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Looking at China from Across the Pacific and Across the Himalayas

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by Jeffrey Wasserstrom

“Wouldn’t it make more sense to focus on Japan?”

Odd as it seems in 2010, several people asked me a variation of this question in 1982, after I mentioned planning to focus on modern Chinese history in graduate school. And I wouldn’t be surprised if some Americans of my generation who announced their intention to study India encountered the same thing. For back then, Japan’s was the surging Asian economy whose rise was generating the most interest—and concern—in the United States. Books like [“Japan as Number One”](#) (1979) got the sort of attention then that [breathless publications on the PRC](#) like [“When China Rules the World”](#) (2009) receive now. So the fact that, partly on a whim, I had started learning Mandarin as an undergraduate rather than Japanese seemed downright eccentric.

With the PRC having replaced Japan as the world’s second biggest economy, and Beijing standing in for Moscow as the capital of the red threat in the minds of some Americans, eyebrows no longer get raised when intellectually adventurous or job conscious American twenty-somethings say they want to take up Mandarin. In an era when China’s presence in our daily life has never been stronger, and when the country’s rise is triggering an outpouring of sensationalistic commentary informed by what [Perry Anderson has called](#) Sinomania (How did they do it!) and Sinophobia (Can they be stopped?), it is choosing Japanese or Russian or Hindi over Chinese that has become the eccentric move requiring explanation.

Has Indian interest in China shifted in comparable ways? I’m not qualified to say, for my knowledge of China’s hold on the Indian imagination is fragmentary at best. It is based largely on three things. Reading works by and exchanging ideas with [Pankaj Mishra](#) and [Pallavi Aiyar](#), two South Asian authors who have spent time in and written insightfully on China. Perusing articles on the PRC in the English language Indian press. And the conversations on relevant themes I had with various people during a recent weeklong stay in Delhi, my first visit to India, which I have discussed a bit already in [a previous post](#) for this site. I’m clearly in no position to make grand pronouncements, and I’ve no wish to be seen as an [“airportologist,”](#) to use the term that China-based specialist Huang Yasheng employs for drop-in-drop-out pundits like Thomas Friedman, or as someone who engages in what Harvard’s Vietnam historian Hue-Tam Ho Tai has dubbed Julius Caesar-style cultural analysis: I Came, I Saw, I Theorized. This won’t stop me, though, from offering up some preliminary thoughts on current Indian and American ideas about China.

My main point is simple. Beijing’s increasingly far-flung economic footprint and diplomatic clout is triggering anxiety throughout the world. But the global phenomenon of worrying about China always has local inflections.

This first became clear to me on trips to Europe, when I’d get asked questions unlike those I typically got in America. In Sweden around the turn of the millennium, for example, I did a radio interview that began with the interviewer asking me whether, when I spoke and wrote about human rights, I focused much on the death penalty, an issue that she and many of her compatriots thought important. This question interested me in part because she made it clear that the fact that the U.S. and the PRC were among the few major countries that considered it legal to put some criminals to death meant that, to a fair number of Swedes, China and America fit into the same human rights-abusing category. In America, when I had gotten questioned about human rights after lectures or during interviews, they had tended to focus on very different kinds of abuses, such as the ways that Beijing limits religious freedom, crackdown in Tibet and Xinjiang, Tiananmen, and even the “one-child family” policy. And in the U.S., my interlocutors usually made it clear in phrasing their questions that they thought of their country and China as totally unlike one another when it came to rights.

When I visited India, what struck me was not this kind of sharp divergence from my experiences in America, but something subtler. After giving talks about China in the U.S. these days, I often get asked forward-looking questions like: Will the PRC's economy keep booming? Will there be another massive uprising like that of 1989? And will American companies keep investing in China—or look for other places to spend their money due to the Google controversy and related flaps? In India, people asked similar things after the talk I gave and the two public roundtables in which I participated. But they were framed a bit differently and clearly informed by different kinds of domestic and historical concerns.

To put it baldly, Americans often make me feel that they want to be told that China cannot really be en route to occupying the place in the world we've grown used to occupying. Some Indian questioners, by contrast, made me feel that they wanted to hear me endorse the notion that, despite the inability of the Commonwealth Games to measure up to the Beijing Olympics, their country is destined to occupy soon the place in the world China now claims. There is an underlying desire in each case to be told by a China specialist that the things that make the Chinese different from "us" (whoever the "us" is) will end up pulling the rug out from under Beijing.

In India, I heard fewer people suggest that growing income disparities and unrest in borderland regions would curtail China's rise, and less about the potentially disastrous impact of high male-to-female ratios. These issues do not, perhaps, flag China's "otherness" in India the way they do in America. And while in India, I heard more people ask—with a greater sense of urgency in seeking my agreement than is common in the United States—if I thought that China's economy could not possibly keep growing at a fast clip without elections. They wanted affirmation that I, too, felt that to make it all the way to the top, Communist China would have to become more like democratic India.

A less subtle difference relates to proximity. No matter how tightly U.S. and Chinese interests become entangled, being separated from China by a wide ocean will always be different from sharing land boundaries with it. The last China-related news story I saw covered in Indian newspapers before heading home from Delhi on October 23 illustrated this. They told of a Chinese firm offering up an alternative to Google Earth, the satellite mapping service.

In the American press, this cartographic clash has been treated [primarily as a business story](#). In the Indian press, though, it's typically handled as a political tale. The focus is not on Google's market share but on [the fact that the Chinese company treats Arunachal Pradesh and Aksai Chin](#) as part of the PRC, not part of India.

This contrast underscores the difference proximity makes, but it also shows why history always gives Sinomania and even more so Sinophobia special inflections. For many Americans, a Chinese firm challenging Silicon Valley's dominance in the high-tech industry conjures up memories of the time when Japanese car companies first challenged Detroit leading position in the automotive industry. For some Indians, though, newspaper stories about symbolic battles over where exactly to draw the boundary line between China and India brought to mind the physical clashes between Chinese and Indian armies of almost half-a-century ago.

It says much about the variable forms that worrying about China can take that a single news story can lead people in one country to think mainly of bottom lines, in another mainly of border lines. And lead one group to hear echoes of trade wars of the early 1980s, the other echoes of violent confrontations in the early 1960s.

** A slightly shorter version of this commentary first appeared in the November 9 issue of the Delhi-based newspaperly [Mail Today](#). Since writing the piece on my last day in India and during the long flights home, I've continued to track international coverage of the Chinese Map World vs. Google Earth story, and to be struck by the varied ways that the tale can be spun. For example, while Western media accounts have sometimes handled the issue of [contested borders effectively](#), they have often [highlighted business angles](#) and the question of copyright infringement and the [amount of technology and data that has been "borrowed"](#) to create the new service (leading to [refutations in the Chinese press](#) of "allegations" that the PRC "website steals data"). Meanwhile, in many Asian countries*

other than India (e.g., Vietnam and Japan), the issue of what territories the Chinese counterpart to Google Earth presents as belonging to the PRC has often been emphasized.