



Institute of Chinese Studies

WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Revisiting Tiananmen:
Narratives and Discourses*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speaker :

Debasish Chaudhuri

Rajiv Ranjan

Rakesh Kumar

Snigdha Konar

4 June 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Speakers: **Dr. Debasish Chaudhuri**, Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Dr. Rajiv Ranjan, Associate Professor, Department of East Asian Studies, University of Delhi; and, Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Dr. Rakesh Kumar, Associate Professor, Centre for Chinese and South East Asian Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Dr. Snigdha Konar, Research Associate, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Chair: **Dr. Bhim Subba**, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad; and, Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Date: 4 June 2025

Venue: Zoom Webinar

- The seminar commemorated the 36th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square incident, reflecting on the politics of protest in post-Tiananmen China. Chaired by Dr. Bhim Subba, the discussion emphasised the need for moving beyond discourses from Mainland China while examining the role of youth, particularly students, in shaping dissent.
- Dr. Debasish Chaudhuri questioned whether Tiananmen ought to be viewed as a “movement” or as a “massacre”, especially in the context of student demands and the state’s focus on preserving “stability” at all costs. He discussed Tiananmen’s convergence with ethnic movements, and noted that the transition to a democracy would have been far from easy, with heightened criminalisation of protests and surveillance in the wake of Tiananmen.
- Dr. Rajiv Ranjan adopted a “what if” approach, speculating on how the movement might have evolved had key figures like Hu Yaobang, Zhao Ziyang, and Deng

Xiaoping acted differently. He suggested that alternative outcomes could have led to greater political liberty, grassroots electoral processes, and improved relations with the West.

- Dr. Rakesh Kumar traced the lineage of youth activism in China, from the May 4th Movement to the recent White Paper Protests, suggesting that Tiananmen was not an anomaly. He questioned the argument about the inevitability of the massacre and highlighted the state's enduring threat of force. He also noted the shift in the sites of protests, from Tiananmen Square to symbolic sites like the Great Firewall.
- Dr. Snigdha Konar explored historical amnesia among Chinese youth, citing Louisa Lim's work to show the widening gap between generations in terms of awareness and interest about the crushing of the protests on Tiananmen Square. She examined how dissent has evolved through euphemisms and memes, with youth adopting attitudes like *bai lan* (White Paper) and *tang ping* (Lying Flat) as forms of indirect resistance to state control.
- The seminar stressed the adaptability of protest in the face of censorship, with panellists exploring how the language of dissent now includes symbolism and coded references. Social media has emerged as a key battleground where controlled activism and creative resistance continue to develop under surveillance.
- Dr. Subba summed up the discussions by reaffirming the lasting impact of the Tiananmen movement on China's socio-political landscape and underlining its enduring complexity and significance in understanding state-youth dynamics.

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