissipated.

**The issue of Tibet**

Luo Jialun (Lo Chia-lun, 1897–1969) was the first ROC ambassador to India. Arriving in Delhi in early 1947, he soon had to address one of the thorniest issues affecting relations between the ROC and the emerging independent Indian state. The British Indian government had bequeathed the problem of Tibet with regard to its status vis-à-vis the Chinese state and the borders that separated it from the Indian state. The British had been involved in border negotiations with Tibetan and Chinese representatives since the early twentieth century and had recognized Chinese suzerainty over Tibet but not Chinese sovereignty. Neither the INC nor the Muslim League was part of these
discussions until plans for the Asian Relations Conference were communicated to the Tibetans and Chinese in 1946.

The idea of organizing a conference highlighting Asian solidarity originated in an op-ed entitled “Colonialism Must Go,” which Nehru (1946) wrote for the *New York Times* on 3 March 1946. In the op-ed, Nehru called for closer links among Asian countries, including those in the Indian Ocean region. The Indian Council for World Affairs (ICWA) was tasked with planning the event. An organizing committee led by Mrs Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949) drafted the agenda for the conference and sent out invitations to all Asian countries, as well as to Egypt. Tibet and the ROC received separate invitations, which triggered debates within the GMD leadership over Nehru’s intentions and India’s policy toward Tibet. Some in the GMD believed that Nehru had “ulterior motives in mind” (Yang 1974: 408), including wanting to continue British policies on Tibet, while others saw the conference as Nehru’s attempt to “promote his personal prestige” in Asia (Dai [1946] 1971).10

When Tibet accepted the invitation, the ROC government launched an official protest with the provisional Indian government. Some within the GMD government wanted to boycott the conference altogether. Through K. P. S. Menon,11 Nehru indicated to GMD officials that the conference was not intended as a political event but would deal “principally with cultural and economic matters and will not consider the internal situation in any country” (IOR L/PS/371/63541: 155–156). Chiang reluctantly agreed to send a delegation to the conference in Delhi, members of which were primarily intellectuals and low-ranking officials. However, when the Chinese delegation arrived at the venue they were furious to find that the map of Asia displayed on the conference podium separated Tibet from the rest of China. The delegation insisted that if the map were not rectified, they would withdraw from the conference. Eventually, one of the members of the Chinese delegation resolved the issue by painting over “the Tibetan region in the same colour as that used for China” (Yang 1974: 408–409). However, the conference was marked by several other disagreements between the Chinese delegates and those representing the host country. This included the location of a permanent “center for Inter-Asian relations,” which the latter wanted to set up in India, while the Chinese argued that, “if a center of inter-Asian relations were to be set up, it should be located in China” (Platov 1947: 95).

The personal relationship between Nehru and Chiang Kai-shek seems to have soured after the Asian Relations Conference. In July 1947, Chiang Kai-shek, writing in his diary, expressed his displeasure with India’s attempt to “consolidate control over Tibet.” There were no further communications between Nehru and Chiang subsequent to the conference (Yang 2015: 140). Shortly after the fall of the GMD regime in China, Luo Jialun, who was told about the impending recognition of the PRC by the Indian government, warned Chiang that Nehru, in order to deny Chinese sovereignty over Tibet, might attempt to recognize the Communist government in China in exchange for their acceptance of the 1914 Simla Agreement. In one of his telegrams to Chiang, Luo quoted Nehru as saying that, “In a vague sense we have accepted the fact of Chinese suzerainty [over Tibet], [but] how far it goes one does not know” (AH 002000000453A).12 The Communists in China were equally suspicious about Nehru’s position over the status of Tibet, calling him a “stooge” and a “running dog” of the British and American imperialists. This name-calling continued into the mid-1950s (Jain 1981: 17–19). Chiang, on the occasion of India’s recognition of the PRC, became completely resentful of Nehru and started using a homonym for the Indian prime minister’s name in his diary that literary meant “Mud Black-roadist” (“Niheilu”) (Lin 2017: 197).
**Recognition of the PRC**

On 22 November 1948, K. M. Panikkar, the Indian ambassador to the ROC, wrote a memorandum called “When China goes Communist,” in which he predicted that “within the course of the next twelve months the unity of China proper will be re-established under a Communist regime” (IOR L/PS/371/75798: 37). Panikkar outlined the possible impact within China and projected the implications of this political transition for India. Panikkar expected Tibet to declare its independence shortly after the collapse of the GMD regime. If the British, American, and Indian governments recognized this claim for independence, then, Panikkar speculated, “there may be some hope of keeping the new Chinese Communist State away from the Indian border” (IOR L/PS/371/75798: 41). Nehru had his own predictions and strategies regarding the imminent establishment of a Communist government in China. In a note dated 5 December 1948, written in response to one of Panikkar’s communications from China, Nehru emphasized the necessity of forming an independent policy toward the new regime. “We have to be wide awake,” he wrote, “and not merely hang on to Chiang Kai-Shek and his fading authority. Nor should we just follow what the U.K. or U.S.A. might do in China.” Nehru suggested a possible outreach to the Communist leaders using the “slight reputation” he has with them so that they are not “hostile to us.” Nehru also explained that India could not ignore the Communist government in China, but “we shall not of course immediately recognize it” (NMML JN 16-I: 104).

Despite his earlier close relationship with Chiang Kai-shek and other GMD leaders, Nehru was critical of the ROC government during the final few months of its rule. In a letter dated 1 July 1949 to Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, the Indian ambassador to the United States and Mexico, Nehru sharply criticized the GMD for failing to address the needs of the Chinese people: “[w]ith all my friendship for Chiang,” Nehru remarked, “I cannot as Prime Minister or Foreign Minister shut my eyes to facts and to my conviction” (NMML JN 26-I: 22; Nehru 1991: 12.408). After the establishment of the PRC, Nehru noted, “It was clear that recognition has to be given. The only question that arises is that of timing” (NMML JN 31-I: 72). In this note, written on 17 November 1949, Nehru suggested the third week of December as the tentative “time” for the recognition of the PRC (NMML JN 31-I: 73). A little over ten days later, in a letter to Tan Yunshan, the Director of the GMD-funded Cheena Bhavana (see below), who had cautioned him against recognizing the PRC in haste, Nehru explained that it was not a matter of if but when: “To do it too late,” he added, “means that it has been taken under compulsion” (NAI MEA/7(1)P/1952/).

The discussions between Nehru, his key ministers, and foreign leaders in the aftermath of the establishment of the PRC indicate that a timeframe for India’s recognition of the Communist regime in China was determined fairly quickly: it had to be before the United Kingdom did so. It was initially decided that the recognition would take place between 15 and 25 December but was eventually fixed for 30 December. This decision was communicated to the British Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, and the leaders of other Commonwealth countries. The United Kingdom then decided that it would recognize the Communist government on 6 January 1950 (NMML JN 33: 60). In a letter to the leaders of various Indian states dated 31 December 1949, Nehru pointed out that, “after full thought and frequent consultation with other countries, we have decided to recognize this new Government of China, as from today” (NMML JN 33: 224).

A few days after India officially recognized the Communist regime in China, Nehru wrote an introspective letter about contemporary world affairs to the Burmese Prime
Minister U Nu. The establishment of a new regime in China, Nehru observed, “is obviously of the greatest significance to Asia and the world. It is indeed a world event of the first magnitude.” Explaining India’s relations with China at this watershed moment, Nehru pointed out,

If we recognized China, then we should do it in as a normal and friendly a way as possible and not mar that recognition with unfriendliness. Friendliness of course does not mean weakness…. There is not much danger of any Chinese aggression across the Indian border. But I want to make it quite clear if occasion arises, that the slightest attempt at such aggression whether in India or Nepal would be stoutly resisted by us.

(NMML JN 34: 123)13

By the time the ROI had formally recognized the PRC, political relations between India and China had transited through three key phases: from 1937 to 1945, when the interactions were dominated by concerns about Japanese expansion and Indian independence; from 1945 to 1947, when the issue of Indian independence remained an important focus, but new avenues of economic and cultural connections were being discussed (see below); and from 1947 to 1949, when the status of Tibet and the need to forge a new relationship with the Communist regime in China emerged as the main concerns in their bilateral relations. By the end of 1949, the personal relationships between the INC and GMD leaderships that defined their war-time interactions were becoming overshadowed by concerns over Tibet and other territorial issues, both of which remained the primary issues in the political relationship between the two countries during the subsequent decades.

The cultural sphere

Between 1937 and 1949 several facets of China–India interactions in the political sphere were closely intertwined with cultural exchanges. This was especially true, as outlined below, for the war-time period, when the GMD, the INC leadership, and the British government in India attempted to promote people-to-people connections in order to foster mutual understanding and sympathies. The fact that a few leading Chinese artists and intellectual took refuge in India due to the rapid expansion of Japanese forces also nurtured the cultural interactions between China and India. It was, however, Rabindranath Tagore’s visit to China in 1924 that had inaugurated a period of intense educational and cultural exchanges, which extended through to the 1950s.14 Shantiniketan, where Tagore founded an educational institution called Visva-Bharati, became the main hub for these interactions. In the same way, the Maha Bodhi Society in Calcutta developed into a place for cooperation between the Buddhist communities of the two countries. Furthermore, exchanges of students and scholars were also initiated during the 1930s and the 1940s, resulting in broader exchanges and a vibrant circulation of knowledge.

Visva-Bharati was established in 1921 with the money Tagore received as part of his Nobel Prize in Literature in 1913. Tagore’s vision was to create a place where intellectuals and scholars from around the world would congregate in pursuit of knowledge, a place, as the official slogan advertised, “where the world makes a home in a single nest.” The study of Asia and the promotion of interactions among Asian intellectuals and artists was one of the major initiatives at this newly founded institution of learning.15 In 1927
Tagore met a person called Tan Yunshan in Singapore and invited him to Visva-Bharati. Tan arrived in 1928 with the aim of raising funds and setting up an institute dedicated to the study of China. However, neither Tagore’s nor Tan’s contacts were able to provide the required funds for such an institute (Sen 2017: 308). In 1930, Tan, who had by then re-located to Burma, was entrusted by the local Chinese Consul-General to accompany a GMD official to Tibet through Calcutta and Kalimpong. When this GMD official died on his way to Lhasa, Tan replaced him, met the Thirteenth Dalai Lama in Tibet, and returned to China to report formally on his trip (Zhu 2016). This unexpected mission brought Tan into direct contact with high-level GMD officials, including Dai Jitao, the then president of the Examination Yuan, who became instrumental in raising funds for the proposed institute at Visva-Bharati.

In 1933, Tan initiated the Sino-Indian Cultural Society in Nanjing and invited Dai Jitao to be the organization’s “chief supervisor.” A year later, an Indian chapter of the society was founded in India with Rabindranath Tagore as the “founder-president” and Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Chiang Kai-shek, and Soong Mei-ling as “honorary presidents.” It was also in 1934 that Tagore drafted a concept note for building a “Chinese Hall” in Shantiniketan, in which he offered “hospitality” to the Indian chapter of the Sino-Indian Cultural Society. In 1935 Chiang Kai-shek allocated seed money to establish the “Chinese Hall” (i.e. Cheena Bhavana) at Visva-Bharati; individual funds came from Dai Jitao, H. H. Hung, and a Singaporean banker called Chen Yen-chien (Tan Ean Kiam). This “Chinese Hall” was called “Cheena Bhavana” and was formally established in 1937. It received additional funds from the GMD in 1942, 1945, and 1946. The government of China also contributed by sponsoring five “Chinese Culture Fellowships,” and the Chinese Ministry of Education offered “special” three-year grants to Cheena Bhavana. According to Tan (1998: 128), who became its founding director, Cheena Bhavana was

a gift of the Chinese people to Gurudva (i.e., Rabindranath Tagore) in response to his appeal and in appreciation of his ideals for reviving the ancient Sino-Indian cultural relationship on one hand and to create new relations between the two countries on the other, and lastly to work together for world peace and fraternity mainly through cultural exchange.

Over the next two decades, Cheena Bhavana embarked on a rigorous examination and translation of Chinese Buddhist literature, set up Chinese and Tibetan language programs, and built one of the best Chinese-language libraries in India. Cheena Bhavana also attracted several leading Chinese intellectuals and artists, drawn by Tagore’s allure, Tan’s persuasion, or the perils of the war. The famous Chinese painter Xu Beihong (1895–1953) and the renowned scholar Wu Xiaoling (1914–1995) were two such residents of Cheena Bhavana in the 1940s. Xu Fancheng (1909–2000), who became a leading scholar of Indian philosophy, taught at the institution from 1946 to 1950. P. C. Bagchi (1898–1956) and Kalidas Nag (1892–1966) were two Indian Sinologists who worked at the institution. Cheena Bhavana was also a site for diplomacy between the representatives of the GMD and the Indian leaders. Dai Jitao visited Shantiniketan in 1940 and met Tagore, while Chiang Kai-shek and his wife traveled to Shantiniketan with Nehru and toured Cheena Bhavana in 1942. A majority of publications initiated by Tan in the 1940s promoted and publicized these connections between the GMD and INC. Kala Bhavana (Institute of Fine Arts) at Visva-Bharati also attracted Chinese
students and teachers. While a person named Chang Xiufeng (1915–2010) studied painting under the renowned Indian artist Nandalal Bose (1882–1966) in 1949–1950, You Yunshan (1912–2004), a disciple of the Chinese painter Gao Jianfu (1879–1951), taught Chinese arts in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Indian artists including Y. K. Shukla, Nihar Ranjan Chaudhury, and Beohar Rammanohar Sinha, studied in China during these two decades. The interactions between the Chinese and Indian artistic communities involved mutual learning and the exchange of paintings. On 4 June 1948, for instance, when a Sino-Indian painting exhibition was held at Peking University, where Shukla’s and Chaudhury’s paintings were displayed, leading Chinese artists and writers, including Xu Beihong, Shen Congwen, Ye Qianyu, Wu Xiaoling, and Wang Qingfang, attended and expressed their admiration for paintings done by the two Indian artists (Shen 2013: 59–64). Mutual influences can be discerned not only in the motifs employed by some of these painters but also in the stylistic features that emerged as a result of these encounters (Bhattacharya 2014).

The Maha Bodhi Society was similarly involved in promoting cultural connections between India and China. Established in Calcutta in 1892 by the Sri Lankan Buddhist leader, Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933), the Maha Bodhi Society attempted to revive Buddhism and Buddhist sites in India. Buddhist communities from across Asia supported this endeavor. The Japanese invasion of China resulted in deep divisions among the Buddhists in China and Japan, with each country sending “goodwill” missions to various regions of Asia in order to promote their respective causes. In 1940, the GMD dispatched a Buddhist mission to South and Southeast Asia with the aim of establishing a unified front against the Japanese invasion of China. This mission was led by a famous Chinese monk called Taixu, who had been an overseas member of the Maha Bodhi Society since 1928. The mission arrived in Calcutta in early January 1940 to tour sacred Buddhist sites and met with various Indian leaders and personalities, including Tagore, Nehru, and Subhas Chandra Bose. One of the key outcomes of Taixu’s visit was the strengthening of Buddhist interactions between India and China, with the Maha Bodhi Society as the center of such activities. After World War II, in 1947, Taixu promised to raise funds to build an International Cultural Religious Center within the premises of the Maha Bodhi Society’s headquarters in Calcutta specifically for Chinese monks visiting India. A donation of Rs. 10,000 received from China later that year was used to build an apex building called “China Block.” It was eventually dedicated to Taixu, who had died before the building was completed. The Chinese Consul-General, who was at the ceremony to lay the foundation stone, expressed the hope that the building would “serve as a meeting place of Chinese and Indian scholars whereby the bond of friendship and cordiality existing between China and India will be further strengthened” (The Maha-Bodhi 1947: 219).

Cultural interactions received a boost in 1943, when a formal agreement was signed between the British Indian government and the ROC to initiate a bilateral student and scholar exchange program. This idea was initially proposed in 1933 by H. N. Davy, Professor of English literature at the Central University in Nanjing. Davy was sent to Nanjing by the International Committee on Intellectual Cooperation under the League of Nations, where he was placed in charge of the Advisory Committee for Overseas Study. It was in this capacity that Davy wrote to Miles W. Lampson, the British Minister in Beijing, suggesting the possibility of Chinese students going to Indian colleges to study “agricultural institutions and village experiments” (IOR L/PS/12/70: 26). The British government consulted the Vice-Chancellor of Hong Kong University, who dismissed Davy as a “foolish young man” and his idea of sending Chinese students to India
“a monstrous one” (IOR L/PS/12/70: 16). The proposal was consequently shelved by the British Indian government. However, almost a decade later, the recommendations of John Sargent, the educational advisor to the Government of India, received a positive response and resulted in a different outcome.

After concluding his visit to China in May 1942, Sargent wrote a report in which he explained that the primary objective of his trip was to explore practical methods by which educational relations between China and India could be strengthened with special reference to the possibility of arranging exchanges of teachers and students between Indian and Chinese educational institutions and of finding ways of helping China in regard to the temporary difficulties with which her educational system is faced at the moment.

(Sargent L/PS/12/2318: 189)

Sargent proposed that these educational exchanges could take place through the visits of prominent “educationalists” and the exchange of graduate and other students. He also listed some of the topics these educationalists and students might pursue in India and the ways in which the British government in India could pay for the expenses thus incurred. Sargent’s suggestions seem to have emerged from his discussions with Chen Li-fu (1900–2001), the Minister of Education, who was also involved in setting up Cheena Bhavana.

The British Foreign Office and the British Council strongly supported Sargent’s proposal and communicated their endorsement to the British ambassador in Chungking. Moreover, Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy of India, personally sent a letter to Chiang Kai-shek indicating that he had tasked Sargent to organize a visit of Chinese educationalists to India to discuss how the proposed educational exchanges could be implemented (IOR L/PS/12/2318: 182). Sargent followed this up by writing to Chen Li-fu, referring him to Lord Linlithgow’s letter, and recommended the places and institutions that the recommended Chinese educational delegation might visit in India (IOR L/PS/12/2318: 182–184). Although the plans were quickly drafted, the visit was delayed due to the criticisms levied against the British government by Chiang Kai-shek, Chiang Ting-fu (T. F. Tsiang, 1895–1965), the appointed leader of the Chinese delegation, and the Chinese press in general about the arrests of Gandhi and Nehru (IOR L/PS/12/2318: 152–163).

The “Chinese Educational Mission” eventually arrived in India in March 1943. Prior to this, the British government of India had already announced that it would offer “ten free scholarships for Chinese research workers at such universities or research institutions as the Chinese Minister of Education may select” (IOR L/PS/12/2318: 136). The visit of the educational mission resulted in an agreement to exchange ten students from each side, who would study and engage in research at different universities in India and China. By October of the same year, ten Chinese students were already in India, five of whom started studying politics, law, philosophy, and culture, three industry, one agronomy, and one mechanical engineering. Three of the ten Indian students who reached China at almost the same time were enrolled at the National Central University in Xishuangbanna, two at the South West Associated University in Kunming, two at the Chekiang University of Zunji, and one each at the University of Nanking in Chengdu, the National Western University in Leshan, and the Academia Sinica. These students studied a variety of subjects, including Chinese history, philosophy, archaeology, mathematics, agriculture, botany, and soil chemistry (IOR L/PS/12/2648: 17–19).
After Indian independence, a new group of Indian students arrived in China, among them Amitendranath Tagore, Satiranjan Sen, K. Ventakaramanan, and V. V. Paranjpe. While the first three emerged as the leading Indian scholars of China in subsequent years, Paranjpe became a diplomat and a famous “China hand” in the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). These students arrived in China in mid-1947 and remained there until mid-1950. Although some of them wished to stay on in China after the establishment of the Communist government, the MEA denied their request, noting that “their further stay in China is inadvisable” and that they “should return to India immediately by first available boat” (NAI/MEA/680-C.J.K/49: 55–56).

Despite the disruptions caused by warfare and the politics of post-war nation-building, cultural and educational interactions between India and China continued uninterrupted. Buddhist monks, renowned intellectuals, artists, and students traveled between the two countries in pursuit of knowledge and artistic skills. Noteworthy in these exchanges is the support of various government officials, the INC leaders, the GMD, and even India’s British rulers. Also remarkable was the diversity of these exchanges, which included visits by philosophers, scientists, and agriculturalists. The artwork created by Xu Beihong, Xu Fancheng, You Yunshan, and Chang Xiufeng in India, and those by Y. K. Shukla and Nihar Ranjan Chaudhury in China are enduring products of this vibrant period of cultural exchanges. Moreover, Cheena Bhavana and the Maha Bodhi Society, the two hubs of interactions during this period, continued to foster cultural exchanges between India and China during much of the 1950s.

The economic sphere

The signing of the Nanking Treaty by the Qing government in 1842 led to the opening of a number of Chinese ports to the European colonial powers and resulted in the establishment of several Indian commercial firms at these sites. Parsis, Sindhis, and Baghdadi Jews from India operated their business networks and real estate ventures in Shanghai and Hong Kong. Traders from India were also present in Tibet and Xinjiang areas in the late nineteenth century. Similarly, merchants from Yunnan, Shandong, and other places in China established their own commercial ventures at Indian ports and towns, including Calcutta, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong. After World War II maritime connections between Shanghai and Bombay resumed, and new routes, such as the Kalimpong–Yatung–Lhasa and the Burma–Yunnan Ledo Road, were added to the list of conduits for economic interactions. In addition, there were various remittance linkages, either through banks or the Chinese diaspora networks that facilitated the movement of capital between China and India.

Changing global conditions dictated and influenced commercial interactions between British India and China during the 1930s and 1940s in a variety of ways. The downturn in the world economy in the 1930s known as the “Great Depression” was one such aspect. At the same time, Japanese industrialization and its imperial expansion into East and Southeast Asia exerted a significant impact on maritime commercial exchanges between China and the Indian Ocean region. In addition, the presence of the Russian empire in Central Asia affected the trade in Indian goods in Chinese Turkestan. Despite these factors, economic exchanges and the movement of commercial specialists between India and China endured throughout the two decades.

Official data on commercial exchanges between India and China in the 1930s and 1940s pertain mostly to the maritime trade, being collected by the Chinese Maritime Customs
office. These data indicate that in the early 1930s Chinese exports of cotton yarn, piece goods, and raw silk to British India increased from 1.8 to 5.19 percent (Akita 2010: 26). China's position in the global cotton industry and trade continued to strengthen in the mid-1930s. While imports declined, the export of cotton products increased noticeably, resulting in a favorable balance of trade for China in the commodity even during the first two years (1937–1939) of the Japanese occupation (Cheng 1956: 137). In 1939 occupied China's import surplus in relation to India stood at $3,536,700, accounting for ten percent of the total import value for that year. Gunny bags and raw cotton were the two main Indian commodities entering China during this period. Sustained transportation facilities were important reasons for these continued trading relations with British India. Unoccupied regions of China also maintained commercial contacts with British India between 1939 and 1941, with cotton yarn as the top import item from India (Cheng 1956: 129).

Occupied China's foreign trade with British India was significantly disrupted between 1942 and 1945 due to Japanese expansion into southern China and Southeast Asia. However, overland commercial activities between free China and British India continued. In 1944 Indian imports from and exports to the latter region amounted to nine percent of the total value of the region's foreign trade. In the first eight months of 1945 there was a sudden upsurge in the percentage of imported goods from India, reaching 54.6 percent of the total foreign imports. This significant increase, as Cheng (1956: 148) points out, was due to the inclusion of items from the United States that were delivered to China through India. In the same way, Chinese exports to the United States during this period were first transported by air to India (Cheng 1956: 150–151). The figures for trade between China and India from January to August 1945 therefore reflect this substantial transit trade. Even without the transit trade, in the post-war period, British India remained one of China's top trading partners. However, due to the disruptions caused by the war, a large stock of “short staple” cotton paid for by the Chinese had remained unshipped. In order to discuss the issue of this undelivered stock of cotton, the prospects for cotton exports in general, and to probe other trading opportunities, the British Indian government proposed sending a “small official delegation” to China (AH 0200119040004).

This delegation, known as the “Indian Trade Mission,” arrived in Hong Kong on 22 February and returned to India on 29 March 1946 after visiting Shanghai, Tianjin, Beijing, and Chongqing. The delegation was led by K. K. Chettur, Joint Secretary in the Commerce Department of the Government of India, and included Tulsidas Kilachand, a representative of the Indian cotton trade. The members of the delegation met a number of GMD officials, including Dr. T. V. Soong, the President of the Executive Yuan, and the representatives of various ministries. In Chongqing, they were received by Chiang Kai-shek. Describing the meetings that the delegation had in China, K. P. S. Menon, then the Agent General for India in China, noted that, “[t]here was a general anxiety for the resumption of trade between India and China, for the enlargement of existing contacts and for the exploration of new avenues of trade and commerce.” He added, “In effect what started as a trade mission turned out to be a goodwill mission and as goodwill is the basis of trade the time spent on such demonstrations of friendship cannot be regarded as having been wasted” (IOR L/PS/12/2648: 12–13). Chettur's report predicted good potential for Indian cotton and tobacco in Chinese markets and stressed that “there is no need for pessimism with regard to the revival and development of our trade with China” (The Times of India 1946).

Commercial exchanges between British India and the so-called “Chinese Turkestan” region or with Tibet do not seem to have been on the agenda of the Chettur-led
delegation. The trade between British India and “Chinese Turkestan” or the Xinjiang region passed through three distinct sites: Leh, Gilgit, and Chitral. Trade along these routes endured from the late nineteenth century to the 1940s, despite significant obstacles and its own steady decline. An overview of this trade was provided by the British Consul-General in Kashgar in his annual report for 1937. The report pointed out that, after peaking in 1895–1896, trade between British India and Xinjiang had declined due primarily to competition from cheap Russian goods. The Russian Revolution resulted in the revival of the trade, which continued until 1926–1927. Thereafter, trade persistently declined through to the 1930s (IOR L/PS/12/2354). In his next annual report, the Consul-General pointed to local rebellions and the “strict anti-British boycott,” which had led to “universal decline in both imports and exports.” He added: “Prospects for the future of Indo-Sinkiang trade are exceedingly gloomy” (IOR L/PS/12/2354).

This assessment was confirmed in the subsequent annual reports from Kashgar, as local unrest, the adverse policies of the provincial government, and competition from Russian suppliers undermined the trade between British India and the Xinjiang region after the mid-1940s.

The route connecting northern Bengal to Tibet and extending into Yunnan province seems to have been the only sector of the British India–China trade that witnessed vibrant economic activity in the mid-to-late 1940s. The main commodity traded along this route was Tibetan wool, which was transported to Kalimpong and from there to Calcutta and onward to the United States, the main global market for the item. Except for 1943–1944, when World War II interrupted the shipping lanes from Calcutta to the United States, the trade in Tibetan wool flourished along this route (IOR L/PS/12/4209: 18, 103).

Traded in the other direction was Chinese tea, especially brick tea from the present-day Yunnan–Sichuan region, which entered Calcutta through Burma and was transported overland through Kalimpong to Lhasa (IOR L/PS/12/4209: 18). This growing commercial activity on the Kalimpong–Lhasa route drew the attention of the British intelligence network in India. Captain A. R. Allen, who worked for the British government’s Chinese Intelligence Wing in India, composed a report in 1944 outlining the commercial exchanges and security concerns associated with the movement of goods and people between Kalimpong and Tibet. In his nine-page, single-spaced report entitled “Notes of Kalimpong’s Trade with China” (WBSA 955–44/234: 41–33) and another equally long document called “Exports Overland to China” (WBSA 955–44/234: 32–24), Allen focused on exports through Kalimpong to Tibet and Yunnan. He noted that, while “gold, stationery, medical preparations, leather and other merchandise figure from time to time as exports, there seems to be no doubt that piece goods and cotton yarn are the principle exports” (WBSA 955–44/234: 32). The volume of piece goods and cotton yarn exported amounted to an average of three tons a day in 1943–1944. The significance of the trade through Kalimpong, according to Allen, was reflected in the presence of ten Chinese firms in the town, twenty-six individual traders, and a hundred Chinese traders based in Calcutta who focused on commercial activity along this route. The presence of a branch of the Bank of China in Kalimpong was also indicative of the site’s commercial importance. Allen also argued that the Chinese government’s interest in this route was associated with its aim of developing trade in the western regions of China, “rather than [being] a merely wartime phenomenon. It accords with, even if it is not certainly a product of, the Chinese policy of penetration in Tibet” (WBSA 955–44/234: 35).

India’s independence did not bring about any significant changes to the economic exchanges between India and China. This is reflected in a letter sent to the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs by the Indian Embassy in China in January 1949
(AH 0200119040004) asking the Ministry to distinguish China’s trade between the “two Dominions of India and Pakistan” and to record the commercial exchanges separately in government publications. The letter provided a list of ports in Indian, including French Indian, states and summarized the trade between India and China from 1939 to 1948, listing the commodities traded between the two countries and its corresponding value (see Appendix, Figs.1 and 2). The letter also expressed a hope for the future development of commercial exchanges, noting:

There is no immediate prospect of improvement in trade between India and China, mainly due to prevailing controls and restrictions in both the countries. With the return of normal conditions, however, trade is bound to prosper for the mutual benefit of both the nations.... India and China will do well to promote business relations between the two countries and thus strengthen the centuries’ old bonds of friendship for which the trade has to contribute its due share.

(AH 0200119040004: 31)

Not until after the founding of the PRC would commercial prospects once again be discussed in detail.

Unlike the cultural sphere, commercial exchanges between India and China were most acutely influenced by events taking place elsewhere in the world. World War II, competition from Russia, and the Chinese civil war all prevented full realization of the commercial potential. Except for the traders plying the Kalimpong–Tibet route, general conditions for commerce and itinerant merchants between 1937 and 1949 remained depressed. Although efforts were made by both governments to explore ways to promote commercial exchanges, not much seems to have been accomplished in this period of turmoil and uncertainty.

The “subaltern” sphere

Often overlooked in accounts of relations between India and China are the experiences of migrant communities, of Indians in China and of Chinese in India. The end of the Opium War created several new networks of connections and “contact zones,” which facilitated interactions between Chinese and Indians who were neither government officials nor intellectuals, but traders, soldiers, laborers, and also smugglers. Calcutta, Bombay, and Kalimpong became the main destinations for Chinese migrants seeking new livelihoods. In China, Indians traveled to and settled in Canton, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Kashgar, and Lhasa. However, it was not only in India and China that these itinerants met: Chinese and Indians also encountered each other at several other colonial port cities, such as Singapore and Port Louis, brought together as indentured laborers (Sen 2017: 279–284). These migrant groups created their own distinct spaces and dynamics for cross-cultural interactions, introduced new practices and tastes, and triggered complex questions of identity and belonging. The latter issue became pertinent, both legally and culturally, in the late 1940s and early 1950s after citizenship rules were enacted by the independent Indian state and peripheral regions were incorporated into the Chinese state by the PRC.

By the early twentieth century, the Chinese in India had established Chinatowns in Calcutta and Bombay, as well as smaller settlements in Kalimpong, Darjeeling, and at several towns in Assam. Chinese temples, restaurants, shoe stores, and carpentry warehouses became ubiquitous in many of these places. There were also GMD
offices, newspaper outlets, and schools that sustained Chinese migrants’ connections with their ancestral homeland. The late 1930s witnessed an influx of Chinese refugees from Southeast Asia and a large number of GMD soldiers who received training from American and British military personnel to fight the Japanese. Consequently, the population of ethnic Chinese in India in the mid-1940s exceeded 25,000 (NAI MEA/612(3)-CJK/49: 1). However, the Chinese in India were never a unified group, as there were divisions based on speech groups, especially between Hakka and Cantonese speakers, between wealthy classes and laborers, between older migrants and the newcomers, and, in the late 1940s, between those who supported the GMD and those who preferred the emerging Communists in China (Zhang 2015).

There was also professional diversity among the Chinese: the Hakka Chinese in Calcutta worked in the tanneries and made leather shoes, the Cantonese engaged in carpentry, the Hubenese were dentists, and those from Shandong traded in silks and other textiles (Liang 2007). Itinerant traders from Yunnan traversed the Lhasa–Kalimpong route and used the Chinese banking facilities in Calcutta to remit money home. The Chinese in Darjeeling and Assam labored in the tea gardens, and others in Calcutta and Bombay were employed by the British in the docks. The wealthy Chinese in Calcutta and elsewhere were active in the political and cultural exchanges, often organizing receptions for visiting dignitaries from China and also contributing funds to support the Chinese war against the Japanese.

In the Calcutta Chinatowns there were opium dens and rampant illegal activities such as gambling and the smuggling of contraband goods. There were also agents of the GMD who collected and transmitted confidential information on British policies concerning Tibet, as well as the political activities of Tibetans in India. The most famous case of GMD espionage in British India was that of Pandatsang Rapga, a member of the wealthy Tibetan Pandatsang family settled in Kalimpong. Rapga obtained an official GMD passport and founded the Tibetan Revolutionary Party in India to promote the overthrow of the existing regime in Tibet. In 1946, the British government discovered that Rapga was planning a large-scale recruitment drive in India. This led to security searches of various sites associated with Rapga and his collaborators in Calcutta and Kalimpong, and Rapga’s eventual deportation. After the establishment of the PRC, the intelligence and police agencies, especially those in West Bengal, became concerned with Communist propaganda among the Chinese living in India, which eventually resulted in the arrests and deportation of a large number of ethnic Chinese in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This resulted in the rapid decline of the Chinese communities in India, with no more than five thousand living across the country at present.

The Indian community in China was equally diverse with respect to its ethnic composition, professions, and political leanings. The Parsis and Sindhis were among the earliest traders to settle at the Chinese treaty ports; Sikh soldiers and policemen were brought to these cities by the British; Kashmiri and Marwari traders set up their bases in Xinjiang and Tibet; and there were also agriculturalists and laborers belonging to different ethnic groups across several regions of China. Unlike the Chinese in India, the Indian communities did not carve out special spatial areas for themselves, although there were a few gurdwaras and mansions belonging to rich Indian traders in Shanghai.

Like the Chinese in India, the Indians started leaving China soon after the end of World War II. Some 1200 of the 2500 Indians living in Shanghai opted to leave China, as did 23 out of 123 in Hankou (in Wuhan). For those who decided to continue living in China, the office of the Indian Agent General provided “monetary relief and warm
clothing.” A special attaché was appointed to help the large number of Indians who remained in Shanghai. There were other Indians in Manchuria, Tianjin, and Beijing who were reported to be “fairly well off.” In Xinjiang, however, Indians engaged in agriculture, mostly living in the southern region of Xinjiang in places such as Yarkand, Khotan, and Keria, were in dire straits. The half-dozen Indian merchants in Kashgar were noted as having been affected by the decline of trade between Xinjiang and India. The Indian Agent General in China, in addition to addressing the needs of some of these migrants, also had to deal with the trials of Indians charged with collaborating with the Japanese, including that of Nanak Chand, the Chairman of the Indian Independence League in Shanghai (IOR L/PS/12/2648; Sharma 2018). Within four years of this initial exodus, a new wave of repatriation of Indians in China started when the PRC was established. Many of the Indians who left China in the second half of the 1940s resettled in Hong Kong. Only a few Indian families remained in Shanghai when India and China went to war in 1962.

Indian independence and the founding of the PRC made the issues of national identity and belonging key concerns for the Chinese, many of whom had lived in India for several generations. Only a few were able to acquire Indian citizenship; some decided to take PRC passports once they were offered by the Chinese embassy and consulates in the 1950s; a majority, however, remained designated as “stateless.” Culturally, many Chinese in India continued their ancestral practices, lunar New Year celebrations, and mortuary tradition of burying the dead. In Calcutta they continued to study in Chinese schools and retained their Cantonese or Hakka heritage. The Chinese who lived outside Calcutta often married locally, later generations losing their Chinese language skills. Nonetheless, they were all categorized as “Chinese” by the Indian state. Their internment and deportation, mentioned earlier, resulted from this categorization and the suspicion that they were Chinese agents and therefore a risk to the Indian state.

Some of the Indians who settled in Xinjiang and Tibet faced similar dilemmas. In Xinjiang, for example, the agriculturalists had married locally and, as the Indian Agent General K. P. S. Menon (IOR L/PS/12/2648) points out, had “lost touch with India.” These people were “compelled” to sell their lands “at ridiculously low prices” between 1937 and 1942, reducing them to the status of “landless paupers.” The Indian Agent General made representation on behalf of these people in Urumchi, assigning, either intentionally or unintentionally, an Indian identity to them. The Indian state also intervened in the early 1950s, when the Khache, descendants of the Kashmiri Muslim traders residing in Tibet, asserted their Indian identity and demanded that they be allowed to “return” to India (Atwill 2018). After establishing alternative networks of connections from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, these subaltern Chinese and Indians found themselves caught up in the politics of nation states, where the interests and concerns of migrant groups were eclipsed by concerns about territorial demarcation, restrictions imposed on cross-border movement, and the implementation of laws on citizenship. The interactions between India and China were no longer as free-flowing as they had been in the 1930s and 1940s.

**Conclusion**

Although a timespan of a mere twelve years, the period between 1937 and 1949 witnessed global turmoil and momentous transformations in several regions of the world. World War II, the beginnings of decolonization in Asia and Africa, India’s independence, and
the founding of the PRC all happened within this brief period. Affected by these events, interactions between India and China went through their own changes and transformations. For instance, the political connections between the GMD and INC leaderships were strengthened due to mutual concerns about imperialism but weakened after the war due to the narrower interests in asserting territorial claims. While economic exchanges between the two countries were influenced by global upheavals in the 1930s and 1940s, the cultural sphere transcended these uncertainties and forged multifaceted connections centered around educational interactions. The experiences of the migrant communities added another dimension to this relationship that reflected the diversity of connections between India and China. These twelve years shaped the world views, professional careers, and livelihoods of political leaders, intellectuals, artists, and itinerants, as well as the “landless paupers” in Xinjiang and the stateless Chinese in India.

The future of the bilateral relationship became uncertain in December 1949, when the ROI decided to recognize the PRC. However, some of the key strands in the impending relationship had already appeared between 1937 and 1949. These included aspects that were conducive to furthering mutual bonds between the two nations, as in the case of the cultural and educational exchanges; those that had the potential to expand and develop, as with the economic interactions; and the strains that clearly foreboded significant discord in the long-term bilateral political relationship, as with the issues of Tibet and the status of the respective migrant communities. It would therefore not be going too far to conclude that these twelve years laid the foundations for a complicated relationship between the ROI and the PRC in the decades that followed.

Appendix

Figure 1 List of commodities traded between China and India, 1939–1948

Imports into China from India


Exports to India from China


Notes

1 For a study of the situation in China in the 1930s and prior to the end of World War II, see van de Ven (2003); for India during the same period, see Raghavan (2016).

2 For a detailed study of Subhas Chandra Bose’s complex engagement with China in the context of Japanese imperialism, see Sharma (2018). GMD’s predicament over the Indian independence movement between 1937 and 1945 is discussed in Samarani (2005). The concerns over GMD espionage activities in British India are examined in Sen (forthcoming).


4 On the Brussels Congress and its impact on Nehru’s anti-imperialist world view, see Louro (2018: 19–64).

5 Mamlok (2018) has examined the various medical relief groups operating in China during the World War II period.

6 On the experiences of this medical mission in China, see Basu (1986). See also Sheng, Lu and Zhang (1983) and Lin (1993: 327–361).

7 The details of some of these experiences appear in the “Diary of a Journey” written by Nehru (1940: 21–53). See also Lin (1993: 274–287) for Nehru’s visit to China in 1939.

8 On the missions of Dai Jitao and Taixu, see Sen (2017: 321–337); the Islamic delegation led by Ma Tianying is examined in Jeong (forthcoming). Dai had previously visited India in July 1936 and August 1938. See Lin (1993: 243–256) on these trips.

9 British officials were particularly offended by the remarks Soong Mei-ling made to the American press in April 1943, which called for Nehru’s release (IOR L/PS/12/2315: 25–26).
She also criticized Gandhi for being “somewhat cloudy in his thinking” and having “no world vision because he was overcome by his restricted obsession for India’s freedom regardless of world conditions” (IOR L/PS 12/2315:19).

Additional details on the Asian Relations Conference and its implications for China–India relations can be found in Sen (2017: 337–347).

During British rule, K. P. S. Menon was the Agent General for India in the ROC and was based in Chongqing. After Indian independence he was appointed the ROI’s foreign secretary. On his experiences in China, see Menon (1972).

Luo sent two telegrams on the Indian government’s decision to recognize the Communist regime in China, one dated 18 November 1949, the other 23 December 1949.

Burma had recognized the new regime in China on 16 December, becoming the first non-Communist state to do so. The following day, the Burmese Foreign Minister, U. E. Maung, explained to Nehru that the “disturbing” situation in the border regions between Burma and China with regard to territorial claims and Chinese migrant settlements had “forced” the Burmese government’s hand in recognizing the new regime. See NMML JN 32-II: 387.

Hay (1970) and Das ([1993] 2005) have examined Tagore’s visit to China and the controversies surrounding it.

On Tagore and his ideas of Pan-Asianism, including the role of Visva-Bharati, see Frost (2010) and Stolte and Fischer-Tiné (2012).

On the establishment and the functioning of the Sino-Indian Cultural Society, see Lin (1993: 234–239; 412–419).

For an overview of Cheena Bhavana and its role in fostering intellectual and diplomatic interactions between India and China, see Sen (2017: 306–320). See also Tsui (2010 and forthcoming) for a critical analysis of the role of Tan Yunshan in these connections. The contributions of Xu Fancheng, who lived at the Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry from 1951 to 1978, and You Yunshan have been less explored. On these two figures, see Sun (2009). You Yunshan later became a nun and is better known by her Buddhist name, Rev. Yaoyun, and as the founder of Huafan University in Taiwan.

For a recent study of Anagarika Dharmapala and his connections across the Buddhist world, see Kemper (2015).

Taixu’s goodwill mission to India and his meetings with Nehru and other political and religious leaders are detailed in Sen (2017: 322–337).

This included a visit by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan in May 1944, whose lectures, according to Menon, left his audiences “at once awestruck and befuddled” (IOR L/PS/12/2648). After Indian independence, P. C. Bagchi was appointed to the Chair of Indian History at Peking National University (now Peking University). For a report Bagchi submitted in 1948 to the Indian embassy in Beijing about ways to develop educational interactions between India and China, see NAI/MEA/728–C.J.K/50. Chen Hansheng and Chang Renxia were two important Chinese scholars who were active in India during the 1940s. While Chen went to India in 1944, Chang arrived a year later. For an outline of Chinese scholars and students present in India during this period, see Lin (1993: 412–422).

Xu Fancheng, in addition to being a philosopher, also painted. He may have been influenced by You Yunshan. Three hundred of his paintings are housed at the Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry. Chang Xiufeng was a student of the renowned artist Nandalal Bose and drew inspiration from the Bengal School of Art. On artistic exchanges between India and China in the 1930s and 1940s, see Bhattacharya (2014).

I use the term “subaltern” here for the non-elite people, who did not have any national identities, and those who are usually neglected in the historiography of China–India relations.


The number of Chinese almost halved by 1948, when a report from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs gave their numbers as 12,911 (NAI MEA/612(3)–C.J.K/49: 1).
Many of these activities are recorded in the British (and subsequently independent Indian) Intelligence Branch files in Calcutta. These files are now housed in the West Bengal State Archives in Calcutta.

On the Rapga case, see McGranahan (2005; 2017) and Sen (forthcoming).

See Cohen and Leng (1972). In recent years, accounts of those arrested and interned in India have also appeared. See, for example, Marsh (2012).


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