

For Our Students

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Revisiting Tagore's Visit to China: Nation, Tradition, and Modernity in China and India in the Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the historical background of Rabindranath Tagore's visit to China in 1924, which proved to be a failure because of harsh criticism from the Chinese side. The paper explores both the Chinese and the Indian sides of the story, examining key intellectual and cultural movements in the two countries in their early encounters with the West. The paper further argues that the difference in attitudes toward tradition demonstrated by the two countries during this period

was an important difference worthy of further attention in our reflection upon the historical writing of the non-western world in general. This deep-rooted difference about tradition was a key reason of Tagore's failed trip in China.

What is being "modern" and what is modern about "modern China"? These are important questions in the study of Chinese history. In the popular understanding of Chinese history, it is widely acknowledged that the "modernity" of "modern China" comes from a rejection of tradition. This dichotomy of "tradition vs. modernity" was also deeply inscribed in the study of Chinese history in the West by pioneers such as John King Fairbank. Despite much criticism, this conceptual framework still dominates much of our understanding of Chinese history, both academic and popular.¹

Students of Chinese history rarely look beyond the Himalayas at its crowded neighbor.² In this essay, I would like to draw our attention to such a comparative project between Chinese and Indian history. The value of this comparison lies in the historical difference in the attitude and treatment of "tradition" in these two countries. India provides us with a path of history that is beyond our conceptual framework of modernity as rejection of tradition and therefore merits our own reflection. This crucial difference was demonstrated most dramatically when India meets China, specifically in the case when the Nobel Prize laureate Rabindranath Tagore visited China in the spring of 1924.

The Event: When India meets China

A ship named *Atsuta Maru* steamed into the Huangpu River in Shanghai on the morning of April 12, 1924. A large crowd was waiting at the dock, which included journalists, intellectuals and representatives of various Chinese educational and literary organizations, and members of the Shanghai local Indian community.³ When the ship finally docked on the west side of the river, the crowd swarmed onto the deck immediately. At the center of the crowd was an old man, dressed in a long gown, wearing a pair of fancy glasses and an impressive beard,

huge and white. He was given a flower ring by the representative of the local Indian community, and was invited to be seated in a chair, surrounded by the welcoming crowd and the curious journalists from China and Japan who grasped every opportunity to interview and photograph this respected guru.

This old man was Rabindranath Tagore, Bengali poet and Nobel laureate in literature in 1913. He was invited by *Jiangxueshe*, one of the recently founded intellectual organizations that burgeoned during the May Fourth era, for a lecture series tour of several Chinese cities.⁴ *Jiangxueshe* was devoted to inviting eminent foreign intellectuals to travel around China and give lectures, hoping to change China intellectually. Previous guest lecturers included leading intellectual figures such as John Dewey and Bertrand Russell.⁵ In response to one of the journalists' questions, Tagore talked about the purpose of his visit wishfully: "My general idea is to advocate Eastern thought, the revival of traditional Asian culture, and the unity of the peoples of Asia."⁶

However, after six weeks of stay, the poet was not as confident as he had been when he first arrived. During the six weeks, Tagore gave public lectures and met with Chinese intellectuals and political leaders in Shanghai, Hangzhou, Nanjing, Jinan, and Beijing. The major theme of his lectures was, as promised, the profundity and superiority of the spiritual civilization and culture of the East over the material civilization of the West, and the (cultural, not political) unity of all Oriental peoples. Friendly in intention as he was, and despite the warm welcome he got from the Chinese literary groups, Tagore did not enjoy his visit very much, but instead received harsh and bitter criticism during his six-week stay in China. In one extreme case, he was virulently attacked and labeled by someone as "a petrified fossil of India's national past" (*Yindu guogu de toushi*).⁷ Very few people in China accepted Tagore's "message of the East."⁸ The criticism against Tagore was so strong that he had to cancel the last three of his previously scheduled lectures in Beijing and leave in tremendous disappointment.⁹ In one of his farewell addresses, Tagore made a self-criticism and said: "In the depth of my heart there is a pain—I have not been serious enough. I

have had no opportunity to be intensely, desperately earnest about your most serious problems.”¹⁰ Xu Zhimo, the famous Chinese poet who was Tagore’s guide, translator, and closest friend in China, commented on the last speech of Tagore in Shanghai: “These words contained unlimited bitter pain, unlimited resentment. At that time I felt very sorry for him.”¹¹

Explanations: Why Was it?

Why did Rabindranath Tagore receive such a negative general response from his Chinese audience? Scholars have proposed several different explanations. Stephen Hay, an India specialist trained at Harvard, was the only person so far to have done a book-length review of Tagore’s visits to China and Japan. In 1970 he published the revised version of his doctoral thesis under the title *Asian Ideas of East and West*. In this well-researched monograph, he argues that the failure and humiliation of Tagore’s trip to China was Tagore’s own responsibility: Tagore tried to “play the role of a prophet rather than a poet,” and propagated the ideal of a unified Orient characterized by spiritualism—a myth essentially nonexistent and created by the West.¹² “The idea of the East” being one of the key things that Hay examines in his work, he unsurprisingly puts Tagore’s idea of the monolithic East as a most significant reason of the failure of the visit.

The scholar who has published most extensively on Tagore’s visit to China in the Chinese-speaking world is Sun Yixue, a literature scholar at Tongji University in Shanghai. In recent years he has compiled and edited Tagore’s speeches and responses to them in China into several volumes (a little repetitively). He interprets the failure of Tagore’s visit as “a misunderstanding of the time” (*shidai de wuhui*).¹³ He says “the unsuccessfulness of Tagore’s visit to China was because he came in a ‘wrong season’ with a ‘world-saving messianic message’ that was not suitable to China’s conditions, and that he came among a group of Chinese intellectuals who didn’t understand him (both supporters and opponents).”¹⁴ Sun further enumerates the five “misunderstandings of the time” of Tagore by his Chinese contemporaries. He uses the word “actually”

nine times in six pages when he talks about these five misunderstandings.¹⁵ He gives readers an impression that the perceptions of Tagore's visit at the time were incorrect, and that all the misunderstandings could have been avoided as long as Tagore was understood and perceived in the correct way. Therefore they could have made the beloved poet's stay in China a pleasant one and not shamed themselves with their rudeness to the respected old wise man.¹⁶

Neither of these explanations is persuasive enough. Stephen Hay's explanation is acceptable in a certain sense, but his conclusion puts too much emphasis on Tagore's own idea and attributes the responsibility of the failure of the trip exclusively to Tagore himself. He fails to pay enough attention to the historical context and intellectual conditions of the two countries at the time of the event. Sun Yixue's explanation is a good-willed romanticization of a historical event. In sharp contrast to Hay's conclusion, Sun attributes the responsibility of the failure of Tagore's trip almost completely to Tagore's Chinese audiences. Trained as a scholar of romantic literature, Sun has not been able to propose a successful historical explanation of the failure of Tagore's visit.

This essay would like to suggest a new approach to this question. During the course of the two countries' encounter of Western modernity, intellectuals in China and India had drastically different attitudes toward "tradition." These different attitudes were crucial to their conceptualization of modern "nationhood" as well as to the development of nationalist political movements in the two countries in the following decades. In this essay I would like to argue that the difference in attitudes toward "tradition" in the two countries was an important reason of the disappointing failure of Tagore's visit to China in 1924.

The Case in China: "Totalistic Iconoclasm" and the Repudiation of Tradition

The Chinese side of the story was characterized by a strong cultural and intellectual inclination to totally reject and repudiate the Chinese traditions in the broader historical context of the May Fourth era. This rejection of tradition was a key reason why the

Chinese audiences of Tagore refused to accept his messages and engaged in active and angry opposition instead.

1. The Voices of Opposition and "Totalistic Iconoclasm"

The welcome of and opposition to Tagore's visit to China had started long before the poet actually set foot in China. They began in as early as September 1923, when words of certainty about the poet's planned trip first came to China. The news about the coming of the Nobel laureate excited the literary community in China. The Chinese literary leaders had launched a literary reform movement less than ten years earlier to liberate Chinese literature from old-fashioned conventions to a freer and more expressive style by advocating the use of vernacular Chinese in written language. Therefore, they viewed Tagore, who received worldwide recognition for his effort to liberate Bengali literature from obsolete conventions, as their colleague.

At the center of this Chinese literary reform was the Literary Studies Association (*Wenxue yanjiu hui*). Its official publication, *Short Story Monthly* (*Xiaoshuo yuebao*), was the most important literary magazine in China. When the young editor of the magazine, Zheng Zhenduo, heard of the news of Tagore's coming, he conceived of a special issue for his monthly.¹⁷ In September and October, two issues of *Short Story Monthly* were published as "Tagore Numbers," with the editor himself writing an enthusiastic introduction to welcome the literary giant. Most of the articles in these two special issues were translations of Tagore's literary works and introductory essays about Tagore's literature, with only a couple of exceptions discussing Tagore's biographical information and his criticism of nationalism.¹⁸

However, the effort to welcome Tagore was soon overwhelmed by the voices of opposition. In response to the words of hospitality from the literary circle, left-wing intellectuals soon published several articles in mid-October to voice their unwelcoming attitude toward Tagore. Guo Moruo and Chen Duxiu both wrote articles emphasizing the urgency of national salvation and how the "worship" of Tagore would undermine the Chinese audience's sense of this urgency by proposing the "unprincipled propaganda of non-violence"¹⁹ and "thoughts of

utter stupidity against material civilization and science.”²⁰ One of the key leaders of the Chinese intellectual world at the time, Chen Duxiu was so angrily and virulently against Tagore that he planned to launch a special issue for his magazine, *Chinese Youth* (*Zhongguo qingnian*), with the explicit and straightforward name “Opposing Tagore.” When the poet was about to come to China in early April 1924, Chen Duxiu wrote a letter to his friend Hu Shi asking the latter to compose an article for this special issue.²¹ Hu Shi did not respond with a ready publication condemning Tagore and hence the plan for the special issue ended up as an abortive attempt, yet not long after Tagore’s arrival many articles of criticism of the beloved poet emerged among the Chinese magazines. The most famous of the authors of these articles were left-wing writer Mao Dun, future Communist leader Qu Qiubai, and then-Communist leader Chen Duxiu himself.

What did these men write about? One thing that keeps coming up in all these articles of criticism is the sense of crisis. All of these articles demonstrate a strong tone of Social Darwinism, which had been a very powerful and influential thought among Chinese reformist and revolutionary intellectuals ever since Yan Fu’s translation of T.H. Huxley’s *Evolution and Ethics* in 1897. Starting in the late 1910s, perceived crises from both inside and outside of the country gave these Social Darwinist intellectuals an unprecedented sense of crisis for China. In these articles of criticism, including those mentioned above by Guo Moruo, the authors employed Marxist historical materialism as the main method of analysis of contemporary sociopolitical problems.²² Also, the authors kept writing about Western imperialism and class oppression, and consequently national revolution as a necessary means to the liberation of the oppressed nations. It was obvious that these authors were strongly influenced by Lenin’s thinking about imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism. In these Marxist-Leninist thoughts, there is necessarily the concept of progress and the notion of historical evolution. So in these articles we can capture words such as “backward/left behind” (*luohou*) and “advancement” (*qianjin*). According to this line of thought,

the new was necessarily better than the old. Under the cultural and intellectual situation of the time, this judgment meant that Confucianism and anything of the old time were bad, backward, and reactionary; a new revolutionary culture lay in front waiting to be created, at the center of which would be “science.”²³ And Tagore, since he was propagating a return to the spiritual civilization created by the ancestors of the East, would undoubtedly be labeled as backward and reactionary as well. For example, Qu Qiubai labeled Tagore as a “man of the past” (*guoqu de ren*) in his article title, let alone the metaphor about the “petrified fossil.”²⁴

There is one very interesting phenomenon in the two articles by Qu Qiubai and Chen Duxiu published on April 16 and 18, 1924. At the end of Qu Qiubai's ironic piece the final sentence reads: “Mr. Tagore, thank you! There are already plenty of *Kongmeng* (Confucius and Mencius) in our country!”²⁵ Apparently, the *Kongmeng* here has an assumed negative meaning without the need of an explanation. In Chen Duxiu's even more ironic article, the final sentence strikes us with its similarity: “Tagore! Thank you! There are already a ton of human-monsters in China!”²⁶ The clear parallel of the two sentences indicates that to this radical group of Chinese intellectuals, the long-respected Confucian tradition was already considered as evil and horrendous as “human-monsters.” It was less than two decades after the abolition of the thousand-year-old civil service examinations, and the Confucian tradition was already detested to such a degree!

The above example is a perfect illustration of the strong sense of antitraditionalism among Chinese intellectuals of this period.²⁷ It is hard to conceive of a more appropriate term to describe the cultural and intellectual condition in May Fourth China than the classic “totalistic iconoclasm,” which was originally coined by Lin Yu-sheng in his 1978 book, *The Crisis of the Chinese Consciousness*. In this study, Lin Yu-sheng identifies radical antitraditionalism as the main intellectual trend in China during the May Fourth period. He finds two main reasons for the rejection of traditions in the late 1910s: the collapse of the imperial order in 1911 and the abuse of tradition

by Yuan Shikai and Zhang Xun in mid-1910s. Therefore, a strong tide of antitraditionalism held sway in the middle and late 1910s, exemplified by figures such as Chen Duxiu, Hu Shi, and Lu Xun. However, as the Great War in Europe came to an end, some Chinese intellectuals started questioning the value of Western civilization, and hence proposed a reassessment of the previous antitraditional, iconoclastic approach to the sociopolitical problems in China. The totalistic iconoclasm needed a defense.

2. The (Re-)consolidation of Antitraditionalism: The Debate on Science and Metaphysics (Ke-xuan zhi zheng) in 1923 as the Background of Tagore's Visit

The questioning of antitraditionalism among Chinese intellectuals reached its height in the early 1920s, made possible by two influential publications of two famous authors. Liang Qichao published his *Reflections on a Trip to Europe (Ou you xinying lu)* around 1920 after a trip to Europe, casting his doubts on Western civilization and Chinese antitraditionalism. According to Hu Shi, this book declared the “bankruptcy of science.”²⁸ One year later, Liang Shuming published a series of his lectures into a book titled *Eastern and Western Culture and Their Philosophies (Dong xi wenhua ji qi zhexue)*, in which he took on an ambitious comparative study of European, Chinese, and Indian civilizations, and adamantly came to the conclusion that the spirituality of the East was superior to Western materialism. These two books fostered hot discussions and debates in the intellectual world. The situation worried the intellectuals upholding science and antitraditionalism, who felt their position endangered. A renewed battle had to be fought in reaction to this Thermidorian Reaction in the intellectual realm.

Such an opportunity arose when, on February 14, 1923, Chinese philosopher Zhang Junmai delivered a speech at Tsinghua University. The title of the speech was “*Rensheng guan*” (A view of life), and the question posed for the Chinese public could be summarized as “Can science govern a view of life?”²⁹ Zhang Junmai had recently returned from the trip to Europe with Liang Qichao and a couple more years of study

with European idealist thinker Rudolf Eucken. In the speech, published by the *Tsinghua Weekly* (*Qinghua zhoukan*), Zhang Junmai claims that a view of life cannot be governed by science because, according to his famous formulation, a view of life is “subjective, intuitive, synthetic, freely willed, and unique to the individual,” while science is “objective, determined by the logical method, analytical, and covered by the laws of cause and effect and by uniformity in nature.”³⁰ Thus Zhang Junmai warned the audience of the limitations of science and the importance of cultural and spiritual pursuits.

The situation soon unfolded into a heated debate as Ding Wenjiang, one of the foremost geologists in China, challenged the opinions of his close friend, Zhang Junmai. Outraged by Zhang's conclusion and alleged problematic reasoning, Ding Wenjiang wrote a long response to Zhang Junmai's speech. In this response, he half-jokingly ridicules Zhang Junmai as haunted by a “ghost of metaphysics” (*xuanxue gui*) and associates Zhang with the detested tradition of the medieval past in both Europe and China, especially the reactionary Roman Catholic theologians who prosecuted Galileo and the *Xinxue* school of Neo-Confucianism.³¹ Ding defended “*the omnipotence of science, the universality of science, and the comprehensiveness of science*” by saying that these qualities of science “*lie not in its subject matter, but in its method* [emphasis original].”³²

Ding's article soon attracted another reply from Zhang Junmai and then numerous subsequent articles in 1923. The debate soon swept through the entire intellectual community and attracted the attention of many. While the debate became increasingly heated, it also proved long-winded, diffuse, and off-topic. As two key proponents of science, Hu Shi and Wu Zhihui, later joined the debate, the scale of opinion leaned increasingly toward one side over the other. In December of that year, two publishing houses published collections of debating articles on science and metaphysics, and the two collections were respectively prefaced by Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi in one, and Zhang Junmai in the other—each side seemingly claiming its own victory.³³ However, in the end there was general

agreement in the public that science had won a victory “of propaganda if not of understanding,” as pointed out by a previous study.³⁴ The academic prestige of Neo-Confucianism suffered another serious blow, and public opinion in the intellectual world again favored those who upheld science in opposition to the Chinese tradition. The position of the antitraditionalists was defended and consolidated through this renewed battle.

The Debate on Science and Metaphysics served as the key intellectual background of Tagore’s visit to China, on the eve of which the positions against tradition again held sway. After a full year of heated and emotionally charged debate, Chinese intellectuals with a belief in science and progress, firmer in their conviction than ever before, could not endure more attacks on science or praise of the superiority of spirituality. They put an enormous amount of personal emotions into their quest for a new China, built upon and made powerful by science. They would not tolerate any reactionary voices.

The Case in India/Bengal: Brahma Samaj, Swadeshi, and Hindutva

In the 1925 edition of *Talks in China*, Rabindranath Tagore edited a special piece of his speech titled “Autobiographical” and put it at the beginning of the book, obviously in a purposeful response to the cool reception he received in China.³⁵ In this talk, Tagore describes his different experiences of Indian and Chinese observations and comments about him, and expresses his shock at the amazing contrast. He says:

According to him [an observer] I was altogether out of date in this modern age, that I ought to have been born 2,000 years ago.... This has caused me some surprise.... Almost from my boyhood I have been accustomed to hear from my own countrymen angry remonstrances that I was too crassly modern, that I had missed all the great lessons from the past, and with it my right of entry into a venerable civilization like that of India. For your people I am obsolete, and therefore useless, and for mine, new-fangled and therefore obnoxious. I do not know which is true.³⁶

In hope that his Chinese audiences would understand him better, Tagore then started off talking about his own experiences and the cultural, social, and political conditions into which he was born. He says, "Just about the time I was born, the currents of three movements had met in the life of our country."³⁷ By these three movements Tagore means first, the religious movement of Neo-Hinduism or Brahmoism, headed by Rammohan Roy, and made popular by Rabindranath's own father, Debendranath Tagore; second, the literary movement of Bengali literature, led by Bankimcandra Chatterji; third, what Tagore calls "national movement," the political struggle of Bengalis and other peoples of India against British imperialism.³⁸

These movements, Tagore says, had had significant influence upon his life, and had been crucial to the formation of his thoughts and ideas as a thinker. It has been a common problem in the study of Rabindranath Tagore, as David Kopf points out, that historical scholarship "rarely places the right emphasis on the sociocultural and ideological background of his period."³⁹ Therefore it is important for us to put Tagore into historical context and to study these historical movements of his time, which will help us better understand Tagore's thoughts and ideas as they were.

1. Early Discourses: Brahmo Samaj

The Brahmo Samaj was a religious movement starting in early nineteenth-century Bengal in attempt to reform traditional Hindu religion. Originally, Brahmo Samaj (formerly named Brahmo Sabha) referred to a reformist religious society founded by Rammohan Roy, who was highly respected and commemorated in subsequent centuries and hailed as "the Father and Patriarch of Modern India."⁴⁰ The Brahmo Samaj was started by Rammohan Roy in 1828 and later made popular by the effort of Debendranath Tagore, son of the first Bengali capitalist entrepreneur Dwarkanath Tagore (who was a very close friend of Rammohan Roy) and father of Rabindranath. The Brahmo Samaj movement clearly had a strong impact on the life and thought of Rabindranath, as also could be seen

through his pride in announcing his own father as a key leader of this movement.⁴¹

The founding father of this religious movement, Rammohan Roy, was well-versed in both Sanskrit and Persian religious classics. Through exposure to Islamic thought, young Rammohan became intrigued by the idea of Unitarianism, which later prompted him to pursue active studies of Christianity. Thus monotheism later became a central theological doctrine of the Brahmo Samaj. Another aspect of Rammohan's thought was his anti-idolatry. He considered the worshiping of idols in religious practices as erroneous and engaged in active debate against it. What was considered orthodox Hinduism had both elements of polytheism and idol worship, so it was something unacceptable to Rammohan. Noticeably, however, unlike the Chinese intellectuals discussed above, Rammohan did not oppose the orthodox Hindu tradition holistically or embrace a readily available Western alternative. Instead, he chose to reform the Hindu tradition by looking backwards into antiquity, into the very early traditions of Hindu religious discourse: the Upanishads. Rammohan translated the Upanishads from Sanskrit into Bengali and English for a wider readership. He revived the reading of the Upanishads because of its ancient polemic role in challenging the orthodoxy of the Vedic ritualistic traditions.

Rammohan's position against orthodox Hinduism subjected him to hatred and criticism for opposing the Hindu tradition. In response to such charges, Rammohan explains the rationale of anti-idolatry and deviation from the Vedic tradition of the Brahmo Samaj: "The ground which I took in all my controversies was not that of opposition to Brahmanism, but to a perversion of it; and I endeavoured to show that the idolatry of the Brahmans was contrary to the practice of their ancestors, and the principles of the ancient books and authorities, which they profess to revere and obey."⁴² In response to the crises of early colonial Bengal, Rammohan, together with his influential Brahmo Samaj, looked back into the ancient traditions for solutions, rather than discarding the tradition entirely in hatred and disgust. Rammohan's effort was later inherited and

popularized by Debendranath Tagore, and had a strong impact on his youngest son, Rabindranath.

Rammohan's strategy was, in the words of Professor Brian Hatcher, "to retrieve the Vedanta of the Upanishads from oblivion and to identify in it a religion that could both answer the challenges of modernity and provide new norms of collective identity."⁴³ The quest for a new collective identity was a new phenomenon in the subcontinent in the early years of colonialism. In reaction to early contacts with the West, Rammohan employed religion to construct identity and self-definition. He was the first to introduce the word "Hinduism" into English. In subsequent decades, this quest for a new cultural and political identity became increasingly strong and took the shape of popular movements, which formed the basis for the rise of Indian and Bengali nationalism.

2. Indian Nationalism: *Swadeshi* and *Hindutva*

One such popular movement that heavily influenced (and also was heavily influenced by) Rabindranath Tagore was the *Swadeshi* movement, which took place around the turn of the century. *Swadeshi* in Bengali means "land of our own," asserting a strong sense of the consciousness of self, which also assumes the existence of a non-self "other," the British. The *Swadeshi* movement reached its height when public unrest arose in reaction to Lord Curzon's order concerning the partition of Bengal in 1905. However, the root of the movement, and even the key slogan, could be traced back two decades earlier, in the fictional works of the great Bengali literary figure, Bankimcandra Chatterji.

Bankimcandra Chatterji's most famous and influential work was his historical novel *Anandamath*. The story was set in the eighteenth century about an ambivalent conflict between the locals and the foreigners who came to this isolated and unexposed area. The plot was clearly allegorical and foreshadowed the nationalist struggles of the Bengali Indians. In the novel, because of the coming of foreigners to this insulated land, the local residents started to search for an identity of themselves. In doing this, they identified the shared land and

past of the community, and announced their pride of this shared identity in the expression “*Bande Mataram*,” “Hail to the Mother.” (Ever since then, “Mother India” has become a very popular expression, though it was used in different intentions. For example, Katherine Mayo titled one of her books *Mother India* for a clearly ironic purpose.) A secret society was formed and the members were determined to stand up against the foreigners when needed.

Bankimcandra Chatterji was extremely popular and influential in Bengal in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. When *Anandamath* was first published serially in Bankim’s own journal, *Bangadarshan*, in 1881, it received extremely wide acceptance and high popularity. When Rabindranath Tagore recounts his childhood memories about the novel, he says: “At the time, *Bangadarshan* made a tremendous impact. . . . All that everyone in the land could think of was ‘What’s happened now?’ and, ‘What’s going to happen next time?’ [in the story]. As soon as *Bangadarshan* arrived, the afternoon siesta would be out of the question for everyone in the neighbourhood.”⁴⁴

Chatterji’s novel foretold the popular movement that happened two decades later. The Swadeshi movement in Bengal at the beginning of the 1900s saw mass mobilization and active leadership of local Bengali elites in the creation of national consciousness against foreign cultural and economic influence. The activists hailed “*Bande Mataram*” and declared Bengal as “*swadeshi*,” “land of our own.” Reacting against the influence of the West, many in the Swadeshi period turned to traditional Hinduism in search of a purely indigenous and popular form of nationalism. This explains the “curious but by no means unique phenomenon” of intellectuals “utterly westernised in outlook” turning to orthodox Hindus overnight during this period.⁴⁵

At the height of the Swadeshi movement, popular unrest included violent actions such as burning foreign textiles and attacking western missionaries. The actions involved in the movement seemed to be very anti-Western; however, Tagore criticized the excessive violence in the movement as a Western

import that was foreign to India. In 1910 he wrote a novel named *Home and the World*. In this novel of only three main characters, he depicted the two possible positions that he saw in the nationalist struggle: Sandip, representing the radical, materialistic revolutionary position, which he considered to be Western and alien, and Nikhil, representing the moderate, spiritual reformist position, which he considered superior and native to India, with Nikhil's wife Bimala in the middle choosing between the two. Tagore's criticism of the Swadeshi movement (in which he was also a leader) reflected his thoughts about the "Indianization" of nationalist approaches: the spirit and attitudes of traditional Hinduism being enshrined in the nationalist struggles of the modern era, rather than hailing traditional Hinduism as a symbol and excuse for mass violence. In both the Swadeshi movement and Tagore's criticism of it, we can clearly see the important place of Hindu tradition: it was used by both parties, who both upheld the Hindu tradition as of utmost importance to the nationalist struggle.

Another important event in the development of Indian nationalism was the publication of V.D. Savarkar's *Hindutva* in 1923. We are not sure how much Tagore was influenced by Savarkar's thought, yet it can certainly give us some insights into the intellectual conditions of India at the dawn of the poet's trip to China.

Savarkar's *Hindutva* was a poetic booklet in praise of the greatness of Sindhu, the land between the rivers, mountains, and the ocean. It talks about the long history of the land, the glory of the faiths that originated there, and the greatness of the community called India formed by the descendants of the ancient inhabitants of this holy land. The book was a passionate composition of exuberant emotions, exciting national pride based on the greatness and wonder of the national past. Savarkar's little book received tremendous popularity and has remained a classic on Indian nationalism till today. It represented the core value of Indian nationalism in the early twentieth century: the glorification of national traditions.

Conclusion: Same name, different paths

After examining the cases in both China and India, it is now clear to us that the two countries had drastically different attitudes toward tradition during the course of their encounter with the West and in the process of their own nationalist struggles. Generally speaking, Chinese intellectuals in the early twentieth century tended to repudiate the dominant Confucian traditions and embrace Westernization as a readily available alternative; Indian pundits and intellectuals, however, were inclined to preserve and cherish the Hindu traditions and look back to ancient traditions for solutions to modern crises. For the Chinese of this period, the most important thing about nationhood was national survival: if the nation ceased to exist, what would the tradition be affiliated to? For the Indians, however, the issue of utmost importance about nationhood was national essence: if the nation did not have a clearly defined essence, what would make it what it was? These were some interestingly drastic differences between Chinese and Indians in the early twentieth century, which provided the historical background for Rabindranath Tagore's visit to China in 1924. With the two such different ways of thinking, it was hard to avoid some bitter conflicts and quarrels between the two. No doubt Tagore was confused about the different treatments he received at home and in China. This important difference in attitudes toward tradition, rather than the responsibility of Tagore's own ideas or the misunderstanding of Tagore by the Chinese, is the key reason for the failure of Tagore's visit to China in 1924.

It is also interesting to look at the historiography, especially the naming of the two intellectual events during this time period in the two countries: the May Fourth Movement and the Bengal Renaissance. When Chinese intellectual leader Hu Shi spoke at the University of Chicago in 1933, he titled his lecture series "The Chinese Renaissance," recalling the name of a student magazine started in Peking University in 1918.⁴⁶ The intellectual movement in Bengal was also named a "renaissance," spanning roughly from the time of Rammohan Roy to that of Rabindranath Tagore. However, these two "renaissances," though bearing

the same (Western) name, were characterized by very different content and attitudes, as discussed above. Hu Shi describes the word “renaissance” as a movement of “reason versus tradition,” which fits with the Chinese picture.⁴⁷ Yet the revival of ancient traditions in the Bengal Renaissance seems to be more suitable to the original meaning of the French word “renaissance.” Both countries grabbed this Western term to label their own intellectual movements. Confusion arises when the same name refers to different things. Tagore was confused, but we are no more.

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Endnotes

- ¹For a recent example of this conceptual framework in what can be considered both academic and popular history, see Rana Mitter, *Modern China: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11-16.
- ²On the Chinese negligence of India, see Susan L. Shirk, "One-Sided Rivalry: China's Perceptions and Policies toward India," in Francine R. Frankel and Harry Harding, eds., *The India-China Relationship*:

What the United States Needs to Know (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

³Stephen N. Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and His Critics in Japan, China, and India* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 148.

⁴“*Jiangxueshe*” was translated differently by Chow Tse-tsung, Stephen Hay, and Sisir Kumar Das, respectively, as the “Society for Lectures on the New Learning,” “Peking Lecture Association,” and “Universities Association.” None of these translations is satisfying enough, so I made the decision to use the transliteration. See Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1967), 187; Stephen Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West*, 139; and Sisir Kumar Das, ed., *Talks in China* (Calcutta: Visva-Bharati, 1999), 15.

⁵Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement: Intellectual Revolution in Modern China*, 191-192.

⁶Stephen Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West*, 148.

⁷Wu Zhihui, “Wangao Taige’er” (Courteous advice to Tagore), in Sun Yixue, ed., *Taige’er yu Zhongguo* (Tagore and China) (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin chubanshe, 2001), 256.

⁸Stephen Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West*, 243.

⁹Krishna Dutta, and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Myriad-Minded Man* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 248, 251.

¹⁰Rabindranath Tagore, “Leave Taking”, in Sisir Kumar Das, ed., *Talks in China*, ed., 76.

¹¹Stephen Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West*, 184.

¹²Sisir Kumar Das, “The Controversial Guest: Tagore in China,” in Tan Chung, ed., *Across the Himalayan Gap: An Indian Quest for Understanding China* (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Gyan Publishing House, 1998), 311.

¹³Sun Yixue, “Yici buhuan’ersan de wenhua juhui” (A cultural gathering without a happy ending), in *Buhuan’ersan de wenhua juhui: Taige’er laihua yanjiang ji lunzheng* (Cultural gathering without a happy ending: Speeches and discussions on Tagore’s visit to China), ed. Sun Yixue (Hefei: Anhui jiaoyu chubanshe, 2007), 15.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 16-21.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁷Stephen Hay, *Asian Ideas of East and West*, 192.

¹⁸*Xiaoshuo yuebao* (Short Story Monthly) 14, no. 9-10 (September–

October, 1923).

- ¹⁹Guo Moruo, “Taige’er laihua de wojian”(My opinions on Tagore’s coming to China), in Zhang Guanglin, ed., *Zhongguo mingjia lun Taige’er* (Chinese famous writers on Tagore) (Beijing: Zhongguo huaqiao chubanshe, 1994), 67.
- ²⁰Chen Duxiu, “Women weishenme huanying Taige’er” (Why do we welcome Tagore?), in Shen Yihong, ed., *Taige’er tan Zhongguo* (Tagore on China) (Hangzhou: Zhejiang wenyi chubanshe, 2001), 130.
- ²¹Shuin Ru, ed., *Chen Duxiu shuxin ji* (Collected Letters of Chen Duxiu) (Beijing: Xinhua Chubanshe, 1987), 387-388.
- ²²For example, Guo Moruo explicitly mentioned “historical materialism” (*weiwu shiguan*) in his article. See Guo Moruo, “Taige’er laihua de wojian” (My opinions on Tagore’s coming to China), in *Zhongguo mingjia lun Taige’er* (Chinese famous writers on Tagore), 67.
- ²³D. W. Y. Kwok, *Scientism in Chinese Thought, 1900-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), 161-162.
- ²⁴Qu Qiubai, “Guoqu de ren—Taige’er” (A man of the past—Tagore), in *Taige’er tan Zhongguo* (Tagore on China), 143.
- ²⁵Qu Qiubai, “Taige’er de guojia guan yu dongfang” (Tagore’s view on nation and the East), in *Taige’er tan Zhongguo* (Tagore on China), 142.
- ²⁶Chen Duxiu, “Taige’er yu dongfang wenhua” (Tagore and Eastern civilization), in *Taige’er tan Zhongguo* (Tagore on China), 163.
- ²⁷In this essay I use the word “antitraditionalism,” which was also a creation by Lin Yu-sheng, as an interchangeable synonym and shorthand for “totalistic iconoclasm” to refer to the intellectual trend of opposing Chinese traditions and upholding science and western civilization as an alternative.
- ²⁸Hu Shi, “Xu er” (Second Preface), in *Kexue yu rensheng guan* (Science and a View of Life), prefaces by Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi (Hefei: Huangshan shushe, 2008), 9-11.
- ²⁹Charlotte Furth, *Ting Wen-chiang: Science and China’s New Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 100.
- ³⁰Zhang Junmai, “Rensheng guan” (A view of life), in *Kexue yu rensheng guan*, 33-36.
- ³¹Ding Wenjiang, “Xuanxue yu kexue: ping Zhang Junmai de ‘Rensheng guan’” (Metaphysics and science: a comment on Zhang Junmai’s “A view of life”), in *Kexue yu rensheng guan*, 39-48.
- ³²*Ibid.*, 51, 56.

- ³³Gao Ruiquan, "Ben shu shuoming" (An explanation of this book), in *Kexue yu rensheng guan*, v.
- ³⁴Charlotte Furth, Ting Wen-chiang, 133.
- ³⁵The 1925 edition of *Talks in China* was the second edition of the book. The first edition, published in 1924, was "withdrawn almost immediately from the market for reasons not known to us," and a new, completely restructured edition was published in February 1925. It was very likely that Tagore was not happy with the contents of the first edition and arranged the second edition himself. See Preface of *Talks in China* (1999), written by Sisir Kumar Das.
- ³⁶Rabindranath Tagore, "Autobiographical," in *Talks in China*, 29.
- ³⁷*Ibid.*, 30.
- ³⁸*Ibid.*, 30-32.
- ³⁹David Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 287.
- ⁴⁰Brian Hatcher, "Remembering Rammohan: An Essay on the (Re)Emergence of Modern Hinduism," *History of Religions*, 46:1 (August 2006), 52.
- ⁴¹Rabindranath Tagore, "Autobiographical," in *Talks in China*, 30.
- ⁴²Stephen Hay, ed., *Sources of Indian Tradition, Volume Two: Modern India and Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 21.
- ⁴³Hatcher, "Remembering Rammohan," 62.
- ⁴⁴Quoted in Julius Lipner, "Introduction," *Anandamath, or Sacred Brotherhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 6.
- ⁴⁵Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973), 495.
- ⁴⁶Hu Shi, *The Chinese Renaissance: The Haskell Lectures, 1933* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1933), 44.
- ⁴⁷*Ibid.*