



Censorship, Morality and Cultural Policy under Xi Jinping

Speaker: Prof. Michel Hockx

Chair: Prof. Sabaree Mitra

Date: 9 January 2019

Seminar Room, ICS

The event commenced with Prof. Sabaree Mitra's welcome note. After introducing the Speaker, she mentioned that the triad of "truth, goodness and beauty", a major theme of the talk, is closely related to the Indian philosophy and the triad "Sathyam, Shivam and Sundaram".

The Speaker began the talk with a brief introduction of his academic orientation and research interests. He talked about his previous work on internet literature and explained how it has directed him into the current study. He revealed that it is a guideline for 'the healthy development of internet literature published by the State Administration of Press Publication, Radio, Film and Television of the People's Republic of China which paved the foundation of his current research. Many see this guideline as a form of clamping down on online cultural production in China. Its projected aim is "constantly guide online literature towards putting into practice the core socialist value system, promoting Truth, Goodness and Beauty, and communicating positive energy". Interestingly, the speaker asserts that the guideline is not exactly an assertion of control over online cultural production or a strait forward form of censorship. He believes, on the one hand the guideline encourages online cultural producers to have a self-regulation and the other it encourages print cultural producers to incorporate online platforms for having more and more entrepreneurial success.

Brining the focus into the three professed aims of the guideline, which are 'to put into practice the core socialist value system', 'to promote Truth, Goodness and Beauty', and 'to communicate positive energy', the speaker explained various dimensions of Xi Jinping's cultural policy. He argued that the idea of 'positive energy' in the guideline is borrowed from British psychologist Richard Wiseman. He said it is the triad of 'Truth, Goodness and Beauty' which most attracted

him from the guideline as he hadn't seen these terms prominently featuring in the cultural policy of PRC earlier. Therefore, he advanced the present research to reveal the politics which brought the triad that is well-known from the history of European philosophy and often used to build a moralistic value system into Xi Jinping's cultural policy.

Tracing the roots of the new discourse in China's cultural politics, the speaker reassessed the significance of Xi Jinping's speech in October 2014 which is widely perceived as China's return to the policies of Mao's Cultural Revolution. He questioned the Western media/academic portrayal of Xi Jinping's power over culture on the basis of this speech which was later published as a book and stated that he does not believe "Xi Jinping has anything near the kind of power over culture that Mao had". The speaker analysed the speech by separating five major issues Xi addressed in it. Firstly, in the speech Xi asked the people in the field of art and literature 'to bring about the great revival of the Chinese nation for the Chinese culture to flourish and prosper'. It is the official policy of the Chinese Communist Party and they aim to achieve it by 2049, the 100th anniversary of PRC. Secondly, Xi asked them to 'create excellent works that are worthy of this era'. Thirdly, he demanded them to 'maintain creative direction that place people at the centre'. Fourthly, he asserted that the 'Chinese spirit is the soul of socialist literature and arts'. Fifthly, he aims to 'strengthen and improve the party's leadership of the work of literature and arts'. The speaker explained how Xi Jinping observed other major cultures in the world in his speech and how he placed the Chinese culture as the superior one in relation to others. He said, Xi's cultural policy which is taking shape in a time of China's massive economic development aims to project that the Chinese culture is at least in par with if not superior to all other great nations. In his view, Xi's attempt to compare the Chinese culture with other cultures itself proves that his policy is not placed in Mao's direction.

The speaker assessed the way in which Xi analysed the link between art and morality in his speech. He observed, Xi has begun his analysis of the link between the art and morality with an angry note on moral problems in contemporary Chinese society. Xi argued that the Chinese people are largely confused these days because of globalization and growing influence of other cultures. In his view, people sometimes even lose their sense of values; they don't follow party discipline and they have no sense of collective, family and nation. He added, they are now unable to distinguish right and wrong, good and bad, true and false, beautiful and ugly: all they

care about is greed and luxury. He argued that the eternal value of art and literature lies in the triad of truth, goodness and beauty and urged writers and artists to be the light and inspire the people in a right direction. He asked them to be the example of both the triad of ‘truth, goodness and beauty’ and uphold the core values of socialist system. However, Xi attempted to project patriotism as one of the core socialist values. Indeed, the speaker noted, Xi is not the first person to project patriotism as a socialist value; even Stalin did the same in the Soviet Union. The speaker sees some of the observations of Xi Jinping in his speech as a part of his attempt for building an anti-corruption discourse.

Analysing the history of the triad of ‘Truth, goodness and beauty’ and assessing its growing significance in Xi Jinping’s cultural policy, the speaker argued that Xi is trying to build a new value system based on socialist principle. He said, unlike the past the triad is now largely being used in Chinese literature. To support this view, he analysed the appearance of the triad in the title of Chinese journal articles since the mid twentieth century. He said, it is since the 1980s, after the reform and opening of the Chinese economy, the use of the triad began to grow in Chinese literature. In recent years, it has gained more significance in the Chinese cultural policy. Therefore, he insisted that Xi’s cultural policy is not a going back to the Mao’s era, instead it is going back to the early reform period. The speaker concluded the speech by arguing that Xi is definitely trying to shrink the space of literature and art by bringing a moral framework based on socialist values for them.

This report has been prepared by Muhammed Kunhi, Research Associate, ICS

Disclaimer

The Wednesday Seminar at the ICS is a forum for presentations and discussions on current affairs as well as ongoing research by scholars, experts, diplomats, and journalists, among others. This report is a summary produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion. All views expressed here should be understood to be those of the speaker(s) and individual participants, and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies