Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927) and India: The Indian Travels of a Cosmopolitan Utopian

Nicolas Idier
Kang Youwei 康有為 (1858-1927) and India: The Indian Travels of a Cosmopolitan Utopian

Nicolas Idier

“The quality of the infinite is not the magnitude of extension, it is in the advaitam, the mystery of Unity. Facts occupy endless time and space; but the truth comprehending them all has no dimension; it is One. Wherever our heart touches the One, in the small or the big, it finds the touch of the infinite.” (Rabindranath Tagore, “The Poet’s Religion”, in Creative Unity, 1922).

1 The idea of raising the question of Kang Youwei’s cosmopolitanism and, more specifically, his Indian experience of it, emerged when I informed Professor Anne Cheng of an upcoming trip to China at the invitation of Qingdao Municipality and its cultural association, on the occasion of a symposium about Kang Youwei and calligraphy. I was on my way back to France after four years in China and four more years in India. The question of cosmopolitanism is a delicate one in my view, especially in the context of intellectual geopolitics.

2 India’s place in Kang Youwei’s itinerary somehow belies the cliché about Chinese scholars and their presumed lack of opening to the world. The influence of Europe, Japan and the United States on cultural transfer may be the emerging part of a deeper question. Despite its historical importance, the role of India is often ignored. And in spite of its crucial influence on Chinese classical thought, aesthetics and politics, India seems to have vanished under the radar. The biographical episode of Kang Youwei’s agitated itinerary is barely questioned and almost unknown. And yet, it was not a mere tourist anecdote or a fortuitous stopover during a longer journey, but two important stays in India that contributed deeply to the shaping of Kang’s theories. Beyond Kang Youwei’s individual experience of India unfolds the relation between the two countries on the threshold of the Age of Extremes—to quote the title of Eric Hobsbawm’s 1994 essay.
A meaningful comparison can be made with Rabindranath Tagore, who also travelled extensively, including in China, and whose philosophy resembles in many aspects the highlights of the *Datong Shu* and oscillates on a similar scale between universalism and nationalism, resulting in a new philosophy of mankind. On a wider scale, these two thinkers may have redrafted the idea of Human Rights. The distinguished author, sinologist and translator Simon Leys emphasizes the point: “Since the very enunciation of this kind of position –Human Rights are a Western concept and therefore have no relevance in the Chinese context– excuses one from taking the trouble to refute it, I shall merely add here one incidental remark: human rights are not a foreign notion in Chinese modern history. Nearly a century ago, the leading thinker and political reformer Kang Youwei (1858-1927) made it the cornerstone of his political philosophy”.

During the Qingdao colloquium, more than fifty Chinese academics investigated the importance of epigraphy and calligraphy in Kang Youwei’s intellectual background and practice, including his famous supplement to the *Treatise on the History of Calligraphy* by Bao Shichen 包世臣 (1775-1855), the *Guangyizhou shuangji* 廣藝舟雙楫 (1891). Stellar inscriptions mainly inspired the calligraphic art of Kang Youwei. His style is considered today as a masterpiece. Some of Kang Youwei’s influences on calligraphic practices of other countries like Japan and Korea are also studied and questioned. Through this methodology of visual study, the antagonism between tradition and modernity was emphasized. One of the most remarkable points is the intellectual network at that time of tremendous cultural effervescence: the flowering of pluralistic movements, individual dynamics and continuous spreading of innovative ideas.

Undoubtedly, his deep attachment to calligraphy allowed Kang to maintain an intense relationship with his cultural centre of gravity, despite his many travels. Kang Youwei may have owed a lot to his native place, the province of Guangzhou. As Simon Leys writes in his biographic studies on the painter Su Renshan, “the remoteness from the centre and the geographical isolation profoundly conditioned Guangdong’s cultural physiognomy, endowing it with both a hyper-conservative and a vigorous propensity to independence. (...) While being less subordinated to the authority of the capital, Guangdong was more directly exposed to the various stimulants coming from the outside world. Located at the outposts of the Empire, the main gate of the maritime trade with Southeast Asia and the West, Guangzhou was not only a cosmopolitan landing platform for merchant ships, but also, since the beginning of the sixteenth century, the first point of entry for Western missionaries”.

Kang Youwei travelled for the first time of his life in 1879, not too far away, since he went to Hong Kong, then in 1882 to Shanghai. It was because of political pressure that he had to leave mainland China. After the failure of the Hundred Days’ Reform, from June to September 1898, Kang Youwei had no choice but to go abroad: he left Beijing on September 20th, 1898 (he was forty-one years old) to Shanghai, and after a stopover in Hong Kong, arrived in Japan with his disciple Liang Qichao on October 24th, 1898.

Kang Youwei kept himself busy in Japan with his militant activities. He wrote a huge amount of letters and published many articles, especially against the Empress Dowager Cixi. In 1899, a Sino-Japanese diplomatic agreement forced him to leave Japan. He left the country on April 3rd, heading for Canada. He arrived in Vancouver and continued his journey across North America where he tried to unite the Chinese diaspora around...
his patriotic project to save China. He also made a quick trip to the United Kingdom before going back to Canada.

8 He returned to Hong Kong in September 1899 and attempted a coup against the Empress Dowager. After a new political failure, he took the road to India and Indonesia in January 1900, with a death warrant issued against him by Cixi.

9 It was not until 1913 that he came back to China. He participated in his last political attempt on July 1st, 1913 to reinstall Puyi on the throne. On July 12th, the Restoration failed. This fiasco forced Kang Youwei to take refuge inside the Embassy of the United States, where he wrote several poems including the “Poem of the Refuge at the US Embassy in June of the Year Dingsi”, published in 1917. He adopted a new nickname, “Life after the second existence”.

10 Despite being a native of Guangzhou, it was Shanghai that was the beating heart of his life. He moved to the city in the summer of 1914, renting a house on Xinsha Street. Then, he built his own property which he named “Youcun lu” (Existence after exile) on Yuyuan Street. He moved there in 1921, starting on the last chapter of his life. Following an old habit, he wrote a long poem during the house-warming party. This poem sums up perfectly his state of mind: “Some years ago, I rented a roof in Shanghai, today I had my house built. River and mountain cross the garden; sun and moon enter the windows. Speaking of the universe, sitting in my pavilion, exploring the earth, I compare myself to a hero. Towards the ground, the king looks at the ants; towards the sky, one place can house a dragon. Facing the city, back to the countryside, I build my own home; trees and grass, winds and smoke, landscapes are outlined by the horizon. To make trails, I pick up white pebbles; to add bloom to the garden, I plant red plum trees. Surrounded by hills, nature enchants me; creating this garden, I prove my talents. The yard is green with growing grass; with my family I walk on the moss. The garden is forty zhang deep, a stream meanders through the woods. In front and behind, high buildings rise alongside large avenues; in the middle the water flows around a calm hill. Every day on the three paths lined with chrysanthemums and pines I walk, walking on the two bridges I compose poems in drunkenness. Since my exile I have led a life surpassing any dream, but I survived until today, with a lonely sense of joy”.

11 By virtue of the very nature of this city and the role it played in Chinese history since 1842, Shanghai was a key point between two worlds: it produced translations of Western books and the first newspapers, it entertained enthusiasm for scientific progress and a special relation to money and international trade. The great specialist of Kang Youwei’s calligraphy Fan Guoqiang writes: “By its culture turned at once towards the traditional culture of Jiangnan imbued with a pragmatic Confucianism, and towards Western culture since the introduction of the concessionary regime, this city constituted an intellectual laboratory and first-rate policy. Shanghai was a real home for many literate civil servants after the fall of the Empire in 1911. The list goes on: Shen Cengzhi, Miu Quansun, Chen Sanli, Zheng Xiaoxu, Liang Dingfen, Fu Zengxiang, Luo Zhenyu, Ye Changzhi –many scholars trained under the Qing dynasty to the art of brush (painting, poetry, calligraphy), whom the erosion of their socio-economic status forced to live by the trade of their works. Kang Youwei was one of them.” In Shanghai, in a household open to the many intellectuals of the city, he gave many parties where the pleasures of wine mingled with the joys of calligraphy, and in 1926, in the last years of his life he even founded a new school, “the Institute of the Celestial Journey” (Tianyou xueyuan), where he taught astrology, calligraphy, and science. At this time, he
adopted one of his last nicknames: “the Immortal of the Celestial Journey” (tiányòu huârên). During his lessons, he showcased the books and the items he had been collecting during his many travels, including the ones from India.

In early 1927, with the intensification of political turmoil (the first coup of Chiang Kai-shek took place in March 1926, and in March 1927 occurred the third insurrection of Shanghai), Kang Youwei, at the age of seventy years, was forced into the last exile of his existence. He celebrated his birthday, on February 5th, with friends. As farewell presents, they gave him many calligraphies and paintings, among which was a wooden plaque with a calligraphy by Puyi himself: “Like the mountain that stands, the deep water is crystal clear”, before which Kang Youwei bowed down. A month later, he decided to leave the city with a last heart-breaking sigh, as remembered by his daughter: “My connection with Shanghai is over!” On March 21st, he arrived in Qingdao. Ten days later, he died in a house renamed Tiannyaoyuan (Garden of the Celestial Journey), a last and sensitive reminder of his attachment to the cosmos and the celestial walk.

Kang Youwei’s life was deeply influenced and impacted by this notion of “journey”. One cannot understand Kang’s views without taking into account his endless wandering. The seal he used for many of his calligraphies was embossed with a short account of this travelling life: “One hundred days of Reform, sixteen years of exile, three world tours, four continents and thirty-one countries visited, six hundred thousand li covered on foot.” (維新百日出亡十六年三周大地游遍四洲經三十一國行六十萬里).

One stage of this long, tortuous and not so much of a celestial journey around the world was India.

Two trips to India

Kang Youwei is one of the very few Chinese scholars who travelled to India in the early twentieth century, in spite of an increasing trade with many other countries in Asia, Europe and North America. The image of India was very negative: it was no longer perceived as the native land of Buddhism, nor as a great philosophical and visual civilization, but as a lost, divided, colonized country. Kang Youwei’s Indian lesson was perhaps not as spiritual as it was political: at the antipodes of Japan, India offered the exact vision of the nightmare that China would endure if the country did not reform itself. An excerpt from a 1904 novel published in a Jiangsu newspaper gives a sense of this: “Shibiao looked closely at these people, and they all had faces black as coal. They were wearing a piece of red cloth around their heads like a tall hat; around their waists, they wore a belt holding wooden clubs. Shibiao asked the old man: are these Indians? The old man said: Yes, the English use them as policemen... Shibiao asked, why do they not use an Indian as the chief of police? The old man answered: Who ever heard of that! Indians are people of a lost country; they are no more than slaves”. Later in the same story, Shibiao understands that many turban-wearers are actually Chinese and that everyone in the street wears red turbans and the schools are held by Christian missionaries. This dystopian nightmare reveals the fear about China becoming the same as India: colonized.

Without going back to the heroes of the cultural exchanges between China and India, like Xuanzang who went to India in the second quarter of the seventh century, or even Faxian, a Chinese pilgrim in 399, Kang Youwei had some more recent precursors, namely envoys of the Qing court on official missions. The first recorded diplomatic journey took place in 1878-1879. It was led by Huang Maocai, and taken through the
region of Calcutta, the capital of the British Raj. The decisive role of the Opium War and the opening of the commercial ports with Indian traders coming in, as well as the soldiers and many servants of the British power as in the nightmare of Huang Shibiao, sharpened the relationship between the two countries. Among the Chinese elite, it was known that the Unequal Treaty favoured British India which became a threat to China’s territorial integrity and to the management of its economy. This geopolitical context made the Chinese more and more eager to understand the collapse of the Indian civilization.

The diplomatic report of Huang Maocai provides a precise analysis of the economic, military and administrative system. This study of India was progressivist-oriented and not so negative. Huang Maocai recommended looking carefully at the modernization processes that he witnessed in India. He and five other members of his delegation visited Calcutta, where they stayed for nearly three months. They also visited Darjeeling, Manipur, Dhaka, Allahabad, Agra, Delhi and Bombay. Huang Maocai’s writings reveal some nostalgic feelings for the Sino-Indian relationship during Xuanzang’s time.

Another delegation occurred in the summer of 1881 not long after Huang Maocai’s visit, led by Ma Jianzhong, an expert on international questions, accompanied by a scholar, Wu Guanpei. Their mission was shorter, with only twenty-five days in India and with a restrictive aim: to negotiate opium trade with the British Raj authorities. Their vision of India was very negative and contributed to the strengthening of the Chinese perception of India as a civilizational failure.

India had to wait twenty full years for someone capable of breaking away from this stereotypical image. Kang Youwei wrote down in his diary his personal motivation: “First, after living in Penang for several years, my health deteriorated because of heat and humidity. I wanted to settle on the snowy mountains of India. Second, India is the oldest nation in the world. Its long history and the mix between the traditional Indian system and the new British system could be used as a meaningful reference to China.”

During the early years of the twentieth century, India was an increasingly fragmented country, characterised by a long process of internal political erosion and commercial annexation by the East India Company. This annexation was enforced in the mid-eighteenth century, until its placement under the direct authority of the British Crown after the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 –also called the First War of Independence.

The process began with the death of Aurangzeb, the last of the Great Mughals, in 1707. His reign had already been disrupted by internal struggles, a climate of instability and the emergence of new powers such as the Sikhs in Punjab and the first European traders on the West, South-East and Bengal coasts. India was gradually getting divided into independent states or autonomous military forces while the Marathas annexed the whole country. The country had to face the violent invasion of the Persian ruler Nadir Shah in 1739. The throne of Delhi no longer had any authority and the country became a battlefield between the French, the British and the Marathas. The 1763 Treaty of Paris conferred to France five trading posts, so-called “factories” with the possibility of trading but no longer ruling. The British gradually conquered the Deccan and the Ganges valley. Following the doctrine of lapse, the British took suzerainty over any given territory as soon as its ruler was declared incompetent. Through this strategy, they extended their control over many Indian states. From 1858, a general government was instituted and a new division of the states was decreed. The use of English as an
official language was spreading. Many educational institutions, schools and colleges were created, boosting the spread of Western culture from Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. The colonising strategy also disseminated through the infrastructural network: railways, roads, telegraphic lines, postal services, money, weights and measures and other new norms. Industrial techniques were imposed on agriculture (tea, coffee, jute and indigo) and industry replaced small scale enterprises (coal, steel, leather). India quickly became the main supplier of the British Empire. In 1876, Queen Victoria was solemnly proclaimed Empress of India. However, a nationalist spirit was emerging amongst a few intellectual elite personalities like Ram Mohan Roy, Dayananda Sarasvati, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore. The new ideas found one of their political expressions in the creation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 in Bombay. This party proclaimed self-determination, Swaraj. Despite its industrial output and the emergence of a political dynamic, the country was deeply weakened from the inside. From 1896 to 1900 many areas were even affected by famine. Plague epidemics claimed many victims in Bombay in 1896 and in Calcutta in 1898. The third plague pandemic, the so-called “Chinese plague” because it was declared in Canton and Hong Kong in 1894, reached the European coast by several ports including Marseille, in 1902, and Le Havre. It also caused about forty deaths in Paris in 1920, especially in the poor neighbourhoods of Saint-Ouen. In Bombay, between 1896 and 1914, the plague inflicted more than 180,000 casualties. One can get a better sense of the audacity of Kang Youwei, travelling across the whole country, alone with his daughter and his servant, at that time of political violence and major sanitary hazards, with no diplomatic nor corporate protection.

When Kang arrived in India, George Curzon (1859-1925) was the Viceroy and General Governor. He stayed in this position from 1899 to 1904, then again in 1905 –when he issued the most controversial of all his measures: the partition of Bengal between Muslims and Hindus, which was a precursor to what happened later on with the 1947 Partition.

Kang had left China three years earlier. His departure to India came after one of his failed political attempts at Imperial Restoration, which forced him to leave Hong Kong in January 1900, heading to Singapore and Penang on the north-west coast of the Malay Peninsula. On December 7th, 1901, he embarked from Penang to India, accompanied by his daughter Kang Tongbi (1881-1969). They sought rest on the mountains of north-east India, where the cold dry climate might cure Kang Youwei’s physical exhaustion. Kang Tongbi was taking great care of her father; moreover, she was his translator in English. More than that, she was also a great travel companion, very well-educated, fond of poetry and calligraphy like her father. Kang Youwei had great ambitions for his daughter. He was convinced that she could contribute to his great goal. After that journey through India, Kang sent her to study in the United States. She accompanied her father on many of his travels, to Paris in 1906 and to several European countries, including Sweden where Kang Youwei even bought an island. The King of Sweden was one of their visitors. In 1908, still in Sweden, Kang Tongbi accompanied her father to Norway to watch the polar lights. During the last two years of her father’s life, Kang Tongbi spent a lot of time with him, taking part in his activities like going to Qingdao to contemplate the blossoming trees in the spring. It was indeed a very strong father-daughter relationship.
Let us retrace their itinerary. On December 12th, 1901, their boat entered the Ganges delta and reached Calcutta in the evening. On December 14th, they spent the day visiting the city. The next day, Kang went to the Government House to get a firearm license. The Viceroy Lord Curzon received him. On December 16th, Curzon invited Kang Youwei and Kang Tongbi to a tea party. On December 23rd, they took the train to Allahabad, but realized it was heading the wrong way. Thanks to this mistake, Kang and his daughter had a chance to visit Agra and its rich heritage. On December 25th, they were in Agra where they visited the Taj Mahal, the Red Fort, the Moti Masjid Mosque and the tomb of Emperor Akbar in Sikandarabad. In one of his poems, Kang Youwei compared Agra and Shravasti, where a rich merchant had donated Jetavana Park, “the Park given to orphans and widows” (Jiguduyuan), to Gautama Buddha. On the 27th, they visited the religious complex of Mathura. On December 29th, they arrived in Delhi where they went to the Ashoka Pillar at Qutub Minar and climbed up a hill which Kang Youwei mistakenly believed to be the Vulture Peak of Buddha. The Vulture Peak was one of the Buddha’s two favourite abodes when he was in Rajagriha. It is best known for being the place where the Buddha gave certain sermons, especially the one reportedly contained in the Lotus Sutra. It is in fact not located in Delhi, but in the current state of Bihar, in the district of Nalanda. This did not prevent Kang Tongbi from being enthusiastic about this visit and writing a poem about being “the first Chinese woman ever to enter the Western Paradise”.

On January 2nd, 1902, they arrived in Lucknow. The capital city of Uttar Pradesh developed in the late 14th century under the Sharqi dynasty (1397-1476), from a late 13th century fort built by Lakhna. During the Mughal period and especially thanks to a French officer, Claude Martin (ca. 1735-1800), who gave his name to a school he founded there, La Martinière, the city became a great cultural hub with many emblematic buildings, such as the congregational rooms for Shiite rituals and the Rumi Darwaza (1784), built on the model of the “Sublime Porte” in Istanbul. In addition to its heritage, the city was the heart of Urdu poetry. However, at the time of Kang Youwei, the very strict control imposed by the British on the Nawabs had weakened the cultural influence of Lucknow.

Kang Youwei continued his journey and arrived at Benares, one of the seven most sacred cities of Hinduism, probably founded in the seventh or sixth century BCE, and dedicated to the cult of Siva. Kang observed on this occasion the religious ardour of the countless pilgrims thronging from all over India to purify themselves in the waters of the Ganges. Benares is also a major centre of learning in theology and philosophy. During his stay in Benares, Kang Youwei visited the eighteenth century Durga temple dedicated to the warrior goddess Durga.

From there, Kang Youwei and Kang Tongbi reached the city of Bodhgayâ, where the Buddha reached enlightenment under a peepal tree. Kang Youwei reported in his diary that he visited the famous Mahabodhi Temple, built under Ashoka and rebuilt several times between the first century BCE and the fourth century CE, until its more recent restorations in the fourteenth century and again in 1884. The building is very recognizable with its pyramidal tower 54 meters high, its four corners flanked by other pyramidal towers. The main tower is surmounted by a small stupa. The sanctuary houses a large stone statue representing Buddha with the mudra of taking the earth as witness (bhumisparsha mudra). He also wrote in his notebooks about his visit to the
sacred Bodhi tree, replanted in 1881 by the British architect Alexander Cunningham, the first director of the Archaeological Survey of India.

28 On January 8th, 1902, Kang and his daughter returned to Calcutta. Only then did Kang Youwei take a train to his initial destination, the Himalayan region of the Northeast. He settled in Darjeeling, in a mountain resort also favoured by the British. One of Kang Youwei’s most important letters depicting his political vision was sent to Liang Qichao from Darjeeling. It is also there that he completed the writing of the Datongshu. The place appears to have been very inspiring to him.

29 Throughout his whole journey, Kang Youwei mostly stayed in British accommodations rather than local habitat for reasons of comfort, security and common habits. His contact with the daily life of locals was therefore restricted. His practice of English was not good enough to read newspapers or books, but was sufficient for everyday life as India was not the first English-speaking country he had visited, and his daughter was there to help him. However, one can speculate about his abilities to get deep inside Indian culture and history. He mostly relied on a superficial experience of India, but got the best of it.

30 This explains why Kang Youwei made a second trip to India: he wanted to know more. It was at the end of 1909, when he was 52 years old. In October 1909, he arrived in Madras by boat. Located in Tamil Nadu, the modern city of Madras was created in 1639 by Francis Day, who made it a trading post for the East India Company. A military fort was built in 1644 which later was the venue of the Anglo-French rivalry. One of the specificities of Madras is that many Hindus have been Christianized according to the legend of St. Thomas which is commemorated in the Basilica San Thome in Mylapore, built in the sixteenth century by the Portuguese and renovated in neo-Gothic style in 1893.

31 Kang Youwei went to the hinterlands to visit the temples of Tanjore. He witnessed there a phenomenon explaining the very nature of Indian civilization still present in our times: the mutation of Buddhist temples into Hindu temples. He was impressed by the bas-reliefs and considered their obscene sexual scenes as a proof of a lack of balance between Yin and Yang which he deemed responsible for the historical weakening of India resulting in colonization and servitude.

32 Kang then left Madras to go to Bombay, where he visited the cave temples of Elephanta with their rock-cut sculptures showing the syncretism of Hindu and Buddhist ideas and iconography. He was definitely attracted by the spiritual remains of the greater Indian civilization.

33 On his way back to British Malaysia, he went to Ceylon (present day Sri Lanka) which was connected to India by a chain of coral reefs and had become a large British tea production centre. Ceylon was the last stage of his experience of Indian culture. An experiment that made him travel, at the least, more than seven thousand kilometres by land and which deeply modified his ideas about the destiny of a civilization.

How did Kang Youwei perceive India?

34 It was during his first stay in India, once he was settled in Darjeeling in May 1902, that he sent a long letter to his disciple Liang Qichao. Their last meeting had been in September 1900 in Penang where Liang Qichao made a stopover on his way to Australia. During their conversation, Liang Qichao had questioned the large size of China, and suggested that the eighteen provinces should gain autonomy. The letter from
Darjeeling is therefore essentially a passionate response from Kang Youwei to convince his disciple of the danger of territorial division. He made use of several arguments: the specificity of each country in its organisation; the military and political weakening caused by compartmentalisation into independent provinces (he compared Bengal to Guangdong, arguing that in case of autonomy, Guangdong would become like Bengal, a political base for foreign powers); the great similarity between India and China in terms of dimension, demography, sciences, religions, philosophy, agriculture, international trade by sea and land, literature, arts, architecture and physical constitution of its inhabitants. Kang pointed out the heavy emphasis in both countries on the three constitutive principles of a great country: law, culture and rites. His letter was influenced by theories circulating at the time, notably those of Comte de Gobineau explaining racial singularities by geographical conditions and attributing the presumed laziness of Indians to climate; Kang Youwei considered Chinese civilization as superior to Indian civilization in terms of clothing and cooking, but also, more importantly, because it placed human equality at the heart of its mental structures informed by Confucian philosophy, while India was built on a system of inequalities between people induced by the caste system.

In this same letter, Kang Youwei referred to Japan as the exact opposite of India: the country remained strong thanks to its unity. He ended his letter by deploiring the standard of living of a large part of the population, and expressed his concern about the impact of poverty on China and the threat of collapse comparable to the dramatic destiny of India.

This letter had a decisive influence on the ideas of Liang Qichao who, returning from a lecture tour in the United States and Canada in 1903, abandoned the idea of a violent revolution and took up the concept of a reformist movement as advocated by Kang Youwei, with the project of a constitutional monarchy as an intermediate step.

Was India such a decisive revelation for Kang Youwei? There are many mentions of India in Kang’s writings even before his first stay but still, traveling to the country made him very proud and he clearly asserted that direct observation had been crucial for his deeper understanding of India. He wrote: “Of all the Chinese people who have travelled to India, I am the fifth, after Qingjing, Faxian, Xuanzang and Huiyun. However, there is no Chinese account of Indian culture, religion, languages, architecture and craftsmanship. Huang Maocai has made commendable efforts to examine the geography of Tibet and Yunnan, but has written nothing about Indian culture. Only those who have a deep knowledge of culture, religion and politics are able to observe and analyse the different aspects of their travels.”

Kang Youwei’s interest in India had been fed by many readings, including Chinese translations of British works devoted to India such as those of the Baptist missionary Timothy Richard, the author of a book about a journey to India in 1897 who was closely associated with the Qing court. Another great influence on Kang Youwei was the illustrated gazette on the maritime empires by Wei Yuan 魏源, the Haiguo tuzhi 海國圖志. This work, published in 1843, had a great success among intellectuals. It contributed to enlarge the Confucian perception of China and to give rise among scholars to some new geopolitical considerations.

The strict geopolitical analysis is less assertive in the Yindu youji. In this travel book, Kang Youwei explains that his first stay in India was motivated by two reasons: remedying his health issues and studying an alternative political model. However,
limited by his lack of direct access and his confinement to circles of power, his views of India largely reflect his former readings and the general ideas found there. As Pankaj Mishra writes, “Kang turned out to be less of a nationalist than a utopian internationalist.” This idea of utopia is a key-concept to understand Kang Youwei’s political obsession: in many ways, he was attracted by the utopia of the Golden Age, which is why the very ancient past of India was so inspiring to him. Still, he realised in India how one nation, even though it be the oldest in the world, can decline. The philosophical and pragmatic response to avoid such decline is the *Datongshu*.

It was in the Himalayan foothills of Darjeeling that Kang Youwei completed his great work, the *Datongshu* (The Book of Great Community), in 1902. He had written a first version of the book in 1884–1885, under the title “General Principles of Humanity” (人類公理). Therefore, it cannot be argued that his trip to India was the origin of the project. In 1887, he took up his manuscript and continued working on it. Thanks to Liang Qichao, it can be ascertained that this work was completed in 1902. Kang Youwei himself was very cautious about his book. He was convinced that his contemporaries would never understand the content as it was too innovative in nature. It was not until 1913 that Kang consented to the publication of the first two parts of his work, and he refused any translation project during his lifetime. The book was not published before 1935, long after the death of its author.

The *Datongshu* reflects many influences, including that of Buddhism. One cannot ignore the passages where Kang Youwei rates Buddhist practices above Hinduism, especially when he deplores the inequalities of the caste system in the third chapter. Kang had a critical eye on these inequalities between humans not only as being contrary to the principles of nature itself, but also as opposed to the logic of progress. The idealism of Kang Youwei never goes without pragmatism, and this is undoubtedly what gives the work its relevance. Another important statement after witnessing the inequalities between men and women in India is his advocacy for gender equality.

Alongside his advocacy of human rights, Kang Youwei’s utopian project has a universal ambition and aims to deconstruct all the boundaries that limit society. Did the very notion of universal love and absolute equality among all human beings play a role in the thought of Indian intellectuals at the time? Even if it was not until 1935 that the book appeared in full, Liang Qichao, one of the very few early readers of this work, voiced the ideas of the *Datongshu* in the course of his interactions with Indian intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore and others.

There are a total of more than two hundred references to India in the complete works of Kang Youwei. He expressed on many occasions his admiration for the greatness of Indian civilization: “India is an ancestral land with very ancient religions, as well as very ancient writings. It can be regarded as the ancestor of European and American civilizations.” How does he explain the collapse of this ancient civilization in contemporary times? His answer is clear: India “perished because it was locked in conservatism and was reluctant to change. The British invaders ingeniously used to their advantage this fatal weakness, and they succeeded in reducing India to a colony.” Kang Youwei stated this point of view long before travelling to India in the preface to a publication of the Beijing Teachers’ Academic Society (jingshi qiangxuehui xu) in 1895. In the same text, he raised the following question: “Conservatism has been a long standing and common problem for all feudal dynasties, but why did India fall into slavery because of it?” He explained this through the geopolitical situation and rise of...
Western imperialism. This idea recurs in many of his writings and it is quite obvious that he felt deeply concerned by the decay of colonized India. To these external conditions, he added three internal factors to account for the collapse of India: an inflexible social structure (in reference to the caste system), gender discrimination and social inequalities. “The caste system prevents the wisest men from being able to play a role in society. When nature created the human species, it did not create classes, but created everyone equal. How abominable and absurd it is to divide men into those who have value and those who are worthless! Societies that have been divided along lines of caste and inequality have made their people unhappy and the country has suffered and eventually tipped over; India is no exception.” Kang Youwei similarly revolts against the practice of sati, the Hindu custom dating from the fifth century, under the Gupta Empire, of widows having to sacrifice themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands. It may seem surprising that Kang witnessed this custom officially abolished throughout India in 1829, but it continued to be practiced, particularly in Bengal and Rajasthan, until the early twentieth century. “The incineration of women on the funeral pyres... this old repressive custom is profoundly immoral and cruel.”

His perception of British colonization was utterly negative. He repeatedly protested against racial discrimination in British India, not only within the country’s government but also in the areas of law, medicine, industry and commerce—all monopolized by the British. “Thousands and thousands of kilometres of Indian immensity are nothing more than a prison for the people.” Many passages in his Indian notebooks describe the weight of colonial oppression, such as the following: “As a rule, knives and guns are banned in India, and even a butcher’s knife has become a rarity. If the authorities learn of the existence of a butchery, it is immediately closed. If a literary magazine offends the government by issuing one or two criticisms, it is immediately censored. The promulgation of these drastic laws has affected many people. If people criticize the government, no lawyer can defend them; it is a crime for which capital punishment applies. There are many patriotic intellectuals who have been prosecuted, imprisoned or killed.” Kang Youwei had indeed experienced one of the most turbulent and fertile periods in the history of contemporary Indian thought, with the emergence of numerous journals, such as The Modern Review, founded in 1907 by Ramananda Chatterjee. It is also interesting to read in one of the first issues a reference to China written by Sister Nivedita in her article “India and Democracy”: “On abstract grounds also we take exception to the statement that India, or for that matter, any country, is not fit for any popular system of Government. No doubt everywhere it has been and is a question of training. And this training can be given to any nation. Were all countries where democracy now prevails fitted for democracy from the beginning of time? Did not the divine right of Kings—even to misgovern—claim a large number, if not the majority, of Englishmen as its followers, in England itself? Was Japan considered by foreigners fit for democracy half a century ago? Was Persia considered fit three years ago? Is China now considered fit?”

Despite the accuracy of his social observation, was Kang Youwei’s perception of the future of India pessimistic? I do not think so for two reasons. The first is that he witnessed the emergence of the independence movement. He met, possibly in December 1901, Gandhi himself during the one year he spent in India while living in South Africa: “During my stay in India, I discussed with Gandhi and others that, although you are a nation of 300 million people, you are divided by castes and religions. And what about the intelligentsia? It is almost negligible. Here are the reasons for the
Indian fragility. Indians deplore the desperate situation of India. Now, more groups have come together to form the National Congress and are waking up.” The second reason is that Kang maintained great confidence in the strength of religious faith. “Although India has been reduced to slavery, its 200 million Hindus continue to follow the precepts of their religion with rigour. This could therefore regenerate the Indian nation.” Kang Youwei was thus combining his utopian perspective with a lucid political and geopolitical analysis. He wrote in the Datongshu that if a change occurred in the domestic situation of Great Britain or if Great Britain experienced a military defeat against Germany, India would have a chance to regain its independence.

Tagore, an Indian Kang Youwei?

Shortly after Kang Youwei’s last stay in India, the First World War broke out. Kang Youwei’s closest disciple Liang Qichao travelled to Europe in the aftermath of the conflict in 1919. From Paris, he travelled all over Europe and wrote down his numerous impressions. Melancholy invaded him to the point that he compared the sun to a stain of blood. He contemplated the cathedral of Reims bombed by the German army. He noted that in Leuven, German troops had committed the worst acts of violence against civilians and destroyed the University library. The First World War acutely shocked the Asian elites. As Tagore writes: “The torch of European civilization was not meant for showing light, but to set fire”. This is how the most faithful disciple of Kang Youwei ends up writing: “Of the methods of relieving spiritual famine, I recognize the Eastern – Chinese and Indian– to be, in comparison, the best. Eastern learning has the spirit at its starting point, and Western learning has matter…”

Could one therefore hope that the intellectual and spiritual encounter between China and India in the twentieth century had finally taken place?

Gandhi aside, Tagore was the most celebrated and important figure amongst all Indian intellectuals in the twentieth century. Certainly, he did not play as Gandhi any direct political role; nor like Ambedkar, a direct role on Indian constitutionalism; but he founded an ideal university at Shantiniketan (“place of peace” in Hindi) and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 –becoming the first non-European to receive the prestigious distinction. Sometimes called “Gurudev” (“Divine Master”) by his contemporaries, Tagore was not only a poet, painter, lyricist, but also an essayist, the author of Creative Unity, Nationalism, Crisis in Civilisation, The Religion of Man and Greater India. A reading of these few essays gives a sense of the intellectual kinship which could have occurred with Kang Youwei. Like him, Tagore was a great traveller – and his travels included China. Moreover, his judgment on China is not so different from the one Kang Youwei pronounced upon India: a country that suffers because of Western imperialism but has a very long history still full of vitality. This criss-crossing analysis is meaningful and throws light on the common points between the two countries on the edge of much political turmoil.

Tagore made his first trip to China in 1924. He travelled from Calcutta, embarking on March 21st. He arrived in Hong Kong on April 8th. On April 24th, he was in Shanghai where he was hosted by the Association of Literary Studies (Wenxue yanjiuhui), the Shanghai Youth Society (Shanghai qingnianhui) and several personalities such as Zhang Junmai, Zheng Zhenduo and Xu Zhimo – who was not only one of Tagore’s two interpreters during this stay but was also his disciple, adopting the nickname “Sushima”, as he tried to found a community on the model of Shantiniketan in 1929. Tagore stayed in China for about fifty days and visited Shanghai, Hangzhou, Nanjing,
Jinan, Beijing, Taiyuan and Hankou. He left Shanghai, heading for Japan on May 30th. During his stay in China, he met many intellectuals, including Liang Shuming. He also met more atypical personalities like the polyglot Gu Hongming who also wrote under the pen name Amoy Ku, as well as the opera singer Mei Lanfang, and Puyi.

A gifted orator, Tagore invoked in his speeches the greatness of Sino-Indian relationship and asserted he would strengthen this relationship now distended for too long. “I am rather reminded of the day when India claimed you as brothers and sent you her love. That relationship is, I hope, still there, hidden in the heart of all of us –the people of the East. The path to it may be overgrown with the grass of centuries, but we shall find traces of it still.” Or again, “I hope that some great dreamer will spring from among you and preach a message of love and, therewith overcoming all differences, bridge the chasm of passions which has been widening for ages.”

Tagore’s stated goal was to reopen “the ancient channel of spiritual communication” between India and China. At first glance, these words look tainted by religious idealism, but as in the case of the Datongshu, we must decipher the political and even geopolitical project that this thought conceals: Tagore was working to recreate the great unity of the East. India and China would obviously be the two strongest pillars of this renewed Unity.

One can find in Tagore’s views many ideas of the time which were also espoused by Kang Youwei. Thus, the notion of “defeated race”: “We in India are a defeated race; we have no power, political, military or commercial; we do not know how to help or to injure you materially. But, fortunately, we can meet you as your guests, your brothers and your friends; let that happen.” There is in Tagore a mistrust of materialism, which he considers as a Western evil: “I cannot, however, bring myself to believe that any nation in this world can be great and yet be materialistic. I have a belief that no people in Asia can be wholly given to materialism”. That being the case, Tagore observes that the “deformity” of materialism, “the huge demons of ugliness that stalk the world” begins to be seen in Shanghai and Tianjin –but not in Beijing.

Tagore made a second visit to China, a much shorter one, in 1929 in Shanghai. He then resided with Xu Zhimo and his wife, the painter and poet Lu Xiaoman. Liang Shuming was among the personalities that Tagore met, as was Liang Qichao. Liang Qichao made a stay in Europe after the First World War, and he came back disillusioned about Western civilization and a number of its principles: “The Europeans who dreamt of establishing the versatility of science are now conceding their failure, which is the intellectual trend there now.”

Tagore and Liang Qichao appreciated each other greatly and Liang Qichao very warmly welcomed Tagore during the 1924 tour. Liang Qichao, like Tagore, was hoping for reconciliation between India and China. “As brothers, it is our honoured mission for the human beings to cooperate for a long time.” It was Liang Qichao who personally chose a Chinese name for Tagore: Zhu Zhendan. He (Tagore) told me about the first syllable of his name, Rab, meaning the sun, and the next two syllables, Indra, meaning thunder and rain... by choosing these two Chinese characters (Zhendan), there is deep symbolic significance: The thundering shock in the cloudy and misty atmosphere awakens all beings in the universe. The beautiful sun that has bathed in Japan emerges on the horizon. What a scene! This actually is what Rabindranath means, and there is no other word more befitting his name than Zhendan.” From Japan to India, Liang Qichao here drew for Tagore an intellectual map of twentieth century Asia.
Another intellectual whom Tagore met and who also reminds us of the density of the intellectual fabric of this period of transition in the 1920s in China was Hu Shi, the author of the Development of the logical method in ancient China. He was seven years old during the Hundred Days Reform and belonged to the generation following Kang Youwei. Hu Shi was one of the emblematic intellectuals of the May 4th 1919 movement. He had an illustrious career: Ambassador of the Republic of China to the United States, President of Peking University, then President of Academia Sinica from 1958 onwards in Taiwan where he lived until his death in 1962. While Hu Shi, a faithful disciple of John Dewey, was not attracted to the universalist vision of Tagore, nurtured by ancient texts and carried away in a cosmic inspiration –nor to Kang Youwei’s, similar in many ways and legitimist at that– he nevertheless defended Tagore’s freedom of expression and opposed the Leftist youth who distributed leaflets against Tagore at the venue of some of his lectures. “Whether you approve or disapprove of his way of teaching matters little, but what matters is to know him as a person before deciding how you will conduct yourselves toward him. China is known as a country of people who act properly, and we must deserve this reputation. If we wish to live up to our traditional politeness and hospitality, we must receive Dr Tagore with respect. Furthermore, Tagore’s personality, his spirit of literary revolution, his sacrifice for rural education, his movement of rural cooperation, all deserve our respect, to say nothing of his personality, his benevolent countenance, and his humanitarian spirit.”

Eventually, a division emerged in the form of opposition from Leftist writers such as Lu Xun, Guo Moruo, Shen Yanbing, Chen Duxiu, Qu Qiubai. Their main argument was that it was time to revolt, not to meditate and contemplate love. The most severe criticism came not from Chen Duxiu –who was the first to translate Tagore’s poems into Chinese, but who was to become Secretary General of the Chinese Communist Party founded in 1921 in Shanghai– but from Qu Qiubai, who dubbed the Indian master guoqude ren 过去的人, a “man from the past”, a “has-been”. The question then, in this context, would be: was Kang Youwei also to be considered in the same light?

It is true that the ideal of an “Eastern civilization” advocated by Tagore fizzled out, even with Liang Qichao who did not appropriate this ideal cooperation between India and China. Tagore failed to have a dialogue with Kang Youwei, strangely absent during this China tour of 1924. This absence is due to the fact that Kang Youwei himself was a victim of criticism from the new generation of intellectuals and he became increasingly confined to the narrow circle of his relations.

Some concluding reflections

The year 1962 has long been synonymous with the interrupted relationship between China and India, and there are still many tensions at the border between the two countries. Recently, the situation may have improved. For example, China was the guest of honour at the New Delhi World Book Fair in January 2015. In the academic context, several Indian Sinologists are studying China but the priority is very often given to contemporary matters, closer to Chinese Studies than to classical Sinology, despite the legacy of one of the greatest Sino-Indian minds of the twentieth century: Tan Chung 譚中, born in 1929, son of Tan Yunshan who was himself the founder of the Department of Chinese Language at Santiniketan’s “Cheena-Bhavan”, the ideal university founded by Rabindranath Tagore in 1901. Tan Chung contributed greatly to the development of the departments of Chinese studies at Delhi University and Jawaharlal Nehru University between 1964 and 1994. He is also the editor of a two-
volume work of tremendous importance: *Across the Himalayan Gap*. The first volume is subtitled *An Indian Quest for Understanding China* and the second *A Chinese Quest for Understanding India*, both inspired by the “India and China looking at each other” seminar, which opened in September 1996.

Another scholar to whom we must pay tribute is Professor Prabodh Chandra Bagchi (1898-1956), student of Sylvain Lévi and visiting professor at Peking University in 1947. It was thanks to the invitation extended to Sylvain Lévi by Rabindranath Tagore to visit Santiniketan in 1922 that young Bagchi met the eminent French scholar in Indian studies and created this fascinating relationship between the three countries: India, China and France. Indeed, Bagchi studied in France at the École pratique des hautes études from 1923 to 1926, following the courses of the most eminent specialists of India and China: Paul Pelliot, Henri Maspero and Jules Bloch. In 1927, he submitted his thesis “The Buddhist Canon in China” (in two volumes), followed by two Sanskrit-Chinese lexicons. In 1944, in Calcutta, Bagchi published *India and China. A Thousand Years of Cultural Relations* (Zhong-Yin qiannian shi) which includes a chapter entitled “The two Civilizations: A synthesis”. The author brings out the connections between Tian and Varuna, Tianzi and Rajan, the ancestor worship of the Confucian tradition and the Pitryajna, and compares the elegance and simplicity of the Shijing with the hymns of the Rigveda. However, it is disappointing not to find in this book any reference to Kang Youwei, as if the link with contemporary history, in full development both in China and India, could not be established without taking the risk of diminishing the grandeur of classical reflection. This omission can be explained by Professor Bagchi’s caution. When he published his book, Kang Youwei’s China had changed, and although Kang had always been on the side of reformism, his legacy is inevitably related to the overthrow of the Empire and the emergence of Republican China. Moreover, Kang had been openly critical of British colonialism and the art of division, considering the Indian experience as a counter-example, to be avoided at all costs by China if it wanted to maintain its greatness.

Today in New Delhi, bookstore shelves are cluttered with Anglo-Saxon journalism on twentieth and twenty-first century news with catchy titles. More often than not, the Indian or even Chinese point of view is missing. The publication of the novel by Rita Chowdhury, a senior Indian official and former director of the National Book Trust, *Chinatown Days* devoted to the Chinese minority in Assam, in this context, is to be welcomed. It is also important to cite *India, China and the World: A Connected History* by Tansen Sen, director of the Center for Global Asia and Professor of History at New York University, widely viewed in Shanghai.

In the midst of all this, Kang Youwei is an even more powerful inspiration. Kang paved the way towards renewed interest between these two great cultural ensembles that are India and China, and beyond that, their innumerable interconnections with the whole world. It would be appropriate to inscribe under Kang Youwei’s auspices a programme of Sino-Indian exchanges, through the translation of both classic and contemporary texts, regular meetings and considerations on a thought that is, if not utopian, at least cosmopolitan. Only then can this Great Creative Unity be considered, not only as a memory but as a vivid testimony to two figures larger than life, Rabindranath Tagore and Kang Youwei. Eventually, they may meet, and through them, their countries.
Kang Youwei and his daughters Kang Tongwei, Kang Tongfu, Kang Tongbi (Xinhua)
Image courtesy Xinhua Agency

Kang Youwei in his garden, Shanghai, early 1920s
Image courtesy of Special Collections
Poem dedicated to Kang Youwei’s mansion Youcunlu in Shanghai, 1921

Courtesy of Special Collections, Kang Youwei shuxue guoji yanjiu hui (International Association for the study of Kang Youwei)

Calligraphy by Kang Youwei in « kaishu » style, 1923

Courtesy of Special Collections, Kang Youwei shuxue guoji yanjiu hui (International Association for the study of Kang Youwei)
Kang Youwei's last home (desk), Qingdao
Photo Nicolas Idier

Kang Youwei's last home (alligator), Qingdao
Photo Nicolas Idier
Extended Paired Oars for the Book of Art (Guang yizhou shuangji), 1891
Photo Nicolas Idier

Darjeeling Street scene. The majority of the prints in this collection entitled “Album of views of India and Ceylon” are unsigned, however the Darjeeling views may be the work of Johnston & Hoffmann as the company maintained a studio there

British Library commons
Darjeeling in 1880 from above St. Paul's School
Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries

Kolkata, capital city of the British Raj
Public Domain, Heritage Image
Lucknow at the beginning of the 20th Century, La Martinière
Public Domain, Heritage Image, La Martiniere College, Lucknow, India, c. 1925. Cigarette card produced by the Westminster Tobacco Co Ltd, Indian Empire, 1st series

Street Scene Madras (Chennai) - India 1890's
Public Domain, Heritage Image, www.oldindianphotos.in
Tagore and Puyi, at the Forbidden City, Beijing, 1924

Twilight in the Forbidden City by Reginald F. Johnston with a Preface by the Emperor D. Appleton – Century Company Incorporated. New York. 1934

Tagore and the poet Xu Zhimo (right) and the architect Lin Huiyin (left), Beijing, 1924

China Photo Press
NOTES

1. The author expresses his gratitude to Sindhuja Veeraragavan for having revised the English version of this article.


---

INDEX

*Keywords*: cosmopolitanism, utopia, India and China, Tagore, Chinese calligraphy, Liang Qichao, Chinese modernity, Republican Revolution in China, Cultural exchanges, British Empire, British Raj, imperialism, Swaraj, Buddhism, Datongshu, Santiniketan

AUTHOR

NICOLAS IDIER

Nicolas Idier is an author specialised in Chinese studies. He holds a PhD in Art History from the Sorbonne. He has published numerous academic articles on China and India, including « Chinese and Indian Modernity towards the Past: A paradoxical appropriation » in *Exploring Indian Modernities: Ideas and Practices*, Springer, 2018. His last four novels have been shortlisted for major literary awards. *Electric Nights in Beijing, a novel*, is published in English translation by Yatra Books, New Delhi, 2020. He has been working as a cultural diplomat at the French Embassy in China and at the French Institute in India from 2010 to 2018. He is currently deputy director of the “Cité internationale de la bande dessinée et de l’image”, a research institute and national museum dedicated to comics and visual culture.