
Rezensiert von: Rakesh Ankit, Politics and International Studies, Loughborough University

Tansen Sen is the „Global Network“ Professor at New York University. These bracketed words summarise his past, present and forthcoming works on Buddhism, China and the Indian Ocean. Sen has cultural capital of the kind that Bengali Bhadralok (a colonial class of prosperous „gentlefolk“, usually upper caste) enjoy in India. His father, Narayan Chandra Sen, is „one of the most knowledgeable persons“ on China (p. xiii). If this is the personal context to bear in mind, when reading this book, then an academic context is the rush of volumes on China-India lately.¹

A third context is provided by the contemporary turn in historiography towards „global history“, which has sought to gear history-writing towards a wider reading public.² It is within these folds of the person, his milieu, the academic bandwagon and the disciplinary trend in which the content of this book is situated.

The book is about a longue durée circulation-connection-exchange-disconnect between India and China. It offers the fourfold argument that (a) „pre-twentieth century interactions not be construed within modern nation-states framework“, (b) „non-Asian networks affected Asian connections“, (c) Asian and European colonialisms enhanced these connections and (d) „territorialised nation-states created wedges in relations“ (pp. 2–4). This argument is detailed through themes of „material, knowledge, contacts, interaction“ (p. 4), which moved in a „circulatory“ manner (p. 13). It is a history of „complicated connections“ between „complex identities“ across „history, time and space“ (p. 17). Employing a range of primary sources, mostly Chinese for the medieval period, the book begins by reiterating Sen’s work on Buddhist and trading ties.³ For subsequent centuries, sea-faring companies, colonial states and territorial nationalism provide links. This passage through centuries comes in five chronological chapters, clustered around „circulations of knowledge“, „objects“, „maritime connections“, „pan-Asianism“ and the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (1949), the Republic of India (1950) and their relations (pp. 22–25).

Chapter 1 begins with complexities of knowledge circulation (p. 30) – geographical, religious, linguistic and imperial – mediated by Chinese scholar-monks, Mongol mercenaries, Tibetan travellers, Arab merchants and Srivijayan (Indonesian) traders. Their overland journeys and oceanic exchanges enabled a transfer of three kinds of technical knowledge over the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, namely the „science of the heavens“ (p. 81), medicinal knowledge and sugar, gunpowder and paper-making (p. 82).

Chapter 2 concretises knowledge into objects, maps their circulation routes and catalogues exchanges around markets/ports. It also broadens this Asian history into an „interlocking“ Afro-Eurasian „world-system“ (p. 112). Sen lists four kinds of objects: Buddhist (icons/manuscripts), commercial (precious stones), birds/animals and boats/ships. By the tenth century, China was the „centre“ of the Buddhist universe (p. 143) and by the fifteenth, diplomatic „gifts“ between the Mongols, the Ming, the Delhi Sultanate and coastal kings in south India were being exchanged.

Chapter 3 carries these imperial connections from the fifteenth to the early twentieth centuries, assigning a period of dominance each to the Ming, the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British (p. 196). The latter provided for „new“ interactions in „global“ circulations. While their exploitation triggered an impulse for „pan-Asianism“, their emergence followed Asian imperial variants (p. 197). Sen

brings out individual stories of British Indians and Chinese (pp. 235–270), shows the formation of their respective diasporic communities (pp. 272–277) and ends the chapter by highlighting the „out of Asia“ sites of interaction (pp. 278–284). Chapter 4 follows with „pan-Asianism“, with India and China at its core, tracing its rise and fall in the period from 1900 to 1950. Accompanying the rise was a telling call for „Hindu China“ (p. 297), a conflation that Sen quotes without comment. The Japanese invasion of Manchuria in the 1930s halted this variant of Panasianism before issues around Tibet, Communism and border disputes put paid to it. It was shored up by Bengali thinkers and their Chinese interlocutors at places like the Visvabharati University, the Maha Bodhi Society and the Sino-Indian Cultural Society (pp. 306–320). The emergence of „two Chinas“ (pp. 349–361), but also India’s Partition, rendered fruitless this „search for one Asia“ (p. 368). Sen takes well-trodden paths here (pp. 337–347) by summoning up ghosts of Indian journalists and diplomats and summarising records of the Indian Intelligence Bureau (pp. 361–368).

Chapter 5 takes this defeat to its climax of a „geopolitical disconnect“. It combines the well-known, fascinating beginning and sad end of India and China’s „enigmatic“ brotherhood (pp. 383–411), with the ultimately futile peace attempts by Western activists/thinkers (pp. 435–451, 461). It is in recounting stories like that of Chang Xiufeng, „caught in the crossfire“ of state suspicions, that Sen elevates this section (pp. 411–434). Chang’s life-history brings to mind the short story „Wangchu“ by noted Hindi writer Bhisham Sahni. The rest of the chapter summarises writings on India-China „hatred“ (p. 451) and/or „Chindian utopia“ (p. 452). Sen comments here on the encyclopedia of cultural contacts sponsored by China and India (pp. 454–459), complaining that „no scholars from outside the two countries were asked to contribute […] nor […] peer-review the entries“ (p. 456). Why would he expect this?

The last pages of this chapter taper to enumerating contemporary „disconnect“, a list that is already outdated. While Sen could include the war of 1962, the frozen relations thereafter, the commercial thaw since 1988 and recent „sites of competition“ (p. 460), he could not include the June-August 2017 Doklam border standoff. His hopes regarding „regional groupings“ (p. 461) and the „One Belt One Road“ (OBOR) initiative of China are optimistic. He notes that India remains the only country that „has not formally endorsed the OBOR“ (p. 466), given that it passes through the disputed territory of Kashmir, but Pakistan is curiously missing here. More conspicuous is the absence earlier of Naxalbari/Naxalites, given their considerable recent presence in both global history and regional anthropology. Sen is on firmer grounds with his concluding remarks. His is neither a presentist history of „nation-state interactions“ nor a civilisational take on 2,000 years (pp. 471, 477). Instead, he has shown two strains of the complex longue durée: (a) Buddhism and trade, (b) colonialism and nationalism. Likewise, contemporary relations remain complicated as „stereotyping, trust deficit, racist viewpoints“ (p. 479) coexist with record trading figures.

Sen ends on an unlikely note when he calls upon both sides „to relinquish the constraints of nation-state-bilaterals and allow an impartial committee to resolve“ their territorial dispute (p. 480)! No sentiment can be farther from the situation on the ground even if one restricts this ground to Kashmir and Xinjiang, Assam and Tibet, where the two regimes’ hubristic abuse of power, accrued differently but arrayed similarly, pits state against society. India’s ascendant Hindu nationalism is primed to imitate Han Chinese majoritarianism. Both nation-states have dealt with disputes in the currency of „internal matter“ and the world accepts it, as perhaps the only thing connected is the „deterritorial impulse of capitalism“ (p. 464). Much else like sovereignty and resistance is regionally rooted and disconnected far below Sen’s globally networked historical sweep.
