

India and China : Cultural Reciprocity

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The civilisations of India and China are the twins, emerging from the trans-Himalayan regions covering these two countries. The direct ape ancestor of man *Ramapithecus* and the earliest apeman called *Yuanmou man* are the glaring evidences of existence of primitive human race, the fossilised remains of which were discovered in the Indian subcontinent and China respectively. Over the later years there might have been indirect connections between these two vast land masses.

To the Chinese travellers India was known as *shin-tu* or *shen-tu*. The first contact of China in the historic period with Indian subcontinent was through *Chang-kien*, an emissary sent by *Wu-ti*, the ruler of Han dynasty during 2nd century B.C. *Chang-kien's* report brought home to the Chinese emperor the necessity of opening a commercial intercourse with India and the other western countries. The next cultural contact took place around 61 A.D. when the emperor *Ming-ti* sent an emissary to India for acquiring canons of the Buddhist literature and also to invite monks to come to China.

A Chinese text *Hou-han-shu* mentions an ambassador name *Pan-yuong*, who arrived at *Tien-chu* during the later phases of Han dynasty. *Tien-chu* or *Shen-tu*, though initially meaning the lower Indus region, with the widening of knowledge about India, came to signify the Indian subcontinent of that period. The accounts of the Greek and Roman historians and some Indian evidences also show that the Central Asian routes from China passed through western India extending upto the interior of this country. It may not be an exaggerated statement that *Chang-kien* was responsible for opening of the world's oldest highway popularly known as Silk road. Two other overland routes also connected India with China. There was also a maritime route from India to China, some details of which can be had from the travel account of *Fa-hien* which included his journey from *Tāmralipta* to *Śrīlaṅkā* and from there to Java on the way to Canton in China.

Fa-hein visited India with an avowed purpose of collecting Buddhist scriptures and to remove the imperfection of the doctrine prevailing in China. He entered the valley of Kashmir followed by Peshawar and Taxila and later the principal pilgrim-spots in northern India. Immediately after the departure of *Fa-hein* for India in the year 404 A.D. another enthusiastic Chinese monk from *Chang-ngan* along with his fourteen companions visited the Buddhist monastic sites, including

Kapilavastu where Buddha had spent early part of his life and Kusumapura or Pāṭaliputra, the capital of the ruling Gupta dynasty.

A group of twenty-six Chinese monks led by Fa-yong took the northern overland route to enter Kashmir who on his return journey to China preferred the traditional sea route *Nan-hai*. The other Chinese pilgrims to India during the 5th century A.D. were Taopau, who left for India by sea-route but unfortunately his life ended due to a shipwreck: Tao-yu visiting India between 425 and 451 A.D., who came as far as Sankissa in the modern Farukabad district of Uttar Pradesh as well as Fa-shing and Fa-wei. In the year 518 A.D. an empress of Wei dynasty sent a mission to India under the leadership of Sang-yun with a view to offering the presents to the Buddhist sanctuaries and bringing the sacred scriptures from India. He returned to China after four years. Another celebrated pilgrim-scholar, I-tsing has referred to in his memoirs the names of fifty-six pilgrims who visited India and adjoining provinces prior to his own visit in 675 A.D. The first maritime contact of China with India is mentioned in a passage of *Chien-hun-shu* which speaks of a trading mission passing through different ports and ultimately terminating at Huang-chi *i.e.* Kanchipuram in Tamilnadu.

II

From India it was also a band of Buddhist missionaries who laid the foundations of cultural bonds between these two countries. It is said that a *śnamana* in the early third century B.C. (*i.e.* 217 B.C.) visited China to plant the first seed of the new doctrine which was then hundred years old only. The Chinese traditions mention about the first Indian missionaries, Dharmarakṣita and Kaśyapa Mataṅga who went to China in the third quarter of the 1st century A.D., during the rule of emperor Ming-ti of the Han dynasty. Gupta emperors including Kumāragupta sent their emissaries to China. Nīthada was deputed in 428 A.D. and the latter Ruda in the year 502 A.D. Nīthada mentioned to the Chinese emperor about the high standard of moralisation of the people of Kapilvastu, once capital of Sākyas. Ruda visited Nanking the capital of Lion dynasty. They were followed by a succession of Indian monks, who carried the message of Buddhism to China, mostly from Kashmir, the celebrated seat of Buddhist learning. During the glorious rule of T'ang kingdom between 618 and 907 A.D., the cultural and commercial ties between India and China reached an all time closer record. A large number of Indian merchants and travellers, missionaries and emissaries were seen moving across the territories of China quite happily and enthusiastically, performing their business. Between 357 and 571 A.D. more than ten Indian embassies were sent to China.

The Chinese Buddhist records say that Punyatara, a monk from Kubha (modern Kashmir and neighbouring areas) 'produced by recitation' the text of the *Sarvāstivādasūtra* (*Shisongzing*) which indicates that the *sūtra* was translated into Chinese based on his memory only. Kumārajīva, who went to China in 383 A.D. and stayed till his death in 409 A.D. helped China to establish a new academic enterprise of the translating Buddhist literature of the *mahāyāna* doctrine. Another eminent Indian was Bodhiruchi who lived in China between 508-539 A.D. and had with him seven hundred monk-scholars to complete the translation of thirty scriptures of Indian origin. Prince Guṇavarman of Kashmir also preached Buddhism and is said to have painted the *jātaka* scenes in Canton dedicating his life for the sake of the doctrine till his death at Nan-kin in the year 431 A.D. Kashmir ceased to play the effective role in the cultural transmission from India to China after the 5th century A.D.

The Buddhist savants to visit China after this time were mostly from the Nalanda university, a great international centre for Buddhist culture of the period. The first scholar of this university to visit China was Prabhākaramitra towards the end of the year 627 A.D. Bodhidharma (529-536 A.D.), who travelled from Kanchipuram in Tamilnadu taught the *dhyāna* aspect of *mahāyāna* Buddhism at the temple of Shorin which came to be known as *chan* in Chinese and ultimately evolved as the *zen* Buddhism in Japan. Paramārtha of Magadha also reached China in 545 A.D., was the first Buddhist scholar to introduce and propagate the *tantrayāna* Buddhism in China. In order to keep up the torch of Buddhism alive, a number of Indian monks of western India came to Chang-ngan in 972 A.D. Dharmadeva also called Fa-tien visited the Chinese emperor from Nalanda in 973 A.D. and translated many Sanskrit texts into Chinese till his death in 1001 A.D. According to the Chinese chroniclers at no period of history were to be seen so many Indians as at the close of 10th and 11th century A.D. and that was why the Chinese Buddhist collection was enriched by two hundred one volumes between 982 and 1011 A.D.

Besides Buddhist religion and literature, Indian travellers to China carried with them the knowledge of Indian art, music, painting, astronomy, astrology and medical science, thus strengthening the thread of cultural harmony and reciprocity.

III

The monk pilgrims from China recorded a number of evidences of the art of metal sculptures as practised in various parts of India. Indian metal craftsmen were also held in great esteem in China as late as the Yuan period. The Chinese travellers attracted by the gospel of Buddhism visited the monastic centres where metal sculptures were

manufactured. Their accounts are mostly related to the flourishing of this art prevailing in Eastern India. But whatsoever, some sporadic evidences provided by the Chinese scholars have come to light from north-west and western India.

In a frankly naive account the Tibetan *kālatantrayānī* Buddhist Lāmā Tāranātha (c. 1575 A.D.) had mentioned 'skilled image makers abounded in very place where the law of Buddha flourished'. The monasteries were consecrated with the images of Lord fashioned in metal viz. gold, silver, copper and bronze placed on the altars of the shrine.

A Chinese account also tells us that King Meghavāhana of Śrīlaṅkā (A.D. 352-379) sent a mission to the emperor Samudragupta seeking his permission to build up a monastery for the pilgrims visiting Bodhgayā. Hieun-Tsang, who visited the valleys of the western Himlayas in the second quarter of the 7th century had also seen the Buddhist monasteries presumably with enshrined figure of Buddha. He also mentions that King Śīla, a Maitraka king of Valabhī in Gujarat of the 7th century A.D. installed seven metal images of Buddha in a *vihāra* built by the side of his palace. Tāranātha, the Tibetan monk-scholar maintained that this king Śīla identified as Śīlāditya I, also called Dharmāditya who ruled between A.D. 580-610 in Saurashtra region was the patron of an artist named Shringadhara (Śārangadhara) who excelled in metal casting. Another old Buddhist text records that King Śīla himself caused metal images, paintings, *vihāras* to be made assiduously. Hieun-Tsang refers to a great bronze image of Buddha seen by him at Nalanda.

In Eastern India, a large number of Buddhist bronze images were fashioned which were created chiefly for the monks and the residents of the great Buddhist monasteries and universities as also for lay-worshippers.

The bronze images are comparatively lighter than the images sculpted in stone and therefore, are portable in nature and can be carried in procession for worship in domestic shrine or taking to their home as the sacred mementos by the pilgrims. It is known that Chinese monk-scholar Fa-Hien who travelled India between A.D. 399-414 and Hieun-Tsang visiting between A.D. 639-645 carried Buddhist bronzes from India to China. Another monk traveller I-tsing observed that apart from installation of the bronze statue of Buddha in the main shrine of the Buddhist monasteries, the individual monks kept their small copper icons in their individual apartments. He goes further to mention some rituals pertaining to anointment of the holy metal images. An image either of gold, silver, copper or stone is put in a basin of the same material, while a band of girls play music. The image having been anointed with scent, water with perfume is

poured over it. The priests bathe an image everyday so carefully in accordance with prescribed rituals that no ceremony is omitted.

We have no doubt that these monasteries had workshops for making metal images since excavations have revealed bronze figures in the cells of monks of the Buddhist monasteries, specially in Nalanda and elsewhere, corroborating I-tsing's account. He also stated that the copper images, whether large or small, were brightened by rubbing them with fine ashes or brick-powder and pouring pure water over them, until they became perfectly clear and shining like a mirror. A large image was washed in the middle and the end of a month by the whole assembly of priests, and a small one everyday, if possible, by individual priests.

There is also archaeological evidence to establish the existence of foundries for making of such images. Many of the image-casters were probably skilled in the art prior to their adopting the monastic discipline.

The foregoing account explains the activities of fashioning sculptures in metal in Indian territory as gleaned from the Chinese sources. The same accounts also mention an Indian artist named A-ni-ko, who acquired mastery in designing, modelling and metal casting at a very young age. Born in Nepal in A.D. 1243, A-ni-ko at the order of Chinese emperor Kublai did a lot of conservation work in the royal palace repairing the old statues and making fresh ones for various monasteries of his empire.

