

## PROGRAMS

Home > Programs > A Paper by Chang Tsong-zung, in conjunction with CHINA IN ASIA/ASIA IN CHINA

### A PAPER BY CHANG TSONG-ZUNG, IN CONJUNCTION WITH CHINA IN ASIA/ASIA IN CHINA

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Columbia University

*This paper by Chang Tsong-zung was delivered in absentia by Jane DeBevoise, in conjunction with a panel CHINA IN ASIA/ASIA IN CHINA: Imagining Asia in Contemporary Chinese Art, organized by Columbia University and Asia Art Archive in America. From the perspective of contemporary visual art practice, this panel will interrogate the role of China in Asia and Asia in China from multiple perspectives. Acknowledging that the concept of Asia itself is a construct which has been put to multiple purposes in the 20th century, this panel looked at how projects in this Asian space have begun to emerge in the imaginary of contemporary practice in China, particularly in the last five years. This panel also explored how China figures in the imaginary of artists today, and in particular artists working in India, Japan, Korea and Vietnam.*

China's singular obsession with everything western, from politics and economics to culture and philosophy, is a phenomenon apparent to everybody. This is not a new "cultural turn" for China. China's preoccupation with the West began in early 19th century, and it has eclipsed China's cultural interest in all of its neighbours, all except Japan, with whom, as we know, China has had a century-long love and hate entanglement. For a start, China's access to Western ideas in the 19th century had much to do with Japan, whose translation program overtook China even with China's head start. It is impossible for modern China to disengage itself from this intellectual influence, because the modern Chinese vernacular tongue cannot be spoken without using many of these Japanese translated terms. Japan was also one of the early Chinese destinations to study modernization. The 1894 Naval War and the 1937 Japanese invasion have put a wall between the two countries. More significantly, Japanese imperial ambitions have turned sour the concept of a pan-Asian alliance. Today, if either China or Japan brings up the concept, accusation of imperialist design would immediately be lodged by the West.

Historically, Korea was always a conduit between Chinese and Japanese cultures, and today Korea still looms large in the Chinese imagination on account of Chinese involvement in the 1950 Korean War. However, having changed sides from one side of the Cold War to the other, China is now in an awkward position with both Koreas.

With India, the only major intellectual exchange in the 20th century was Rabindranath Tagore's famous visit in 1924. Tagore's quest was to bring together "eastern civilizations" as an alternative to western values. The visit was a disappointment as it did not go down well in China, especially with Left leaning intellectuals, whose interest was Chinese modernization through westernization. Interestingly, when Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek visited India in the 1940s to urge an Asian alliance against Japanese imperialism, he couldn't resist making a speech against colonialism on the eve of his departure, even though his British host specifically warned him against it.

The one important legacy of Asian cooperation was the Bandung accord in Indonesia when the concept of the Third World was enthusiastically received by China and subsequently championed by Mao Zedong. But border war with India in 1964 naturally put paid to Sino-Indian fraternity.

What becomes apparent with these various connections, when looked at together, is the common cultural-political predicament of Asian countries in the face of imperialism: Imperialism either manifested as colonialism (both territorial and cultural), and as exploitative capitalism. The fact that 19th century Japan needed to define its modernity as a policy that "turned back on Asia in order to engage Europe" underscores this imperialist character of modernity. Cold War politics that has divided China, Korea, Southeast Asia also reveals the fact that both capitalism and communist socialism are committed to a historical project of modernity, and neither choice is successful in addressing local Asian social historical realities.

To understand the realities confronting Asia, experience of both sides of the Cold War is not enough, as evidenced by China's dramatic political experiments. Comparative Asian experience is necessary. In other words, it is possible for an Asian country to see clearly its contemporary situation only under an inter-Asian perspective. This is the rationale behind the project "West Heavens", an Indian-Chinese exchange of contemporary art and social thought. "West Heavens" is an old Chinese reference to India, and the plural for "Heavens" is a quest for viable alternatives to monotheism.

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#### ALL KEYWORDS

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West Heavens started with an art exhibition and a "Summit for Social Thought" in 2010.



Tushar Joag, *Riding Rocinante From Bombay to Shanghai via Sardar Sarovar and the Three Gorges*. Photo courtesy of the artist and West Heavens Project

In 2011, a film program together with a companion series of forums on film theory, "You Don't Belong" traveled to 4 cities in China. The project will go on to Hong Kong and Taiwan this year. A return program of Chinese documentary film to India is being planned for 2012.



Repairing and editing the celluloid of *Komal Gandhar* (1961, Ritwik Ghatak) in Shanghai Film Technology Plant. Photo courtesy of West Heavens Project

Currently, the Mumbai Urbanist group KRVA and Tongji University are working on a comparative case study of slums and relocation.



SAME-SAME: Mumbai Shanghai Urbanist Project, a collaboration between KRVI and Tongji University. Photo courtesy of West Heavens Project

With the West Heavens project we hope to create a fresh imagination about contemporary India; we hope to highlight India's leading intellectual achievements. In China, the popular view is still about animals on the street and the caste system, while baffled by the Indian economy and its creative industry. For China, the significance of engaging India is to appreciate its radically different path to modernity. China embraced western modern principles full-heartedly, championing it as a means to correct the "wrongs" of its own heritage. To China even until today, the West has a distant romantic aura, to say the least. On the other hand, India has modernity thrust upon it through two centuries of colonialism, and India's critique of the West is a view made from the inside out.

China's path to modernity has been moulded by a series of revolutions, which has overthrown shackles of the past to create new social forms. The damage of revolution is to become radically removed from our historical roots. India overthrew colonial domination, but has characteristically preserved colonial institutions after independence. And yet, when comparing post-revolutionary China with post-colonial India, we cannot help but be amazed at the prevalence of left wing politics in India. There are currently over forty major parties of Communism in India, engaging in varying forms of revolutionary tactic. At the same time India is also impressively the world's biggest democracy. China's encounter with India inadvertently raises the suspicion: whether if China's revolution harbours a latent colonial gene? Conversely, whether the Indian version of post-colonialism is in fact another form of revolution? China's singular state purpose has completed the most daunting social engineering in history; but in terms of diversity and richness of historical culture it is no match for the treasure trove of India, where old and new traditions co-exist on the level of daily life. If "Enlightenment" is supposed the legacy of modernity, this close encounter of Asian cultures should be a project of self-enlightenment.

I wish to close this presentation with a paragraph I wrote for the Foreword of West Heavens exhibition catalogue:

"For more than a century, challenges of imperialism and capitalism have forced India and China to develop political strategies that have profoundly transformed both societies. To share this experience is valuable for Indians and Chinese alike. For China, long before the seismic cultural shift towards the West, it had experienced one other profound cultural turn: when Chinese pilgrims sought out the teachings of the Buddha. The Buddhist turn did not result in destructive fervour like the past century of revolutions, but its influence was just as far reaching; and Buddhist learning took many centuries before it was fully absorbed into Confucian scholarship. Today, after a century of revolutions, it is important to remember this history of cultural self-transformation. It is critical to remind ourselves that in our imagination of the world there is not just the West, but also the 'West Heavens'."

*For more information about the West Heavens Project, please click here.*