

Review Essay

By Samantak Das

***Tagore and China.* Eds. Wang Bangwei, Tan Chung, Amiya Dev, Wei Liming. Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2011. Print. [also published in New Delhi by Sage, 2011, where the editors are listed differently, in the following order: Tan Chung, Amiya Dev, Wang Bangwei and Wei Liming]**

Rabindranath Tagore arrived for his first, and only, visit to China in April 1924 and left the country at the end of May that same year. Of all the poet's many trips abroad and his "grand visits" to different countries, especially after gaining international fame with the Nobel Prize in 1913, this was probably the most contentious. In his 1998 article "The Controversial Guest: Tagore in China", published in *Across the Himalayan Gap: an Indian Quest for Understanding China*, Sisir Kumar Das calls Rabindranath "the most controversial guest in twentieth century China".

Something of the controversy that surrounded Rabindranath's China visit can be gauged from the two editions of *Talks in China*, published fairly shortly after the poet's return from that country. The first edition, published by Visva-Bharati (undated, but in all probability printed in 1924) differs radically from the next, published from Calcutta in 1925 and carrying Rabindranath's seal of approval. Not only is the arrangement of the books different, three lectures from the Visva-Bharati edition were omitted entirely from the 1925 text. It was only in 1996, with the publication of the second volume of the *English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* by the Sahitya Akademi, edited by Sisir Kumar Das, that non-specialist readers gained access to the full set of lectures delivered by Rabindranath in China. And, incidentally, neither the Visva-Bharati text nor the formally-approved 1925 text was ever translated into Chinese.

The controversies that raged around Rabindranath forced him to refuse or cancel some of his

speaking engagements and to declare, in his final speech, his awareness of, and disappointment at, the heated debates his visit had engendered. He ended that final speech, titled “Leave Taking” in the 1925 text, by saying, “Some of your patriots were afraid that, carrying from India spiritual contagion, I might weaken your vigorous faith in money and materialism. I assure those who thus feel nervous that I am entirely inoffensive; I am powerless to impair their career of progress, to hold them back from rushing to the market place to sell the soul in which they do not believe. I can even assure them that I have not convinced a single sceptic that he has a soul, or that moral beauty has greater value than material power. I am certain that they will forgive me when they know the result.”

Yet, despite the bitterness and sarcasm of these words, a major result of the Chinese visit was the setting up, in 1937, of Cheena Bhavana in Visva-Bharati, which remained for several decades the premier institution for Sinological studies in India. It seems obvious therefore that Rabindranath Tagore’s Chinese sojourn is not one that leads to easy exegesis.

This is where the importance of the volume under review becomes apparent. It traces not just the significance and impact of the 1924 trip, but also locates China within the larger context of Rabindranath’s “cosmology of thoughts” (to use Swapan Majumdar’s phrase) and looks at Rabindranath’s “vision of the East” (Amiya Dev) before trying to gauge the contemporary relevance of Rabindranath and his critique of nationalism (Prasenjit Duara).

Precisely because “the contrast between Tagore’s problematic reception in China in his grand visit in 1924, on the one hand, and his deep love and admiration for China, and also China’s uniformly positive response to Tagore before his arrival, on the other, calls for more sophisticated investigation than they have tended to get” (Amartya Sen, in his magisterial opening essay, “Tagore and China”), a volume such as this assumes significance. For it not only initiates the

novice into the world of Rabindranath's relationship with China— a relationship that began long before 1924 and continued up to the time of the poet's death— it also provides significant fodder for thought for those who are interested in the contours of the larger history of Indo-Chinese relationships and the possible directions such a relationship might take in future.

The studies of Rabindranath's influence on a particular writer (in the essay by Zeng Qiong), or his close bond with Tan Yun-Shan (Huang I-shu's essay) are important for they provide models, as it were, for micro-analyses of individual responses across the India-China divide, while the more sweeping studies, such as Tan Chung's "Towards an In-depth Understanding of Tagore, China and Asia" or those by Dev or Majumdar already referred to, enable one to step back from the minutiae of personal response to gain a broader vision of the way in which India's greatest modern literary figure paved the way to what, with luck, will be a relationship between the world's two most populous countries based, not on antagonism, but on mutual tolerance, respect and understanding. Or, as Rabindranath himself put it, in his address on the occasion of the inauguration of Cheena Bhavana in 1937, "to offer at least a genuine atmosphere of hospitality, of an earnestness to cross over our limitations and move nearer to the hearts of other peoples and understand somewhat of the significance of the endless variety of man's creative effort."

It is a great pity that a volume of such importance should be marred by so many typographical errors, as was the case with the text given for review. One can only hope that the edition published by Sage, which will be read by many more readers, is free of such avoidable blemishes.

Works Cited

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