3. An Experiment in Connectivity: From the 'West Heavens' to the 'Middle Kingdom'

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This essay is based on my curatorial work for the exhibition *Place.Time.Play: Contemporary Art from the 'West Heavens' to the 'Middle Kingdom'* (various venues in Shanghai, October–December 2010). The first instance of contemporary art collaboration between artists from India and China, this exhibition resulted from unprecedented opportunities and challenges for artists, curators and scholars from the two countries. In addition to the exhibition, this project involved fieldwork and dialogue for participants from both countries, and fed into the ongoing 'West Heavens' platform that has grown to encompass Sino-Indian dialogue across art, architecture, political theory and film.¹ A major bilingual (Mandarin and English) publication was produced that recorded the exhibition and the process of dialogue through edited and footnoted transcriptions of conversations between Indian and Chinese participants.² The following text represents a retrospective consideration of the 2010 exhibition, intended to highlight questions relevant to the theme of Asian connectivities and intra-Asia regional connections.

It is an enduring irony of contemporary Asian art as a discursive field that most intra-Asian conversations have been mediated via non-Asian locations such as Australia and the United States. As a postgraduate student of art history in India, I gained only limited awareness of modernist art in 'Asia'.³ This limited awareness came via the pan-Asianist adventure launched in Calcutta and Santiniketan (Bengal) in the first decades of the twentieth century, primarily between Indian and Japanese actors. The Japanese scholar Kakuzo Okakura (1862–1913) visited India in 1901–1902 at the invitation of Indian poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). This visit led to the publication of *Ideals of*

1 See <http://westheavens.net/en> for descriptions, forums and announcements about this ongoing project. 'West Heavens is an integrated cross-cultural exchange programme. It aims to untangle and compare the different paths of modernity taken by India and China, to facilitate high-level communication between the two countries' intellectual and art circles, and to promote interaction and cross-references between the two countries through social thoughts and contemporary art. Since 2010, the project has organized more than 100 events including forums, exhibitions, film screenings and workshops, as well as publishing more than 10 books.'

2 Chang Tsong-Zung, Chen Yun & Chaitanya Sambrani, eds, *Place, Time, Play: Contemporary Art from the 'West Heavens' to the 'Middle Kingdom'* (Hong Kong: Hanart TZ Gallery, 2012).

3 I was an MA student in the Department of Art History and Aesthetics, Faculty of Fine Arts, MS University, Baroda, India, over 1992–1995.

the East, a manifesto that propounded the essential unity of Asian art from India to Japan.⁴ Okakura's book begins with the singular claim: 'Asia is one!', which could be seen as part of the cultural logic for the development of the pan-Asianist foreign and military policy of Taisho (1912–1926) and Showa (1926–1989) Japan. Okakura was not alone in propounding the unity of Asian art; Rabindranath Tagore and A.K. Coomaraswamy (1877–1941) also supported a pan-Asian internationalism as an alternative to the cultural hegemony of Europe. Coomaraswamy asserted that Okakura was the first to emphatically argue the fundamental unity of Asian art, essentially that of Indian with Far Eastern art.⁵ Okakura's ideals of a pan-Asian cultural unity found sympathetic ears among Abanindranath Tagore's (1871–1951) circle of artists, which sought a revival of 'Indian' art. Okakura placed India and China as the two fountainheads of Asian culture,⁶ arguing, however, that India had lost its 'capacity to give ... its sublime attainments [having been] almost effaced ... by the rough-handedness of the Hunas, the fanatical iconoclasm of the Mussulmân, and the unconscious vandalism of mercenary Europe, leaving us to seek only a past glory in the mouldy walls of Ajanta, the tortured sculptures of Ellora, the silent protests of rock-cut Orissa ...'.⁷

The pan-Asianist experiment in revivalist art across India and Japan resulted in Japanese *nihonga* artists (Yokoyama Taikan (1868–1958), Kanpo Arai (1878–1945), and Katayama Nanpu (1887–1980)) travelling to India during the first two decades of the twentieth century, as well as Indian artists, notably Nandalal Bose (1882–1966) and Benodebehari Mukherjee (1904–1980) travelling to Japan, China and Nepal during the 1920s until the 1940s. Kala Bhavana, the Visva-Bharati University's school of art at Santiniketan ('abode of peace'), founded by Rabindranath Tagore in rural West Bengal, became a location for an eclectic intra-Asian dialogue. This did not, however, mean the exclusion of European influence, as R. Siva Kumar has shown.⁸ The study of European modernist developments was complemented by a growing interest in 'Far Eastern' art. Nirmalendu Das notes that Bose's 1924 visit to Japan resulted in the arrival into Santiniketan of 'an authentic collection of Chinese rubbings and Japanese colour woodcut prints with him.'⁹ Mukherjee embarked on a self-funded trip to

4 Okakura Kakuso [sic], *The Ideals of the East* (London: John Murray, 1903).

5 AK Coomaraswamy, *Fundamentals of Indian Art* (Jaipur: Historical Research Documentation Programme, 1985), 21.

6 Recent art historical writing has rightly contested the assumption that these two fountainhead cultures dominated the art of Asia.

7 Okakura, *Ideals of the East*, 6.

8 R. Siva Kumar, 'Benodebehari Mukherjee: Life, Context, Work', in *Benodebehari Mukherjee (1904–1980): Centenary Retrospective*, curated by Gulammohammed Sheikh and R. Siva Kumar (exhibition catalogue) (New Delhi: Vadehra Art Gallery in collaboration with the National Gallery of Modern Art, 2006), 73–75.

9 Nirmalendu Das, 'A Brief History of Printmaking at Santiniketan', *Art Etc. News and Views*, August 2011, <http://www.artnewsnviews.com/view-article.php?article=a-brief-history-of-printmaking-at-santiniketan&iid=23&articleid=593#sthash.Rv1d7SEz.dpuf>.

Japan and China over nine months in 1936–1937. Even though his trip to China was necessarily short and restricted by the Japanese invasion, Kumar argues that the influence of a Chinese aesthetic sensibility remained paramount for Mukherjee, his most admired Japanese artists—Toba Sojo, Sesshu and Tawaraya Sotatsu—being 'considered Chinese in spirit, or more accurately, eclectics, combining Chinese sublimity with the dramatic force and decorative rigour of Japan.'¹⁰ Chinese artist Xu Beihong (1895–1953) spent several months in 1940 at Santiniketan, marking a 40-year engagement between modern art in India and the 'Far East'.¹¹

The legacy of the Santiniketan experiment in Asian internationalism has been translated variously in diverse locations across India.¹² In Baroda, for instance, the syllabus in modern art covered the history of Indian and Euro-American modernism, but remained largely devoid of modernist art in other parts of Asia, or of modernism in Latin America (save for figures such as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo), or Africa. I first encountered modern and contemporary 'Asian' art in locations outside Asia proper, particularly in Australia. Institutionalised opacities continue to attend art historical scholarship and pedagogy in many parts of Asia, and indeed the world, where a biennalised world order of a reified 'contemporary' seems to offer redemption from Euramerican dominance.¹³ The dream of Asian (or other) connectivity continues to be beset by the limits of knowledge. The spectre of mutual ignorance haunts the cosmopolitan imagination.

Underlying this 'inequality of ignorance' is the problem of the 'hyperreality' of Asia, as argued by Dipesh Chakrabarty.¹⁴ Anthony Milner and Deborah Johnson have demonstrated historical dimensions and modern constructions of the 'idea of Asia' in political and cultural dimensions, as well as the limits of such constructions.¹⁵ Historical constructions of Asia originate in ancient Greek thought and, while these constructions have changed over time, it is significant that they have almost always originated in non-Asian contexts. In other words, the definitions of 'Asia' and 'Asian' have primarily come from outside Asia, particularly Europe. The exhibitionary and scholarly field of contemporary Asian art is of relatively recent origin, emerging almost simultaneously in Australia and the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with a slightly earlier Japanese precedent noted below. The Artists' Regional Exchange project was

10 R. Siva Kumar, 'Benodebehari Mukherjee', 76. There is an underlying argument here regarding the differences between *Kara-e* (Chinese manner) and *Yamato-e* (Japanese manner) in Japanese art history.

11 Ibid.

12 This translation could be the subject for another study in its own right and cannot be addressed here.

13 Terry Smith, 'Worlds Pictured in Contemporary Art: Planes and Connectivities', *Humanities Research* 19, no. 2. 2013, eds Caroline Turner, Michelle Antoinette & Zara Stanhope.

14 Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?', in *A Subaltern Studies Reader 1986–1995*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 263–93.

15 Anthony Milner and Deborah Johnson, 'The Idea of Asia', <https://digitalcollections.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/41891>.

initiated in Perth, Western Australia, in 1987 and ran until 1999, inaugurating exchanges between Australian, South-East Asian and New Zealand artists. In 1989, the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, organised an exhibition of Japanese art of the preceding decade. In 1990, the Asialink Arts program at the University of Melbourne was established with Alison Carroll as founding director. In 1991, John Clark (then at The Australian National University, Canberra) convened a conference on modernity in Asian art.¹⁶ In 1992, Vishakha Desai (then vice-president and director of the Asia Society Museum, New York) convened a roundtable comprising eminent curators from Asia. Participants included T.K. Sabapathy, Singapore; Gulammohammed Sheikh, India; Apinan Poshyananda, Thailand; Jim Supangkat, Indonesia; and Redza Piyadasa, Malaysia.¹⁷ In 1993, subscribers to *Art and Australia* were supplied with a small supplement, *Art and Asia Pacific*, which has since become the major international art journal, *Art Asia Pacific*.¹⁸ In the same year, the Queensland Art Gallery launched the first of its Asia-Pacific Triennials of Contemporary Art, an ongoing series of influential exhibitions and publications. It would seem that, at the beginning of the 1990s, a number of locations at the margins of the Asian mainland simultaneously started paying attention to contemporary art in their neighbourhoods.¹⁹

In making these observations, I do not seek to imply that art historical scholarship is of recent origin in Asia. Sophisticated traditions of scholarship on modern and contemporary art within national boundaries exist in many Asian art cultures, but they are largely restricted to national boundaries. With the exception of the Fukuoka Art Museum's exhibitions of modern and contemporary Asian art initiated in 1979,²⁰ the 'invention' of contemporary Asian art, however, took place outside Asia.

Recent years have seen an amelioration of this situation via commercial exhibitions and museum projects involving intra-Asian relationships. Here again, Japanese organisations have taken the lead: witness the Japan Foundation-initiated project *Under Construction: New Dimensions of Asian Art* (2001–2003) that involved 'a new type of collaborative project initiated in Asia, [with] 9 young curators in their twenties and thirties from 7 Asian countries (China, India, Indonesia,

16 The edited proceedings were published as John Clark, ed., *Modernity in Asian Art* (Sydney: Wild Peony Press, 1993).

17 It is significant to note that of these, three (Sheikh, Supangkat and Piyadasa) had trained primarily as artists.

18 *Art Asia Pacific* is now a quarterly journal of some 200 pages, with global distribution. It has been based in Sydney, Hong Kong and New York and is currently in Hong Kong.

19 For an analysis of this phenomenon, even as it was being born, see Apinan Poshyananda, 'The Future: Post-Cold War, Postmodernism, Postmarginalia (Playing with Slippery Lubricants)', in *Tradition and Change: Contemporary Art of Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Caroline Turner (Brisbane: Queensland University Press, 1993), 3–24.

20 See http://faam.city.fukuoka.lg.jp/eng/about/abt_history.html#b. The Fukuoka Art Museum is the parent organisation of the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (which opened in 1999 with the *1st Fukuoka Asian Art Triennale* (The 5th Asian Art Show)).

Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Thailand)' being invited to to engage in fieldwork 'to produce one integrated exhibition as the result of their collaborative effort.'²¹ In 2006, Arario Beijing (a branch of the Seoul-based gallery) hosted a major exhibition of contemporary Indian art. To my knowledge, this was the first substantial exhibition of contemporary Indian art to be held in China.²² The Museum of Contemporary Art Shanghai, a private space adjoining the Shanghai Art Museum, hosted exhibitions of contemporary Indian art in 2009, and of contemporary Indonesian art in 2010.²³ Apparently, commerce in contemporary 'Asian' art was no longer a matter of selling works domestically, or else in Euro-American venues: intra-Asian transactions in contemporary art were emerging as a financially viable proposition for the international art market.

The 'West Heavens' Project

Johnson Chang (Chang Tsong-Zung) and I first met at the Asia Art Archive, Hong Kong, in 2008.²⁴ Chang was keen to explore how contemporary Chinese artistic and academic cultures might benefit from interactions with their Indian counterparts. He wanted to present an exhibition of Indian contemporary art in China accompanied by an ongoing intellectual dialogue. We corresponded over the course of the following year leading to the inception of the 'West Heavens' project. While Chang was inclined to organise an exhibition of Indian work in China, I was keen that the works of contemporary Indian artists be seen in dialogue with those of their Chinese colleagues. We agreed to invite Indian and Chinese artists to travel to each other's countries, to engage in dialogue, and to produce work as a result of these interactions. The project title came from the ancient Chinese name for India, as the heavenly realm lying to the west; heavenly because it was the place where the historical Buddha was born, lived and attained enlightenment.

21 An introduction to this project can be seen at http://www.jpf.go.jp/e/culture/new/old/0210/10_07.html. See also, Mami Kataoka, ed., *Under Construction: New Dimensions of Asian Art* (Tokyo: Japan Foundation Asia Center; Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery, 2002).

22 Hungry God: Indian Contemporary Art, Arario Gallery, Beijing, 3 September – 15 October 2006. See Chaitanya Sambrani, 'Ways of Belonging: Post-national Art in India', in *Hungry God: Indian Contemporary Art* (Beijing, Arario, 2007), 32–46.

23 See www.mocashanghai.org for details.

24 Chang co-founded the Asia Art Archive and, as gallerist, curator and scholar, has made a major contribution to raising international awareness of contemporary Chinese art. I was visiting the archive to give a presentation on my curatorial project *Edge of Desire: Recent Art in India*, which was exhibited in Australia, the United States, Mexico and India over 2004–2007.

Since then, the 'West Heavens' project has developed into an ongoing series of individual yet related projects incorporating art exchanges, social theory, publications, independent cinema, performance and video, as well as dialogues on urbanism and architecture across India and China.²⁵

Place.Time.Play: The Making of an Exhibition

The process of making the exhibition *Place.Time.Play: Contemporary Art from the 'West Heavens' to the 'Middle Kingdom'* involved a series of contacts, reciprocal visits and discussions involving artists, curators and scholars from India and China. The title of the exhibition was designed to signal the invitation to encounter locations (place) and histories (time) across old and new borders, and to engage with them critically and creatively. *Place* signals geography, *time* speaks of history, while *play* invokes a potential for artists to work with, or subvert, established structures. Reckonings with place imply an understanding of contextual difference, and an attempt to enter another location. Taking time is both a requirement of this process, and an opportunity to encounter a different sense of history, and to work with legacies of tradition as well as current economic and political conditions. The invitation to play was extended on the premise that the *ludic* instinct is a fundamentally life-affirming gesture, which is too often lost in the pursuit of representations of topical issues.²⁶ The project hoped to inaugurate continuing relationships between artist communities across the two nations.

In the course of fieldwork, we travelled to locations in India (Delhi, Baroda, Ahmedabad, Bombay) with a group of Chinese artists and curators in March 2010. In April 2010 we travelled with a group of Indian artists to Shanghai, Hangzhou, Yiwu and other places in the Yangtze Delta, including waterside villages, a Buddhist monastery and a Literati poets' retreat. In both countries, we convened 'moving forums' that brought the travellers together with local artists for conversations and reciprocal presentations of work.²⁷ In addition to these collective trips, the project enabled several artists to visit specific locations of interest to their individual practice.

25 As part of the 'West Heavens' project, Gao Shiming and Chen Kuan-Hsing were invited to convene a series of lectures by Indian intellectuals of different nationalities (Sarat Maharaj, Partha Chatterjee, Prasenjit Duara, Ashis Nandy, Tejaswini Niranjana, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Homi Bhabha and Geeta Kapur). Significant publications from the oeuvre of each individual were published in a series of bilingual readers under the series *Readers of Current Indian Thought*, Nanfang Daily Press.

26 I am thinking of the general tendency for exhibited works from less privileged contexts to highlight issues considered relevant to recent history. It is relatively rare to find a valorisation of 'Third World' abstractionists. Nasreen Mohamedi (1937–1990) is a case in point in that her international acclaim has been posthumous.

27 The model of the 'moving forum' was an adaptation of the discursive structure devised during the 2008 Guangzhou Triennial *Farewell to Post-Colonialism*, curated by Johnson Chang, Gao Shiming and Sarat Maharaj, at the Guangdong Art Museum, Guangzhou, 6 September – 16 November 2008.

In choosing which artists to invite, we first considered ongoing concerns within the artists' work. We were especially interested in work that crossed boundaries and aspired to speak to audiences beyond the familiar binary of local self and Euro-American other. We considered which artists would be willing and able to accommodate within their practice the challenges of interaction with a parallel civilisation: one that appears to be historically inextricably linked with one's own and, yet, so far removed in modern experience, except in an adversarial role.²⁸ What kind of artistic internationalism could be imagined without the international being routed via Western Europe, North America or Australia? Equally, we were keen to steer clear of revivalist practice that would involve a nostalgic return to the traditional, but to seek contemporary re-activations of the traditional in a politics of the present.

The impatience we felt with the East/West binary could be mapped on to the growing ambitions and strengths of Chinese and Indian art cultures and economies. Certainly, we were responding to the aspirations of artists who straddle continents and cultures in their work, confounding inherited structures of belonging and address. A major point of discussion was the display of specific national or regional characteristics that marked an artist's work as being an authentic representation of an originary culture. Who would this display be for? Was a display of 'Indian' or 'Chinese' authenticity more valid when it appealed to the exhibitionary desires of the West? What characteristics would the work display if it were aimed at a Chinese (or Indian) audience? As an exhibition *Place.Time.Play* sought to address the possibilities and limits of artistic conversation within Asian contexts without recourse to Euro-American forums.

A concern with national histories and traditions, especially in their authorised guises, was a frequent feature of the conversations. In what was constituted an 'Indian' view of Indian tradition, given the inheritance of British colonialism and more than 60 years of the existence of the Indian nation state? How did contemporary Chinese artists situate their tradition, considering an ancient history of learning and international contact, and the tumultuous events of the twentieth century with Euro-American colonisation and Japanese imperialism, followed by the establishment of the Peoples' Republic and the destructive events of the Cultural Revolution? India and China came to realise their republic at the same time, but with marked differences. With similar challenges, they chose different paths to modernisation. What might be the gains and losses in understanding modern historical parallels and divergences between these two nations? In addition to being considered major economic growth regions, India and China are participants in long-running border disputes and, in an ironic reprise of neo-colonialism, competitors over the resources of poorer Asian and

28 India and China fought a war over territory in 1962. At the time of writing, there are ongoing disputes over the boundaries that are shared between the Republic of India and the Peoples' Republic of China.

African nations. Meanwhile, the cash registers of dealers and auction houses regularly ring with the next big sale achieved for the work of one or more of the superstar artists from India or China.

What, then, might it mean for artists from these countries to address each other, and what would be the terms of that address, acknowledging that both sides were increasingly implicated and imbricated within the post-conceptualist framework of an international contemporary art world mediated via biennials and art fairs? What did Indian and Chinese artists, curators and academics have to learn from each other? Would the process of a single art event adequately address the entire range of possible conversations between the two art cultures? In retrospect, I do not hold that all the works in the exhibition lent themselves to this range of speculation or aspiration. In a process-driven and exploratory exhibition, it would be futile to expect every work to address the, sometimes intractable, issues of inter-cultural communication, especially between countries such as China and India, and within the time frame in which we worked. Language was a formidable barrier, despite the efforts of Chen Yun, our project manager, and Chang, both of whom functioned as interpreters and intermediaries in most of the Sino-Indian conversations.

That the exhibition took place at all was remarkable in view of the challenges we faced. Not only were we embarking on an exception to established practice in international exchanges, we were exploring a way of communicating with a cognate art culture, which defied the existing framework of such exchanges being routed via non-Asian academic and exhibition venues. Leaving aside the Santiniketan experiment at the beginning of the twentieth century, there was no history of collegial interaction on which we could rely. That we did not have the support of a major museum placed logistical and infrastructural limitations on the exhibition. This limitation, however, could be seen as an asset in view of the artists' works discussed below, several of which undertook experimental forms that deviated from conventional museum formats. For instance, the project enabled artists to undertake projects that, due to legal issues, would have been impossible for a museum administration to support.

Despite this, the production and installation process did present a range of difficulties associated with bureaucratic and infrastructural conditions. The exhibition sites comprised the foyer of a 22-storey bank building on Nanjing Xi Lu (Nanjing West Road, opposite the Shanghai Art Museum, site of the Shanghai Biennale), and a pair of nineteenth century heritage-listed monastery and chapel buildings (South Suzhou Road, adjoining the Bund). After many bureaucratic delays, the crates containing works from India were delivered only three hours before the scheduled exhibition opening on 23 October 2010, in the midst of a torrential downpour associated with Tropical Cyclone Megi. The 2010 World Expo in Shanghai had already altered timelines for customs clearance.

The audience was met by an exhibition team and artists frantically unpacking crates, with only the locally made (Chinese and Indian) works ready for display. As a consequence, the formal opening was rescheduled to 30 October.

Place.Time.Play: Crossings and Conversations

The routine censorship of work in the Peoples' Republic of China played a role in the process of installing the exhibition and a work by Wu Shanzhuan (b. 1960) and Inga Svala Thorsdóttir (b. 1966) was affected by state intervention. Wu and Inga (as they call themselves) had proposed a reworking of their text-based *Things' Rights*, which idiosyncratically reinterprets the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by replacing each instance of the word 'human' with 'thing'. That Wu Shanzhuan's family name (Wu) also equates to 'thing' was something the artists exploited in the work. Wu and Inga proposed a series of texts for the exhibition that represented the 'manifesto' of thing's rights in three languages: Mandarin, Sanskrit and Hindi. In the context of the (then) recent award of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to the dissident Liu Xiaobo (who is a political prisoner in China), Chinese censors took a dim view of any work that invoked, no matter how obliquely, the idea of human rights. The work was refused a license for exhibition. As a compromise, small booklets with the Sanskrit and Hindi text were available for the audience to take away, the vast majority of whom (including the officials) could not read the text in those languages.

Atul Bhalla's (b. 1964) work was another casualty of Chinese censorship. His location-specific series *The Listener from the West Heavens* addressed his ongoing concern with water and its cultural meanings. Bhalla's practice has involved an investigation of the values associated with water in all its forms: as drink and irrigation; as rivers, canals and reservoirs; as an object of value and a precious resource to be controlled and administered; and, as carrier of refuse. In a series of choreographed photo-performances, Bhalla assumed the role of a stranger listening intently to the underground streetscape of Shanghai. For him, the spectacular growth of Shanghai conceals a buried history: the many streams, lakes and canals that once constituted a waterside economy might still be audible below the concrete. Vestiges of the past, haunting the pursuit of hyper-modernity, are perhaps discernible to the ears of strangers from afar. Bhalla subtitled his back-lit images with modified texts from Chang Jung's novel *Wild Swans* (1991), which recall slogans from the Cultural Revolution. Bhalla modified these slogans to appear as consumerist exhortations and some of these re-alignments—especially those that mentioned the words 'communist' or 'democracy'—were refused an exhibition permit. Our token protest in response to this refusal was to display the works as blacked-out light-boxes, coupled with a stop-motion video of Bhalla 'listening' in a number of Shanghai locations.

Atul Bhalla, *The Listener from the West Heavens* 2010 (detail); light boxes and video; 9 pieces, 135 x 95 x 20 cm each.

Photograph: Thomas Fuesser; courtesy of West Heavens

The idea of entering another location, or of intruding into another territory, was also exemplified in Qiu Zhijie's (b. 1969) *Railway from Lhasa to Katmandu* [sic] (2006–2010). In 2006–2007 Qiu Zhijie walked from Lhasa (Tibet) to Kathmandu (Nepal). The trigger for this project was the inauguration in July 2006 of the Golmud–Lhasa railway line, complete with pressurised passenger cars to facilitate high-altitude travel. For Qiu Zhijie, this represented the latest in a series of entries into the mythical Shangri-La that Tibet represents: a hermetic realm of spirituality and peace, but also a geopolitical prize vied over by European as well as Chinese imperial interests.²⁹ His research into the 'discovery' of Tibet led him to the character of Nain Singh (Nain Singh Rawat, 1830–1895) an Indian employee of the (British) Geometrical Survey of India who mapped the route from Nepal to Tibet in 1866.³⁰ Qiu Zhijie set about replicating Nain Singh's journey in reverse, using as much as possible of the same technology for navigation and measurement (including wearing shackles to mimic Nain Singh's

29 As part of the work, Qiu Zhijie presented an annotated map insinuating his own journey among the routes and dates of the various nineteenth century European expeditions into the north-west of China.

30 Nain Singh Rawat was one of the first explorers of the Himalayan territory working for the British Government. His 1865–1866 journey from Kathmandu to Lhasa was characterised by intrigue and impersonation. Having been trained to take equidistant steps regardless of terrain, he posed as a monk, but with a modified prayer rosary of 100 instead of 108 beads to keep track of distance, and a compass and thermometer camouflaged in his monastic equipment.

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measured footsteps of precisely 33 inches. The idea of Tibet as an object of desire, sandwiched between British India and Imperial China, and its conflicted history in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries was presented in the exhibition through a series of photographs, video and *thang-ka* paintings. In an ironic comment on Tibetan identity and destiny, Qiu Zhijie also included three lengths of rail tracks reconstituted from an alloy of objects of ritual, musical and religious purpose that he collected, via barter, on his journey.

Qiu Zhijie, *Railway from Lhasa to Katmandu* 2010 (detail); performance, photographs, installation.

Photograph: Thomas Fuesser; courtesy of West Heavens

Throughout history, wanderers, explorers and colonisers have been seduced by the promise of crossing culture: of discovering the unknown and thereby oneself. Such trespass might uncover the unknown within the intimate, and reveal the familiar within the seemingly foreign. The travels of Sun Wukong in the Chinese classic *Journey to the West* are evocative and revelatory in respect of Qiu Zhijie's experimental walk. This journey of self-discovery was echoed in Tushar Joag's (b. 1966) motorcycle odyssey from Bombay, India, to Shanghai, China. On his unassisted ride between these two financial capitals, Joag made strategic stops among communities affected by India's Sardar Sarovar complex of dams on the river Narmada, and the Three Gorges complex on the Yangtze. Both governments have represented the projects as major landmarks

in nation-building, and both projects have resulted in large scale dispossession of indigenous tribes and farmers in service of the presumed greater ideal of modernisation. Crossing diverse terrain and experiencing extreme temperatures, landslides and storms, Joag undertook a feat of endurance in *Riding Rocinante from Bombay to Shanghai via Sardar Sarovar and the Three Gorges*³¹ astride a 1950s-designed, 350 cc Enfield 'Bullet' motorcycle with sidecar. Joag's journey to Shanghai followed earlier journeys in reverse, such as that of the Buddhist monk Xuanzang (seventh century CE) who travelled to India in search of original Buddhist scriptures. It also made reference to the Buddha's journey of renunciation on his horse Kanthaka, and Ernesto 'Che' Guevara's travels of self-discovery in Latin America. On reaching Shanghai, Joag dismantled his motorcycle, which was presented as a sculptural installation, *The Realisation of Kanthaka*, using water from the Yangtze, Joag's battered equipment, a copy of his blog entries, maps used on the journey³² and other ephemera.

Crossing boundaries was a repeated refrain in the artists' responses to the exhibition theme. Having undertaken a research trip to Beijing, Anant Joshi was fascinated by the imposing gateways that he observed in many cities, including Beijing (the gates to the Forbidden City) and his home city of Bombay (the Gateway of India). Associated with imperial might, these gateways function as proclamations of authority; at once welcoming portals and forbidding bulwarks. In his *Musical Chairs*, Joshi manipulated the form and function of gateways to create a sculpture that functions as a closed gateway from one side, and a series of hospitable thrones from the other. His ongoing concern with games and play was represented by a tongue-in-cheek comment on thrones and the jostling for power that goes on in the backrooms of government. Joshi's installation and accompanying flipbook presented a playful critique of how civilisations and empires construct parameters of permissibility and prohibition.

The idiosyncratic paintings, intended as a trilogy/triptych, of Liu Dahong (b. 1962) gestured towards a series of improbable syntheses between Indian, Chinese and European histories. *Travelling Worldwide* presented a seemingly wanton series of leaps across European, Indian and Chinese sources. The artist's intentions, however, were more complex than syncretism for its own sake. He sought a radical revision of art historical narratives, potentially rewriting them from within, to construct an alternative vision of that which *was*, and that *might have been* in terms of art historical representation. Liu Dahong constructed an amalgam of historical material that presented reinvented histories of India and China. The drama of this fantasy was enacted under the poetic penumbrae of the reclining figures of Leo Tolstoy and Rabindranath Tagore, and of an allegorical and heavily pregnant nude mother figure, perhaps about to give birth to a new,

31 Joag chose to name his motorcycle Rocinante after the horse on which Spanish writer Miguel de Cervantes's delusional character Don Quixote famously tilted at windmills.

32 Joag's blog *Riding Rocinante* can be accessed at <http://riding-d-rocinante.blogspot.com/>.

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reconfigured world. This comedic and cosmic drama encompassed a gamut of historical characters ranging from long-dead emperors of the past to political figures of the twentieth century. The work asked the viewer to 'think otherwise', to contemplate the nature of political and cultural relationships in an altered articulation of history.

Nilima Sheikh (b. 1945) also chose to work with historical realignments in her *Over Land* series of 14, free-hanging, tempera-on-paper scrolls (mounted on silk in Hangzhou). Installed in the chapel at 107 South Suzhou Road, her work originated in her commitment to working with elements of Asian tradition. Her engagement with the poetic and the lyrical has traversed visual and literary traditions across India, Pakistan and China. Having first visited China in 1991, and several times since, she studied Chinese traditions and their intersections, via the Himalayan regions, with Indian traditions. Her constellation of works included abbreviated notations and motifs that encompassed various forms of trans-culturality. Her poetic and pictorial references included legends from the Jatakas (the previous lives of the Buddha in Indian Buddhist traditions), and poetic works from Chinese, Kashmiri and Punjabi poets: amongst them Sung Chih-Wen (*Crossing the Han River*), Yuan Mei (*The Tree Planter Laughs at Himself*), Shah Husain (Punjab, Shaalu and Heer) and Lal Ded (Kashmir).

Nilima Sheikh, *Over Land* 2010; casein tempera on rice paper mounted on silk; 14 scrolls, 366 x 30 cm each.

Photograph: Mao Xingyu; courtesy of West Heavens

In the same space was installed Hema Upadhyay's (b. 1972) motorised installation *Twin Souls* comprising 40 mechanical birds whirling in a cage-like structure. Upadhyay's birds spoke of the troubled experience of migration and (re)settlement, exploring the interstices between belonging and alienation. Upadhyay used Chinese-made, mass-produced toys to construct a cacophony of caged birds circling endlessly, trapped between destinations and forever unable to reach home. The birds' erratic behaviour as a flock hinted at a state of anxiety driven to violence, invoking a mob in place of a community. Where a confluence of cultures might have been imagined, Upadhyay presented a collection of imprisoned beings driven to desperation.

Sonia Khurana's (b. 1968) work was concerned with embodying a private ethics of being in the world, and the complications attendant to the meeting between this private realm and that of the public. She produced for the exhibition a (work-in-progress) project, *An Imprecise Portrait*, which resulted from the chance discovery of a scrapbook belonging to an anonymous person (a Chinese woman?) containing in addition to 'authorised' images from the Cultural Revolution, various interpolations that had presumably been made by the owner/occupier of this book. Khurana also presented in the exhibition the ongoing work *Lying Down on the Ground* in which she variously enacted temporary inhabitations in the public space, where the human presence (the artist's body) temporarily assumed the role of dereliction, dispossession, and abandonment. Khurana presented herself as standing, or more precisely, lying, outside the boundaries of the permissible in society.³³ Khurana's work was connected to its exhibitionary context in Shanghai through a discreet subversion: an everyday practice subtly undermining the conceits of supervised society.

Place.Time.Play: Legacies

Contemporary accounts represent India and China as areas of extraordinary commercial and industrial growth in this century. As arenas of unsurpassed opportunity for enterprise, they are also characterised by extreme inequalities in income distribution. Ethical modernisation and social equity are ongoing concerns and challenges in both countries. As many artists in this exhibition highlighted in their work, the incomplete legacies of nationalist modernisation remain relevant to the future.

33 Khurana's artist's statement asks, 'Can the critical possibilities offered by small acts of transgression—or trespass—be considered beyond their value as individual acts, for the potential of their accumulation? Could these acts be seen as perpetual rehearsal, of being into becoming? Can the dynamic build-up of infinitely small disturbances change structure into movement, a thing into a current?'

Highlighting an ethics of everyday life, Hu Xiangcheng's (b. 1950) work was animated by an admiration for Gandhian principles and concerns with sustainability in the context of rapid modernisation. That Hu Xiangcheng had worked in Africa as well as China underlined his investment in these issues. His work in this exhibition addressed food security in the developing world in the context of the rapid growth in genetically modified and artificially fertilised food crops. His installation consisted of replicas of architectural monuments from historical and contemporary periods in India and China, constructed from (potentially) edible material, using Chinese reinterpretations of Indian dairy-based sweets suspended on an armature that alluded to agrarian origins. Underneath these superstructures, Hu Xiangcheng installed a mass of silhouettes of restless figures: images of turmoil against a background dominated by fertiliser in plastic bags.

L.N. Tallur (b. 1971) based his work on his decade-long engagement with monetary and cultural values of specific objects. His work involved subjecting currency and objects of reverence to the eroding scrutiny of the artist's mechanical contrivances. In his interactive *Coin Polisher*, coins were mechanically brushed into devaluation in the search for polish/civilisation, rendering them into certified 'clean' money that was manifestly 'civilised' and useless at the same time. In the process, claims of sovereignty associated with the coinage were made irrelevant, and ultimately transferable, as every coin could be made to look like every other, regardless of the issuing authority. With *Enlightenment Machine (Beta Version)* Tallur made the audience implicit in humour-laced transcultural erasure, by offering them a chance to contribute to the gradual effacement of 'heritage' in the form of iconic images from India and China.

Having researched and performed over a decade the intermissions between dreams of modernisation, governmental fantasies of control and the illusion of redemption, the Raqs Media Collective (founded 1992) produced an interactive work for a street-side audience. In *Revolutionary Forces (The Three Tasters)*, Raqs 'delegated' their agency to a group of volunteer actors who performed a script written by Raqs. The performances took place intermittently over two months on a tableau designed by Raqs. Viewed as a companion/counterpoint to Raqs' work in the Shanghai Biennale 2010, *Revolutionary Forces* sought to insinuate 'new' mythology into the midst of existing Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist lore. While the narratives, all of which began with 'There was once a ...', seemed to belong to the time of legend, they also conveyed an underlying current of revolutionary transformation, an uncoiling of certainties yielding a pliable twine to be woven anew.

Tallur L.N., *Enlightenment Machine (Beta Version)* 2010; wood, bronze, steel, grinding stone; 180 x 200 x 220 cm.

Photograph: Thomas Fuesser; courtesy of West Heavens

In a different register, Gigi Scaria's (b. 1973) works *No Parallel* and *Raise your hands those who spoke to him* also unwind authorised histories of revolution and social transformation. In these works Scaria's concern with the successes and failures of physical and philosophical modernisation extended to an investigation of the meanings associated with iconic historical figures. *No Parallels* highlighted the incongruent careers of two national giants, Gandhi and Mao. Scaria was struck by the commonalities in their status as national icons and symbols of liberation who committed their lives to the emancipation of their peoples, and the distinct positions that they occupy in terms of their political philosophies. The portrait of Mao that gradually emerges in *Raise your hands* ... moves between nostalgia and propaganda. In every case though, there is a sense of a fleeting essence being resuscitated on the screen, even as the flipping panels of the animation in *No Parallels* reveal sometimes touching and, often, conflicting juxtapositions between the careers of the Mahatma and the Chairman.

Gulammohammed Sheikh's (b. 1937) monumental installation *City: Memory, Dreams, Desire, Statues and Ghosts: Return of Hiuen Tsang* asked a number of historical questions. Sheikh was interested in what Hiuen Tsang (Xuanzang) might experience if he were to return to India (and to Sheikh's home city of Baroda) in 2010. In his career as artist, poet and teacher, Sheikh has engaged

with diverse artistic and literary traditions and his interest in Indian, Chinese, Persian and European art history dates back four decades or more. The installation combined these ongoing streams in his oeuvre, mapping the art historical onto the contemporary, teasing out the interstices between tradition and contemporaneity and collapsing place and time into an amalgam that can speak in diverse registers. The world view of this work was rooted in the welter of contact, exchange and influence that has given rise to contemporary cultures. Sheikh's re-visioning of the world is capacious and his inclusive imagination makes it possible to integrate the anguish of contemporary events, such as episodes of sectarian violence that have occurred in his native state of Gujarat (most recently in 2002), with historical phenomena, such as the spread of Buddhism (the creed of non-violence) from India to China, as symbolised by the figure of Huien Tsang.

Qiu Anxiong, *Cubic Globe* 2010; wood and steel; 5 pieces, 120 x 60 x 60 cm each.

Photograph: Thomas Fuesser; courtesy of West Heavens

In *Cubic Globes*, Qiu Anxiong (b. 1972) revisioned contemporary geopolitics by invoking ancient Chinese understandings of the cosmos (a round Heaven and a square Earth). Each of the five cubical works elaborated on topographical, geological, climatic and political ramifications of an alternate configuration of the world as cube rather than sphere. The most significant manifestation of these cubical earths lay in the relations of power and marginality between and within

nations. Qiu Anxiong's flat-faced earths proposed their own theory of distance, spatial relationships, centrality and the peripheral and tied into the adventurous traversals represented in many of the works exhibited in *Place.Time.Play*. What might be the spatial and political experience of seekers, migrants, refugees, traders (or artists), on this radically reconfigured earth? As realignments of power re-draw the political and economic landscape of the world, Qiu Anxiong's work encouraged a reflection on these matters from an always-marginal position situated on a pointed corner of his new worlds, looking anxiously towards one of the three facets visible, a position doomed to perpetual anticipation of being flung into space as the cube made its clumsy rotations.

In Conclusion: Relief and Return

A central consideration of many works in the exhibition was responses to ongoing rehearsals/re-inscriptions of history—and the need to critically re-historicise what they represent. Such responses are critical if we are to remain interested in the idea of connectivity, intra-Asian or otherwise. Contemporary connectivity across the two so-called 'fountainhead cultures' of Asia is, we discovered, fraught not only with linguistic and political barriers, but with entrenched institutional conditions involving logistics and reception. What did a Chinese audience expect Indian contemporary art to look like? Producing work that was intended for neither domestic commercial gallery spaces or mainstream international venues (biennials, art fairs, country specific museum exhibitions) was also a factor in the artists' processes, and perhaps a liberating one. Not being aligned with any major institutional structure perhaps offered artists participating in this project a sense of relief and return: relief in that there was no expectation to represent their national art cultures, and return in that there was an opportunity to consider historical recursions as they impact on contemporary practice.

The exhibition, despite its acknowledged limitations, can be seen as part of a larger and ongoing project in Sino-Indian conversation, one that continues to build, but is yet in its initial stages. No single event can adequately address the entire range of potential conversations between two art cultures. Mainstream institutional and political conditions remain hostile to connectivities between China and India. The survival and continuance of a platform such as 'West Heavens' demonstrates the potential for flexible and adaptive practices that intend to address entrenched 'inequalities of ignorance'.³⁴ This acknowledgement of unequal ignorance is a necessary first step. Transcultural exchanges in an inter-Asian context need, however, to remain attentive to the combination of

34 Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History'.

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blindness and super-vision that comes out of shared inheritance: an inheritance that always needs to be claimed, whether by members of the originary culture or by others that aspire to expanded forms of belonging. Only through adventurous—and sometimes faltering—claims can connectivity grow.

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