

**The conflict between the other Asia and the New Asia:  
Rabindranath Tagore, Liang Qichao and  
Kakuzo (Tenshin) Okakura  
and the Politics of Friendship and a love story**

This is the story of three men and their activities in the first three decades of the twentieth century. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Kakuzo Okakura (1862-1913) and Liang Qichao (1873- 1929) of India, Japan and China respectively. These men occupied the East Asian stage as three protagonists with very different visions of Asia. This paper will unveil the complex friendship between the three within - and against - the background of a unified Asia that concealed considerable political differences.

Okakura, Japanese writer, founder of a radical art school (Nihon Bijutsuin) and well known art curator, was an ultranationalist, who followed Fukuzawa Yukichi's (1834-1901), philosophy of *Datsu-a Ron*, (1) meaning 'saying goodbye to Asia' while casting Japan's lot in with the civilized nations of the West. His prime intention was

to adopt a militaristic nationalism to compete with the West, thus bringing about a new Asia.

But there is quite a lot of ambivalence in his notion of Asia, which can be perceived in his envisaging an image of pan-Asian unity – a unity apparently based on the oneness of oriental art but covertly establishing the supremacy of Japanese art. Hence in his book ‘The Awakening of the East’ (written by Okakura during his stay in Calcutta and, for unknown reasons, not published during his life-time) he wanted us to believe that we are one...Asia is one (2) but his Japanese identity disrupted his own idea of the unity in ‘we’ and created an Asia as a part of two mighty civilizations, the Chinese with its communism of Confucius (according to Rustam Barucha what he meant was communitarian ethics) (3) and the Indian with its individualism of the Vedas; these, like two sides of a triangle, with Japan as the apex of the triangle, and thus made unabashed display of his ultra-nationalism

In his ultra-nationalist wisdom, denigration of India and China was crucial to establish the supremacy of Japan and hence he spoke of India as the ‘orphaned child of Asia’ (4) and of China as the victim of the ‘White disaster in the

Opium War' (5), thereby implicitly suggesting that we are not one Asia.

One should not, however, find in this any post-colonial strain of destabilizing a monolithic perspective of unitary culture at Asia's level; but it was Okakura's own futuristic thinking along ultra-nationalistic and imperialistic lines which was soon revealed in Japan's war with Russia (1904-05), and with Korea, turning it to a protectorate in 1905 and then in 1910 – forcing it to surrender its sovereignty following wars with China in 1894-95 and 1937-1941.

Among the other pan-Asianists, Okawa Shumei, who had converted himself into a pan-Asianist in 1913 after reading a book about India's dire state under the British, forgot, in due course, all his idealism and accepted Pan-Asianism with Japan as the future imperial conqueror. (6)

Indeed, the 'unified Asia' of which Tagore and Okakura appeared to dream together was imagined on significantly different grounds. For Okakura it was a triumphant call for a new Asia in the guise of Japanese imperialism and

for Tagore it was the perennial Asia reworded as the 'continental mind of Asia' i.e. an Asia of 'one mind.' A votary of Asian cultural unity and not an advocate of a political federation of Asia, Tagore invoked this notion of -a single -continental mind of Asia in his third visit to Japan in 1929, while paying his highest tribute to Okakura, who died in Boston in 1913, while serving there as the curator of the Museum of Fine Arts.

Let me pause a little in this narration to look back to the time when Okakura came for the first time to India for a period of 9 months on 6 January, 1902 and met the Tagores in their Jorashanko residence. There is no record of what kind of discussion took place between Rabindranath and Okakura but one thing is sure - the mutual affection and respect which each had for the other was very much visible in their behavior. However, they never exchanged letters and their friendship remained mostly speculative but what cannot be denied is the intensity with which it was celebrated. (7)

After 1902 Tagore met Okakura for the second and last time in his life in February 1913 in Boston. It is possible

that Okakura had a premonition of his own imminent death as it was recorded by him in a letter to Priyambada Devi Banerji. She was a widowed *bhadramahila* (educated Bengali lady) and a poet, distantly related to Tagore, with whom Okakura fell in love at first sight on his last visit to Calcutta in 1912. This meeting led to a long distance love affair conducted by

passionate letters written to each other. Following Tagore's visit, Okakura wrote to Priyambada on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1913, 'It is snowing here still and I long for the sunshine and flowers of the orient. Your uncle (Tagore) has left for Chicago and I feel a sudden loneliness.' (8)

Liang Qichao, an ardent Orientalist and President of Beijing Lecture Association, had a radical mindset in his younger days and hero-worshipped Mao Zedong in his youth but later turned away from radicalism and also from Europe's Universalist ideals of the Enlightenment – which he saw as a moral cover for unjust racial hierarchies- to seek strength and dignity in a revamped Confucianism. (9)

On his invitation, Tagore visited China in 1924 but this gave rise to a virulent campaign against Tagore, so much

so that in Hankou he had to hear such slogans as: “Go back, slave from a lost country!” But let us not forget what Lu Xun (1881-1936), a celebrated Marxist poet and story writer of world fame pointed out in 1927: “All the ancient civilization of the world, Chinese and Egyptian included, had lost their voices. Nor was there any voice in Annam and Korea. There was only one voice still living and that was the voice of Tagore in India.” (10)

No doubt the hostility against Tagore in China was partly because of his hosts Liang Qichao and Zhang Junmai. Both were targets of severe criticism by the leftist radicals who disliked their so called ‘reactionary politics’. In spite of a statement by Liang (11) that Mr Tagore and he had no connection with each other, and... Tagore did not come to China to assist him, the resentment against Tagore continued. No doubt Liang’s questioning of China’s tradition, and his skepticism about China’s old Confucius tradition’s ability to adapt to the harsh world of competition, were the basis of both radical new despair and also hopefulness for the New Culture which ushered in the May 4 Movement in 1919.

But Liang could not get the credit for this as his disastrous strategy of aligning himself, during the post-Qing state,

with the violent and corrupt warlords, compromised his position and ultimately led to his becoming politically irrelevant and, tragically, a target of criticism involving Tagore.

Resentment against Tagore notwithstanding, it is difficult for me to accept terms like ‘reactionary’ or ‘revisionist’ or even ‘obscurantist’ for Liang Qichao, which were used by the left radicals to demean Liang as well as his mentor Kang Youwei (1858-1927). Liang was known as China’s first iconic modern intellectual, who stressed the urgency of political reform as more important than technological reforms and was nothing less than radical in his demand for political innovation and public participation in government; he tried to reformulate Confucianism by adding to it some of the virtues of the West, particularly ‘Mr Democracy and Mr Science’ as mentioned by Chen Duziu and his friends associated with the journal, *Xin Quignian* (New Youth). (12) I shall come back to this point later.

The resentment was also because of Tagore’s criticism of the Western model of development and the notion of Western modernity (13) and also because of the upsurge of Chinese nationalism after the May 4 movement.

Though Tagore wrote three important articles on China; The Death trade in China (*Chine Maraner Byabasay*), Social differences (*Samajbhed*) and letters of a Chinaman (*Chinemaner Chithi*) and also profusely referred to Chinese civilization and contemporary Chinese life and political turmoil in his writings, yet he did not realize the intensity of the repugnance for Confucianism and aversion from a moribund feudal culture in China among the younger generation and that failure made it very likely that he would be misunderstood amid the clamour of that seething internal strife.

But at the same time there were many scholars, writers and intellectuals who expressed enthusiasm for Tagore's visit in abundant measures. These included Zheng Zhentuo, the editor of 'The Fiction Monthly', (Xiaoshuo Yuebao), Xu Zhimo (1895-1931) and Zhang Wentian (1900-1976), a close associate of Mao Zedong and Guo Moruo, the distinguished writer who was critical of Tagore but at the same time wrote of his experience of reading Tagore's writings: "I felt I found my 'life of life', my 'fountain of Life.'" (14) Though in 1924 Guo Moruo had drifted far from Tagore, (15) yet one should not overlook the ambivalence in his use of terms like *baoda* which means to repay one's indebtedness. Though



he criticized Tagore but at the same time repaid his indebtedness by establishing, at the same time, his spiritual communion with Tagore.(16)

No doubt Tagore was deeply hurt by the scathing criticism meted out to him by the leftist radicals. However, he did not change his views about the danger of adopting the Western materialistic model of development and ignoring the country's heritage of the past. At the same time did not hesitate to say, 'We have a great thing to accept from the people of the West – their treasure of intellect, which is immense and whose superiority we must admit.'(17) Lu Xun in his 'remembering Tagore's visit, 1933', aptly summed up the reasons for all criticism and hostility against Tagore: 'Perhaps if our poets and others had not made him a living fairy he would not have been so confused and the Chinese youths would not have been so alienated. What bad luck now.' (18)

In spite of all kinds of controversy and virulent attack Tagore's love for China did not weaken. When Tagore was leaving Beijing somebody asked him: 'I hope you have not left anything.' Tagore shook his head gently and said in a sad voice, 'Nothing except a portion of my

heart.’(19) But he could not say this for Japan as after Japan’s brutal aggression against China Tagore acknowledged, ‘I can no longer point out with pride the example of a great Japan.’

Tagore formulated a non-nationalist ideal of Asian cosmopolitanism early in his life, and never departed from it. This is his perennial Asia which has now become ‘other’ within its own boundaries and the tussle between the new and the other, and the slogan of one Asia in different connotations, and how it led to the politics of friendship has become the main issue in this narration.

It was not Okakura but Yone Naguchi (1875-1947), who was among the best-known Japanese writers in the first two or three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and an associate of W.B. Yeats and Ezra Pound, and who met Tagore in Calcutta in 1902, when he came to deliver a course of lectures in Calcutta and other universities. Naguchi became a very popular figure among Indians and was greatly respected by Tagore.

Naguchi’s poetry was most romantic and devoid of materialistic spirit but Tagore was stunned to receive a letter from him in mid 1938 – after a gap of 36 years – arguing vociferously for Japan’s spiritual and moral role

in sending an army to China and wanting to use their friendship politically, but Tagore's ideology was much more important to him than friendship and his firmness towards that proposal was exemplary. Tagore had only one ground on which to counter the machinations of realpolitik of friendship: humanity.

It was very difficult, though, in case of Naguchi, who became a close friend on Tagore's first visit to Japan in 1916 and supported his views on nationalism or to be precise against nationalism. It is surely ironic that their break-up was directly related to Naguchi's significantly altered views and his reversion to Nationalism in 1938. In 1916 Tagore said in a lecture,

'I sincerely hope that Japanese people will not forget the old Japan. The new Japan was only an imitation of the West. This will ruin Japan.'(20)

In fact Tagore was differentiating between the New Asia and the perennial Asia, which by then had become the other Asia of philosophy, idealism, humanity and love for all, or universal humanism, but the new Asians were bent upon discarding it and during Tagore's visit to China in 1924 the radicals circulated leaflets denouncing Tagore by stating,

‘We have had enough of the ancient civilization.’

Definitely, for the Chinese and the Japanese it was important to build their nations on western lines - and they were surprised to find Tagore not worried at all about his country’s political subjugation and to hear him speaking instead of spiritual liberation.

They had no idea of the real nature of Tagore’s thinking. For Tagore, India’s unity was a social reality. It was not a political agenda. His ideas of *samaj*, social upliftment and then *atmasshakti*, self reliance and thereafter *swaraj*, self rule, form a sequential progression to true national freedom wherein there is no scope for violence.

Underlying his participation in the Hindu *mela* from the age of 14, his renouncing the knighthood after the Jalianwala Bagh massacre at the age of 58, and even after that his anti-imperialist viewpoints forcefully displayed in his last stirring lecture ‘The Crisis in Civilization’ at the age of 80 - in which he mentioned the impertinent challenge by the imperial ruler to our conscience - was a completely non-political attitude. His anti-imperial stance was in fact an aspect of a universal struggle for political justice and cultural dignity, and a protest against violence. Years after Tagore left China Lu Xun had to

acknowledge, 'I did not see this clearly before, now I know that he is also an anti-imperialist.' (21)

In his classic autobiography, *Errata: An Examined Life* (1997), George Steiner, one of the foremost philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote:

'It is possible to suppose that the period since August 1914 has been, notably in Europe and Russia, from Madrid to Moscow, from Sicily to the Arctic Circle, the most bestial in recorded history.' (22)

Steiner's epitaph to the essential tragedy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century may well serve as a postscript to Rabindranath's critique of nationalism. Indeed, it would be logical to infer that much of the cause for human grief, pain and humiliation in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, can be attributed to the conflicting claims of Nation States. Far from acting as an instrument for realizing collective or communitarian aspirations and welfare, nationalism has tragically led to collective despair.

## **Friendship**

It is almost impossible to imagine laws determining friendship. Friendships are 'voluntary, unspecialized, informal and private' says Allan Silver (23), and this

definition would fit the friendship of Tagore and Okakura very well.

Naguchi definitely introduced politics into his friendship to placate Tagore so that he withdrew his statement about the Japanese invasion of China as 'slaughtering madness'. (24) Naguchi explained in his letter to Tagore that the Japanese invasion of China was the means for establishing a new great world in the Asiatic continent', a war of 'Asia for Asia' – one Asia. But for Tagore 'one' is a very suspect term because there is no unity in one.

He said, in his essay, *Shikshar Milan* (The Unity of Education), 'a man who is alone or one is meaningless because there is no unity in one. The one with many is truly one because in that one, one can see the unity and this unity gives the message of truth.' (25) Tagore condemned Naguchi's so-called idea of one Asia, which destroyed others so as to establish one's own one new Asia. Tagore in that long exchange of letters ultimately said, 'Wishing your people whom I love, not success, but remorse.' (26)

Liang Qichao's friendship was different and so was of Okakura's. It is generally surmised, though wrongly, that under attack by the Chinese radicals Tagore's host Liang Qichao and his interpreter, the poet, Zhang Junmai, used Tagore's talent to instill in young China their conservative and reactionary tendencies (27) and used his great name in pursuing their ulterior motive.

Could this be true of a man of Liang's stature who – as I have said before – believed, like Tagore in 'broad nationalism', as opposed to what he called 'narrow nationalism', (28) and also believed in Confucian *ren, yi, xiao* i.e. benevolence, propriety, filial piety, and the correct modes of behavior. He was politically more pragmatic than his mentor, Kang Youwei, and also, by invoking Patrik Henry's famous words, 'Give me Liberty or give me death', spoke about freedom as an absolute necessity for China. Could a man of such vision ever use Tagore's name for his so called ulterior interest? It was just not possible.

Tagore before leaving China also said, 'I have done what was possible – I have made friends' Tagore celebrated the day in 1941 when he was given the new name 'Zhu

Zhendan' in a poem concluding with the sentence :  
'Where ever we find friends there begins a new life'. (29)

Tagore's friendship with Okakura was definitely different. In Okakura's mind the place of Japan was supreme as was India in the mind of Tagore. But if Okakura showed his desire to create a new Japan in Asia, he was equally enthusiastic to assure Tagore that 'China is great.'(29) 'This big-hearted Japanese thinker' had always displayed his idea of the welfare of total Asia but when looking at it politically, he would give Japan the supreme place in it. Otherwise, as mentioned by Sister Nivedita in the 'Introduction' of his book 'The Ideals of the East' (1903), when Okakura looked at Asia culturally he would see it not as 'the congeries of geographical fragments', but rather as a 'united living organism, each part dependent on all the others, the whole breathing a single complex life' (30)

In Tagore's concept of one Asia there is no political motivation. His was a non- political ideal of Asian



cosmopolitanism with all the Asian Nations living in harmony but not in uniformity or, in other words, acknowledging the real differences between them yet seeking some basis of unity. (31)

Okakura's transformation from his earlier nationalist avatar was already evident from 1908 onwards in the mellowing of his nationalism through cosmopolitanism, which he developed by moving into the World of Oriental Art as a curator and thus realizing a fundamental unity across different cultures of the Orient. In the last year of his life, in 1913, primarily through his correspondence with Priyambada, we find more conclusive evidence of his emergent cosmopolitan humanitarianism.

Written to Priyambada from Akakura Springs, Echigo , Niigata prefecture, the letter says, 'yet, I am in perfect peace with the universe and grateful, oh, so grateful for all it has granted me of late. I am perfectly content and even boisterously happy. I laugh at the clouds that sweep and swirl round my pillow.'(32).

Tagore in his lecture, almost an obituary lecture, given in 1929 in Japan said that Okakura had a feeling of reverence for his neighbouring country, China, and had

developed a true 'continental mind of Asia'. (33) Tagore is talking for the first time with reference to Okakura about Asia as an idea in a world facing severe economic depression, hatred and suspicion fanned by exclusive nationalism and hearing with dreadful fear the clamouring of the drums of war. In that situation it was Tagore's message, a message of Asia, the Other Asia, to the people, urging them not to think of the world as territorial but as an idea (ideational) in order to save it from total annihilation.

What happened to Priyambada? It is a long story not meant for today except to say that at Okakura's request Priyambada sent her most favourite Tagore song, *Tobu mone rekho Jodi dure jai chole* in English translation to Okakura. Okakura liked it immensely and remembered it by repeating those lines again and again, one can assume, till the last days of his life :

Even so, remember me

If I should move far away, even so

If the old love should be lost in the mazes of a new  
passion

Even so, remember me  
 And if although I am near  
 My presence, like shadow, is shrouded with doubt  
 Your eyes might cloud with tears.  
 And if one lovely night this game should end

Even so, remember me.....

### Notes and References:

1. Refer to David J. Lu's Japan: A Documentary History (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), pp. 351-3
2. From Okakura's book 'The Awakening of the East' (written by Okakura during his stay in Calcutta and not published in his life-time; it is a mystery and later retrieved by members of the Okakura family and published in 1938 in original Japanese language and English translation in 1940)
3. A fascinating book on Tagore and Okakura by Rustom Bharucha 'Another Asia; Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Tenshin, Oxford, (2006) P.17
4. Okakura Kakuzo, The Awakening of the East; Collected English Writings, vol. 1. 1984, p. 141
5. Ibid, p. 138

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6. From the Ruins of Empire, Pankaj Mishra, (2012) p.155

7. Rustam Bharucha, Another Asia: Rabindranath Tagore & Okakura Tenshin, (2006) p. 174

8. Okakura Kakuzo's letter to Priyambada Devi Banerjee, 3 March 1913, Okakuro Kakuzo, Collected English Writings, vol. 3, p. 182

9. For a useful study of Liang see, Joseph R. Levenson, Liang Chi-ch'ao (Berkeley, 1970).

10. 'Wushengde Zhongguo' (The Voiceless China). Lu Xun Quanji, Vol.IV, p. 15

11. published in Chen-Pao, 31 May 1924, quoted by Stephen Hay, 'Asian Ideas of East and West (1970)p. 214

12. Please see, From the Ruins of Empire, Pankaj Mishra, (2012) p.182

13. It was difficult for the 'Moderns' to understand the definition of Modernity by Tagore which was an extension of the notion of continuity in the Indian ethos: The revelation of material things is extremely old. The revelation in spirit in man is truly modern; I am on its side, for I am modern. 'Autobiographical', Talks in China, The English Writings of

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Rabindranath Tagore ( Now henceforth EWRT) (ed)  
Sisir Kumar Das, Vol. II reprint 2012, P. 585

14. “ I still remember when I got those books in the autumn of 1916 at the Kang Shan Library I felt I found my ‘life of life’, my ‘fountain of life’” quoted by Sisir Kumar Das, Tagore in China, Visva-Bharati, (1999), p. 160

15. ‘The literature of yesterday is an unconscious sacred recreation for the aristocrats who hold supremacy in life. Like the poems of Tagore and the novels of Tolstoy, I feel they are offerings alms to the hungry ghosts’. Guo Moruo’s letter to Cheng Fangwa in Zhonguo Xin Wenxue daxi, Essay, Vol. I, p,219

16. Sisir Kumar Das, Tagore in China, Visva-Bharati, (1999)

17. First Public speech at Beijing near Zhonghai, the Middle Lake, referred to by Sisir Kumar Das in his article ‘Tagore in China’ included in Talk in China: Rabindranath Tagore, (ed), 1999) p.167

18. Quoted in From the Ruins of Empire :The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia, Pankaj Mishra 2012, p.218

19. Lun Taoge’er. Op.cit., pp.180-81

20. On June 13, 1916 in front of some 250 dignitaries, who came to Kaneiji Buddhist Temple to honour Tagore at a formal reception where the Prime Minister, the Mayor, the President of Tokyo Imperial University, the Minister of Education “all the famous people of the day” present. The meeting was opened by Dr Takakusu Junjiro, Japan’s most eminent scholar, after which Heki Mokusen (who like Takakusu had visited India) senior priest of the Soto Sect of Zen Buddhism, read an address of welcome. Tagore replied in Bengali with a succinct restatement of his message to Japan. The Prime Minister thanked him. See Stephen N Hay: Tagore and his Critics in Japan, China and India (1970), p.66

21. Amiya Dev and Tan Chung (eds), Tagore and China, p.37

22. George Steiner, Errata: An Examined Life, (1997), p.103

23. Silver, Allan, Friendship and Trust as Moral Ideals: An Historical Approach, Archives europeenes de sociologie 30, (1989), p.274

24. The term ‘slaughtering madness’ was used by Naguchi as a synonymic expression to present Tagore’s extreme criticism against Japan’s invasion

against China , see the letter by Naguchi to Tagore on July 23, 1938, EWRT, Vol. III. P.834

25. In 1922 in Pune in the Kirlosker Theatre he gave a lecture on Indian Renaissance, elaborating this idea , the Bengali version of that is titled: '*shikkhar milan*' See Rabindra Rachanvali, (Tagore-s Collected Works), Vol. XI,p.671,WB Govt Publication in 15 Volumes, 1961

26. Tagore's letter to Naguchi, October 27, 1938, EWRT, Vol. III, p. 845

27. Pankaj Mishra, From the Ruins of Empire: The Revolt Against the West and the Remaking of Asia, p. 236

28. Ibid, p. 177

29. It is mentioned in Naguchi's letter to Tagore on October 2, 1938. EWRT, Vol. III, p. 839

30. Sister Nivedita, 'Introduction', Okakura, 'The Ideals of the East', (1903), p.11

31. Tagore, 'Indian Nationalism', EWRT, Vol. III, p.453

32. Okakura Kakuzo, Collected English Writings, Vol. 3, p.217

'On Oriental Culture and Japan's Mission'. EWRT, Vol. III. P.606

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