New Delhi, May 29: The Chinese may have the highest regard for Buddha but apart from him, the Indian name best known to them is Rabindranath Tagore.

"In the background of over two millennia of China and India having been interconnecting, interacting, and learning from each other, the Nobel Laureate was closest to our times, real and intimate to us," says Wang Bangwei of Peking University.

"From Sakyamuni (as Buddha is referred to in China) we have enjoyed more of a reverent godliness, and from Tagore we have enjoyed a tangible humanness that was noble and admirable," writes Wang in “Tagore and China”, arguably the first full account in English of the poet’s visit to China and related issues.

Along with Wang, the book, published by Sage, is co-edited by Tan Chung, Amiya Dev
and Wei Liming.

The book charts Tagore’s ‘grand visit’ in 1924 undertaken in response to China’s ‘Tagore fever’ and the series of talks he gave there, their antecedents as well as impact. During the visit, the Chinese celebrated Tagore’s 63rd birthday and conferred him the Chinese name of ‘Zhu Zhendan’.

“Tagore and China” is a collection of articles by eminent academics and scholars including the likes of Amartya Sen, Prasenjit Duara, Uma Das Gupta and Patricia Uberoi.

Supplemented by some rare photographs, it is a tribute to Tagore’s 150th birth anniversary.

“In the beginning, as an Asian winner of the Nobel Prize, Tagore made the Chinese feel the recovery of Eastern glory, as the Chinese saying goes: ‘yu you rong yan’ (we all share the glory). When Tagore visited china, there were various intense arguments in the Chinese cultural and educational circles because of the difference of personalities and ideologies. When the Sino-Japanese war broke out, Tagore strongly condemned Japanese militarism and made us feel he was our real friend,” Wang writes.

Tagore, Tan says, was the inspiration of India-China fraternity in modern times.

“Jawaharlal Nehru once wrote that unlike Mahatma Gandhi who arrived like a thunderbolt shaking us all, Tagore ‘crept on us and permeated us’.

“His influence on Nehru augmented Nehru’s own idealism for a special friendly relations with China during the 1950s which culminated in the ‘Hindi Chini Bhai Bhai’ sentiments,” Tan, a pioneer of China studies in India, writes.

According to Dev, Tan “planned the book, thought up its thrusts, knew whom to invite to write on them, got in touch with them.”

Amartya Sen writes that Tagore’s involvement with China not only included admiration for Chinese culture and civilisation, but also his deep sympathy for the people of China.

“At the age of 20 in 1881, Tagore wrote a powerful attack on the opium trade, which had been imposed on China. It was particularly disturbing for many Indian, including Tagore, that the opium was mostly being grown in British India. His Bengali essay on this, under the title ‘Chine Maraner Byabasay’ (the business of killing people in China) was a comprehensive attack on the British strategy in this terrible area, with its devastating impact on the Chinese people,” Sen writes.

The book has a foreword by India’s Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao in which she says
that Tagore sought to promote the cause of India-China understanding, envisioning the ascent of India and China to a higher platform of civilisational leadership and fraternal partnership.

Tagore’s visit to China in 1924 was described by Chinese scholars as an “earth-shaking event” at that time.

“Tagore’s China visit and the various attitudes in the Chinese response to it wrought an unforgettable page in the annals of Sino-Indian cultural intercourse. It has provided endless food for thought for the benefit of posterity in their introspection and forward looking. Though Tagore’s visit created approbation and disapprobation in the thinking society and cultural circles of China, there is no gainsaying that the traditional friendship between the two peoples of China and India was strengthened and the path of cultural intercourse was recreated,” writes Wei Liming, an expert of Indian literature in Peking University. PTI