



Tagore's China, Yeats's Orient

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Both India and Ireland were a central interest of Chinese intellectuals of the late nineteenth and of early twentieth centuries. Both countries' people and intellectuals were seen as having suffered under, and stood up to, the same British imperialism that had wreaked havoc in China during the nineteenth-century Opium Wars.

The awarding of the Nobel prize to Tagore coincided with the Chinese revolution (1911) and the founding of the new Chinese Republic (1912). In the years that followed, young Chinese poets were striving to craft a new vernacular poetic language and Tagore provided them with much inspiration. It was Guo Moruo, an aspiring poet who would later become a major revolutionary figure in the Communist pantheon, who came across Tagore's 'Crescent Moon' and started translating the Bengali poet into modern Chinese. The other major romantic poet of his generation, Xu Zhimo, would serve as Tagore's interpreter during his visit to China in 1924 and would be admirer for the rest of his life and would establish a major Chinese poetry journal, and eponymous poetry school, called *Crescent Moon*.

The Chinese interest in Yeats also dates from the pioneering efforts of writers in the new Chinese language and literature of the early twentieth century. Even before Yeats won the Nobel prize, he was introduced to the Chinese public, by the main literary magazine of the day, *The Short Story Magazine*. In 1923, the same publication would also translate and publish his Preface to *Gitanjali*, and the last issue of the year would carry articles relating to his being awarded the Nobel Prize.¹ Chinese writers and readers were interested in Yeats as a poet, as a

¹ Xiazhi 夏芝 [Yeats], Wang Jiansan 王劍三 (trans), 'Renxin' 忍心 '(An Enduring Heart)', *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小說月報 12 :1 (1921).

representative of the Irish renaissance, and as a champion of anti-colonial Irishness. But Yeats, unlike Tagore, seemed disinterested in the Chinese social reality, and China for him remained bound up with an Orientalist, exoticized vision of the East similar to that he had demonstrated in his early appraisal of Tagore. Thus, Yeats in a very real way exhibited the stereotypical interest of the Anglophone bourgeois world for all that was old in the East, whereas Tagore engaged with poets and others who were about imagining a new Asian culture.

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At the beginning of the 20th century, the intellectual and political forces of the emergent Chinese nation-state, which would take shape in 1912 as the Republic of China, followed avidly how other progressive, anti-colonialist, would-be nation-states were using culture and language to build their ideal countries. India and Ireland, as two political entities that had been produced as such by the colonisation and oppression of British imperialism, were scrutinized with particular attention. The new China was in need of a modern language and a new nationwide culture. And even if Tagore was not a manipulator of a new national language as such, his celebrity naturally brought him to the attention of those in China aspiring to find for themselves a new, national, poetic voice. Rabindranath Tagore was Asian, he had written both in his own language, albeit not a national language, and in the language of the oppressor. For young Chinese writers, however, the language of the oppressor was not an external language, but the dead language practised and imposed by a 2000-year-old Confucian order, and latterly also the instrument of the Manchu's oppression of what would be China. Writers were creating a new language and their models were the European languages to hand and, in particular, English and French. English was the most widespread foreign language, while Japanese also gave access

Xiazhi 夏芝 [Yeats], Gao Zi 高滋 (trans), 'Xiazhi de Taige'er guan' 夏芝的太戈爾觀 [Yeats's perspective on Tagore], *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小說月報 14:9 (1923).

Xi Di 西諦 'Yijiu'ersan nian de Nuobei'er jiangjin zhe Xiazhi pingzhuan' 一九二三年得諾貝爾獎金者夏芝評傳 [A critical biography of 1923 Nobel prize winner Yeats], *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小說月報 14:12 (1923).

via translations to world literatures. Thus, Tagore's use of the English language was unproblematic for them, indeed it enabled an immediacy of access.

By the same token, Yeats's poetry was accessible to well-educated readers and aspiring Chinese writers, and his Irishness equally should, in theory, have made of Yeats an influential voice in China. However, this was not the case. The differing receptions accorded to Tagore and Yeats in China betray a distinct imbalance. Tagore, of course, was already a global celebrity—the first Asian literary Nobel prize winner in 1913, a moment coinciding with the early days of the new Chinese Republic and its search for a national cultural compass. Yeats's later Nobel fame perhaps explains, in part, the lesser Chinese interest in the Irishman. But Tagore's comparative popularity was due not simply to the availability of his work in translation, the fact that he was read in China, but also, in large part even, the fact that he visited China and reached out to a burgeoning Chinese literary and intellectual constituency. Tagore was interested in the now of Chinese letters. Yeats, however, did not visit China, and seemed interested only in a cultural China based on the past, an Orientalist invention.

Yeats and Tagore emanated from the two British colonized entities whose thinkers and writers were among the most vociferously antagonistic to British rule, whose nationalist literary and cultural foundations were already established or becoming established. This was very different to the situation in China, where nation-building intellectuals were still finding their way. Whereas both India and Ireland had long been territorially as well as intellectually colonized by Britain's imperial power, China's experience while just as brutal had brought little that might be considered recuperable. The Qing dynasty that had ruled over the territories that constitute what is now China, had been brought to its knees by the British-led opium wars in the mid-nineteenth century. Britain's authorities and capitalists were only interested in the economic exploitation of China, not in colonizing it culturally. And it was in the shape of troops serving under the British flag that most people living during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

would become acquainted with Indians and the Irish. While British literature was, of course, known, before the end of the nineteenth century little was known of Irish or Indian writing as such. The great literary rebel hero in the eyes of the turn-of-the-century Chinese literary world was the much-translated Byron who in his poetry had condemned British aggression and supported Greek independence.² Thus, before looking in greater detail at the various reception is play, an overview of the Chinese context is essential.

At the dawn of the new Republic that was China, an old poetic language and formal rules had dominated literary creation for over 2000 years, and this despite evolutions in the common language that rendered the poetic idiom in the old literary language incomprehensible to all but the elite; much as Latin poetry would be inaccessible to a modern-day European. It was thus impossible for young intellectuals who were attempting to forge a new literature for a new standard national language to make use of it. Moreover, the vast majority of the population was illiterate; a more accessible, teachable, language was needed.

For formal and conceptual inspiration, they turned to poets of both the present and the past beyond China's frontiers. A few were attracted to the Anglophone tradition, many to French *vers libre*. The poetry produced by these young nationalist, poetic pioneers was unrecognisable to those in the West who had invented and popularized "Chinese poetry" for European and American consumption: Waley, Fenellosa, Pound, and later in the twentieth century Rexroth and Snyder. The efforts of these modern translators and modernist poets located, in a very Orientalist way, so-called "Chinese" poetry in the past.³ Indeed, the Victorian and later twentieth century notion of China as a whole was in great part created and bolstered by translators. Indeed, from the Jesuits onwards "China" was largely invented through translation.

² Gregory B. Lee, "Other People's Heroes: Intertexts, History, and Comparative Resistance to Totalization", *GRAMMA: Journal of Theory and Criticism*, Vol. 13 (2005).

³ One of the few admirable exceptions was Harold Acton who visited China and mixed with young Chinese poets in the 1930s. See his *Modern Chinese Poetry*, London: Duckworth, 1936.

“China”, the word and the imaginary that conjured up a homogeneous space, people and culture, had only existed (alongside the word “Cathay”) since the sixteenth century. And only in the mid-nineteenth century, after the onslaught of Western territorially and technologically invasive imperialism, would “the Chinese” and “China” emerge as an identity and an entity subscribed to by the dominant elite living within the borders of the Manchu-ruled state called Da Qingguo 大清國, the Great Qing state.⁴ The Western representation of Chinese literary creation as produced and fixed in the past, aided by local politico-cultural conservatism, would make the efforts of the writers of *Xinshi* 新詩 or “New Poetry” in the emerging national language inaudible. Indeed, vernacular national language poetry would not become a credible poetic medium to most readers until the late twentieth century. However, even then there continued to be polemical debate within the Western sinological community as to the “worth” of modern Chinese poetry compared to that of the past.

The first generation of poets in emerging Chinese national language (*guoyu* 國語), were avid not only for poetic models from outside but also for romantic role models of anti-colonialism and the independence movements that shook nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe.

The poet Guo Moruo 郭沫若, who we shall later see was an early admirer of Tagore, followed closely the Irish independence struggle and the tribulations of its heroes and even wrote a long, impassioned poem about the hunger striker Terence MacSwiney. While the admiration of Jawaharlal Nehru, and the Indian revolutionary Bhagat Singh for Terence MacSwiney is well known. The place of the Irish martyr in the Chinese intellectual imaginary is less well known. And yet, as we see in the lyric representation of Guo Moruo, MacSwiney's case was followed with great attention by this young Chinese student who was abroad studying in a modernizing Japan that already benefited from the latest available technologies. Guo Moruo thus avidly

⁴ Gregory B. Lee, *China Imagined: From European Fantasy to Spectacular Power*, London: Hurst & Co., 2018, *passim*.

followed the telegraphic dispatches concerning the state of MacSwiney's health during his 1920 hunger strike.

The young Guo Moruo who had read the poetry of the American Walt Whitman, took a keen interest in, and wrote on a daily basis, about Terence MacSwiney. In his narrative poem “Shengli de si” 勝利的死, or “Victorious in death”, written in praise and commemoration of MacSwiney, the voice of the poem echoes that Sean O’Casey who had been “deeply moved by the assertion of the hunger striker Terence MacSwiney that it was not the people who could inflict the most, but those who could suffer the most who would win in the end.”⁵

In Guo’s poem the paratext, the notes surrounding the poem, are essential in conveying the extent and nature of the Chinese poet's imaginary concerning Ireland and its contemporary martyr; the poet claims that the sections of the poem were written, ‘in real time’, as milestone events took place on 13th, 22nd, 24th and 27th October. MacSwiney died on 25th October. The poem is thus constructed as a narrative with a sense of telegraphic immediacy.

Guo Moruo represents MacSwiney, the Irish Republican Army and Irish youth as standard-bearers for freedom, by which he intended national freedom. China itself was re-imagining itself for the first time in history as a nation-state modelled on the Western, and now Japanese, modern nation-state. The Irish as a long-standing colonized, subjected people so close to the heart of the British Empire necessarily inspired the imagination of the Chinese revolutionary who longed for a similar national revolutionary fervour in China.

Honoured MacSwiney!

Dear sons of Ireland,

the spirit of freedom will ever stand by you

⁵ Guo Moruo 郭沫若, *Moruo wenji* 沫若文集, Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian 三聯書店, 1957, Vol. 1, pp. 101-108.
Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, London: Vintage, 1996.

for you stand by one another,
you are the incarnation of freedom!

October 13⁶

On 22 October, Guo Moruo wrote these lines:

Terence MacSwiney, Irish patriot!

Today is the 22nd of October!

(Never has a calendar on the wall so fixed my attention!)

Are you still alive in your prison cell?

There came a cable from London on the 17th:

It was 60 days since your fast began,

And yet you bear yourself as well as ever.

Your strength was failing daily ...

and today is the 22nd October.

.....

A cable on the 17th from your native Cork

Told that a Sinn Feiner, comrade of yours, Fitzgerald,

fasted for 68 days in Cork City Gaol

and suddenly died at sundown on the 17th.

⁶ Translation based on "Victorious in Death" Kuo Mo-jo, *Selected Poems from The Goddesses*, translated by John Lester and A. C. Barnes, Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1958, pp. 44-47.

Cruel deaths there are in history, but few so tragic.

Michael Fitzgerald had indeed died after 60 days on hunger strike in Cork Gaol. And then Guo compares the two Irishmen to ancient legendary Lords of the Shang Dynasty, Boyi 伯夷 and Shuqi 叔齐 who when their dynasty was overthrown, a millennium before our era, rather than surrender took refuge in the Shouyang Mountains where they eventually starved to death.

The Shouyang Mountain of Ireland!

The Boyi and Shuqi of Ireland!

The next cable I dread to read....

On 20th October MacSwiney fell into a coma, on the 24th October 1920 Guo writes:

Now arrives a cable of the 21st:

Three times MacSwiney has fainted,

His sister has sent a telegram to his friends

.....

She prays that he may die the sooner, and his agony be ended.

Who could bear to read to the end these heart-breaking words?

Who could restrain his tears?

Bestial murderous government, are you bent on casting an indelible stain on the history of the world?

Cruel, callous Englishmen, has the blood of Byron and Campbell ceased to flow in your veins?

On the 25th October MacSwiney passed away. Two days later Guo wrote:

The mighty ocean is sobbing its sad lament,

the boundless abyss of the sky is red with weeping

far, far away the sun has sunk in the west.

Brave, tragic death! Death in a blaze of glory! Triumphant procession of victor! Victorious death!

Impartial God of Death. I am grateful to you! You have saved the MacSwiney for whom my love and reverence know no bounds!

MacSwiney, fighter for freedom, you have shown how great can be the power of the human will!

I am grateful to you, I extol you; freedom can henceforth never die!

The night has closed down on us, but how bright is the moon....

In this panegyric, it is not only the heroism of MacSwiney that is eulogized, but a whole people. The Irish struggle against British imperialist dominance was understood as a shining example for Asia, no less for China than it was for India.

Yeats, Things Chinese, and History

While Tagore, as we shall see, was one of the few foreigners ready to listen and engage with young Chinese voices, Yeats, who never set foot in China, remained enamoured of the exotic

lure of the “Orient”, of its past, and of the Western imaginary of the East. Yeats’s knowledge of, and perhaps his interest for, China was limited to his readings and very much influenced by his relationship with Pound, and in general terms, filtered through a European Orientalist imaginary of Asia. Indeed, Yeats seems to have been blind to the similarity his Chinese contemporaries perceived between Ireland’s colonial condition and China’s subjugation to British imperialism, or if he was aware of it he saw no need to address it in a spirit of solidarity. Indeed, “the Chinese” seemed not to be subjects to Yeats, but rather the token Orientalist fantasy figures we see emerge in his poetry which are very much the product of a tradition of British Chinoiserie. Yeats’s understanding of East Asia, in which Japan and China constituted a pre-modern cultural pond into which the Irish poet could dip his pail, was dependent on Fenellosa and Pound, who both despite their Modernist stance, or indeed perhaps because of it, had simply exploited pre-modern literature from East Asia understood as a body of exotic texts totally dissociated from any contemporary social reality.

Of course, we could establish an apology for Yeats by simply explaining he was a product of his times and his class. After all, even the author of a 1982 article on Yeats’s “Lapis Lazuli” unproblematically and without comment evokes and re-inscribes the derogatory ‘Chinaman’ of Yeats’s poem.⁷ The Chinoiserie that was the object giving rise to Yeats’s text evidently forms part of an Orientalist imaginary shared by both poet and critic. But even Yeats’s interest in the object remains superficial. As O’Donnell reminds us, there was an inscription on the back of the object which Yeats’s friend Edmund Dulac surmises is a poem and which he offers to have translated; a proposition which seemingly drew no response from Yeats.⁸ He was not interested in a potential intertext, but solely in the imaginary scene he conjured up in his own mind.

⁷ William H. O’Donnell, “The Art of Yeats’s “Lapis Lazuli””, *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Summer, 1982), pp. 353.

⁸ O’Donnell, p. 355.

O'Donnell concludes: "it matters not one whit to us whether his freedom with details was a result of his lively imagination or of his unfamiliarity with Chinese iconography."⁹

The manner in which O'Donnell analyses this poem follows Richard Ellman's division of it into "Western" stanzas and "Eastern" stanzas: "the East, according to Yeats, rejects intellectual pride and optimism as trivial and is indifferent to history."¹⁰ And yet, the year the poem was published, 1938, was heavy with historical significance for China. China had been invaded by Japan in 1937, and was in the throes of war that would last until August 1945. But again, Japan in Yeats's imaginary was not the militaristic, fascist power of the 1930s, but the Japan he had apprehended while associating with Pound in 1913-1916; Yeats, after all, "was intrigued by what he learned of Japanese Noh drama."¹¹ And yet, the Japanese state at the moment "Lapis Lazuli" was published had become an agent of death and destruction, and the Chinese people, unlike "the Chinamen" who peopled Yeats's imaginary "East", were far from being "indifferent" to history. Rather, the supposed "indifference" is constructed and compounded not only by Yeats himself, but by his interpreters, intent on maintaining this east/west divide that characterizes the West's imaginary of "the East". But, then, without the West's invention of the East there would be no divide.

O'Donnell goes on to discuss the 1921 poem "Nineteen hundred and nineteen" in which the following lines appear:

When Loire Fuller's Chinese dancers enwound

A shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth,

It seemed that a dragon of air

⁹ O'Donnell, p. 356.

¹⁰ O'Donnell, p. 359.

¹¹ David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap, Harvard UP, 1976, p. 584.

Had fallen among dancers...¹²

The dancers were, in fact, Japanese, and yet what is perhaps more significant here is the absence in this poem of a sense of any East Asian reality, that a huge injustice against a people may be occurring elsewhere than Ireland in 1919; an injustice, what is more that shared the same imperialist origins. The post-World War I Versailles peace treaty of 1919 had signed over defeated Germany's Chinese colonies to Japan whose military-dominated authorities would use them as a foothold for further encroachment and eventually in 1937 of full-fledged invasion of China. In China, the 1919 treaty gave rise to major clashes between students and the Chinese authorities at Tiananmen Square and led directly to the creation of the 4th May Movement - a literary, linguistic and cultural nationalist movement that saw a national language and a national culture as essential to China's salvation. The poet Guo Moruo was a product of this movement, and it was, as we saw, who would write in that same year of Ireland's struggle against Britain's "bestial murderous government". That Yeats might have been ignorant of twentieth-century current affairs is always a possibility, but hardly a likely one. That he did not care to take an interest is more probable. In a letter written to Dorothy Wellesley in December 1936, at a moment when Europe itself was already in the grip of Nazism and fascism, and with the Civil War raging in Spain, Yeats could write: "why should I trouble about Communism, fascism, liberalism, radicalism, when all...are going downstream with the artificial unity which ends every civilisation."¹³

To return to the poem "Lapis Lazuli", it is a poem which is also noteworthy for its blatant misogyny. For O'Donnell, the "goal of 'Lapis Lazuli' could, I think, be to articulate an answer to the "hysterical" women's charges that art is frivolous and unsuited to desperate times."¹⁴

Yeats had written:

¹² James Pethica (Ed.), *Yeats's Poetry, Drama and Prose*, New York & London: Norton, 2000, p. 93.

¹³ W. B. Yeats letter to Dorothy Wellesley, [late December 1936], *Letters on Poetry*, p. 128 cited in O'Donnell p. 364.

¹⁴ O'Donnell, p. 366.

I have heard that hysterical women say
They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow,
Of poets that are always gay,
For everybody should know
That is nothing drastic is done
Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out¹⁵

The women in question are doubtless mocked for their justified concern about wars, the coming European war, and the rise of fascism and Nazism in Europe. The first three stanzas of this poem relate to futile concern of the passage of civilizations, “Old civilizations put to the sword”, futile since “All things fall and are built again”, the last two relate to a millennial, eternal, timeless Orient where “Chinamen” with “ancient, glittering eyes” sit unconcerned with worldly concerns.¹⁶ Such a division between European and Chinese perspectives could only be built on a stubborn refusal to see what was happening in the world on a real global scale, to move beyond the parochial and the inherited Orientalist vision, and see that the same forces of domination and subjugation that had been at work in Ireland were holding sway the world over.

That the genuine concern shown by women over the world’s condition should be derided is to Yeats’s discredit, that the critic O’Donnell writing four decades later should indulge such unrepentant and foolish misogyny is unworthy and frivolous: “We know that history is on the side is on the side of the women of the opening stanza, but we are permitted by the power of this magnificent rhetorical poem to ignore their limited perspective and to adopt the gaiety of the others shown to us in the poem.”¹⁷ The poet and critic Tom Paulin, writing at the same moment as O’Donnell, provided a more sober and incisive critique of Yeats when he wrote:

¹⁵ Pethica, p. 115.

¹⁶ Pethica, p. 116.

¹⁷ O’Donnell, p. 367.

“He was self-consciously old-fashioned and... quite incapable of identifying with socialism, feminism or any movement which depended on what he scorned as ‘Whiggish’ notions of progress.”¹⁸

Tagore in China

Tagore first visited China in 1924. However, even before the interest stirred by his tour of China, numerous articles about the poet had been published there. Between 1922 and 1925 a total of 27 articles concerning Tagore and his work and philosophy were published in the leading literary journal of the day, *Xiaoshuo yuebao* 小說月報 or to give it its English subtitle *The Short Story Magazine*.

As we have seen, the early pioneering poet Guo Moruo had early on being attracted to Tagore’s poetry, and in his own early contestatory poems Tagore’s name is mentioned. In 1919, the Japanese press responded to Chinese student demonstrations over the Versailles peace treaty, that favoured Japan at China’s expense, by labelling the demonstrators “student bandits” or *xuefei* 學匪.¹⁹ Guo retorted with his “Elegy to the bandits” in which he praises a panoply of foreign contestatory writers and thinkers. On the eclectic list were José Rizal, the Filipino independence hero, Karl Marx, Engels, Lenin, Martin Luther, Nietzsche, Whitman, Tolstoy, Rousseau, and lastly Tagore. The tone of Guo’s poems would rapidly become sharper and more anti-colonialist, as we saw in his 1920 poem about MacSwiney.

Guo was first exposed to the Tagore’s poetry when he was a student in Japan where Tagore having been awarded the Nobel Prize “immediately became popular”.²⁰ It was in 1915 in Tokyo that one day a relative brought home the mimeographed selection of Tagore’s poems

¹⁸ Tom Paulin, *Ireland and the Irish Crisis*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Bloodaxe, 1984, p. 203.

¹⁹ David T. Roy, *Kuo Mo-jo: The Early Years*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971, p. 80.

²⁰ Roy, p. 66.

from *The Crescent Moon*. It was thus that Guo first encountered the poems “On The Seashore”, “Baby’s Way”, “Sleep Stealer”, and “Clouds and Waves”. In subsequent years, Guo “read everything by Tagore that he could lay his hands on”: *Gitanjali*, *The Gardner*, *The King of the Dark Chamber*, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, *Stray Birds*, *Lover’s Gift* and *Crossing*.²¹ In 1917, Guo translated into the new Chinese national language a selection of poems from *The Crescent Moon*, *The Gardner* and *Gitanjali*.²² Guo himself described his debt to Tagore’s poetry, to his translations of *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, and to his drama. “I bought and devoured them as if I were starving and parched,” wrote Guo.²³

In 1922, Guo was responsible for polishing the translation of *The Crescent Moon* by the established poet Wang Daqing 王杜清 (1898-1940).²⁴ However, later in the same year as Guo shifted politically to the left, his appreciation of Tagore became more critical, even antagonistic. In a short piece entitled “Zuoye mengjian Taige’er” 昨夜夢見太戈爾 (Last night dreaming of Tagore), Guo addresses the issue of mimicry, a charge frequently made against the fledgling poets writing in the new Chinese national language. Here is his dreamed discussion between the Nobel prize winner and the young Chinese poet:

He [Tagore] said to me: “Your Chinese poets, are nothing but a troupe of performing apes.”

I replied, “What do you mean?”

He said, “They’ve grown accustomed to imitating. Imitating the East, imitating the West, while sporting some seemingly fancy clothes that are in fact worn and ill-fitting.”

“Hah, what a joke.” I replied angrily. “In fact, you, old man, aren’t you just an old ape yourself. You’ve got the better only in getting the Westerners to reward you with a little more cash, that’s

²¹ Roy, p. 66.

²² Roy, p. 67.

²³ Guo Moruo 郭沫若, *Moruo wenji* 沫若文集, Hong Kong: Sanlian shudian 三聯書店, 1957, Vol. 11, p.140 : 我都如饑似渴地買來讀了。

²⁴ Roy, p. 119.

all.”

He came and hit me with his cane, and I woke up, regretting having shattered a great idol.”²⁵

The question of imitation addressed here was a troubling one for the new poets attempting to craft a new literary language. But having rejected the poetry and language of the dynastic era, where else were they to turn if not outwards? Guo Moruo’s infatuation with Tagore had ended. He discussed Tagore once more in 1923 after the poet’s visit to China had been mooted, but only to justify his earlier interest for Tagore.²⁶ But at this moment in time another soon-to-be major Chinese modern poet would become Tagore’s Chinese standard-bearer: The anglophile romantic poet, Xu Zhimo 徐志摩 (1896-1931). It was, in particular, his association with this young Chinese poet in the English Romantic tradition, that would assure Tagore an enduring place in the history of modern Chinese letters.²⁷

Xu Zhimo who had studied in America and England and had moved in UK Labour circles, was much loved in China by those who were drawn to romantic poetry. In 1918, Xu left China to study in the USA, and then between 1920 and 1922 attended King’s College, Cambridge while also frequenting the London School of Economics. Xu seems to have achieved unparalleled and easy access to English literary society. In a comment that perhaps says more about Xu’s Westernized manner than to the inclusiveness of the English literary world, Harold Acton commented that in his “company foreign friends were oblivious of any racial disparity.”²⁸

²⁵ *Chuangzao* 創造季刊 1,2, section 3, p. 12, 25 August 1922 :

他問我說道：“你們中國商人，都是些唱戲的猴子。”

我說：“怎麼說呢？”

他說：“他們慣會模仿。東一模仿，西一模仿，身上穿的一件花花衣裳，終竟促襟見肘。”

“哼，笑話。”我憤恨着回答他，“其實你老先生也不是一條老猴子。你我們好點的，是西洋人多賞了你幾個錢罷了！”

他用手杖來打了我一下，我醒了轉來，失悔我毀壞了一個大偶像。(My translation.)

²⁶ Guo Moruo, ‘Taige’er lai Hua de wo jian’ 太戈兒來華的我見 [How I see Tagore’s visiting China], *Chuangzuo zhoubao* 創造週報 N° 23 (14 October 1923), pages 1-6.

²⁷ Not only was Tagore discussed and translated in the literary press during his 1924-25 visit, his association with 1920s Chinese intellectuals has also spawned a minor Tagore-in-China industry in contemporary Chinese Indian; see, Wang Bangwei, Tan Chung, Amiya Dev, Wei Liming (Eds.), *Tagore and China*, Beijing, Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2010; New Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 2011.

²⁸ Harold Acton and Ch’en Shih-hsiang, *Modern Chinese Poetry*, London: Duckworth, 1936, p. 25.

Having returned to China, Xu rapidly integrated Peking's literary world. In April 1924, he would serve as Tagore's interpreter during the latter's visit to China and even accompanied him to Japan. Xu Zhimo was very much attracted to Tagore's thinking as well as to his poetry, and they spent long hours discussing philosophy. Xu would later set up a dining club which in turn spawned a literary society, a bookstore, and a monthly literary journal; all were called Crescent Moon, in Chinese *Xinyue* 新月, after Tagore's collection of poetry. Indeed, a whole school of poetry would come to be known as the Crescent Moon.

Although already a published poet Xu "probably did not become nationally famous" until the celebrated Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore visited China.²⁹ The invitation had been extended in 1922. Tagore had dispatched Leonard Elmhirst to Peking to arrange the logistics of the visit, and the Englishman became friendly with Xu Zhimo who effected the liaison on the Chinese side. The trip was first planned for 1923, but was postponed because of Tagore's illness and only took place the following year, Tagore bringing with him the historian Kalidas Nag, and the artist Nandalal Bose, and a scholar-philosopher Kshitimohan Sen.³⁰ Elmhirst would later recall that "Tagore immediately recognized in him [Xu] first of all a fellow poet and, secondly a man through whom he felt he could get into touch with the spirit of the Chinese, especially the spirit of the younger Chinese."

During his 49-day visit, Tagore gave fifteen lectures and was feted in numerous cities where he conducted over thirty informal meetings and conversations.³¹ A large party was arranged in Beijing for his 64th birthday on 8th May at which both Liang Qichao 梁啟超 and Hu Shi 胡適, two of the most distinguished intellectuals in China were present. During the festivities, Xu and his lover Lin Huiyin 林徽音 staged a performance of Tagore's play *Chita*, in which Tagore

²⁹ Leo Ou-fan Lee, *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973, p. 145.

³⁰ Leo Lee, p. 145.

³¹ Zhang Zhongliang 張中良, *Wusi de fanyi wenxue* 五四的翻譯文學, Taipei: Xiuwei zixun 秀威資訊, 2005, p. 82.

took the part of the god of love.³² Subsequent to these encounters, Xu enjoyed a long correspondence with Elmhirst between 1925 and 1929. In 1928, Xu was in Britain again and paid Elmhirst a visit at his Tagore-inspired community at Totness in Devon.

Tagore, then, had been famously present in China, speaking not to the custodians of traditional culture, but rather to young intellectuals, academics and writers, and came to understand the aspirations of twentieth-century Chinese creators. We have seen, however, that there were by 1924, dissenting voices regarding Tagore; Guo Moruo was just one example. And yet, in the twentieth-century academic literature on the young Chinese poets who had been admirers of Tagore, there is little mention of the more negative reception of Tagore during his 1924 visit to China.³³ As Amartya Sen has noted, however, there had been a general cooling of the initial enthusiasm for Tagore that was not out of step with the radicalisation of the progressive literary milieu. Mao Dun, the then soon-to-be celebrated Communist novelist, while respecting Tagore's stance on the oppressed peasants, criticized his praise of "Oriental civilization", what was seen as his antagonistic views on Westernization, and his positive appreciation of modern Chinese poetry, which is no doubt a reference to the non-Marxist Xu Zhimo's and his fellow poet Wen Yiduo's lyrics which were much given over to love poetry.³⁴ Indeed, the illustrious Chinese literary figures who attended Tagore's birthday celebration all belonged to the old liberal reformist camp rather than to that of the leftist revolutionaries. As for Tagore's young poet-friend Xu Zhimo, despite his frequenting socialist activists such as Harold Laski while in Britain, in China he was seen as at best a political moderate at a time when most young Chinese writers were either anarchists or communists.

³² Leonard K. Elmhirst, "Recollection of Tagore in China," mimeographed transcript of 3 March tape recording, cited in Leo Lee, p. 146.

³³ See Leo Ou-fan Lee, *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973 and David T. Roy, *Kuo Mo-jo: The Early Years*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971 *passim*. However, both authors note the leftist Chinese writers increasing dissatisfaction with Tagore as the early 1920s progressed. See also Sisir Kumar Das. "The Controversial Guest: Tagore in China" in *China Report*, 29.3 (1993): 237-273.

³⁴ See Amartya Sen, "Tagore and China" in *Tagore and China*, New Delhi: SAGE Publications India, 2011, p. 9; Amartya Sen is the grandson of Kshitimohan Sen.

Conclusion

Tagore's relationship with China was, unlike Yeats's, not virtual, it was real, philosophical, and personal. It was a two-way street. Even if all of his ideas were not universally appreciated by the entire Chinese intellectual class, on the creative side Tagore's work served as an example to the newly emerging Chinese poetry. On the other hand, Yeats's relationship with China, such as it was, was constituted by the Irishman's vision of the Orient as a collection of fantastic objects, and maybe summed up as orientalist, reifying and exploitative: a one-way street. Yeats seemed uninterested by China's trying to unshackle itself from multiple colonial oppressions, and was ignorant of the burgeoning cultural creativity of the new Republic, a Republic slightly older than his own, that was China. Yeats was simply "fascinated", as all European Orientalist were, and still are, by an "Oriental" past. Moreover, Yeats's was an Orient filtered through the eyes of Ezra Pound and Fenellosa.

For Said, Yeats was one of the "poets and men of letters of decolonisation", a the writer who "rises out of his national environment and gains universal significance".³⁵ Said even singles out the poem "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" as "a terrible new beauty that changes the old political and moral landscape".³⁶ But, despite the enormous respect we have for Said's work and its contribution to postcolonial studies, my reading of Yeats's work does not permit me to share Said's perception of its "universal significance". Indeed, in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" we find a text that betrays no interest in the greater context of the colonized world. It is a poem that ultimately is parochial and inward-looking. Yeats's poetry cannot be

³⁵ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York, N.Y., Knopf, 1993, pp. 232-233.

³⁶ Said, p. 232.

considered of “universal significance” to those who aspire to cultural decolonization, as it has merely comforted a minor segment of the world’s colonized.

Yeats’ and Tagore’s China stories are thus very different. Tagore’s was profound and extensive not only in terms of the intertexts that may be discerned between his poetry and his translations and that of his Chinese contemporaries, but because of the impact his ideas and his presence had had on Chinese minds and the debate on westernisation. Yeats’s engagement with China was minimal, his fantasy “China” leaving but a few scant intertextual traces in one of his late poems. His disregard for, or at best disinterest in, China’s anti-colonialist struggle and cultural nation-building project was in tune with the West’s, even the liberal West’s, vision of new Post-First World War order, the Wilsonian world of self-determination reserved to white European would-be nation-states coupled with a disdain and disregard for the still colonized peoples of Asia and Africa. He would be no second Byron for China.