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Chinese Studies
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**OCCASIONAL
PAPER**

No. 111

December 2025

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Shubhda Gurung

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Author: Shubhda Gurung

First published in 2025

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Institute of Chinese Studies
B-371 (3rd Floor),
Chittaranjan Park, Kalkaji
New Delhi 110 019, India
Ph.: +91-11-40564823
Email: info@icsin.org
Website: www.icsin.org

About the Author

Shubhda Gurung is an Institute of Chinese Studies-Harvard Yenping Institute (ICS-HYI) fellow. She is currently pursuing her PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Prior to this, she was a Yenping Scholar at the Yenping Academy of Peking University, Beijing, wherein she completed her Master's degree in China Studies. She also holds an advanced diploma in Chinese language from Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing as a UNESCO-Great Wall Fellow. At HYI, she is conducting research on India and China cultural connections in Prof. Ji Xianlin's works.

Contact: shubhdagurungjnu@gmail.com

Tagore and his 1924 China Visit: Reassessing Ji Xianlin's Perspectives¹

Abstract

As 2024 marked a hundred years since the Indian Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore's 1924 China visit, the present moment is an apt time to reflect on its impact on cultural interactions between India and China. This paper aims to explore the perspectives of Ji Xianlin, an important Chinese scholar and a key historical witness to the tumultuous events of the twentieth century. Within China, divergent views surrounded Tagore's visit, both during and after his stay, and Ji is one of many scholars who has written about this historically significant event. Ji's perspectives emanate from his encounter with Tagore as a middle-schooler in Jinan, Shandong Province. Six decades later, Ji was not only a world-renowned Indologist but also the translator of one of the key works on Tagore – *Tagore by Fireside*. Ji's academic perspectives on Tagore were primarily unbiased by contemporaneous politics. Ji recognised the support and sympathies Tagore was able to draw towards China during the War of Resistance against Japanese aggression. Through the lens of Ji Xianlin's research on Tagore's thoughts and writings on China, this paper examines the footprints of how Tagore's 1924 China visit influenced the Chinese perceptions of India and vice versa.

Keywords: Tagore, Ji Xianlin, India, China, Cultural Interactions

¹ An earlier version was published as a working paper, as part of the *Harvard-Yenching Institute Working Paper Series*, in April 2025.

“Then [in 1924] I was only thirteen, did not know much about poetry and even less about India. Yet, I felt at the time he [Tagore] must have been a great man.”

Ji Xianlin 季羨林²

Introduction

On 7 May 1861, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) was born into a prosperous, devout and a patriotic family in Calcutta, India. Tagore withdrew from school at a young age and began homeschooling at fourteen (Zhang and Hebert 2023: 92). By the age of sixteen, he released his first poems, and gradually progressed toward writing short stories, dramas, fiction, and songs. Some of his most renowned works include *Gitanjali* (Song offerings), *Sonar Tari* (The Golden Boat), *Kabuliwallah* (The Fruit Seller from Kabul), *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World), and *Sadhana* (The Realisation of Life). He studied law at the University College London but went on to receive the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913, which brought him huge success and immense recognition throughout the world. As a Nobel laureate, Tagore was invited as a distinguished guest to travel to various countries and give speeches to the leaders and inspire the youngsters. The host countries included Japan, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Mexico, as well as many countries in Southeast Asia and Europe. This long list of countries also included China, a destination that since childhood Tagore had longed to travel and explore. Therefore, upon receiving an invitation from the *Beijing Jiangzuo Xiehui* 北京讲座协会 or Lecture Association of Peking in 1923, he humbly accepted it.

² *Tagore and China: Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of Tagore's Birth* (泰戈尔与中国: 泰戈尔与中国 – 纪念泰戈尔诞生一百周年) *Taigeer yu Zhongguo – Jinian Taigeer Dansheng Yibai Zhounian*, 1982. Ji Xianlin 季羨林 (1911–2009) was one of the founders of Sino-Indology. He was trained in the languages of Sanskrit, Pali, and Tocharian at Gottingen University, Germany. His PhD thesis was titled, “Die Konjugation des finiten Verbums in den Gathas des Mahavastu” (The finite verb change in Mahavastu). Beginning in 1947, he was a professor of Indian studies at Peking University, Beijing. He translated Indian classics like the *Ramayana*, *Shakuntala*, and *Jataka Tales* from Sanskrit and Pali into Chinese. All of his works have been compiled in 30 volumes titled *Ji Xianlin quanji* 季羨林全集 (*The complete works of Ji Xianlin*), published by Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

There have been few Indian³ and Chinese⁴ scholars who have argued that Ji Xianlin's understanding of Tagore's visit is "the most authoritative" and "valuable" (Wei 2010: 397; Das 1998: 379). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to put forth Ji Xianlin's understanding of Tagore and his 1924 visit to China. The paper's scope is threefold: to discuss Ji Xianlin's association with Tagore, to explore Ji Xianlin's understanding of Tagore's idea of China, and to analyze Ji Xianlin's assessment of Tagore's 1924 China visit and its impact on the future of India-China cultural interactions.

The method used in this paper is primarily explanatory and analytical and it aims to discuss Ji Xianlin's encounters with and perspectives on Tagore and his China visit. The languages of the sources used in this paper are Chinese and English. The most foundational work is Ji Xianlin's article titled "Tagore and China: Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of Tagore's Birth," published in the book titled *Zhong-Yin Wenhua Guanxishi Lunwenji* 《中印文化关系史论文集》 or *The Collected Essays on the History of Sino-India Cultural Relations*, published by the *Sanlian Shudian Chubanshe* 《三联书店出版社》 or Sanlian Publication House in 1982. This lengthy article with extensive analysis forms the basis of this paper. Other sources include "Ji Xianlin and Tagore," written by N.M. Pankaj and Liu Jian, published in *South Asian Studies* in 2008; "The Controversial Guest: Tagore in China" written by Sisir Kumar Das and published in the book *Across the Himalayan Gap: An Indian Quest for Understanding China*, edited by Tan Chung in 1998; "Grand Visit to China: Historical Significance of Tagore's China Visit," written by Wei Liming and published in *Forum for World Literature Studies Journal* in 2010; "Lu Xun's Critique of Tagore: Sardonic Irreverence and Misunderstanding", written by B.R. Deepak in 2014; and *Tagore's Talks in China* (1925 edition).

³ Sisir Kumar Das in the article titled 'The Controversial Guest: Tagore's 1924 Visit in China' writes, "The long article by Ji Xianlin, the Director of the Institute and an eminent scholar, also the President of the Comparative Literature Association of China, is particularly valuable as it gives a scholarly analysis of factors responsible for controversy about Tagore's visit."

⁴ Wei Liming in the article titled 'Grand Visit to China: Historical Significance of Tagore's China Visit' writes, "I think his (Ji Xianlin) comments above on Tagore's 1924 China visit is the most authoritative on earth and I have not seen any other comment more authoritative than it."

Tagore and Ji Xianlin: A Cross-Cultural Connection

In the summer of 1924, a sixty-three-year-old Tagore visited Jinan, the hometown of Ji Xianlin, in Shandong Province. During this visit, a teenage Ji Xianlin met with Tagore. Regarding this formative encounter, Ji wrote, “Then I was only thirteen, did not know much about poetry and even less about India. Yet, I felt at the time he [Tagore] must have been a great man” (Wei 2010: 396). Who could have known that a few decades down the line, Ji Xianlin would become a renowned Chinese Indologist and an insightful critic of Tagore’s life, thoughts, and work? In addition, he translated an important work, *Tagore by the Fireside*, written by Tagore’s protégée Maiyatri Devi into Chinese as *Jiating zhong de Taige’er* 《家庭中的泰戈尔》 in 1985 (Devi 1967). It is believed that meeting Tagore at such a young and impressionable age was highly influential on Ji Xianlin, and that it was because of Tagore’s 1924 China visit that Ji chose to study Sanskrit and Buddhism ten years later during his doctoral studies at the University of Gottingen in Germany (Pankaj and Liu 2008: 85).

In the article “Ji Xianlin and Tagore”, Pankaj and Liu explain the similarities between Tagore and Ji Xianlin in four aspects. First, they argue that, like Tagore, Ji was a “learned and versatile genius” (*Boxue duoneng de tiancai* 博学多能的天才) and an advocate for “Eastern culture” (*dongfang wenhua* 东方文化) (Pankaj and Liu 2008: 84). Second, they argue that Ji Xianlin’s interest in Sanskrit and profound knowledge of Indian philosophy contributed to the formation of his theories such as the concept of “*Tat tvam asi*”⁵. Third, while Tagore mainly used poetry as his medium to become a moral model for his nation, Ji Xianlin chose prose to express his opinions and guide the younger generation of his country. This shows how both of them used some form of literature to express their concerns about their nation’s existing struggles with colonialism at the time. Lastly, both felt dearly about each other’s countries. As Tagore was leaving China in 1924, a Chinese friend asked, “Did you leave anything behind [on the train]?” Tagore replied, “Only my heart” (Pankaj and Liu 2008: 86). Similarly, throughout his several trips to India, Ji Xianlin expressed an equally sincere belief in the greatness of the Indian people and the bright future of India-China relations. His brief

⁵ *Tat tvam asi* (तत् त्वम् असि) or *Ni jiushi ta* (你就是它) stands for “You are that” in English. It essentially means the relationship shared between the self and others and with the world of nature. A central concept in Hindu philosophy emphasising the unity of the individual self (Atman) with the ultimate reality (Brahman).

memoir, *Tianzhu xinying* (天竺心影), proves his deep sentiments towards India (Pankaj and Liu 2008: 86).

Outside of these similarities in their perspectives on the world, a few differences exist. Of course, there was a large age disparity between Tagore and Ji, which meant that only one of them was able to read and write about the other. Ji Xianlin wrote about many outstanding figures in China and abroad, but it is indeed extraordinary that he wrote a total of eight articles about Tagore, which are collected in volume 5 of the *Ji Xianlin wenji* 《季羨林文集》 *Collected Works of Ji Xianlin* published by *Jiangxi jiaoyu chubanshe* 江西教育出版社 in 1995 (Pankaj and Liu 2008: 85). It is noteworthy that in the year 2000 when Peking University presented a bronze bust of Tagore at the Peking University Library during the visit of Indian President K.R. Narayanan, none other than Ji Xianlin was invited to the ceremony as the guest of honor (Pankaj and Liu 2008:86).

One of the eight articles, “Tagore and China: Commemorating the 100th Anniversary of Tagore’s Birth”, was written by Ji in 1961, but it was not until 1978 that he finally published it. One of the reasons he decided to complete this article was that he had just returned from his third trip to India and realised how significant Tagore was for the Indian people (Pankaj and Liu 2008: 86). During his trip, he met numerous Indian scholars and leaders of the time, many of whom praised Tagore and some of whom highlighted his shortcomings. However, as Ji penned his thoughts on the matter, he posited “the need that ‘gold must be pure and people must be perfect’ is an idealist approach”⁶ (Ji 1978: 137). He added that demanding perfectionism from people, even someone like Tagore, is uncalled for. One can argue that Ji practised this fair-minded and objective approach to understanding Tagore and his China visit in his analytical work. Furthermore, Ji emphasised the need to understand Tagore’s main outlook or perspectives, which, according to him, can be explained in three aspects. The first is Tagore’s love and sympathy for China, opposition to colonisation, and deep feelings for the Chinese people. Second, Tagore’s literary works, to a certain degree, influenced the formation of new art and literature after the May Fourth Movement of 1919. Tagore’s deep feelings toward the Chinese people also roused similar feelings in Indian people toward

⁶ This has been translated into English by the author of this paper. The original sentence in the article is “要求 ‘金要足赤, 人要完人’ , 是唯心主义形而上学的做法”.

China. Third, Ji believed that Tagore's contributions would be remembered forever in the larger paradigm of India-China relations. (Ji, 1978: 137)

Ji Xianlin's Perspective on Tagore and China

Tagore visited China at the age of sixty-three, but he had been fascinated with China since his younger days. At twenty, he wrote an article, "The Death Trade of China" (*Siwang de maoyi* 死亡的贸易), published in the Bengali magazine *Bharati* in 1881, which assessed the role of Britain in the opium trade in China and extended his sympathies to the Chinese people (Ji 1978: 151). In the article, he writes, "This trade and various other means of earnings can be considered trade only if there is an air of politeness or courtesy to it. This is simply an act of robbery" (Ji 1978: 152). This showcases his deep sensitivities and concern towards China since his younger days. *Samajbhed* (Social differences), written in 1901, and the famous *Chinemaner Chithi* (Letters of a Chinaman), published in 1898, are eloquent evidence of his knowledge of and interest in Chinese affairs (Das 1998: 384). Since then and up until the very end, Tagore spoke about China and the Chinese people with grave sympathy and love.

However, the question that arises is why Tagore had such deep sentiments and feelings toward China. Why was he interested in China, the Chinese culture, and Chinese civilization? As per Ji's understanding, the answer is not simple, and its complexity can be described in three folds (Ji 1978: 152). First, the long-standing cultural interactions between India and China left a deep impression on the poet. In Tagore's own words, "China and India are old and are close like two brothers" (Ji 1978: 152). These words reflect his true feelings regarding the enduring and intimate relationship between the two neighbours as they faced similar challenges at the time.

Second, since both India and China had been subjected to Western oppression, Tagore was able to empathise with China. Ji argues that because Tagore's motherland had also been adversely impacted by Western imperialist powers, he felt personally invested in this matter. Tagore believed that the West is a materialistic civilization and was on the path of science, while the East is a spiritual civilization and was on a humanistic path. He also believed that in the West, all problems had to be resolved at the level of the country itself; however, since society was the basis in the East, a country might perish but its society could persist (Ji 1978:

153). However, Ji addresses Tagore's distinction between East and West with a caveat. He points out that the basis of this distinction may inherently have stemmed from Tagore's own sentiments and perceptions, which he may have extended to politics and philosophy but not necessarily vice versa (Ji 1978: 153).

Third, Ji Xianlin argues that Tagore observed unique aspects of Chinese culture and was in great awe of it. This particular aspect of Tagore's interest in China and Chinese culture was multifaceted. Ji Xianlin explains this in four key points. (i) Tagore believed that there is a hospitable spirit in Chinese literature. While delivering a speech in Shanghai in 1924, he stated, "The root of hospitality is civilization" (Ji 1978: 155). (ii) Tagore admired the Chinese people's ignorance towards the brutal power of militarism. He believed that it was similar to that of the Indians. (iii) Tagore discussed Chinese people's love for the world and love for life. This is a crucial point. Ji believed that among all the philosophers and literary figures in India, Tagore stood out because of his evident love for life and the world. After learning this aspect about him, his love for the Chinese culture can be easily understood. (iv) Tagore praised the Chinese for their lively spirit and knack for doing simple things in exceptional ways (Ji 1978:156). Although Ji Xianlin systematically analysed these reasons for Tagore's interest in Chinese culture, he does not fully agree with all the aspects of China and Chinese culture as understood by Tagore. However, he does agree with the fact that Tagore deserves great respect for reflecting the deep friendship between India and China (Ji 1978: 156).

Ji Xianlin on Tagore's 1924 China visit: Cultural Diplomacy, Intellectual Reception and Ideological Tension

After receiving the invitation from the *Beijing Jiangzuo Xiehui* 北京讲座协会 or Lecture Association of Peking in 1923, Tagore immediately accepted it and arrived in Shanghai on 12 April 1924. Throughout his entire visit, Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 was his official translator until his departure in late May 1924. The two formed a special bond, and Tagore even dedicated his book *Talks in China*, published in 1925, to Xu (Tagore 1925). In the span of seven weeks, he traveled across various parts of China including Shanghai, Jinan, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Tianjin, and Beijing. Tagore met various people, visited many well-known places, and gave numerous speeches, and in one of those speeches he said, "I don't know why, but upon reaching China, it feels like I have arrived at my hometown" (Ji 1978:152). Upon reaching

Beijing, he was warmly welcomed by Liang Qichao 梁启超, then president of the university's Association, who spoke highly of the unity between India and China in his inaugural speech (Tagore 1925: 1). During the course of the trip, the Crescent Moon Society (*Xin yue she* 新月社), a literary society named after one of Tagore's poems, also arranged a function to celebrate the poet's sixty-fourth birthday. It was on this occasion that Liang Qichao bestowed upon Tagore a stone tablet engraved with his Chinese name: *Zhu Zhendan* (竺震旦) (Das 1998: 396).

Before Tagore's China visit, between the years of 1921 and 1924, there were many articles written by Chinese scholars and political activists about him. These were later published by Zhang Guangliang as a volume titled *On Tagore Lun Taigeer* 《论泰戈尔》 in 1984 (Das 1998: 379). This was reinforced by Ji in his 1958 lecture "Indian Literature in China" at Peking University. He noted that "...it may be said that China was intoxicated with the Tagore fever around the time of his visit to China, both before and afterwards" (Wei 2010: 396).

Tagore's visit to China grabbed a lot of attention both internationally and nationally. During the early 1920s, capitalist society was emerging on the international level. At the national level, China was a semifeudal society facing a severe invasion of imperialism, shrouded in economic crisis. Both domestic and foreign capitalists were oppressing workers. This socio-economic crisis led to political debates in literary circles as well. To briefly summarise, the literary circles that emerged at the time included "The New Culture Camp," "The Feudal Revivalists", "Right-Wing Bourgeois", and "The Modern Critics". (Deepak 2014: 149). The "New Culture Camp" refers to a group of left-wing writers represented by Chen Duxiu 陈独秀, Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白, Guo Moruo 郭沫若, Mao Dun 茅盾, and Feng Naichao 冯乃超, etc. They criticised traditional elements and supported new forms of Chinese culture. "The Feudal Revivalists", who opposed writings in the vernacular and advocated that there could be no unity between literary and vernacular language, were represented by Hu Xiansu 胡先肃, Mei Guangdi 梅光迪, and Wu Mi 吴宓, etc. The right-wing bourgeois were referred to as "The Modern Critics", as they advocated for learning from the West while equally

admiring Eastern civilization. They were represented by Hu Shi 胡适, Xu Zhimo 徐志摩, and Lin Zhangmin 林长民 (Deepak 2014: 149).

Against the backdrop of the New Culture Movement of 1919 and the establishment of the Communist Party of China in 1921 — indeed, merely a few years after these important historical events — Tagore found himself in a tumultuous situation in April 1924. In the aftermath of these circumstances, there were some groups who opposed Tagore's China visit and some that were in favour of it. According to Ji, there was a group of people who took advantage of Tagore's "regressive or traditional views" to serve their own agendas at the time. In his view, this group included Tagore's hosts (Ji 1979: 158). The other group perceived Tagore as someone who sympathised with and hoped for the well-being of China. Furthermore, Ji argues the only difference between the two groups was that the former seemed to have forgotten that Tagore also opposed Western imperialism, which was not what they had hoped for (Ji 1978: 158). By the time Tagore reached Beijing, he had already begun to sense these complex feelings about his ongoing visit. He stated,

“I even heard some were opposed to my coming because it might challenge your exceptional enthusiasm for modernism and for Western progress and force. True, if you want a man who will help you in these things, you have been mistaken in asking me. I have no help to give you here. You already have ten thousand able teachers, go to them.” (Tagore 1925: 73).

It is in this context that Ji assesses Tagore's visit to China. One of the ways that Ji approached this proposition was to ask his readers rather carefully and objectively whether it would be wise to say that Tagore should not be held responsible for the domestic climate of China at the time. However, what Ji did feel was that Tagore was not able to fully express the thoughts and ideas for which he was responsible. During his trip, he emphasised the meaning of the East or Eastern culture and strongly criticised the “machine civilization” of the West (Ji 1978: 158). However, Tagore did not completely oppose Western civilization, in fact, he supported Western developments in science and technology. To quote Tagore himself, “I don't oppose machines, but it is merely the control of the machine on the human spirit that I oppose” (Ji 1978: 159). Whether this specific thought of Tagore may or may not be correct is another matter. Therefore, Ji argues that this key aspect of Tagore's perspective was not

observed or was most likely ignored by the group of people who had been eager to invite him to China (Ji 1978: 159).

Apart from this, Ji analyses Tagore's inherent duality as represented in his thoughts and works (Chatterjee 2014: 29). According to Ji, Tagore was not only an anti-imperialist and intensely patriotic but also spiritual and a mystic. On the one hand, he would write and speak harshly against the evil of fascism and the oppression of imperialism in his own home country, and, on the other hand, he could write long essays and poems about loving life and people with deep emotions. His songs, poems, and fiction inspired the Indian people to continue their fight for liberty and independence.

Tagore's poems and short stories have an implied universal spirit. Some believe that a few of his works are outlets for leaving this world through escapism (Chatterjee 2014: 29). According to Ji Xianlin, some people in China tried to establish Tagore as a spiritual and mystic figure without any concern for human suffering. They tried to depict Tagore as a man driven by dreams and emotions without any real feelings for humanity. Ji states that it was Tagore's Chinese hosts who also chose to focus on only one aspect of his dual personality (Ji 1978: 159). Furthermore, he believes that the works that were chosen to be translated such as *Song Offerings* (*Ji tan jia li* 吉檀迦利), *The Crescent Moon* (*Xin yue ji* 新月集), *Stray Birds* (*Feiniaoj* 飞鸟集), and *The Gardener* (*Yuanding ji* 园丁集) were representative of only one aspect of Tagore's multifaceted personality (Ji 1978: 159).

Furthermore, in "Tagore and China," Ji briefly discusses some of the Chinese scholars who were critical of Tagore and his China visit such as Qu Quibai 瞿秋白, Yun Daiying 恽代英, and also includes Lu Xun 鲁迅. During his visit, Lu Xun, who was from the "New Culture Camp", was rather indifferent and was not vocal about his thoughts. But in 1927 Lu Xun addressed Tagore as a "beautiful yet poisonous *datura* flower", after learning Tagore's views on *sati* (Deepak 2014: 152). This scathing review of Lu Xun about the Indian poet was opposed by many Chinese Indologists such as Liu Jian 刘建 and Wang Yan 王艳, who believed it was Lu Xun's insufficient knowledge about Tagore and his works that led him to make such remarks (Deepak 2014: 152). Interestingly, in 1924, Lu Xun did praise Tagore for raising his voice against Western imperialism in India while other countries like Egypt, South Korea, and Vietnam were voiceless (Ji 1978: 161).

In view of the circumstances, Tagore decided to cut his trip short and left China on May 29, 1924. Tagore's last words before leaving China were, "I have done what was possible – I have made friends". He continued on this path following his departure, devoting much of his energy in the last decade of his life to establishing contact between India and China. Tagore urged Indians to paper the Chinese language, literature, culture, and history to live up to the symbol he had become in China: "an Indian monk accepting offerings from China" (Das 1998: 403). It is significant that in 1941, six months before his death, Tagore commemorated the day he was given the new name "Zhu Zhendan" in a poem, concluding with the sentence: "Wherever we find friends, there begins a new life" (Das 1998: 403).

Ji Xianlin on Tagore's Vision for India-China Unity

Among all the countries in the East, Tagore had the greatest hope for China. As he stated in one of the lectures he delivered in 1924, "I believe that your country [China] has a great future; I believe that when your country stands up and expresses its spirit, Asia will also have a great future" (Ji 1978: 169). Both India and China are large players in the East and therefore a core constituency in Tagore's idea of a "new era". In 1924, Tagore stated,

"The new era has arrived, standing at our door, waiting for us to welcome it. We cannot let her stay at the doorstep any longer. Let China and India unite; let the songs of welcoming the great era ring out from China and India! Let our two countries ignite the lights of welcome and go forward! If someone's lamp may be blown out due to headwinds, then let's help each other; if someone may faint, let another wake her up!" (Ji 1978: 169).

He frequently preached to his students that both India and China were under a dark age in the history of human civilization, but now they had arrived in the new world.

Furthermore, in his 1937 article "India and China" he wrote,

"Just like the island in the morning before dawn has completely broken, it sings and announces the rise of the sun. My heart is singing, announcing the arrival of a great future—a great future that is already very close to us. We must be ready to welcome this new century." (Ji 1978: 169).

These words by Tagore were food for thought for many. However, as Ji argues, Tagore did not analyze the issue of East and West from a societal or class perspective. He did not understand the historical development of science and he did not quite understand that the decline of Western civilization was in actuality a result of the emerging capitalist culture. According to Ji, Tagore stood with the people and sympathised with the East and, relying on his poetic sensitivities, felt that the West was on the decline and the East would eventually rise. But what Tagore felt and perceived was not quite right, from Ji's perspective, if one were to look at the situation objectively.

Outcomes of Tagore's 1924 Visit

One of the most important of Ji Xianlin's assessments of Tagore's 1924 China visit was that it was a successful one with long ranging results (Ji 1978: 162). He saw this in two facets. First, Tagore's visit advanced the translation of his literary works, which resulted in the deeper penetration of his work within China. This impact could be seen in all the literary circles at the time. In this period following 1924, being just five years after the start of the New Culture Movement, which led to the formation of a new literary style, Tagore's influence as a poet from the East was quite significant. Second, Ji believed that Tagore's visit contributed to the traditional friendship between India and China and built a new path for India-China cultural exchanges. In Ji words, "It was a prologue in the new chapter" of India-China relations (Ji 1978: 163).

Since then, the connections between India and China have increased drastically, showcasing the success of Tagore's advocacy for the Chinese language, literature, and culture in India. One example was the appointment of Cheena Bhavan at Vivsabharti in Calcutta, India, in 1937. Tagore also invited many literary figures and painters from China, including students on scholarships, to visit India and paper at Visvabharti. One of the most famous painters of the time, Xu Beihong 徐悲鸿, was among them. According to Ji, "this showcases that the seeds that were sown by Tagore's visit to China had already started to bear fruit" (Ji 1978: 163). Some scholars believe that it was Tagore's visit that "inaugurated a period of intense educational and cultural exchanges, which extended to the 1950s" (Sen 2020: 70). From the perspective of Indian scholars, as quoted by Ji, "At the time when imperialist forces of Japan

were attacking the Chinese culture, Tagore, on the other hand, was spreading the research on Chinese culture.” (Ji 1978: 163).

Another significant aspect was Tagore’s support and sympathy toward China during the War of Resistance against Japanese aggression in 1937. There was a drastic change in Tagore’s attitude towards Japan in a span of a few years, and his inclination toward China was ever on the rise, especially following 1937. On 21 September 1939, in a conversation by telephone, Tagore expressed his sympathies to Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (Ji 1978: 166). On 9 January 1938, the Indian government had sent a mission to help China, and in June of that year, Tagore published *Zhi Zhongguo renmin shu* 致中国人民, in which he wrote, “Our only consolation is the hope that this well thought out violence against your country will, in the heroic pain it brings, have a spiritual meaning and prompt the creation of a new national soul.” (Ji 1978: 166). Most famous of all is the poem written by Tagore when he heard about Japanese troops attacking a Chinese temple. The poem, excerpted below, is titled *They March to the Temple of Buddha* (敬礼佛陀的人门 *Jingli fotuo de renmin*).

They will punctuate each thousands of the maimed and killed
with the trumpeting of their triumph,
arouse demon’s mirth at the sight
of the limbs torn bleeding from women and children;
and they pray that they may befog minds with untruths
and poison God’s sweet air of breath,
and therefore, they march to the temple of Buddha, the compassionate,
to claim his blessings,
while loud beats the drum rat-a-tat
and the earth trembles.⁷ (Yu and Liu, 2021: 231)

It was through the medium of writing poems and articles as well as by giving speeches that Tagore not only influenced the minds of the people of India toward China but also impacted the international community as well. It was in this way Tagore raised his voice to support China in their war against Japan, which became something the Chinese people would never forget (Ji 1978: 168).

⁷ The English translation of the full poem can be found in *China and India: Dialogue of Civilisations*, published in 2021 by Pentagon Press LLP, p. 231.

Conclusion

As 2024 marked the hundred-year centennial of Tagore's China visit, it is important to reflect on how this historical event unfolded to lead us to the present and future. Various narratives and perceptions have been recorded and perceived by scholars and historians around the world. Ji Xianlin's analysis is one of many. He considered Tagore's visit to be a successful one, in contrast to the views of some scholars like Stephen Hay who have deemed it a "failure" (Das 1998: 378; Hay 1970: 7).

In short, Ji's assessment of Tagore can be summed up simply in the following four aspects (Das 1998: 401). First, he has asserted that some interest groups in China wanted to play up Tagore's visit for his "backward or regressive influence". The Chinese hosts of Tagore never projected his anti-feudal and anti-imperialist side.

Second, at a time when class struggle was intensifying in China, an incorrect projection of Tagore would naturally have had a negative effect, and for his part, Tagore could not have helped but share in the responsibility of not expressing his views in a balanced manner. He over stressed the significance of the culture of the East and severely criticised the materialistic culture of the West in his speeches in China. At no point was it clarified to his Chinese audience that Tagore never negated Western modern science and technology or that he had appealed to the Indian people to acquire them as well.

Third, there is a duality in Tagore's character and writings. He had one face, that of a sage, and another, that of a warrior (Ji 1978: 158). It was a lapse by his hosts not to project both sides of the poet. Lastly, Ji concludes his assessment by stating that Tagore's visit was a success as it promoted Chinese translations of his works and strengthened the friendship between the two countries while reopening new avenues of Sino-Indian cultural interactions.

As India and China grapple with strategic, economic and geopolitical issues in the 21st century, the spirit of Tagore's visit remains relevant. It serves as a reminder that despite differences, there is potential for collaboration and understanding between the two nations. Reflecting on historical moments like Tagore's journey, especially through the lens of an Indologist like Ji Xianlin, can help both India and China find pathways to deepen cultural exchanges, strengthen bilateral ties, and engage in constructive dialogue – an endeavour that

holds promise for a peaceful and prosperous future for both countries in this rapidly changing world.

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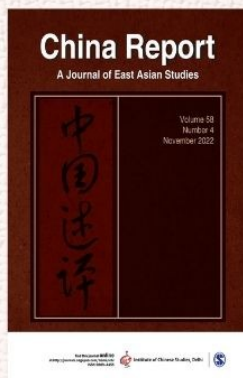


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INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES
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