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STRAY BIRDS: TAGORE AND THE GENESIS OF MODERN CHINESE POETRY

Wolfgang KUBIN (顾彬)
Department for Chinese Language and History,
Institute of Oriental and Asian Studies, University of Bonn
Regina-Pacis-Weg 7, 53113 Bonn, Germany
Kubin@uni-bonn.de

In recent decades, poetry has died many deaths and is still considered moribund today. The strange thing, though, is that it remains alive and often revives in moments of political crisis. This, for instance, was true in 1919 in the Republic of China (1912–1949) as well as in 1979 in the People's Republic of China (1949–present). Both of these dates also have to do with an Indian poet, namely with Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941, or Taige'er in Chinese: 泰戈尔), whose impact on Chinese literature is still measurable even after more than eighty years. The turning point in 1919 was for some type of bourgeois revolution and the watershed in 1979 represents a kind of socialist reform. Both dates are milestones in the history of modern China. But how can it be that poetry played a role in these decisive events at all?

Key words: Rabindranath Tagore, Chinese poetry, Mao Zedong, Cultural Revolution, Bei Dao, Bing Xin, Xu Shimo, Guo Moruo, John Caley

One can compare classical Chinese poetry with all its rules and regulations to traditional Chinese society with all its rules and obligations. There was no free verse, just as there was no individual freedom, before the Revolution of 1911. A poem had to fit into the cosmological scheme and a human being had to obey the laws of the ancestors and the emperor. As soon as the old order started to collapse, the old intellectual forms that held society together began to dissolve, too. The attempt at reforming Chinese society that started at the end of 19th century was accompanied by a search for new modes and forms of expression in literature and the arts on the part of the *literati*. A new language was the foremost aim of China's writers, especially after the downfall of the imperial system. While it is true that Chinese poetry was resuscitated by the

vigorous influence of modern European and American poets, it was not only the Occident that helped Chinese writers find their new way. It was also Asia, especially Japan and India, that brought about a renewal of language and literary form. As for India, Tagore might have been singled out as a unique figure, except that he left his mark in Europe and America at the same time as he had an impact on China.

The situation in 1979 was in some respects not very different from that of 1919 on the mainland. Mao Zedong's (1893–1976) speech at the Yan'an-Forum in 1942 on literature and the arts meant the end of (Western) modernity in the very long run. He himself had returned to the imperial forms of writing poems and songs and asked his followers to do the same. Literature between 1949 and 1979 was bound to old Chinese forms and new socialist content. It was a medium in bondage to the Communist Party of China. A group of young poets then stood up against prescribed language and thought at the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and demanded the liberation of the mind. Again, it was Tagore, among others, who helped them to find their way and get rid of 'Maoist speech' (Mao ti) which, unfortunately, still remains in the minds of some writers today.

In the following text, I will describe three different cases in which Tagore had influence on the formation of modern Chinese poetry. I shall restrict myself to the Republican period and talk about poetic form, love in the broad sense of the word, and pantheism/heroism. In these three examples, I shall give preference to a poetess for certain reasons that will become obvious.

I

It is even said today that Tagore destroyed his name as a poet when he began translating his own poetry into English prose.[1] An editor of his future publishing house in Germany, for example, sent back his *Gitanjali* after reading the English edition, although later, the very well-known German publisher Kurt Wolff (1887–1963) at the same publishing house hastened to the post office himself the very day he heard that Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize.[2] In following years, he made a fortune by selling more than a million of Tagore's

[1] KÄMPCHEN, M. (ed.) *Rabindranath Tagore. Gesammelte Werke*. Düsseldorf and Zürich: Artemis & Winkler, 2005, p. 547f. Elmar Schenkel offers a similar opinion in his review of this book In *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, June 30, 2006, p. 50.

[2] KÄMPCHEN, M. *Rabindranath Tagore.* Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1992 (= rm; 50399), p. 80. WEIDLE, B. (ed.). *Kurt Wolff. Ein Literat und Gentleman.* Bonn: Weidle, 2007, p. 19, presents a different version of the story. Cf. also KÄMPCHEN (ed.). *Tagore. Gesammelte Werke,* p. 560 and footnote 19, p. 566.

books that he had printed in eight volumes.[3] Some of them are reprinted as new editions in Germany even today!

I myself doubt very much whether Tagore would have won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 at all, if he had not tried to translate his own works after his third stay in England in 1912.[4] Since he had studied in Brighton (1878–1880) and had been back to Great Britain in 1890, his English must have been fairly good. What, then, is the problem with his translations? Those who translate literature are asked only to translate into their own mother tongue. This is an unwritten but common law among translators. But if a poet—for whatever reasons—is forced to translate himself into a foreign language, he has to face two problems. First, his once creative process of inventing new images, new patterns, even new words, may not have a true counterpart in another language. Second, the translation must necessarily end up as a different kind of poetic result. That is why those who understand translation work never demand a literal translation into another language, but a new and original work. In this sense, Tagore's own translations should pertain to English literature rather than to Indian literature. Looking at it from this angle one can understand why his work in English struck his first readers—among them well-known poets—so forcefully that they immediately helped Tagore to publish his *Gitanjali* in London twice, in 1912 and 1913.

Before 1949, probably all works of Tagore were translated directly from English into Chinese. Nowadays, several editions of Tagore's collected works can be found in China. The eminent Chinese Poet Bei Dao (b. 1949), who fell under Tagore's spell when he started writing short poems after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), told me in Bonn quite recently (July 5, 2007) that these complete works might have been translated directly from Bengali.

The early and great success of Tagore in China since 1918[5] is due to many different factors. The foremost factor may have been the fact that his first translators were literary giants themselves. They not only translated him and introduced him to a broader audience, but they also remodelled Chinese literature and even themselves through their translations of his works. In translation theory, this is called a change of language (*Sprachwechsel*). This term encompasses the idea that modernity, or in our case modern literature, is

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[3] WEIDLE, B. (ed.). *Kurt Wolff*, pp. 19, 36, 43f. A photo of Tagore and Wolff (1921) is shown on p. 19.

[4] As for the translation process, see KÄMPCHEN, M. *Tagore*, pp. 72–80.

[5] The first two translations I could find were published in the influential magazine *New Youth*, see *Xin Qingnian* 5 (1918). Reprint Tokyo: Kyuko Sho-in 1970, p. 257f. They are entitled 'Haibin' (海滨五首, On the Seashore. Five Poems) and 'Tongqing' (同情二首, Sympathy. Two Poems). Both are called poems in Chinese. The first one is No. 60 from *Gitanjali*. The five sections of the English original in prose have been split into five poem-like structures. I have not yet been able to verify the second example of Tagore.

nothing more than a translated modernity; in this specific instance, it is literature that is translated from a foreign language into a language of one's own. Therefore, many a modern Chinese poet is nothing more than a translated Tagore, that is, a Tagore translated into Chinese. This is especially true for the poetess I am about to introduce.

One of today's most prominent translators of our Indian poet was an author of poems, short stories, and letters, a woman who—since September 9, 1919—had self-styled herself in accordance to Tagore's works as Bing Xin (冰心, 1900–1999), that is as 'heart chaste as ice'. Although she fell under the influence of this Indian poet very early on, in 1919, she started translating his works from English only after she returned from her first trip to India in 1953.[6] Her comments on her first reading of Tagore are not without contradictions. It is possible that she first read the English version (1916) of *Stray Birds* in 1919, or she may have read the translation[7] of her teacher Zheng Zhenduo (1898–1968) long before the final publication of his Chinese version in 1922. Be it as it was, before and after 1949, Tagore had the best possible translators introduce his English works into Chinese in China, as well as the best spokesmen for his works. Bing Xin, as is apparent in her open and laudatory letter to Tagore[8] (August 30, 1920), was only one of the many best possible translators.

II

Though Bing Xin published only two volumes of poetry during her lifetime, both in book form in 1923, her influence on the development of Chinese poetry was then, and is even now, immense. How did she start writing poetry? She speaks about her first attempts at modern verse in the foreword to her first poetry collection called *Stars* (Fanxing, 繁星). On September 1, 1921 she writes:[9]

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[6] Among her many translations are *Taige'er shixuan* (*Selected Poetry of Tagore*), Peking: Renmin Wenxue, 1958, reprinted in: *Bing Xin Quanji* (*Complete Works of Bing Xin*), Fuzhou: Haixia Wenyi, 1994, vol. 4, pp. 430–537; *Gitanjiali* (*Gitanjali*), Peking: Renmin Wenxue, 1955, reprinted in: *Bing Xin Quanji*, vol. 4, pp. 141–186.

[7] First serialised in the magazine *Xiaoshuo Yuebao* (1/1921).

[8] 'Yao ji Yindu zheren Taige'er' (*Sent far away to the Indian Sage Tagore*), in: *Bing Xin Quanji*, vol. 1, p. 115. From today's point of view, this effusive letter is more or less only of historical value. For its background, cf. Marián Gálik: *Influence, Translation and Parallels. Selected Studies on the Bible in China.* Sankt Augustin: Monumenta Serica, 2004, pp. 251–270 (*Young Bing Xin and Her Poetry*).

[9] My translation from *The Collected Works of Bing Xin* (*Bing Xin Wenji*), Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi, 1983, vol. 2, p. 3. For a full translation into English cf. JOHN CALEY (Tr.). 'Selections from *A Maze of Stars*', In *Renditions* 32, 1989, p. 108.

In the winter of 1919, while sitting together with my younger brother Bing Zhong close to the oven, we were reading *Stray Birds* (Mitu de niao, 迷途的鸟) of Tagore. 'Do you not often say that your thoughts sometimes are very loose [lingsui, 零碎], so that you cannot finish anything big?' my brother said to me. 'Actually you could also do it this way.' Since then I sometimes made notes in a booklet.

'Do it this way,' that is, do it the way Tagore would do it! She remembers her beginning as a poetess in a similar way later. Around 1933, after declaring that her *Stars* was not poetry but „only a collection of fragmentary thoughts," she has the following to say in the foreword to the edition of her *Collected Poems* in 1933:[10]

I don't understand poetry; I am sceptical about it and I dare not try writing it. I feel that the heart of poetry lies in its content not its form. ... I wrote the *Stars*, just as I said in its preface, after I read Tagore's *Stray Birds*. By using his form, I tried to collect my fragmentary thoughts....

Two things are obviously of major importance in her deliberations. Through Tagore, Bing Xin found a form in which to express herself — that is, the genre of the short poem or mini poem (xiao shi, 小诗) which works best with free verse, plain language, and the technique of juxtaposition. Very often it consists only of two or four lines, and the starting point is commonly a minor event or observation which is followed by a comment or image. Moreover, through Tagore, she found a symbol for her existence as well. At the same time, this symbol can be taken as representing the Chinese mind after 1919, after the imperial order had been left behind, but a new form of existence had not yet been found. Though birds do play a role in her poetry, her favourite symbol found its foremost expression in the image of the star. Stars in her eyes were

[10] JULIA LIN: *Modern Chinese Poetry: An Introduction*, p. 51.

single entities lost in the universe.[11] In this respect, stray birds—or, in her[12] (Chinese) words, 'birds that have lost their way'—symbolise not only the fragmentary thinking of Bing Xin's generation but also its fragmentary way of existing. That the image of the 'stray' bird is more than just a title of a book but also a metaphor for the modern poet torn between East and West can be recognized in a letter that Tagore wrote in June 1917:[13]

I, who have the amphibious duality of nature in me, whose food is in the West and breathe air in the East, do not find a place where I can build my nest. I shall suppose I shall have to be a migratory bird and cross and recross the sea, owning two nests, one on each shore.

The same can be said of any other Chinese writer between 1912 and 1949, and even today this applies to some Chinese writers after 1979 who have made their home in the West, but publish in the Chinese-speaking world!

The English edition of *Stray Birds* was published in 1916.[14] Bing Xin may have read it in English. Actually its Bengali title is a little bit different. It is *Kanika* (1899 or 1900), which is sometimes translated as aphorisms, sometimes as little things, sometimes as mini-poems. If we can rely on the German translation from Bengali, the form really does look like a short poem with four lines.[15] Something similar can be said of his *Lekhan* (1927). Tagore explains that he started this collection of aphorisms in China and Japan in 1916, when friends asked him for some words on certain occasions. What he "wrote down" (*lekhan*) then on fans and on similar things also comes very close to the kind of poetry Bing Xin liked to write.[16] Tagore is said to have translated *Kanika* into English prose on his way to Japan. But where does its English title *Stray Birds* come from? In 1916, the Indian poet published *Balākā*, a collection of poetry written between 1914 and 1916. Its title is also translated as *Stray Birds*. In

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[11] Cf. the remarks in my *Die Geschichte der chinesischen Literatur im 20. Jahrhundert*, Vol. 7 of Kubin, W. (ed.). *Geschichte der chinesischen Literatur*, pp. 79–83.

[12] In the words of Zheng Zhenduo, the 'flying birds' in the title of his translation work have become *Feiniao ji* (飞鸟集, *Collection of Flying Birds*).

[13] Quoted from STEPHEN N. HAY: *Asian Ideas of East and West: Tagore and His Critics in Japan, China and India*, p. 125.

[14] I have to confess that I got mixed up sometimes with all the seemingly contradictory comments in the secondary literature in all the different editions in Bengali, English, German, and Chinese that I consulted.

[15] KĀMPCHEN, M. (ed.) *Tagore. Gesammelte Werke*, pp. 21–23, for a definition, see p. 576.

[16] KĀMPCHEN, M. (ed.) *Tagore. Gesammelte Werke*, pp. 81–83, for explanations, see p. 597.

actuality, it means something like flying swans. If we read Tagore's explanation, however, we discover there is not much difference between a swan and a stray bird. While standing at a river one day in 1915, Tagore watched a group of swans take off from the quiet water and fly into the vastness of the sky. For him, the movement of the birds was the symbol of life, and their flight became a symbol for himself, too.[17]

Bing Xin's poetry is very simple, her language clear, her vocabulary (insects, birds, flowers, mountains, rivers, stars, the moon) pared down to the essentials. This may have a straightforward reason. It seems that only a few literary critics have noticed that her ideas on the unity of man and the cosmos, of the poet and nature, of art and the universe, etc. are embedded in her philosophy of love, a philosophy that derives from Tagore, too,[18] and is of great importance for Xu Zhimo (1896–1931),[19] another important Chinese poet to be mentioned in connection with Tagore. See for instance Bing Xin's poem No. 12 from *Stars*.[20]

> Fellow humans,
>
> Let's love one another,
>
> We are all passengers on a long journey
>
> To the same destination.

Within the context of Chinese literature and society, this is quite a strange poem and an unusual statement. One must bear in mind that since the downfall of imperial China until the end of the Cultural Revolution, hatred was the driving force behind word and deed on the mainland. In the beginning, it was the Manchu, then the imperialists, the Japanese, and finally it was one's own people that had to be hated, according to political propaganda. But Bing Xin's use of the personal pronoun 'we' here does not seem to differentiate between Chinese and non-Chinese. Behind this might be Tagore's idea of cosmopolitism, universalism, and antinationalism—in short, Tagore's concept of 'cosmic love' and 'loving universe' which, as Bing Xin put it, in a concept that does not make

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[17] KÄMPCHEN, M. (ed.). *Tagore. Gesammelte Werke*, pp. 592f.

[18] Cf. her early essay 'Wuxian de sheng' de jiexian' (Boundary of 'Endless Life'), In *Bing Xin Quanji*, vol. 1, dated April 10, 1920, pp. 90–93. For its 'Tagorean' background cf. Gálik.

[19] LEO OU-FAN LEE: *The Romantic Generation of Modern Chinese Writers*, esp. 144–170.

[20] ANGELA JUNG-PALANDRI. 'Bing Xin', In LLOYD HAFT. *A Selective Guide to Chinese Literature 1900–1949*, p. 63.

a basic distinction between East and West.[21] It is herein where I see the political importance of the Indian poet and the Chinese poetess. Both help to reduce the tension between 'East' and 'West' instead of strengthening it, as is still espoused today in post-colonial theory.[22] One can even speak of a mission as Xu Zhimo did in 1924 when he, during a public speech in Peking, put emphasis on Tagore's faith in life and on his idea of compassion (tongqing, 同情) amidst a world of violence.[23]

III

The German translator and biographer of Tagore, Martin Kämpchen, summarises the importance of the Indian poet in the following four points: typical for his life and work is first, his desire for independence (liberty, freedom); second, his concept of love (human and erotic); third, his positive approach to life; and fourth, his internationalism.[24] These four points also describe the influence that Tagore exercised on the Chinese mind. In her later translations of *Gitanjali*, for example, Bing Xin liked to comment upon the political aspect of Tagore's understanding of freedom. But for someone like Xu Zhimo, who accompanied the Indian poet as his translator through China in April and May of 1924, freedom primarily meant the freedom of the individual, be it as poet or as a lover. This freedom included independence from the world he detested. This is one of the reasons why the metaphor of flying became so important to him. The look from above was, in his case, the view of a melancholy person full of disgust with the world. He shared the same kind of hero worship that he felt for Tagore with Guo Moruo (1892–1978).[25] Though Guo Moruo was deeply influenced by the pantheism of the Indian poet, he never felt the love for the cosmos that is so characteristic of Tagore and Bing Xin, but just the opposite—he who declared himself God wanted to destroy the old world in order to build a new one. As one of the most ardent supporters of Maoism, he really played a part in all of the persecutions that took place in

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[21] Cf. SAMIR DAYAL. 'Repositioning India: Tagore's Passionate Politics of Love', In *Positions* 15, pp. 165–208.

[22] I have written about the aspects of hatred and of post-colonialism so often that I feel there is no need to go into detail here.

[23] Held May 12, 1924. The speech was published with the title 'Taige'er (Tagore)'. I have been unable to find and download from the internet this speech in: JIANG FUCONG, LIANG SHIQIU (eds.). *Xu Zhimo Quanji*. Taibei: Zhuanji Wenxue, 1969, but I did find the following two essays in vol. 6: 'Taige'er lai Hua' (Tagore Will Visit China, 1923), pp. 463–472, and 'Taige'er lai Hua de queqi' (Tagore's Visit to China Fixed, 1923), pp. 473–478.

[24] KÄMPCHEN, M. *Tagore*, pp. 125–127.

[25] OU-FAN LEE. *Romantic Generation*, pp. esp. 181–191.

China between 1949 and 1976. We know that Tagore, for a very short time, fell prey to Mussolini and Stalin,[26] too, and that in one of her last poems, Bing Xin praised Mao Zedong as a 'great leader' [27] who, as we know today, was responsible for the death of millions of Chinese.

Why do I come up with things like this? In the 20's, it was already being said that both Bing Xin and Tagore were passé in and outside of China. Quite a few people said nasty things about them and their poetry. I do not want to quote these ugly words here.[28] I would rather get to the point. Under the influence of Tagore, both Bing Xin and Xu Zhimo discovered the value of tiny, seemingly unimportant things. But only the poetess was able to discover a language that no one else was able to use at that time. Although Xu Zhimo and Guo Moruo are regarded today as more famous or even better poets than Bing Xin, I think it is time to reconsider what she and others have said about her poetry. Though the mini poem had already come into existence in China in 1917, it was only through the collections of *Stars* and *Spring Waters* that this poetic genre became popularized.

There is still an unsolved riddle left in this essay that an attentive reader might have caught at the very beginning: what Bing Xin read of Tagore's works, whether it was in English or Chinese, was technically prose, and not poetry. How was she then able to come up with this typographical form which was totally uncommon at the time? Her English translator John Caley understands this problem only as an issue of versification. To demonstrate, he quotes *Stray Birds* No. 257 with the images of heart and child, which were so important for both Tagore and Bing Xin: 'The trembling leaves of this tree touch my heart like the fingers of an infant child.' He rearranges this obviously prosaic sentence the following way:[29]

Trembling leaves of the tree!

- They touch my heart

Like the fingers

Of an infant child.

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[26] KÄMPCHEN: *Tagore*, p. 91.
[27] *Bin Xin Wenji*, p. 279.
[28] They are listed in the above mentioned articles by Caley, Gálik, and Xu Zhimo.
[29] CALEY, J. 'Birds and Stars: Tagore's Influence on Bing Xin's Early Poetry', In *Renditions* 32, 1989, p. 121f.

Indeed, this is classic Bing Xin. Seen from this point of view, her contribution to modern Chinese poetry would be more or less a rearrangement of Tagore-like jottings.

There is another recollection of the poetess from 1954 in which she describes how she finally finished *Stars* and *Spring Waters*.[30] First she tells the reader that on May 4th it was quite common for students to collect sentences, phrases, and words from their readings and arrange them in lines a few days later. Then she starts speaking about Tagore:

Stray Birds is a collection of short pieces of few words and phrases but filled with poetic feeling, artistic insight and philosophical understanding. It struck a chord in me. It occurred to me that the jottings in the margins of my notebooks could also be brought together and set in order. As I collected them I chose those which were particularly poetic, those which were particularly resonant and suggestive, and put them in sequence. . . . If Tagore's *Stray Birds* was a collection of poetry, then wasn't my 'Maze of Stars' also?

Poetry as random jottings set into order or put into sequence sounds as if Bing Xin, at that time no older than 20, was waiting for inspiration to strike. In her *Stars* No. 14, she calls nature one source of her inspiration. Nature, of course, is an important part of Tagore's philosophy and art. So let us give the poetess the last word:[31]

Nature called aloud and said –

'Take your pen,

Dip it into my ocean;

Humanity's heart is too dry and parched.'

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[30] BING XIN.'How I wrote *A Maze of Stars* and *Spring Water*', In *Renditions* 32, 1989, p. 89.
[31] BING XIN. 'Selections from *Spring Water*', tr. by Grace Boynton with an introduction by Charlotte Boynton, In *Renditions* 32, 1989, p. 99.

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