
Xu Beihong and India: An Alliance Never Explored

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ABSTRACT:

Despite the long history of Sino Indian cultural and artistic exchange, the artistic discourses in the modern era remain confined within a limited periphery. As a conjugated chapter to this history, in the mid of twentieth century, Chinese painter and calligrapher Xu Beihong's emergent visit to Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan left unanticipated impact on the art practice of the local artists and art scholars; but this artistic visit also had a reverse effect on the visiting Chinese artist, resulting in polemics on Xu's later artistic oeuvre and which should be studied thoroughly. This article will intimately observe some of the major art works created by Xu Beihong during his brief tenure in India, and will attempt to argue that this cultural/artistic exchange was not one sided and had also influenced the visitor's art and shaped an unique Asian artistic style.

Key words: *Xu Beihong, Chinese Art, Kala-Bhavana, Painting, Sino-Indian Art.*

Since last few years, the geopolitical relationship between two giant neighbors, China and India are agitated with the blatant allegations of unauthorized Chinese invasion into the Indian soil. Was this the only instance when the Chinese tried to invade into the Indian soil? The answer can be very obvious and most of us will say that they are doing it for quite a few years now; some might even say that this commenced during the first Sino-Indian war in 1962. Then the next apparent question will be, was 'hostile incursion' the only mode of connectivity between the two states? – Certainly not; however, many will never try to perceive that these two nations have a long standing history of cultural communication and reciprocation. Even in the modern world, this affinity was operative and over a half a century ago, Xu Beihong's visit to Tagore's Santiniketan in the midst of the last turbulent decade of British Colonial India clearly illustrate this presumption. Although, like most other major issues related to Sino-Indian cultural exchange, this was also subdued and unheeded without any further discussions.

The two Asian countries, India and China, apart from their ancient history walked in almost parallel pathways of cultural transformation in the twentieth century. The western realism in art introduced in both of these countries in the late nineteenth century to the early decades of twentieth century and transformed the general perception of art education. Although for India, it came through the western colonizers, who ruled India for over two hundred years; whereas early Chinese painters traveled to Japan in order to master the western techniques. Unlike Western colonizers, Japan as an Asian colonizer during the early half of twentieth century played a vital role to preserve, develop and utilize the Asian art tradition. The first Japanese artist, who visited India, was leading artist and art scholar Kakuzu Okakura (1863 – 1913), who was invited to Calcutta

in 1901-1902 by the nationalist monk Swami Vivekananda (1863 – 1903). He not only influenced the local artist and art scholars but also wrote his book “The Ideals of the East”ⁱ during his stint in Calcutta and also insisted Bengali Poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861 – 1941) to visit and explore the heritages of Chinese Art. As a consequence, the great poet and then painter Nandalal Bose (1882 – 1966) visited China in 1924ⁱⁱ; afterword artist Binod Bihari Mukherjee (1904 – 1980) also visited china in 1937. Moving through this newly found relationship, the first Chinese painter to visit India was none other than Xu Beihong, who during the heydays of Republic of China, came to Calcutta in 1940 by the invitation of Poet Rabindranath Tagoreⁱⁱⁱ: this visit certainly had a great impact on the Indian art scene.

It was a cloudy mid-March day in Beijing, and I reached the threshold of the “Xu Beihong’s Former Residence” (Image 1), which is now turned into a memorial museum by the Chinese Government^{iv}. The commodious edifice is located in a middle-class quite ambience of the city. Unlike any of its neighboring buildings, Xu’s former residence is indeed discrepant with the rapidly developing Chinese capital where skyscrapers covered the actual sky. Its archaic but robust and graceful architecture provides a vignette of immemorial pre-communist Beijing. After Xu’s untimely death in 1956, the original residence was given to the Chinese Government by his wife, who transformed it into a huge Museum that houses most of Xu’s works, articles long with his own collection of rare artifacts. Throughout the year the Museum is open for art lovers. It was a dream for me to visit it someday, perhaps much more than the average dream of visit *The Louvre* in Praise; more so because that’s well documented and widely popular among the art enthusiasts of this sub-continent since the past century. The moment of epiphany of witnessing Xu’s master pieces in his own residence overwhelmed me. But who was Xu Beihong? For any non-Chinese, it would be difficult to fathom Xu’s importance in Chinese Modern Art history, but any average student of Chinese art without any reservation can tell you that Xu Beihong is the father figure of modern Chinese art history. More because of the role he played to shape the art practice in post-1949 People’s Republic of China^v. It is also interesting to note that before the creation of P. R. China, Xu Beihong’s visit to India has changed his own ways of seeing the world as well as it transformed the discourse of modern Indian painting.

The untamed towering horse painting that disseminated Xu Beihong (1895 - 1953) in to his iconic fame was not all that he stood for. After the birth of the “People’s Republic of China” in 1949, Xu^{vi} with his connection and dominance over the Communist Part and Chinese Art scene respectively, was the one to shape the next decades of newly formed China’s art practice. Xu, as an apostle of the Chinese Art, was personally cherished by Tagore. Motivated to reinvent and rebuild a cultural relationship between India and China, in 1939 Tagore invited Xu to spend a productive tenure at his own abode of peace Visva-Bharti University’s Kala-Bhavana^{vii} (the Institute of Fine Arts); the concept of this overture was to organize exhibitions and lectures on Chinese art. Overwhelmed by this invitation, Xu arrived in Santiniketan in 1939 and stayed there for a few months for regular lecture and demonstration of painting/calligraphic techniques for the Santiniketan students and scholars. It was the golden age of Visva - Bharati, when luminaries of the Santiniketan Art School - Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Bajj (1906–1980), Gauri Bhanja (1907–1998) and Binod Behari Mukherjee were present along with the prodigious appearance of Tagore to observe and interact with this esteemed guest. Tagore was an ardent admirer of Xu’s fluid

style; he even wanted him to teach the Chinese painting and calligraphy to the students and teachers of Kala-Bhavana. Certainly, Xu played a vital role to grow artist's interest towards Far-East Asian art by his scholarly explanations of artistic and aesthetic significance of Chinese and Japanese traditions. In 1939, Xu arranged his first exhibition of paintings at Visva-Bharati University and later exhibited for the second time at Calcutta. In his two years long stint in India, Xu stayed at Tagore's Kala-Bhavana apart from traveling to Calcutta and northeastern India, where he created a bulk of amazing art works inspired by the Indian scenario and Indian people.

Tagore created his bucolic abode of peace (Santiniketan) far from the urban life, where the nature and people can dwell in perfect harmony, and this positively fascinated the Chinese painter. Along with the numerous portraits and sketches, Xu painted landscape and detailed tree studies to capture the tranquil charm of Santiniketan's lucid nature. The important aspects of Xu's tenor at Santiniketan were the learning experience for the Indian artists and at the same time exploit this opportunity to comprehend the nuances of Chinese art. With Tagore's puissant progressive ideas, the Kala-Bhavana explored a new path beyond the amplitude of colonial academic art preached by institutions like the Calcutta Art-schools. Thus Kala-Bhavana turned into the nucleus of a new movement in Indian art with a modern, comprehensive predilection that seek to adjoin the East with the West and stimulated Indian artists to pursue a whole new spectrum of imagination, innovation and engage the individual expression to an universal art. This is where Xu Beihong enters into this discourse – although Xu was a master of both Eastern and Western painting techniques, his expertise in Chinese water colour painting and calligraphic techniques assisted the Santiniketan artists to realize the veritable potential of a non-colonial art movement. Xu Beihong's teaching had a considerable impact on the art practice of Kala-Bhavana community – this is evident in the post 1940 paintings made by the Santiniketan ideals like Nandalal, Gauri Bhanja and Binod Behari.

At Santiniketan, Xu painted ten portraits of the great poet, among them one was in Oil (Image 2) and the rest were ink wash paintings. This was a time, when the Indian struggle for independence was reaching its final stage. Eventually, at Santiniketan Xu met the preeminent leader Mahatma Gandhi (1869 -1948). This meeting left a considerable influence over his psyche. He not only made a portrait sketch of Gandhi but also wrote extensively about his meeting with the doyen of Indian freedom movement. After his tenure at Santiniketan, Xu organized an exhibition of his paintings in Calcutta^{viii} in February 1940. After the exhibition, he traveled to the serene hills of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, and stayed there for almost a year. During his sojourn in the mountains, Xu fall in love with the nature and people of this area. He finished a number of landscape paintings, mostly in ink wash and water colour, of the tranquil natural beauty. This prolonged productive refuge compelled Xu to contemplate of his most renowned work "Yugong Removing the Mountain" (also known "Foolish Old Man Who Removes the Mountains"); he initially painted an ink wash composition which he later transformed in a bigger oil paint version. For this huge oil painting, Xu used his numerous sketches of Indian individuals, which he created during his stay at Calcutta. Finally in December 1941, Xu Beihong ended his Indian tour and returned to Singapore for the fifth annual exhibition of the *Society of Chinese Artists*. His selected paintings, including the Portraits of Tagore and "Yugong Removing the Mount"

were exhibited there, and thus invoking a pan Asian connectivity which was once dreamt by another oriental scholar Okakura.



Image 1: Xu Beihong's life-like statue at the entrance of Xu Beihong Museum in Beijing.

Photo Courtesy-Author.

The Xu Beihong Museum has an area of about 3,200 square meters with seven large exhibit halls and the former studio of Xu^{ix}. The studio is now made into a thriving art training centre by the Chinese Government, where professors from Beijing's Central Art Academy teach painting techniques to advance level students from China and abroad^x. My entry to the main museum building left me spellbound with the level of orderliness and cares to maintain the museum untainted like it was at the time of Xu. Perhaps it's not only the money that obligates the museum staff but their respect and fondness towards Xu and his art. I was here mainly to observe the artistic genius of Xu from an intimate distance. The museum provided a distinguishable display area for his works produced in India; this includes the oil painting portrait of Tagore (Image 2) and the portraits of other Indian luminaries, numerous sketches and landscape paintings. Apart from Tagore's portraits, the main attraction was certainly a detailed replica of Xu's most famous and largest painting "Yugong Removing the Mountain"^{xi}. Let's discuss about this painting. The painting was based on a popular Chinese story *Beichan Yugong* from the classic work of *Liezi*^{xii}. It was the high time of Second Sino-Japanese war (1937 – 1945) when Xu created this epic art-work; actually he was eager to exploit the popularity of the story through his art as a metaphor to laud his countrymen's war efforts against the Japanese imperialistic aggression. The painting considered as Xu's artistic way of inspiring his own people and the hope for them to persevere against all hostilities. Despite the fact that it was produced in India, the painting fairly alludes that China and its people were always existent in Xu's psyche. Although the painting seemingly follows the Chinese traditional paintings style, especially for its background, but the figures on the foreground were painted in a manner closer to western realism, where the artist added many complex anatomical details. All the figures and the forms on the painting surface were mostly diligently modulated. All most all the muscular human

figures on the forefront, except the Yugong (the foolish old man) and the lady beside him, were modeled after Indian individuals – for this Xu used the numerous sketches done in India. Xu denied the western concept of painting and used bold black line to outline these figures – the lines were sinuous and flowing and they hints Xu’s mastery in Calligraphy; this uniqueness coupled with (almost) shadow-less colour shades the painting gained an exceptional three dimensional effect. Xu had rejected the classical Chinese art’s compositional restriction and instead a complex fixed-point perspective composition. He used naturalistic earthly colours to show his inclination towards western realism. In the foreground of the painting, six robust, tanned skinned men are laboriously working on the mountain. Out of the six men, five are young, naked, sturdy and brawny, but the sixth one is a voluminous older person. Only the sixth man, showing his back to the viewer, is wearing an *Indian Dhoti*; there’s also an elephant standing beside him, probably for menial labor. The elephant and *Dhoti* here show distinctive influence of Indian culture. There is an old man, a village colleen and a buffalo cart painted at the centre of the painting; here Xu balanced the Indian influence with the Chinese buffalo^{xiii}. Unlike the rest of the figures, the old man, presumably the main protagonist Yugong (the foolish old man) and the girl distinctly resemble Chinese villagers; they are also wearing typical Chinese clothes and here they seem culturally different from the sixth man donning a *Dhoti*. Maintaining this congruence with the central protagonist, the background, which is chiefly covered with bamboos shoots, were painted in Chinese ink style. However, this Chinese backdrop is seemingly fading away with the cogent presence of the muscular Indian men on the forefront of the painting. The painting can be seen as the consummate example of an unique art-form where three different art and cultures (Chinese, Western and Indian) successfully amalgamated to create a modern Asian genre.



Image 2 (Left): Tagore’s portrait in Oil, Xu Beihong Museum Beijing. Image 3 (Right) : Xu’s sketch of an Indian man, Xu Beihong Museum Beijing. Photo Courtesy-Author.

Xu Beihong and his artistic tenor in India were as substantial to India as it is to China. Xu himself was influenced with Indian culture and his later works are affirming to this statement. At the same time, his creative oeuvre had a greater impact on Indian artists and their creations. Unfortunately, unlike their Chinese counterparts, Indian authorities are almost oblivious to this

little piece of history. Sixty years have been passed since the premature death of Xu Beihong, and history brought us into a new hinge, when we should employ a supportive role to perceive Xu's importance in the Sino-Indian cultural dialogue and act accordingly to preserve his remaining artifacts at the Visva – Bharati Universities, which can surely open a new chapter in Indian art history.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ This book on Asian artistic and cultural history was written during his visit to Kolkata and later published from London on the eve of the Russo-Japanese War (1904 – 1905) and it's considered as a distinguishable work on Asian cultural and art, where Okakura talked about a spiritual unity throughout Asia and that certainly includes Japan, China and India. See Kakuzo Okakura, *THE IDEALS OF THE EAST WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE ART OF JAPAN*, John Murray, 1903.

ⁱⁱ For details about this visit see, Sisir Kumar Das, "The Controversial Guest: Tagore in China", *India And China In The Colonial World*, Social Science Press, 2011: 85 – 125.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Amitava Bhattacharya, "In Search of a Forgotten Dialogue: Chinese and Indian Artists Since 1924." *Tagore and China*, Sage, 2011; Das Gupta, Uma. *Rabindranath Tagore: An Illustrated Life*. Oxford University Press, 2013:83.

^{iv} See my earlier published short travelogue R. Bhowmik, "Xu Beihong's India", *The Art Daily*, 22 Aug. 2013.

^v In Mao Zedong's China, Xu was undoubtedly the most powerful person to direct and reshape the Chinese Art practice. He was the President of the Central Academy of Fine Arts (the most influential Art institute in entire China) and also the chairman of Chinese Artists' Association, the government organization responsible to control the art practice in China. See, "Painting Academies and Western Influence." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin: New Series* Vol. 58.No. 3 (2001): Pp. 20-22; "Xu Beihong.", China Online Museum. Web.

^{vi} Xu started his initial training in classical Chinese calligraphy and painting under his father Xu Dazhang, eventually he traveled to Tokyo to study far eastern techniques. In 1919 Xu went Europe to study academic painting, and thus became one of the first Chinese to obtain western art education. During his 8 long years there, Xu achieved great skills from prestigious institutes like *École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts* and *Berlin Art Academy*. To study more about Xu and his artistic pursuit, see "Painting Academies and Western Influence." *The Metropolitan Museum*

of *Art Bulletin: New Series* Vol. 58.No. 3 (2001): Pp. 20-22; "Xu Beihong and Qi Baishi: Grazing Horse." *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1 Oct. 2006.

^{vii} Tagore established this noted fine-arts institute as a part of his Santiniketan Ashrama in 1919. Tagore invited painter Sri Nandalal Bose, who later traveled to China in 1924, to become first principal of this institution. Another noteworthy faculty of this institute is Sri Binod Bihari Mukherjee who also went to China to study their art and culture, see Amitava Bhattacharya, "In Search of a Forgotten Dialogue: Chinese and Indian Artists Since 1924." *Tagore and China*, Sage, 2011.

^{viii} It was much before Calcutta's name became "Kolkata". At that time it was known as Calcutta, the former capital of British India and I am here using that name.

^{ix} See "Xu Beihong Museum." *Xu Beihong. Org*; R. Bhowmik, "Xu Beihong's India", *The Art Daily*, 22 Aug. 2013.

^x *Ibid.*

^{xi} For about 10 years (1941 – 1951) the original work was hidden in a dry well in Singapore and it was recently auctioned for US\$4.12 million, paid by an unnamed (Chinese) collector, see Wang, Shanshan. "Painting Scales a Mountain for Record Price." *China Daily* 27 June 2006: P-1.

^{xii} The story depicts an old man decided to remove two mountains blocking the way from his house. Despite all the derision and disbelief, the old man along with his sons and grandsons arduously endeavored in the task of removing those mountains. His exertion and determination impressed the god, who removed the mountains. *Ibid.*

^{xiii} In Indian context elephants are used for laborious works and similarly Chinese people traditionally use buffalos for strenuous works.

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