

April 8, 2024

## Remembering Tagore's 1924 Trip to China

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*Tagore's visit to China in April 1924 was significant, both then and now. The poet's vision of Pan Asianism saw Asia as a force for the oppressed. As Western dominance wanes, understanding Asia's two ancient civilisations becomes important in our move from an Age of Europe to an Age of Humanity.*

In the 7th century C.E., the Chinese scholar Xuanzang wrote to the Indian scholar Jnanaprabha, requesting some Indian texts be sent to him. "I returned more than 10 years ago. The frontiers of the countries are far away from each other [...] I should humbly like to let you know that while crossing the Indus I had lost a load of sacred texts [...] I request you to send them to me if you get the chance."

Xuanzang was one of several Chinese visitors to India who were seeking out the centre of the philosophy that had made a profound impact on China —Buddhism. An earlier visitor, Faxian, referred to India as the Middle Kingdom, *zhongguo* (or *madhyadesha* in Sanskrit). Similarly, Xuanzang's contemporary Daoxuan wrote "south of Himalaya is named Zhongguo." Several Chinese scholars of the time were fascinated by India and it is significant that they referred to India as the Middle Kingdom.

Buddhism had travelled to China earlier. One of the key later figures in this transmission was Indian scholar Kumarjiva (5th century), who led a team doing translations in China. The extent of contact between India and China in the first millennium C.E. is still a subject of research.

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When Rabindranath Tagore, modern India's greatest poet, visited China 100 years ago, reaching Shanghai on 12 April 1924, his hosts compared his visit to this ancient cultural interchange. The Chinese scholar Liang Qichao, speaking of Tagore's visit referred to this old memory, saying, "India and China are like twin brothers. Before most of the civilised races became active, we two brothers had already begun to study the great problems which concern the whole of mankind. India was ahead of us and we, the little brother followed behind."

Liang spoke of how colonialism and Western domination had severed the relationship of exchange between equals. Western colonialism had not only interrupted civilisational exchange, it had created conditions for mutual suspicion and misunderstanding. Chinese now met Indians as indentured labourers in foreign lands or as soldiers in the British army. The opium flooding China was being harvested in India.

The great fact of the age was the domination of the West over the darker peoples of the Earth, including most of Asia. By the time Tagore visited, however, the societies of India and China were in the midst of an upsurge. The M.K. Gandhi-led non-cooperation movement in India and the May 4th Movement in China had just happened a few years ago.

Most intellectual discussions at this time in Asian countries were concerned with the West. Freedom fighters and intellectuals in India and China were attempting to examine the conditions that had allowed the West to dominate their societies and compared their own societies with Western ones. China was going through an ideological struggle and some intellectuals, most prominently Chen Dixiu, opposed Tagore's visit by claiming that it would strengthen the forces of conservatism and Confucianism in China.

Tagore, however, argued against associating modernity simply with the West. In response to his critics, he said, "The revelation of spirit in man is truly modern: I am on its side, for I am modern." He further felt that Asian countries must know each other and renew their own civilisational links before they could properly assimilate any knowledge from the West.

Tagore was articulating an idea that emerged at that time — Pan Asianism. The idea originated with Japanese thinkers, most prominently Okakura Tenshin. Tagore's Pan Asianism was more complex than these early ideas. In many ways, it was closer to the ideas of Sun Yat Sen, the revolutionary democrat who saw Asia as a political and historical category and Pan Asianism as a cause of

the oppressed masses.

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Tagore was a trenchant critic of Japanese imperialism over China and against Japanese domination of Asia. He was thus ignored by Japanese writers, many of whom saw him as a voice of a defeated nation. This was unlike China, where, in contrast, Tagore had a huge impact on Chinese literature and thought.

Tagore envisioned his visit as a vehicle for the coming together of Asia. Later, he established Cheena Bhavan in Visvabharati University along with Tan Yun Shan, who became a disciple of both Tagore and Gandhi and spent his life facilitating exchanges and cooperation between India and China.

Tagore's visit was a harbinger of subsequent contact between India and China. Jawaharlal Nehru's visit to China and the Indian medical mission are well known. To cite a few lesser known examples, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan visited China in 1944. Radhakrishnan spoke primarily on Buddhism and the philosophical connections between India and China but naturally also responded to questions on the violence of World War II and its aftermath.

Another interesting visitor to China during World War II was Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, who literally had to face Japanese bombing during her visit in 1941. She met Chiang Kai Shek and also Zhou Enlai and spent a considerable amount of time with Mme. Sun Yat Sen. She was critical of Chiang Kai Shek's policies and found herself to be in sympathy with Mme. Sun Yat Sen, who she felt was continuing the ideals of Sun Yat Sen.

In turn, there were several Chinese visitors to India, including educationist Tao Xingzhi in 1938 and artist Xu Beihong, the leading figure in modern art in China, in 1939. Xu Beihong spent time at Santiniketan and one of his most famous paintings, 'The Foolish Old Man Moves a Mountain', used Indian models. He painted a portrait of Tagore and did a sketch of Gandhi. Several of the artists at Santiniketan, including Nandalal Bose and Benode Behari Mukherji, were influenced by Chinese art techniques and had studied them.

There were several other Indian visitors to China after the country became independent in 1947. They included Pt. Sunderlal, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, Rahul Sankrityayan, and D.D. Kosambi, all of whom wrote about Chinese society. A particularly interesting case was that of P.C. Mahalanobis in 1957, and his engagement with Chinese statisticians, who were interested in his contributions to national surveys and sampling methods.

One may then justifiably ask, of what relevance is this history today? Indeed, pessimism and scepticism might lead one to dismiss this history, as several academics do.

Chinese poet Bing Xin visited India in 1953. Her poetry had been deeply influenced by Tagore and she was one of many modern literary figures in China who were shaped by contact with his writings. This included Xu Zhimo, who had a deep friendship with Tagore and Guo Moruo, one of the most important Chinese writers of the 20th century, who wrote glowingly of how Tagore had helped him move past a dark phase in his life.

The sad break in India-China relations following the 1962 war needs no repetition. Even right after the war, during a speech at Visva Bharati, Nehru acknowledged the presence of Tan Yun Shan in the audience, "While we fight the aggressor, we do not fight culture and we do not fight the people who are friendly to us". It is said that Tan Yun Shan openly wept on the occasion.

Interactions between India and China subsequently declined. Contact and relations have oscillated over the subsequent years, never reaching the same levels. One may then justifiably ask, of what relevance is this history today? Indeed, pessimism and scepticism might lead one to dismiss this history, as several academics do, who point to this history as a failed effort of an idealistic past.

For those, however, who are interested in peace and a future for humanity, I believe this history is of immense importance. For history is ultimately always about the present. The age of Western domination is over and we are in the midst of a transition from the Age of Europe to the Age of Humanity. This transition is likely to be punctuated and full of dangers.

The economic and technological advances in Asia, and in India and China in particular, have led to a large global literature on the rise of Asia. A lot of the literature has focused on trade relations and geopolitics. In India, the discussion on the rise of China revolves

mostly around realpolitik and discussions on the border. The discussion of the each other's society in both countries is often shaped by Western narratives.

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There is no doubt that the economic rise of Asia will have a profound impact on the world. However, it is important that we also consider the loss of the richness of contact between the peoples of Asia that this history shows us. There are several common questions that Asian societies face as they rise. What is the relationship of modernity to their ancient civilisation and heritage? How will they deal with the challenges of economic inequality in their society and the cultural distortion that it creates?

On many global challenges, Asia naturally has a common perspective. India and China will play a major role in the future and it is necessary that there be more contact between the two societies.

It would be good to remember the extensive contact these societies have had in the past and continue to seek knowledge and contact in our age. China and India must know each other on their own terms. To honour and celebrate the anniversary of Tagore's visit is particularly important because the writer has become a very well known and respected figure in China.

The best way to honour Tagore is to facilitate contact between a wide section of Indian and Chinese people. In a return to Tagore's writings and ideas on Asia, we will rediscover a modern vision for the coming together of the two civilisations and people.