

# ‘We’re working very hard to increase Bangladesh’s export to China’

Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Li Jiming shares his views on the depth and prospects of the bilateral relationship between Bangladesh and China in an exclusive interview with Porimol Palma of The Daily Star, on the occasion of China’s 73rd founding anniversary.

**What are the achievements from the Chinese State Councillor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s recent visit to Bangladesh?**

China and Bangladesh are amicable neighbours and strategic partners of cooperation. Through the visit, China and Bangladesh renewed commitment to their traditional friendship, reiterated the One China principle, agreed to deepen strategic integration, and further enhanced practical cooperation, thereby jointly committing to maintain stability in the region and beyond amid an uneasy international environment.

**Bangladesh is going through economic challenges in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. How can China help Bangladesh in mitigating this immediate challenge?**

To meet the present challenges, I think Bangladesh can do the following together with China: first, join the Global Development Initiative (GDI) proposed by China; second, fully utilise and benefit from the zero-tariff treatment to 98 percent of Bangladeshi products exported to China; third, advance studies on Bangladesh-China FTA and enhance common development of Bangladesh-China economy; fourth, accelerate the promotion of the MoU on special assistance plan for disaster prevention and mitigation; and fifth, promote the work related to taka-renminbi currency swap and enhance Bangladesh’s foreign exchange payment capacity.

**China has two new initiatives: Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Security Initiative (GSI). What implications do they have for**

**Bangladesh?**

President Xi Jinping has put forward these initiatives in response to the urgent needs of developing countries as well as global development and world peace, following the guideline of policy coordination and practical cooperation, so as to help the developing countries maintain national stability, promote economic recovery, and advance the 2030 Agenda.

**Bangladesh’s export to China is less than USD 1 billion a year, though the bilateral trade is USD 25 billion. Why is the trade gap so wide?**

To put it in another way, although there is a trade deficit, the imported textile raw materials and mechanical equipment (that comprise most of the amount) are all of great necessity and are helping Bangladesh’s RMG exports, manufacturing industry and development. So, we need a right perspective to view this temporary imbalance of trade, and we’re working very hard to increase Bangladesh’s export to China, to reduce trade deficit and maintain trade balances. The duty-free treatment of 98 percent tariff lines is granted by the Chinese government, precisely to increase Bangladesh’s exports to China.

**Since September 1, China is giving duty-free access to 98 percent of Bangladeshi products, which has been increased by one percent. What products would be included in the additional percentage, and can it make any significant increase in export to China?**

Several kinds of basic leather products have been added, which is good news for Bangladeshi exporters



Li Jiming, Chinese ambassador to Bangladesh

PHOTO: COURTESY

in the leather industry, an industry with huge potential. Businessmen in the leather industry have already been focusing on the opportunity provided by the 98 percent duty-free treatment. Programmes such as “Bangladesh leather and leather products promotion webinar” are undergoing and helping Chinese leather product manufacturing enterprises to form business relations with leather exporters in Bangladesh.

**Dhaka and Beijing signed an agreement for 27 projects with an estimated cost of USD 20 billion. As of now, only eight projects have been undertaken and USD 3.8 billion has been disbursed. Why is that and how can this be sped up?**

Well, this may not be accurate enough. Bangladesh and China have been actively cooperating and working together to promote the progress of the MoU projects. As far as I know, most of the major projects have been

progressing smoothly, more than eight are completed, and a good number of the others are expected to be completed by the end of 2024.

Here, we have to make it clear that the MoU on Strengthening Investment and Production Capacity Cooperation, signed during Chinese President Xi Jinping’s visit to Bangladesh in 2016, is not a commitment of a basket of Government Concessional Loan (GCL) or Preferential Buyers Credit (PBC). The 27 projects attached to the MoU are only a list of projects to be considered for promotion by both sides, not a list of GCL or PBC projects. It should be stressed that only projects that have been evaluated and approved by both sides and for which loan agreements have been signed are the GCL and PBC projects, for which the Chinese side would commit to provide GCL or PBC loan support.

**Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi proposed signing an MoU on**

**Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Cooperation Framework. How can signing this MoU help? Is the PPP model more efficient?**

It will help the governments to better play the regulatory role, select better quality enterprises to participate in the economic cooperation between Bangladesh and China, constantly improve the quality and efficiency of cooperation, and better avoid risks. At the same time, it will help Chinese companies better and more widely participate in Bangladesh’s construction in the fields of energy, urban development, ports, rail transit, roads and bridges, airports, and so on. We believe that signing a G2G MoU on PPP is an ideal way of enhancing bilateral cooperation and will serve the interests of both sides.

**High costs of projects and their commercial feasibility are an issue of concern. This is much talked about in the case of Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port. Do you have any new policy in mind regarding cost efficiency in Chinese projects and funding?**

All Chinese projects have been evaluated and approved by the Bangladesh government and the Chinese government before implementation. Economic feasibility and cost efficiency of the projects have been fully demonstrated by professional institutions on both sides and recognised by both governments. Bangladesh and China will continue to strengthen cooperation and work together in this area. If anyone can name any single Chinese-funded project that is commercially or financially unfeasible, please tell me.

**How do you want to cooperate**

**on environmental protection and climate change actions as Bangladesh is at the forefront of the challenges?**

Climate change and green development constitute one of the eight areas of GDI. Under this framework, China will carry out more extensive cooperation with Bangladesh in the fields of renewable resources and clean energy. We will encourage and guide Chinese enterprises to adopt more advanced technologies and equipment to invest in more environmentally friendly projects in Bangladesh.

**A common perception is that China is not doing enough in addressing the Rohingya crisis, given that you have strong influence in Myanmar. How do you respond to the criticism?**

China has been a facilitator between the two countries, and has always held that the issue should be resolved peacefully through bilateral negotiation and consultation. We have been providing support to both Bangladesh and Myanmar, aiming to improve the ground-level condition and to create a favourable environment for commencing repatriation. Because of the political change in Myanmar early last year, negotiations on the Rohingya issue were once suspended between Bangladesh and Myanmar. The international community should play a constructive role in the process of finding a durable solution to the Rohingya issue.

**To read the full interview, please visit our website.**

## To kill a mocking monster



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is a professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

I am trying to get this image out of my head. Over a hundred people of all ages walked in to find their spots on a boat that would take them to the other side of the Korotoa River to celebrate Mahalaya. These pilgrims joined the herd in good faith – they must go to the temple to invite their goddess before she starts descending from Mount Kailash for the annihilation of the monster. They would also pay tribute to their dead ancestors. There was not an inch of empty space left on the boat. The boatman waded back and forth to check how his passengers had been tucked in. Some last-minute passengers touched the rim in reverence or sprinkled waters with piety before the boat set sail.

These were devotees in Panchagarh district, at the northern tip of Bangladesh, who had hired this boat to visit the Bodeshwari temple. Surprisingly, none of them – of the

over a hundred pilgrims – pointed out how dangerous it was to travel like that. Not one soul protested saying, “I am not riding on this boat.” They simply sailed to their deaths. Within minutes, the overcrowded boat capsized and most of the devotees perished; at least 68 bodies have been found so far, with many still missing.

What prompted them to join this death march? A belief that they would be taken care of by divine providence! The practical reason was that it was the best they could afford. Who in their right mind would like to see their money wasted? The Korotoa River had other plans, though. However tame it looked in autumn, it had no place for recklessness. Shouldn’t I feel pity for these victims? Instead, I am upset by their blind foolishness. I am angry at those people at the shore who allowed them to dock dangerously and kept on recording the spectacle.

I am angry at the relatives who came to see them off for not talking sense to these people. The accident shows how cheap our lives have become. What good is paying compensation per body? Use that money to improve transport quality and safety rules. Use it to educate people and inculcate common sense.

I am trying to get another image out of my head. Hundreds of female students of Eden Women’s College were seen shouting and yelling,

of the college told *The Daily Star* that previous investigations were still ongoing, and she now seeks psychological counsellors to change the students’ mindsets.

My common sense tells me not to rock the boat carrying the Eves of Eden. They are no less mighty and lethal than their male colleagues, whom we have recently seen in full action. And the sad part is that the existential label that they are carrying and the jerseys that they are donning

**The Panchagarh boat capsizes shows how cheap our lives have become. What good is paying compensation per body? Use that money to improve transport quality and safety rules. Use it to educate people and inculcate common sense.**

beating up one another, pulling at each other’s hair, and banging on the iron gate in the middle of the night. The scene was raucous; I did not turn up my TV volume. A déjà vu. The allegations are serious and outright illegal: student leaders are allegedly engaged in seat-trading, extortion, torture, forcing other students to indulge in unethical activities, and controlling hostels and cafeterias. We have heard it before. The principal

are but temporary. Their essential identity is tied with power politics. They blindly join the party vehicle with the hope of being blessed by some divine providence. This is a slow death of a different kind: the mass killing of a generation. And the worst part is that they devour the image of their founder, who struggled to give us freedom.

I am trying to get this image out of my head. After a hiatus from

holding an administrative post at a private university, I resumed my job at the oldest university in the country. I am assigned a course named “Novels through Theory,” wherein I am teaching *Frankenstein*, a multi-layered text from the 19th century written by a 19-year-old Mary Shelley. The author believed that she was responsible for the death of her mother, who died of postpartum infection. Mary Shelley, therefore, wanted the human race to continue without the need for biological birth that kills many women. Her science fiction involves creating a life without the need for a mother. She makes her male protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, bring dead bodies to come to life in his lab.

My feminist reading of the novel shows gender performativity to argue that gender roles are elaborate social performances that one puts on in their everyday life. It goes beyond the fixed conceptions of “man” as “masculine” and “woman” as “feminine.” Victor is the “mother” of the creature, for instance.

I gave further examples of our national women’s football team, whose valour at the Dasharath stadium in Kathmandu, Nepal earned the nation a coveted trophy that had been eluding their male colleagues for decades. These women

manned the mission and came back as national heroes riding a roofless bus under the sky. Their performance was masculine. But when some of these girls were returning to their hometown in a public bus, they were verbally abused by some conservative men for their supposed “abnormal” gender performance in “skimpy” clothes. In that remote private space, the girls were reduced to being “stereotypical women.”

As I said these words, I noticed a couple of students in my class shaking their heads with visible displeasure. The cue was obvious. I must be careful with my examples. Just like when giving one of the definitions of Frankenstein, I had to check myself from referring it to our student body. Frankenstein is “something that destroys or harms the person or people who created it.” But the irony is: even Frankenstein, a wrongly attributed name given to the monstrous creature, wanted to learn. He read history, poetry, philosophy, and politics, and wanted to know himself before his self-annihilation for the sake of humanity. He realised that the purpose of life is to give meaning to it, not die meaninglessly, or become the cause of harm to others.

I am trying to get these meaningless images out of my head.

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Antlered animal

5 Kick off

10 Flaring star

11 Painter's place

12 N. Mex. neighbor

13 Sentence ender, of a sort

14 Rebate

16 It's behind home plate

20 Earlier

23 Flamenco cry

24 Be real

25 Boat's load

27 Pulled off

28 Buckeye

29 Journey break

32 Catch up with and pass

36 Changing room fixture

39 Region

40 Set straght

41 Wee bites

42 Fruit basket items

43 Designer Spade

DOWN

1 Unseen problem

2 Singer Amos

3 Tel—

4 Garden pavilions

5 Pancake order

6 Ankara natives

7 Say further

8 Carnival city

9 Great weight

11 Word

separator

15 Homer's son

17 Matador's foe

18 Gymnast

Korbut

19 Lowly worker

20 Hotel units

21 Way to go

22 Rover's pal

25 "Believe" singer

26 Scuba need

28 Plain to see

30 Game of hands

31 Pizzeria sights

33 Sills song

34 Retained

35 Comfort

36 Cut short

37 Lode material

38 Snoop grp.

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