

Re-assess the Legacy of the Indian Pan-Asianism¹

By Yichuan Zhou, PhD Candidate, Politics Department, The New School for Social Research

I. Research background

Widely seen as a geopolitical conception, the term Third World emerged during the Cold War. The term was initially used by Western strategists to identify countries whose political stance did not align with the Western Bloc or the Eastern Bloc. However, after Mao's use of the term in the 1970s, it began to incorporate a different connotation that indicated a stronger connection with developing and once colonized countries scattered in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Mao's engagement with the Third World concept and his theory of the "intermediate zone" proposed in the 1960s conveyed a strong sense of anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism, and thereby shook the world order dominated by the two superpowers at that time. Nonetheless, in my research project, the Third World is not merely taken as a theory that concerns the politicians or revolutionaries.

As I trace the history of Sino-Indian cultural exchange in the early twentieth century, I find that a Third World consciousness was cultivated among the Chinese and Indian intellectuals as early as the 1930s when the Chinese poet Yun-Shan Tan visited India and dedicated himself to this foreign land. In Tan's close contact with Rabindranath Tagore, he began to realize that India and China went through a similar experience since the 19th century when confronted by the rise of Western modernity. From Tan's view, the collapse of the traditional Chinese value system generated a profound crisis within Chinese society despite the fact that China had never been fully colonized by the West. Therefore, after his visit to India, Tan, with support from Tagore, founded the Sino-Indian.

Cultural Society in Santiniketan set up a branch in Shanghai to promote cultural communication between the two countries. Following this, an institution called Cheena Bhavana (Department of Chinese Language and Culture) was founded in Visva-Bharati University in 1937 when China was on the eve of the Sino-Japanese War, and Tan was appointed as the chair. At that time, Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi went to the opening ceremony and praised that the institution brought China and India together.

The current scholarship has identified the significance of Tan's interaction with Tagore within the broader context of the rise of Pan-Asianism conception in the twentieth century, among which three articles are particularly typical and inspiring for my investigation. First of all, Stole's article² examines their divergent traditions that emerge in India in the past century concerning Pan-Asianism. His critical analysis is centered around the assumption that nationalism is connected with a kind of universalism instead of being antagonistic to each other during the

¹Asian anti-colonial era of the twentieth century. Secondly, Duara's study on the civil society in Manchukuo ³ reveals that the idea of Pan-Asianism not only arouses the cultural elites' attention but also underpins the grass-root religious societies as well as their activities. Last but not least, Tsui's research is equally inspiring since it indicates the limitation of Pan-Asianism lies in the absence ⁴ of a socio-political vision. In other words, as the paradigm of the nation-state is adopted by the revolutionaries in China and India, the idea of Pan-Asianism is too weak to face and positively respond to the real state of affairs.

II. What is missing?

It is not difficult to find that the existing studies have spent much effort on the articulation of Pan-Asianism within the historical context of the early twentieth century. However, what is missing from this inquiry is the broader implication of Pan-Asianism on contemporary politics. From my end, Pan-Asianism refers to the politics that requires articulation, rather than a historical and cultural community that already existed. Given this, the way followed by Tagore and Tan is essentially limited. Because by appealing to the shared spiritual or intellectual resources between India and China, what Tagore and Tan tried to do is to identify something like the "essence of Asian identity", so long as to antagonize Western modernity. However, the problem is triggered, that is, not to mention the difficulty of looking for the commonality within a highly diversified Asia, how should Tagore and Tan make a response in order to highlight their difference with Tokyo School, which has been long criticized for its justification for Japanese expansion. Based on the political writings of Tagore, it is clear that Tagore himself was disappointed and even angered by the rise of Japanese imperialism. Therefore, the problem indicated here cannot be easily ignored. After all, Tagore and his workmate Tan, have the necessity to address their divergence in contrast with some Japanese scholars' way. However, as noted by Tsui in his close study of Sino-Indian communication, this kind of awareness is totally missing from Tagore's and Tan's idea of Pan-Asianism. So, we have to continue to figure it out: Where to find the solution?

I argue the possible solution may come from the political vision offered by the Indian and Chinese Left of the twentieth century. In other words, to make Pan-Asianism alive and illuminating for contemporaries, it is necessary to reactivate the socialist and anti-colonial tradition, which used to be the themes of Indian and Chinese twentieth-century history and use them as the cornerstone to articulate the meaning of an imagined Pan-Asianism. This echoes Japanese leftist philosopher Takeuchi Yoshimi's notion of "China as a method." What I call for is

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² Stolte C and Fischer-Tiné H, "Imagining Asia in India: Nationalism and internationalism (ca. 1905-1940)," 2 *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 54(1) (2012).

³Duara P, "The discourse of civilization and Pan-Asianism," *Journal of World History* 12(1) (2001).

⁴Tsui B, "The plea for Asia - Tan Yunshan, Pan-Asianism and Sino-Indian relations," *China Report* 46(4) 4 (2010).

to reinvent a new ⁵ conceptions of Pan-Asianism based on the rejection of the version offered by Tagore and Tan.

This is not to repudiate their contribution. Rather, I admit that their contribution is huge which mainly lies in their clear critical position in facing the rise of Western modernity. However, what they fail to do is to develop equally a dimension of what I call "internal criticism" that is conducive to self-reflection and building real solidarity so as to transcend the trap of geopolitics shaped by the West. Today, this trap is the "New Cold War" that is in the formation against the context of U.S.-China competition.

III. Framework for future research

Therefore, the legacy of the twentieth century becomes the essential component of my conception of Pan-Asianism, which is untouched by Tagore's and Tan's political imaginary given their cultural conservatism. In more recent times, Wang Hui's discussion of Asia has suggested that the questions like ⁶ Pan-Asianism seem to no longer arouse the interests among contemporary social movements of students, workers, farmers, and feminists. Therefore, this research report ends with the following call: I argue, two questions deserve further argumentation for the reactivation and development of Pan-Asianism. First of all, why has our concern for Pan-Asianism declined in the past half of a century? This belongs to the historical inquiry that aims to explain the rupture between the "short twentieth century", concerned by Hobsbawm, and our time. Secondly, what is the cost we have to pay for neglecting such socialist and anti-colonial tradition left by the twentieth century, especially in the context of today's movements? This is to stress the significance of the "Third world" consciousness and suggest the need of recalling it. ²

²Stolte C and Fischer-Tiné H, "Imagining Asia in India: Nationalism and internationalism (ca. 1905-1940)," 2 *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 54(1) (2012).

⁵ Takeuchi Y, *What Is Modernity?: Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

⁶ Wang H, *The Politics of Imagining Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

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