



THE FANG FANG PHENOMENON: MANUFACTURING DISSENT AMID COVID-19 CHINA

Speaker: Dr. Hemant Adlakha, Associate Professor, JNU

Chair: Amb. Kishan Rana

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Noting how the Fang Fang diary has taken a global shape and turned into the “Fang Fang phenomenon”, the speaker began the presentation by introducing the author. A Wuhan based writer, Fang Fang spent her childhood during the Great Leap Forward and her teenage years during the Cultural Revolution decade. She is among the first group of students to enroll in a university after the Cultural Revolution. She began writing fiction in the early 1980s and is the recipient of many literary awards in China including the Lu Xun Literary Prize.

The speaker further divided the “Fang Fang phenomenon” into three phases. The first phase, from 25 January to 7 April, the second phase from 8 April to 8 May and the third phase, from 8 May and is still continuing. The first phase began when the lockdown was announced and the ended with the lifting of the lockdown in Wuhan. The second phase began after the lifting Wuhan’s lockdown and the publishing of Fang Fang’s Wuhan Diary in English and the third phase which is still continuing is marked by the involvement of a senior Chinese official in the debate surrounding Wuhan Diary and setting a fierce attack on the author as well as on the public intellectuals of the country. While in the early period, starting from 25 January, Fang Fang’s Diary was not a major issue concerning the Chinese government, on 7 February, when Dr. Li Wenliang passed away and a tribute post on social media written by the author was taken down by the government, she became the focus of attention. Earlier in 2016, Fang Fang had found herself in a middle of a controversy for her book “Soft Burial” which was eventually banned the year after.

The speaker further mentions that although the reason for attack on Fang Fang is not very clear, there could be two possible reasons for it. First, although the articles accused the author of rumor mongering, as later reports from Wuhan suggest, there was some truth to what she had written. Second, the attack was due to her identity and her past. Dr. Adlakha contends that if the Wuhan diary was written by somebody other than Fang Fang, this would have not turned into a major issue, and the fact that she is not a member of the Party is also important to understand the cyber-bullying faced by the author.

Describing the third phase, the speaker mentions that, the nature and the frequency of the attack during this time had changed. The issue had become much larger than Wuhan Diary or Fang

Fang herself. The idea of intimidating Fang Fang by labelling her as an American agent and anti-national did not quite work out. He further elaborated on the characteristics of the third phase. On 8 May, the Deputy Education Minister of China held a meeting at Beijing Normal University which, according to the speaker, was indicative of the university becoming the “battleground of ideas”. The speaker mentions that various government apparatus, including Xinhua New Agency, China Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) and Communist Youth League Daily have come together to take on all the supporters of Fang Fang. There has been reports of University professors and public intellectuals being investigated for their “improper speech”. In this light, Dr. Adlakha contends that as Chinese cultural writings present a better insight into the politics than the writings of Political Science itself, it is very important to read literature in order to understand Chinese politics.

As discussion began, a question related to Fang Fang going abroad with her publication and offering an opportunity to foreign powers to attack China was raised. In response, the speaker noted that it has indeed become the only point of attack on Fang Fang in the third phase. While in the earlier phase, the criticism against the systemic failure in Wuhan had been accepted in China, the publication of the Diary by Harper Collins has not set well with the authorities. On the question related to the “battle of ideas” inside China, the speaker mentioned that the ‘Fang Fang phenomenon’ does not primarily talk about Fang Fang or the Wuhan Diary but rather it has transcended that boundary. It also involves the major support the author is receiving on social media, which the Chinese authorities had not anticipated. He further talks about the first meeting of the National Security Commission in 2013 and Xi Jinping’s outlining seven major threats to China which was eventually known as Central Document No. 9. Among the seven threats Xi had mentioned, the first was ‘western liberal ideas and free press’. The speaker observed that Fang Fang does not fit the category of the “typical dissident” as she is not actively campaigning against socialism or the Party, thereby, making it difficult for the Party to deal this “phenomenon”.

This report was prepared by Bihu Chamadia, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi.

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