

Promoting stratified development of Area Studies

EDITOR'S NOTE

The establishment of Area Studies as a first-level discipline provides new opportunities for building an independent knowledge system. The first article focuses on the stratified development of Area Studies, and the second article focuses on the analysis of the fundamental concept of Area Studies.

By WANG YIZHOU

Due to significant demands of national development and financial investment, Area Studies has emerged as a thriving institutional framework and a focal point of disciplinary growth in Chinese universities. This development is primarily manifested in three key areas.

Firstly, universities have quickly established dozens of research institutions, and relevant national departments and education regulators have initiated hundreds of special projects. A considerable number of institutions have begun to actively recruit students and provide relevant training for society and enterprises.

Secondly, within various universities, there has been a concentrated effort to dedicate institutional arrangements to Area Studies, laying a preliminary foundation for their long-term development.

Thirdly, within domestic universities, two distinct research pathways have emerged. The first pathway emphasizes the humanities, drawing upon disciplines such as literature, history, philosophy, and foreign languages. It places emphasis on diversity and differences, delving into the historical origins of civilizations. The second pathway focuses on the social sci-



Area Studies thrives in China. Photo: Zhao Yuan/CSST

ences, relying on disciplines such as political science, economics, law, diplomacy, and international relations. This pathway engages in analysis related to tracking realistic interests.

Compared to other periods in other countries, the progress, scale, and impact of Area Studies in Chinese universities have been quite spectacular in recent years.

Innovation through inheritance

So far, the theoretical foundation of Area Studies is relatively weak. Its proprietary theories and methodologies have not yet taken shape, leaving a significant gap in its development as an independent discipline. Existing academic history has shown that the key to knowledge progress is innovation through inheritance, namely the continuous updating and breakthroughs of research paradigms, as well as the exchange, evaluation, and critique of different schools of thought. By this standard, Area Studies is still in the early stage of academic growth, both domestically and internationally.

Area Studies has a long history and abundant achievements, enriching academic discourse and providing differentiated research paradigms to various extents. However, these academic clusters largely construct specific knowledge of their respective domains and gather historical information about target areas (countries). From a contemporary perspective, they lack holistic discussions on Area Studies as a whole, without ideas suitable for China to initiate creative dialogues with target areas (countries) and build new communities with a shared future. There is also a lack of theoretical positioning regarding the holistic connections between different regions in the era of profound changes.

Existing discussions on Area Studies in domestic universities lack self-reflection, dialogues, and critiques. The essence of modern sciences lies in self-reflection and sublimation. For Area Studies to thrive, it is essential to cultivate an assessment and reflection system for the subject and establish

mechanisms for dialogue and critique among scholars. It is also important to delve into seemingly metaphysical but fundamentally rational issues, such as the concepts of "self" and "others" in different historical eras. Only by adhering to this direction can existing Area Studies gradually incorporate different ideas and schools, cultivate a good sense of ontology and methodology, gradually form consensus around supporting courses and specialized knowledge, and thus transform itself into a "sub-discipline." (It resembles a general discipline in structure, and has its own academic core, though a mature and comprehensive academic system has yet to be fully developed.) Area Studies in a disciplinary sense cannot be conducted without reflection and questioning.

Stratified development

Drawing inspiration from the concept of "stratification" in geology, it may be possible to see the stratified development of Area Studies in the future, revealing a greater development space for young scholars.

Stratification refers to the layered structure produced in the changes of rocks along the vertical axis. It provides insights into the various ages, depositional environments, sedimentation processes, and structural characteristics of sedimentary rocks. This is achieved through the distinct changes or gradual transitions in the material composition, structure, and color of the rock, which give rise to unique bedding patterns or textures between the layers.

The stratification process is long and complex, and its classification and interpretation can reveal the characteristics of geological struc-

tures and the surrounding atmospheric and spatial environment. This, in turn, aids in the analysis of the laws governing the emergence and evolution of the universe. It inspires us that the key to establishing a disciplinary form is whether there exists a rich and differentiated hierarchical structure and analytical hierarchy, and whether there is a conscious awareness of the overall and categorical nature of the discipline.

In a vast and diverse country like China, with its unique regional development and foreign exchanges, the stratified approach becomes even more relevant. It is crucial to encourage local universities and teachers to harness their enthusiasm, activate existing resources, tap into their research potential, and embark on exploratory endeavours.

The narrative of Chinese modernization and Area Studies in the new era should not only be shaped by authoritative departments or a few key universities, but also by the distinct perspectives and contributions of various local universities. When the roles of various entities are fully utilized, Chinese characteristics will manifest themselves.

Creative Area Studies can help alleviate various foreign-related challenges facing countries and societies. If efforts are made to develop Area Studies in universities across China, it can not only develop into an independent knowledge system for engaging in dialogues with international peers, but also create highly valuable resources for future Area Studies with Chinese characteristics.

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Multidisciplinary research serves Area Studies

By RENXIAO

Area primarily refers to a geographical area, also known as a "region." Asia is a vast area with complex circumstances, and various regions in West Asia and Africa are often collectively referred to as the Middle East. The term "Middle East" originated from Europeans who categorized different regions as Near East, Middle East, and Far East based on their proximity to Europe, reflecting a clear "Eurocentric" perspective. In China, to overcome this tendency, the academic community has used the term "West Asia and Africa." However, with the passage of time, the "Middle East" is no longer considered inappropriate. This is because the division of geographical regions is not only based on natural geographical factors, but also on cultural and economic factors, including language, religious customs, civilization, and so on. After the

disintegration of the Soviet Union, terms such as Central Europe, Central Asia, Russia, and Eurasia were used one after another, though no single term was sufficient to fully cover the space of the Soviet Union. All of these reflect the complexity of issues under new political and economic conditions, making it relatively difficult to identify "self-contained" regions. This also indicates that among the constituent factors of a region, economic and political factors of humanities are more important than natural geographical factors.

Cultural and economic factors

The formation of a region cannot be separated from land, which usually includes a certain range of land or sea space. The ocean can serve as a barrier or a channel. With advancements in navigation technologies, the ocean has increasingly become a means of connecting

countries. In addition, there are areas formed by river basins or bays. These areas often transcend national boundaries and are formed based on specific natural regions, but they are not confined within those regions. They are also influenced by economic connections and cultural exchanges between individuals, making them relatively self-contained.

There are two dimensions of time and space in any region. In terms of spatial dimensions, any region or country is a geographical spatiotemporal entity. The spatial dimension reflects the concept of spatiality, and in addition to natural geographical factors, human activities must also be present. On the dimension of time, a region or country usually has a history of hundreds to thousands of years. The time dimension reflects the concept of temporality, which continues to unfold and thrive. At any given

time, the combination of spatial and temporal dimensions constitutes a spatiotemporal entity, the content of which consists of human political, economic, and cultural activities. Therefore, exploring the spatiotemporal entity of regions and countries requires multiple perspectives from politics, economics, and culture, and requires collaboration among multiple disciplines.

Multidisciplinary approach

Area Studies actually demonstrates another orientation in social science research, which focuses on specific regions and countries as research objects. This type of research requires starting from different disciplinary perspectives and applying different disciplinary expertise for comprehensive exploration. Area Studies is actually a knowledge-based exploration of a country's external world. For any country, understanding the exter-

nal world is essential.

Area Studies and the construction of social science theories complement each other and should form synergistic advantages. The formation of social science theories is closely related to the in-depth development of Area Studies. Area Studies emphasizes language foundation and the use of primary sources. Moreover, Area Studies and social science theories studies are closely related to each other. Social science theories provide a theoretical framework for Area Studies, while solid Area Studies provide crucial references for the theoretical construction, improvement, and revision of social sciences. The value of theoretical research lies in its reflection of reality. The research of international relations theories and comparative political theories should be tested, revised, and advanced within the practice of Area Studies. Only through such research can vitality be unleashed.

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