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Smoke and Mirrors: China and India
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After reading a short excerpt from Pallavi Aiyar’s new book, Smoke and Mirrors: An Experience of China, at Danwei.org, we wanted to ask her a few questions about her experience as a journalist and writer working in China (Danwei has also posted an interview with Aiyar, asking for her insights on the relationship of and comparisons between China and India; and additional reviews of the book have been posted at the WSJ China Blog and The International Herald Tribune). Here are her answers to our questions, followed by a short excerpt from the book. Smoke and Mirrors can be purchased at this website, and, according to Amazon, will be available in the US in September.

China Beat: Did you expect to end up spending as long a stretch of time in China as you have?

Pallavi Aiyar: Not at all. I came to China only reluctantly, following my then boyfriend who was a Sinophile. I was at the time, a typical middle-class Indian with an Anglophone education so that “abroad” and “the UK/US” were almost synonymous for me. China might have been next door to India geographically but conceptually it was a black hole. I spent my first year in the country teaching something called “English journalism” (which turned out to be mostly English) to students at the Beijing Broadcasting Institute while learning Chinese myself. At the end of the year, I felt it would be a waste not to stay for at least another year and recoup the investment of that first year in China. And so it went, year-after-year. With hindsight, moving to China was the best decision of my life. Not only did the boyfriend become my husband, but the timing was right and ripe for an Indian in China. Bilaterally, relations began heating up and internationally as well the China story increasingly became the China-India story. An almost bottomless appetite for China news was to evolve south of the Himalayas and I was one of the very few people in a position to sate that hunger. Given that China and India together account for almost 2.5 billion people, the fact that when I first began writing from Beijing I was one of only two Indian correspondents in the country is a profound comment on how disconnected these two neighbors were. There are now four of us Indian correspondents in China (compared to some 125 American journalists), but I remain the only Mandarin-speaking one.

CB: What was the single thing that surprised you most about China during your time there—the thing that jarred most with the image of the country you had formed by reading about it ahead of time?

PA: To be honest I hadn’t done much purposeful advance reading about China. What I knew about it was primarily based on random articles I came across from time-to-time in Indian and foreign media.
I had a vague understanding of the fact that after some two decades of reforms China was generally thought to have pulled well ahead of India economically but wasn’t quite able to visualize what this would mean in terms of the visceral difference in the physical experience of being in say New Delhi and in Beijing.

In my immediate impressions of the country I was very much the average Indian. What really “shocked and awed” was thus Chinese infrastructure. Beijing’s roads seemed impossibly smooth, its airport impossibly efficient, given that despite what I had read about China’s material progress it was still designated as a “developing” country.

Once I was able to look beyond the razzle and dazzle of China’s infrastructure, what jarred most was the homogeneity of the country. I had read much about the diversity of China, its foods, its fifty-plus minorities, its linguistic multiplicity, etc. But in fact I found it remarkably similar in architecture (from the “historic” pagoda-style buildings to the more modern bathroom-tiled atrocities), language (all the dialects shared the majority of written characters so that in fact the diversity really existed only in spoken form and the country was knit by hanzi) and most of all attitude. It was really strange how no matter whom I was speaking to—taxi driver, economics professor or the bicycle repairman round the corner—the moment I said I was Indian, the response consisted of how wonderful Hindi movies were, how Indian women had such large eyes, and how the dancing and singing was simply fantastic. The whole country seemed programmed to reproduce the same answers to the same questions.

I must stress that my reaction was conditioned by my Indian-ness. India was a country of 22 official languages and over 200 recorded mother tongues. Far from being bound by a common script many of the languages in India did not even belong to the same linguistic group. In my “Hindu” country, there were more Muslims than in all of Pakistan. India’s cultural inheritance included fire-worshipping Zorastrians, and Torah-reciting Jews. With no single language, ethnicity, religion or food India’s diversity was on a whole other plane to China’s.

CB: Do you see particular advantages or disadvantages you have working as a reporter in China due to being Indian? Or due to being female? And if the latter, do you feel this is dramatically different than the advantages or disadvantages a Chinese female reporter would have in India or, say, England, where I see from the web you studied for a couple of different graduate degrees?

PA: On the whole, being an Indian helped me gain access as a reporter because I did not automatically fit into the “foreign/western media = anti-China” equation. The fact is that as an Indian journalist my agenda was different than that of many Western colleagues. The audience in India was rarely interested in the usual human rights/corruption issues that the US media, for example, focus a lot on.

Given India’s own human rights problems and abysmal levels of corruption, the idea of having me write about China was not for me to serve as a watchdog on Beijing. It was rather to explain a changing China to an audience that knew very little about its neighbor, in addition to suggesting ways and means by which the Indian establishment might learn from China regarding economic policy, foreign policy power projection, poverty alleviation, etc.

Moreover, over the course of the time I spent in China, the Chinese authorities gradually began to take India a lot more seriously—especially after the likes of Goldman Sachs and McKinsey started to mention India in the same breath as China. They were as a result increasingly keen to reach an Indian audience.

Being a female reporter in China was a liberating experience. I felt free to travel and report in even relatively remote parts of the country without my gender being an issue. India is a far more difficult place for women in general. Even in big cities like New Delhi it’s hard for women to walk on the streets free of harassment or what Indian law rather quaintly calls "eve teasing."

While I don’t think being female brought any particular advantages to reporting in China what struck me most was how it did not bring any disadvantages. I never felt patronized by male interviewees or sexually threatened in any way.
Regarding England—let me just say that I spent three months back at Oxford last year as a Fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. At one of the very first seminars organized for the term, the presenter (an eminent German foreign correspondent) bemoaned the decline of “serious” journalism in the West, attributing this to “sensationalization, simplification and feminization”!

**CB**: If you could convince academics to do more work related to a topic in Chinese history or contemporary China, what might that be?

**PA**: The impact of model worker Shi Chuanxiang on the profession of manual scavenging. The difference in attitude and circumstance between toilet cleaners in China and India struck me strongly and is something I write about at length in the book.

**CB**: What do you feel is the most exciting part of covering China?

**PA**: Trying to penetrate and understand well enough to explain to others a society that is so perfectly self-contained that its language requires even proper nouns to be translated. China, I would hold, has been the least outward-oriented of all major cultures, in recent centuries. To be a link or bridge, however minor, in the new process of connecting this civilization outwards is exciting. It feels pioneering in a way that, say, reporting from Brussels or even Moscow wouldn’t.

**CB**: A lot has been written lately about comparisons and contrasts between China and India. Is there anything you’ve read lately that you found particularly insightful on that topic?

**PA**: My book!

Immodest humor aside the answer would be: not really. As you say there is so much out there at the moment that I’ve almost made it a rule not to read anything with “dragon” “elephant” or “chindia” in the title!

India and China are not only different in their modern political avatars, but have historically been very different cultures. India’s philosophical and cultural underpinnings were steeped in metaphysics, ontology and epistemology forming major intellectual planks of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, etc. Territorial integrity and notions of empire were much less central to India’s image of itself. As a result, the Indian civilization was more of a conceptual rather than geographic entity; less united territorially and politically than the Chinese empire. In contrast, China was always more coherent territorially. Its empire was moreover underpinned by philosophies like Confucianism that tended less to the metaphysical and more to the practical, legalistic and political.

The point to remember is that while the two countries share superficial similarities they are very, very different, often making comparisons unhelpful and on occasion even disingenuous.

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Five years was a decent slice of time to spend in a country and I had used it relatively well: travelling and asking questions. But as I geared up to draw a curtain across my China-life, I was increasingly being called upon to answer a few questions as well.

“Where was China heading?” people would ask me when I travelled outside the country to Europe or the U.S. Was the CCP doomed or would it continue to be a formidable political force in the coming decades? Would China implode in the absence of a democratic revolution? Was its economic growth sustainable without fundamental institutional reform?

In India, the key question was different. From newspaper editors to the maid at home the most common query I encountered was a deceptively simple one: what could India learn from China? What should India be doing that China had already been doing? For China the U.S remained the ultimate
benchmark when it came to its self-assessment of national power and achievement. But for India, it was China that had emerged as a commonly used yardstick to evaluate its own progress.

Back in China the question I faced with greatest frequency was again different, at once the crudest and perhaps most difficult of all to answer. "Which is better? India or China?" taxi drivers in Beijing had asked me with monotonous regularity. "Do you prefer India or China," my students at the Beijing Broadcasting Institute had often queried. "Do you like living in Beijing? Or was it better in Delhi?" my hutong neighbours enquired whenever they got the opportunity.

This last question in its various forms was one that I spent much thought grappling with and my answers were as variable as the day the question was posed. Following conversations with Lou Ya and other toilet cleaners in my neighbourhood I would think back to the wretched jamadarnis back home and marvel at the relative dignity of labour that China’s lowliest enjoyed.

In my hutong the refuse collectors wore gloves when picking up the garbage on their daily rounds. This single, simple article of protective clothing and the barrier it created between bacteria and skin leant them at least a modicum of self-respect. Their children almost always went to school. They may not have been well educated themselves but could usually read and write enough to avoid the worst kind of exploitation.

These were modest gains and not everyone in China could claim even such moderate progress. But were I one of the millions-strong legions of cleaners, sweepers, janitors or night soil workers in India, I would probably prefer by some twist of karma to have been born Chinese.

But on other days I felt differently. These were days when I spent hours hunting for a Chinese source amongst the country’s think tanks, universities and research institutes for fresh insight or an alternative point of view on an issue for a story I’d be working on. It was always such dishearteningly hard work.

China’s was a pragmatic society and over the years I met any number of people blessed with more than usual amounts of a canny, street smart, intelligence. As evidenced by the Zhejiang entrepreneurs, ordinary Chinese were masters of locating the loophole, of finding escape routes, of greasing the right hands and bypassing stifling regulations. If need be they could sell contact lenses to a blind woman and chicken feet to a vegetarian.

But while it may have abounded with consummate salespeople and irrepressible entrepreneurs, Chinese society remained deeply anti-intellectual. More a product of a political and educational system that discouraged criticism and encouraged group-think, than any primordial characteristic, this was the aspect of China I personally found most wearying.

It was the absence of a passion for ideas, the lack of delight in argument for its own sake, and the dearth of reasoned but brazen dissent that most often gave me cause for homesickness. When the Foreign Ministry interpreter Xiao Yan claimed in Tibet that China was different from other countries in that all Chinese must think the same thing, she was consciously overstating her case in light of Jes’ comments. Nonetheless a nub of truth in what she said remained.

In universities like BBI the idea was drilled into students’ heads that there were right answers and wrong answers. While ambiguity and nuances may have been both sensed and exploited in practice, on a purely intellectual plane there was little space for them.
For an argumentative Indian from a country where heterodoxy was the norm, this enforced homogeneity in Chinese thought and attitude scratched against my natural grain[1]. There were thus occasions when despite all of India’s painful shortcomings, I would assert with conviction that it was nonetheless better to be an Indian than endure the stifling monotony of what tended to pass as an intellectual life in China.

But then I would return to Delhi for a few days and almost immediately long to be back in Beijing where a woman could ride a bus or even drive a bus without having to tune out the constant staring and whispering of the dozens of sex-starved youth that swarmed around the Indian capital’s streets at almost any given time.

Later on the same day however, I might switch on the TV and catch an ongoing session of the Indian parliament, not always the most inspirational of bodies but when looked at with China-habituated eyes, more alluring than usual.

China’s economic achievement over the last 30 or so years may have been unparalleled historically, but so was India’s political feat. Its democracy was almost unique amongst post-colonial states not simply for its existence but its existence against all odds in a country held together not by geography, language or ethnicity but by an idea. This was an idea that asserted, even celebrated the possibility of multiple identities. In India you could and were expected to be both many things and one thing simultaneously.

I was thus a Delhite, an English speaker, half a Brahmin, half a Tamilian, a Hindu culturally, an atheist by choice, a Muslim by heritage. But the identity that threaded these multiplicities together was at once the most powerful and most amorphous: I was an Indian.

India’s great political achievement was thus in its having developed mechanisms for negotiating large-scale diversity along with the inescapable corollary of frequent and aggressive disagreement. The guiding and perhaps lone consensus that formed the bedrock of that mechanism was that in a democracy you don’t really need to agree – except on the ground rules of how you will disagree.[2]

All of which being true still did not help to definitively answer the question, “If I could choose, would I rather be born Indian or Chinese?”

Perhaps part of my problem was that unlike how students were educated in China into believing there were right and wrong answers I had been encouraged to do precisely the opposite. “Always problematise,” my earnest, khadi kurta clad professor, Sankaran, used to thunder at us during class back in my undergraduate days as a philosophy student in Delhi.

But if forced to reply in broad brush strokes I would assert the following: were I to be able to ensure being born even moderately well-off, I would probably plump for India over China.

In India, money allowed you to exist happily enough despite the constant failure of governments to deliver services. Thus most Delhi households that could afford it had private generators for when the electricity failed and private tube wells in their gardens to ensure the water supply that the municipality couldn’t. The police offered little protection from crime and so many households hired private security guards.

Having developed the necessary private channels with which to deal with the lack of public goods one was free in India to enjoy the intellectual pleasures of discussing the nature of “the idea of India” or to enjoy the heady adrenalin rush of winning a well-argued debate.

These were real pleasures and freedoms and their broader significance was not merely confined to the elite. A tradition of argumentation was fundamental to India’s secularism and democratic polity, with wide-ranging implications for all sections of society.

On the other hand, were I to be born poor, I would take my chances in authoritarian China, where despite lacking a vote, the likelihood of my being decently fed, clothed and housed were considerably
higher. Most crucially, China would present me with relatively greater opportunities for upward socio-economic mobility. So that even though I may have been born impoverished, there was a better chance I wouldn’t die as wretched in China, as in India.

This was not to deny the importance of the vote for India’s poor, which undoubtedly endowed them with collective bargaining power. Dislocating large numbers of people to make way for big infrastructure projects for example was an uphill task for any Indian government. As a result, the kind of wanton destruction of large swathes of a historic city like Beijing justified by the hosting of a sporting event would be extremely unlikely to occur in India.

In China on the other hand, not only did the poor lack a vote,[3] but the CCP was also adept at disabling the capacity of disaffected peoples to organise, thus depriving them of the influence of numbers that could pressure government policy through other means.

However, it was also patently clear that in India the right to vote did not necessarily or even usually translate into better governance. Fear of alienating a vote-bank might persuade a local politician to turn a blind eye to illegal encroachment by migrants on city land. But the ensuing slum would lack even the most rudimentary facilities like sewage or water supplies.

Citizens threw out governments in India with predictable regularity. The country’s vast poor majority dismissed on average four out of five incumbents, so that what was called the anti-incumbency factor was possibly the most crucial in any Indian election.

Often celebrated as a sign of India’s robust democracy what this state of affairs in fact reflected was a track record of governance that was so abysmal that even in regions where incomes had improved and poverty reduced, people believed this was in spite and not because of the government.[4]

So ultimately despite political representation for the poor in India and the absence of political participation in China, the latter trumped India when it came to the delivery of basic public goods like roads, electricity, drains, water supplies and schools where teachers actually show up. This counterintuitive state of affairs was linked to the fact that while in China the CCP derived its legitimacy from delivering growth, in India a government derived its legitimacy simply from its having been voted in. Delivering on its promises was thus less important than the fact of having been elected.

The legitimacy of democracy in many ways absolved Indian governments from the necessity of performing. The CCP could afford no such luxury.

Footnotes
[3] 40 million peasants have been forced off their land to make way for roads, airports, dams, factories, and other public and private investments, according to China: the Balance Sheet, Center for Strategic and International Studies and the Institute of International Economics: Washington, DC, 2006