

# The Chinese Puzzle

Pallavi Aiyar, *Smoke and Mirrors: An Experience of China* (New Delhi: Fourth Estate, 2008), pp. 273, Paperback, Rs.450

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Written in 2008, Pallavi Aiyar's *Smoke and Mirrors: An Experience of China* remains as relevant today as then, even though the pace of change in China has been unusually rapid. Written like an extended diary, reflections on her 5-year stint in China from 2002 onward (working as an English language instructor first, and then journalist), Aiyar's book is at a deeper level a document about the human condition in one of humankind's greatest revolutions – the transformation of China in our time. But the book is also as much about India as it is about China, two peoples joined by geography, history and culture, but also, from the Indian side, anxiety about its resurgent neighbor. Aiyar writes for an India unable to fully grasp what is happening in China, sometimes comparing the two, at other times, more directly if also a little simplistically asking: what could India learn from China? (p. 239). For someone who has just returned from a trip to China, many years after Aiyar lived there, I believe that in many ways the questions are still the same except that the lag on the Indian side has become more comprehensive, acute and exasperating. Here, I will not dwell on Indian anxieties about China. We live it all the time. My focus, as a historian, will be to read *Smoke and Mirrors* as a document of history, a kind of ethnographic history of the everyday in fast-changing China, where the author, in her perceptive, sensitive and evocative prose, weaves a picture of a society in transition. Her wit and humor add an aspect of irony to her prose that is remarkable.

The first chapter (pp. 10-27) – *Better Fat than Anapple* – deals with Aiyar's introduction to China, primarily through her interaction with her students at the Beijing Broadcasting Institute, where she first comes face to face with the puzzle that is China. Writes Aiyar: 'The China I lived in was a communist country in name but a strange hybrid in practice...students sat through compulsory

classes in Marxism and Maoist thought, bored blind, fantasizing of little but money' (pp.15-16). Her struggle with the language, amusement at finding that young people learning English invariably take funny English names, realization of how deep they had been socialized into being apolitical, and (almost) horror at discovering the women students' bizarre fixation with large eyes, among other things, give us a sense of how strange and mixed-up a place China appears at first glance.

From her work place, Aiyar eases us out into the streets of Beijing, the city which was to be her home in China, a city in the grip of a huge make-over for the Olympics in 2008, a prestige event that the Chinese government, already in the midst of supervising the massive transformation of its cities, was bent upon making a success at all costs. This chapter – *Olympian Makeover* (pp. 28-50) – tracks the demolition of a very large part of historic Beijing, 25 million square meters, and the creation of a swanky new city with a Central Business District, 'the capitalist core of the communist capital' (p. 28). According to Aiyar, 'the pace of the current transformation was unbeatable as was its reach, as it pushed into every nook and corner, bulldozing its way into even Mongol-period enclaves that had so far miraculously remained intact' (p. 37). In this city in the throes of an 'identity crisis' (p. 36), the Chinese people, observes Aiyar, used to the 'ceaseless impermanence' and 'flux (p. 39)' of their recent past, showed a certain 'equanimity' that 'would have made the Buddha proud' (Ibid.).

In the next chapter, titled *Coronavirus* (pp. 51-70), the writer comes to grips with the Chinese government's obstinate refusal, shored up through censorship and socialization, to first recognize the SARS epidemic, then its volte-face in the face of aggravated circumstances, and the subsequent scramble for damage control. Stunned, Aiyar

notes 'the manner in which students violently oscillated from complete trust in the authorities to hysterical suspicion' (p.60), and the fact that 'the whole country was like a pressure cooker, calm on the top but boiling inside' (ibid.). Though horrified at the state's response, Aiyar also recognizes, in the state's belated acknowledgement of the crisis, that its power eventually lay in fostering an 'uninterrupted illusion that the CCP's continuing rule was essential and beneficial for all sections of Chinese society' (ibid.). Alongside this meditation on the Chinese state, Aiyar brings alive in these pages the panic that gripped the city, with vignettes about the odd and pathetic acts of both the state and the people to safeguard themselves from the disease, like rubbing vinegar on the walls of buildings, playing badminton feverishly, and killing pets and dogs suspected of carrying the virus.

In *Hindi-Chini Buy Buy* (pp. 69-96), Aiyar busts the myth of the China-India comparison, pointing to not just the huge, almost unbridgeable distance between the two countries, but also the surprisingly small economic relationship between the neighbors in relation to the hype. But yes, she finds out, there is indeed a growing exploration by Indians of the opportunities in China, whether it be high level diplomatic and business visits from the subcontinent or the modest adventures of Indian yogis, students and mofussil jobseekers in China's bustling cities.

With the following two chapters – *Mr. Wu and Family* (pp. 94-114) and *Hutong Days* (pp. 115-125) – Aiyar opens an absolutely riveting window into the life of Beijingers in the *hutong* neighborhoods and their *siheyuan* homes in the Chinese capital. *Hutongs* are 'essentially willow-lined villages hidden away from the surrounding urban sprawl' (p. 95), comprising a network of small alleys and courtyard homes that were once the residences of the imperial elite. Although large sections of the *hutongs* have been demolished to make way for the new, glitzy Olympic City, a few have been preserved as souvenirs of Beijing's 'historic district'. The *Hutong*-scape of Beijing bears the scars and spirit of China's turbulent history, having witnessed the eviction of the old elite, resettlement as a proletarian complex with public toilets, and the recent make-over as a tourist curio even as its oldest inhabitants await another dislocation. Through the idiosyncratic behavior of her landlord Wu, perpetually repairing the house, the laid-back domestic rhythms of *hutong* residents, and the lively community entertainment and gossip sessions of the area, Aiyar evokes a China at once in the throes of change and as placid as ever. She writes: 'I loved the communality that infused the *hutongs*... Overfull quarters forced people out to the streets and through the changing seasons residents bundled together outdoors, exchanging gossip, playing mahjong, quaffing beers on steamy hot summer nights or just watching the

world go by' (p. 5). During my recent visit to Beijing, I too stayed for a few days in a *siheyuan* now converted into a hotel, and much has – miraculously and thankfully – remained the same.

Passing over the comedies that beset Indian businessmen as they struggle with Chinese food in the chapter *Chicken Feet and Jain Diets* (pp. 126-136), Aiyar delves deeper into the economic miracle that is China in *Factory of the World* (pp. 137-168) and the recent freedoms in religious life in *Opiate of the Masses* (pp. 169-200). On the former, Aiyar observes that Chinese entrepreneurship has often led rather than followed economic liberalization. Given the tumultuous history of the last century, unsure of whether anything will ever last, the 'people', Aiyar quotes a local, 'don't think they get another chance in life... if (they) get an opportunity (they) grab it, tightly, it may be the only one (they) get' (p. 165). On the question of religion, Aiyar believes that faced with 'yawning inequalities, vanishing provisions for education and healthcare, unpaid wages and pensions and rampant official corruption, and disenchantment across large sections of Chinese society... the party (CCP) was thus coming to realize that (religion) may be an opiate, but opiates soothe tensions and calm frayed nerves' (p. 176). Popular religiosity has thus been allowed to grow. During my visit to China's largest mosque in Xian and a Buddhist temple in Shanghai, I too was struck by public notices that spoke of how the government was providing funds for the upkeep of these shrines in keeping with the (*re*)correct(ed) policies of protecting cultural minorities.

In *Shangrila* (pp. 201-2013), Aiyar visits Zhongdian, indeed billed by tourism publicity as 'Shangrila', a largely Tibetan area bordering the Tibet Autonomous Region; and in the *Roof of the World* (pp. 2013-234), she finds herself on board the first train into Lhasa. It is here that she confronts the Chinese puzzle at its most frustrating point, something that leads her, but for the epilogue, to her final substantial chapter *Squaring the Circle and Coming Full Circle* (pp. 235-262), where, in the light of her experience of disaffection among the Tibetans, she ponders over the heart of the matter. Having lifted millions out of poverty in perhaps one of the biggest transformations of our age, created a society where education, health, dignity of labor, women's rights and civic behavior were the norm, provided local social and political freedoms, was the CCP's asking for too much in its demand for total loyalty from all its peoples? Conversely, was India's democracy worthless in the light of the Indian state and peoples' failures in giving themselves a decent life? Given that the promises of political freedom and social equality in India have repeatedly been belied, more so in the present day, I can understand why even in 2007, Aiyar was unable to decide.