Book Discussion

This book is an outstanding achievement of both synthesis and research. It reflects Tansen Sen's over 20-year engagement with a wide-ranging set of scholarship in multiple languages that include English, Hindi, Bengali, Japanese and, of course, most importantly, Modern and Classical Chinese. Sen has not only mastered the literature but synthesised it for us to offer a compelling vision of a connected past. While this is itself an impressive feat, Sen has also mined a host of primary and archival sources located in China, India, Taiwan, the USA, England and the Netherlands. They span compilations of pre-modern texts, heretofore unexplored manuscripts and personal papers, as well as a range of non-textual materials, such as religious objects, technologies, maps, paintings and photographs. Sen's use of them is skilful, and the connected nature of South, Southeast and East Asia's past that emerges from his pen is fascinating in its depth and diversity. The result is a work that is at once an authoritative summary and bellwether pointing to future research. It is probably a fair assessment to say that this book could not have been written by anyone else.

Sen's book, and specifically his discussion of pre-modern history, encourages us to reflect on how we proceed with comparative and connective history.[1] Do we need new models or frameworks to understand comparison, contact and exchange across time? After all, it is all too easy for us to fall into the trap of attempting to understand regions through the administrative categories of a centralised state, both today and in the past. As so many instances in this book demonstrate, the pre-modern reality was far more complex. For instance, we discover that in the early fifteenth century, the king of Bengal beseeched the Ming Yongle emperor (r. 1402–24) for help to defeat his neighbour, the ruler of Jaunpur (p. 80). In the South, in present day Kerala, Sen describes a struggle between the neighbouring city states of Cochin and Calicut and the less-than-impartial involvement of the Ming eunuch admiral, Zheng He, in these machinations (pp. 216–17). And then there is the case of the Chola Empire mounting a

[1] On this, in particular the idea of reciprocal comparisons, see the discussion in Pomeranz (2001) and Wong (2000).

CHINA REPORT 54 : 3 (2018): 358–360
SAGE Publications Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC/Melbourne
DOI: 10.1177/0009445518779278

punitive naval mission in 1025 CE against the mercantile Srivijayan polity, to discipline them for misrepresenting their relationship with the Cholas to the Song (p. 76–77).

Such cases urge us to focus not on an imperial centre, nor specifically on individuals, but on regional polities. This opens us up to thinking about not just how relations evolved with regions putatively foreign (i.e., the Han, Tang, Wei, Song, Ming and so on) but also across what would be considered less foreign or even domestic boundaries—that is, across various regional polities within the subcontinent. In other words, they blur the very notion of 'foreign' and 'domestic' for the pre-modern past. At the very least, we have to proceed by recognising that such characterisations carried very different connotations than they do today.

Indeed, the various political machinations that Sen describes between polities in the Southern and Eastern parts of the subcontinent are reminiscent of how historians have characterised the eighteenth-century collapse of the Mughal Empire: British, French and other foreign actors were perceived as equal and equally legitimate participants in state making and unmaking.[2] They are equally reminiscent of other 'invasions' of the subcontinent, from Alexander to Babur. Similar frameworks can be applied to Tibet's historical relations with all its neighbours. This book therefore helps us question and develop models of state interaction as part of a matrix of interactions, without predicating current national boundaries and the units they presuppose. Similarly, we can set aside ideas about civilisational and cultural nationhood and disentangle instead the contested and essentially politically fractured nature of the subcontinent's history and the broader history of the Afro-Eurasian region.

Moving to the twentieth century, it is striking to see how the narrative shifts away from material, mercantile and knowledge-based circulations to broad cultural (civilisational) engagement and geopolitical considerations, both of which Sen unpacks for us expertly. He also points to what is frequently lost in such essentialising approaches. For instance, the earlier emphasis on trade and the circulation of goods and individuals appears to be overwhelmed. But is this a fair assessment or an artefact of our own myopia? Sen offers interesting examples from the archives to make a case for the latter. He takes us down to the everyday lived experience of common people in both China and India. We read about the tragic and shameful internment of thousands of Chinese-Indians at Deoli in the 1960s and the experiences of the Nandalal Bose-trained painter Chang Xiufeng (pp. 417–31). We also read about Makhan Lal Das, an Indian accused of raping a Chinese woman in Shanghai (pp. 432–34). Similarly, Sen narrates the story of the ill-fated Delhi–Peking Peace March, pointing to groups of people who continued to entertain ideas of alternate futures.

It is high time we counter this myopia and discover new frames of reference and formulate fresh insights about China and India's recent connected past.[3] Trade is one of the most fruitful ways to proceed. In recent scholarship, the primary focus has been

[2] See, for instance, Marshall (2005).

[3] On this, see also, Ghosh (2017).

on border trade and the attendant role of Tibet. But if we take Sen's rich description of trade through older maritime and land networks, and especially their intensification during the early modern eras (as also pointed out by Madhavi Thampi[4]), then we must ask the question—what happened in the twentieth century? A short visit to the Shanghai Municipal Archives (SMA) is sufficient to indicate that trade (and, at the very least, enthusiasm for trade) existed across much of the century. The archives are full of communications between Chinese and Indian companies looking to trade a wide range of goods.

A similar diversity and range of activities will surely also emerge if we direct our attention to the fields of arts and science. Greater attention to such histories is crucial. It will take us beyond the narrow confines of state-to-state relations, which continue to dominate contemporary scholarship. And it will help us explore and examine the history of China and India from a connected and regionally embedded perspective. Such an approach is essential if we are to gain a more nuanced understanding of our history.

Apart from the contributions of Sen's book discussed above, there are many others just as worthy. For instance, Sen's discussion of the larger world within which connections between China and India existed is evidenced through the extensive influence of Islamic actors (scholars, merchants, rulers and the like). Unlike Buddhism, the role of Islam and Muslims remains a much under-studied subject. Similarly, the numerous accounts of (mis-)interpretation, (mis-)translation and (mis-)communication that populate the book raise questions of language and communication and their roles in connected histories.

This book, in short, is a terrific achievement. It will be invaluable as we go forward, not just as a major work of reference but also as an inspiration for what can be done and for opening up avenues for future research.

REFERENCES

Ghosh, A. 2017. 'Before 1962: The Case for 1950s China–India History'. *Journal of Asian Studies,* Vol. 76, No. 3, 697–727.

Marshall, P. J. (ed.) 2005. *The Eighteenth Century in Indian History: Evolution or Revolution*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Pomeranz., K. 2001. *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Thampi, M. 2005. *Indians in China 1800–1949*. New Delhi: Manohar.

Wong, R. Bin. 2000. *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Arunabh Ghosh
History Department, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
E-mail: aghosh@fas.harvard.edu

[4] *Inter alia*: Thampi (2005).