



INSTITUTE OF CHINESE STUDIES

Title: Dying to Survive: Realism or Sensationalism

Speaker: Hemant Adlakha

Date: 14 August 2018

Venue: ICS Seminar Room

The subject of discussion was the recently released Chinese low-budget movie, *Dying to Survive*, which has struck a chord with the *Laobaixing* (common people). The film is based on real-life story of Lu Yong, a Chinese businessman who bought anti-cancer drugs from India for himself and other Chinese patients suffering from leukemia. These drugs were considered illegal in China so he was charged with the selling of counterfeit medication in 2014. However, the pressure from the cancer patients and public clamor against the unaffordable drug pricing led to an unprecedented dismissal of Lu's case. The movie is a notable departure from a standard Chinese blockbuster. It has aptly grappled with a prevalent social ill of extortionate costs of certain medicines in China and the resultant financial burden for the *Laobaixing*. Usually, mainstream Chinese movies do not address the social woes pervasive in the society. The speaker asserted that the popularity of the movie could be assessed from the fact that the common people have been sending small 'red envelopes' with the film tickets inside—a typical Chinese style of sharing the Chinese New Year gift—to relatives, inviting them to watch the movie.

The movie has sparked a nation-wide debate on the political discourse and public health reforms, the intensity of which has not been seen in China for the last 40 years. The speaker noted that in 2013, the Chinese healthcare system underwent a new cycle of reform which abolished the planned economy. The new cycle of reforms robustly pushed for privatisation and marketisation

of China's public healthcare system. The monopolistic pricing practices of foreign pharmaceuticals which led to inflated prices of medicines were the outcome of these reforms.

Another argument brought into public discourse by the movie has been the inquiry that if China should go India's way? India has flouted the patent rights issued by the pharmaceutical MNCs on the indigenous production of drugs. In the 1970s, with the impetus of then PM Indira Gandhi, a comprehensive attempt was made by the government to attain self-reliance in the pharmaceutical sector, both in production and in technology. It also made a concentrated effort to control the drug prices through the Drug Price Control Act (DPCO). Many critics have voiced out that China should adopt similar measures to curtail the inflated costs of the imported drugs. However, the speaker noted that a neoclassical counterargument had been stipulated for this discourse that the returns from the high-cost drugs provide for the investments in R&D (research and development). China would not be able to go India's way because it is bound by the rules of World Trade Organisation (WTO) and lacks the technical know-how.

The speaker also alluded to the interview of Li Ling, a veteran economist, to draw on the socio-political discussion ushered by the movie. Li Ling, who first advocated for the reforms of the public healthcare system, pointed out that China lacked national drug price negotiating framework, the private firms were approached directly by the provincial governments and the local hospitals. This approach allowed the provinces the flexibility to customise healthcare provisions to their socio-demographic and fiscal needs and the central government's role was minimised. According to the speaker, Li Ling insisted that there is an urgent need to replace the existing profit driven nexus of local hospitals which worked hand in hand with the pharmaceutical MNCs. He argued that she also stressed a need to intensify healthcare reforms and to set-up a cohesive, efficient and secure system of drug production, drug distribution and drug reimbursement.

The speaker also maintained that many commentators have been looking for answers to why such a politically-sensitive movie did not get banned in strictly-censored China? The movie might have addressed a social problem, but it underpinned hearty-messages in accordance with China's contemporary political and economic priorities. In the political context, it depicted the government responding to widespread concerns with compassion and urgency. The speaker asserted that the movie seemed to have praised the Xi Jinping's 'governance style'. Early in

2018, the Chinese government announced a new medical reform to reduce the tariffs on imported cancer drugs and the prices have already been reduced drastically. In the movie, the real villain was the pharmaceutical industry and not the government. It promoted the idea that the government cared for the popular sentiment of the people and understood their immediate needs. The speaker pointed out the likelihood that the Communist Party of China had recognised the propaganda value of the movie. After all a population content with the efforts of the government is essential for the continued mandate of the CPC. A socially conscious movie like *Dying to Survive* could be seen as an attempt to modify different movie genres to Chinese characteristics. As long as the movie plotlines portray the social problems being aptly dealt by the government, they could become the entertainment medium to applaud the government's policy achievements.

The speaker also brought into discussion the question if the Chinese left was on the rise? He narrated that the Xu Zhangrun, 许章润 a law professor at Tsinghua University in Beijing, took a significant risk when he delivered the fiercest denunciation yet from a Chinese academic of Mr. Xi's hardline policies, the revival of Communist orthodoxies and adulatory propaganda image. A two-line party struggle within the party has erupted in the open. Xi Jinping's thought on *socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era* has become the guiding ideology for the CPC at a crucial juncture in the history when China is emerging as a leading global power. It has resulted in apprehensions within the party of Xi becoming too powerful and formidable. In his conclusion the speaker remarked that many Chinese historians consider *Hai Rui Dismissed from Office* (a political drama penned by Wuhan in 1961) among political factors leading to the launch of the Great Cultural Revolution by Mao Zedong; will *Dying to Survive* also be remembered for playing a role in changing the course of Chinese politics?

The chair then opened the floor to questions and comments from the audience. An audience member asked if the Chinese government's recent crackdown on the healthcare corruption had any connection with the message of the movie? Moreover, what were the other implications for the Public healthcare sector in reference to Chinese government's policies? The speaker responded that despite the anti-corruption campaign undertaken under the aegis of Xi Jinping's leadership, many commentators have questioned the fairness of the nation's legal system, as courts have very little autonomous power. The public healthcare system would not undergo a drastic change, as it has evolved in a direction which is irreversible. Another question was about

the perception of the Chinese viewer of India after watching the movie. To which he responded that India was portrayed as a country with low-cost drugs and there was no other connotation regarding the country in the movie. When asked to elaborate on the parallel between the movie and the play *Hai Rui dismissed from the office* and their relevance in the political discourse, the speaker noted that it was too early and too premature to draw a definite link between the two. However, as per his observation, a two-line ideological struggle has been intensified within the party since the 18th Party Congress. The question that if Xi Jinping is a puppet or puppeteer requires further exploring which he would take up in his next talk after gathering more substantial arguments to illustrate his viewpoint.

About the Speaker

Hemant Adlakha, PhD, is professor of Chinese and the Ex-Chairperson, the Centre for Chinese and Southeast Asian Studies (CCSEAS), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He is also an Honorary Fellow, the Institute of Chinese Studies (ICS) Delhi. His areas of research include Political discourse in the P R China, Chinese literature, culture and cinema. He has published articles in Chinese and in English. He is a member, International Editorial Committee, International Society for Lu Xun Studies, Seoul (ROK). His most recent publications include, 'Confucius' in *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism, 2nd Edition*, Gale Cengage Learning, Macmillan Reference, USA. He has been invited to give lectures in International Politics at the Summer School, University of International Relations, Beijing, for several years. He regularly contributes articles to journals and news magazines such as *China Report*, *The Diplomat* etc. He has watched the film, *Dying to Survive* on 13 July 2018 in Beijing.

The Report is prepared by Navreet Kullar, Research Intern, ICS.