

SHASTRI RAMACHANDARAN

CHINDIA

Journey to an Asian Century



Commendations

Shastri Ramachandaran, a China writer and analyst with nearly two decades' experience, has earned his place in the select club of experts on China. His longstanding belief in 'Chindia'—strategic rapport between India and China—was tested by periodic setbacks, most recently the Galwan clashes of 2020. Subsequent quiet diplomacy at the highest levels, including parleys between Prime Minister Modi and President Xi, helped restore a measure of normalcy. These developments reinforced Shastri's conviction that, in the uncertain geopolitics of today, China has 'no option' but to accommodate India, and that India, too, stands to gain from closer ties in its national interest. His prescription: Trust will provide thrust.

Shastri's logic is compelling.

— **Lalit Mansingh**

Chairman, Kalinga International Foundation; former Foreign Secretary, High Commissioner to the UK and Ambassador to the US; and former trustee of the International Crisis Group.

Shastri Ramachandaran has distilled his experiences of China and knowledge of India-China relations into a book that should appeal to specialist and layman. Covering a wide swathe of issues, this informed analysis of India-China relations discusses the past and future of the relationship in a rapidly changing geopolitical context. Lucidly written and clearly argued, it makes a strong case for India-China engagement and cooperation without minimising the difficulties.

— **Shivshankar Menon**

Former National Security Adviser, Foreign Secretary, Ambassador to China and High Commissioner to Sri Lanka and Pakistan; and author of *Choices: Inside the Making of India's Foreign Policy* and *India and Asian Geopolitics: The Past, Present*.

For all those in India who are as eternally curious about China as the Chinese are about India, Shastri Ramachandaran's second book, *Chindia: Journey to an Asian Century*, will be a godsend. Written with the seasoned, yet not unsympathetic, eye of a foreign journalist living in China, Shastri's book is completely free of the ingrained hostility which is the starting point of all but the very best Indian writing on China and China-India relations in the past seven decades. From its very first pages this book

views the Chinese, notably the upwardly mobile new middle classes and the highly aspirational intelligentsia, as ordinary people trying to climb the ladder of success within their own society. This is refreshing, to say the least, and the fact that Shastri has encased his observations in a slim patina of humour makes everything he says more believable and enlightening.

One of the more important of Shastri's many observations is the complete asymmetry of perception between how the Indian intelligentsia views China and how its Chinese counterpart views India. While Indians are acutely aware of China and regard it with a mixture of hostility and envy, the average Chinese city dweller is barely conscious of India as a factor in his or her life.

One, almost certainly the main, reason for this is that we not only emerged the losers, but by burying the Henderson Brooks report from 1962 till the present day, we did not allow our public and our intelligentsia to understand the true causes of that war. The government's silence has therefore kept alive the humiliation that all Indians, including myself (then an impressionable 23-year-old), felt at our ignominious defeat in 1962, and which is still alive in most of us today.

Almost none of the present generation of students and policymakers have read Tolstoy's preface to his immortal novel *War and Peace*. This consists of a single crisp sentence:

"To understand all is to forgive all."

By hiding the Henderson Brooks report (an investigative review of the Indian Army's operations during the Sino-Indian War of 1962) for sixty-three years, successive Indian governments of every persuasion have denied Indians that understanding, and therefore that capacity to forgive. As a result, our governments—one after the other in mule-train-like succession—have forgone every chance of reconciliation with China, and forsworn the massive benefits that would have flowed from it. What is even more regrettable is that it has allowed the rank and file of the Indian intelligentsia to harbour a resentment towards China, that China has tried, more than once, to alleviate, but failed.

Shastri's book does not contain even a smidgen of this resentment. So, it gives its readers the chance to join him in his enjoyment of China's successes and to sympathise with it for its failures. Those are the gates to

a better and, dare I hope this in a time of genocidal war, more peaceful future for our war-torn world.

— Prem Shankar Jha

Economist and Visiting Professor at Harvard University;
former Editor of *Hindustan Times* and *The Financial Express*, and
Information Adviser to Prime Minister V.P. Singh; and author of, among
other books, *The Perilous Road to the Market: The Political Economy of
Reform in Russia, India and China* and *Crouching Dragon, Hidden Tiger:
Can China and India Dominate the West?*

As India and China seek a new *modus vivendi* after an avoidable period of mistrust it is imperative that we get an authentic Indian view of China not impaired by Western blinkers. Shastri Ramachandaran offers us a truly Indian view of contemporary China. These essays should help the increasing number of Indian businesspersons and tourists visiting China get a better appreciation of a rising power.

— Sanjaya Baru

Author and economist, former Editor of *Business Standard*
and *The Financial Express*, and Media Adviser to
Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

Only a handful of Indian journalists who have lived and worked in China for a considerable number of years have published their experiences with meaningful analysis and a balanced approach. Shastri Ramachandaran is one of them. This book, *Chindia: Journey to an Asian Century*, like the earlier one, *Beyond Binaries: The World of India and China*, is not only a mine of information about China, and India-China relations, but also provides readers a new perspective far removed from both the Western perspective and that of the Indian media.

The, by and large, negative perception and assessment which the Indian media, in particular the electronic media in local languages, has projected over the years and continues to do so even now cannot be exaggerated. Public opinion of China among Indians is a reflection of the misinformation fed by the media. This cannot go on forever. Hence the dire need for this book. Undoubtedly, media disinformation is not a recent phenomenon. It has been going on since India's humiliation in 1962.

This book has many qualities of appeal for all those from India who wish to learn about contemporary China as well as current India-China relations from an unbiased observer. Undeniably, there is a shortage of

such writers in this country. This book is a must-read for those desirous of learning about China's success story. Any possibility of normalisation of ties between the two emerging powers is remote unless there is a balanced picture on both sides. Shastri Ramachandaran's book is a sincere and serious attempt towards this.

— **Sreemati Chakrabarti**

Chairperson and Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies,
New Delhi; author of *China and the Naxalites*; and former Professor
and Head of East Asian Studies Department and Dean of the
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Delhi.

It is a privilege to introduce this new work, *Chindia: Journey to an Asian Century*, by Shastri Ramachandaran at this point in time, when the many well-known stalwarts of Sinology have died or stopped writing. The likes of Giri Deshingkar and Mira Sinha-Bhattacharjea, who have passed away, and Manoranjan Mohanty are not easily substitutable. They have left illuminating work, which will be read by scholars and future historians too.

There is a large galaxy of retired diplomats who are keen watchers of China but they constitute a specific group, mostly interested in politics and economics. A few might write someday. They remain linked with China-related seminars and gatherings, and with universities. The three best-known ones retain insight but they do not write, to the best of my knowledge.

For 15 years Sharmishta Mohanty organized a marvellous annual literary collaboration with Chinese poets and writers in both countries, which gave many of us a chance to gauge cultural changes in China.

Now, I have to depend mostly on journalistic coverage. Hence, I am delighted that Shastri's book covers both the scholarly and the everyday in China. His long acquaintance with China is valuable.

Like India, China too is a changing country and an old civilisation. A book by a younger, committed impartial Indian writer is a gift to students in India, studying the politics of China and its changing cultural anthropology.

— **Ashis Nandy**

Author, Honorary Fellow and former Director of the Centre for the
Study of Developing Societies; awarded the Fukuoka Asian Culture Prize
and named among the world's Top 100 public intellectuals in 2008.

This book by Shastri Ramachandaran, written in his inimitable and highly readable racy style, is studded with metaphorical idioms and figurative phrases on a variety of subjects that fall under the main theme of India-China relations. Divided into four sections, the book invites the readers to look into many facets of contemporary China, ranging from the failure of the one-child policy to a much-publicised judicial trial, from conspicuous consumption to living at subsistence level and so on.

With his keen eye and analytical mind, sharpened by his firsthand, personal knowledge and understanding gained by navigating China's unique social, economic and cultural landscape, and the regional disparities, the author points out the well-thought-out strategy its government has evolved to re-industrialise the country's north-eastern region, a strategy that India can gainfully learn from. The author also offers a sequential presentation of the economic developments in both India and China, indicating where India lacks and where it has the potential to forge ahead. While the author allows the economic questions to interlace and overlap the political ones of both countries, his overriding concern is the border question—which dates back to colonial times—that prompts him to listen carefully to the calibrated statements of the rulers of both countries, effectively read between the lines and grasp the sub-texts. In the words of A.G. Noorani, a scholar on the subject, “the border dispute is a heady cocktail of history, law, morality, and expediency. None of these factors can be ignored; none singly can be decisive.”

The author, however, sees from the recent diplomatic moves by both sides that some substantial solution may well be in the offing. It is repeatedly emphasised that despite the unresolved boundary dispute, the volume of trade between the two countries is steadily increasing, although the balance of trade is not in favour of India. This can be offset, according to the author, by Chinese capital investment in India. The success of such an arrangement is, in the long run, predicated upon a resolution of the border dispute. In passing, it must be emphasised that the author's observations about India's relations with some of its other neighbours need updating in view of the many seismic changes that have taken place. The author's objective and non-partisan narrative includes vignettes of life in contemporary China. The Tibetan travelogue laced with literary flavour is enjoyable as well as insightful.

Readers like me would hope that the author's optimism is not vitiated by the vicissitudes of history but instead translates into the emergence of an Asian Century led by the two Asian giants—thus actualising a veritable Chindia.

— S.V. Rajadurai

Writer, including on China, social activist and former Professor
of Periyar Studies, Bharathidasan University, Tamil Nadu.

Shastri Ramachandaran's latest book on China, *Chindia: Journey to an Asian Century*, is a refreshing addition to the universe of books on China published in India. For three main reasons.

First, his broad sweep and lived experience of China covers much more than the usually beaten track of the border dispute and other problems in the India-China arena. Many novel aspects of China thus stand revealed to the Indian reader. Second, Shastri's journalistic training makes him a healthy sceptic of official media—whether Chinese or Indian. Instead, he depends on personal observation and research to reach evidence-based conclusions. Third, his writing style is conversational, bereft of jargon and unfettered by footnotes, whilst his anecdotes engage the reader.

His insights, though, are sharp. Here are two examples. Early in the book, he notes that thousands of Indian traders, entrepreneurs and professionals live or work in China or travel there regularly. Their own prosperity depends on how accurately they assess the risks and opportunities inherent in the Chinese economy and polity. Even so, neither the Government of India nor the media has thought it fit to seek their assessments on these crucial matters.

Finally, Shastri concludes that no Indian politician, howsoever “strong,” who faces elections, will risk a boundary agreement with China which involves “give and take.” In his view, this can only happen when India and China find a larger “common purpose.” What might that be? Shastri does not say, we can only speculate: will it need to be something existential like disastrous climate change or another global pandemic to bring these Asian giants together?

— **Ravi Bhoothalingam**

Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi
and former President, Oberoi Hotels.

Trade, business, and investments can bring people and nations together. History bears witness to this truth, though there are undoubtedly exceptions. Bharat and China dominated the world till 1800, then declined together, then started rising again only in the past few decades, admittedly at different rates of growth. Together, they can bring in the Asian Century better than separately. Shastri Ramachandaran makes great points in this regard.

— **R. Gopalakrishnan**

Author and former Director of Tata Sons and Vice Chairman, HUL;
and co-author of *Chanakya and Sun Tzu: A Business Lens on Trade,
Thought and Travel*.

Drawing on years of firsthand reporting from China, expert access, and rare insider perspectives, Shastri Ramachandaran's *Chindia: Journey to an Asian Century* masterfully maps China's society, politics, and global posture alongside the complexities of India-China relations. From border crises and economic competition to diplomacy, media, and inequality, it offers a layered, balanced narrative grounded in on-the-ground experience. Erudite yet accessible, it guides readers through disputes, cooperation, and future possibilities shaping the Asian Century, making it essential reading for scholars, practitioners, and anyone seeking a deeper grasp of Asia's evolving strategic landscape.

— B.R. Deepak

Professor at Centre for Chinese & Southeast Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University; writer, editor and translator in English, Mandarin and Hindi; and author of the two-volume *Rising India and China: Strategic Rivalry in the Himalayas and Indo-Pacific*.

Shastri Ramachandaran, a versatile journalist with deep knowledge of China where he has worked for Chinese publications, delves into his rich experience of nearly two decades of writing on China and India-China relations, to present a comprehensive and engrossing book, *Chindia: Journey to an Asian Century*.

This book represents a continuum to Ramachandaran's previous book, *Beyond Binaries: The World of India and China*. The author's optimism that there will be normalisation of relations between India and China by overcoming every obstacle in the way of reconciliation—by means of cooperation, not confrontation—comes through in several chapters. The gradual and calibrated approach adopted by diplomacy has been overtaken by the enthusiasm of business and industry to restore normalcy. China's economic renaissance, the political continuum and the cultural transformation by absorbing several Western economic tenets in a civilisational ethos find expression in this brilliant depiction. The Belt and Road Initiative, India's counter strategies and China's engagement with Africa, ASEAN and South Asia, and India's soft power diplomacy make for complex geopolitical strategies of engagement across bilateral and multilateral fora.

— V. Srinivas

Chief Secretary of Rajasthan and President, International Institute of Administrative Sciences.

The author's lived experience enriches his narrative across the many layers of the India-China relationship, revealing why the two nations must constantly balance rivalry with cooperation. Insightful, grounded and highly accessible, *Chindia: Journey to an Asian Century* fills a long-standing gap—offering Indian readers of every background a clear, compelling window into contemporary China.

— **Santosh Pai**

Partner at Dentons Link Legal, Honorary Fellow at Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi, and member of Confederation of Indian Industry's core group on China.

Chindia: Journey to an Asian Century is a timely book with a unique perspective by an author who has spent considerable time and energy travelling, understanding, appreciating and analysing the potential of two great Asian nations with long, common borders, history and heritage. From this book it appears that the relationship between China and India has the potential to design and define the future of the world and the future of humanity going forward in the 21st century.

— **Sam Pitroda**

Thinker, inventor, entrepreneur and technocrat, policy adviser to Prime Ministers Rajiv Gandhi and Manmohan Singh, and 'mastermind of India's telecom revolution.'

Shastri Ramachandaran's *Chindia: Journey to an Asian Century* offers a rare and thoughtful exploration of the complex and evolving relationship between India and China. Drawing on decades of journalistic engagement and firsthand experience within Chinese media institutions, the author provides a textured account that moves beyond the conventional binaries of rivalry and partnership. The book captures the multiple dimensions of China's transformation—from its political and economic structures to its social and cultural dynamics—while situating these changes within the broader canvas of India-China relations.

What makes this work particularly valuable is its grounded perspective: Ramachandaran writes not as a distant analyst but as an observer who has lived within the spaces he describes. The narrative interweaves reportage, policy insights, and personal reflections to illuminate the shifting patterns of cooperation, competition and mistrust that shape Asia's most consequential bilateral relationship.

At a time when public discourse often reduces India-China relations to simplistic geopolitical frames, *Chindia: Journey to an Asian Century* invites readers to engage with complexity. It encourages a deeper understanding of China's internal dynamics and argues for a more nuanced and informed approach to managing one of the defining relationships of the 21st century. For scholars, policymakers and general readers alike, this book is an insightful contribution to contemporary debates on Asia's future.

— **Rityusha Mani Tiwary**

China studies expert and faculty, University of Delhi,
and Associate Editor of *China Report*.