

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

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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 intensively 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.¹

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 regional construct to rethink political action and organization during the twentieth century course of anti-imperialism and nation-state formation 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 bore 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-embraced 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 mushroomed in the capital and each provincial seat. As government affiliated research institutes, all academies play both roles of academic research and advisory 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 these '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 major 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, country 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 scholars from different academies are invited to reflect on the development of their own institutes and their own research. It is the editor's wish that these articles will offer the audience 'windows' to how China envisions herself in Asia and the world.

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South Asian Studies at the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences

Lan Deng

I joined the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences (YASS) in 2000, when the YASS Institute of South Asian Studies was formally established and the then President of India, Kocheril Raman Narayanan, visited us. In the initial stage of my career, I was awarded a valuable opportunity and granted a scholarship to pursue my further studies and conduct fieldwork at the School of International Studies (SIS) and the Center of Economic Studies and Planning (CESP) of the School of Social Sciences (SSS) in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in New Delhi, as visiting fellow and full-time student from 2002 to 2005. Yet, my own career pursuit is in alignment with the overall commitment of YASS to become a high-end think tank with international influence especially in the fields of South Asian and Southeast Asian studies.

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 'Kunming 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 China 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 society of South Asian studies in China, it is built on the capacities of research and administration of our institute. In 2006, YASS was rebranded as the Yunnan Academy of Southeast and South Asian Studies. The newest addition to its research capacity is the establishment of the Chinese (Kunming) 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 cooperative 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 Comprehensive Economic Partnership' (RCEP) and emerging free trade zones in the region.

Considering Yunnan's geographical proximity to 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 province sponsored projects are conducted on such topics as the geopolitics and geo-economics, maritime and non-traditional securities as well as the economic and social development



Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai

The Center for Global Asia at NYU Shanghai serves as the hub within the NYU Global Network University system to promote the study of Asian interactions and comparisons, both historical and contemporary. The overall objective of the Center is to provide global societies with information on the contexts for the reemerging connections between the various parts of Asia through research and teaching. Collaborating with institutions across the world, the Center seeks to play a bridging role between existing Asian studies knowledge silos. It will take the lead in drawing connections and comparisons between the existing fields of Asian studies, and stimulating new ways of understanding Asia in a globalized world.

Asia Research Center at Fudan University

Founded in March 2002, the Asia Research Center at Fudan University (ARC-FDU) is one of the achievements of the cooperation of Fudan and the Korean Foundation for Advanced Studies (KFAS). Through the years, the center is making all the efforts to promote Asian Studies, including hosting conferences and supporting research projects. ARC-FDU keeps close connections with the ARCs in mainland China and many institutes abroad.

Notes

- 1 The English translation of Xi's sentence is "China today is more than the country itself; it is very much a part of Asia and the world". See 'Full text of Xi's speech at opening of CDAC', 16 May 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/BaRP-full> (retrieved 29 May 2019).

in the region. The Research Association of Indian Ocean has been set up to facilitate the networking of concerned scholars.

On the one hand, focusing on the national strategies and heated issues, our institutes have carried out research and provided policy consultation, on such topics as relationships among South Asian countries and major powers, regional security, international politics and relationship between neighboring countries and China. On the other hand, country-wise research has always been emphasized in the South Asian studies in China. Nowadays, all of the eight South Asian countries have been covered by different specialists. The *Series of South Asian Studies* and the *South Asian Annual Report* have run for almost 20 years, alongside the policy briefings and scholarly monographs published from time to time. In the future, the fundamental research on history, religion and culture should not be ignored, while the applied research continues to be emphasized. The in-depth research on individual countries will be further strengthened.

Last but not least, YASS has been seeking for active engagement and partnership in the region by hosting the China-South and Southeast Asian Think Tank Forum (2013-2019) and signing Memorandum of Understandings (MOUs) with major South Asian research institutions, as well as launching joint projects.

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