

Why fiction matters in contemporary China?

Date: 9th December 2020

Speaker: Professor David Wang

Chair: Professor Hemant Adlakha

The event was opened by Professor Adlakha, and followed by a presentation by Professor Wang who briefly presented findings from his recently culminated research. Highlighting the interconnections between literature and politics, Dr. Wang said that it was President Xi's call for telling a good 'China Story' that inspired him to probe what counts as a 'good story', and to observe the multiple attempts to tell the "China Story" since the millennial turn.

He first elucidated the different meanings of the term '*gushi*' - as accomplishments of bygone era; as literary and historical allusions; and an imagined narrative or fictional account. Seeking to probe the matter beyond assigning narratives to the category of propaganda, he argued that the importance of fiction and its ability to influence masses was recognised by Chinese political thinker and leader Liang Qichao in the early 20th century. This tradition of narratives was carried forward in Xi Jinping's presidency as he brought up stories of 'Chinese Dream', 'One Belt and one Road', the Confucius Institutes, and idea of "the community of shared future for mankind".

He further argued that at a time when both 'history' and 'story' are incorporated into the truth regime of the state, fiction is now, more than ever a highly contested form of manifesting the power of polyphony. Relying on ideas of scholars like Mikhail Bakhtin and Hannah Arendt, he wanted to probe the relation between fictionality and reality in the 20th century. The speaker brought up examples from the COVID – 19 pandemic to show how some people were labelled as traitors (Fang Fang for publishing *Wu Han Diary*) and others as martyrs (A doctor who was arrested by the state for spreading information the new virus). He then went on to argue that a good story was to be analysed not only from the point of view of literature but also society and politics.

In the second part of the presentation, Professor Wang talked about Chinese fiction in the last few decades, analysing fiction in three categories – fiction as transgression, fiction as transmigration and fiction as transillumination. Here, he spoke about tens of fictional works from China and the Sinophone world and what kind of China Story do they tell. These included Li Rui's *The Eighth Day of Zhang Mading*, Liu Cixin's *The Three Body Problem*, Mo Yan's

Life and Death are killing me, among many others. He argued that these fictional works often dark and dystopian, shine new light on understanding Chinese reality.

Finally, in a gripping question-answer session, the Professor Wang answered several questions about the nature and future of literature in China. While concluding that in China, *wenxue* or literariness and politics have been closely related, he asserted literature in China is the most democratic genre, and that one needs to be careful that in telling the China Story, China should be de-essentialised moving away from so called 'Chineseness'. It is because the contemporary writers can write beyond geo-political boundary lines that they can communicate with people across the world. The session ended with Professor Adlakha's expression of gratitude on behalf of ICS and the attendees to Professor Wang. Dr. Wang's wide ranging experience and intellectual depth were visible in this much appreciated lecture.