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Ai in Mumbai

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[Ai in Mumbai](#)

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How a first-ever exhibition on Chinese dissent got noticed in India

By Reshma Patil

The Chinese artist offered a firm handshake and his business card. The Indian curator hesitated for a split second. They were, after all, standing in a men's loo in Gwangju, South Korea.

The curator returned to Mumbai, a financial powerhouse that several Chinese artists in the study group at Gwangju had never heard of. "[What is Mumbai?](#)" they asked him. The artist, who happened to know where Mumbai lies, returned to his studio in Beijing. He and the curator communicated via email for over a year. There were long silent gaps, until one day this year, the curator received a parcel of video CDs dispatched from Beijing.

For the first time, Ai Weiwei arrived in India.

It was an odd occurrence. Cultural exchanges between India and China are limited to one-off exchanges and festivals of diplomatically correct art.

The last burst of cross-border cultural exchange happened in 2010 during the 60th anniversary of diplomatic ties between the rivals separated by a boundary disputed since half a century. The stage shows sprinkled with song and dance from the esoteric Kuchipudi to Jai Ho were more political than popular in outreach. I visited an India-China Friendship Exhibition spread on an 11th floor hall in Beijing, where I found myself the lone visitor, staring at paintings on India-inspired themes by dozens of Chinese artists.

Now here I was, shuffling clumsily into the darkened century-old Clark House (nobody now remembers who Mr. Clark was) showing the activist-artist's videos. The colonial building on the southern seaside of Mumbai used to be the office of a tea export company that cut-price Chinese competitors made defunct in the nineties.

The entrance was lit by Mumbai-based artist Justin Ponmany's work of two skirt-shaped lampshades with blood-red maps of India and China on each. An engrossed old lady sat on a Shenzhen-made replica of a Ming dynasty hunting chair. "You're blocking my view," she complained about my presence before the screen draped on the wall. If she had stayed at home, she would be flicking channels broadcasting the successful trial of India's Agni-5, a nuclear-capable missile that can reach Beijing and Shanghai.

"We had visitors who spent half a day here, to watch all four films," said curator Sumesh Sharma who accepted Ai's handshake in a loo in 2010, when he knew the man as just a co-designer of the Bird's Nest Olympics stadium in Beijing. China's best-known activist-artist became a familiar name in Indian newsprint only during his 81-day detention last year.



Exhibition view from left to right of video by Ai Weiwei, prints by Nikhil Raunak, posters from the Cultural Revolution, video by Tushar Joag and print by Atul Dodiya. Photo credit Clark House.

“It indicates a government strangely unsure of its legitimacy, wary of its own people,” said a [Hindustan Times editorial last April](#). “Which is why New Delhi and other capitals are watching China’s external actions so carefully, worrying and watching out for any evidence that domestic paranoia is feeding into foreign policy practice.” The *Indian Express* ran [an op-ed](#) on the “dangerous artist” by Salman Rushdie. But Ai is not as well known in India as in the West. The screenings in the Clark House gallery from April 13-22 last month may have changed that. They called it “Arranging Chairs for Ai Weiwei,” as a gesture to welcome him to India.

An art critic paced upstairs. Foreign tourists came daily in droves. A video of Ai in Ordos, Inner Mongolia, streamed on a computer screen atop an antique table topped with sunflower carvings. A miniature porcelain ensemble of an “animal farm” sat in a dusty box under the computer. The screens were surrounded by works of half a dozen Indian artists, including Tushar Joag, who rode a motorcycle from Mumbai to Shanghai two years ago to make symbolic linkages between controversial great dam projects in both nations.

Sharma discussed the “cultural indifference” and “hostility” one experiences on both sides of the border, especially when forging people-to-people connections. “Our motive to bring Ai Weiwei to India stemmed from a personal want to bridge the cultural indifference to a neighbour with whom we share our longest boundary,” he said in a statement.

Rambling through the rooms, one watched Ai and Tan Zuoren's campaign against "tofu schools" that buried over 5,000 child victims of the Sichuan earthquake of 2008; the controversial case of Yang Jia who was executed for killing six Shanghai policemen and Ordos 100, where architects were invited to design 100 villas on a piece of desert in Inner Mongolia.

Nearly all Mumbai-based newspapers reported the screenings, but the coverage didn't make direct linkages with India. Students, artists, journalists, and retired neighbors trooped in to sit on the replica hunting chairs, showing that Indians too want to listen to what the Chinese are talking about. It's just not Peking Opera.

Both the contrasting civil societies are becoming more vocal in asserting their rights in governance. Chinese netizens last year attempted to launch anti-bribery websites modeled on those in India. Chinese bloggers spread the word on the Anna Hazare-led anti-corruption campaign last year, noting that Indians, at least, [have the right to protest](#).

"The critique that we often have of India is that it is inefficient and corrupt for [all that] it is democratic and accommodating," said Sharma. "But through Ai's movies I felt that the state was failing itself initially through corruption and subsequently through repression of people like Tan Zuoren and Ai who uncovered these failures."

"The relationship between the police and citizens," he said, "reminds us of the relationship we in India hold with the state."

Three unidentified Chinese men also came and took a good look. The organizers wondered why they left without revealing their names.

Reshma Patil works as associate editor at the Hindustan Times. She is writing a book on Sino-Indian relations based on her years as the paper's first China correspondent from 2008-11.