

An Inter-cultural Study between Chen Duxiu and Tagore's Anti-imperialist Strategies

Haiyan Yao^{a,*}, Wenbin Wang^{2,b}

¹Institute of Foreign Language, Ren'ai College, Tianjin, China

²Institute of Foreign Language, Liaoning University, Shenyang, Liaoning, China

^a504145836@qq.com, ^bdaniel7778@163.com

Keywords: Materialistic Tool Theory, Utopianism, Pragmatism, The Dispute between Science and Metaphysics, Cultural Identity

Abstract: Tagore's visit to China in 1924 caused two kinds of reactions from domestic intellectual circle, including welcome and fierce attack. Chen Duxiu was the representative who opposed Tagore's oriental civilization theory. Chen Duxiu refuted Tagore's cosmopolitanism with materialism tool theory. Chen Duxiu's anti-imperialist practice is the victory of effective pragmatism, while Tagore's anti-imperialist strategy is utopianism. Tagore was involved in the dispute between science and metaphysics between 1923 and 1924, and became the reinforcement invited by the intellectuals of metaphysical school in China. The differences between Chen Duxiu and Tagore are not only due to the differences in national conditions and historical views, but also due to their different cultural identities. Tagore participated in the post-colonial anti-imperialist context as a poet, and his theory of oriental civilization salvation was sometimes a set of effective methods, but sometimes it would become a tool used by imperialism.

1. Introduction

In 1924, Tagore visited China, which caused great repercussions in the domestic cultural circles. On the one hand, major newspapers and magazines in China, such as Shenbao, Novel Monthly, and New Youth in Buddhism, were full of reports on Tagore's grand visit to China, and cultural celebrities and masters such as Liang Qichao, Lin Huiyin, Gu Hongming and Cai Yuanpei extended their warmest welcome to him. Xu Zhimo accompanied and translated Tagore's speeches in Beijing and Shanghai. Tagore was even received by Pu Yi, the emperor of the Qing Dynasty, and was also welcomed by the monks of Fayuan Temple in Beijing. On the other hand, scholars who supported the New Culture Movement criticized Tagore sharply. Among them, Chen Duxiu, whose pen name was Shi An, was the fiercest and most ruthless critic.

As early as 1915, Chen introduced Tagore's works in the second volume of *La Jeunesse*. He translated four poems in *Gitanjali*, and objectively evaluated Tagore's position in literature as "advocating the spiritual civilization of the East Asia" and "his poems are rich in the ideal of religious philosophy"[1]. Chen's translation on these four poems adopted the form of ancient Chinese poetry. There is such a sentence. "Into that heaven of freedom. My father, let my country awake." [1] It seems to be an annotation of an awakening generation. But why did he launch an almost abusive attack on Tagore in 1924? Tagore was also an advocate and practitioner of Indian literary revolution. Why was Chen Duxiu, a literary revolutionary, totally opposed to it? Was Chen Duxiu's attitude towards Tagore a misunderstanding, as some scholars have analyzed? What is the difference between Tagore's awakening and Chen Duxiu's awakening?

In the framework of comparative culture, this paper mainly adopts the perspective of post-colonialism to provide the answers to the above research questions, and analyzes Tagore's and Chen Duxiu's strategies against colonialism, so as to answer the reason why Chen Duxiu criticized Tagore fiercely in 1924. This article will cite some strong evidence to prove the rationality of his remarks in that stormy era, and try to avoid using contemporary people's ethics to analyze the events of a hundred years ago, in order to go deep into the original appearance of history, and give

Chen Duxiu a fair evaluation.

2. Inter-cultural Study between Chen Duxiu and Tagore's Anti-imperialist Strategies

2.1. The Theory of the Salvation by the East and the Theory of Material Civilization as a Tool

Tagore and Chen Duxiu used different strategies in the anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movements based on different national conditions. The colonial nature of India had become a fact. Tagore used a discourse strategy that transcended colonialism, trying to make India's culture occupy a place in British colonial India. He also pointed out the problem of colonialism, and that the expansion of western material desires will inevitably lead to the emptiness of the soul. Tagore discovered the problem of colonialism. Even if colonialism brought India more material wealth and higher living standards, if the way of life was completely British, Indians would actually have lost their souls, and then Indian culture would really die. Tagore called on Indians to carry forward their own culture, which can even cure the chronic diseases of western culture and cure the confused hearts of westerners caused by the disintegration of traditional values in the 20th century. This makes Tagore stand at the level of the whole human race, not only keeping his own soul for Indians, but also standing at the height of all mankind, showing his extensive love for all mankind, which is why Tagore is so popular all over the world.

Tagore was criticized in 1924 because of his speeches in China. The purpose of his visit to China was to revive the eastern ideas and Asian culture: "Some young people in Asia have obliterated the ancient Asian civilization, but it is a big mistake to follow the ideas of western culture and try to absorb them. Western culture tends to be material, but there are many defects on the spiritual side. This view is evident in the bankruptcy of western culture in the European war. On the contrary, the oriental civilization is the most sound." [2] After reading this speech, Chen Duxiu immediately refuted Tagore's misunderstanding of the value of science and civilization itself: "He didn't know that the competition and killing among human beings was due to the fact that under the private property system, the society could not guarantee the material survival of each individual, so each individual had to contend for their own existence and protect their descendants. Clash and kill between classes was caused because the special class monopolizes the poor people's material and spiritual right to live, and the oppressed class has to fight. ...all due to the social and economic system under private ownership, which is not the sin of science and material civilization itself at all." [3] Here, Chen Duxiu used the principles of Marxism, expounding that material civilization is only a tool, and would only play different roles according to different social systems. In a society of private ownership, science and material civilization can be used as tools for fighting and killing. In a society with mutual ownership, it is the source of good health. Tagore believed that the western civilization was in crisis because of excessive material desires, while Chen, from the perspective of Marxism, analyzed that the excessive desire of human beings was not due to material, but due to the existence of private ownership.

Tagore was an anti-imperialist patriot and a man who cares about politics. On April 13th, 1919, the British colonists in India massacred civilians who gathered peacefully in a park, resulting in the Amritsar massacre. Angry Tagore showed his patriotism by returning his knighthood. In a letter to India's *Modern Watch* magazine, Tagore said that India's long-term subordination caused the public's silent and painful anger. "After losing all the special treatment, I hope to stand with my compatriots. Although they are insignificant, they can endure the unbearable humiliation of human beings." [4] This view of being able to endure humiliation as an advantage, in the eyes of a religious figure, was the only way to enlightenment. However, in Chen Duxiu's view, it happened to be the malady that led to the backwardness of the East in the Eastern civilization: "Being content with one's living conditions is also a unique thought of the East. In Tagore's opinion, it is precisely because the East has this brilliant idea that it is superior to the western society where people are not satisfied with contentment and can't bear to be easy. As we all know, the oriental nations are rich in the peace thought of giving in, being content and being patient--the peace thought of slaves. Therefore, the Chinese are still living in a situation of struggling among soldiers and bandits." [2]

Chen pointed out that contentment and self-restraint are just the root of the long-term enslavement of Asians oppressed by western powers. Tagore rooted this nationalist behavior in universal humanity, and what he protested was also the unbearable insult faced by human beings. He wants to help his own nation as well as all nations. This kind of writer's fraternity was understood by Chen Duxiu to be exactly the same as Lao Zi's philosophy which he thought was outdated. His evaluation of Tagore was that "the gentleman's heart is sincere and bitter, but his skill is absurd." Therefore, he refuted that "the origin of fighting and killing among ethnic groups alone is when the productive forces of capitalist countries have developed to the point where they have to import raw materials and export surplus raw products to safeguard their class privileges; imperialism that invades weak ethnic groups naturally forms. Imperialism is the natural result of the development of capitalism, that is, the only motive force for ethnic groups to compete and kill." [3] Chen Duxiu believes that Tagore chose a wrong reason to lead the oriental nation into the liberation movement. At the critical moment of survival, when the material civilization was almost zero, the industry was naive, the culture was backward, and it was unnecessary to pursue the luxurious spiritual civilization. Therefore, Chen believed that Tagore's internationalism strategy with oriental culture as its essence was not feasible in China.

Chen Duxiu's point of view was later brutally confirmed in Japan: the western material civilization without its own fault had become a tool for exercising regional hegemony in Japan, which fostered Japan's imperialist ambitions. Tagore once went to Japan to give a speech with his oriental cultural ideal, and attacked Japan's embrace of western science and materialism with the culture preserved by China and India. He believed that Chinese and Indian cultures were like buds, which would blossom one day and become the status symbol of Asia. Japan's notorious theory of co-prosperity of Greater East Asia was caused by Okakura Tenshin (1863-1913), a Japanese historian and artist deeply influenced by Tagore's works, who spread Tagore's view of oriental culture back to Japan. He made Japanese militarists think that Japan was a museum with Indian, Chinese and Western cultures. As a result, he interpreted the coexistence of these cultures as the basis of Japan's right to lead Asia. At this point, Tagore's idea of painstakingly advising the world to keep spiritual freedom has also been ruthlessly used by the imperialists. Therefore, Tagore was criticized by western scholars, who thought that the oriental spirit he defended was extremely easy to be used by imperialism and became an accomplice of imperialism in squeezing the weak nations.

2.2. Utopianism and Pragmatism

Tagore's decolonization strategy with love as the carrier is a kind of utopianism. Canadian scholar Sandeep Banerjee explored the integration of decolonization and utopianism by drawing on Tagore's creativity and critical thinking. He believes that Tagore's works not only reflected people's unremitting efforts to get rid of the shackles of capitalism and nationalism on post-colonial activities, but also emphasized the cultural labor that promotes the decolonization process. Tagore's works on the decolonization theory against materialism linked him with Antonio Gramsci, Frantz Fanon, a theorist of culture and colonialism. Lahiri, an American scholar, believes that Tagore's *Gitanjali* has two versions: Hindi and English, in which there are many Indian dialects and traditions, and even the title of the book is written in native language. [4] The work reveals an ideal of defending and spreading oriental culture and retaining a cultural enclave. "He is trying to show the world that the value they give to Asia is not through bloodshed, but through enlightenment. Tagore, after all, labors to demonstrate that the values they attributed to Asia were transmitted not through blood but through cultivation." [5] At that time in India, British colonialism has formed a strong fortress, and the act of striving for independence needs to sprout and infiltrate slowly from the inside. The best way was to confront or even eliminate the western colonial discourse through the inherent cultural and spiritual civilization in the East. This kind of post-colonial strategy is fundamentally contrary to Chen Duxiu's materialistic anti-imperialist strategy, and they naturally became the two extremes of the debate.

This utopian anti-imperialist strategy was proved by the reality to be ineffective and out of date in China at that time. China was not subjugated, but it was on the verge of subjugation, being

divided by foreign powers, and it was in urgent need of action. The government was preparing for the North Expedition to overthrow the warlords who were backed by the western powers. Chen Duxiu, who had profound literary accomplishment but devoted all his energy to the nation's revolution, took the action of overthrowing imperialism directly through class confrontation as his strategy. Chen Duxiu's strategy was concrete and urgent, which required both enlightenment and sacrifice. He had been the secretary of the Communist Party of China for 4 sessions. "In 1924, after the cooperation between the Kuomintang and the Communist Party, he had to coordinate the relationship between the Russian Communist Party, the Communist International and its representative Polotin, deal with the contradiction with the Kuomintang, and lead the party affairs and revolutionary movements throughout the country. In addition, at that time, there were few cadres in charge of the central government, and Chen Duxiu was extremely busy." [6] He had no energy to do meticulous study on Tagore's anti-imperialist strategy, so he only published several longer critical articles like "Tagore and Oriental Culture" and "Comments on Tagore's Speech in Hangzhou and Shanghai". There were only a few shorter articles published in *the Guide*, and they were not discussed in detail, because the first two long articles had been discussed in detail. Chen Duxiu's strategy was a pragmatic one.

2.3. Tagore was Involved in the Vortex of the Debate between Science and Metaphysics

Tagore's visit was in the tenth year of the New Culture Movement. In 1923, a conservative scholar, Zhang Junmai, gave a lecture entitled "Outlook on Life" in Tsinghua University, which set off a debate between the scientific school and the metaphysical school. Yan Fu and Liang Qichao, representatives of the metaphysical school, respectively set off the trend of thought of restoring ancient ways and oriental culture, while Hu Shi, Wang Xinggong and others countered them with materialistic and naturalistic outlook on life. A forum "Science and Outlook on Life" was set up in Wang Xinggong's *Morning News Supplement*, and an article of the same name was published in *Effort Weekly*. Chen Duxiu and Hu Shi respectively wrote a preface, which was also published in *La Jeunesse*. In the preface, Chen Duxiu humorously pointed out that the Chinese intellectual class had finally made a little progress, and no longer discussed whether "wires are spider spirits". He not only laughed at the metaphysical school's lack of the common sense of social science, but also laughed at the fact that the debate between the scientific school and the metaphysical school was "pot calling the kettle black", because the metaphysical school could give some specious evidence about "why science can't dominate the outlook on life, while the scientific school failed to point out any evidence about why science can dominate the outlook on life." [8] Chen Duxiu used historical materialism to elaborate various customs, behaviors and morals, thoughts and emotions of human society, all of which were secretly restricted by economic relations and objective environment. He held that the metaphysical school has fallen into agnosticism. "If there is no material or economic foundation, the metaphysical school can cause such a big world war, then we have to admit that Zhang Junmai's so-called free will is really powerful." [7]

As a matter of fact, this big debate was coming to an end. Just at this time, Tagore came to Tsinghua University to give a speech, telling the youth that western civilization has led to war, and materialism has become a monster, and this monster is also in Chinese cities, such as Tianjin, Shanghai, etc. It sounds like this was exactly what the retro school and the metaphysical school wanted. This only led to Chen Duxiu's anger, because he thought it would poison the people who had already begun to wake up, especially the young people, and it would greatly affect the awakening of the nation who had worked hard for many years and sacrificed countless lives. Besides, at this moment, the momentum of the May 4th Movement has passed, and apart from a few awakened young people running around for the country, the society was still filled by a group of dead people. "Needless to say the walking dead. There is another group of young people who are about to wake up, but led to sleep by Laozi and Zhuangzi's philosophy or some eastern culture, ... In China, only a few young students are awake. How dangerous it is!" [8]

In short, apart from Hu Shi's attitude towards Tagore, which changed from opposition to neutrality, Tagore was unanimously attacked by the scientific school, especially in *The Guide*. Wu

Zhihui alluded to Tagore as a “waste of nature” in his “A kind word to Tagore”, and Yun Daiying said that Tagore was invited by “metaphysical ghosts” in China. In Shen Yanbing’s “Thoughts after Reading Tagore’s Two Beijing-Shanghai Speeches”, he said, “Tagore shouted ‘oriental culture’, but he didn’t clearly explain what oriental culture was. Isn’t it very much like a disgraced resident shouting the ‘virtues of ancestors’ to console himself?”[9] among such critical articles, which criticism is not more intense than Chen Duxiu’s?

2.4. The Dislocation of identity: Poet and Revolutionary

Tagore was Gandhi’s friend and comrade, his interlocutor and admirer, but when Gandhi began to call on Indians to destroy machines and give up their ownership in the later stage of the non-violent non-cooperative movement, Tagore disagreed. Tagore was very opposed to Gandhi’s call for Indians to fight colonialism by spinning at home. He believed that this behavior turned Indians into spinning machines and was an obstacle to the anti-colonial liberation movement. The spiritual and purely aesthetic *Gitanjali* is indeed a kind of autonomy and independence that is essentially out of the western context. Even his most political expression is written in the form of hymns. This is the ultimate autonomy of the spiritual self, not political autonomy. In fact, India’s liberation movement led by Gandhi was successful, so Tagore’s anti-colonial idea was not approved and understood in his own country, let alone in China.

When most British and American readers interpreted *Gitanjali* as a spiritual aesthetics that can make up for the ills of western civilization, Chinese intellectuals often thought that it pays tribute to the unspeakable laws of the universe by using poetics and aesthetics. So Chinese readers including Chen Duxiu only regarded him as a poet.

So when Tagore claimed to be a revolutionary to the Chinese audience, “If you reject me, you have this freedom. But as a revolutionary, I have the right to carry the banner of spiritual freedom in your materialistic shrine”[10]. Many Chinese revolutionaries were angry. Chen Duxiu, a materialist who took part in numerous debates and spreaded the scientific outlook, accused Tagore of poisoning Chinese youth with the outdated oriental spirit, which would revive the old customs that the May 4th Movement tried to held back in the past: we have had enough of those confused and meaningless discussions about “spirit”. “We have had enough of the confused thoughts of Laozi and Zhuangzi and the confused Buddhist thoughts, and we already feel a lot of India’s gift.”[11] After returning to India, Tagore was in a bad mood. He recalled that “some of your patriots are afraid that the spiritual pollution from India will weaken your vigorous faith in money and materialism. For those who are nervous, I assure you, I didn’t mean to offend; I have no power to harm their progressive cause, and it’s futile to pull them back and stop them from going to the market to sell their souls that they don’t believe in.”[12] It can be seen that Tagore did not understand the true connotation of Chen Duxiu and other revolutionary undertakings at all. One of Tsinghua University’s papers, “Closed Openness”, summed up the public opinion climate of Chinese intellectuals in 1920 with “Closed Openness”[13] put forward by American scholar Allen Bloom . Tagore had the same closed openness. He came to China with sincerity, but the pride of being a writer, philosopher and Nobel Prize winner permeated in his speech. His mind was also closed against the real situation of China at that time.

By contrast, in 1915, Chen Duxiu explicitly regarded the ethnic differences between the East and the West as the difference between water and fire in the essay “The Differences between Eastern and Western Civilizations”. According to Chen, From ancient times to the present, Westerners had always advocated war, individualism, legal system and practicality. But orientals like to rest in peace, family life, feelings and empty words. This kind of difference leads to China’s inability to develop not only their society, but also individuals’ ability and self-expression. The purpose of his comparison was to arouse the shame of Chinese people and make them change the old customs with advanced western lifestyle. He went on to discuss that this was not to simply imitate western technology or system, and that wrong imitation had already been made by the Westernization Movement. What we really need to learn is an all-round political awakening, so that people can know that they have a country, and they can firmly believe that they have the right to own this

country and are responsible for it. After more than half a century of humiliation for Chinese people, Chen Duxiu keenly felt the arrival of modernity. He stated in an article “1916” that “our people should have special feelings and unsurpassed hopes for this year. We have our own history until 1915. We have committed sins and humiliated ourselves politically, socially, morally and academically, though we can’t laugh at them. When the old cloth is replaced with the new one, we should repent and turn over a new leaf.”[14] Developing industry and pursuing national independence and freedom are the most urgent tasks for Chinese people who had been humiliated for more than half a century.

3. Conclusion

Chen Duxiu made an objective evaluation of western material civilization by using historical materialism. However, in the 1920s, the oriental spirit advocated by Tagore was exploited by Japanese imperialism with ulterior motives, who took the master of oriental civilization as a mask, but carried out imperialism and militarism in its bones, falsely called for greater East Asia’s co-prosperity and pan-Asianism, but killed innocent people in East Asian countries without humanity, which brought deep suffering to the people of East Asian countries. It violated Tagore's propaganda of love. It led people to agree more with Chen Duxiu’s argument that what is guilty is not the material civilization that Tagore said, but the imperialist behaviors that are like the heart of darkness.

References

- [1] Chen Duxiu. Hymn [J]. Youth Magazine, 1915,1(2): 42-43.
- [2] Shi An (Chen Duxiu). Tagore and Eastern Culture [J]. Chinese Youth, 1924,2(27):1-2.
- [3] Shi An (Chen Duxiu). Comment on Tagore’s speech in Hangzhou and Shanghai [N]. National Daily. Consciousness, 1924,4(25):1-3.
- [4] LAHIRI. Imperfect Solidarities: Tagore, Gandhi, Du Bois, and the Global Anglophone.[M]. Northwestern University Press, 2020.
- [5] GVILI. Pan-Asian Poetics: Tagore and the Interpersonal in May Fourth New Poetry. [J]. The Journal of Asian Studies. 2018,77(1): 181–203.
- [6] Tang Baolin. The Complete Biography of Chen Duxiu [M]. Beijing: Social Science Literature Publishing House, 2013:406.
- [7] Chen Duxiu. Preface of Science and Outlook on Life [J]. La Jeunesse, 1923,(2): 34-39.
- [8] Shi An (Chen Duxiu). What should young people do [J]. China Youth, 1923,1(1):2-4.
- [9] Yan Bing. Tagore and oriental culture-thoughts after reading Tagore’s two speeches in Beijing and Shanghai [N]. Republic of China Daily Enlightenment, 1924,5(16):1-2.
- [10]TAGORE, RABINDRANATH. Talks in China: Lectures Delivered in April and May.1924.[C]. Calcutta: Visva-Bharati university. 1925.
- [11] Shi An (Chen Duxiu). Why Do We Welcome Tagore [J] Chinese Youth,1923,1(2):15.
- [12] JENCO. Revisiting Asian Values. Journal of the History of Ideas[J]. University of Pennsylvania Press. 2013, 74(2): 237-258.
- [13] Peng Shanshan. Closed and open: Tagore’s visit to China in 1924 [J]. Journal of Tsinghua University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), 2010, 25 (04):126-137
- [14] Chen Duxiu. 1916 [J]. Youth Magazine, 1916, 1(5):1-4.