
The Future of China Area Studies

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To construct a “new and modern sinology,” I think we ought to problematize every word in the phrase “China Area Studies.”

China

In the area studies programs that flourished (in the United States at least) during the cold war, there were different ideologically based visions of the nature of “China”: some saw it as a Communist menace, a strategic threat to the “Free World”; others saw it as a troubled, modernizing nation, which was striving to overcome the legacies of a revolutionary past; still others saw it as a “revolutionary redeemer”, a beacon of hope for the oppressed of the world. Now, none of these visions seems credible. The fundamental, fatal flaw undermining all of them, I would argue, was the notion that “China” was a coherent, unified nation state.

The notion of a unitary China, based on a unified national culture, was, for Americans at least, the product of a superpower culture, of a society that aspired to unite the whole world under its leadership and saw itself locked in deadly competition with a communist competitor that claimed to do the same. This superpower competition, indeed, tended to create what it imagined. For a while, the pressures of global rivalry may have helped Chinese rulers to believe that they and their nation formed a unified force with the mission of blocking the global aspirations of American imperialism.

Now that the cold war is over, it is easier for outsiders—and perhaps for Chinese themselves—to perceive the ethnic rivalries, regional diversity, cultural conflicts, and economic disparities that divide the people who are officially under the authority of the government of the People’s Republic of China. The word “China” ought to be a plural noun, capable of denoting a variety of identities and political-economies. For example, the notion of “China” ought to reveal rather than obscure the coexistence of at least three different political-economic systems within the area under PRC sovereignty: the rapidly developing coastal zone of “newly industrializing China” (which conforms to many of the patterns of other East Asian NICs); the stagnating northeastern “socialist China” (which looks like many of the East European countries making a transition away from an economy of state owned enterprises); and the hinterlands of “third world China” (which looks like many third world agrarian societies, mired in poverty, beset by lawlessness, and tormented by ethnic rivalries). The notion of “China” should be conceived in such a way as to facilitate thinking about the divergent ethnic identities of Han Chinese, on the one hand, and Tibetans and Uyghurs, on the other; and on divergent national identities of Taiwanese and citizens of the

PRC.

Area

“Area” studies have been based on the need to develop a holistic understanding of human life—to see the structures that intertwine social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions of life. In my view, such comprehensive, multidisciplinary understandings are now more needed than ever. However, area studies tried to achieve this holistic comprehension by assuming that the different dimensions of existence were integrated within different geographical regions. Within the national borders of “China”, however, there are many different configurations of social, cultural, economic, and political life, and some of these configurations are shaped by globalized social systems that far transcend political boundaries.

Geographical “area”, therefore, does not seem to be an especially useful focus for a multidisciplinary understanding of a changing world. Perhaps a better focal concept would be that of “context.” To understand any part of social action, one has to see how it interacts with other kinds of social action within a context. This does not assume that the different dimensions of any context are in equilibrium, or in resonance, or even that they are tightly integrated. It just recognizes that they have some important influence on each other. A context does not necessarily have to be framed by geography, although geography is often one important part of the frame. Neither are contexts fixed—their parameters are constantly evolving as their components change.

For example, if one were to understand the development of export processing industries in Guangdong, one would obviously have to understand the social factors that make Guangdong labor relatively cheap by global standards, and to do that one would have to understand the confluence of social processes that have created labor surpluses in the hinterlands of China, the political processes that have enabled such workers to migrate to coastal cities while denying them the opportunity to engage in collective bargaining, and the cultural processes that facilitate repressive labor regimes (especially when most of the workers are women). Besides a knowledge of basic economics, this contextual understanding would require a knowledge of the languages, cultures, and local social histories which have affected the reproduction of this cheap labor—and which may change the cost of this labor in the future. This contextual knowledge would require many of the basic skills that were once acquired in Chinese area studies programs, but it would also require a knowledge that would not have been conveyed in traditional area studies programs—for instance knowledge about international political economy and about networks of Chinese entrepreneurs in the United States, Europe, and Southeast Asia.

Studies

How can we cultivate and convey this kind of contextualized knowledge? Answers to such questions lead us to basic epistemological and moral problems that gained new salience in the post-cold war era. Academic disciplines are not simply embedded in scholars’ heads—they are embedded in institutions that are tied to vast structures of power. In the United

States at least, university based scholars have to get funding by providing knowledge deemed useful by the government bureaucracies and corporate foundations that provide our funding. Last year for example I attended a meeting in Washington hosted by the Department of Education to prepare directors of “Asian studies programs” to apply for grants to support such programs. Some of the professors at the meeting tried to press for a wider definition of such area studies to include attention to cross national migration flows and to global movements of capital. The bureaucrats at the Department of Education quickly dismissed such suggestions—by mandate of Congress, the nature and scope of area studies were defined in the traditional way and if we wanted to get funding we had to conform to those categories. Meanwhile, scholars who work in partisan “think tanks” (e.g., American Enterprise Institute, Heritage Foundation) are expected to produce knowledge that supports the partisan political agendas of such groups. To speak truth to power, scholars have sometimes to take the professional risks that come from biting the hand that feeds them. This requires moral courage which can be sustained only if scholars see themselves as animated not simply by ambition to advance their careers by a wider vocation to serve the public good.

What is the public good? Without being able to adequately explain my position here, I would define the public good (in Habermasian terms) in terms of common understandings of social justice, arrived at through broadly inclusive public discussion, rather than submission to the dictates of wealth and power. This inevitably involves a critique of global institutions that would seek to alienate and dominate people. One of the tools used by such institutions is “Orientalism”, the creation of an alien Other that contrasts with the universal righteousness of one’s own cause.

For example the official statement of the Bush administration about the National Security of the United States begins with a statement that there is “a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise” (which are defined in neo-liberal terms), and it holds that nations that resist this notion are potentially enemies of the United States. From this it is a short distance to defining resistance to U.S. efforts to maintain a global hegemony in terms of a “clash of civilizations.” Since September 11, the main villain in this “civilizational clash” has been identified as the immoral anti-modernism allegedly emanating from Islamic societies, but we must not forget that before September 11, there were those in the foreign policy establishment of the Bush administration who seemed eager to make China the primary object of America’s enmity.

The way to defend against such mischievous Orientalism is to engage in deep dialogue with those whom the wielders of power would want to objectify as Other. In the end, this is a moral dialogue, a conversation about the nature of a good and just world order. There are powerful humanistic traditions in both European and Asian cultural traditions that a full knowledge of oneself can only come about through an understanding of one’s interrelationships with others. As I put it in a recent publication, “The attempt to understand other cultures and systems of morality leads to a ‘fusion of horizons’ in which we gain a broader set of terms to reflect critically on our own identity. This approach by no means precludes criticisms of other moral systems. But it insists that for such criticism of particular moral practices to be valid, the criticism must be predicated on a broad understanding of what the practices mean in their overall contexts—and criticism of the other should be accompanied by self-criticism.” By engaging in such dialogue and enabling our students to

do the same, sinologists could play a small part in inoculating our respective societies against the self-righteous, chauvinistic moralisms that threaten the peace of the planet today.