Asian studies in China's academy of social sciences: an introduction

In his progressive vision of a general Chinese history, the phenomenal Chinese intellectual Liang Qichao in 1901 claimed the modern period of China would be characterized by a transition from 'China of Asia' [yazhou zhi zhongguo] when "the Chinese intensely engaged and competed with various peoples of Asia" to "China of the world" [shijie zhi zhongguo] when "the Chinese united with all the Asian peoples in their negotiation and competition with the Westerners". It came as no surprise that the Chinese President Xi Jinping quoted Liang in his recent keynote speech at the Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations.

As argued by contemporary scholars, regions are imagined constructs that have historical specificity and reflect the existing international structures. In the case of Asia, it was first created as a political construct to rethink political action and organization during the twentieth century course of anti-imperialism and nationalism in the West Pacific and Indian Ocean. The rise of the modern scholarship of Asia in China was a response to China's frontier and identity crises from the mid-nineteenth century to the WWII era. After 1949, Asian studies in China also became as much strategic importance as the area studies in other countries. The best example is the development of Asian studies in the Chinese academies of social sciences.

Although modeled on the Soviet-style Academy, the Chinese academies of social sciences were established after 1978, when the Soviet influence had faded away and China re-embarked the world.

Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China’s reform and opening up, underlined the significance of academic achievements to China’s course of modernization. Under his leadership, state and provincial level academies were set up in the capital and each provincial seat. As government affiliated research institutes, all academies play both roles of academic research and advising function to the party-state. Hence, their research agendas are tightly bound to the missions of particular ministries, and the foreign analysts have learnt to observe China’s policy-making system through the ‘important windows’. This also smoothens their recent transformation into ‘think tanks with Chinese characteristics’.

In addition to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 7 out of 29 provincial-level academies have specialized institutes for Asian studies, largely in response to their geographical proximity to relevant Asian countries and sub-regions. As a result, the academic definition and scope of Asia and its sub-regions reflect the geopolitical dynamics as well as China’s political interests and concerns. Prior to 1978, attention was given to Asian countries with either historical ties with China or belonging to the Communist bloc. In the 1980s, county surveys and comparative studies of economic development were emphasized, as China endeavored to learn from the ‘East Asian Miracle’. Since the 1990s, regional security and cooperation as well as sustainable development have become the common themes for the pursuit of a more integrated Asia. As China craves for a more substantial role in Asia, more academic resources have been poured into the studies of China’s national strategies and new regional/sub-regional orders.

Besides this introductory piece, three scholarly articles from different academies are invited to reflect on the development of their own institutes and their own research. It is the editors’ hope that these articles will offer the audience ‘windows’ to how China envisions herself in Asia and the world.

Notes
1 The English translation of Xi’s sentence “It’s now more than the country itself; it is very much a part of Asia and the world”... (retrieved 29 May 2019).

South Asian Studies at the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences

When Premier Zhou Enlai and Prime Minister Nehru met for the first time in 1954, they discussed the possibilities of opening airlines and motorways between China and India. The YASS scholars are the successors, promoters, practitioners and innovators of their ideas. As early as the 1960s, scholars at YASS started to conduct research on India and South Asia. In the late 1990s, China and India called for regional cooperation among Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar (BCIM) and met with positive responses of the other two. The four countries later signed and put it into action the ‘Kunning Initiative’. After rounds of Track-II conversations, this cooperative mechanism was upgraded to Track-I channel, known subsequently as ‘The Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM EC)’. In 2013 in both Joint Statements of China and India and Bangladesh.

Responding to the constant changes both home and abroad, YASS continuously promotes the institutionalization of South Asian studies. In 2000, three years after its launching, the Center of South Asian Studies was upgraded to the Institute of South Asian Studies. In 2003, the Yunnan Society of South Asian Studies was established. As the first local-level provincial academy of South Asian studies in China, it is built on the capacities of research and administration of our Institute. In 2005, YASS was reborn as the Yunnan Academy of Southeast and South Asian Studies. The newest addition to its research capacity is the establishment of the Chinese (Kunning) Academy of South Asian and Southeast Asian studies in 2015. The state-level institutes such as Institute of Indian Studies and Institute of Bangladesh Studies came out of the shell as well. I was transferred to the Institute of Indian Studies and have served as its deputy director since 2016.

Compared with other research institutions of South Asian studies in China, the strengths of YASS have lain in the regional and sub-regional comparative studies. Apart from our long-term focus on the BCIM cooperation, we have widened our research scope by monitoring other multilateral sub-regional cooperative mechanisms, such as ‘The Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal (BBIN) Initiative’, ‘The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation’ (BIMSTEC), ‘The Regional Cooperation of Economic Partnership’ (RECP) and emerging free trade zones in the region. Considering Yunnan’s geographical proximity and historical links with the region in perspective, we have also expanded our work into Indian Ocean studies. A number of books are published and a few state and provincial sponsored projects are conducted on such topics as the geopolitics and geo-economics, maritime and non-traditional security and also the economic and social development in the region. The Research Association of Indian Ocean has been set up to facilitate the network of related research and cooperation.

On the one hand, focusing on the national strategies and bilateral issues, our institutes have carried out research and policy consultation, on such topics as relationships among South Asian countries and major powers, regional security and cooperation, and supporting research projects. ARC-FDU keeps close connections with the JKAS in maintaining China and many institutes abroad.
Asian studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences: a retrospective

Lei Tang

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n the winter of 1963, before visiting the African countries, Premier Zhou Enlai submitted ‘A Report on Strengthening Research about Foreign Countries’ to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), which had been formerly endorsed by the Central Foreign Affairs Leading Group. In the report, Zhou proposed to strengthen research on foreign affairs by establishing a systematic research system in response to the changed international status of China as a big country with the world’s attention. This report was approved by Chairman Mao on 31 December 1963. After that, area studies in China took off.

The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) is a case in point. It was originally established five divisions to cover Literature, Philosophy and Social Sciences, the Institute of Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Studies, the Institute of West Asian and African Studies, and the Institute of Economics. In 1978, a number of new institutes were added, and the CASS Center for Asian Studies was established. Today, CASS has become China’s largest, most influential and comprehensive academic institution. It owns five national-level publishing houses.

In order to explain the global influence of cities such as New York, London and Tokyo, the theory of global city, which Turner proposed, is designed to explain the complex relationship between economic forces and urbanization processes. This theory posits that globalization is in fact a functional process that is a world system in which the economic forces of the world are embedded. This theory also explains that globalization is a process of integration and differentiation, and that globalization is a process of interaction and exchange.

In the global city theory, Asia’s global cities have become more vulnerable. Thus, when orchestrating global city policies, the emerging global cities have to maintain a balance: to safeguard the social welfare for all stakeholders, especially the poor and the vulnerable groups; to coordinate the industrial upgrading and the domestic labor market; to enact urban preservation and renewal; as well as to better integrate the global development system into the existing urban system.

Unfortunately, with the outbreak of the financial crisis and the reversal of the world economic cycle, the emerging global cities, as they are so dependent on the world market, become more vulnerable. Thus, when seeking world-class influence, emerging world cities need to not only rethink the profound implications of globalization for their own development, but also to examine their own development strategies from the perspective of internal integration and complexity.

Compared with other emerging global cities in the BRICS, especially India, Shanghai has achieved considerable success in becoming a global city under the national reform and opening-up strategy. It is the rising node in the global city system. It also serves as the engine of China’s modernization and the bridgehead for China’s going out strategy. In the global city theory, Asia’s global cities like Tokyo and Seoul are considered as nation-led while western cities like New York and London are market-led. It is well understood that Shanghai falls into the nation-led type, and even more so than Tokyo and Seoul. Efficient public services supplied by the state, such as labor, healthcare and education, matter much in the process. Besides that, the informal governance based on a household registration system and local social network, which are indeed of Chinese characteristics, has taken on a negative impact of global city practices. Thus, for any emerging global city in the BRICS to succeed in its global city circle, it must appropriately deal with the inherent complexity of its own development stage.

Building global cities in Asia. Shared experiences and challenges.

Wei Tang

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