

## **Book Review: How China sees India and the World – Shyam Saram**

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China is a state that has not been completely colonised by any western country. Its political culture is continuously influenced by its history of imperialism, which has carried the concept of a central authoritarian political structure undisturbed for centuries. Even in the modern era, unlike India, China openly acknowledges the existing social-political hierarchies.

*‘The Zhou rewrote the history of their violent overthrow of the Shang and began the tradition of dynastic history-writing. This occurred with every dynastic change. There was always the fear of the power of the past to discredit the future. This has continued to be the case into modern times in China.’ (34)*

*While such attempts to rewrite history take place in every country, including, as we are currently witnessing, in India itself, the Chinese effort is much more deliberative and even dramatic.(39)*

All these claims are vetted by Shyam Saran in his book, ‘*How China sees India and the World.*’ The book asserts that the current popular opinion and the narrative of the CCP claim that China’s political culture is shaped by Confucianism and Legalism (p 43). Confucius’ text is more regarding the state craft and governance, where as Han Feizi’s text is regarding jurisprudence. Apart from these texts, there is another notable text which is titled ‘book of lord Shag’ and it is called as the world’s first totalitarian manifesto. These scriptures have shaped the political culture of the Chinese empires and kingdoms. Though this book does not add any extra knowledge about China, the narrative is simple, and the book serves as an easy introduction to understanding China’s viewpoint and its political history.

The book develops China’s perspective of India (though very little) by analysing historical accounts and the diplomatic experience of the author. As per the account of Shyam Saran, China asserts its power and influence using its history. The narrative of the book shows that the mainland China was always politically aimed to be a unified country but has seen several breakouts. The history where the Chinese empire was widespread is used to prove China’s claim on Tibet, South China Sea, and Xinjiang. As all other political boundaries worldwide have been drawn using historical maps and treaties. China’s claim on Tibet extends to what the Kings of Tibet claimed in modern times. Shyam Saran quotes a letter between then Tibet government and Prime minister Nehru in 1947, which asks the regions of Darjeeling, Sikkim, Bhutan, Ladakh. China uses the same point and claims its authority over these regions. This is the string that keeps the border issue burning.

### **The Opium War**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the growing opium addiction among the Chinese people and their loss of silver to pay for opium imports led the Qing emperor, Daoguang (reigned 1820-50) to assign a senior official - Lin Zexu, as Vice Governor of Canton. He implemented an official ban on opium imports. Lin ordered the seizure of opium chests stored in warehouses in British factories and dumped them into the ocean, setting off a chain of events culminating in the First

Anglo-Chinese Opium War of 1839-42. The war ended in the humiliating defeat of the Qing forces and the signing of the first of the unequal treaties - the Treaty of Nanjing, on 29 August 1842. China ceded the island of Hong Kong in the Pearl River delta to Britain and opened up four other ports on the Chinese coast to trade with Britain. These were Xiamen, Fuzhou, Ningbo and Shanghai. China agreed to pay a large indemnity, allow the import of opium, permit Christian missionary activity in the treaty ports and concede extraterritorial rights to British citizens operating in the treaty ports. (p 140)

The defeat of the Qing led to the even more humiliating Treaty of Tianjin, concluded in 1858, by which major concessions were extracted by the victorious powers. These included the opening of several other Chinese ports for trade, the right to navigate inland along the Yangzi river, the right to travel to all parts of the Qing empire, the removal of all restrictions on missionary activities throughout China and legalisation of import of opium into the country. China also agreed to set up foreign legations in the capital Beijing (P 141). Apart from China's concedings to the European powers, due to its political weakening, Russia and Japan also invaded China.

The century of humiliation as taken a whole chapter in this book and this is the one that touches the hearts o the reader. Vast references to Cambridge university, oxford university history books along with the diplomatic expériences of the author makes the 'century of humiliation' discourse book valuable and acceptable. It shows the China's self perspective of one being a victim during the colonial times. However, one has to remember that all the countries apart from European have gone through the struggle of colonisation.

### **Xi Jinping and the Current Status**

The foreign policy shifts often ascribed to Xi Jinping were already evident in statements made by his predecessors and in Party documents. They resulted from a fresh assessment of the international balance of power after the global financial and economic crisis of 2008, from which China emerged as a more powerful actor on the geopolitical landscape, reducing the asymmetry of power vis-à-vis the US. What Xi has done is reinforce these shifts and unveil plans and programmes which follow from them. The BRI, the AIIB, the occupation and militarization of several disputed islands in the South China Sea and the more frequent use of punitive commercial measures in pursuit of its geopolitical objectives evolved out of an altered strategic view, deemed more favourable to China (215).

In regulating private business, Xi has also imposed ideological norms. For example, commercial online tuition firms have been banned. The very lucrative video-streaming services, including video games, have been placed under severe limits and surveillance. There is a determined effort to eliminate what the Party calls 'celebrity culture'. The new policy is designed to channel capital into more ideologically desirable channels and towards sectors that are important from the national security point of View. Enterprises in these favoured sectors, including private companies, would also receive State support. This includes the semiconductor sector,

for example. If this is true for the current political situation India cannot entirely leapfrog these stages. It should position itself to become the recipient of the most advanced knowledge and technology, create an ecosystem that enables swift assimilation and create a pool of highly educated and trained manpower, which may then carry forward the process of assimilation into innovation (229).

Finally, author opined that the world order would become multipolar (p 238). While it can be true, author appoints that United States and the western powers will face a reduction in the global influence. While China, will definitely see an increase in its global influence. Well, author draws a line here. He asserts that China cannot replace United States as a global hegemonic power. That means that China might become an Asian power. However his historic account on how China sees it self and the world, does show that there are regional powers in history.

The criticism to this book is that the book does not do justice to the title. Expect the last chapter, the whole book is a narrative of political history. There is a little on how it sees India and the World. If a reader has gone through any other history book, then this will not be exciting. Perhaps, the author could have brought more personal experiences than just repeating literature. That would make this book more appealing.

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