

Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Gurudev Rabindranath
Tagore in Shanghai*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker :

Riva Ganguly Das

23 October 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker: Amb. Riva Ganguly Das, former Diplomat; Member, Governing Council, Asian Confluence, Shillong; and, Distinguished Fellow, Council for Strategic and Defence Research, New Delhi.

Chair: Prof. Sabaree Mitra, Chairperson and Professor, Centre for Chinese and South East Asian Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; and, Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Date: 23 October 2024

Venue: Zoom

- The seminar explored Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore’s historic journeys to Shanghai in 1924 and 1929, marking significant milestones in advancing cultural relations between India and China. The presentation was based on Amb. Riva Ganguly Das’ experiences during her tenure as Consul General in Shanghai (2008-2012).
- Amb. Das recalled that her tenure was coterminous with a thriving debate and discussions on the “Asian Century” and at a time of heightened interest in cultural connections between India and China. Tagore's philosophies of humanism and universalism were viewed as a basis for cross-cultural dialogue and Asian cooperation. During her tenure, initiatives undertaken included identifying public spaces for Tagore commemorations and collaborating with the Shanghai administration, which ultimately resulted in the installation of a Tagore bust near Xu Zhimo’s residence.
- Amb. Das noted Tagore’s central presence at the India Pavilion during the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, which witnessed vibrant cultural exchanges. Additionally, she highlighted annual celebrations of Tagore’s birth anniversary in collaboration with the Shanghai Writer’s Association, and archival research projects on Tagore’s visits, which culminated in the publication of *Rabindranath Tagore in Shanghai* by Xing Jianrong.

- The speaker explored the key differences in the purpose, nature, and reception of Tagore's visits to China. In 1924, Tagore's ideals of civilizational dialogue, humanism, and universalism resonated with some, but were criticised by others. For his critics, Tagore's idealism was considered to be in conflict with the prevailing sentiments of Chinese intellectuals. Misunderstood as a spiritual figure, Tagore returned to India somewhat dejected. His subsequent visit in 1929 was more subdued, marked by private gatherings with Xu Zhimo, his interpreter and close friend.
- Amb. Das also shed light on the enduring bond between Tagore and Xu Zhimo, emphasising the role of personal relationships in fostering cultural exchanges. Concluding her presentation, Amb. Das noted a renewed interest in Tagore among younger Chinese readers, reflecting a deep appreciation for his philosophical insights and poetic legacy. She argued that stable geopolitical relations and mutual trust are critical to making cultural relations more meaningful and impactful.

Disclaimer:

This is a summary produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion. All views expressed here should be understood to be those of the speakers and individual participants, and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies. Since this is a summary, it cannot be used for citation without confirming with the speaker(s).