

Xu Fancheng: a Chinese scholar, artist and sage in 20th century India

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A small coastal town in southern India and a former French colony, Pondicherry is best known for its association with Sri Aurobindo, née Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950), India's foremost modern philosopher and revolutionary-turned-mystic, and his French spiritual collaborator, Mirra Alfassa (1878-1973), popularly known as 'The Mother'. Since the 1940s, an increasing number of persons from India and abroad were drawn to Pondicherry by the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the radiant presence of The Mother. Some of these visitors stayed on in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, the community that grew around the spiritual masters. As a result, this small town transformed into a melting pot of people, and its quiet, sleepy exterior belied the rich spiritual and cultural life of its international residents. Among them was a most intriguing personality, a Chinese scholar and artist whose life and legacy are a fascinating study.

Xu Fancheng, more commonly known as Hu Hsu in India, was born on 26 October 1909, in Changsha, Hunan Province, into a well-to-do family. Coincidentally, the young Mao Zedong was his geography teacher in school. However, it was Lu Xun, the noted Chinese writer and literary reformist, who played the role of his early mentor. Xu enrolled at the Second National Sun Yat-sen University (today Wuhan University) in 1926, to study History, then shifted to Fudan University in Shanghai the following year to study Western Literature, before moving on to study Fine Arts and Philosophy at the University of Heidelberg in 1929.

When his father died unexpectedly, Xu returned to China in 1932. At the prompting of Lu Xun, he began the first of his major translations into Chinese – Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra* [Thus Spoke Zarathustra]. He would go on to translate a number of the German philosopher's works. Xu settled down in Shanghai, where Lu Xun also



Fig.9: Xu Fancheng's Exhibition in 1967, The Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry.

lived until his death in 1936, and taught at Tongji University. In 1939, as the Japanese invasion raged on, Xu moved to the National Academy of Art in Hunan, then to Kunming. In 1941 he moved to Chongqing, working at the Central Library and teaching at the National Central University. Finally, in 1945, Xu received a government grant and headed to Shantiniketan in eastern India. At Cheena Bhavan, the Chinese study center co-founded by Rabindranath Tagore and Tan Yun-shan in 1937, Xu joined a group of Chinese scholars, artists and pioneers in the re-establishment of the ancient cultural links between India and China. After five years at Shantiniketan, and a short interlude at Varanasi where he worked on his Chinese translation of Kalidasa's Sanskrit play *Meghaduta* [The Cloud Messenger], Xu arrived in Pondicherry in 1951. He was accompanied by a gifted Chinese female artist from Shantiniketan, You Yun-shan (lay name of Master Xiaoyun, later an influential Buddhist nun in Taiwan and the founder of Huafan University). While You left after a few months, Xu remained in Pondicherry for 27 years.

Xu never met Sri Aurobindo, who had already passed away a year earlier, but The Mother became a central spiritual figure in Xu's life, to whom he dedicated all his future books. The Mother treated him warmly and encouraged his tremendous potential. A master of many languages – in addition to German, Sanskrit and English, Xu also knew Greek, Latin and French – he was now keen to translate Sri Aurobindo's books into Chinese. The Mother arranged a large French colonial bungalow on the beach road for Xu; it was surrounded by a garden and overlooked the Bay of Bengal. Here, at *Villa Ophelia*, Xu lived a life of intense solitude and concentration. He worked intensively on his translations, sometimes for 14 hours a day. In order to support him, The Mother purchased and shipped a Chinese printing press, and appointed a salaried assistant for him from Hong Kong.

Xu published translations of numerous works of Sri Aurobindo such as *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, and *The Human Cycle*, and the translations from Sanskrit of 50 *Upanishads* (texts of religious teaching and ideas) and the *Bhagavad Gita* (Hindu scripture) as well. He also published commentaries on Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism, and the origins of Chinese characters. Xu combined in his person a rare mastery of both Indian and Chinese philosophy. Those who knew Xu in Pondicherry spoke warmly of him in interviews with the author. Many highlighted his indrawn, refined, yet humorous personality. Although he was not a social person, his small circle of friends fondly remembered the time they spent together playing Go, learning calligraphy and painting, and cycling through the countryside on Sunday afternoons. Even though he accepted very few students formally, the little children of the Ashram

school often came over to the 'Chinese house'. He was happy to allow them to play and run around in the garden even as he continued his work quietly, occasionally also surprising them with lemonade or a short calligraphy demonstration, much to their delight!

In his spare time, Xu was also an avid painter. His paintings are mainly brushwork depicting Chinese landscapes, flowers, and bamboos in color or ink. He also practiced Chinese calligraphy in mostly traditional styles. We know that he had exhibited his artworks at least twice in Pondicherry. The first was shortly after his arrival; the second major exhibition was held in 1967, which was given considerable prominence by The Mother. In the exhibition poster, there was a message written by The Mother in her own hand, which was displayed on the Ashram Notice Board. The message reads, "Here are the paintings of a scholar, who is at once an artist and a yogi, exhibited with my blessings". Xu offered about 300 of his paintings to the Ashram, which are still preserved, and are a testimony to both his artistic and scholarly achievements. (Fig 9)

Xu lived like a sage – simple, focused on his work, and with bare necessities. He had very little money of his own, and all his material needs were taken care of by The Mother. In a letter to a friend, Xu reportedly wrote, "If you want to experience Taoism, come to live in the Ashram, you will have the realisation of Lao-Tse's philosophy." The Mother passed away in 1973. A few years later, with China slowly opening up after the death of Mao Zedong, Xu felt he had a duty to take his books to the mainland, as his books could not be sold in China in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1978, Xu left for China and eventually settled in Beijing, a decision influenced by two friends from his time at Heidelberg who now taught at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. They encouraged him to join them; Xu agreed on the condition that he would not have to teach, so that he would be allowed to continue his work quietly. Thus, Xu finally returned to his homeland after 33 years in India.

In Beijing, Xu continued writing and painting, sharing his vast erudition with interested students. He soon came to be known as one of the foremost Chinese scholars on the subject of Indian philosophy. On 6 March 2000, Xu passed away. His younger colleague at Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Prof. Sun Bo, recognized the importance of Xu's work, and became a moving force in publishing his books in China. Today his books attract a growing number of readers; his paintings too have recently drawn attention from many quarters. The full import of Xu's legacy will become clearer in the years to come. His life and work are a modern symbol of the ancient spiritual and cultural bridges that have historically spanned India and China.

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While Professor Sen's quest was to highlight little-known artistic interactions that took place between the two countries, as a reporter, I was intrigued by these journeys across the border prior to the 1962 Sino-Indian War, which has in many ways come to define the two countries' relationship with each other. I received a wide range of comments to the stories I filed, largely from readers telling me that they really had no idea that such exchanges had even taken place. In fact, the consistent feedback I received for most of my

reports was that these were interesting stories about Chinese people, who were largely unknown in India. My reporting on Chang and Hu was instrumental in opening my eyes to a whole new world of stories that could define the way the two countries view each other. Especially in the 70th year of diplomatic ties, this seems worth pondering over.

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