

A Common Dream between India, China and the World: my experience as an Avantha International Fellow in Aspen Institute India

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The encounter with the Other, with other people, has always been a universal and fundamental experience for our species...People thus had three choices when they encounter the Other: They could choose war, they could build a wall around themselves, or they could enter into dialogue.

Ryszard Kapuscinski, The Other¹

It is my honour to become the first Chinese national receiving the privileged Avantha International Fellowship by Aspen Institute India. As a doctoral candidate at the Environmental Change Institute (ECI), University of Oxford, I focus my research on India's and China's energy and low carbon policies, as well as their implications for global energy governance. The Avantha Fellowship provided me with a unique opportunity to observe my research topic in the context of the Indian policy cohort 'inside out', and this experience opened a new window onto my long-lasting interactions with India.

An Entangling Story between China and India

China and India are Asia's biggest neighbours and two of the oldest living civilisations. They have had exchange of people, ideas and goods for centuries. However, for the past century, China and India have frequently experienced rivalrous relations, and have chosen different pathways in many aspects of both domestic development and foreign policy. Those tensions and differences, despite of their increasing economic interests, have significantly reduced the frequency and depth of their mutual communication.

My entangling story with India dates back to 2009, when I came to India to be an MA student at the Centre for the Study of Regional Development (CSRD) at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU). Many Chinese people asked me why I was going to India. The university where I completed my undergraduate studies, Tsinghua University, is one of the best universities in China. The current President of China and his predecessor, both are alumni of my university and one third of the graduates continue their studies in top universities in the West. Chinese people believe that studying in 'the more advanced and more developed countries' can help us achieve

the Chinese dream of prosperity, happiness and harmony. In people's minds India was not part of that group. So my decision to embark on further postgraduate studies in India was hard for my peers to understand.

However, I did, get some support from Professor Xue Lan, the Dean of the School of Public Policy and Management at Tsinghua. He wrote the foreword to my newly published book *Grow Up in India* and mentioned how he felt about this decision, "When Yuge told me about her idea of going to India, I was truly thrilled. It has been quite a few years since China has embraced the global economy, and I am glad that Chinese students have finally started exploring the real world and the rich diversity it offers. Now that South Asian, African and Latin American students are increasingly studying on our campus, our own graduates are now thinking of discovering these emerging counterparts."

Coming to India with a Dream

I came to India with a dream - a dream which is under a threat in the multi-polarising world.

Ever since the Chinese President Xi Jinping developed the idea of the *China Dream* as one of his key motifs, the international community, including India has been discussing and closely watching the actual content of China's Dream, and what it will bring to the world. To my understanding, the China Dream is deeply rooted in the wisdom of the Chinese civilisation: *Shi Jie Da Tong* - global integration. In the past 20 years, the emergence of new economic powers is posing challenges to the existing international order - from development, trade, energy, nuclear disarmament, climate change, cyber security to international crime. In a multi-polar world, it is crucial to build mutual understanding and cooperation between emerging countries, as well as between the emerging countries and the rest of the world; because without it, the global integration and thereupon - the effective international cooperation essential for tackling pressing common challenges - is hard to achieve.

However, unlike the OECD countries, which share similarity in both economic systems and political ideologies, the emerging countries, for example each of the BRICS, though having common economic interests in general, has been practicing very different cultural, social and political values. This divergence in economic interests and kinds of soft power has created obstacles for collaboration among emerging countries and has also challenged the realisation of global integration.

Carrying the dream of an integrated world, where multi-stakeholders – cross-nationals, nationals, sub-nationals, and other kinds of organisations, as well as various individuals – despite of their different backgrounds, can equally voice and participate in global governance which brings common goods to all human kinds, and where

cross-cultural relations are built on real understanding, instead of manipulated imagination, I went to India. I believe that collaboration and integration is built on trust, and that trust comes from authentic mutual understanding. While most Chinese students are looking at the West, there is a dangerous knowledge gap about ‘the rest’. India is not only one of the most important emerging powers, but also an unavoidable neighbour of China. More importantly, in many ways India has taken a different pathway in development compared to China. Facing similar challenges, the Indian experiences may inspire China’s reflection on itself.

Bittersweet Journey of Knowing Each Other

As former Chinese Consul in Kolkata, Mr. Mao Siwei recently said in an interview,ⁱⁱ India has always been China’s teacher throughout history. It is well-known to the world that in the early Tang Dynasty (7th Century), Xuan Zang, the famous Chinese Buddhist monk, scholar, traveller and translator went to India and studied in Nalanda University for almost two decades. His writings and translations inspired by studies of India had greatly enriched the development of Buddhism in China. The flourishing of Buddhism, reflecting the openness and inclusiveness of the then Asian society, witnessed China’s reaching one of the climaxes of its civilisation – Tang Song culture.

It is also well recognised that studying in a country is the best way of understanding it, and modern transportation has made the journey between China and India much easier and faster compared to Xuan Zang’s time. However, when I really encountered India, a huge country with endless diversities, pursuing a clear route to understanding it seemed impossible. To get deep into Indian society, the classroom is necessary but not sufficient. So I started to learn the local language, make Indian friends, read extensively, travel and research across the country. I wrote about conversations, observations, questions and confusions, and published them on various media in China. From the intensive interactions with the Chinese public that resulted, I got to understand their growing interest to know India and at the same time, common misunderstandings and misinterpretations that are deeply rooted.

Slowly, my publications gained more and more interesting responses from Chinese audiences, reflecting the bittersweet process of getting to know one another. Someone wrote to me after reading my article on the human experiences of rapid urbanisation in Assam, “What Indians are experiencing sounds so similar to us. Why can’t we learn from each other’s experiences and try to avoid those tragedies in modernisation?” Someone else responded to my article on local democracy in Tamil Nadu, “It is hard to imagine that a country with so many poor and illiterate is really suitable for democracy. It seems that India is trying to break this curse! I get to know more about democracy from the Indian experience than from the West!” There are also people who do not quite agree with my writing, for example, “I read your article about the dilemma between economic growth and climate change in India. Obviously, China

never wastes time on such unproductive discussion. India should learn something from us.”

During my year of study in India, I tried every means at my disposal to know about India and to look for a channel to rebuild the mutual understanding between the two. However, the more I experienced India, the more confused I became, because I did not have an efficient way of combining my enriching but fragmented local experience into an insightful and systematic understanding. Then, I was inspired by reading *Journey to America*, the notes of the pioneer French thinker Alexis De Tocqueville’s 9 months stay in America from 1831 to 1832. In contrast to the two masterpieces called *Democracy in America (1 & 2)* which came out in France 3 and 8 years after that journey, de Tocqueville’s first hand journal was fresh and original, but fragmented. Real understanding requires not only fresh experience, but also systematic thinking, intellectual debate, and comparative perspectives.

So after one year of studying in India, in 2010, I went to Oxford to further my understanding and read for the MSc in Contemporary India. In 2011, I also had the opportunity to join the Brookings Institution as a Guest Researcher, conducting comparative research between China and India. The next year, I came back to Oxford, and with the support from my supervisor Professor Barbara Harriss-White and Wolfson College, my colleague Danielle de Feo Giet and I founded the Oxford Juxtapose Project - a multi-disciplinary platform for scholars to discuss China and India, and to promote mutual understanding through academic and cultural innovations. ⁱⁱⁱ

Coming back to India and Working with Aspen

For three years, though physically not being continuously in India (I made two short visits to India for conference and travel in between), the focus of all my learning had always been closely related to India. I was hoping that some distance from the subject of my study, as well as the academic training and international exposure I had acquired during these years could enrich my thinking, prepare me to come back to India and conducting innovative comparative research and, further, prepare me to pursue that dream of understanding, trust, peace and prosperity.

It was around this time that several emails of Avantha International Fellowship Call-for-Applications from different sources bunched in my Oxford mailbox. I realised that this was exactly the opportunity I was waiting for to go back to India. So I sent across the application in early May and went through two rounds of skype interviews. Finally, one day in June, I was informed by Ms Kiran Pasricha, CEO of Aspen India that I was one of the lucky few to get the fellowship.

A fast changing India

On the 15th of October 2013, I landed at the Indira Gandhi International Airport at Terminal 3. My journey with Aspen India started there and then. I vividly remember when I first came to Delhi in 2009; the currently modern and fashionable Terminal 3 of the Indira Gandhi International Airport was still under construction - the jumble of wires hanging from the ceiling did not quite describe the booming emerging economy for a first time visitor.

Incoming flights from Beijing always land after midnight in India. The first change I noticed when I returned this time to India was that the cows had largely disappeared. The road from the airport to the city, even during the night, would have white cows sleeping on the roadside or roaming in the middle of its empty expanse. This time, however, the road was lit up by orange road lamps and yellow or white car lights. When I asked a friend about it, he said, “Maybe the cows have vanished into a refugee camp in this city under construction”.

For many years now, India has been undergoing a construction boom. In 2009, when the world was badly hit by the financial crises, Professor Xue Lan described India to me as a land full of construction - highways, skyscrapers, shopping malls, factories, subways – proof of rapid and obvious growth across the country. This was the picture I had in my mind before I visited India for the first time. It is still the case when I returned to Delhi this time, though the economic growth of India now had almost halved its high point before the financial crisis, falling rapidly to barely 5%.

The second visible change I noticed in Delhi is that the auto-rickshaw, readily agreed to “go by the meter”. Years back, the auto-rickshaw drivers were very reluctant to use it and would even get offended or irritated if you insisted on it. The roads were crowded as they used to be, but the rushing buses had begun to close the doors (earlier most of them did not), and an increasingly large number were air-conditioned. Those small changes, though might seem superficial, reflect in a vivid way, that India’s once ‘lawless urban jungle’, which was a product of the fast urbanisation, is now transforming into a more organised and more modern direction.

A new window presented by Aspen India

Aspen Institute India is located in Thapar House in Central Delhi. Its location is right behind the Imperial Hotel. The mass-scale metro construction has nearly blocked the way to the office. Hidden from the busy dust on Janpath road, Thapar House has one of India’s most influential corporate conglomerates, the Avantha Group and several promising business centres, but it keeps a low profile. As compared to the gigantic and flashy offices, on the new name cards of *Emerging India*, Thapar House’s modest maintenance seemed on purpose. Its style is practical and well-organised.

Aspen India is on the second floor of Thapar House. It is a young and emerging independent and not-for-profit organisation in India. Its mission is to foster value-based leadership, encouraging individuals to reflect on the ideals and ideas that define a good society, at the same time, to provide a neutral and balanced venue for discussing and acting on critical issues.

Working with Aspen on a day-to-day basis, I got the opportunity to learn about the various ways by which Aspen, as a unique not-for-profit achieves its mission. Basically, it facilitates and promotes open dialogues and cross-sector outreach by engaging business, governments, non-profits, and other stakeholders on issues closely related to India's development. For example, during my tenure, I had the opportunity to help and participate in the panel discussion on national security policy, a public lecture on China, a lunch talk on the US and India's foreign policy, India's elite culture and its implications for democracy, the Bhutan-India relationship, America's Pivot to Asia, as well as corporate social responsibility discussions among high-level Indian entrepreneurs etc. Those open and close-door discussions have attracted audiences from all kinds of backgrounds, and provoked diverse debates in related areas. By doing this, Aspen India engages in promoting a deeper understanding of India's development and of challenges among various stakeholders within and beyond the Indian society.

In general, the Avantha International Fellowship provided me with a unique opportunity to observe the Indian policy cohort through the lens of non-for-profit organisations. This diverse cohort is a dynamic combination of policy makers, think tanks, media, social workers, academics, business, as well as active individuals. During my tenure, I got the chance to interact with those people in person, and discuss about topic of common interest.

The heated China Debate in India

The most impressive part of my stay in Aspen was the heated and intensive debate about China in the Indian policy cohort as well as among the general public. Nearly every public event held by Aspen, whose theme might not directly relate to China, would develop into a serious debate on how China will make an influence to the discussed topic, and what India should do to engage with it.

The first two weeks of my tenure coincidentally overlapped with the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to China: 22-26 October 2013. Accordingly, my assignment was to prepare the background paper for the then forthcoming Aspen China Strategic Dialogue to be jointly held with the China Reform Forum in Beijing. To write the paper, I went through published reports and news coverage of the China-India relationship in different perspectives – security, economic, military,

energy, global governance, and social challenges - from China, India, US, and the UK, in both English and Chinese, for the previous six months in 2013. This intensive reading showed that the majority of the reports did not hold positive views about the China-India relationship. Interestingly, the two most positive pieces of coverage on this front came from Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's official speech during his visit to India in May 2013, and Indian Premier Manmohan Singh's speech delivered in his China visit. Apart from these two official gestures of friendliness, the distrust between the two set the dominant tone for this relationship.

The escalating tension in the Chinese and Indian media and think tanks to a large extent, reflects people's opinions towards each other. Several published surveys and academic papers seem to buttress these negative public opinions with more solid data – in one study conducted by Pew Research Global Attitude Project in 2013, 83% of Indians surveyed consider China as a threat to Indian security^{iv}; an earlier piece of research published in 2011, focused on the Chinese online forum participants, shows that 90% of the studied hold negative perspectives toward India in general.^v In both countries, with their different political systems, public opinion is more and more engaged in the discussion of their foreign policy. The active engagement of the educated public, which is equipped by the flourishing usage of the internet and social media, is no longer an easily ignored factor by the governments in making foreign policy. Therefore the increasingly negative public opinions among Chinese and Indians, that are largely based on lack of mutual understanding and long-lasting distrust, are obviously not healthy for a peaceful and prosperous China-India relationship.

People-to-people contact

Public opinion is formed by exposure to information and discussions. Though the coverage of the other country is emerging in both China and India, information based on first-hand data is still limited. Analysis solely relying on second-hand information is embedded with unknown bias and often leads to rush judgements. To overcome this challenge, more people-to-people contact is in urgent demand.

Promoting people-to-people contact recently has got more and more attention from both sides. During Premier Manmohan Singh's visit to China, I was asked by *China Youth Daily* - one of the most influential Chinese newspapers to interview leaders from the Indian industry on recent progress in China-India's economic relationship. Mr Tarun Das, funding trustee of Aspen India, who leads the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) for 40 years kindly accepted my interview request. When asked about the perspective on the future of China-India relations, he argued strongly: "The most important agenda is for the people of China and India to know each other. There had been a huge information and communications gap over decades, which has led to a lack of mutual understanding. Increased people-to-people interaction and economic

cooperation will help to address this problem.” When this interview, titled 'China-India Relationship: the next 50 years will be VERY DIFFERENT from the last 50 years', was published on the last day of the Indian Premier's visit, Oct 26 2013,^{vi} this argument on promoting people-to-people contact between the two as the key for a brand new China-India relationship was quoted by many major media outlets in China.

Nowadays, China-India communication is not only limited, but also imbalanced. In 2012, 610,200 Indians visited mainland China, while only 169,000 Chinese visited India, barely a quarter of the Indian visitors to China.^{vii} A few years ago, the difference was even larger, when 500,000 Indians visited China and merely 100,000 made the reverse. India's strict visa policy is one of the most complained reasons from the Chinese side. Apart from the policy obstacles, further reasons lie in mentalities.

This summer, before the trip to India, I toured China on book launches with widely ranging Chinese audiences. We had many interesting discussions about the complexity of Indian society, the controversial relationship between China and India, and the bittersweet journey of getting to know people from another culture and more about oneself as a result. I had personally always believed that there was a yet-to-be-explored interest in knowing India, the mysterious and unavoidable neighbour. I knew that this interest was just around the corner. The passionate audiences full of inquiring minds exceeded my expectations. Their criticisms and sophisticated questions surprised me but I was conscious at the same time of the fact that their deep-rooted concerns about the topic were not sufficiently reflected in the public and political spheres. We, both China and India, still have a long way to go on this front.

Our Common Destiny

During my tenure at Aspen, I used to take the Delhi metro as part of my daily transport. When I crossed a tributary of the holy Yamuna River, right beside my residence to the nearby metro station, the strong and stinking smell of the drying river and the accumulating garbage floating in it made every passenger cover their nose immediately and tightly. Moving between the two cities with equally smoky skies^{viii}, Beijing and Delhi, and watching them exhaust every piece of energy to chase each other's pace in both developing and polluting, sometimes I would wonder: while this fast modernising process makes human life more convenient and efficient, will our life become more enjoyable with the disappearing animals and biodiversity and decaying nature?

Whenever I think of this common destiny of India and China, which is also the paradox of the whole (developing) world today, the need for us to collaborate in

tackling these challenges becomes urgently pressing. Meanwhile I wonder whether our common destiny lays down more commonalities, instead of differences for us to face each other and the future?

A Common Dream of China, India and the world

After 4 years of my first visit to India, my first book, *Grow Up in India* based on one year of study and research in India (2009-2010) came out coincidentally with the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang's visit to India in late May 2013. Li wrote in his famous speech 'A Handshake across the Himalayas'^{ix} on his first foreign visit as Premier:

“An Asian century that people expect would not come if China and India, the two most populous countries in the world, failed to live in harmony and achieve common development...Our common development will benefit people of the two countries and offer the world more and better opportunities.”

My entangling story with India is just a personal experiment of the long process in mutual understanding between India and China, learning from each other, and getting to know oneself more. Mutual understanding is a continuous endeavour and a strategic investment. With this endeavour, we invest in the solid foundation of trust-building for a great dream. An integrated world is not only a dream of Chinese destiny, but also a dream for India, Asia and the world.

In the end, I express my sincere gratitude to Mr. Gautam Thapar, without whose support, the Avantha International Fellowship Programme would not have been a possibility. Once again, I would like to thank Aspen Institute India for offering me this great opportunity to come back to India, and opening a new window. I have been greatly enriched by the global Aspen spirit, which is dedicated to “fostering enlightening leadership, the appreciation of timeless ideas and values, and open-minded dialogue on contemporary issues”. The mutual understanding of China and India, the two most important emerging powers is no doubt one of the most pressing contemporary issues in the world. Aspen's wide outreach and rich reflections within and beyond India have greatly inspired my thinking on this front. I would like to contribute to and collaborate with Aspen in the future projects of promoting common ground and deeper understanding between India, China and the world.

About the author:

Ma Yuge is Avantha International Fellow 2013. She is DPhil Candidate in Environmental Change Institute (ECI), University of Oxford. Before joining Aspen India, she was a guest researcher with the Brookings Institution in Washington DC and Beijing (2011-2012) and a GG2022 fellow (gg2022.net). She is co-founder of the Oxford Juxtapose Project, which is a multi-disciplinary platform for comparative

studies on contemporary China and India. Her first book *Grow Up in India* is published in Beijing in 2013.

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ⁱⁱⁱ Website of Wolfson College, University of Oxford (2013):
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^{iv} PewReserch Global Attitude Project (2013)

^v Simon Shen (2011). Exploring the Neglected Constraints on Chindia: Analysing the Online Chinese Perception of India and its Interaction with China's Indian Policy. *The China Quarterly*, 207, pp 541-560. doi:10.1017/S0305741011000646.

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^{vii} Data from the Chinese and Indian Foreign Ministries

^{viii} New York Times India Ink (2013):
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^{ix} The Hindu (2013):
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