

Institute of Chinese Studies

# WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Democracy and  
Socialism: A Perspective  
from China*

## REPORT

Speaker :  
**Zhengxu Wang**

8 November 2023

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Speaker: Prof. Zhengxu Wang**, Distinguished Professor, Department of Political Science, School of Public Administration, Zhejiang University, China.

**Chair: Dr. Rajiv Ranjan**, Associate Professor, Department of East Asian Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Delhi; and, Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

**Venue:** Zoom Webinar

The seminar examined the need to broaden conventional understandings of “democracy” and “socialism”. The talk was delivered by Prof. Zhengxu Wang, whose extensive scholarship focuses on democracy in East Asia, and China in particular, as well as citizen politics and political trust.

Socialism and democracy are often cast as opposing political traditions, with the former being associated largely with authoritarian regimes. The seminar drew on the long-standing East-West ideological divide, and sought to de-centre Western-framed narratives. This endeavour included challenging popular, and often one-dimensional, understandings of these two concepts that are often employed in rigid categorisations.

Prof. Wang argued that socialism in China centres on the equitable distribution of social and economic resources, without implying commitment to any single political model. He stated that through its varied stages of development, China has retained its socialist orientation in working matters, diverging from the Western narratives of China practising ‘capitalism with Chinese characteristics’. Contrary to the popular narrative of pitting socialism against democracy, Prof. Wang argued that the two concepts overlapped, and instead, it was capitalism and socialism that were at odds with each other. Within the entrenched ideological divide between East and West, democracy has been reduced to little more than multiparty electoral competition. Prof. Wang underlined the need to move beyond such a procedural definition since it ignored more substantive models such as that of China. In this formulation, Chinese democracy is grounded in norms and values rather than in clearly defined institutional arrangements. The speaker asserted that China’s history was laden with instances of emphasis on people’s sovereignty and meritocracy, ensuring that the government

functioned “for the people”. This assertion lends to the understanding that limited definitions can ultimately contribute to warped perceptions on the international stage. In keeping with this, the Chinese government has been pushing back against the Western definition, and maintaining that democracy is better described as a regime that is “for the people”, and employed “law-based governance”.

In conclusion, the speaker argued that both democracy and socialism should be understood as universal values. Prof. Wang emphasised substantive outcomes and normative orientations rather than rigid categorical definitions. Such an approach challenges entrenched ideological binaries and opens space for nuanced interpretations of political systems.

During the interactive session, questions were raised with regard to the seemingly authoritarian tendencies of the Chinese government and how these could be reconciled with China’s claims of being a democracy. The chair, Dr. Rajiv Ranjan echoed these concerns as well. The speaker maintained that the liberal democratic values in question did exist in China and that the difference existed merely in the form or degree of their application. Prof. Wang highlighted that English language sources often carried a strong bias, and that Chinese leaders are consistently held accountable by the Communist Party of China. The speaker further stated the need to view democracy in China within existing contexts, and not through biased lenses.

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