Building personal and political bridges between Pakistan and China

By SUDENSA SARKAR

When Mushahid Hussain was 13, his father Amjad Hussain, a colonel in the Pakistani military, was posted to Dhaka city, the current capital of Bangladesh which was at that time still a part of Pakistan. Accompanying his father from Lahore, the teen found himself lonely in the new city at first. This was in the 1960s and the means of entertainment and communication was very limited. Television broadcasts had just started in Pakistan and were not accessible everywhere. So his father gave him a radio on his birthday to keep loneliness at bay.

The shiny new Philips shortwave radio led to a passionate love affair with China.

“The radio became a close companion,” says Hussain, “I started listening to Radio Peking daily and followed the intense political debates during the ‘cultural revolution’ (1966-1976).”

“I used to subscribe to Chinese periodicals like Peking Review, China Pictorial and China Reconstructs.”

Today, the teen has become a state senator and the radio has been long since replaced by the iPad. But Hussain’s passion for China remains as strong.

It led him to establish the Pakistan-China Institute (PCI) in Islamabad to offer a private non-governmental platform for promoting people-to-people cooperation between the two countries, as “a labor of love.”

“I have always felt an affinity towards China, almost a romance, as our best friend, close ally and strategic partner, whose role is crucial for our prosperity, security, and stability,” Hussain says.

To cultivate greater people-to-people links, PCI publishes a cultural magazine, Youlin, meaning good neighbors, in collaboration with the Xinjiang Association for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries.

“Since the website is both in Chinese and English, it can be a powerful form of communication between the two peoples,” says Dushka H Saiyid, editor of the monthly publication.

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Academic plans

This year, the government of the southeastern Sindh province announced plans to make Mandarin mandatory from grades six to 12 at both public and private schools. Muhammad Siddique Memon, Sindh’s education and literacy secretary, said in a press release that more Confucius Institutes would be opened at universities in Karachi and Hyderabad to train Chinese language teachers.

Karachi University plans to set up a Mandarin center in cooperation with the Confucius Institute. The target learners will range from primary to high school students.

The university has an agreement with China’s Sichuan University for bilateral academic cooperation. Students who complete the language course can attend a one-year advanced course at Sichuan University for free.

The growth of Mandarin has given rise to small-scale individual entrepreneurship as well.

SM Asim Qadri is a manager with a private company in Karachi. But being an MBA with a penchant for languages, he explores further business opportunities on the weekend. How far can you stretch Pakistani Rupees (40000?) Not too far, one would think. But Qadri guarantees five Sundays of gainful activity at his short Mandarin course at the Karachi Institute of Economics and Technology.

In 15 hours, he promises to teach some basic spoken Mandarin, what interest in the language and culture, and advise where to go for advanced studies.

“Learning spoken Chinese for today will be fruitful for tomorrow,” Qadri predicts.

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The publications are followed up on commerce, science and technology, education and youth activities.

“They thought it would be a good idea to bring the two countries together through dissemination of news and bridging the gap on access to the Chinese World.”

Started in 2009, the portal is edited by Muhammad Arif, a 32-year-old now doing a PhD in journalism from Hebei University in the city of Baoding, close to Beijing.

The contents come from a army of freelancers and volunteers in China, Pakistan and other countries. “We have 40,000 to 50,000 subscribers,” says Arif. “They are from 59 countries. In a week, we have nearly 800 surfers visiting our site.”

The publications are followed up by different cultural activities.

This year, PCI sent two Pakistani scholars to Shanghai University for “bilateral brainstroming” with Chinese peers on culture and other areas.

It also facilitated a visit by Musharraf Hussain Tarar, the 74-year-old celebrated Pakistani author, actor and mountaineer, to Xinjiang in northwest China to write the first travelogue from the region in Urdu, Pakistan’s national language.

Then there have been events like the Pakistan-China Media Forum, and a cultural show hosted with the Chinese embassy in Islamabad. There have also been launches of books on China and even a documentary, Rising China.

Besides cultural and political initiatives, PCI encourages Chinese investment in Pakistan for greater economic cooperation. It works as a consultancy for Chinese companies that are setting up business in Pakistan, helping them cope with the different regulations, culture and other aspects.

“The basic issues pertain to security, law and order, bureaucratic red tape which needs to be slashed in order to get things done, promises not kept in time, and, occasionally, allegations of graft,” Hussain explains.

About 15,000 Chinese techniciens, engineers and experts live in Pakistan, working in over 120 projects. These include the Gomal Zain Dam built in Waziristan – a rugged mountainous region in the northwest of Pakistan – by the Chinese State-owned company Sinohydro Corporation; and gold and copper mining in Sindh and Balochistan.

Hussain met his first Chinese official in 1986 when the then Chinese president Liu Xiaoqi visited East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Hussain had been one of the rows of students from the Adanpooe Public School who had waited with bouquets to greet Liu on arrival.

This May, as PCI chairman, he met Chinese Premier Li Keqiang twice when Li visited Pakistan. The first time, it was with a group of parliamentary leaders at the Senate of Pakistan, and later, with a think-tank delegation.

The media reported Li as lauding the PCIs role as icebreaker, saying such initiatives promoted such initiatives promoted people-to-people contact. He also recalled “very fond memories” of his own first visit to Pakistan 27 years ago as part of a youth delegation.

Now PCI is gearing up for another book launch, this one by Hussain himself.

“My first exclusive book on China, basically a history of our bilateral bond, will be published this year concurrently in Islamabad and Beijing,” he says.