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Nicolas Nercam  
*Université Bordeaux Montaigne, nicolas.nercam@free.fr*

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# The Gentleman, the Craftsman and the Activist: Three Figures of the Sino-Indian Artistic Exchange in Colonial Bengal

Nicolas Nercam\*

*Université Bordeaux Montaigne*

## Abstract

This article analyses some aspects of the Chinese-Indian exchanges, which took place in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the artistic circle of Calcutta and Shantiniketan, in Bengal. From the beginning of the last century, the Bengali elite was under the influence of Okakura Kakuzo's Pan-Asian theories, in its approach to Chinese art. From the 20's, under the auspices of Rabindranath Tagore the first direct contact between Chinese and Indian artistes took place and lasted until the 40's. From the 30's, the Bengali avant-garde, in its search of a new aesthetic in relation with social and political oppression found stimulation in the Chinese woodcut movement.

## Résumé

Cet article analyse quelques aspects des échanges artistiques Sino-indiens, durant la première moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, au sein des sphères artistiques de Calcutta et de Shantiniketan, au Bengale. Dès le début du siècle, l'élite bengalienne fut influencée par les théories panasiatiques d'Okakura Kakuzo, dans son approche de l'art chinois. A partir des années 1920, sous l'égide de Rabindranath Tagore, les premiers contacts directs entre artistes indiens et chinois eurent lieu et durèrent jusqu'aux années 1940. A partir des années 1930, l'avant-garde bengalienne, dans sa quête d'une esthétique au contenu social et politique contestataire, trouva dans le mouvement de la gravure sur bois chinoise de nouveaux stimuli artistiques.

*\* Nicolas Nercam is a lecturer in History of art, in the Fine art department in Bordeaux Montaigne University, UFR Humanités. He is a member of the research laboratory MICA, Bordeaux Montaigne University. Main research themes: Non-western artistic modernities - Contribution of the postcolonial discourse in modern and contemporary aesthetic - Globalization in contemporary arts - New connections between arts and politics. Contact: [nicolas.nercam@free.fr](mailto:nicolas.nercam@free.fr)*

This article analyses some aspects of the Chinese-Indian exchanges in the artistic domain and studies their impact on the cultural production of the two major 'artistic homes' in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Bengal: the metropolis of Calcutta and the centre of Shantiniketan.

At first sight, these two artistic centers of Bengal seem to be opposites. On the one hand, the powerful metropolis of Calcutta, the capital of the British India from 1773 to 1911 with Neo-Palladian and Victorian monuments, was the center of the economic, political and cultural colonial power in the Indian Subcontinent. This colonial town was also an intellectual haven where, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the 'Bengali Renaissance' an important renewal movement started in politics, religion, arts and science among the urban anglicized Indian elite.<sup>1</sup> The city of Calcutta was a melting pot in which different cultural inputs, brought by the colonial trade routes, harmonized in resonance with one another.

On the other hand, the site of Shantiniketan, located one hundred and eighty kilometers North West of Calcutta in the rural Bengal was transformed into the international University of Visva-Bharati, by the effort and willingness of Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Rapidly, the artistic development grew in this ashram.<sup>2</sup> Far away from the colonial city of Calcutta, the rural surroundings of Shantiniketan provided a stimulating and new framework for social and artistic experiments. These attempts strived to link once again with the way of life and the traditional techniques of pre-colonial India. Taking the opposing stance of the 'Gentleman artist' promoted by the cultural surroundings of Calcutta,

<sup>1</sup>- Susobhan Sarkar, *Bengal Renaissance and other essays* (New Delhi The People's Publishing House, 1970).

<sup>2</sup>- In the case of the center of Shantiniketan, the term ashram could be understood in its traditional meaning, especially during the first phase of Shantiniketan's development. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Debendranath Tagore (Rabindranath's father) nicknamed *Maharishi* (The Great Sage), member of the *Brahmo Samaj*, founded Shantiniketan (Haven of Peace), in a remote place, far away from the colonial city of Calcutta, to pray and meditate around a guru. This place was open to all kind of people, irrespective of different caste. But, in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the help of Rabindranath Tagore, Shantiniketan extended well beyond the traditional role of an ashram. The place became the testing ground for Rabindranath's pedagogical theories. These theories, based on the recognition of the single individual, were against the traditional values of religion and opposed the educational principles of the British. In 1918, a University (Visva-Bharati) was founded in the place of Shantiniketan.

Shantiniketan wished to create the 'Craftsman artist' who was aware of his specific cultural environment.<sup>3</sup>

The town of Calcutta as well as the ashram of Shantiniketan were the two main artistic homes with a pan-Indian dimension. During this period of the struggle for emancipation, both centers were actively involved in an anti-colonial movement. Their cultural development was largely due to their own capacities to welcome and to integrate different artistic contributions coming from different areas of civilization. The various international exchanges that followed led to the confrontation between the colonial contribution and the affirmation of the Indian nationalism. However, this conflict forged a new identity of political importance that attracted the attention of the Anglicized Indian elite. This 'Western / Indian' encounter also flourished through dialogues with different Asian cultures and in particular with the Far East; conditioned by the political and social context of this period.

Three major steps must be emphasized concerning the artistic exchanges between China and the two cultural centers of Bengal:

- Firstly, the contribution of Okakura Kakuzo: During the late nineteenth century, there were no exchanges between Chinese and Indian artists. At this time, the knowledge and the appreciation of Chinese art was largely based on the panasiatic ideals (political as well as aesthetic) of the Japanese philosopher and art critic Okakura Kakuzo who stayed in Calcutta from 1901 to 1902.
- Secondly, the contribution of Rabindranath Tagore: In the 1920's the first Sino-Indian artistic interfaces took place, with the help of the poet. In 1924, Nandalal Bose was the first Indian artist to accompany Rabindranath Tagore to China to meet Chinese artists.
- And lastly, the contribution of the Second Communist International: In the 1930's, a new

<sup>3</sup>- R. Siva Kumar, "Shantiniketan: A Development in three Movements" in *Art and Visual Culture in India, 1857-2007*, ed. Gayatri Sinha (Mumbai, Marg Publications, 2009), 104-117.

dissemination art network was created between China and India, with the help of the Marxist movements in connection with the Second International. This new network played a major role in elaborating a new aesthetic in India, particularly in Bengal, that linked social protests with formal innovations.

This article mainly analyzes the global structures of the dissemination of cultural networks between China and the two Indian centers of Calcutta and Shantiniketan.

## The Indian Perception of Chinese arts Through the Prism of the Japanese Expertise

In Calcutta, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the birth of the artistic movement of the Bengal School, part of the 'Bengali Renaissance' was closely connected with the emergence of a new nationalist discourse.<sup>4</sup> This movement, with the artist Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) as its leader was considered to be the artistic expression of the nationalist ideology of Swadeshi<sup>5</sup> (a movement for self-rule). The main ideologues of the Swadeshi arts were Ernest Binfield Havell (1861-1934) English director of the Calcutta government art school from 1896 to 1905, Sister Nivedita (1867-1911) an Irish disciple of Vivekananda, the Indian historian of art Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) and the Japanese philosopher Okakura Kakuzo.

Okakura Kakuzo (1862-1913) stayed in Calcutta from 1901 to 1902. He responded to the joint invitation of the philosopher and mystic Vivekananda and Rabindranath Tagore. He stayed

in the house of Satyendranath Tagore's son, Suren Tagore. Okakura's philosophy played a very important role in developing the interest of the Bengali intelligentsia in the art and culture of the Far East. The Japanese philosopher presented his conception of Asian civilization through his book *The Ideals of the East*<sup>6</sup> Indian artists and intellectuals, especially in Jorasanko<sup>7</sup> welcomed this book and appreciated the pan-Asian dimension with enthusiasm. Sister Nivedita, who understood the ideological importance of the book, wrote the introduction of the first edition in 1903. While comparing Okakura to a Japanese version of William Morris and drawing parallels with the *Nihon Bijutsuin*<sup>8</sup> and the British Medieval Revival, Sister Nivedita insisted on Indian subjugation to imperial power. She wrote: "Art can only be developed by nations that are in a state of freedom."<sup>9</sup> She concluded: "Asia, The Great Mother; is forever One."<sup>10</sup> In his book Okakura emphasizes on the strong unity of Asia, not only from a cultural and artistic standpoint but also from a political. In front of the colonial humiliation and the upheavals brought by the western modernity, he wrote:

Arab chivalry, Persian poetry, Chinese ethics, and Indian thought, all speak of a single ancient Asiatic peace, in which there grew up a common life, bearing in different regions different characteristic blossoms, but nowhere capable of a hard and fast dividing-line.<sup>11</sup>

In the *Ideals of the East*, Okakura defines three main geographical and cultural ensembles from where the "Asiatic Ideals" are delimited<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>4</sup>- Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a new 'Indian' Art. Artists, aesthetics and nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992) Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922, Occidental orientations* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994) Debashish Banerji, *The Alternative Nation of Abanindranath Tagore* (New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2010).

<sup>5</sup>- *Swadeshi* (1905-1911) was the first Indian mass movement that challenged the colonial authority. The movement was born in 1905 in Calcutta (capital of the *British Raj*) amongst the manifestations and processions in the city against the partition of Bengal ordered by the Viceroy Lord Curzon. The political activism (boycott and destruction of the British goods imported in India) and the nationalist ideology of *Swadeshi* constituted an essential step towards a radicalization of the Indian elite's engagement in the direction for political claim of the independence. Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi movement in Bengal, 1903-1908* (New Delhi, People's Publishing House, 1977).

<sup>6</sup>- Kakuzo Okakura, *The Ideals of the East, with special reference to the Art of Japan* (London, John Murray Ltd., 1903).

<sup>7</sup>- Jorasanko, Tagore's villa in Calcutta was, by the beginning of the 20th century, a creative and intellectual center. It became the *Mecca of the Calcutta artistic life* (Tapati Guha-Thakurta, 1992) where the intellectual elite of the city, the Indian and European orientalist, as well as the visiting writers and artists used to meet each other.

<sup>8</sup>- Kakuzo Okakura founded The *Nihon Bijutsuin* (Institute of Japanese Art), in 1898, with Hashimoto Gaho, Yokoyama Taikan, Shimamura Kanzan and Hishida Shunso. This institute was established to promote Japanese Art by organising exhibitions of arts and handicraft and international seminars related to the Japanese culture. The vocation and the structure of the *Indian Society of Oriental Art*, created in 1907 in Calcutta, was similar to those of the *Nihon Bijutsuin*.

<sup>9</sup>- Sister Nivedita, 'Introduction', in *The Ideals of the East, with special reference to the Art of Japan*, 2.

<sup>10</sup>- *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>11</sup>- Okakura, *The Ideals of the East, with special reference to the Art of Japan*, 6.

<sup>12</sup>- As Debashish Banerji mentioned, Okakura, in *The Ideals of the East* reduced Islam as 'Confucianism on horseback, sword in hand'. In fact, the Islamic world has no place in Okakura's conception of 'Asia'. Debashish Banerji, *The Alternative Nation of Abanindranath Tagore*, 40.

Although Japan is the main theme of the book, India and China are also considered to be the original cultures of the Asiatic civilization. According to Okakura, 'the Indian religion' and 'the Chinese learning' sustain the Asian culture. In his approach to Indian Art, Okakura stressed the ancestral values of Indian culture. He considered "the Indian Buddhism" of the Asoka's period to be *the original stream of abstract idealism*, from which the epitome of Chinese and Japanese art found nourishment. Okakura was passionate about the Taoism and the Buddhism of South China and in particular about the perfection of the Zen's teaching under the Song Dynasty. He found in the ink paintings of landscapes of the Emperor Huizong period (1082-1135) the manifestation of individualism, of mysticism as well as the expression of the harmony between mankind and nature under the brushes of painters such as Ma Yuan, Xia Yuan and Muqi.

While insisting on the organic unity of Asia, the philosopher builds a kind of a hierarchy between the three nations: the ancestral societies of India and China are the cultural and philosophic base of Asia, upon which Japan stands. According to Okakura, Japanese culture constitutes, in our modern era, the best expression of these 'Asiatic ideals.'

Okakura's coming to Calcutta was motivated by the will to spread this conception of a cultural and political unity of Asia, which was eroded by western activism.

The theoreticians of the Bengal School movement, in their approach to Indian and Chinese arts, took the idea of India and China as ancestral civilizations, where the artistic practices are in connection with traditions and in osmosis with nature on a 'spiritual and mystic' dimension. This is in contrast with the 'materialistic' dimension of the West.<sup>13</sup> The writings of European orientalists, in particular those of Max Müller on the *Rig Veda* and the research of British archaeologists such as

Prinsep and Cunningham, contribute significantly 'to make sacrosanct' the Hindu past in the West as well as among the Bengali bourgeoisie.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the conception of the Indian subcontinent as the original civilization finds its roots in the European speculations that from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards China and India were considered the 'civilizations of all the origins.'<sup>15</sup> The orientalist Ernest Binfield Havell considered the Vedic philosophy to be the source of Asiatic art.<sup>16</sup>

The Bengal School became the new reference for the Bengali elite in the search of the national artistic expression, in form and substance. The quest for a 'purely' Indian artistic heritage led the nationalist elite to doubt the ideals of the Western aesthetic and the mimesis techniques, which were considered to be an artistic form linked with the colonial subjugation of India. The paintings of Abanindranath Tagore's movement borrowed their subjects mainly from the Hindu mythology and the epics and their formal treatments were inspired by the miniature techniques of the princely courts of North India (Moghol school, Rajput and Pahari schools).

But the artistic affiliation with Indian miniatures was not the only reference used by the artists of the Bengal School. Okakura was instrumental in bringing two Japanese painters to Calcutta, Yokoyama Taikan (1868-1958) and Hishida Shunso (1874-1911) for a six-month stay. Taikan introduced Abanindranath and Gaganendranath Tagore to the use of ink and this learning led to the 'Wash technique' typical of the Bengal School's pictorial effects. Abanindranath Tagore's painting *Goat and Monkey* (c. 1910-15) represents two animals embracing each other (Fig.1). The lack of figurative background gives the impression that the protagonists are 'floating' in a sort of golden space. This is probably an interpretation of the Japanese Tosa School.

<sup>14</sup>. Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>15</sup>. Catherine Weinberger-Thomas, "Les yeux fertiles de la mémoire. Exotisme indien et représentations occidentales" in *L'Inde et l'imaginaire* (Paris, Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, collection Purusha, 1988).

<sup>16</sup>. Ernest Binfield Havell, *The Ideals of Indian Art* (London, 1911) in Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922, Occidental orientations*.

<sup>13</sup>. David Luden, "Orientalist Empiricism: Transformation of Colonial knowledge" in *Orientalism and Postcolonial Predicament*, edited by C. A. Breckendridge and P. Van der Veer (Philadelphia University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993) 250-278.



**Figure 1:** Abanindranath Tagore, *Goat and Monkey or Companions*, c.1910-1915, tempera on paper, 23 x 29,4 cm, Acc. n°1834, NGMA, New Delhi. (Credit to the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi)

During the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the artists of the Indian avant-garde in Calcutta were exposed to the Japanese pan-Asian aesthetic principles as well as to the pictorial techniques from Japan. In comparison, the same artists had an indirect knowledge of Chinese art and culture. At that time, no significant contacts were noted between Chinese and Indian artists and intellectuals. In India, the approach to the Chinese art remained dependent on Okakura's writings. It is interesting to note that, at the same time, in Europe and particularly in Great Britain a similar situation existed regarding the relationship with Japan and China. As Michelle Ying Ling Huang mentions in her article "The influence of the Japanese Expertise on the British Reception of Chinese Painting"<sup>17</sup> the European intelligentsia in

the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was well exposed to the artistic products from Japan. In a context of a craze for *Japonisme*, the knowledge of Chinese art was, in comparison, quite imperfect<sup>18</sup> to the extent that in his book *The Painting in Far East* (1908), Robert Laurence Binyon, historian of art attached to the British Museum, aligned his opinion on Chinese art with the thesis Okakura developed in *The Ideals of the East*.<sup>19</sup>

Economic factors were the main source of this phenomenon: At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the economic impact of Japan was felt on its international relations. Since the commercial treaty of 1858, Japan opened its ports to the Western trading companies and the Meiji period

<sup>17</sup> - Michelle Ying Ling Huang, "The influence of the Japanese expertise on the British reception of Chinese painting" in *Beyond Boundaries, East and West Cross-Cultural*

*Encounters*, edited by M. Ying Ling Huang (Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 88-111.

<sup>18</sup> - Bernadette Lemoine (ed.) *Regards et discours européens sur le Japon et l'Inde au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Limoges, Presses Universitaires de Limoges, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> - Laurence Binyon, *Painting in the Far East, an Introduction to the History of Pictorial Art in Asia, especially China and Japan* (London, Edward Arnold, 1908).

(1868-1912) marked the beginning of an era of economic modernization. Comparatively, the Republic of China, proclaimed in 1911 on the ruins of the Qing dynasty, did not have the same economic power and remained on the fringes of the main trade circuits.

The circulation of information and of artistic objects by the colonial power, focused on the dynamism and of the renewal of Western art. This renewal was nourished and stimulated by the discovery of non-Western representations. As a result, the challenge of the European aesthetic of the mimesis took a true international dimension, connecting different cultural areas. It was in this context that India wished to find an alternative to the academic Western art and came in contact with some other Asian cultures, especially Japan.

### First Sino-Indian Artistic Exchanges around Rabindranath Tagore

The political context of the 1920's and the 1930's, with the Sino-Japanese War, the intensification of the fight for the independence in India as well as the creation of an Indian political antifascist front contributed in modifying the frame of the Sino-Indian relationship. In the early 20's, the Sino-Indian exchanges received a new impetus. In 1921, following the visit of the French Sylvain Levy, a Chinese department was opened in the Calcutta University. Later, in 1937, it was the turn of the Visva-Bharati University in Shantiniketan to create its Chinese Institute (The Cheena Bhavan) with Professor Tan Yunshan as the headmaster. In the ashram of Shantiniketan, it was Rabindranath Tagore who breathed a new aesthetic dynamism founded on the artistic exchanges with different cultural areas.<sup>20</sup> The poet wanted a cultural exchange outside the prism of colonial influence. As a result, he set up Visva-Bharati as an aspiring utopian vision for a new humanity. During the inauguration of the Visva-Bharati University, on

<sup>20</sup>. Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson, *Rabindranath Tagore, The Myriad-Minded Man* (London, Bloomsbury, 1995).

the 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1922, Rabindranath Tagore declared:

The aim of the Visva-Bharati is to acknowledge the best ideal of the present age in the centre of her educational mission. The question therefore arises, what is the immediate step she should take in order to fulfill her object. The first thing which must occupy our attention is to concentrate in this institution the different cultures of the East and West... India must fully know herself in order to make herself known to others.<sup>21</sup>

In 1923, Rabindranath Tagore made his first trip to China, in Beijing at the invitation of the Beijing Lecture Association. He went back to China in 1924 with the painter Nandalal Bose (1882-1966), headmaster of the Kala Bhavan (department of arts and crafts in Visva-Bharati University Shantiniketan). In the town of Hangzhou, Nandalal Bose met three Chinese artists, Qi Baishi, Yao Mengfu and Chen Banding and he practiced ink painting. Observers noticed that the Japanese and the Chinese painting influenced Nandalal Bose.<sup>22</sup> During this short stay in China, Nandalal Bose made drawings, sketches and took notes. These documents are the first attempt towards an intercultural understanding between India and China. In his letters to his colleagues of Shantiniketan, he gave his opinion on Chinese art scene; he criticized the Western influences on the contemporary art of China, especially the American one. He compared these influences to those of "an insect biting a ripe fruit."<sup>23</sup> He clearly sided with the defenders of the "purity" of the Chinese pictorial tradition. According to Nandalal Bose, the specificity of art is rooted in the "expression of the national genius."<sup>24</sup> Thus, India as China must seek the "purified essence" of its artistic expression. In his opinion, all western cultural influences had to be considered with the utmost care because of their 'imperialist' traits.

<sup>21</sup>. Rabindranath Tagore, "Visva-Bharati" (1923), in *Shantiniketan 1901-1951* (Calcutta Visva-Bharati Publishing Department, 1951), 15.

<sup>22</sup>. R. Bartholomew (ed.) *Nandalal Bose Centenary Volume, a Collection of Essays* (New Delhi, Lalit Kala Akademi, 1983).

<sup>23</sup>. Amitava Bhattacharya, "In Search of a Forgotten Dialogue: Chinese and Indian artists since 1924", in *Tagore and China*, ed. Tan Chung and Amiya Dev (New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2011).

<sup>24</sup>. Nandalal Bose, *Silpa-Katha, a collection of essays*, translated by S. Ghose, (Calcutta, Visva-Bharati Publishing Department, 1944).

Nandalal Bose's visit to China led the way to a short series of exchanges between India and China which were interrupted by the Second World War. In 1937, the painter from Shantiniketan Binode Behari Mukherjee (1904-1980) stayed for a short while in Shanghai. In 1930-1931, the Chinese painter Gao Jianfu (1879-1951), founder member of the Lingnan Academy in Canton, made an artistic journey in India. There is very little information on the details of this journey and especially on his possible influence on the Indian artists.<sup>25</sup> Gao Jianfu had received an artistic training in Japan, in the Nihon Bijutsuin institute. After his return from Japan, he founded the Lingnan Academy with his brother Gao Qifeng and the artist Chen Suren in Canton.<sup>26</sup> The aesthetic aim of the Academy, inspired by the Japanese experience, was to modernise the Chinese contemporary art by joining the traditional Chinese art techniques (*Shuimohua*) with different foreign inputs (in particular from Japan and from the West). It was with this wish to change the Chinese painting that Gao Jianfu undertook his journey to India. Gao Jianfu made an initiation trip to Ajanta caves in Maharashtra, the source of monumental Indian painting with frescoes from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 4<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>27</sup> He ended his journey in Calcutta where he was welcomed in Jorasanko. There, he met Abanindranath and Gaganendranath Tagore. He left India in 1931, the year the Japanese invaded Manchuria.

In the spring of 1940, the Chinese painter Xu Bei Hong (1895-1953) came to Shantiniketan invited by Tagore. It was the first time that Visva-Bharati invited a foreign artist of such repute. One of the main objectives of Xu Bei Hong's study tour in India was to make the Indian intelligentsia aware of the Japanese aggression in China. It was in that respect that he met Gandhi in February 1940. During his stay in Shantiniketan, he painted and drew portraits, landscapes and many genre scenes.

<sup>25</sup>. Amitava Bhattacharya, "In Search of a Forgotten Dialogue: Chinese and Indian artists since 1924", in *Tagore and China*, 44-59.

<sup>26</sup>. Lü Peng, "The New Chinese painting: the School of Lingnan", in *A History of Art in the 20th Century China* (Paris, Somogy, 2013), 123-133.

<sup>27</sup>. The contemporary Chinese artists used to reproduce the well-known paintings (wall paintings from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries) of the Magao caves in Dunhuang. The Indian painter from Shantiniketan, Krishna Deb Barman studied these frescoes during his stay in China in the beginning of the 1930's.

In Darjeeling, the artist made his famous narrative painting *The Foolish Old Man Removed the Mountains*, based on a popular Chinese fable. The Indian painter Binode Behari Mukherjee met with Xu Bei Hong in Cheena Bhavan. According to Amitava Bhattacharya<sup>28</sup> the two artists examined the place of traditional art in contemporary China and India respectively. The Indian painter defended the fact that traditional art should sustain the modern and contemporary art whereas the Chinese artist developed the idea that a profound renewal should animate the contemporary Chinese art scene. These differences in artistic position were partly relevant due to the social and political context. On one hand, India wished to build a modern art as an anti-colonial response in connection with tradition. Whereas, on the other hand, China wished to renew the art world, far away from any nostalgic feelings, in relation with the aesthetic view of Mao Zedong. At the end of his stay in Bengal, an exhibition of the works of Xu Bei Hong was held in Shantiniketan and Calcutta and the funds collected were given to the Chinese refugees in India.

The Indian nationalist intelligentsia was affected by the aggressive policy of Japan in China and thus Japan was no more the incarnation of an Asiatic modernity that India had to follow. Many events of the Second World War, especially Burma's invasion by the Japanese and the bombing of the towns of Chittagong, Dacca, and Calcutta by the Japanese military aircraft, strengthened a kind of anti-Japanese feeling in Bengal.

### ***The India Progressive Writers' and Artists' Association; New Ways of Artistic Distribution***

In 1936, in line with the *Conférence Mondiale des Écrivains* (Paris, June 1935) and with the creation of the *Association Internationale des Écrivains pour la Défense de la Culture et contre le Fascisme*,

<sup>28</sup>. Amitava Bhattacharya, "In Search of a Forgotten Dialogue: Chinese and Indian artists since 1924" in *Tagore and China*.



the All India Progressive Writers' Association (I.P.W.A.) was created. This cultural association predominantly led by Marxist intellectuals, played a very important role in the Indian artistic sphere during the 1940's. During the first I.P.W.A. conference, on April 10 1936 in the city of Lucknow, the association wrote a manifesto. In its manifesto, the I.P.W.A. exhorted writers and artists to focus their attention on the basic problems of the daily life (undernourishment, poverty, economic and social underdevelopment, political subjection) and it called for actions on the issues of colonialism, war, militarism and fascism. The manifesto proclaimed that the Indian independence could not happen without the victory over fascism. According to the main ideologues of the I.P.W.A., such as S. Sajjad Zaheer<sup>29</sup> Mulk Raj Anand<sup>30</sup> and Hirendranath Mukherjee<sup>31</sup> the association wanted to fight the so-called reactionary and anti-progressive artistic tendencies and the revival aesthetic of the Bengal School was particularly targeted. The progressive writers and artists were asked to play an active social role in the trade unions, local associations, and in the publication of magazines and newspapers. In 1941, The Indian People's Theatre Association (I.P.T.A.) was created in Bangalore and later in 1943, a branch opened in Bengal. The aesthetic and ideological orientations of the I.P.T.A. were similar to those of the I.P.W.A. notably artistic work related to social reality, the development of a political awareness by a large distribution of arts, and the stimulation of popular arts through theatre, dance and songs.

During the 1930's and the 1940's, the I.P.W.A. offered a new dissemination channel to Indian artists parallel to the colonial network level, to the Indian artists. It connected them to Europe, the Soviet Union, and many other countries from Asia and Latin America. In this way, the I.P.W.A., with the help of the Chinese Left-Wing League of

Writers and Artists were responsible for promoting the works of contemporary Chinese artists. This League was a cultural organization created in 1930 in Shanghai, under the auspices of the Chinese communist party. The ideological line of this organization was to fight against the repressive state policy of the Kuomintang by propagating the revolutionary ideals through newspapers and cultural organization. The ideological orientation of the League wanted to closely connect art with social struggle:

Our art must respectfully contribute to the bloody 'life and death' struggle. If the content of art is the human emotions, then our art must have as its content the emotions of the proletariat in these dark 'medieval' days of class society. Thus, our art will be opposed to the feudal classes and the bourgeoisie, as well as to the Petty bourgeoisie, which has 'lost its social status.' We must help and serve the emergence of proletarian art.<sup>32</sup>

The Left-Wing League promoted particularly the art works of the 'Eighteen Art Society of Shanghai.'<sup>33</sup> This artistic association was created in 1929-1930 by a group of communist artists, with the engraver Jiang Feng (1910-1983) as the leader. The etchings made by these artists (like Jiang Feng, Luo Quingzhen, Xu Tiankai) represented new subjects based on the representation of the social conditions of the working class like unemployed factory workers, the picket line, view of the factory and of the workers homes, etc. These engravings with strong expressionist tensions are saturated by large black surfaces. As Professor Lü Peng mentions:

While criticizing 'art for art's sake,' they (the Chinese printmakers) were able to combine the objects of expression of sympathy, anger or critique and the content of their ideology with modern styles far removed from realist painting, and they developed vigorous branches of modernism in this unique period.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup>- S. Sajjad Zaheer, "A note on the Progressive Writer's association" in *Marxist Cultural Movement in India, chronicles and documents, 1936-1947*, Vol. 1, ed. Sudhan Pradhan (Calcutta, Pustak Bipani, 1979), 118-125.

<sup>30</sup>- Mulk Raj Anand, "On the progressive Writer's Movement" in *Marxist Cultural Movement in India, chronicles and documents, 1936-1947*, 6-25.

<sup>31</sup>- Hirendranath Mukherjee, "Bengal Progressive Writers for the People" and 'Bengal Writers and Artists to fight Fascism' in *Marxist Cultural Movement in India, chronicles and documents, 1936-1947*, 118-125.

<sup>32</sup>-Tang Tao, *A Brief History of Modern Chinese Literature (Zhongguo xiandai wenxue shi jianbian)* (Beijing, People's Literature Publishing House, 1984), 23. Quoted by Lü Peng, *A History of Art in the 20th Century China*, 207.

<sup>33</sup>- Julia F. Andrews, *Painters and Politics in the People's Republic of China, 1949-1979* (Oakland, University Press of California, 1994).

<sup>34</sup>- Peng, *A History of Art in the 20th Century China*, 204.

These printings on wood or on linoleum were a kind of synthesis between the popular Chinese woodcuts<sup>35</sup> and the Western printmaking avant-garde. Indeed, these Chinese images were influenced, in their content as well as in their form by German expressionist woodcuts and by Russian engravings in the artistic movement of the Socialist Realism and of the Russian neo-primitivism. In the 1930's, the Shanghai's publisher Lu Xun (1881-1936) disseminated the works of this European avant-garde among the Chinese artists such as the prints of Aubrey Beardley, Edward Munch, Carl Meffert, George Grosz, etc. Regarding the political dimension of the woodblock prints, Lu Xun declared: "In revolutionary times, the woodblock print is most widespread, because even in extremely pressing circumstances it can be produced quickly."<sup>36</sup>

In 1930, he published the album *Selection of New Russian Paintings* with original prints of A. Favorski,<sup>37</sup> Patel I. Pavlinov, Aleksei I. Kravchenko, Kouptevianov and Grigoriev. In 1933, he introduced to the Chinese artists *Four Graphic Novels of Frans Masereel*. In 1936, he published *Collection of Käthe Kollwitz Woodblocks Prints*; a compilation of 21 prints from the series *The Weavers* (1893), *The Peasant's Rebellion* (1908) and *The Children of Germany die of hunger* (1923).<sup>38</sup> Finally, Lu Xun published many books presenting contemporary Chinese etchings. Among them *The Path of the Wood Engraving*, edited in 1934, which was a compilation of 24 young Chinese artists' stamps from the Shanghai Eighteen Art Society. It should be noted that the 18 volumes entitled *Modern Prints (Xiandai banhua)* presented the stamps of the artists from the Mu Ke Society in Shanghai, and the issues of the magazine *Woodcut World (Muke jie)* presented monographs of European and Chinese printers.

<sup>35</sup>. Francesca Dal Lago, "Les racines populaires de l'art de la propagande communiste en Chine : des gravures sur bois du Mouvement pour la nouvelle xylographie (*xinxin banhua*) aux nouvelles estampes du Nouvel An (*xin nianhua*)" in *Arts Asiatiques*, vol. 66 (Paris, 2011), 225-238.

<sup>36</sup>. Lu Xun, "Introductory Note" in *Selection of New Russian Paintings* (*Xin E huaxuan xiaoyin*), Jiweiiji Shiyi, Renmin Wenxue Chubanshe, 1930. Quoted by Lü Peng, *A History of Art in the 20th Century China*, 214.

<sup>37</sup>. In the album *Selection of New Russian Paintings* were presented Favorski's prints illustrating the book *October 1917*, published in Moscow in 1928.

<sup>38</sup>. *50 ans de gravures sur bois chinoises, 1930-1980*, exh. cat. (Grenoble Museum, Centre de Recherche de l'Université de Paris 8, 1981).

The Chinese League was created before the Indian P.W.A. and it is quite possible that the political and cultural principles adopted by the Chinese organisation had influenced the writing of the Indian manifesto in Lucknow. In the cultural progressive associations of Calcutta, the contact with the prints of the Chinese artists from Shanghai as well as the woodcuts were promoted among the Bengali artists as a political tool to propagate a social message to the masses. In the 1940's, in China and India, the woodblock print became the matrix of propaganda art intended to denounce social injustice and it was transformed into a real political weapon against colonialism by propagating the Marxist revolutionary ideals.<sup>39</sup> In 1943, Indian artists such as Zainul Abedin (1914-1976), Somnath Hore (1921-2006), Ramkinker Baij (1906-1980), Sudhir Ranjan Khastagir (1907-1974) and Chittaprosad Bhattacharya (1915-1978) supported by the Marxist cultural associations used this woodcut technique and the aesthetic of the Chinese images to bear witness to the Great Famine of Bengal, which caused the death of three million people in the rural areas.<sup>40</sup>

In 1937 Chittaprosad Bhattacharya, still a college student in Chittagong (now in Bangladesh), joined the communist party of India, and in 1941 he was a part of a volunteer team to help a peasants' trade union in the immediate suburb of Chittagong. Doctor Sanjuka Sunderason mentions in her article 'As Agitator and Organiser: Chittaprosad and Art for the Communist Party of India, 1941-1948':

In the early 1940s, the spectre of wartime Japanese attack on the eastern borders of Bengal had made resistance in the bordering provinces a political reality, and young graduates and local cadres of the Communist Party or Kisan Sabha (Peasant Congress) volunteers tried mobilizing popular

<sup>39</sup>. Éric Janicot, "Le mouvement de la gravure sur bois", in *50 ans d'esthétique moderne chinoise, tradition et occidentalisme 1911-1949* (Paris : Publications de la Sorbonne, 1997) 54-58, Éric Janicot, *L'art chinois, nouvelles approches* (Paris, You Feng Publishers, 2007).

<sup>40</sup>. In Bengal, the I.P.T.A. created many artistic productions related to the event of the 1943 Famine (especially *Nabanna – New Crop* – the theatre play of Bijon Bhattacharya, performed in 1944). The I.P.T.A. drama groups adopted the *Yatra*, a traditional and popular form of drama in Bengal. The playwrights stripped off the religious content of the *Yatra* to put a social and political contemporary content. That is how Utpal Dutta started his political activist career. Adapting the techniques of the Soviet Agitprop groups, Utpal Dutta's theatre company toured Bengal, performing in villages and in the vicinity of the factories in the suburbs of the cities.



Figure 2: Chittaprosad Bhattacharya, *Famine, Midnapur*, 8 November 1943, in *Hungry Bengal, a tour through Midnapur District by Chittaprosad*, 1944, ink on paper, 17 x 22 cm, illustration p.49, DAG Modern, New Delhi. (Credit to DAG Modern, Chittaprosad Bhattacharya).

opinion against possible Japanese aggression, much along the Chinese model.<sup>41</sup>

Apart from the woodcut technique, the Chinese stamps also influenced many 'Bengali artists of the famine'<sup>42</sup> Thus, during the Great Famine, Chittaprosad produced a report, based on a tour of the rural areas of east Bengal by composing texts and drawings, entitled *Hungry Bengal*. Each piece of the series *Hungry Bengal* referred to a specific situation and on each drawing, close to the signature, the artist noted the date and the name of the place from where the situation was taken (Fig.2). When the book was published in 1943, under the auspices of the communist party of

India,<sup>43</sup> the British authority banned it because of its subversive content<sup>44</sup>. In this book, Chittaprosad did not restrict his work to present only the human disaster of the famine, but he also denounced the profiteers of the system and the beneficiaries of the speculation. There are numerous, ferocious drawings by Chittaprosad representing round-bellied traffickers taking without pity the humble equipment that the half-starved peasants were forced to sell (Fig.3).

<sup>41</sup>- Sanjuka Sunderason, "As Agitator and Organiser: Chittaprosad and Art for the Communist Party of India, 1941-1948" in *Object* n°13 (London, 2011), 76-95.

<sup>42</sup>- Sanjoy Mallick, "Social Realism in the Visual Arts, Man-made famine and political Ferment, Bengal 1943-46" in *Art and Visual Culture in India, 1857-2007*, ed. Gayatri Sinha (Mumbai, Marg Publication, 2009), 150-162.

<sup>43</sup>- During that period, Chittaprosad produced many political posters, drawings and caricatures for the communist newspaper *People's War*. The first issue of *People's War* was published on July 5, 1942. This newspaper lasted until the end of the War. After that, the journal continued under the name of *People's Age* (the first issue was published on November 25, 1945). Between 1942 and 1945, around 35 drawings of Chittaprosad Bhattacharya were published in the journal.

<sup>44</sup>- Sripantha, *Daya* (Calcutta, Nayak Sandeep, 1994).



Figure 3: Chittaprosad Bhattacharya, *Famine*, 5 November 1943, in *Hungry Bengal, a tour through Midnapur District by Chittaprosad*, 1944, ink on paper, 16 X 23 cm, DAG Modern, New Delhi. (Credit to DAG Modern, Chittaprosad Bhattacharya).

## Conclusion

During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the cultural and artistic exchanges between China and India used different channels of communication. The colonial channel, with its many trade routes throughout the Empire was without any doubt the main source of communication and the city of Calcutta became the main hub for these different relations in Bengal. At that time Japan, which turned economically and socially towards the open market system, was an integrated part of it. Colonial India as well as Europe were exposed to the cultural and artistic influences of Japan, while the art and culture of China remained largely unknown. In the context of national struggle, the Bengal intelligentsia came in contact with Okakura's Pan-Asian aesthetic. During the 30's the Indian elites of Calcutta and Shantiniketan were still under the influence of Okakura Kakuzo's theories. According to the Japanese philosopher, the essence of Asian art had to be mystical, rooted

in ancestral traditions and in connection with the myth of a 'pre-colonial Golden Age.'

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also saw the emergence of two other channels of different type.

The first one was built around the personality of the poet Rabindranath Tagore and the artists of Shantiniketan benefited from its advantages. The poet wished to create within the circle of the Visva-Bharati University, a channel of communication capable of connecting people beyond nationalist, economic and cultural antagonisms. Under the auspices of Tagore the first direct contact between Chinese and Indian artists took place in the 1920's and lasted until the 1940's.<sup>45</sup>

The second one was on a more significant and larger scale. It was structured around the Second Communist International and was relayed by the communist parties and the cultural Marxist organizations in India and China. From the 1930's, the cultural circles of Calcutta, in their new search for an aesthetic in relation with social and political oppression found stimulation in the Chinese woodcut movement.<sup>46</sup>

The international relationship between various artistic domains found different channels of communication that helps us to understand the evolution and the changing aesthetic of modern Indian art. The study of these interrelations also obliges us to adopt a new perspective on the global Modern Art of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The research of the impact of these international exchanges on the Indian and Chinese art production has not been done yet. Probably this

<sup>45</sup>. These two systems of connections between Indian and Chinese cultures had been studied by researchers like: Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters. A history of European Reactions to India Art* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1992), Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922, Occidental orientations*, 1994, Thakurta, *The Making of a new 'Indian' Art*, 1992, Tapati Guha Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories. Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004), Banerji, *The Alternative Nation of Abanindranath Tagore*, 2010.

<sup>46</sup>. These cultural exchanges inside the International Communist are not well known yet. There is a need to explore further this phenomenon. According to the curator and Chinese art dealer Chang Tson-Zung, this lack of interest in the Communist circuit of communication is closely linked to an ideological heritage of the Cold War. Chang Tson-Zung "Fare well, The Third Gungzhou Triennial" in *Farewell to Post-Colonialism, Querying the Ghangzhou Triennial 2008*, ed. Sarat Maharaj (n°11, May 2009), 14-15, quoted in *Art et Mondialisation* (Paris, Centre G. Pompidou, 2013), 227-229.

relationship had modified the way the artists in both countries approached the pictorial composition, the use of the lines, the symbolism of the colors and the renewal of their themes. To undertake this study, an analysis of the formal structures of the art production should be conducted (with the social and cultural context as framework). This study would help us to understand the process of cultural transfers in the masterpiece and in the artistic process as well.