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Study on Building a China-South Asia Community of Shared Future under the Context of Mutual Learning among Civilizations

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Abstract

At present, the world is experiencing profound changes unprecedented in a century. Regional and global issues continue to emerge, posing significant challenges to national governance and regional relations. In response, China has introduced the Belt and Road Initiative and aims to build a human community with a shared future, proposing Chinese solutions to global governance issues. South Asia, being an important region surrounding China, becomes a key partner in this endeavor. As highlighted by President Xi Jinping, mutual learning among civilizations is essential for constructing a China-South Asia community with a common future. Historically, China and South Asian civilizations share a deep-rooted connection, both belonging to the Himalayan civilization circle and having

frequent religious and cultural exchanges, particularly through Buddhism. To establish a China-South Asia community with a common future through civilizational exchange and mutual learning, we should further strengthen the shared will of Chinese and South Asian civilizations, implement existing cultural agreements, and use current cooperation mechanisms as a starting point. This involves steadily advancing projects that benefit people's livelihoods and well-being. Additionally, it is essential to continue cultural exchanges and collaboration in diverse fields such as biochemistry, establish a solid foundation of popular support, and achieve sustainable development.

Key words: Belt and Road Initiative, China, South Asia, Mutual learning, Civilizational exchange, Sustainable development.

Introduction

South Asia, comprising Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bhutan, Nepal, Maldives, and Afghanistan, covers 5.13 million square kilometers and has a population of 1.81 billion. In 2022, the region's total GDP reached 4.39 trillion US dollars, with an annual per capita GDP growth rate of 6.5 percent, indicating huge potential for economic development.¹ China is adjacent to Pakistan, Nepal, India, etc., and has sustained historically close exchanges with them. South Asia has become one of the most important regions in China's neighborhood and lies along the Belt and Road. Since the beginning of the 21st century, China and South Asia have maintained close political exchanges and increasingly close economic and trade relations. Data shows that the total import and export volumes between them in 2022 reached about \$197.4 billion, compared with less than \$100 billion in 2013, showing a rapid growth trend, with a mean growth rate of 8.3% this year.² At present, China is the main trading partner of South Asia, particularly Pakistan and Bangladesh. The exchanges and interdependence between China and South Asia have progressed significantly. Concurrently, the risks and challenges of transnational cooperation have become increasingly prominent, with global climate issues, ecological degradation, terrorism, refugee flows, food security crises, public health incidents, and

¹ "World Bank Open Data." World Bank Open Data, data.worldbank.org/country/8S. Accessed 8 June 2024.

² "2022年1-12月中国与亚洲国家(地区)贸易统计." Yzs.mofcom.gov.cn, yzs.mofcom.gov.cn/article/date/202308/20230803434301.shtml. Accessed 8 June 2024.

³ Zhong Nan and Li Yingqing, "China, South Asia ties on upswing", *China Daily*, July 26th, 2023, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202307/26/WS64c0690ca31035260b8187fc.html>

other problems emerging one after another, likely triggering “resonance effects.”

Amidst the global changes, China has contributed its wisdom and solutions to world peace and progress. In March 2013, President Xi delivered a speech at the Moscow Institute of International Relations titled “Following the Trend of the Times and Promoting World Peace and Development,” where he introduced the concept of a “human community.” Since then, he has elaborated on this concept at various international forums, emphasizing its profound significance.

In 2015, President Xi proposed establishing an Asian community and discussed the shared goal of creating a better future for Asia. The idea of a human community has been integrated into important United Nations resolutions and documents, reflecting China’s cultural values of unity with nature and the world. It also encapsulates China’s practical approach to diplomacy, characterized by mutual benefit with its neighbors. The concept of a “Community of Human Destiny” is abstract but encompasses security, common interests, responsibilities, cyber issues, and ecological civilization. This has led to the emergence of economic, political, and cultural communities, including the China-Africa, China-ASEAN, China-South Asia, Lancang-Mekong, China-Pakistan, and China-Myanmar communities, organized around different regional “circles.” The China-South Asia community is integral to this hierarchical structure.³

South Asia holds great significance in China’s regional relations, and the China-South Asia community is crucial for both theoretical development and practical application.

Research Review

1. The focus of research on China-South Asia relations in recent years

There is extensive research both domestically and internationally on China’s relations with South Asia, focusing primarily on politics, diplomacy, economy, security, and culture. Geopolitics in South Asia is widely viewed as complex due to factors such as geographical size, population, national strength, and international influence. India has

³ 4 Niu Zhifu: “Join hands to build a South Asian Community with a shared Future” , http://www.cssn.cn/dq/yn/201907/t20190709_4931365.shtml, 2019-07-09.

long been regarded as the dominant power in South Asia, with regional mechanisms perceived as relatively inefficient and power relations asymmetrical.⁴

This asymmetry is growing, with India's influence expanding while its leadership is increasingly questioned, posing significant obstacles to peace, stability, and regional integration.⁵ China's rise has reshaped South Asia's political landscape, making both China and India crucial players for smaller countries like Bangladesh.⁶ Managing China-India relations, balancing geopolitics, diplomacy, economic development, and ensuring national security are challenges for all South Asian countries beyond India.

India faces difficulties in achieving comprehensive breakthroughs in its diplomatic engagement with China, given the current power disparity. In recent years, India has fragmented its relations with China into multiple issues, adopting a problem-oriented approach that focuses on specific concerns rather than broader strategic considerations or potential Chinese reactions.⁷ The strong government under Modi has emphasized long-term national interests and sought to cultivate robust relations with China.⁸

In terms of trade, China's overall trade with South Asia has grown, yet significant imbalances persist. China exports mainly technology-intensive products while importing labor-intensive goods from South Asia.⁹ Trade between China and South Asia is characterized more by complementarity than direct competition. Moreover, there is considerable potential for collaboration in international logistics amidst changing global dynamics, suggesting that Asia's future holds promise for increased regional cooperation and development.¹⁰

⁴ Feng Chuanlu, "Observation on the Geopolitical Pattern and Regional Situation Development in South Asia from the perspective of the 'Belt and Road'", *South Asian Studies*, No. 3, 2017, p. 1.

⁵ Patryk Kugiel. "India's Soft Power in South Asia", *International Studies*, Vol 49, Issue 3-4, 2012, pp.351-376.

⁶ Lailufar Yasmin. "India and China in South Asia: Bangladesh's Opportunities and Challenges", *Millennial Asia*, Vol.10, Issue 3. 2019. pp. 322-336.

⁷ Ye Hailin, "Research on the Modi Government's 'problem diplomacy' strategy toward China - and India's attitude toward the 'Belt and Road' Initiative from this perspective", *Journal of Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies*, No.6, 2017, p. 24.

⁸ Ye Hailin, "China's strategic Thinking in response to the United States' republication of the 'Indo-Pacific' concept", *Indian Ocean Economic and Political Review*, No. 5, 2019, pp. 13-14.

⁹ Zhao Lei, Wang Guoliang, Wu Ying, Wei Suqiong, "Analysis of China's trade pattern in South Asia under the background of the Belt and Road Initiative", *World Geographical Studies*, No.5, 2019, p. 44.

¹⁰ Liu Liu. "China and South Asia Logistics Industry Development Based on Marine Water Conservation", *Journal of Coastal Research*, Special Issue 93, 2019, pp. 1066 – 1072.

Indian scholars view the “Belt and Road” initiative as mutually beneficial, recognizing it can bring significant business opportunities to South Asia, including India.¹¹ Some scholars argue that due to power imbalances, religious and ethnic conflicts, trade similarities, and other factors, regional integration in South Asia lags behind, with limited effectiveness and uncertain prospects.¹²

In terms of security, the outlook for South Asia is grim. The region is a hotbed of extremism in various forms, constantly evolving technologically, expanding its external affiliations, and enhancing its operational capabilities. Security issues pose a significant threat to regional stability,¹³ affecting both China and South Asia, which have been targets of terrorism.¹⁴ Establishing a China-South Asia anti-terrorism mechanism should be prioritized to safeguard regional progress and relations.¹⁵

Former Indian President K.R. Narayanan emphasized the need to enhance “cultural ties” between China and India, believing their cultural influence can positively impact the international order.¹⁶ Scholars widely acknowledge the longstanding history of cultural exchanges between China and South Asia, evident from literary records. Historically, Buddhist and commercial exchanges were primary modes of communication, driving cultural interactions and fostering China’s multicultural development.¹⁷

At the Third China-South Asia International Cultural Forum, scholars from China, India, and other nations underscored the pivotal role of culture in bilateral exchanges. They advocated leveraging culture to deepen cooperation across various sectors,

¹¹ Blanchard JM.F. “China’s Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative and South Asia: Political and Economic Contours, Challenges, and Conundrums”, *Blanchard JM. (eds) China’s Maritime Silk Road Initiative and South Asia*. Palgrave, Singapore, 2017.

¹² Wang Tao, Cao Fengyu, “The Historical Origin of the dilemma of regional Integration in South Asia”, *South and Southeast Asian Studies*, No. 2, 2018, p. 55.

¹³ Shanthie Mariet. “D’Souza.Countering Insurgencies, Terrorism and Violent Extremism in South Asia”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol.28, No.1, 2017, pp.1-11.

¹⁴ Wang Weihua, “A Study on Terrorism and Regional Security in South Asia”, Fudan University, PhD thesis, 2012.

¹⁵ Zong Wei, Liu Aijiao, “Analysis on the construction of China-South Asia Counter-Terrorism Cooperation Mechanism”, *Journal of Beijing Police College*, No. 3, 2019, pp. 44-51.

¹⁶ Tan Zhong, Geng Yinzeng, *India and China: The Interaction and Agitation of Two Great Civilizations*, Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2006, p. 3.

¹⁷ Li Tao, “Strengthening Cultural Exchanges between China and India and Promoting Harmonious Development in Asia: A Summary of the Third China-South Asia International Cultural Forum”, *South Asian Studies Quarterly*, No. 4, 2011, pp. 106-108; Wando, “The History of Religious and Cultural Exchanges between Tibet and South Asia in China: Tracing the footprints of Bandzhida and Luzawa”, *Journal of Tibet University*, No. 1, 2017, pp. 16-21.

rejuvenate Eastern cultures, and usher in an Asian renaissance.¹⁸ The evolving China-India relationship aligns with both nations' fundamental interests and the century's historical trajectory of profound changes, promising a renewed partnership. Moving forward, enhancing cooperation in diverse fields, strengthening market connections, and promoting cultural exchanges will be crucial.¹⁹

These studies have provided valuable insights into various aspects of China-South Asia relations from different perspectives. However, as highlighted in these studies, the primary obstacles to collaboration include low regional integration, inefficient mechanisms, trade imbalances, dominance by a single country, border disputes, and issues between India and Pakistan, as well as security concerns. Achieving consensus on these issues in the near term will be challenging.

From the broader scholarly perspective at home and abroad, cultural exchanges and mutual learning align with the historical and current realities of China and South Asia. They represent a crucial pathway for both regions to shape an Asian era.

2. Main aspects of the study of mutual learning among civilizations

Scholars at home and abroad primarily delve into the definition of exchanges, how to facilitate communication and mutual learning, and their connection to the Belt and Road Initiative and the concept of a human community. Civilizational exchanges and mutual learning involve the interaction, influence, and shared progress among civilizations worldwide, emphasizing harmonious coexistence and mutual advancement. This approach effectively counters Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory. Engaging actively in cultural and religious discourse is essential for promoting cultural exchange and integration within the framework of the "community of human destiny."²⁰

In civilizational exchanges, maintain an open and inclusive attitude towards life, values, history, and civilizations. Respect our own culture while learning from others'

¹⁸ Tong Gamon, "Chinese Culture in South Asia: Historical Materials and Connotations", *International Sinology*, No. 2, 2017, pp. 110-116.

¹⁹ Ma Jiali: "China-India Relations take on a new look", *Beijing Daily*, January 15, 2020, p. 16.

²⁰ Qiu Yonghui, "Discourse Construction and Religious Culture of the Community of Human Destiny", *Journal of the Chinese Academy of Socialism*, No.3, 2018.

strengths and weaknesses.²¹ We must reject cultural ultra-nationalism, populism, and simplistic dichotomies like “either/or” and “zero-sum games,” which promote adversarial thinking and undermine cooperative relationships. Instead, we advocate for a cooperative and inclusive approach that fosters mutual understanding and collective progress.²²

Civilizational exchanges and mutual learning play pivotal roles in fostering global harmony, closely tied to initiatives like the Belt and Road and the concept of a human community. Scholars emphasize that cultural exchanges drive progress, prosperity, and advancement across Asian nations. Through mutual communication and exchange, civilizations realize their value and vitality, essential for Asia’s prosperity in the 21st century.²³ Since the 20th century, cultural interactions among Asian countries have reached unprecedented levels.²⁴ Promoting exchanges among civilizations preserves diversity, fosters harmonious progress, and builds a new global order, promoting world peace guided by the theory of civilizational exchange and mutual learning.²⁵

This approach is crucial for the Belt and Road Initiative, serving as a primary channel for promoting exchanges among civilizations, shaping human society, and catalyzing the realization of a human community. It fosters peaceful interactions and understanding among civilizations, guiding global progress. The contrasting paths of China and America reflect different developmental directions:²⁶ China, under President Xi’s leadership, proposes the “One Belt, One Road” initiative based on Eastern wisdom for global peaceful development. In contrast, U.S. leadership under Trump emphasizes “America first,” raising questions among foreign scholars about the initiative’s alignment with partner

²¹ Golley, Jane, and Adam Ingle. *The Belt And Road Initiative: How To Win Friends And Influence People Prosperity*. Melbourne: Australian National University, 2018, pp. 42-60.

²² Chen Youkang, “Exchanges and Mutual Learning among Civilizations and the Construction of a ‘Community of Human Destiny’”, *Journal of Shandong University of Socialism*, No. 4, 2018, p. 4; Qin Long and Zhao Yongshuai: “Exchanges and Mutual Learning among Asian Civilizations Pool Wisdom and Strength for Building a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind,” *Tianjin Daily*, May 27, 2019.

²³ Robert A. Scalapino. “Asia’s Future, Council on Foreign Relations”, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 1, 1987, pp.77-108.

²⁴ Lo, Kwai-Cheung, and Laikwan Pang. “Introduction: Chinese Culture in Inter-Asia”, *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, No. 1, 2005, pp.1-7.

²⁵ Yu Weiguo, “The Scientific Connotation, Theoretical Value and Practical Significance of ‘Mutual Learning Theory of Civilizations’”, *Ningxia Social Sciences*, No.6, 2017.

²⁶ Zhang Xiaoping: “Building a Peaceful Road of Mutual Learning among Civilizations Along the Belt and Road”, *People’s Tribune*, No. 9, 2019, p. 36.

countries' development and security interests.^{27 28}

Regarding the relationship between a human community and mutual learning among civilizations, scholars assert that fostering a human community among China and its neighboring nations embodies a symbiotic concept and mutual benefit. This relationship is evident in current cooperation efforts and their evolution.²⁹ To establish a human community, concerted efforts in politics, economy, culture, and ecology are essential. Culture, being a fundamental and pervasive force, plays a central role.³⁰ Deeper civilizational exchanges and mutual learning enhance mutual recognition and respect among countries. Conversely, limited exchanges increase the likelihood of misunderstandings, contradictions, and conflicts.³¹

The aforementioned studies primarily address the significance of civilizational exchanges and mutual learning, the methodologies for conducting them, and the necessity of building a human community, emphasizing that exchanges among civilizations constitute the crucial pathway. These studies provide a foundational framework for exploring the establishment of a shared future community between China and South Asia.

Historical Basis for Mutual Learning between China and South Asian Civilizations

China shares borders with South Asian nations such as Bhutan, India, and Nepal. Throughout history, these geographical proximities have facilitated cultural exchanges in religion, culture, and other aspects. These exchanges and collaborations, rooted in mutual learning among civilizations, form a robust historical foundation for the relationship between China and South Asia as integral parts of Asian civilization.

²⁷ Golley, Jane, and Adam Ingle: *The Belt And Road Initiative: How To Win Friends And Influence People Prosperity*, Melbourne: Australian National University, 2018, pp.42~60.

²⁸ Mobley, Terry. "The Belt and Road Initiative: Insights from China's Backyard", *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, 2019(3), pp.52~72.

²⁹ Zhang Yunling, "China's Relations with its Neighbors: The Logic of a Community of Common Destiny," *People's Tribune*, 2014, No.2, p. 36.

³⁰ Wang Zongli, "On Exchanges and Mutual Learning among Civilizations and Community of Human Destiny in the Context of Globalization", *Journal of Northwest Minzu University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, No. 6, 2019, p. 44.

³¹ He Xingliang, "Exchanges and Mutual Learning among Civilizations and the Building of a Community with a Shared Future for Mankind", *People's Tribune*, No.7, 2019, p. 7.

China and South Asia's original ties to the Himalayan civilization circle

The Himalayan orogeny gave rise to the Himalayan cultural sphere, encompassing the South Asian subcontinent, parts of Central and Southeast Asia, as well as the Yangtze and Yellow River basins. This region fostered rich civilizations and gave rise to two distinct cultural spheres: the “Chinese civilization circle” and the “Indian civilization circle.”³² These civilizations, with roots spanning thousands of years, have been celebrated globally. Rabindranath Tagore famously remarked in 1916 that China and India are the only civilizations capable of enduring where the lamp of civilization shines.³³

Over millennia, China developed into a unified civilization, contrasting with India's “unity in diversity,” which includes numerous independent countries within its broader cultural community across the South Asian subcontinent. Despite differences in ethnicity, religion, ethics, and values, Chinese and Indian civilizations interacted and integrated with each other. The Chinese and South Asian cultural spheres were dynamic, facilitating mutual communication and influence.

Consequently, China and South Asia have served as crucibles for the mutual learning and integration of diverse cultures, enriching the concept of multiculturalism and advancing Asian civilization collectively. They stand as integral components of the broader Asian civilization.

The study of Buddhist religious culture in the history of China and South Asia

Since Siddhartha Gautama founded Buddhism in the 5th century BC, Buddhist culture has spread gradually. Over millennia, China and South Asia have maintained close ties through Buddhist cultural exchanges, profoundly influencing both civilizations.

South Asian monks traveled to China to propagate Buddhism, while Chinese monks journeyed westward to seek scriptures and Dharma. As early as the 1st century AD, Indian monks like Kāśyapamātanga and Dharmaraksa were invited to Luoyang, China, to teach Buddhism. During the Wei, Jin, Southern, and Northern Dynasties, monks from places

³² Tan Zhong, “Exploring the birth and Growth of China's ‘homeland’ civilization State - and on the Himalayan Civilization Circle”, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, No. 8, 2015, pp. 180-181.

³³ Tan Zhong, “Exploring the birth and Growth of China's ‘homeland’ civilization State - and on the Himalayan Civilization Circle”, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, No. 8, 2015, p. 176.

like Sri Lanka and India increasingly traveled to China via routes through Burma to preach Buddhism. In the 5th century, Sangha Bhadra from Sri Lanka was sent to China, followed by the renowned Indian monk Ratnaratha in the 6th century who preached in Quanzhou. In the 9th century, Padmasambhava was invited to Tibet, establishing Buddhism there for 53 years. In the 11th century, Adixia from present-day Bangladesh was invited to Tibet,³⁴ while in the 14th century, Dhyana bhadra taught in China for six years. Conversely, many Chinese monks journeyed westward to study scriptures, notably Xuanzang who traveled to India during the Tang Dynasty via the northern Silk Road. During the Song Dynasty, monks undertook significant missions to India, including 157 under Song Taizu, promoting Buddhism and translating scriptures. These exchanges enriched historical and cultural ties between China and South Asia.

After the Taoist classic *Dao De Jing* was translated into Sanskrit and introduced to India via Assam and other regions, it influenced the development of the “Sahajayana” sect within Buddhism. This transmission of Taoism led to its widespread adoption among esoteric followers of Indian religions such as Buddhism, Brahmanism, and Vaishnavism, who integrated it into their teachings.³⁵ Buddhism, introduced into Tibet, Southeast Asia, and Yunnan through Sri Lanka, gave rise to distinct forms like Tibetan Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism, each reflecting regional characteristics.

These religious exchanges have historically bridged cultural ties between China and South Asia. Furthermore, Buddhism adapted to local cultures in the region, maintaining significant influence to this day. Additionally, Hinduism’s spread in China influenced various fields of ancient Chinese thought and culture, including astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and philosophy.³⁶ In Yunnan, the combination of Hinduism’s deities with local folk beliefs has shaped a distinctive regional religious culture.³⁷

The relatively similar traditional thinking and narrative modes

³⁴ Sonam Tserang, “The Ideological process and characteristics of the localization of Buddhism in Tibet - dominated by Padmasambhava, Adixia, and Tsongkhapa”, *Journal of Tibet University for Nationalities*, No. 5, 2018, pp. 48-54.

³⁵ Prabodhi Chandra Bagachi, trans by Jiang Jingkui et al., *India and China: Cultural Relations in the Millennium*, Peking University Press, 2014, p. 167.

³⁶ Zhu Mingzhong, “The Influence of Hinduism on ancient Chinese Thought and Culture”, *Southeast Asian and South Asian Studies*, No. 4, 2011, p. 51.

³⁷ Qiu Yonghui, “Hinduism in China: Weber’s Proposition and Yunnan’s Experience”, *World Religions and Cultures*, No. 3, 2019, p. 22.

Both Chinese and Indian cultures exemplify inclusivity, unity, and diversity. Chinese culture, spanning 5,000 years, has historically embraced diversity and inclusiveness, shaping its civilization. Indian culture, similarly, embodies both unity and diversity,³⁸ reflecting the varied landscapes and cultural expressions across South Asia. Economic differences between China and South Asian countries have led to diverse cultural landscapes within each nation, such as India's urban, rural, and forest regions.³⁹ China, too, exhibits a blend of tradition and modernity, showcasing a coexistence of primitive and developed aspects.

Both Chinese and South Asian civilizations prioritize agriculture, viewing livelihoods as central to development. Farmers, integral to this ethos, harness the forces of nature for cultivation, echoing Lao Zi's emphasis on natural harmony and growth. This agricultural perspective transcends mere survival, encompassing development and societal stability within a spiritual universe.⁴⁰ Tagore's insights into Indian civilization highlight its evolution from nomadic existence to settled lifestyles, akin to China's historical progression from pastoralism to urbanization.⁴¹ Practices like Indian yoga and Chinese Tai Chi further underscore a shared ethos of physical and mental harmony with nature.

Chinese and South Asian cultures also share similar modes of thinking, narrative styles, worldviews, and values. Both regions favor intuitive, comprehensive, and holistic thinking,⁴² often interpreting natural phenomena and human development through myths, legends, and fables. Their worldviews emphasize concepts like "harmony between heaven and individuals," moral integrity, and peace, reflecting a cultural harmony that resonates globally.⁴³ This shared "culture of harmony" represents a common thread in today's international community's values.

³⁸ Gao Shanbi, *Outline of the History of Ancient Indian Culture and Civilization*, The Commercial Press, 1998, p. 3.

³⁹ Fei Xiaotong ed., *The Pluralistic and Integrated Pattern of the Chinese Nation*, Minzu University of China Press, 2003.

⁴⁰ Tan Zhong, Geng Yinzeng, *India and China: The Interaction and Agitation of Two Great Civilizations*, The Commercial Press, 2006, p. 300.

⁴¹ Tan Zhong, "Exploring the birth and Growth of China's 'homeland' civilization State - and on the Himalayan Civilization Circle", *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, No. 8, 2015, p. 106.

⁴² Niu Zhifu: "Hand in hand to build a South Asian Community of Shared Future", 2019-07-09 , http://www.cssn.cn/dq/yn/201907/t20190709_4931365.shtml.

⁴³ Zhang Weiwei. *The Civilized Country*, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2017, p. 31.

Common historical opportunities in modern history

Since the 18th century, Southeast Asian countries endured over 200 years of British colonization, suffering severe exploitation and losing national autonomy. Similarly, China faced colonial and semi-colonial conditions following the Opium War in the 1840s. Both China and India achieved independence in 1947 and 1949, respectively, after histories of exploitation and struggle, forging a bond rooted in shared adversity. During their early nation-building stages, China and India supported each other internationally, exemplified by the joint initiation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in 1954, which continue to guide global norms today. Figures like Swami Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Gandhi, and Tagore also underscored this friendship through mutual support.⁴⁴ This historical camaraderie lays the groundwork for a human community between these major Asian nations, offering a common foundation for fostering a similar community between China and South Asia.

Close exchanges between China and South Asia in modern times

The friendship established by Chinese and Indian intellectuals in the 1930s has been widely praised by the people of both countries. In 1924, at the invitation of Liang Qichao, Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore traveled to China to give lectures. Tagore's journey spanned nearly two months and encompassed half of China's territory. He formed a deep friendship with Chinese scholars such as Liang Qichao, Xu Zhimo, Lin Huiyin, etc., and went to Shanghai, Hangzhou, Jinan, Beijing, Taiyuan, Hankou and other places to give lectures, which were warmly welcomed by young people everywhere, and his speeches generated a great response. During his stay in China, Tagore brought forward the mind of organizing a Chinese academy in India to promote cultural exchanges between China and India. This facilitated an agreement for scholars from China and India to visit each other, and advocated for the establishment of the "China-India Society" by enthusiastic individuals from both countries to promote cultural exchanges.

In 1927, Tan Yunshan met Tagore in Singapore and was warmly invited to teach at the International University. He arrived at Shantiniketan, India in 1928 and began

⁴⁴ "The History of Friendly Relations between Chinese and Indian People: 1815-1949", *South Asian Studies*, No. 4, 1996, p. 90.

fundraising for the Chinese Academy. Returning to China in summer 1932, Tan Yunshan actively promoted and planned for the establishment of the China-India Association, which was formed the following year. In 1934, he returned to India and collaborated with Tagore to establish the China-India Cultural Association, with Tagore as its president. This association facilitated the establishment of the Chinese College at Shantiniketan on April 14, 1937, near Bolpur in West Bengal. Tan Yunshan served as the first president of the Chinese College, marking a new era in modern Sino-Indian cultural exchanges.

Tan Yunshan remained in India from 1928 until his death in 1983, earning him the nickname “modern Xuanzang.” He maintained special friendships with Mahatma Gandhi, Indian presidents, and prime ministers, and had a close relationship with Tagore as teacher and friend. The Chinese Academy offered majors in Chinese language and literature, facilitated scholarly exchanges between China and India, and supported study visits through scholarships from the Chinese Ministry of Education. Renowned Indian scholars such as P.C. Bagchi and Pradhana conducted research and teaching at Peking University. Despite the complexities of World War II, Sino-Indian cultural and friendly exchanges continued to flourish. Today, the International University preserves a significant collection of Chinese books, offers Chinese language majors, hosts international academic conferences, and remains dedicated to promoting China-India exchanges.

The Practical Significance of Building a China-South Asia Community of Shared Future

An inevitable choice for the common development of China and South Asia

In the modern era, the world is undergoing significant progress, regulation, and transformation, characterized by economic multipolarity and globalization. Information technology and cultural diversity are increasingly valued as people strive to establish a global human community, leading to greater interconnectedness among countries. However, this period also witnesses profound and unpredictable changes, along with heightened instability. Global economic development lacks momentum, income inequality is worsening, regional issues persist, and challenges such as public health, poverty, terrorism, cybersecurity, and climate change continue to spread.

Given its large population, high density, frequent security challenges, and varying levels of economic and social development, the degree of social progress and regional stability in China-South Asia holds significant global importance. Strengthening relations between China and South Asia and establishing a China-South Asia human community are seen as effective approaches to addressing regional issues and fostering mutual progress and regional development.

The only way to achieve the Belt and Road Initiative

South Asia is widely recognized as a strategic “fracture zone” extending from Central Asia eastward along Eurasia’s southern shore to include Iran, Pakistan, and India, giving it a distinctive geopolitical character. The region lacks a comprehensive and effective cooperation mechanism, contributing to multiple conventional and unconventional security challenges, making it one of the world’s most insecure regions. India holds significant influence in South Asia’s complex political landscape, despite recent friendly and stable interactions between Chinese and Indian leaders in Chennai and Wuhan, along with cooperation agreements. However, India remains cautious about the Belt and Road Initiative, contrasting with other South Asian nations that engage positively with the initiative. Given India’s dominant role in the region, smaller countries cannot ignore Indian sentiment, often balancing economic dependence on China with security concerns tied to India.

To effectively advance the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia, resolve regional issues, and foster a conducive environment, China should cultivate a sense of community with South Asia and establish a solid foundation of public support. Furthermore, the success of the Belt and Road Initiative in South Asia is crucial as it impacts its implementation in Central Asia, Europe, and Southeast Asia, given the region’s unique geographical position.

The common destiny for China to go global

Peripheral diplomacy is paramount in China’s foreign policy landscape, with a particular emphasis on South Asia as a cornerstone of its neighborhood diplomacy. Among China’s fourteen land neighbors, five are located in South Asia: Afghanistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Pakistan. China prioritizes fostering partnerships and

friendships with its neighbors to create a secure, friendly, and prosperous neighborhood, crucial for its own development. Upholding principles of “sincerity, friendship, inclusiveness, and mutual benefit,” China aims to strengthen cultural and political ties with South Asian countries and neighboring nations. This approach is essential for demonstrating Chinese diplomatic principles in concrete cooperation with South Asia, fostering mutual trust and inclusiveness.

Establishing a China-South Asia human community exemplifies China’s neighborhood diplomacy in practice, aiming to ensure a harmonious and stable regional environment as a foundation for China’s global engagement and community-building efforts. The urgency and necessity of forging a China-South Asia community of common destiny are underscored at international, regional, and local levels. Despite challenges such as mutual distrust and public sentiment issues, enhancing cultural cohesion through civilizational exchanges and mutual learning is essential. By focusing on poverty alleviation, improving livelihoods, and fostering common progress, a cultural foundation can be laid for enhancing economic and social cooperation and facilitating the smooth implementation of Belt and Road projects in South Asia. A stable social environment and a conducive cultural atmosphere are indispensable for sustainable economic and social development and fostering harmonious relations among peoples in the region. Thus, establishing a community of shared future between China and South Asia through civilizational exchanges and mutual learning is imperative for promoting mutual cooperation and achieving common prosperity.

The building of a China-South Asia Community with a Shared Future follows the Principle of Mutual Learning among Civilizations

China and South Asia share common tasks as developing countries, encompassing similar identities, urgent requirements for social and economic advancement, and the historic responsibility for revitalization and prosperity. These shared identities, needs, and missions necessitate joint deliberation, construction, sharing, and development to address developmental challenges and ensure survival. President Xi Jinping’s 2013 call for the four self-confidences; institutional, cultural, theoretical, and path confidence, has bolstered China’s proactive engagement in diplomacy. A China-South Asia community

must adhere to fundamental principles of mutual learning among civilizations.

Mutual learning and exchanges among civilizations as the common basis for bilateral cooperation in various fields

A human community with a shared future presents an aspirational vision for global society, emerging from deep-rooted Chinese cultural values and transcending ethnic, national, and ideological boundaries. It represents an innovative approach in international relations theory amidst existing conflicts in national interests, religious beliefs, ideologies, and social systems worldwide, including between China and South Asia. Despite differing civilizational frameworks, developmental paths, and bilateral relations, China and South Asia share a common geographical and developmental context in the Himalayan civilization circle. This geographical and cultural proximity creates opportunities to foster a community of shared destiny. By emphasizing mutual cooperation over conflict, China and South Asia can leverage their cultural exchanges and developmental dialogues to strengthen people-to-people ties, enhance trade and connectivity, and achieve mutual cultural prosperity. This approach offers a pragmatic pathway towards realizing a cohesive China-South Asia community.

Exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations in promoting mutual understanding and inclusiveness

The human race has a long history of civilization. Each state has built on past achievements to progress to where it is today. It is through the exchange of different civilizations that the world has become what it is, and by promoting interactions, incorporating disparate civilizations, and mutual learning, we make the world more attractive and life greater for global people.⁴⁵

Under the premise of mutual respect, the human community strengthens efforts for shared interests, responsibilities, and concepts, to truly understand and respect the differences among civilizations and achieve peaceful coexistence.⁴⁶ Exchanges between

⁴⁵ “Xi Jinping Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the International Symposium Commemorating the 2565th anniversary of the birth of Confucius and the Fifth General Assembly of the International Confucianism Federation”, *People’s Daily*, September 25, 2014.

⁴⁶ Yang Jianing, ““ Common Value ‘and the construction of China’s international discourse Power”, *Academic Journal of the Long March*, No. 2, 2016, p. 79.

China and South Asia and within South Asian nations are deeply rooted in history. In the development of bilateral and multilateral relations between China and South Asia, the interaction between civilizations and cultures has always been a primary focus. Buddhist culture in China, Nepal, and Bhutan; Islamic culture in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and China; and Hindu culture in India and Bangladesh all influence the countries where they exist. Conflicts in the region, such as the Rohingya crisis at the Bangladesh-Myanmar border and the ongoing China-India border dispute, highlight the challenges.⁴⁷ To address these issues and improve regional relations and global governance, the concept of a human community must be deeply ingrained, fostering mutual understanding of history, culture, and religion. This mutual understanding can build bridges of friendship through exchanges and mutual learning.⁴⁸

For example, the joint participation of China and India in the re-establishment of Nalanda University exemplifies how cultural exchange and mutual learning between and within civilizations in China and South Asia can contribute to development, deepen mutual understanding, soften regional relations, and promote prosperity and peace in the region.

Cultural exchanges and mutual learning for building new type of international relations between China and South Asia

Promoting a China-South Asia community through civilizational exchanges and mutual learning is crucial for fostering a novel type of regional international relationship characterized by equity, mutual respect, and win-win collaboration. In 2014, President Xi proposed establishing a new category of international relationships with win-win collaboration at its core, further elaborating on this concept on various occasions. This approach innovates beyond traditional international relations and is fundamental to China-South Asia relations.

Based on mutual respect, mutual learning among civilizations is essential for shaping regional relationships. China and South Asia, both with long histories of civilization, have

⁴⁷ Qiu Yonghui, "The Boundary issue between China and India from a Cultural Perspective", *South and Southeast Asian Studies*, No. 4, 2019.

⁴⁸ Dai Jingni, Yang Siyuan: "Analysis on the Thought of the New International Order by Xi Jinping", *Modern Research on Governing the Country*, No. 2, 2018, p. 12.

a rich legacy of cultural and civilizational exchanges. This historical depth adds significant weight to their bilateral and multilateral relations. Diversity promotes the exchange and development of civilizations through mutual learning. China should intensify these exchanges and mutual learning across different nations, ethnic groups, and regional cultures, aiming to build a China-South Asia community.

The concept of “new type of international relations” is a key guiding ideology in Chinese diplomacy, widely recognized by other countries, and has a profound influence on current international relations.

Role of exchanges and mutual learning among civilizations in promoting harmony

The China-South Asia Community is a crucial element of the broader human community. The harmony of world civilizations depends significantly on the joint efforts of China and South Asia. The world comprises diverse civilizations, and civilizational exchange and mutual learning are essential frameworks for understanding these interactions. This approach contrasts with Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” theory and other related concepts such as “civilization assimilationism,” “cultural relativism,” and “cultural conservatism.” Each of these theories has its own theoretical and practical limitations and fails to address the challenges faced by human civilization in the era of globalization. Mutual learning among civilizations represents a significant breakthrough in the development of civilization theories and is a critical step forward in forming new concepts of civilization. Civilizational exchanges and mutual learning are fundamental for overcoming the estrangement between China and South Asia, thus contributing to the establishment of a China-South Asia community.⁴⁹ Moreover, this process is essential for integrating and promoting harmonious global civilizations and serves as the cornerstone for a human community with a shared future.

Path for Building a China-South Asia Community of Shared Future through Mutual Learning among Civilizations

Currently, the world is experiencing profound changes. In South Asia, both

⁴⁹ Liu Hong: “Mutual Learning of Civilizations is an important force for Promoting the construction of the Belt and Road”, *People’s Tribune*, No. 21, 2019, pp. 35-37.

conventional and unconventional issues are becoming more prominent. The Indo-Pakistani conflict over Kashmir remains unresolved, and many complex social problems continue to emerge. Cultural exchanges between China and South Asia have a strong historical foundation, and mutual learning among civilizations is crucial to building a human community. China should contribute to the China-South Asia community in the following aspects based on the concept of civilizational exchange and mutual learning.

Awareness of the Chinese and the South Asian civilizations, and build and expand common consciousness

The rich and extensive histories of Chinese and South Asian civilizations can be better appreciated and their commonalities highlighted through the following measures:

- **Boosting Cultural Exchanges:** Enhance mutual understanding through diverse cultural exchanges involving music, art, and literature, helping people from both regions appreciate each other's cultures and values.
- **Reinforcing Education:** Integrate Chinese and South Asian histories and cultures into educational curricula, fostering a deeper awareness and appreciation of their shared heritage among students.
- **Organizing Cultural Activities:** Host cultural festivals and seminars to showcase the unique aspects of both civilizations, providing opportunities for people to share experiences and learn from each other.
- **Supporting Tourism:** Promote tourism to highlight the historical and cultural attractions of China and South Asia, encouraging visits that foster a greater appreciation of their common heritage.
- **Nurturing Economic Collaboration:** Strengthen economic ties through collaboration in investment, trade, and infrastructure development, enhancing mutual understanding and cultural exchange.
- **Utilizing Media and Technology:** Employ media and technology, including films, television programs, social media, documentaries, and online platforms, to raise awareness of the rich cultural heritage of China and South Asia.
- **Partaking in Research:** Encourage scholars and policymakers to research the similarities and differences between the two civilizations, identifying areas of mutual benefit and potential cooperation while deepening cultural understanding.

By adopting these measures, we can enhance the consciousness of Chinese and South Asian civilizations and their shared heritage, fostering greater understanding, respect, and collaboration.

Historically, both Chinese and South Asian civilizations have made significant contributions at different stages. However, there is a mutual lack of understanding between them and the broader global community. China's limited awareness of India's multiculturalism and Hindu nationalism, for example, hampers accurate comprehension of India.⁵⁰

To improve this awareness, policy communication at the Track I level should be strengthened, and cultural exchanges at the Track II level should be promoted. This includes planning major cultural events, participating in regional cultural activities, and expanding sister city collaborations. Additionally, promoting regional culture can help highlight the similarities in traditional thought, narrative modes, life outlooks, and values, while acknowledging differences in political systems and religious beliefs.

Sharing historical stories of friendship and showcasing successful modern cooperation can enhance mutual understanding. It's essential to respect developmental differences, seek common ground, build consensus, and share the achievements of regional progress.

Agreements on science, technology and people-to-people exchanges

China and South Asia have established numerous bilateral cultural collaboration agreements, setting the stage for institutionalized cultural exchanges. Since the 1980s, China has signed agreements with Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Afghanistan, outlining plans for cooperation in art, culture, education, heritage, sports, youth affairs, and media over the next three to five years. These agreements deepen bilateral cultural relations, enhance mutual trust, and support practical cultural cooperation.

In addition to comprehensive cultural agreements, China has also signed tourism

⁵⁰ Qiu Yonghui, "From the Asian Century to Global Governance: China-India Relations from a Cultural Perspective", *People's Tribune*, No. 5, 2019, p. 87.

cooperation agreements with countries such as Pakistan and India, exemplified by the China-Pakistan Tourism Cooperation Agreement and the China-India Tourism Cooperation Agreement. Cultural cooperation is prominently featured in joint statements between China and these nations. Although regional cooperation agreements like those seen with ASEAN have not been established, further development can be achieved by gradually implementing the terms of existing cultural cooperation agreements.

People's Livelihood and Mutual Benefit Projects

To build a China-South Asia community, we should adhere to the principles of “friendship and partnership with neighbors,” consider the global landscape, enhance bilateral and multilateral political trust, and promote regional cooperation for overall development.

China and South Asia have established regional collaboration mechanisms, such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, China-Nepal Economic Corridor, and Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor. These corridors are part of the “Belt and Road” Initiative, despite India's concerns. China should accelerate the construction of these corridors and remain committed to their development.

Based on these cooperation mechanisms, China and South Asian countries should lay a solid cultural foundation through mutual learning among civilizations and advance livelihood projects. These projects should focus on health care, disaster control, and poverty alleviation to benefit the people's vital interests and achieve quick results.

Exchanges and cooperation for people-to-people exchanges

People-to-people connectivity is fundamental in establishing a China-South Asia community. Historically, Chinese culture has significantly influenced East and Southeast Asian nations like Japan, Singapore, Korea, and Vietnam but has had less impact on South Asia. Recently, as China-South Asia relations develop, translating books and films has become a crucial channel for mutual understanding. Cultural performance groups frequently exchange visits, cross-border ethnic exchanges occur regularly, and interactions between think tanks and young people are deepening, enhancing mutual understanding among people of different countries.

Confucius Institutes have brought Chinese language learning to South Asian students, while many Chinese universities offer courses in South Asian minority languages, with graduates in high demand. The rise of new media, such as the popularity of TikTok and Li Ziqi's videos in South Asia, has facilitated grassroots cultural exchanges and mutual appreciation.

In 2015, Yunnan Minzu University and the Indian Cultural Relations Commission established the China-India Yoga College. China has also set up branches of the International Tai Chi College in three Indian universities, including Bixi Yoga University and Devu Culture University. Pilgrimage tours between China and India, Buddhist cultural tours, student summer camps, and natural history and cultural heritage tours are attracting increasing numbers of tourists. India has proposed the "Xuanzang Trip" tourism project to further this cultural exchange.

These cultural cooperation efforts have yielded initial results. Moving forward, we should deepen the development of cultural products and activities, building a solid foundation of popular support between China and South Asia.

Regional political security stability and development through mutual learning among civilizations

Globally, a stable life and sustainable development align with the concept of human civilization. As emphasized by President Xi, building a human community with a common future requires an equitable security pattern, harmonious yet diverse civilizations, and an ecosystem that respects nature and fosters green development. Security encompasses traditional military security, environmental security, and network information security. South Asia faces destabilizing factors such as terrorism, religious extremism, and natural disasters, threatening regional peace and stability. Additionally, issues like imperfect democratic institutions and underdeveloped economies hinder South Asia's ability to combat terrorism and improve its economic, political, and social progress.

As a key neighbor, China should support the aspirations for prosperity, stability, and a green life in South Asia by cooperating to combat terrorism, strengthening non-traditional security cooperation, and adopting sustainable development concepts. Establishing China-South Asia security and sustainable development communities is

essential.

Steady progression and peaceful development are in the interests of all countries. Building an equitable, beautiful, peaceful, safe, prosperous, and inclusive world is our common goal. Strengthening dialogue, managing differences, and respecting mutual concerns and interests are crucial for achieving mutually beneficial regional relations. Both Chinese and South Asian civilizations reflect the wisdom of their people and have significantly contributed to regional progress. Long-term peaceful progression relies on mutual understanding and effective dialogue among different cultures.

Deepening dialogue among civilizations creates opportunities for cooperation, development, peace, and stability. Embracing exchanges, inclusiveness, and mutual learning sustains civilizational vitality. Although civilizational exchanges and mutual learning are slow processes influenced by factors like openness, economic growth, and cultural prosperity, they are vital for maintaining vitality and fostering new ideas. These exchanges provide a pathway for building a China-South Asia community with a common future.