Tagore’s Various Responses in Modern Chinese Intellectual Circles in the 1920s

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[Abstract] The first Indian and Asian Nobel laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore’s visit to China in 1924 once caused fierce controversies among Chinese intellectual circles, which could be regarded as an important event in the history of modern Sino-Indian cultural communication. This paper tries to divide those who had been involved in a number of hot debates on Tagore’s visit to China and his speeches in China into three groups. For the first group, the leading figures like Liang Qichao and Xu Zhimo extended warm-hearted welcome to Tagore because they shared some ideas. For Lu Xun and Guo Moruo the two leading writers in the history of modern Chinese literature, their satiric indifference and strong aversion to Tagore reflected either a contempt for India or inner change of attitude towards Indian culture. Such eminent radical intellectuals as Chen Duxiu, Qu Qiubai and Mao Dun belonged to the third group, who were seriously and fiercely critical of Tagore since they dealt with Tagore’s visit to China and his speeches in the context of Chinese political realities then. For the second and third group, the hot domestic debates on eastern and western cultures or even the road for modern China in the 1920s had had some indirect impact upon their evaluation on Tagore. One of the key issues here was that Tagore and his Chinese hosts and critics didn’t understand each other well enough due to the complicated historical background. Tagore’s visit to China, after all, is a valuable reference to Sino-Indian cultural communication today.

[Key words] Rabindranath Tagore, China, Xu Zhimo, Lu Xun, Chen Duxiu,

Rabindranath Tagore, the greatest modern Indian writer, had paid his genuine homage to China before his visit to China in 1924. Two things impressed him profoundly: China was suffering from colonialism as painfully as India, his motherland then; China has a long history of great culture and still has vigorous vitality. Just several years before his visit to China, he was not totally satisfied with his visit to Japan for he thought that, anyway he ought to visit China at least once. Otherwise, he couldn’t fulfill his duty of being the envoy of friendship from India to East Asia, of which China and Japan are main countries.

On March 21st, 1924, along with other people, Tagore began his first journey to China from Calcutta by sea. He arrived in Hong Kong on April 8th. On April 24th saw the Indian poet in Shanghai where he received warm-hearted welcome by such boards as Association of Literary Study(Wen xue yan jiu hui), Shanghai Youth Society(Shanghai qing nian hui), and by such celebrities as Zhang Junmai, Zheng Zhenduo, Xu Zhimo and so on. Tagore’s stay in China lasted for almost fifty days, during which he visited Shanghai, Hanzhou, Nanjing, Ji’nan, Beijing, Taiyuan and Wuhan. He departed from Shanghai to Japan by sea on May 30. During his stay in
China, he enjoyed the beautiful scenic spots in each place he visited, where he gave talks and changed his ideas with Chinese scholars and hosts from all walks of life, of whom were Fu Yi, the last Chinese emperor, Liang Shuming, Gu Hongming, Mei Lanfang, etc.

One of the keynotes of Tagore’s speeches was his enthusiastic recalling of the traditional Indo-Chinese friendship and his good will to revive and strengthen the fraternal affection of the two age-old neighbor countries. Tagore considered his visit to China as the honorable mission to revitalize the Indo-Chinese traditional friendship. In his “Leave Talking ” we can still find his affectionate enthusiasm to be a qualified envoy of friendship from India to China: “I may tell you now that when my people heard I had received an invitation from China, there was great rejoicing and excitement amongst them. They felt that this was a great opportunity for us to reopen the ancient channel of spiritual communication once again.”\footnote{Rabindranath Tagore, Talks in China, Sisir Kumar Das, ed., The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Vol.2, (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1996), p.615.}

Based on what he was planning to do, he further advocated the great unity of the East, keeping India and China in his mind. Unfortunately, his identity of being a colonized subject gave him some painful trouble later on.

The other issue Tagore focused on is his criticism on the so-called materialism. In his opinion being held for long, to be able to love material things, to clothe them with tender grace, and yet not be attached to them, is a great service. According to Tagore, materialism, the “deformity”, the “huge demons of ugliness that stalk all over the world” could be seen in Shanghai, Tientsin(Tianjin) except Beijing. That’s why he frankly reminded Chinese people of fighting against the materialism when addressing the Chinese youngsters.

As the winner of Nobel literary prize in 1913, the first Asian to gain such an honor, Tagore’s speeches in China was, to some extent, a great success. Many a Chinese host regarded him as the qualified messenger of friendship from India to China, as the Asian hero, the bosom friend. They gave him genuine warm welcome. We can divide those who loved Tagore and appreciated Tagore’s idea into two types. Some of them were eminent Chinese writers.

Of all the Chinese hosts who treated Tagore properly and friendly, Xu Zhimo and Zheng Zhenduo are unique because the two are both so-called Literary Youth(Wen xue qing nian). Take Xu Zhimo for example. Before Tagore’s arrival in China, Xu had shown his sincere love and admiration to Tagore. It’s natural for Xu and other Literary Youth to respect Tagore’s personality because the later had enjoyed high popularity in China through the Chinese translation of his poems. It’s no doubt that Xu was the person who admired Tagore most of all. Xu clearly admired Tagore more for his nature than for his ideas on Eastern civilization. He traveled everywhere as the companion and interpreter of Tagore. Tagore’s visit to China benefited a lot to Xu, who got an Indian name Sushima by Tagore. It’s the romantic Kavihardaya(heart of poet) that helped make them a pair of Sahardayas(close friends). Xu looked after Tagore carefully and hospitably. Tagore, Xu’s Lao Ge Die(Daddy Tagore), who
received unfriendly criticism from some Chinese scholar and students during his public speeches, felt a little comfortable hearing what Xu said. He thanked Xu and to some extent relied on him. In 1929, Tagore had a short stay in Shanghai where the hosts were Xu and his wife Lu Xiaoman.

The reason that such people as Liang Qichao and Liang Sumin gave Tagore warm welcome was not only for the ordinary courtesy but for their echoes of cultural idea. The cases for Gu Hongming and Hu Shi were a little different, however, they were still happy to see Tagore’s stay in China.

Before Tagore’s visit to China, the journey to Europe being over, Liang Qichao who previously looked down upon the traditional Chinese culture while admiring the Western civilization had formed his new idea that Chinese civilization would save the Western civilization from suffering, which can be seen in his book A Record of Mental Journey in Europe(Ou You Xin Ying Lu) written in 1920. He observed: “The Europeans who had a dream of the versatility of science are now claiming its failure, which is the recent main change of ideas there.”

1 What he thought and wrote caused the controversy over Eastern and Western cultures in China once again. As a Western writer said, no other Chinese scholars welcomed Tagore more cordially than Liang. The intellectuals they had met in postwar Europe had encouraged them to believe that Indian and Chinese cultures could supply the deficiencies in Western civilization, forming in combination with the best in the West a new and more perfect whole.

Tagore who eulogized the Eastern civilizations, including Chinese civilization, and condemned the bad factors of Western civilization in China, encouraged Liang Qichao undoubtedly. Tagore held more or less in common with Liang Qichao who was also recently from Europe and was drastically attacked by the other Chinese scholars in two debates on Eastern and Western cultures, and about science and Dark Learning(Xuan Xue, i.e. Chinese ancient metaphysics). With the encouragement from Tagore, Liang determined to hold on to his original view that Chinese civilization could be useful for the revival of the West. The other reason for Liang’s genuine welcome for Tagore was his good will that a warm spirit of co-operation between China and India would result from Tagore’s visit.

Along with Du Yaquan and Wu Mi, Liang Suming, who was then called Dong Fang Wen Hua Pai(Eastern Cultural School), published his book *Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies* in 1921, three years before Tagore’s visit to China. In his book, Liang Suming put forward a theory of three cultural paths. Here the three cultures referred to Western, Chinese and Indian cultures. Liang observed that the West had been first to achieve its global dominance, and China and India still ought to adopt its attitude of struggle. Liang noted, however, that the Western way already seemed a dead end to Westerners themselves, and predicted, “the coming civilization of the world will be the revival of Chinese civilization, resembling the revival of

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Greek civilization in the modern world.” ¹ According to Liang, both Chinese and Indian civilizations are premature. After the revival of Chinese civilization in the future, it’s the turn for India. Perhaps Liang found Tagore congenial to him because both of them focused on the potential powers of Eastern civilization. Now that Liang appreciated Tagore’s writings and some thoughts, it’s natural for him to give the Indian poet-philosopher heart-felt welcome.

Gu Hongming, the most ardently Confucian, who once lived in Europe, knew very well about the positive and negative sides of the Western civilization. According to Gu Hongming, the modern Western civilization is essentially materialistic, which worships the power of matter, while the Chinese civilization of Confucianism emphasizes the power of ethics (Dharma). Gu, like Tagore, looked with disdain upon the materialism of the West. Again like Tagore, he believed that the ancient Chinese civilization, if properly appreciated, could bring salvation to a world torn by war, social conflict, and inner doubt. It seemed only natural, therefore, to bring these two sages together, and this was arranged during Tagore’s stay at Qing Hua (Tsing Hua) College where they had a long talk. Their host, however, later observed to his regret that the two did not get on well with each other, but Gu politely refrained from commenting publicly on Tagore’s ideas until the very day the Indian poet sailed for Japan. Assuredly speaking, Gu knew how to treated his Indian guest properly and politely. It seemed that the exchange of their ideas itself was a diplomatic success during Tagore’s stay in Peking because such Sino-Indian intellectual interaction was rare then.

Hu Shi, the philosophy and social activist, was unique for his cultural identity among the people who welcomed Tagore’s visit. Due to his cultural choice, Hu Shi played a special role at the time when Tagore visited China. As for Tagore’s visit to China, Hu Shi, who studied in America for years and claimed himself ‘I of the West in the twentieth century’, held the opinion that Tagore had the right to express his views unreservedly in China. He firmly refrained from commenting on the message Tagore had brought to China, but just as firmly defended the poet’s right to be heard. In a word, Therefore, Hu Shi neither appreciated Tagore’s opposition against Western materialism in his public speeches, nor was he in favor of the left writers and the progressive youth who opposed Tagore.

In a word, owing to the efforts of Xu Zhimo feeling Tagore the World Citizen congenial to him, who belonged to the Crescent Moon School (Xin Yue Pai, 新月派) and cherished freedom, independence, and democracy, and thanks to other Chinese intellectuals like Liang Qichao, Liang Suming, Gu Hongming, and Hu Shi who either appreciated Indian thought and Tagore’s ideas or respected Tagore’s right to express what he thought in China, an imperfect but very significant Sino-Indian inter-cultural exchange took place in the history of modern Indo-Chinese cultural relations. So far as the revival and development of Sino-Indian traditional friendship considered,

Tagore, Xu Zhimo, Liang Qichao, Hu Shi and other Chinese scholars contributed a lot, which is the just conclusion in the long run.¹

I can, perhaps, finish this article here and leave an ideal and pleasant side of Tagore’s visit to China in 1924 for our readers in India and abroad, which I don’t think, is an attitude taken by a sincere and genuine scholar. As most Chinese scholars know, Tagore’s visit to China in 1924 had caused a hot debate among the Chinese intellectual circles. Just as S. N. Hay observed, although Tagore instinctively shied away from political involvement, his visit and his message to China carried political implications, and he was closely watched by the political leaders of all the sections to see how his ideas and his influence might advance or retard their own causes and interest.² Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Kuomingtang, had showed his warm welcome to Tagore and once invited the Indian poet to meet him. But the case for some leftist intellectuals and writers was quite different. We can also divide those people into two types. Some of the eminent left Chinese writers like Lu Xun and Guo Moruo were indifferent to Tagore and the radical writers and members of Chinese Communist Party like Chen Duxiu, Qu Qiubai, Mao Dun (Shen Yanbing) were seriously against Tagore’s thoughts and his speeches in China as well.

Take Lu Xun first for example. Just as Chinese critics observe, “Lu Xun was a great Chinese thinker and writer in the 20th century…Lu Xun could be regarded as a national soul of modern China…Lu Xun was also one of the cultural giants over the world in the 20th century.”³ However, it could be said that there was a cultural Himalaya gap between Tagore, the Indian man of letter, and Lu Xun, ‘the spine of modern China’, which was an obstacle for their mutual understanding. Lu Xun’s view on the value of traditional culture was so completely opposed to that of Tagore that he presumably saw no point in publicly criticizing the Indian poet. Instead, he criticized Tagore in an ambiguous way.

“We can conclude the nations which are voiceless for the time being. Is there any voice in Egypt, Vietnam or Korea? Any other voice except Tagore’s in India?”⁴ Lu Xun once said mentioning Tagore the Nobel laureate with respect. It seemed that Tagore’s name was dear to Lu Xun before. But so far as Tagoe’s China visit in 1924 considered, Lu Xun’s speeches and attitudes were somewhat difficult to understand. He said satirically, “As far as I have heard, there were four famous writers to have visited China in the last two years. The first one was naturally Zhu Zhendan or Tagore who was most distinguished but he had been lost completely in a terrible state with the help of Zhendanren(Chinese people) in Indian hats and disappeared unaccountably in the end.”⁵ In another occasion, Lu Xun said in a similar satiric mood, “Tagore the Indian sage’s visit to China was like a giant bottle of superior scent to have brought a

¹ Yin Xi’nan, Tagore: From the Perspective of World Civilization(Chengdu: Ba Shu Publishing House, 2003), p.287.
flavor of Wenqi(gentleness) and an air of Xuanqi(mystery) to a few gentlemen... when the old poet who has been changed his name as Zhu Zhendan left Zhendan(China), his fairyland, Zhendan Shixian(Chinese poets) have been seldom seen to wear their Indian hats nor were there any news dispatches about Tagore."¹

How to explain Lu Xun’s indifference and satire to Tagore and his visit to China? The first reason, I think, is that Lu Xun unconsciously had some misunderstanding about Indian culture and a little prejudice against Indian civilization. Indian culture, for him, could be considered as a refurbished version of Chinese feudal culture which he criticized and attacked violently. Naturally, He looked with disdain upon the Indian mind and consciousness as the slavishness of modern Chinese people.² For Lu Xun, Indians got used to their own poor condition but didn’t become accustomed to the prohibition of Sati system. “As a result, they still kept as ‘humble slaves’ in a cage without enemies.”³ Liu Jian, a leading Tagore scholar and translator at Chinese Academy of Social Science of China, once contended, “Lu Xun admired classic Indian literature but took a pessimistic and despondent view on modern India. Indian civilization, for him, was completely and hopelessly on the wane. India, a declining Yingguo or Shadow nation which had been reduced to a British colony, no longer produced men of letter and masterpieces which could have implications upon foreign nations.”⁴

Lu Xun during his tenure as overseas student in Japan from 1902 to 1907 studied the whole world history and found that Wenhua Pianzhi was mostly a seriously common disease for Eastern civilization. As a result, Lu Xun focused on introducing such works of Western “spiritual fighters” as Dante, Jean-Jacque Rousseau and George Gordon Byron to serve a grand project of modifying Guomingxing or Chinese national mind. Tagore during his China visit in 1924 tried hard to advocate rejuvenating Eastern civilization in a series of lectures, while Lu Xun regarded Eastern civilization as Chinese feudal heritage to be destroyed reasonably. Therefore, Lu Xun had a strong aversion to Tagore. In a word, Lu Xun and Tagore held different views on Eastern civilization in general and Chinese cultural heritage in particular.

For Lu Xun’s indifference or even aversion to Tagore, I think, the more critical reason is that the two hardly knew each other fundamentally. For Tagore, Lu Xun was completely a strange name till 1941 when he made his farewell to lokadhātu or the world. He never mentioned Lu Xun in his life-long writings. For Lu Xun, Tagore was just the name of an Indian Nobel laureate other than anything else. Actually, for the purpose of serving the political and literary causes then, Lu Xun showed stronger interest in translating or studying Russian and European writers like Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol(1809-1852) and Henryk Sienkiewicz(1846-1916). He appreciated the writers expressing the rebellious spirit of the oppressed nations. Consequently, Lu Xun focused on such insulted and injured weak nations as Czech, Poland and

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Romania but he unconsciously neglected India, an insulted and injured Asian nation then, which, to some extent, caused some of his misunderstanding on Tagore. Lu Xun said, “I sincerely preferred B. R. Epomehkh (1889-1952), a blind Russian poet who criticized the ridiculousness of Sati system in other nations to Tagore, an Indian poet and sage who won Nobel laurels and eulogized Sati. I cursed the beautiful and poisonous mandala flowers.”¹ The fact that Lu Xun here regarded Tagore as a cursed mandala due to his advocate of Sati deserves to be checked and reviewed in the context of times of globalization. Just as Liu Jian argued in one of his recent articles, Tagore as well as Lu Xun was a staunch chamion against feudalism, colonialism and imperialism. Mahamaya, one of Tagore’s short stories, was proved only to fight against Sati by impressive description of the poor heroine. Tagore’s other writings dealing with Sati expressed the same attitude. Anyway, Lu Xun’s view that Tagore eulogized Sati is not reasonable and his Rāpaka or metaphor comparing Tagore with “the beautiful and poisonous mandala flowers” is wrongly overstated or, if I may say, even stubbornly biased. Lu Xun’s reading of Tagore was very limited. “Lu Xun mentioned Tagore many times in his lectures and essays but hardly evaluated him positively.” Just as Liu Jian said, “He did so due to a lot of complicated elements. At that particular time, apart from some collections of poetry, most of Tagore’s writings had not been translated into Chinese and relevant materials were quite fewer. As a result, an accurate and overall review and judgment on Tagore was a tough task for Lu Xun… but one of the most important reasons seemed to be Lu Xun’s contempt for India reduced to be Yingguo or shadow nation and his natural indifference to Tagore from a country of Yingguo. The fact that Lu Xun and Tagore, the greatest writers for China and India in the 20th century, showed a serious lack of mutual understanding proved that mutual understanding of different civilizations required long-draw-out effort.”² History is always of inspiration. The case for Lu Xun and Tagore is the same as the case for China and India in the 21st century since they are trying to be across the Himalayan gap.

Another reason for Lu Xun’s indifference to Tagore’s visit to China in 1924 might be that Lu Xun had been involved in a number of hot debates with such figures as Xu Zhimo and Liang Shiqiu, the leading writers of a community called “Xin Yue She” or the “Crescent Society”, named after Tagore’s famous work, The Crescent Moon. A Chinese scholar argued, “As a genuine atheist and sober soldier, Lu Xun’s desire for revenge by nature and his relentlessness encourage the successors to think deeply again and again.”³ Unfortunately, Lu Xun’s hot debates with Xu Zhimo had an indirect and negative impact on his evaluation of Tagore whom Xu Zhimo admired most of all. Lu Xun, a fighter against Chinese feudalism, maybe unconsciously refused to welcome Tagore from this point since his major task was to change Chinese national character instead of eagerly rebuilding Sino-Indian friendship with Tagore’s enthusiastically huge help. This is indeed a historical misunderstanding due to Lu Xun’s negative

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impression on Xu Zhimo welcoming Tagore to visit China heart and soul.

Now let’s talk about Guo Moruo’s attitude towards Tagore’s visit to China. “Guo Moruo was a qualified poet and historical playwright to symbolize a special era in the history of modern Chinese literature.”\(^1\) Guo stressed that he heartily welcome Tagore as a private visitor to China, but hoped that he would not dawdle in Peking and Shanghai like a puppet of those who had invited him. But after a survey of his comments on Tagore in the early 1920’s, we would learn that his attitude towards Tagore changed unexpectedly rapidly from 1919 to 1924. How to explain this sudden change?

Guo Moruo, as one critic said, “was the earliest poet in the circle of new Chinese poetry to have been deeply under Tagore’s spell for a short time.”\(^2\) During his stay as an overseas student in Japan, he was really influenced by Indian philosophy and Tagore’s poetry. Tagore, Guo’s spiritual master, had been a sage for him, especially before 1923, one year before Tagore’s visit to China. Furthermore, Guo’s poems of this particular period were proved to be under the influence of Tagore deeply. Why did Guo Moruo, such an ardent lover for Tagore’s poems for several years, began to surprisingly expressed his aversion to Tagore before the Indian saint’s visit to China?

One late Indian scholar of comparative literature, Sisir Kumar Das argued, “But there was a change in his(Guo’s) ideology.”\(^3\) Tagore’s thought, in his early view, were pantheistic. Some of Guo’s poems were inspired by such pantheistic perspective. But between 1921 and 1923, urged and encouraged by the waves of political revolution, Guo as a fresh admirer for Marxism was engaged in literary and artistic creation, which helped change his view on pantheism. Pantheism began to be a target of his attack. And Guo during this period had changed his poetic style from Tagore’s to Goethe and Walt Whitman’s spirit of romanticism in accordance with zeitgeist of The May 4th Movement occurred in 1919. For Guo, the magic of Western culture had taken place that of Eastern culture, including the charm of Tagore’s poetry and his ideas. “In a word,” Guo told us in an article, “As far as my experiences of composing poetry considered, I was at first interested in natural style under the influence of Tagore and others, and I followed a bold and flowing style later on under the influence of Walt Whiteman.”\(^4\) As a result, Guo’s attitude towards Tagore appeared different. In his article, Guo observed, he believed that the philosophy of historical materialism was the only way to solve the problems of the world. Without a change in the economic structure the poor would continue to suffer and the leisure class, to which Tagore belonged, will talk of the reality of Brahma, the dignity of the soul and the delight of love and use them as opium and wine for the intoxication of the masses. He suspected a sinister design behind the invitation to Tagore. “If Tagore comes to China as a tourist we welcome him. But if he is invited for some purpose then I cannot but bandy words with his hosts. We wonder about Tagore’s being invited to China this time. Is there any particular part of Tagore’s thought that is admired by his

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hosts and what would they demand from him?” 1 From his words, we can guess that Guo’s aversion to some Chinese intellectuals had had some negative implication on his remarks on Tagore. So far as Tagore’s visit to China considered, Guo’s aversion from this aspect, to some extent, was similar to Lu Xun’s. In fact, early in the 1920s, Guo had been involved in a series of hot debates with Xu Zhimo and Hu Shi who either invited Indian Nobel laureate to China or gave Tagore warm-hearted welcome.

Just as history proved, in the context of China’s social-political milieu, a man of Guo’s talent and temperament would never admire Tagore. But if we today read the following sentences by Guo himself then the historical misunderstanding between him and Tagore, his one-time spirit master, would be clearly understandable. “Why should we invite Tagore…What is our expectation from him? Has anyone tried to understand his thought and has anyone told us about it? …We do not have any clear idea about his thought nor do we have any genuine urgency to listen to him. It is going to be like children playing dolls and making Tagore an object of pity.” 2 Here we read an irony.

A student of modern Chinese history would be mostly familiar with Tagore Event around 1924. “For Chinese political astrologers Tagore had assumed the proportion of a comet, which is in a way an acknowledgement of his importance in modern intellectual history of China.” 3 Tagore’s first visit to China once caused a great sensation and a fierce political and cultural controversy in the Chinese cultural scene. It was quite unusual for the new cultural camp formed during the May 4th Movement to have become seriously split. A number of personalities involved from political and cultural scene either extended enthusiastic welcome or satiric indifference or fierce criticism to Tagore. The leading figures that were critical of Tagore included Chen Duxiu, Qu Qiubai, Mao Dun(Shen Yanbing), yet some of them were the earliest translators and admirers of Tagore in China. Essays of criticizing Tagore appeared mainly in the political journals. Some of them were departing from facts or groundless.

Chen Duxiu, who was the first to translate Tagore’s poem to China, was then the general secretary of Chinese Communist Party found in 1921. But Chen was also fiercely critical of Tagore’s thought. “Chen Duxiu held extreme views on Tagore since the two had sharp contradictions in cultural and social ideas.” 4 Chen thought that Tagore had two mistakes, of which one was his misinterpretation of science and materialism, the other was his misleading the way of the national liberation movements in the East. Chen wrote under the pseudonym of Shi An in one of his articles: “When Tagore first came to China we regarded him as a poet who cherished Oriental thought. As we were afraid that China’s youth, who usually enjoy empty

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speculation, would fall deeply under his spell, so we could not help opposing him…
He is of nothing.” 1

Mao Dun is one of the early translators of Tagore’s works. But two days after
Tagore’s arrival in Shanghai, Mao Dun wrote an article entitled “Our Expectations
from Tagore” in the supplement Juewu(Consciousness). “The poet-saint of India” He
wrote, “has arrived at last…But we do not welcome the Tagore who loudly sings the
praises of the Oriental civilization, nor do we welcome the Tagore who creates a
paradise of poetry that has made our youth intoxicated and self-complacent. We
welcome the Tagore who works for the uplift of the peasantry(though we do not
support his methods), the Tagore who passionately sings, ‘March alone’…” 2

How to explain the writers and members of Chinese Communist Party like Chen
Duxiu and Mao Dun’s criticism of Tagore’s thoughts and his speeches in China?

We should first of all keep in mind that it was “the misunderstanding of times” 3
that caused Chen Duxiu and Mao Dun’s criticism of Tagore. The two important facts
were that Tagore came to China in a wrong time with a Gospel unsuitable for Chinese
political realities then and that the Communist Party Members and writers were not
quite aware of Tagore’s thoughts and his friendly mission for China due to their
political beliefs and the complicated realities then.

Before Tagore’s visit to China in 1924, Chinese society had been in a state of
turmoil. Such intellectuals as Chen Duxiu believed in Marxism and science, came to
the rescue of China from the most dangerous situation, and regarded eastern
civilization as a synonym of out-of-dated and reactionary thing. Tagore’s thought, in
Chen’s opinion, seemed to be no less than capitulationism and a kind of philosophy
for the conquered people. “Tagore’s peace movement,” in Chen’s words, “is only to
persuade all the oppressed nations following him to exercise restraint, to yield and
sacrificed themselves to the imperialists slavishly. He is no more than a persuader for
the imperialists.” 4

It is very clear that the left intellectuals during the May 4th Movement dealt
equally with politics and academic research or cultural communication and more
often than not confused the two, which, to some degree, could gives us the answer to
Chen Duxiu and his colleagues’ fierce criticism of Tagore and his China visit since the
political reality in China then was only that they cared about most of all.

Many decades after Tagore visited China, Qu Qiubai wrote in one essay,
“Literature and art, generally speaking, are both of demagogy and propaganda by
nature…Literature and art are recorders of politics every time and everywhere.” 5

Many a left writers like Mao Dun under the influence of the policy of Chinese

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1 Shi An(Chen Duxiu), ‘Tagore is of Nothing’, The Guide, No.67. Sun Yixue, ed., Tagore and China(Shijiazhuang: Hebei People’s
Japan, China, and India (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970), p.229. (Note: The translation of the last sentence is mine)
Tagore and China(Shijiazhuang: Hebei People’s Publishing House, 2001), pp.239-240. Trans. by Tan Wen, Tan Chung, ed., Across the
3 Sun Yixue and Guo Hongtao, ‘A Misunderstanding in the History of Sino-Indian Cultural Communication: The Disturbance Caused by
5 Qu Qiubai, Qu Qiubai on Literature (Peking: People’s Literature Publishing House, 1959), p.44.
Communist Party was willing to be engaged in the collective activities of criticism of Tagore. Many decades later, Mao Dun revealed the truth in his memoir, “It’s acknowledgeable that I wrote two articles on Tagore’s visit to China. So far as Tagore’s visit as considered, some intellectuals then were very excited while the Chinese Communist Party were quite aware of this event. The Central Committee of the Party thought that we should write some essays in newspaper to express our attitude and desire for Tagore’s visit then. My two essays(i.e., Our Hope from Tagore and Tagore and Eastern Culture) were written following this direction… At that time when Tagore came to China to advocate his thought of eastern culture, there were many people who were against his ideas and wrote essays, which were published in The Guide and other journals. They were critical of Tagore responding to the Party’s call and they also stroke back the scholars and personalities who invited Tagore to visit China with their own private motives.”

Such words prove that Chen Duxiu and Mao Dun and other left intellectuals were critical of Tagore from a specific point of view. In other words, political cause other than academic research or cultural contact was all they cared for then.

Tagore always dreamt of having an atmosphere for the thinkers and the intellectuals to think independently and freely. But unfortunately enough, just as one scholar observed, “In the context of such a reality full of worry and trouble, it was very difficult to have a kind of pure communication of academic research and cultures realized.”

The second important background for radical Chinese intellectuals like Chen Duxiu and Qu Qiubai to have criticized Tagore are the two debates in the 1920s: The debates on Chinese and western cultures and the debates on science and the so-called xuan xue or ancient Chinese metaphysics.

Just as Indian Nobel laureate economist and writer Amartya Sen observed in a recent paper present at Peking University’s conference to mark the 150th birth anniversary of the Nobel laureate poet and writer Rabindranath Tagore, “Tagore came to China when there was a hot debate, where there were some people who preferred to inherit and carry forward traditional Chinese culture while other newly emerging enthusiasts were deeply involved in changing the modern world other than yearning for the heritage. The result of Tagore’s great travel in China was that stirring Tagore came to a stirring nation then and the two emotions conflicted but lacked their harmony.”

The challenge of the radicals against Chinese heritage around the May 4th Movement caused a debate on eastern and western cultures, which lasted from 1915 to 1927. The leaders of the May 4th Movement like Chen Duxiu and Li Dazhao wrote a number of essays on the issue. Li thought that Chinese civilization was seriously ill and the whole nation was waiting for death. He persuaded the Chinese to study the spirit of science from the West. Chen boldly broke away from Guo Cui or the

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quintessence of Chinese culture, and as a result, he was a forerunner of advocating the wholesale westernlization. After the May 4th Movement, the debate came to the second stage, where the two sides focused on whether the eastern and western cultures could be harmonized at all. At the third stage of the debate saw the publications of *A Record of Mental Journey over Europe* by Liang Qichao in 1920 and *Eastern and Western Cultures and Their Philosophies* by Liang Shuming in 1921, which caused the hot debates to its zenith. They believed that the whole world was destined to march forward in a Chinese and Confucian way, which was directly against what Chen and Li believed in but was very harmonious with Tagore’s conceptual framework. Just as Amartya Sen observed, Tagore met the whole-hearted welcome from the West in the 1920s and 1930s when advocating the quintessence of the eastern civilization since the West was in crisis in belief then while waiting for the better message from the East. But when he addressed himself to the audience in China in the same way, he was doomed to be a conservative under the eyes of radical intellectuals in China. “Tagore was critical of the western value system and he laid his hope on the dominance of the eastern thought, which, of course, would make the radical Chinese intellectuals to think him abnormal or even reactionary.”

It was indeed so especially after the radicals like Chen Duxiu had been engaged in the long debate on the issue of eastern and western cultures.

In the same year before Tagore visited China in 1924, the so-called debate on science and Dark Learning or ancient Chinese metaphysics(Ke Xuan Lun Zhan) closely following the debate on the issue of eastern and western cultures broke out among the Chinese intellectual circles. The leading figures of the school of Dark Learning (Xuan Xue Pai) like Zhang Junmai and Liang Qichao hesitated to admit that science could deal with the issue of life philosophy. The west for them was materialistic and the East spiritual. But the leading figures of the school of science(Ke Xue Pai) like Ding Wenjiang, Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu and Qu Qiubai acknowledged that science was capable of solving the issue of life philosophy. They thought that the West was also spiritual while the East was not materialistic enough. One’s indulging in empty talk or prattling of spirit would prove to be no use for the nation. This debate came to the end when the school of science won by their slogan “Down with the forces of the evil of Dark Learning (Da Xuan Xue Gui)”.

Tagore’s idea that the eastern civilization should be revived to counteract and counterpoise the western civilization was not historically reasonable in the context of the political realities in China then but it was not completely wrong or absurd for it contained some grains of truth from the theoretical point of view in general, and from the perspective of contemporary cultural ecology in particular. Unfortunately enough, the leading figures of the Chinese Communist Party members like Chen Duxiu and Qu Qiubai who had been involved in a series of hot debates, fiercely criticized Tagore who shared some thoughts with his warm-hearted hosts like Zhang Junmai and Liang Qichao in public. What they did was not so polite from the perspective of cultural communication but was quite naturally understandable at a different angle when

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considering their point of views on eastern and western cultures. For example, Shen Zemin, one of the Chinese Communist Party members, also regarded Tagore as “an Indian diehard” like Gu hongming, Kang Youwei, Liang Qichao, Zhang Junmai who was absolutely out-of-dated. Tagore, from Shen’s point of view, was wrong in two aspects: He was a theist and a person who did not know the right road leading to a flourishing and prosperous world culture. Tagore’s thoughts, according to Shen, “are in fact a big obstacle for the Chinese youth’s outlooks.” Here we can cite some words of Tan Chung to answer to the critically questioning of Tagore above: “Now it is quite clear that those people who thought that Tagore publicized before Chinese the Orientalism against the West misunderstood what Tagore really meant…His ideal was based on a flourishing world civilization and celebration of ‘Devali or Light Festival of world culture’…He intended not to teach China as a pupil but to encourage China and India to reflect together instead.”

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The controversy on Tagore’s visit to China, according to some Chinese scholars, is also a fundamental issue about how to deal with foreign literature and culture in the context of China-foreign literary and cultural communications. Its importance and implication are far beyond the relations between Tagore or Indian culture and China. “Be it successful or failed, this controversy is after all a valuable reference for our researches on the relations between Chinese and foreign cultures and literatures.”

Actually, even for such Chinese scholars as Liang Qichao, Liang Suming, Gu Hongming who extended warm-hearted welcome to Tagore, there were yet some cultural barriers between the Indian heavenly Guru and his bosom friends, which was then and is even now a real Himalaya gap between India and China. Take Liang Qichao for example. Although Liang was very pleased to see Tagore’s visit in China, as far as his public speeches considered, he made no mention of ‘Eastern civilization’, clearly separating the traditions of the two countries rather than lumping them together in a single civilization, as Tagore had done. Furthermore, While Liang strongly favored closer contacts between the intellectuals of India and China, he had left no record of how he felt about Tagore’s appeal for a revival of spiritual values in China. For Liang Suming, one of his recommendations to the Chinese people for the present was that the Indian attitude must be rejected, and not a trace of it be allowed to remain in China. In Gu Hongming’s analysis, China had much more to fear from Indian than from Western influences, because Indian civilization was antagonistic to rationalism and science. He felt it curious to see Tagore telling the Chinese to revive this very ‘Oriental civilization’ which had been the cause of the stagnation in the Chinese civilization. According to Gu, if China wanted really to make progress,

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instead of reviving, China must get rid of this Oriental civilization. What he really meant was his suggestion to Tagore: Stick to his poetry, write poetry and don’t talk of civilization.

So far, we have seen enough multifarious Chinese repercussions to Tagore’s visit and his public speeches in China. How to comment on this? When referring to Tagore’s visit to China in 1924, Amiya Dev, Professor of comparative literature from Jadavpur University of India once told us in his article, Tagore the pioneer of modern India, “has been misreading from many aspects.” ¹ Why? Anyway, the lack of mutual-understanding for each other is really a Himalaya gap waiting for the people from both India and China at present to cross or to fill. Let’s cite a Western scholar’s review as the conclusion for this article: “Tagore, whose knowledge of Chinese thought was apparently limited to one Taoist classic, and who seems to have know nothing of Confucianism, was ignorant of both the old and the new landscapes of secular Chinese thought. Many Chinese intellectuals, equally ignorant of Hindu thought, were led to the conclusion that he was a Buddhist whose ideas belonged not even to the recent past, which they were actively repudiating, but to the remote and hopelessly antedeluvian world of the T’ang dynasty.”² Now a new word Chindia has been coined for a new quest for mutual understanding between Indian and China. A number of conferences and seminars to mark the 150th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore have been hosted by different groups of scholars in different countries recently. Therefore it is high time we reflect on Tagore’s visit to China and the various receptions at the Chinese side calmly and sincerely.

About the Author

Dr. Yin Xi’nan was born in Chongqing, China. He obtained his Ph.D. degree of comparative literature in Sichuan University of China in 2006 and he studied Sanskrit in Sardar Patel University of India as a visiting scholar from 2004 to 2005. He did his post-doctoral research work in Peking University of China and continued his studying Sanskrit there from 2008 to 2010. Now he is working as Associate Professor in the Institute of South Asian Studies, Sichuan University. He is currently a visiting scholar at the Department of East Asian Studies of Delhi University, Delhi. He is interested in Rabindranath Tagore, Sanskrit poetics, Sino-Indian cultural relations, Indian subject in the English world, etc. He has published the following books: Rabindranath Tagore: From the Perspective of World Civilization(2003), The Discovery of Rabindranath Tagore(2005), India in English Literature(2008), Indian Images of China(2010), Comparative Studies in Sanskrit Alankara Sastra and Western Poetics(2010), A History of Comparative Literature in India(2011) and Out of India: A Study of Indian Diasporic Writers(2011). His next books will be A History of Indian Literary theories and Critiques, An Anthology of Alankara Sastra, and An Anthology of Essays in Comparative Literature in India.