

# Multilateralism, a Necessity for Living Together

## Dialogue

By LONG Yun & BI Weizi

"I believed in those early years of my professional career, and I still do, that multilateralism is vital for living together in peace and mutual understanding," former UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova told *Science and Technology Daily* in a recent interview.

This conviction, forged during her formative years in international affairs, has been a guiding principle throughout her career and she sees its urgency growing: "Even more so today, when we have huge opportunities for sustainable growth and inclusion, but also challenges — conflict, climate change, and the technological revolution."

In her view, UNESCO's mission to build peace through education, science, and culture is more relevant than ever. "This profound humanist conviction remains as salient today as it was in 1945," she said.

As she puts it: Multilateralism is not just a system, it is a necessity for living together.

### Heritage as identity

Bokova has long championed a deeper understanding of cultural heritage, one that goes beyond architecture and archaeology.

"We often say that culture and heritage are not about bricks and stones, but about identities and belonging," she emphasized. "They carry messages from the past that are important for societies today and tomorrow."

This perspective guided her leadership at UNESCO, where she expanded efforts to protect both tangible and intangible heritage, from ancient sites to oral traditions and endangered languages.

She cited the restoration of Cambodia's iconic Angkor Wat as a powerful



Professor Irina Bokova. (COURTESY PHOTO)

example of cross-border cultural cooperation, where Chinese and Cambodian experts worked side by side. "This collaboration is not just technical — it's deeply symbolic of mutual respect and enduring friendship," she said.

The site, recognized for presenting "an irreplaceable uniqueness and possessing outstanding universal value," reflects a shared global responsibility. Bokova stressed that such criteria are not ceremonial. They define World Heritage status and justify international commitment to preservation.

She recognizes China's growing leadership in global heritage. "China knows very well the power of culture and the need for the preservation of cultural heritage," she said. "With its 60 sites on the World Heritage list, and 44 intangible traditions, China is one of the leading countries that innovate and expand the interpretation of the World Heritage Convention."

The World Heritage Convention is an international treaty adopted by UNESCO in 1972 to protect cultural and natural sites of "outstanding universal value."

### Cities as hubs of innovation

Under Bokova's leadership, UNESCO strengthened the Creative Cities Network, linking urban centers that use culture to drive sustainable development. "I am proud that during my tenure I could declare 11 out of these 12 cities members of this important network," she remarked.

From her perspective, all of this shows China's leadership in crafting new approaches to culture as a powerful driver of creativity and sustainable human development.

"China has found that culture is now an important source of national cohesion and creativity, a pillar of socioeconomic development," she said.

For Bokova, culture is not a luxury: "It is a democratic force for social cohesion and social inclusion and for living together in respect to each other."

She sees institutions like the Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) playing a vital role in preparing future generations for intercultural dialogue. "BFSU has rightfully put forward as its mission equipping students with the knowledge and competencies to understand and respect cultural differences,"

she said.

This mission aligns with UNESCO's broader goal of fostering global citizenship through education. When young people learn to navigate cultural diversity with empathy and skill, they become agents of peace and cooperation.

### Empowering the next generation for global service

One of Bokova's lasting contributions is establishing the first internship program between a UN agency and China, a milestone in China- UNESCO cooperation. It made UNESCO the first UN agency to engage in such cooperation with China, "opening pathways for Chinese talent to enter international organizations."

The program created structured training and career opportunities, enabling young professionals to contribute to multilateral work. It includes mentorship, language training, and placements in UNESCO's headquarters and field offices.

She thinks the UN must continue to attract diverse, committed talent: "The UN needs people who believe in multilateralism and are committed to its values, inclusivity and equity. The UN needs people who are committed to making this world a better place for all, who are competent, knowledgeable and, at the same time, ready to embrace change."

Future leaders, she insisted, must be equipped to navigate complex global challenges. "The UN needs people who share the humanistic vision of respect for all cultures and for diversity and who are capable of dealing with complex issues of conflict prevention, development needs and humanitarian action."

Such professionals have to be nurtured. The China- UNESCO program exemplifies how targeted investment in human capital can strengthen global institutions and ensure they reflect the diversity of the world they serve.

*BFSU also contributed to this article.*

## Overseas Echoes

# When Needles Built an Indestructible Bridge

By Sudeshna SARKAR

When he was a third-year medical student, Mrigendranath Gantait saw one of his professors perform a "miracle."

"A patient had come to the (Calcutta) Medical College with gangrene in his leg and the doctors said they would have to amputate the leg, there was no other option."

But then a senior professor, Dr. Bejoy Kumar Basu, stepped in. The veteran doctor had been teaching some of his students a medical technique that he had learned abroad. It required finding pressure points in a patient's body and inserting fine, long needles there.

The patient clutched at this ray of hope, the treatment was done, and the gangrene was cured.

The method was acupuncture and Dr. Basu its pioneer in India, having learned it in China.

"History talks about ping-pong diplomacy between China and the U.S. (where the ice in the bilateral relationship was broken by friendly matches between Chinese and U.S. table tennis players). This was acupuncture diplomacy between India and China," Dr. Gantait, now 75 and a veteran acupuncturist himself, told *Science and Technology Daily*.

The introduction of acupuncture in India from China established a historical bond between the two neighboring nations that has withstood the ups and downs in their relationship. Its roots go back to 1938 when Japan's invasion of China had reached a frenzy and Chinese leaders asked India for medical assistance.

The Indian Medical Mission, consisting of five doctors, went to China to treat the war-injured. Two of them left unique legacies of amity: Dr Dwarkanath Kotnis, who died in China, and Dr Basu, who bequeathed all his assets to the government of his home state to promote acupuncture after his death.

"He learned acupuncture when he was in China," Dr. Gantait said. "At that time, there were no books in English available on acupuncture. He took painstaking notes by hand and taught us from his notebook. He also brought some acupuncture needles with him as none were available in India. He would lend them to us by turn and we would practice and treat patients with them."

The medical mission subsequently inspired the India- China joint Medical Mission, a recurring initiative which sends young doctors from both countries to serve in rural areas, consolidating people-to- people ties with medical services.

The seventh joint mission was held this June when 11 Indian doctors and 11 Chinese doctors from the

Affiliated Hospital of Guizhou Medical University went to Shibing, a county in Guizhou province in southwest China. They gave free medical consultations to the community, who are mostly from the Miao and Dong ethnic groups.

Dr. Kotnis, who died in China in 1942 when he was just 32, has memorials both in his hometown in India and in north China. More than silent memorials, they are a continuation of medical services.

In Hebei in north China, a medical school, the Shijiazhuang Ke Dihua Medical Science Secondary Specialized School, is named after him, using his Chinese name Ke Dihua, which younger generations in China still recognize.

A journalist and a think tank member both told *Science and Technology Daily* that their school textbooks taught about the selfless spirit of Ke Dihua, resonating with a nation that commemorates Lei Feng, the young Chinese soldier exemplifying self- sacrifice in the service of others.

In India, the Dr. Kotnis Memorial Committee runs health camps, offering free check-ups, vaccinations, and medicines, as well as an Acupuncture Treatment Center.

On the occasion of Dr. Kotnis's 83rd death anniversary earlier this month, Kong Xianhua, the Chinese consul-general in Mumbai, India, wrote Kotnis's spirit of internationalism and dedication "is still running in the blood of both Chinese and Indian people to make us emotionally closer.... Once the seeds of friendship are sown in their hearts, the young people will continue to carry on the spirit of Dr. Kotnis for generations."

The Chinese government has announced it would sponsor a school in Dr. Kotnis's hometown in India, which would be renamed the Dr. Kotnis Friendship School. The Chinese consulate general and Chinese companies have sponsored renovations, sports facilities and a drinking water system in the school.

Dr. Basu's residence in Kolkata, India, is today the B.K. Basu Memorial Acupuncture Research and Training Institute, that also houses a small museum on Basu and his work.

Dr. Gantait, who is also president of the Acupuncture Association of India, said the Chinese consul-general in Kolkata, Xu Wei, donated acupuncture equipment and needles on Dr. Kotnis's 83rd death anniversary.

"When we go to rural areas and treat villagers with acupuncture, they want to know from where this practice originated," he said. "On being told China, they have a positive feeling about China. Acupuncture acts as a bridge between the people of two nations, creating a feeling of friendship."

# Why are Mercury Thermometers Being Banned?

## Science Outreach

By WANG Shanshan & BI Weizi

From January 1, 2026, the production of mercury thermometers and sphygmomanometers will be completely banned in China.

### What's the reason?

"The ban on mercury thermometer production is a specific measure taken to fulfill China's obligations under the important international Minamata Convention on Mercury. It also reflects the concepts of ecological protection and medical safety," said

Professor Yu Lei of the School of Chemistry and Materials Science at Yangzhou University. The convention's core requirements include prohibiting the mining of primary mercury ore, strictly controlling the use of mercury resources, and gradually phasing out mercury-containing medical products and everyday items.

According to Yu, metallic mercury, commonly known as quicksilver, is unique in being a liquid metal at room temperature, and it is highly toxic and non-degradable.

Inhaling high concentrations of mercury vapour can cause acute poisoning, damaging the nervous system and kidney function. Inhaling mercury vapour can lead to developmental delays in children and foetal deformities

in pregnant women. Furthermore, if a broken mercury thermometer is put in the soil or a river, the mercury will convert into methylmercury, which is even more toxic and can cause long-term damage to the ecosystem.

### What are safe alternatives?

Ma Cheng, associate director of the Analytical Chemistry Teaching and Research Office at Yangzhou University, believes that new thermometer products should offer the measurement advantages of mercury thermometers while being safe to use. Electronic thermometers, which are becoming increasingly popular, may be an ideal alternative.

Ma explains that electronic thermometers do not contain mercury, thus eliminating the risk of mercury

pollution. There are two main categories: non-contact and contact. The former includes forehead and ear thermometers.

Contact electronic thermometers resemble mercury thermometers in their use and can measure temperature orally, axillary or rectally. They work by using a temperature sensor to output an electrical signal, which is then processed and displayed digitally. The entire process takes only about 15 seconds.

High-quality products can achieve measurement accuracy comparable to mercury thermometers, significantly improving the efficiency of emergency triage and large-scale temperature screening, while meeting the needs of clinical and everyday use.

# Hezhen Yimakan Storytelling Makes UNESCO List

## Traditional Eastern Wisdom

By BI Weizi

"Hezhen Yimakan storytelling," a revered Chinese folk tradition, has been included in the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage list, a move that is sure to preserve these time-honored oral customs for generations to come.

On December 11, during its 20th regular session in New Delhi, the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage resolved to transfer

China's Hezhen Yimakan Storytelling from the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding, to the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

The Hezhen community has historically lived along the banks of three rivers: the Amur, the Sungari, and the Usuri in north-eastern China. With a population of just 5,354 people, representing only 0.0004 percent of China's total population, according to the 2010 Sixth National Population Census, the Hezhen community is one of the smallest ethnic minorities in China. Yimakan storytelling is a traditional oral art form encompassing singing and narration that has

been passed down through generations within the Hezhen community.

The stories are recounted by artists in the Hezhen language in both a rhythmic and a prose style. Subjects include heroic actions, shamanic traditions, fishing and hunting lifestyles, folk practices and romance, reflecting the collective memory, education and leisure of the Hezhen people during seasonal labor and festivities.

In May 2006, Yimakan narration was added to the list of representative elements of national intangible cultural heritage. Then, in November 2011, it was added to the Urgent Safeguarding List. The Hezhen community is praised for their

extensive history and vibrant culture, especially its exceptional fishing and hunting skills, intricate pattern art, and the captivating nature of Yimakan storytelling.

Since being designated a project requiring immediate protection in 2011, the Hezhen community has embraced its culture with renewed enthusiasm, resulting in increased participation in Yimakan storytelling and related activities, as well as its preservation and sharing. This has fostered the safeguarding of the Hezhen dialect and rejuvenated their cultural practices, enhancing the cultural identity and historical continuity of the communities, groups and individuals associated with them.



Often referred to as the "Lungs of Lhasa," the Lhalu Wetland National Nature Reserve in Xizang autonomous region has been recognized by the World Record Certification Agency as the world's highest-altitude urban natural wetland. Located in the urban area of Lhasa, the wetland covers an area of 12.2 square kilometers at an average altitude of 3,649 meters. (PHOTO: XINHUA)