

# Profound Dynamics

By Nazia Vasi

Fueled by cash flows and expanding channels of communication, China and India are awakening to a third round of bilateral brotherhood, focused on cultural exchange.

I was living in Shanghai and working as the Indian head of an Asian tax and legal consultancy in 2008 at a time when cultural exchange between China and India left plenty to be desired. Indian art and cultural performances touring China's major cities attracted mostly Indian spectators, who enjoyed wallowing in song and dance from their motherland because of homesickness. Chinese people tend to be rare at these cultural events.

Many reasons could be blamed for the phenomenon—awareness of India in China was low at the time. Most Chinese didn't know India as the software superpower it is today. Its economy was gently growing 3.9 percent annually. Most Chinese hadn't traveled to India, were not particularly interested in it and hadn't heard too much about it. India

was a poorer, slower and smaller neighbor and mostly inconsequential to China, which had GDP growth at a 9.7 percent.

However, in 2017, an influx of investments led by Alibaba and Tencent who announced or closed deals valued nearing US\$2 billion, a herald renewing Chinese interest in India's flourishing soft power.

China and India have had a rich tradition of exchange dating back centuries. The first wave was led by Xuanzang's journey to the West and the spread of Buddhism across China. The second round was fueled by business, initially through the trade of cotton and tea and then opium. Today, fueled by cash flows and expanding channels of communication, China and India are re-awakening to a third round of bilateral brotherhood focused on cultural exchange.

## FILM AND TELEVISION COOPERATION

Aamir Khan's movie 3 Idiots grossed US\$3 million in China just a few years ago, helping cement India's image as an enchanting, colorful nation capable of fascinating the Chinese.

Today, film cooperation between India and China is booming. Inchin Closer, a China-India language and cultural consultancy I founded in 2010, is in the thick of translating an animation script for a 5D film that was written in and will be produced in India but shown in 5D theaters in China. This project is making the most of India's film production skills and China's infrastructural abilities.

Also in the works is also a pilot for a Chinese TV series, exclusively created, scripted and produced in India solely for the Chinese

audience. Considering that China is home to the greatest number of screens worldwide, the content consumed by the country's story-hungry consumers has skyrocketed, and media producers in Beijing are bending over backwards to meet the rising demand. Unable to keep up with the demand themselves, domestic Chinese producers are commissioning Indian production companies to make TV shows specifically for the Chinese audience. A trend never imagined before, China is now looking to India for rich storytelling, filmmaking and the production abilities to create world-class content that can be seamlessly sold to audiences from Shanghai to Kashgar.

Concurrently, Chinese content is also being created for Indian eyes. Translated from Chinese to Hindi is a Beijing-based TV series of historical Chinese stories that will be subtitled and dubbed for air on Indian networks. Stories from the Qin Dynasty will be shown on Indian TVs soon, highlighting ancient traditions and customs—similarities our two nations share. Indian audiences will witness the parallels that Indian and Chinese historical dramas, mythology and epics share.

The secret to making Bollywood movies so spicy is creative chaos, an element that China's films seem to lack. India's film industry functions in a mad sync that only its insiders understand. Until China's film industry can harness its creative juices and pour out unbridled

passion, storytelling will remain India's strength.

The cultural similarities between China and India have proved a big advantage for the latter when creating content for the mobile-screen-toting, binge-watching Chinese viewer. Modern twists on love stories and mythological epics are especially high in demand, and just what Indian production houses—skilled in the genre—are being commissioned to write by Chinese media companies. Beijing is now looking to Mumbai, the capital of India's film industry, to learn from and accelerate its storytelling and film production capabilities.

Recently, a high-level government delegation led by Mr. Feijin Du, member of the Standing Committee of the CPC Beijing Municipal Committee, visited Mumbai and New Delhi. Delegates met film producers, the head of the Mumbai Film Festival and government officials to work out plans to host

bilateral film festivals. The agenda was clearly designed to facilitate learning the secrets of Bollywood.

5D films and TV series are not the only carriers of the cultural collision between China and India. Interest in both nations' literature has also swelled. A translation of Amar Chitra Katha's graphic novel on Mahatma Gandhi is now in the works. The novel has already been translated into Chinese and will soon be available at bookstores and for online downloads, enabling Chinese readers to understand how India fought for independence against the British with non-violent means.

#### MIXED MARRIAGE

Alongside the media, other technology has enabled Indians and the Chinese to traverse cultural barriers. Many have fallen in love, married and moved to the other country, adapting to family values, traditions and a new way of life. Sing Ming is



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one example: Now a mother of three children, she married Gautam, a software engineer from Bangalore, India's Silicon Valley, nine years ago. Today, she earns a lucrative living translating documents between Chinese and English, the languages of business for China and India.

"Xiao Ming" is a member of a constantly growing WeChat group of Chinese wives who are married to Indian men. The group, with almost 200 members, was started about six years ago when a few women came together to support each other in a foreign land. Although few have met each other, the group is an extremely strong support network to help the newly married settle in India's chaotic cities. The most discussed topic in the group is food. The women help each other recreate dishes from home in Indian cities where Chinese ingredients aren't easily accessible. One woman even figured out how to make tofu from scratch since the Indian paneer (cottage cheese) never came close in taste or texture. Other topics of conversation range from how to deal with in-laws, experiences growing up as single children in China, and raising kids in a multicultural home.

Many enjoyed boisterous Indian weddings. Marriages in India, like in Bollywood movies, are colorful and peppered with lots of song and dance. However, traditional Hindu weddings involve the couple

circumambulating around a fire to the tempo of a priest chanting 'mantras' or blessings for the couple. Inchin Closer was recently called to translate these mantras for a Chinese bride's family who had travelled from Hunan Province for their daughter's marriage to Prashant. The Chinese side of the wedding party was enthusiastic about understanding the meaning behind the customs and rituals.

#### SINGING IN CHINESE

Jankee, a professional Indian singer, was recently invited to sing a Chinese song at a traditional Indian wedding. The groom's family had some important Chinese clients at his wedding and wanted to impress them. So Jankee was enlisted to learn and sing Mandarin pop songs to impress and entertain the Chinese clientele at the wedding.

Because Mandarin remains China's primary language, producers must make content in Mandarin. However, because of its vital role in bridging relations in business, the number of Indians interested in learning Mandarin has skyrocketed. Businesspeople, traders, merchants, entrepreneurs and professionals all want to learn the language so they can seamlessly do business in China. Speaking Mandarin gives them a big advantage. They can communicate easily with clients, which establishes a channel of trust and camaraderie which translates into better prices and profits in India.

China is also drawing in Indian youth with opportunities to experience the country and culture firsthand through programs such as those offering attractive scholarships to study Mandarin. In 2010, approximately 80 Indian students were offered scholarships to study Mandarin and by 2018, the number had almost doubled to 150. Studying, living and working in China not only offers Indians firsthand experience in the country, but also helps them make friends and build a lasting relationship with their neighbor.

The volume of Chinese tourists to India is growing as well. Per 2017 India Tourism Statistics, the number grew by 12.5% between 2008 and 2017. As an increasing number of Chinese experience India firsthand, our similar cultures, commonness and brotherhood are becoming more and more apparent.

Through these various channels, strengthening of cultural relations between peoples of the world's two most populated nations is on the upswing. This third wave of cultural camaraderie is fueling stronger relations between China and India. And through the intermingling of the threads that bind our people, our nations will weave an ornate quilt of love, respect and a deeper understanding of each other. ■

*The author is founder and CEO of Inchin Closer, an India-China language and business consultancy.*