

Institute of Chinese Studies

BOOK DISCUSSION

*Contemporary China:
Tradition and Modernity*

REPORT

Speaker :

Poonam Surie

16 April 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Ms. Surie's recently published book titled, *Contemporary China: Tradition and Modernity* covers a diverse range of topics from societal and gender issues to environmental objectives and the impact of religious beliefs on Chinese society. Reviewing tradition and modernity as integral parts of a whole, Ms. Surie delicately wove together the dynamics of demographics, urbanisation and migration, and globalisation, within the context of an evolving Chinese society.
- The author has highlighted the growing trend of young people turning to religion in order to escape the pressures of modern society. Despite significant economic and industrial growth in China, there has been a resurgence of traditional philosophies and beliefs, especially Confucianism in post-Mao China, which has signalled a shift in ideological underpinnings. This has also raised questions over the role of religion in Chinese society, and the influence of political approval on religious practice.
- The author referred to the significant economic growth experienced by China, as well as the targeted efforts for poverty alleviation by the government in recent years. Further, Ms. Surie argued that it is important to also view these changes in the context of rising societal concerns over increased surveillance, rigid regulations and governmental control.
- Discussing the key themes of Ms. Surie's book, Prof. Chakrabarti and Mr. Bhoothalingam highlighted its significant contribution toward providing a fresh perspective, beyond the existing focus on geopolitics and security. They underscored the point that analysing China through a social and human lens, has opened avenues for a more comprehensive understanding of an often misunderstood society.

BOOK DISCUSSION

CONTEMPORARY CHINA: TRADITION AND MODERNITY

REPORT

Author: Poonam Surie, Economist and Independent Researcher; and, Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Panellists: Sreemati Chakrabarti, Chairperson, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi; and, Professor (Retd.), Department of East Asian Studies, University of Delhi.

Ravi Bhoothalingam, Founder and Chairman, Manas Advisory, Gurgaon; and, Honorary Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

Date: 16 April 2024

Venue: Zoom Webinar

The book delves into various aspects of Chinese society, culture, and governance, offering a unique perspective that goes beyond the typical focus on geopolitics and security. The author draws from her extensive experience of living in China, her travels within the country, and her academic research to provide a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted nature of China. The discussion covered several key themes, including societal issues, gender disparity, environmental goals, the impact of religious beliefs, and the intersection of tradition and modernity in China.

The author also highlighted the significance of historical baggage in shaping future decisions and the importance of understanding Chinese culture and ideologies in forecasting the country's

trajectory. The core content of the context is about the intersection of religion, governance, societal issues, and cultural dynamics in China.

Ms. Surie further stated that there is a growing trend of young people turning to religion to escape the pressures of modern society. The resurgence of traditional philosophies and beliefs, the role of religion in Chinese society, and the influence of political approval on various religions were further explored by the author. Ms. Surie also gave her insights on the importance of human values and interactions, impact of economic development on youth, unemployment and tourism,. She mentioned that the book also touches on her personal experiences and reflections of living in China and exploring issues such as environment, social relations, and culture, apart from dimensions of geopolitics. and security.

One of the notable points raised by the author in the discussion was the evolving role of religion in China, where a mix of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and folk religion has shaped the country's spiritual landscape. The speaker shed light on the commercialisation of monasteries and the changing dynamics within the realm of Buddhism, reflecting the complex interplay between tradition and modernity.

Another significant aspect addressed by the author in the presentation was the resurgence of Confucianism in post-Mao China, signalling a shift in ideological underpinnings. The speaker provided insights into the changing ideologies of Chinese leaders, from Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping, and the implications for modernization and governance in the country.

While mentioning the peculiarity of Chinese society Ms. Surie stated that "Modern China is a complex amalgamation of political ideologies, which are centred on the power of the leadership, and capitalism with Chinese characteristics, wherein the private sector is curtailed by political factors and controlled by the party in many ways." The author while mentioning recent changes in society stated that "the recent coronavirus epidemic that has taken a toll around the world has

made us realise how connected the world is, and how ultimately we have to value the human values of life.”

The discussion was taken further by the panellists, Mr. Ravi Bhoothalingam and Prof. Sreemati Chakrabarti. They discussed the significance of the book in providing a fresh perspective on China, beyond the usual focus on geopolitics and security. They highlighted the importance of understanding the dimensions of environment, social relations, and culture in gaining a comprehensive understanding of China. The discussion also delved into the challenges of youth unemployment, gender disparity, and the impact of economic development on societal dynamics. The speaker highlighted the need for a humanitarian approach to address these issues and emphasised the importance of behavioural economics in understanding human behaviour within the economy.

In response to questions raised during the session, the author provided further insights into the role of religion in contemporary China, the distinctiveness of Xi Jinping's leadership style compared to his predecessors, and the implications of gender discrimination and societal changes on the country's future trajectory.

The book by Ms. Surie offers a thought-provoking exploration of China's societal, cultural, and governance landscape. The discussion provided valuable perspectives on the complexities of Chinese society, the need for a nuanced understanding of its historical, cultural, and ideological dimensions and highlighted the potential for future research in exploring the evolving dynamics of religion, governance, and societal challenges in China.

This report was prepared by Ashutosh Vashishta, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

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