

Institute of Chinese Studies

# WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*Literary Activism in China  
in the 1980s and 1990s*

## REPORT

Speaker :

**Manju Rani Hara**

*25 October 2023*

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- The seminar focused on the speaker's research on literary activism in China during the 1980s and the 1990s. According to the speaker, despite being an authoritarian country, China has a rich history of activism through literature, which has fluctuated under the tenures of different Party leaders.
- The speaker divided literary activism in China into three phases: starting from the May Fourth movement until the establishment of the PRC (1919-49), the Mao era (1949-76), and finally, the reform era under Deng Xiaoping (1978-89). This categorisation allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the transformation of literary activism in China.
- While writings during the Cultural Revolution were mainly about the political situation in the country, economy became the central theme during the Reform era. The speaker focused on two Chinese writers, Wang Anyi and Wang Shuo, to illustrate the impact of evolving economic and socio-political conditions in China on their literary creations.
- In conclusion, the speaker contrasted the literary works of the two writers, emphasising how their perspectives on social issues were influenced by their socio-cultural milieu and unique backgrounds. According to Hara, this positions literary activism as a crucial instrument for understanding activism in China as well as society in general.

## REPORT

**Speaker: Dr. Manju Rani Hara**, Associate Professor, Centre for Chinese and South East Asian Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

**Chair: Prof. Avijit Banerjee**, Professor in Chinese, and Head of the Department of Chinese Language and Culture (Cheena Bhavana), Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan; Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

**Date:** 25 October 2023

**Venue:** Zoom Webinar

Literature acts as a tool to enlighten the masses. Even in authoritarian societies such as China, literary activism has been used to display people's concerns about their environment. To explore this subject in detail, the Institute of Chinese Studies organised a seminar on 25 October 2023, titled, "Literary Activism in China in the 1980s and 1990s", and featured Dr. Manju Rani Hara as the speaker. In this session, the speaker examined literary activism as carried out by two Chinese writers in the post-Mao period and the socio-political and socio-economic changes that shaped their writings.

The seminar commenced with a brief introduction to literary activism and its history in China by the Chair, Prof. Avijit Banerjee. He divided it into three phases: from the May Fourth Movement until the establishment of the PRC (1919-49), from the proclamation of the PRC until the end of the Cultural Revolution (1949-76), followed by the Deng Era or the Reform Period (1978-89). He added that the first decade after the Cultural Revolution was relatively the most rigorous or vigorous in terms of cultural production, which further gave impetus to decades of exploration of culture, ideology, and economics as China turned from class struggle to economic reconstruction. There was tremendous rigour or vigour in cultural practices, and the previously censored Modern-Western culture became accessible to the public. Further, newspapers and magazines became spaces for debates.

Prof. Banerjee's introduction laid a solid foundation for the participants as well as the speaker, Dr. Manju Rani Hara, to continue her presentation. Although the speaker's primary focus was the decade of the 1980s; yet, she touched upon earlier periods to provide a comprehensive backdrop for understanding the transition and transformation of literary activism in China. According to Hara, literature in China was produced but was sparse and often centuries apart. Taking this into account, she pointed out that the Yan'an talks of 1942 were important as they provided literary guidelines to Chinese writers and artists, and emphasised how literature and politics are inherently linked.

The speaker further delved into the Mao era, when literature was limited and restricted, though there were always exceptions; by and large, the Party dictated what was to be written. It used literature as a tool to meet its political goals, ensure ideological uniformity, and influence the masses with revolutionary zeal. This political control over literary content continued until the end of Cultural Revolution in 1976.

The rest of the presentation focused on the Deng era, when transitioning into a socialist democracy became the aim of the Party, reducing the scope of political intervention in people's lives. According to Hara, emancipation of minds was considered to be important by the Party as liberation could not be achieved without the support of the intellectuals. In this period, women's writings transformed as well, focusing more on humanitarian causes, alienation in socialist societies, and corruption. The Party boosted the confidence of the people to write, and explore, which allowed for a vast range of vibrant literary expression.

The speaker considered two writers from this period, namely Wang Anyi and Wang Shuo, and presented their writings as a case study to help the audience understand the nuances of literary activism in the 1980s. Throughout the seminar, the speaker highlighted how their writings became examples of stories that shattered taboos. In these, women were defined differently from men; they were now depicted as being brave, and even as members of gangs, among other such non-traditional characterisations. Furthermore, as this period in China focused on reform, especially in economic terms, the literary focus also shifted from politics to economy. The speaker further noted that earlier, the lower middle class that was created as a result of the opening up of the economy and the entry of consumerism, was depicted as marginalized, social outlaws, and criminals in the mainstream media; however, Wang Shuo moved away from this and endeavoured to represent this class differently, often as rebels, isolated youth and

unprincipled entrepreneurs. Before him, no one had considered picking a central figure from such a peripheral stratum, thus showcasing a marked shift in literary characterisations.

Concluding the presentation, Hara drew out some similarities and contrasts between the two writers, Wang Anyi and Wang Shuo. She noted that there were commonalities between the two authors in terms of the themes they took up, such as class issues, physical desire, and sexual tension. However, she highlighted, both authors took different stances on the same issues, which were shaped by their own experiences of belonging to a certain class or community. Nevertheless, both authors brought to light topics and themes that were earlier prohibited or tabooed and tried to normalise speaking and reading about them.

The seminar concluded with a Q&A session where the participants raised insightful observations and thought-provoking questions, which Hara duly addressed. The audience actively engaged with the speaker and the chair, leading to a fruitful and enriching discussion after the session.

*This report was prepared by Muskan Punia, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies*

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