

## Tagore's Idea of Pan-Asian Solidarity and Its Influence in East Asia

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Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) is generally recognised as a ‘myriad-minded’ genius of modern India. His collected works, published as *Rabindra Rachanavali* (27 volumes) and *Achalita Samgraha* (2 volumes), testify to the depth and breadth of his creative talent in such diverse genres as poetry, songs, short stories, novels, plays, dance-dramas, essays, biographies, memoirs, literary criticism and travelogues. At the age of seventy he took interest in fine art and produced about 2000 paintings. His songs “jana gana mana” and “amar sonar bangla” were chosen by the governments of India and Bangladesh respectively as their national anthems, and his musical compositions, the Rabindra Sangeet, are equally popular across the geographical divides of these two countries.<sup>1</sup>

In his life Tagore traveled far and wide, preaching his message of the intrinsic unity of mankind. He even established “Visva Bharati,” literally “The Seat of Global Knowledge,” a university which was enshrined in his ideas and ideals of ‘global village’.

Tagore, doubtless, is an archetypal exemplar of the ideal of universal man, a point eloquently stated by Jack Lindsay: “His many-sidedness becomes a powerful protest against the fragmentation of modern men, an expression of human wholeness.”<sup>2</sup> It was to spread his ideal of universal sensibility and vision that Tagore undertook his lecture tours to several Asian countries, beginning with his travel to Japan in 1916. The Nobel prize, awarded him three years earlier, had confirmed his belief in the appropriateness of his position and justifiability of his mission. The First World War made him further convinced that Asia needed to overcome nationalist passion that undergirded the artificial and derivative construct of nation-state. He proposed the revival of ancient Buddhist linkages amongst Asian countries as an alternative of the ‘ghettoisation’ of the East on the European model.

Several scholars have written on this important topic of Tagore’s Pan-Asianism. Stephen Hay was the first scholar to make a systematic study of the several visits undertaken by the poet to Japan and China in the teen years and the 1920’s of the last

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1 Indeed, it is the measure of Tagore’s appeal and influence as a symbol of secular humanism that fundamentalist elements in Bangladesh have recently launched a series of vicious attacks on cultural centres that carry forward his legacy.

See [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/1318991.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/1318991.stm).

2 Jack Lindsay, “Tagore, Poet and Humanist,” in Stephen Knight and S. N. Mukherjee, *Words and Worlds: Studies in the Social Role of Verbal Culture*, SASSC No. 1, Sydney, 1983. I am grateful to Professor Soumen Mukherjee for giving me a copy of this edited volume and drawing my attention to this essay. Also see, S. N. Mukherjee, “Tagore—A ‘Forgotten’ Prophet and a Poet” (unpublished essay).

century.<sup>3</sup> Hay attributes the poet's failure to elicit support for his message in China to the overpowering force of nationalism at the time of his visit.<sup>4</sup> Several scholars have tried to refute the thesis of Stephen Hay, and while some of these studies have succeeded in revealing a few misplaced emphases in Hay's research, stemming mostly from his limited knowledge of East Asian languages, none has made any serious dent on Hay's overall thesis that the views and vision of Tagore failed to find resonance in China and Japan.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper I cover the same terrain as Hays did over three decades earlier, and I wish to make it clear at the outset that I do not seek to dispute his central thesis. Tagore's quest of Pan-Asian solidarity indeed ended in failure. The significance of my paper lies in making a preliminary exploration into the topic from a different interpretive angle by turning the attention away from the temperament of the recipient countries and examining the character of Tagore's gift, i.e. the significance of Tagore's ideas as an instrument of cultural cohesion and coherence in Asia. The paper is based on the premise that the failure of Tagore's vision of Pan-Asianism derived primarily from his romanticised image of Buddhism and the related cultural and religious symbolism of Indian provenance. It is also possible that his choice of Japan as the leader of Asia's cultural resurgence failed to impress the Chinese youth.

### Tagore's Thesis of Buddhist Pan-Asianism

The poet's 'imagined' oriental spirit undergirding the vision of Pan-Asianism was perhaps, nurtured under the influence of Swami Vivekananda<sup>6</sup> and Okakura Tenshin.<sup>7</sup> Vivekanand played a seminal role in forging the religious identity of Indians who felt a sense of inferiority in a milieu dominated by the Christian West. Okakura, who stayed in Calcutta as a guest of both Vivekanand and Tagore, formulated a Japan-centered theory of Asia, a resurgent Asia sustained by the power of Buddhist Japan. Tagore may also have been influenced by the "orientalist" Western scholarship and the attendant Indian

3 Stephen N. Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and his Critics in Japan, China and India.*, Harvard: Harvard University press, 1970.

4 Ibid.

5 See Sisir Kumar Das, "The Controversial Guest: Tagore in China," *China Report*, 29-2 (1993), Delhi. The article is a summary of a detailed work in Bengali called Bitarikta Atithi (Calcutta: Prama, 1985) which Das wrote with the help of Tan Wen, a Chinese scholar of Bengali. Also see, Tan Chung, "Rabindranath Thunder of Oriental Dawn," in Bhudeb Choudhary and K. G. Subrahmanyam eds., *Rabindranath Tagore and the Challenges of Today*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1988, pp. 265-285.

6 Some recent interpretive works on Swami Vivekananda include: Shamita Basu, *Religious Revivalism as Nationalist Discourse : Swami Vivekananda and New Hinduism in Nineteenth-century Bengal*, New Delhi; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002; William Radice, ed., *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*, Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998; Sumit Sarkar, *An Exploration of the Ramakrishna Vivekananda*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1993.

7 Saitō Ryuzō 齊藤隆三, *Okakura Tenshin* 岡倉天心, Tokyo:Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1960 is a useful short biography of Okakura. Horioka Yasuko 堀岡弥寿子's work *Okakura Tenshin: Ajia bunka sen'yō no senkusha* 岡倉天心—アジア文化宣揚の先駆者 (Okakura Tenshin, Pioneer Propagator of Asian Culture), Tokyo:Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1963, provides an uncritical discussion of Okakura's vision of the pan-Asiatic cultural fraternity. A work by an Indian author Dinkar Kowshik, *Okakura*, Delhi: National Book Trust, 1988 is based on secondary sources only, but is important for its inclusion of two essays on Okakura's life in India (Appendix I and II) by his contemporaries Surendranath Tagore and Abanindranath Tagore.

“nationalist” scholarship on ancient Indian religions and culture. Max Muller, for instance, wrote in one of his books, entitled *India What Can It Teach Us?*, “If I were asked under what sky the human mind has most deeply pondered on the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions of some of them which will deserve the attention of those who have studied Plato and Kant—I should point to India”. The Indian nationalist discourses found authentication in these romanticised views. The nativist vision of history invested ancient India with the same attributes with which Europe was equipped in the early twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> For instance, Southeast Asian countries which accommodated Indian ideas and institutions in the past were portrayed by nationalist historians as Ancient Indian colonies.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, as Kumkum Roy has rightly pointed out, the nationalist historical enterprise adopted an a-historical approach to demonstrate that the ideas and institutions of early India corresponded with those of the modern West. These nationalist historiographical projects accorded the former a position of primacy in comparison to the latter, leading to “such absurdities as the Concept of the Welfare State in the *Smritis*” and the existence of democratic and republican form of polity during the time of the Buddha.

It is ironic that Tagore's perspective of Buddhist Pan-Asianism was mediated by Okakura, the high priest of Japanese nationalism during the Meiji era. Paying his homage to Okakura, Tagore once said: “Some years ago I had the real meeting with Japan when a great original mind from these shores came in our midst. . . . The voice of the East came from him to our young men. That was a significant fact, a memorable one in our life.”<sup>10</sup>

Obviously Okakura's writings served as a cornerstone of Tagore's understanding of the East at the turn of the century, and his vision of Asia was enmeshed with Okakura's agenda of Pan-Asianism.<sup>11</sup> In 1916, when Tagore left for Japan aboard a Japanese ship *Tosa Maru* in the company of his close associates, C. F. Andrews, William Pearson and

8 The spirit of nationalist historiography of India represented by K. P. Jayasawal, U. N. Ghosal, R. C. Majumdar etc. has been well summarised by R. S. Sharma in the introductory chapter of his work, *Aspects of Political Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1959, pp. 1–13.

9 R. C. Majumdar, *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East: Vol. 2, Suvarnadipa, Part 1, Political History*, Dacca, 1937 (Reprint, Baroda; Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, 1955), and, *Hindu Colonies in the Far East*, Calcutta: General Printer and Publisher, 1944. In recent decades several scholars have substantially revised the cultural colonisation paradigm and interpret Indian influences in Southeast Asia in terms of selective adoption and domestication of Brahmanic and Buddhist ideas from the Indian sub-continent. For an overview see G. Coedes, “Some Problems in the Ancient History of the Hinduised States of Southeast Asia,” *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, 5, 1964, pp. 1–14; I. W. Mabbett, “The ‘Indianization’ of Southeast Asia: Reflections on the Historical Sources,” *Journal Of Southeast Asian Studies*, 7-2 (1977); and Monica L. Smith, “Indianisation from the Indian point of view: Trade and Cultural Contacts with Southeast Asia in the First Millennium C. E.,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 42-1 (1999).

10 Rabindranath Tagore, *On Oriental Culture and Japan's Mission*, Tokyo: Indo-Japanese Association, 1929, pp. 1–2.

11 An Indian scholar has argued that it is erroneous to interpret Tagore's visits to China and Japan as his missions to strengthen pan-Asiatic bonds. While there is a merit in his thesis that Tagore was a sort of “traditionist modernizer” and his organic vision represented an “East-West Colloquy,” Tagore's uncritical endorsement of Okakura who emphasized the need of the Asian solidarity against the West provides an adequate basis to identify him with Pan-Asianism. See Amiya Dev, “Otherness and Tagore's Vision of the East,” in Kawamoto Kōji et. al. eds., *The Force of Vision 6: Inter-Asian Comparative Literature, Proceedings of the XIIIth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*, 1995, Tokyo: International Comparative Literature Association, 1995, pp.173–180.

Mukul Dey, he was apparently buoyed by the vision of “Okakura’s dream being fulfilled and harmony being restored between all the countries of the Far East.”<sup>12</sup> When in Japan he reminded his audiences that Asia held torches of civilisation while the west slumbered in darkness, and asked Japan to “fulfil its mission of the East” and to “infuse the sap of humanity into the heart of modern civilisation.” However, Tagore was also pained to see how the Japanese people were imitating the West<sup>13</sup> and perverse nationalism was being institutionalised by “injecting into the minds of Japan an abnormal consciousness of racial superiority.” He emphatically declared, “to perpetuate humiliation of defeated nations by exhibiting trophies won from war, and using these in schools in order to breed in children’s minds contempt for others, is imitating the West where she has a festering sore, whose swelling is a swelling of disease eating into its vitality.”<sup>14</sup>

It is obvious that Tagore was under the erroneous impression of Okakura’s importance as a high priest of cultural solidarity and harbinger of Buddhist resurgence in Asia. Through his visit to Calcutta in 1901–1902 and publication of two influential books in English at the turn of the century, Okakura had confirmed the Indian trust in the ‘avowed’ objective of Japan to lead Asia on the path of light and liberty, but in reality his slogan of Pan-Asianism was but a disguised imperialism. In his book *The Idea of Asia* he portrayed Korea and Manchuria as legitimate outlets for Japanese expansionism. Okakura dealt with the Korean and Manchurian question in detail in his another book, *The Awakening of Japan*. He argued that Japan was locked in a deadly conflict with Russia “among the crags of Liaotung and the billows of the Yellow Sea not for the motherland, but for the ideals of the recent reformation, for the noble heritage of classic culture, and for those dreams of peace and harmony in which it saw a glorious rebirth for all Asia.”<sup>15</sup> Okakura sought to inflame Asian hostility toward what he termed “the white disaster” and contended that “the glory of the West was the humiliation of Asia”.<sup>16</sup> Later when Okakura was posthumously elevated as a prophet of “The Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” Tagore was still under the hypnotic spell of Pan-Asianism enunciated by him. A Pan-Asian civilization underpinned by Buddhism reminded him of India’s glorious past when monks all over the world came to study at the feet of Indian teachers. and when India was the ‘guru of the East.’ In several of his writings, most notably his speech at the Mahabodhi Society, Calcutta and his essay entitled “The Flow of Indian History” Tagore fondly acknowledged the contribution of Buddhism in ushering India into the vigorous phase of vibrant cultural interface with the global community.<sup>17</sup>

For Tagore Buddha and Buddhism also held significance as a sumprime symbol

12 See Tagore’s “Japanyatri” (A Traveler to Japan) in *Rabindra Rachana Sanchayan*, New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1987, pp. 793–805. Also see Sashdhar Sinha, *Social Thinking of Rabindranath Tagore*. Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962, pp. 166–177.

13 Sei Togaru, quoted in Stephen N. Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and his Critics in Japan, China and India*, Harvard: Harvard University press, 1970, p. 66.

14 Tagore, “Spirit of Japan,” quoted in Hay, op.cit., pp. 69–70.

15 Quotations are from chapters 3 and 5, “White Disaster” and “Japan and Peace.” Okakura Kakuzo, *Awakening of Japan*, New York: The Century Co., 1904.

16 Okakura Kakuzo, *The Awakening of Japan*, op. cit., p. 107.

17 I have looked at these writings in the Hindi translation contained in Rabindra Rachana Sankalan published by Sahitya Academy, Delhi.

of renunciation in the world increasingly torn asunder by mundane avarice, ambition and the attendant vicious conflicts. Invoking the ideals of Buddhist King Asoka of early India, Tagore once noted: 'King Asoka was inspired by the doctrines of the Buddha to forsake war as a means of territorial expansion and to tread the path of truth and non-violence. Has there been a greater king in the history of mankind than Asoka? The Buddha filled his heart with the light of truth and wisdom. The life and philosophy of Lord Buddha is more relevant today when religious fanaticism is tearing the fabric of mankind asunder and painting the face of the earth with the blood of innocent people'.

Tagore did not take due cognizance of the fact that in the course of transmission from India to the Central Asian states on the Silk Road, and further to the northern Kingdoms of Pre-Sui dynasty China, Buddhism underwent immense changes both in terms of metaphysical speculation and monastic practices. Non-Han rulers of the North patronized Buddhist monks for their professed supranormal powers as well as for their knowledge of such practical areas of human concern as astronomy, calendar-making and medicine. They invoked the ideals of cakravartin, the Buddhist concept of universal kingship, subordinated Buddhism to the interests of the state and gave authority to the belief in the Maitreya's descent on the earth for ensuring the peace and prosperity of mankind. They also integrated Buddhism into their indigenous pattern of belief by employing Buddhist rituals for sacralisation of their ancestors.

In the fifth century the rulers of Northern Wei made further adaptation in the Buddhist institution and ideology. Rulers were accorded the sacred status of Buddha. Wei Shu records that the influential monk Faguo used to say, "Emperor Taizu is enlightened and likes the Buddha dharma. He is the Tathagata of today. Monks must pay him obeisance. Based on this new theoretical premise that the ruling monarchs were identical with the Buddha, the monastic community was now made to believe that in paying homage to the emperor, they were merely worshipping the Buddha. It is apparent that such a system of belief could be woven without much hindrance into the existing political traditions of shamanic kingship in Korea and Japan.

Unlike Indian Buddhism celebrating the word-renouncing tradition, Buddhism in East Asia was adapted to suit the existing tradition whereby rulers presided over both the sacred and profane domains of human affairs. It is also worthy of note that the rulers in East Asia invoked scriptures such as the *Vimalkirti Nirvesa Sutra*, the *Srimala Devi Sutra* or the *Lotus Sutra* which were concerned with the mundane realities of human existence.

In the modern times Buddhism in East Asia had to redefine its identity in a changed universe. Buddhism in Japan had to respond to a vicious campaign of *haibutsu kishaku* (Reject Buddhism and Expel the Monks), whose strength was derived from the belief that Buddhism was incompatible with the Japanese national character because of its alien origin. It was natural, therefore, that the new Buddhism of Japan, conceived and cradled in such a jingoistic milieu, could not but form a myopic Japan-centred view of the Buddhist world, as is evidenced by the perspective of Shimaji Mokurai 島地黙雷, one of the most representative scholars of Buddhism in Meiji Japan. He wrote in his *Bukkyō kakushū kōyō* 仏教各宗綱要 (Lectures on Various Schools of Buddhism, d. 1896) that as "China and Korea are nothing more than a great wave sweeping up to the shore of the teachings

of Eastern Buddhism, there is no need to discuss them at length.”<sup>18</sup> In China, Taixu, the most representative monk of the modern times referred to Ceylon, Tibet and China, as “Three Centers of Buddhism,” and emphasised the need for China play seminal role in revitalising Buddhism in Asia and Beyond. He also gave the slogan of “renjian fojiao” or Buddhism for the Human Realm, stressing the need for Buddhism to align itself closely with the lives of the common people.<sup>19</sup>

### Tagore’s Speeches in Japan and Their Reaction

Tagore made three visits of Japan, each visit repressing the increasing pitch of nationalist fever. In his first visit in 1916 Tagore witnessed the euphoric mood of Japan over its success in its war with Russia about a decade earlier and the process of imperialist annexation of Korea which it facilitated. The poet’s indictment of Japan’s militant nationalism cost him the ovation and affection with which he was initially greeted. C. F. Andrews who accompanied the poet to Japan noted that when he criticised Japan’s “militant imperialism” and “set forward in contrast his ideal picture of the true meeting of East and West,” the people of Japan countered his thesis by arguing that the pacifist philosophy of the Indian poet owed to his experience of belonging to a defeated nation. Andrews further notes that “almost as rapidly as the enthusiasm had arisen, it subsided.” He also informs us that the accusation of the Japanese critics that Tagore was the poet of a defeated country inspired him to write a poem entitled “The Song of the Defeated”<sup>20</sup>

My master has bid me while I stand at the roadside, to sing the  
song of defeat, for that is the bride whom he woos in secret.  
She has put on the dark veil, hiding her face from the crowd,  
but the jewel glows on her breast in the dark.

Tagore gave this poem to a Korean student in Japan, named Chin Hakmun who visited him at the Yokohama residence of Hara Tomaitaro on July 11, 1916. By giving the poem to a Korean student the poet wished to underscore the common destiny of India and Korea and to boost the sinking morale of the Korean people, under the yoke of the repressive Japanese colonial rule. The poem is a testament of the poet’s belief that it is not defeat and humility but conquest by swords that calls for shame. Chin Hakmun was asked by Ch’oe Nam Son, then the editor of Ch’ongch’un 青春 (The Youth), to meet the poet and send a report of his encounter which he did. Chin’s report together with the translation of “the Song of the Defeated” was published under the caption, *T’a sonsaeng ui songyonggi* (My Meeting with Mr. Tagore) a year later.

Stephen H. Hay tells us on the evidence of his 1955 interviews with Mukul Dey, the Indian painter who accompanied Tagore to Japan and Yashiro Yukio 八代幸雄, Tagore’s

18 Shimaji Mokurai, “Bukkyō kakushū kōyō,” quoted in John Jorgensen, “Korean Buddhist Historiography,” *Pulgyo Yonju*, 14, 1997, p. 230.

19 For the life and career of Taixu see Justin R. Ritzinger, “Taixu: To Renew Buddhism and Save the Modern World,” <http://ccbs.ntu.edu.tw/FULLTEXT>, Don Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu’s Reforms*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001 and Nan Huaijin, *Zhongguo fojiao fazhan shi lue*, Fudan daxue chubanshe, 1996, pp. 110–116.

20 C. F. Andrews, *Letters to a Friend*, ed. London: Allen and Unwin, 1928, pp. 66–68.

young interpreter during his 1916 visit, that when Tagore was in Yokohama he received many visitors and that Indian merchants or Chinese and Korean students far exceeded Japanese nationals. Hay continues that the foreign students in Japan came to tell him about “the spirit of Japan” as they had experienced it in their own respective countries and through these private conversations Tagore was awakened to the harsh reality of Japanese imperialism. He was deeply aggrieved to learn about the atrocities Japan perpetrated on Korea which it had annexed six years earlier. Later several Korean students met Tagore and talked to him over many issues on the campus of Waseda University where he was invited to address a gathering.<sup>21</sup>

Tagore visited Japan twice more, once in 1924 on his way back from China and finally in 1929. During his last trip to Japan his vision of the East, blended into a harmonious entity by the ancient spiritual ideals could not withstand the pressure exerted by the imperialist menace of Japan and he declared that he would never visit Japan again.<sup>22</sup> During this visit Tagore made a vitriolic attack on Japan's imperialist rule in Korea. Some Korean students visited Tagore soon after he reached Japan, and apprised him of the exploitation and suffering to which his countrymen were subjected by the colonial rulers. In his speech “On Oriental Culture and Japan's Mission” which he delivered at the India-Japan Association, Tagore alluded to Japan's colonial policy in Korea. He appealed to Japan to provide a dynamic leadership in Asia, accomplish Asian solidarity and fulfil the dream of Okakura—the dream of preserving and advancing the glorious ideals of the East. He condemned the imperialist policies of Japan which violated the rights of other lands. The poet did not dispute the policy of a close alliance with Korea in the interests of Japanese security, but he decried the imperialist mechanism which had been adopted to carry it out.<sup>23</sup>

As 1929 marked the tenth anniversary of the famous March First Movement, some Korean students requested Tagore to contribute a poem to commemorate the greatest expression of protest in the colonial history of Korea. Tagore immediately composed the quatrain:

In the golden age of Asia  
Korea was one of the lamp-bearers  
That lamp waits to be lighted once again  
For the illumination of the East<sup>24</sup>

In the thirties when Japanese imperialism reached its most vigorous stage, Tagore gave a stern warning to Japan. In a letter to his poet-friend Noguchi Yonejiro 野口米次郎 he stridently criticised the Japanese slogan, “Asia for Asia.” He wrote, “You are building your conception of an Asia which would be raised on a tower of skulls.”<sup>25</sup> He further lamented

21 Stehen H. Hay, op.cit., pp. 68, 318–319, 389.

22 Ibid., p. 319.

23 Tagore, *On Oriental Culture and Japan's Mission*, Tokyo: India-Japan Association, 1929. G. D. Khanolkar, *The Lute and the Plough*, Transl. by Thomas Gay, Bombay: The Book Centre Pvt. Ltd., 1963, p. 303.

24 Shin Yong-ha, *Han'guk minjok Tongnip undongsa ui yongu* (Studies in the History of the Korean Independence Movement), Seoul: Ulllyu munhwa sa, 1985, p. 381. The poem was published in the leading Korean language newspaper of the times, *Donga ilbo*, in 1929.

25 Somendranath Bose, ed., *Tagore Studies*, 1971, Calcutta: Tagore Research Institute, p. 6.

that while in the West, in the critical days of war-madness, a number of intellectuals could raise their voice above the din of battle and defy their war-mongers in the name of humanity, in Japan, they had capitulated to the gun-running war-lords and prostituted their pen by translating military swagger into spiritual bravado.

Tagore was invited to visit Japan again, but he declined the invitation on the grounds that it would hurt him too painfully to go and watch crowds of them being transported by their rulers to a neighbouring land to perpetrate acts of inhumanity. He wished Japan not success but remorse. Many years had rolled by since Okakura died and he was now exhumed from his grave and elevated as a prophet of “The Great East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.” But Tagore was no longer under the hypnotic spell of Pan-Asianism which he shared fondly with Okakura nearly three decades earlier.

### The Chinese View of Tagore

In 1923 when Tagore, the “sage-poet” of India visited China to spread his message of Asian fraternity based on the ancient Buddhist linkages, the Chinese youth was under strong influence of the revolutionary ideas of nationalism and yearned for emancipation from the yoke of tradition. Li Dazhao echoed this sentiment when he wrote an his article entitled “Federalism and World Organisation”: “The present age is the age of liberation. Weaker races demand liberation from stronger races, the workers demand liberation from the capitalists, the women demand liberation from the men...”<sup>26</sup>

During this period, generally referred to as “the May Fourth era” Chinese women looked up to Ibsen’s Nora as an archetypal exemplar of women’s liberation from the oppression of a patriarchal society. Modern and educated Chinese women were touched by Nora’s statement to her husband that her sacred duty was to herself, and were impressed by her courage to slam the door on the comfortable “Doll’s House.” In this changed cultural universe traditional values, including chastity were redefined. Since traditional China imposed the demand of chasity only on women, it was interpreted as an instrument of male domination and not an element of human morality. Morality, it was pointed out, had universal validity and appeal and was gender-neutral.<sup>27</sup>

Naturally Tagore’s literature, eulogising the traditional role of women, had little appeal for the contemporary Chinese youth.<sup>28</sup> In an essay entitled “Humane Literature” Zhou Zuoren, China’s famous essayist, severely criticised Tagore for praising ‘the sut-

26 See S. K. Huang, *Li Ta-chao and the Impact of Marxism on Modern Chinese Thinking*, p. 22.

27 Fan Hong has discussed this issue in detail in the fourth chapter of her book, *Footbinding, Feminism, and Freedom: The Liberation of Women’s Bodies in Modern China*, London; Portland, Or.: Frank Cass, 1997, pp. 29–43. Also see Chow Tse Tsung’s classic study *May Fourth Movement*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1960 for a general overview of the anti-Confucian cultural and intellectual climate of the times.

28 Tagore, like other enlightened Indians under the British rule, believed that accommodation of ‘colonial modernity’ at home was tantamount to the annihilation of the cherished ideals and identity of the race. Tagore’s novel “Ghare Baire” (Home and outside) illustrates this point. Partha Chatterjee has also noted how the Bhadrak of Bengal demonstrated accommodative spirit in the ‘outer’ sphere while hostility towards modernity’s intrusion into the inner sphere. Acceptance of Western value-system in the private or inner sphere amounted to acceptance of such Orientalist rationale of colonization as ‘white man’s burden’ or the ‘civilizing mission of the West.’ See his magisterial work *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, c.1993.



tee of the heart' of a woman in one of his short stories. Zhou was referring to Tagore's admiration for the protagonist in one of his short stories who remained chaste and loyal to her husband even though he did not love her any more and had remarried a foreign woman. Zhou further said that Suttee of the body (self-immolation) was capital punishment whereas Suttee of the heart was a life imprisonment.<sup>29</sup>

This assault against tradition was shared by the progressive young generation throughout China which faced the external threat of imperialist powers and the internal crisis of the oppression of feudal social values. Lamenting the loss of spiritual ideals and shedding tears over faded blossoms was not a fitting answer to the imperialist challenge. Mao Dun's criticism was a succinct articulation of this concern. He argued that Tagore created a paradise of poetry and love, and China which was being oppressed at the time by warlords from within and imperialists from without could not afford to indulge in dreaming. Bandits, he continued, could not be repelled by reciting the Five Classics. Lu Xun, by common consent the greatest Chinese writer of our age, acknowledged Tagore as a spokesman of India, but felt disillusioned with his confused thoughts and an ethereal, angelic aura permeating his writings.<sup>30</sup> It is apparent that Tagore's vision of a uniform Asian civilisation anchored in the ideas and ideals of early Buddhism stood in sharp contradiction with the contemporary reality of China.

An anti-Tagore leaflet, distributed in one of his meetings, underscored similar objections. It was pointed out in the leaflet that Tagore was not welcome in China because his praise of "Oriental Civilization" meant his endorsement of gender-based discrimination, caste-hierarchy and feudal despotism. It also noted that China needed modern civilisation, crucial for improved farming methods, cottage industry, roads, transport and sanitary habits. The pamphlet criticized the slogan of Pan-Asianism, nothing that it was tantamount to the abolition of nationality and politics, "replacing it with the consolation of one's soul."<sup>31</sup>

It also needs to be noted in this context that Tagore's exhortation to Japan in his several lectures in the previous years to assume leadership of the Pan-Asian civilization may also have created suspicion in the minds of Chinese nationalists. China always prided in her role as the flag-bearer of ancient oriental civilization. Prasenjit Duara has noted that in one of his speeches in Japan in 1925 Sun Yat-sen used the notion of Confucian statecraft, or Wangdao as the underlying ideology of China's leadership of pan-Asianism. China's 'barbarian' neighbours were incorporated into the orbit of China's tributary relations through this process of Confucian 'acculturation,'<sup>32</sup> and it was invariably China that was the cultural leader of the Orient.

The rejection of Tagore's vision of Buddhist Pan-Asianism in China should not,

29 Kirk A. Denton, ed., *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings On Literature, 1893-1945*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, c1996, pp. 158-159

30 Lu Xun, *Lu Xun Quanjì* (Complete Works of Lu Xun ) vol. 1, *Renmin wenzue chubanshe*, Beijing, 1957, p.292. For a sympathetic perspective of the saga of Tagore's interaction with China, see Ji Xianlin, "Tai ge er yu zhongguo" (Tagore and China) in Zhang Guanglin, ed., *Lun Tai ge er*, Beijing: Nanya Yanjiusuo, 1983, pp. 143-164.

31 See the full text of the pamphlet in Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996, pp. 250-251.

32 Prasenjit Duara. "The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism." *Journal of World History*, 12-1 (2001).

however, be interpreted to mean that Tagore's entire China mission ended in failure. During his visit Tagore forged meaningful relationship with several leading intellectuals and his influence found its best expression in some of the lyrical outputs of the times. The literary world of China during the May Fourth era, notably Xu Zhimo 徐志摩, Bing Xin 冰心 and Guo Moruo 郭沫若 accommodated Tagore's poetic craft and even created the "Crescent Moon Society," apparently to continue the legacy of Tagore whose anthology of poems entitled *The Crescent Moon* was very popular amongst the Chinese youth.

### Reception of Tagore's Works in Korea

The systematic translation of Tagore's poetry into Korean began in the 1920s when Japan modified its policy in Korea as a direct consequence of the March First Movement the greatest expression of protest in the colonial history, and allowed the publication of Korean language journals and newspapers. The early Korean translations of Tagore's works included *Gitanjali*, *Fruit-Gathering* or the *Gardener*. Since these works generally represent spiritual quest of the poet and are characterised by tender mood of wistful longing, Tagore represented to the Korean mind a glowing warmth, not a boiling turmoil, a sob of grateful tears, not an outcry of anguish.<sup>33</sup> Such an assessment is not dissimilar to the recent reevaluation in the radical quarters of Bengal of Tagore's early poetry either as a floral decoration of a boudoir or mystical "intimations of immortality."

Korean literary critics are unanimous in their view that Tagore's influence found its best expression in the poetry of Han Yong-un 韓龍雲 (1879–1944). Han Yong-un, a Buddhist monk, adopted the motif and the metaphorical implications of Tagore's verse and produced "*Nim ui Ch'immuk*" (The Silence of Love) which is considered a milestone in modern Korean poetry for its departure from the traditional poetic conventions.<sup>34</sup> Like Tagore, Han makes an effort in his poetry to transmute human passion into a yearning for an eternal and divine bliss, and to make the divine accessible by investing it with human attributes. Take for instance the following lines from "*Nim Ui Ch'immuk*."

Whose footstep is this paulownia leaf that drifts down in the breathless

33 Yi Kwang-su, Quoted in Kim Yang-shik, "Tagore and Korea," *Korea Journal*, vol. 28, no. 12, 1988.

34 Several poets, notably Ch'oe Nam-son and Kim So-wol dispensed with the traditional technique of versification and adopted flexible rhythms, and at the same time emphasized expression of individual emotions in their poetry in the era prior to the publication of *Nim ui ch'immuk*. Han Yong-un's importance lies, however, in making a sustained use of new metaphors of seemingly spiritual import and of new rhythm pattern in the framework of a free verse form. The following articles have given me relevant information on the forms of poetic expression in early modern Korea: Sym Myung-ho, "The Still Stilly Echoing 7-5 Rhythm," in Kawamoto Kōji et. al., eds., *The Force of Vision 6: Inter-Asian Comparative Literature*, Proceedings of the XIIIth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association, 1995, Tokyo: International Comparative Literature Association, 1995, pp. 41–45. Theresa Hyun, "Translation Norms and the Interpretation of the Symbolist poetry in Early Modern Korea," in Theresa Hyun and Jose Lambert, eds., *The Force of Vision 4: Translation and Modernization*, Proceedings of the XIIIth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association, 1995, Tokyo: International Comparative Literature Association, 1995, pp. 54–61. Sang-ran Lee, "The Impact of the Translations of Western Literature on the Modernization of Korean Literary tradition," in *The Force of Vision 4: Translation and Modernization*, *ibid.*, pp. 62–70.

air?

Whose face is the patch of azure sky that beams through the dark clouds?<sup>35</sup>

The echoes of Tagore in Han Yong-un's poetry have led some critics to create the myth that he learnt from Tagore his lessons of nationalism as well.<sup>36</sup> In reality there are more differences between Han and Tagore than similarities. For Han, poetry was a means to spread his nationalist message and his *nim* in many contexts stands for his country. Unlike Tagore's father who was a mystic sage meditating in the quiet valleys of the Himalayas, Han's father was deeply involved in the Tonghak peasant uprising, and sought to sharpen Han Yong-un's nationalist feelings. The social and familial environment in which he spent his formative years contributed immensely towards the shaping of Han Yong-un's political vision. In his 1933 essay, "To Seoul Via Siberia," Han recollected, "My father used to tell me about the valiant deeds of our national heroes, whose names are indelibly etched in our annals. He also discussed in great detail current national and international affairs. And always on such occasions I felt stimulated to patriotic fervour. Paying my homage to the memory of those heroes, I solemnly pledged early in my life to follow in their footsteps."<sup>37</sup>

Han Yong-un played a pivotal role in the organisation of the March First Movement as one of the thirty three signatories of the Declaration of Independence and author of the three pledges which he made mandatory for all the freedom fighters.<sup>38</sup> In the article, "A plea for Korea's Independence" which he wrote in prison, he prophetically stated that Korea's independence was crucial to peace and prosperity of the whole of Asia, because Japan regarded Korea as a springboard from which to launch its military adventures in other Asian countries, and he further pointed out that inherent in this fact (of Japanese militarism) was the possibility of the outbreak of global war.<sup>39</sup>

Han Yong-un was much more particularistic and practical in his enunciation of political views than Tagore who coached his ideas in the grandiose rhetoric of spiritual harmony and revival of the ancient ideals of the orient. Han imitated the motifs of Tagore—separation, sighs, silent tears—but there is a manifest attempt in his verse to ignite the dormant Tagorean sparks into fervent flame. Han admired in his poems such patriotic *Kisaengs* (female entertainers) of the Choson dynasty as Nongae and Kyeworhyang who sacrificed their lives, but not without wreaking revenge on the Japanese commanders of Hideyoshi's army. And unlike Tagore, Han did not make his country's defeat a cause of pride:

I have no house and for some reason or other my name is not entered in the  
census register

35 Han Yong-un, "Nim ui ch'im muk (Silence of Love)," in An Pyong-jik, ed., *Han Yong-un*, p.13.

36 Chong Hanmo, *Hanguk Hyontae Simunhaksa* (History of Modern Korean Poetry), Seoul: Ilchisa, 1982, pp. 394–400.

37 Han Yong-un, "Siberia koch'o Seoull'o" (To Seoul Via Siberia), in An Pyong-jik, ed., *Han Yongun*, p. 242.

38 Kim Sang-hyon, "Han Yongun ui tongnip sasang" (The Thought of Freedom of Han Yong-un), in *Han Yong-un sasang yongu*, Vol. 2. *Minjoksa*, Seoul, p. 99.

39 Han Yong-un, "The Grounds of Korea's Claim to Independence," *Korea Journal* 11-1 (1971), pp. 20–25; Hong I-Sop, "Han Yong-un and Nationalism," *Korea Journal* 13-4 (1973); Wi Jo Kang, *Religion and Politics in Korea Under the Japanese Rule*, Edwin Mellen Press, 1987.

One not registered has no rights. And since you have no rights, why talk of chastity?

A general told me so and tried to rape me.

I resisted and ran off. And when I saw you (my beloved land) my anger melted into sorrow.

Ah, ethics, morality and law are but incense burned at the altar of sword and gold.<sup>40</sup>

Han Yong-un wrote a poem entitled “After Reading Tagore’s Poem ‘Gardinesto’”<sup>41</sup> which expresses his evaluation of the thought of Tagore:

O my friend, like a flower blooming on the grave of my beloved you fill me with grief.

And like a chance encounter with my beloved in a dark night of a dreary desert you gladden my heart.

You are the odour of white bone, emitting from an ancient tomb and soaring skyward.

You are a song of forlorn hope, the song you sang when you got entangled in a twig and the fallen flowers you gathered were all scattered on the ground.

O Friend you cry over broken love.

Can tears restore the radiant bloom of faded blossoms?

Do not wash fallen flowers with tears, wet instead the dust beneath the flower-tree.

O friend, O my Friend

Sweet may be the fragrance of death, but one can not kiss the lips of bleached bones.

Do not spread the golden net of song on graves, hoist on it a blood-soaked banner.

When poets sing the dead earth is stirred to life and spring breeze blows.

O my friend, I am ashamed. When I read your poems I am ashamed beyond words and my heart beats.

It is because I am torn from my beloved land and heard your song alone.<sup>42</sup>

It is obvious that the literary world of Korea accommodated Tagore’s poetic craft whilst remaining less receptive to his thought. In fact, this ambivalence was shared by the progressive young generation of China. Both Mao Dun 茅盾 and Lu Xun 鲁迅 were disillusioned with the ethereal, angelic aura of Tagore’s poetry.<sup>43</sup>

As we shall see, the re-evaluation and romanticization of Tagore in Korea is close-

40 Han Yong-un, “Nim ui Ch’immuk,” in An Pyong-jik, ed., *Han Yongun*, pp. 36–37.

41 Gardinesto is the Esperanto rendering of the original title “The Gardener.”

42 Han Yong-un, “Nim ui Ch’immuk,” in An Pyong-jik, ed., *Han Yongun*, p. 62.

43 Lu Xun severely criticized Tagore at the time of his visit to China. A few years later, however, when he read one of the writings of Tagore on the Soviet Union in which the Indian poet sounded down-to-earth he modified his view. He acknowledged that during his visit to China the poet might not have been confused, but the confused motley of Chinese conservatives presented him as a living deity. This led to the alienation of the Chinese youth with him. *Lu Xun Quanjī* (Complete Works of Lu Xun) vol. 5, Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1957, p. 469. The radical Chinese intellectuals in the twenties meted out similar treatment to the British philosopher Bertrand Russell who went to China in the fall of 1920 for a stay of about a year, as has been brilliantly argued by Suzanne P. Ogden in her paper “The Sage in the Inkpot: Bertrand Russell and China’s Social Reconstruction in the 1920s” (*Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1982).

ly linked with the politics of the March First Movement. The March First Movement undoubtedly marks the crest of the Korean national movement in that it galvanized nationalist forces of diverse persuasion and altered the character of Japanese rule in Korea. However, over the decades, the leadership in both south and north Korea sought to hijack its significance to serve their own sectarian purposes. Syngman Rhee 李承晩, the first president of the Republic of Korea emphasised the international significance of the March First Movement, because his U. S.-based provisional government (along with several similar enterprises both in Korea and abroad) was formed in the immediate wake of the March First Movement and with the express purpose of upholding its meaning and message. When Syngman Rhee was installed as president of the Republic of Korea, he sought to establish the legitimacy of his regime by projecting his government as a successor to the March First Movement and the crystallisation of its spirit.<sup>44</sup> The March First Movement was enshrined in the constitution as the guiding ideology of the republic and the day was celebrated as a national holiday. When General Park Chung Hee usurped power, he interpreted the relevance of the March First spirit to mean relentless struggle against the Communist North. In 1972 when he declared martial law and introduced a series of draconian measures, he once again invoked the spirit of the March First Movement and called it the inspiration of his agenda of reform which he sought to beautify by naming *yushin* (revitalisation).<sup>45</sup>

Since Tagore's poem was one of the most eloquent tributes to the March First spirit, he was glorified in Korean historical texts as the guiding spirit of the Indian independence movement, the mentor of Gandhi<sup>46</sup> and a source of inspiration for the Korean

44 Syngman Rhee and his party sought to capitalise on the heritage of the March First Movement by emphasizing the following three aspects, as has been pointed out by a young scholar, Chi Su-gol in his recent article on the March First Movement. Chi argues that the March First Movement served Syngman Rhee's purposes in the following three ways: (1) As the great significance of the March First Movement lay in the fact that various nationalist forces transcended their differences to fight shoulder to shoulder against Japanese imperialism, the Korean people needed to display the same spirit at the moment by cutting across class-differences, transcending the conflict raging amongst various political forces and melt into a monolithic entity. (2) As the Shanghai Provisional government inherited and realised the spirit of freedom and democracy of the March First Movement, its legitimacy should naturally be recognised. (3) As the will of independence and national strength have already been demonstrated to the world, the trusteeship plan as stipulated by the Moscow conference of 1945 was invalid and needed to be abolished. Chi Ch'olsu, "Samil undong ui yoksachok uiui wa onului kyohun" (Historical Significance of the March First Movement and Its lessons for Today), *Samil minjokhaebang undong yon'gu*, Seoul: Ch'onnyonsa, 1989. For an understanding of the importance of the March First Movement in a broad national and international context, see Shin Yong-ha, *Formation and development of Modern Korean Nationalism* (tr. N. M. Pankaj), Seoul: Dae kwang munwhasa, 1990, pp. 313–385; Shin Yong-ha, *Han'guk minjok tongnip undong sa yon'gu* (A Study on the History of the Korean Independence Movement), Seoul: Ilchogak, 1985, pp. 367–385; Shin Yong-ha, *Han'guk kuntaesa wa sahoe pyondong* (Modern History of Korea and Social Change) Seoul: Munhak kwa chisongsa, 1980, pp. 224–242; and Yun Pyong-sok, *Samil undong sa* (History of the March first Movement), Seoul: Chongum sa, 1975.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

46 *Han'guk tongnip undong sa charyochib* (Collected Materials on the Korean Independence Movement) contains atrocious stories emphasizing the importance of the March First Movement. It says that the Korean Patriotic leader Ch'oe Nam Son informed Tagore of the non-violent March First Movement of 1919, launched by the patriotic Korean people. Stirred and impressed Tagore wrote to Gandhi, who was then in South Africa to come back and start a similar movement in India. The result was India's non-cooperation movement. Quoted

nationalist poet Han Yong-un.

### Concluding Remarks

It is apparent from the above discussion that Tagore regarded his travels to Japan and China as an attempt to restore the interrupted flow of Buddhist interaction between India and the countries in East Asia that commenced nearly two millenia ago. This is also evident in Tagore's references to the need to carry forward the glorious legacies of such Chinese pilgrims as Faxian and Xuanzang who undertook death-defying journeys to India in order to acquire deeper understanding of Buddhist philosophy and culture. In Japan when the poet saw the ancient Indian ritual of offering incense to the Buddha, he was overwhelmed with joy to discover 'real Japan.' While in China the words which delighted him most were coached in Buddhist rhetoric. The civil governor of Nanjing, a devout Buddhist, welcomed Tagore in these ornate words: "For seven hundred years we have waited for a message for India, and here you are."<sup>47</sup> And as Tagore's recent biographers, Dutta and Robinson note, the invitation that pleased the poet most was coached in Buddhist terminology: "Now You—the great Buddhist poet—come from the original country of the Buddha to our sister-country with all your milk of thought; surely we realise your flowery givings all world around where your elephant-like steps reach."<sup>48</sup> The youth in east Asia in the early twentieth century, however, was stimulated with the modern vision of nationalism and nation-state. In the Meiji period Japan set for itself the ideal of 'de-Asianisation' and subsequently it slid down the path of imperialist expansion under the slogan of "Asia for Asians." In China the youth of the May Fourth generation was not as impressed with the ancient saga of Xuanzang as with the modern lores of Marx and Lenin. Lu Xun sought to invoke the power of Mara rather than Buddha<sup>49</sup> and Hu Shi emphasised the need to exorcise China of the spirit of Indianisation, transmitted through Buddhist contacts.<sup>50</sup> It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Tagore's message of the 'oriental spirit' and 'restoration of harmony amongst Asian countries in the image of the Buddhist past' struck to the Chinese youth as vacant words from the cloud-cuckoo land, incapable to solve China's pressing problems. Nonetheless, the contemporary literary world of China welcomed the poetic craft of Tagore.

The literary world of Korea also, like their Chinese counterpart, welcomed the poetic craft of Tagore, but was not so hospitable to his ideas and ideals. Han Yong-un most clearly illustrated this position, in his masterpiece *Nim ui Ch'immuk* adopting and adapting Tagore's poetic technique whilst at the same time, overcoming the aura of abstract

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in Shin Yong-ha, *Han'guk kumtaesa wa sahoe pyondong* (Modern History of Korea and Social Change), Seoul: Munhak kwa chisongsa, 1980, pp. 224–242. As is common knowledge the 'saint' fulfilled General Smuts desire by returning to India for good in January 1915 after having succeeded in several experiments with truth in South Africa. Moreover, when Gandhi launched his non-cooperation movement Tagore strongly expressed his opposition.

47 See Dutta and Robinson, op. cit., p. 249.

48 Ibid., p. 250.

49 I have discussed this point in detail in my article entitled "Lu Xun: A Cultural Movement," *China Report*, June 1982.

50 See his work, *The Chinese Renaissance*, New York: Paragon Book (Reprint), 1963.

mystery which enveloped Tagore's work. Nonetheless, Tagore's poem 'Lamp of the East,' written in commemoration of the March First Movement, met with the acknowledgement of the Korean people. Additionally, as successive regimes in post-colonial Korea invoked the spirit of the March First Movement as their guiding ideology and imposed on historians the task of enhancing the nationalist consciousness of the Korean people, Tagore's poem was frequently exhumed and cited as an incontrovertible proof of the international significance of the Korean independence movement.

It would be too far-fetched to cite Jiang Zemin's reference to a poem of Tagore,<sup>51</sup> President K. R. Narayanan's donation of a bust of Tagore to Peking University during his state visit to China in 2000, or the existence of the Tagore Society of Korea under the guidance of poet Kim Yang-shik as evidence of the lingering hold of Tagore in East Asia. It would be, perhaps, safe to assume that despite setback suffered by the poet in the early twentieth century because of the incompatibility of his vision with the progressive Western ideas and the model of the European nation state, he is not yet completely forgotten in East Asia. His ideal of 'universal man,' in particular, is more relevant today than a century earlier when he first enunciated it. He chose Buddhism as a unifying force because Buddhism resisted totalisation through its inherent dialogic character and released alternative versions of identity in various countries in Asia where it struck deep root. Furthermore, Tagore's hypothesis that Asia constituted a much more coherent cultural space than is often imagined, provides an alternative to the influential theory of civilizational discord.

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51 Jiang Zemin was reminded of Tagore in his meeting with former Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee in 2003. He quoted Tagore's verse, 'He has made his weapons his gods. When his weapons win he is defeated himself,' a veiled criticism, perhaps, of India's nuclear arsenal or Vajpayee's full-throated endorsement of the US missile defence program.