

Culture, Relativism, and Economics: India and China in Comparison

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Introduction

India and China prospered during the medieval and early modern periods, contributing over 50% of the world's GDP (Consulate General of India). However, both countries encountered significant economic difficulties due to colonization. In recent decades, they have revived their roles as economic giants. This paper explores how their respective cultures and philosophies have been pivotal in their economic rise, decline, and resurgence.

Historically, China sustained a centralized government, especially under the Tang, Song, and Ming dynasties, which allowed greater state control over trade and economic policies. This stable governance facilitated both domestic and maritime trade routes, spurring economic growth. Moreover, China's focus on self-cultivation and Confucian values promoted social order and collective responsibility. In contrast, India achieved substantial progress under several powerful dynasties like the Maurya, Gupta, and Cholas in the South, yet mostly remained politically fragmented. Although India experienced economic and cultural advancements under these dynasties, the absence of consistent centralized power led to the emergence of the Delhi Sultanate, the Mughals, and then the British Raj, who prioritized wealth extraction over domestic development. Foreign rule impeded India's economic progress as external powers directed resources toward their own gains rather than investing in Indian infrastructure or innovation.

India and China have experienced remarkable economic transformations and were among the earliest civilizations to establish enduring political structures. Despite their cultural disparities, both economies thrived until the influx of imperial forces. Given the triumphs and setbacks within the cultural and philosophical contexts of India and China, how do these elements influence the similarities and differences in their economic models? This research article will closely analyze how the prevailing philosophies in Indian and Chinese cultures have shaped the economic principles in these nations.

Problem Statement

India and China continue to be prominent players in the global economy. China is known for its wide-ranging manufacturing capabilities, while India has emerged as a major provider of services internationally. Both nations boast some of the largest labor forces in the world. Their economic parallels are evident, but do they extend beyond mere financial success? Historically, both India and China have been governed by numerous empires and have experienced significant colonial influence. While China has largely remained a cohesive entity, India's history reflects a fragmented control of power. This distinction arises from the differing philosophies that provided their frameworks. It is vital to conduct further research to understand whether the cultural and philosophical values of India and China have contributed to their present-day economic achievements.

Literature Review

There is no doubt that India and China have made significant economic strides in recent decades. The factors driving this advancement in each country have been widely debated. With rich cultural histories, one perspective is to examine how cultural influences have contributed to their economic progress.

Komarzyca posits that language has played a crucial role in the evolution of culture, consequently leading to the establishment of government and politics. He argues that the structure of language influences our thinking, thereby impacting politics, with culture acting as a mediating factor. Examples from Sanskrit in Hinduism and Mandarin are provided to illustrate this point. Hindu culture incorporates metaphysical beliefs, whereas Chinese culture often views language as a social tool for shaping personality and directing actions, which highlights power dynamics and avoids religious metaphysics. Considering China's 56 ethnic groups and India's many ethnically and religiously diverse communities, this evolution would have taken significant time. Both nations display considerable cultural diversity. Bhawuk notes a distinction: despite its various ethnicities, China has sustained unity under a single government. Cultural attributes and norms can significantly influence a country, shaping mindsets from early childhood through parents and other key figures. Grupe observes that societal norms play an essential role in the formation of political institutions, which in turn impact a country's engagement in international affairs and its competitive stance. Both India and China highly value trust and a commitment to education, which directly affects their social and economic development.

A society's cultural norms influence not only its competitiveness but also the roles assigned to different genders. Confucianism, whose doctrines still influence Chinese culture, maintains that a man's virtue is assessed by his performance as a son, husband, and father. In contrast, a woman's

value is determined by her proficiency as a daughter, wife, and mother. Historically, these beliefs have excluded women from prominent positions, which may have impeded China's economic development until the late 20th century (Li). Ultimately, the values and norms embraced by a nation shape its developmental priorities (Friedman). The ethics of those in authority can direct societal progress.

Unlike China, which largely built its cultural framework on Confucian principles, India's cultural foundation arises from a fusion of major traditions rooted in its diverse religions (Kauzo Mino). The basis is profoundly shaped by Hinduism's teachings of dharma (duty), karma (action and consequence), and moksha (liberation). Furthermore, Buddhism and Jainism, emphasizing non-violence, compassion, and self-discipline, have also significantly influenced this heritage. These values fostered a sense of community and collective responsibility, contributing to economic stability and progress. An essential cultural philosophy impacting India's economic development is the caste system (Philippe). While often criticized for enforcing social hierarchies and restricting social mobility, it also enabled labor specialization. Nonetheless, the British exploited this caste system to fragment and control India for their gain, causing a substantial negative effect on the Indian economy.

However, no matter what lens we evaluate a country's culture through, it is important to remember that separate societies have separate cultural codes. These cultural codes are the shared beliefs, values, norms, and practices that define a society's way of life. They dictate acceptable behavior within a society and guide individuals' actions and interaction

All cultures have equal value, significance, and status (Sarma).

The Rise: Historical and Cultural Influences

India and China have rich and diverse histories that have significantly influenced their political as well as their economic development over millennia (Desai; Bhawuk).

In India, the Neolithic Age (8000 BC – 4000 BC) saw the invention of the wheel and the emergence of early urban settlements. This era was succeeded by the Chalcolithic Age (4000 BC – 1500 BC), notable for the introduction of copper usage, and the Indus Valley Civilization (1600 BC – 600 BC), which became one of the world's earliest urban cultures. During this period, the Vedas, a collection of religious texts, began to take shape, significantly influencing cultural and social development (Saraswat). These texts articulated the four objectives of human life: Dharma (the performance of actions beneficial to both the individual and society), Artha (the acquisition of wealth), Kama (the enjoyment and fulfillment of life), and Moksha (self-realization). The philosophies outlined in the Vedas formed the foundational principles upon which social structures were established and impacted India's engagement in trade (Saraswat).

At the time when these ideas were being developed, ancient India transitioned into the Iron Age, marking significant scientific and mathematical advancements during this Vedic period. This era also saw a division of labor that eventually evolved into the caste system—an enduring social hierarchy. Iron tools such as swords and spears, with swords becoming status symbols, were forged during this time, aiding ancient Indian civilizations in trade activities. Rivers served as primary routes for exporting goods, while chariots and wagons facilitated land transport. As trade expanded among civilizations, the barter system declined in favor of metal currency, which gained widespread acceptance.

In China, Confucius's teachings became an integral part of Chinese culture. The Xia (Hsia) Dynasty (4000 BC – 1500 BC) is recognized as one of China's earliest dynasties. During the Shang and Zhou Dynasties (1600 BC – 600 BC), Confucianism emerged alongside a distinctive political and social system. This era also saw the development of writing systems, specialization, bronze technology, and horse-drawn chariots (“Timelines: CHINA | Asia for Educators | Columbia University”). Specialization spurred social development, creating roles for political leaders, farmers, and merchants, much like the European feudal system. The Zhou Dynasty established a hierarchical structure with the royal family at the apex, followed by aristocratic families acting as lords. Following the fall of the Zhou Dynasty, a period of instability prompted the Chinese populace to seek order and control, paving the way for Confucius. His teachings, known as "Confucianism," became embedded in Chinese culture, emphasizing respect, kindness, and self-discipline (“Timelines: CHINA | Asia for Educators | Columbia University”). Confucianism asserts that a man's virtue is measured by his fulfillment of social roles such as son, husband, and father, while a woman's value is judged by her performance as daughter, wife, and mother. These moral codes passed down through generations and often marginalized women by confining them to less significant tasks like cleaning and cooking. China played a key role in the Silk Road Trade, facilitating the exchange of goods and ideas among various cultures and civilizations. This trade also brought agricultural innovations, boosting the food supply.

During this time period, India and China experienced significant advancements that marked the beginning of their global impacts. In India, the caste system developed by the Vedas resulted in limited social mobility among occupations. It was believed that a person's performance in their previous life determined their caste in the next life. Although this structure "divided" society according to Western standards, it was efficient at completing tasks through labor specialization. Similarly, China's political hierarchy promoted unity through order, implementing slightly stricter regulations compared to India. This resemblance between ancient India and China contributed to their successful economic growth, once again, success defined by Western standards (Komarzyca). This raises the question of why these cultures flourished while others did not. Some suggest that language facilitated the creation of culture, which then shaped

government and politics. Language influences our thinking (by how words are structured together), which in turn affects politics, with "culture acting as the mediating factor" (Komarzyca). While this may have played a prominent role in shaping Indian and Chinese culture, it is important to not take this as the main cause of it. Other geographic, economic, and social factors would have played into this "flourishing." For example, the fact that China was isolated would have been an advantage. Even though China was isolated to an extent, it helped develop a major trade route.

Looking forward to around 100 BC, China played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Silk Road Trade around 100 BC, becoming a significant participant. Due to this, China has accumulated substantial wealth through its involvement. This grew their empire, increasing the quality of life of its citizens (Desai). As this major trade route evolved, commerce between India, China, and various other civilizations flourished (Grupe and Rose). In India, Tamil literature gained popularity, alongside significant scientific advancements. Esteemed institutions such as Nalanda University were founded, attracting international scholars and advancing the economy (Desai). Although Western cultures also made progress, Asian civilizations remained at the forefront of innovation during this period (Bhawuk). The type of progress that is being referred to, is economic growth. It is important to note that this progress is based on Western definitions. Naturally, while civilizations have a goal to grow and develop, the goal of all cultures is not focused on creating more items to be traded with others. Their goals may be to focus more on the people, and their own well-being. As a result, the term "progress" remains vague in its definition, when looking at it from the perspective of a relativist.

In China, after a phase of instability ended with the rise of the Tang Dynasty, the influence of Buddhism peaked. Confucian teachings gradually blended with Buddhist principles, giving rise to a new Chinese culture (Bhawuk). Devotees of Buddhism endeavored to make it more widely accepted, though initial resistance was encountered. While it took place over the course of many years, this showcased the adaptability of China's culture. It highlights values of Chinese culture, such as being respectful, that each of its citizens has. This further contributes to a relativist mindset (Sarma). Buddhism eventually gained acceptance when its elements were integrated with familiar Confucian concepts, illustrating that Chinese culture tended to embrace new ideas more readily when they were fused with existing traditions (Li).

In India, the Maurya Dynasty (322–185 BC) unified much of the subcontinent under Chandragupta Maurya and later Ashoka the Great, who embraced Buddhism. Ashoka's promotion of Buddhism led to the establishment of trade routes and the spread of Buddhist culture and art, fostering economic growth through increased trade and cultural exchange (Desai). Following the Mauryas, the Gupta Empire (320–550 AD) is often referred to as the "Golden Age of India." The Guptas made significant advancements in science, mathematics,

astronomy, literature, and art, leading to intellectual prosperity and economic growth (Grupe and Rose). The establishment of universities like Nalanda attracted scholars from across the world, making the empire a hub for trade and commerce (Bhawuk). In southern India, the Chola Dynasty (9th–13th centuries AD) established strong maritime trade links with Southeast Asia, China, and the Middle East, boosting the economy and facilitating cultural exchange (Komarzyca and Fras). The Cholas also made significant contributions to art and architecture, with the construction of grand temples that became centers of economic and cultural activity. The Pallava Dynasty (3rd–9th centuries AD) and the Rashtrakuta Dynasty (8th–10th centuries AD) also contributed to cultural and economic development through their patronage of the arts and promotion of trade. The cultural practices during these dynasties, including the promotion of religion, art, and education, had a profound impact on economic activities, creating a vibrant and prosperous society that left a lasting legacy on Indian civilization (Friedman et al.).

In China, the period between 600 BC and 1200 AD saw the rise of several influential dynasties, including the Zhou, Qin, Han, Sui, Tang, and Song. The Zhou Dynasty (1046–256 BC) laid the foundation for Chinese culture, with the development of Confucianism and Daoism, which influenced Chinese society and governance (Li). The Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC) unified China and standardized weights, measures, and currency, facilitating trade and economic growth (Desai).

The Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) expanded China's territory and established the Silk Road, a network of trade routes that connected China with the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. The Silk Road facilitated the exchange of goods, ideas, and culture, contributing to economic prosperity (Grupe and Rose). The Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD) is often considered a golden age of Chinese culture and economic growth. The Tang rulers promoted trade and cultural exchange, leading to the flourishing of art, literature, and technology. The Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD) continued this trend, with significant advancements in science, technology, and commerce. The Song rulers implemented policies that promoted agricultural productivity, leading to population growth and urbanization (Cooper and Farooq). The cultural practices during these dynasties, including the promotion of Confucianism, art, and education, had a profound impact on economic activities, creating a vibrant and prosperous society that left a lasting legacy on Chinese civilization (Li). The most important fact to take away from these historical descriptions is that the things that were special and unique to each culture allowed them to evolve and advance. This is similar to the philosophy present in Darwin's Natural Selection. The traits that were useful and helped the civilizations prosper stayed and evolved in ways to better the civilization, this would include activities like strengthening political systems, or trading more often. The timeline of said events are summarized below.

Figure A: Timeline of important historical events of India and China from 8000 BC to present day.

Time Period	India	China
8000 BC – 4,000 BC	Neolithic Age: Discovery of the wheel and first urban settlements	---
4000 BC – 1500 BC	Chalcolithic Age: Copper started being used, and the Indus Valley Civilization came into existence	Xia (Hsia) Dynasty
BC 1600–BC 600	Iron Age: Vedas are made and major civilizations form.	Shang and Zhou Dynasties emerged and fell. Confucious writing start getting attention during the Political and social system similar to feudalism
BC 326	Alexander the Great invades North India	—
BC 100	Silk Road Trade Routes Developed <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tamil Literature develops, poems gain popularity 	Silk Road Trade Routes Developed
CE 100	Spice trade with Rome	
220 CE	Urban Infrastructure develops	Han Dynasty ends Confucianism was established as an orthodox Civil service examinations
220-589 CE	Gupta Empire The orbit of planets is discovered	Six Dynasty Period: Period of instability after the Han Dynasty falls
CE 600-700	Islam comes to India	Tang Dynasty emerges Height of Buddhist influence in China

700-900	Chola Empire	–
900-1526	Muslim Rule in India Delhi Sultanate	Song Dynasty (1276) The monetization of the economy Growth in commerce and maritime trade Urban expansion and technological innovations.
1858	British Raj	Opium Wars
1912-1949	Peace movements gain popularity	Republic Period Weak central government
1947	Indian Independence	
1949		Formation of Peoples Republic of China
Present	Parliamentary Democratic Republic.	One-Party State governed by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)

The cultural practices during these dynasties had a profound impact on economic activities. The promotion of religion, art, and education led to the establishment of trade routes, the construction of grand architectural projects, and the flourishing of intellectual pursuits. These cultural advancements attracted traders, scholars, and artisans, fostering economic growth and cultural exchange. The emphasis on trade and commerce, coupled with the patronage of the arts, created a vibrant and prosperous society that left a lasting legacy on both Indian and Chinese civilizations (Kumar).

Indian and Chinese cultures developed independently, and only later came into contact with each other as trade between civilizations developed and as Buddhism spread from India to China. It would be unethical, in a sense, to use a measurement system of a country on the other side of the world to indicate “how well” it is developing. The term “how well” is dependent on each person’s perception of what success is– it is relative to each individual. Looking more closely at Confucianism, one may find that adherence to Confucian moral tradition has been responsible for preventing women from identifying themselves as equally worthy human beings. A lack of

women in political roles means that their perspectives are not heard, so social development may not happen. This has also been the case in India where traditional gender roles and patriarchal structures often limited women's participation in political and economic activities. This may have impacted the rate at which the countries developed. If everyone in both civilizations were fully utilized, then perhaps both civilizations would have developed far beyond imaginable. Perhaps, these long-standing beliefs and structures have had an impact on the education levels of India and China today. It is described in the table below. Today, a country's success is mainly determined by its economic, social, and political stability. A country's economy depends on a strong workforce, and can only grow substantially if the employees are educated. If these social structures persist, then a country is limited in its scope for economic success, as per Western standards. China has a large workforce, with a big part of it taking up factory jobs. India also has a large workforce, but has a growing tertiary sector, due to the widespread use of english in India. This is demonstrated by the contrast in education level percentages, where India has a total of 8.4%, compared to China at 2.6%.

Figure C: Comparison of education level between India and China

Level of education	India	China
Lower	6.7%	0.8%
Middle	8.6%	3.5%
Upper	21.1%	9.8%
Total	8.4%	2.6%

Furthermore, the table below summarizes the main cultural aspects of both countries that were mentioned above. It is evident that both countries are greatly diverse, with China having 56 ethnic groups and India being composed of 6 major religions. The similarity between these countries is that they value the concepts of interdependence and collectivist thinking. These values cannot simply come into place in a matter of a few years– they have to be assimilated into existing structures over a long period. The values present in India and China are the result of being in place of these countries' structures for many years. Perhaps it was the similarities that prompted the economic successes of these countries today– this article will examine this topic later on.

Figure C: Economic and Cultural Comparison Between India and China

	India	China
Diversity	Many diverse groups, ethnically and religiously	56 ethnic groups
Religion	Hindus 79.8%, Muslims 14.2%, Christians 2.3%, Sikhs 1.7%, Buddhists 0.7%, Jains 0.4%	It doesn't have a main religion, however, many follow Confucian teachings
Cultural Traits	Norm-driven, avoid causing embarrassment	Property and uniqueness
Self-concept	Collectivist, interdependent	Collectivist, interdependent

The Decline: Imperialism and Colonization

Imperialism in India began with the Delhi Sultanate, which ruled most of northern India from the 13th to the 16th century. The Mughal Empire, which followed in 1526, was also an imperial force. Established by Babur, the Mughal Empire expanded its territory through military conquest and diplomacy. Under leaders like Akbar, the empire extended over much of the Indian subcontinent (Smith). By the early 18th century, the Mughal Empire began to decline, and regional powers such as the Marathas began reclaiming parts of it (Jones).

The British East India Company, initially set up for trade, seized the opportunity presented by the weakening Mughal Empire. Starting with Bengal in the mid-18th century, they gradually expanded control over India through a mix of military campaigns, alliances, and treaties (Kumar). Governance of India was transferred to the British Empire in the mid-19th century, initiating the British Raj until Indian independence in 1947 (Brown). The colonization of India can be attributed to several factors, particularly the cultural caste system, which the British exploited to divide and rule, and the fragmentation of regional powers, which prevented a unified resistance (Desai).

In Contrast, China's centralized governance has historically been its strength. However, during the Qing Dynasty, political power diminished due to the rampant opium trade conducted by

British companies in China (Huang). This trade resulted in widespread opium addiction, which significantly reduced the productivity of the Chinese workforce (Wang). In an effort to combat this decline, the Qing Dynasty took measures to restrict trade with foreign merchants, ultimately leading to the Opium Wars (Smith). These conflicts in the mid-19th century forced China to open its borders to foreign powers, allowing Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and Japan to establish spheres of influence. These foreign powers imposed unequal treaties, exploited resources, and disrupted China's traditional economic systems, causing profound economic hardships (Brown).

The cultural and social structures of both India and China played significant roles in allowing foreign powers to gain influence and eventually rule, leading to adverse economic impacts. Both countries' cultural and social frameworks, while initially sources of strength, ultimately facilitated foreign domination and economic exploitation (Wang).

The Resurgence: India and China

China's recovery from imperialism and colonization involved significant economic and social transformations. After the end of imperial rule and the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the country embarked on a series of economic reforms (Chen). These reforms included land redistribution, the establishment of state-owned enterprises, and the implementation of central planning. The cultural context played a crucial role in this recovery, as Confucian values of discipline, hard work, and respect for authority were leveraged to mobilize the population towards collective goals (Wang). Additionally, the emphasis on education and technological advancement helped China to rapidly industrialize and modernize its economy (Zhang). With the combination of economic reforms and opening the economy to foreign investment in the late 1970s, the Chinese economy experienced rapid growth and transformation (Lee).

India's journey of rebuilding after colonial rule emphasized self-reliance and structured economic planning. Following its independence in 1947, India embraced a mixed economy, blending aspects of socialism and capitalism (Patel). The government enacted land reforms, fostered public sector enterprises, and pursued industrialization through five-year plans (Kumar). This focus on self-reliance and strategic economic planning drew inspiration from the Vedas, which advocate for self-sufficiency, community well-being, and sustainable living, as discussed earlier in this paper. Post-independence policies aimed at cultivating a self-sustaining economy echoed these values. The nation's vibrant cultural heritage and stress on education and innovation contributed to the development of a robust and adaptive economy. India's significant economic reforms emerged in the early 1990s when it opened up to foreign investments, eased trade barriers, and deregulated the economy (Rao).

Following the decline, this resurgence was shown in the increase in the Human Development Index (HDI) and GDP percentages for both India and China. This is exemplified by the table below. The development in India and China is shown in the table below. In 1950, the HDI of China was 0.163, which is relatively low, and it was 0.160 for India. Sixty years later, in 2010, the HDI for China was 0.691, and 0.519 for India. This is a massive increase and can be attributed to the risks both countries took in hopes of becoming economic powers in the world again (Zhang).

Figure B: Comparing GDP and HDI between India and China

Year	HDI (China)	HDI (India)	GDP% (China)	GDP% (India)
1950	0.163	0.160	4.5	4.2
1980	0.428	0.427	7.83	6.74
2000	0.584	0.491	8.49	3.84
2010	0.691	0.519	10.64	8.50

Conclusion

When analyzing the economic “successes and failures” of India and China, there is no doubt that cultural values played a role in shaping their successes and failures. The collectivist nature of both societies, with India’s Vedic scriptures, caste system, and China’s Confucian hierarchy, promoted a strong sense of social order, but the way this order was enforced differed between the two. China’s more unified approach under centralized governance allowed for rapid development, while India’s fractured political landscape led to slower growth. It would be wrong to evaluate their progress solely through economic outcomes. Cultural relativism reminds us that the success of a society cannot be measured by one standard, especially one rooted in Western values. From a Western perspective, China’s success in trade might be seen as a more effective use of resources, but within the cultural context of India, maintaining harmony and social stability was just as important as economic expansion. Both countries pursued different objectives based on their cultural values, which in turn influenced their economic models. India’s

emphasis on spiritual fulfillment through the Vedas often took precedence over material wealth, while China's Confucian ideals encouraged participation in trade and the accumulation of wealth as a reflection of good governance. It is also important to note that China has always been governed in an authoritative style. This means that China can adopt new policies at a quicker pace than India, as any new rules only need to be passed through government officials. India, on the other hand, is a democracy, so any action taken is delayed by making sure that it is in the interest of all parties. While it may take longer, this delayed growth is more sustainable. Happier people who are in accordance with the actions of the government may lead to sustainable growth and a prosperous society. While this article explored the "economic successes and failures" of India and China as a result of their cultural contexts, it is important to note that the tools for measuring these successes and failures are Western-made and based. Other factors surely influence this, the main one being culture. It is important to look at situations from a relativist perspective at first, so as to not make sudden assumptions. The main takeaway is that, yes, India and China have had "failures" but they are relative to each culture. What is a failure for one, may be a success for another. Both India and China are still developing, and despite the many challenges and setbacks they have faced, they have both shown adaptability and an enduring commitment to their cultural values.

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