



General Situation and Challenges of the Education of Area Studies as a Discipline in China

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Abstract. This paper reviews the history, feature, achievements and challenges of area studies in China since 1960s. Over the past 60 years, it has witnessed three stages of tangible development, while manifesting its own distinctive characteristics. Until now, it has contributed significantly to China's foreign relations and international trade; in the meantime, area studies in China still face three challenges, namely, blurred subject classification, imbalanced curriculum and lack of fieldwork.

Keywords: Area studies · China · Distinctive feature · Achievement · Challenges

1 Introduction

Area studies in China began in the 1960s and have made considerable progresses since then. With the proposal of “the Belt and Road” Initiative in 2013, area studies in China gained new momentum. As of 2022, there are over 400 area research institutions in Chinese universities, covering studies of major regions, countries and international organizations. Quite understandably, in an age of increasing globalization and continued development of China's economy, it is of great significance to identify and study the course of the development, the future and the challenges of area studies in China.

2 The Development of Area Studies in China

Area studies in China have a history of nearly 60 years and can be divided into three stages: the initial stage, the development stage and the flourishing stage.

The initial stage began in the 1960s. Before that time, although China had studied the politics and history of the world, it had not developed into systematic area studies. In the 1960s, when the world was in the midst of the Cold War and China's relations with the Soviet Union began to deteriorate, China faced tremendous political and diplomatic pressures in the international arena, so China's need in area studies increased sharply. In 1963, the central government of China published the Report on Strengthening the Study of Foreign Countries, which pointed out that there were too few area research

institutions and researchers in China at that time, and that there were no international politics majors in institutions of higher learning [1]. In accordance with this instructions, Peking University, Renmin University of China and Fudan University began to establish their own departments of international politics [2], which focused on the teaching and research of affairs in Asia, Eastern Europe and Western Europe respectively. In addition, institutions for conducting research on neighbouring countries or regions were generally set up in universities close to borders. China thus took a big step forward in area studies at this stage (“Table 1”).

The development stage started in the last two decades of the 20th century. After the implementation of China’s Reform and Opening-up policy in 1978, in order to integrate into the world market, China needed to obtain more knowledge through area studies. In the 1980s, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) established 7 institutes of area studies (“Table 2”).

Among them, Institute of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Institute of Latin American Studies and Institute of West-Asian and African Studies were transferred to the CASS by the International Department in 1980, including 350 scientific research and administrative personnel, scientific research facilities, books and materials, etc. The 7 institutes of area studies soon became the leading area research institutes in their respective fields in China, and most of their academic journals became most influential in related fields. Except for the research institute of the CASS, many universities had gradually established a large number of area research institutes, such as Fudan University, which established substantive Center for American Studies (1985), Center for Japanese Studies (1990), Center for Korean Studies (1992) and so on. In this stage, foreign foundations also offered assistance to China’s area studies. For instance, the Ford Foundation in the United States, the Japan Foundation and the Korea Foundation helped fund American, Japanese and Korean studies to some extent [3].

The flourishing stage has emerged since the 21st century, mainly influenced by the Chinese Education Department. At this stage, the development goal of area studies has gradually shifted to improving the quality and depth. After more than 20 years of Reforms and Opening Up, China GDP reached 9.8 trillion in 2000 and the research

Table 1. Area studies institutes in 1960s

Province	University	Institution	Founding time
Fujian	Xiamen University	Research school for Southeast Asian Studies	1956
Guangdong	Jinan University	Institute of Southeast Asian Studies	1960
Beijing	Peking University	Institute of Afro-Asian Studies	1964
Shaanxi	Northwest University	Institute of Islamic Studies	1964
Yunnan	Yunnan University	Institute of Southwest Asia Studies	1964
Liaoning	Liaoning University	Institute of Japan Studies	1964
Jilin	Jilin University	Research Office of Japanese Studies and Korean Studies	1964

Table 2. Area studies institutes of CASS in the 1980s

Institute (Former name)	Now	Founding time	
Institute of Latin American Studies	Institute of Latin American Studies	1961	Transferred to the CASS in 1980
Institute of West-Asian and African Studies	Institute of West-Asian and African Studies	1961	
Institute of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe	Institute of Russian, Eastern European & Central Asian Studies	1965	
Institute of Western European Studies	Institute of European Studies	1981	Established by CASS
Institute of Japanese Studies	Institute of Japanese Studies	1981	
Institute of American Studies	Institute of American Studies	1981	
Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies	National Institute Of International Strategy	1988	

environment improved accordingly. The symbol of this stage is that since 1999, the Ministry of Education has set up 151 key research bases for social sciences in 66 excellent universities, while 9 research bases have been set up in the field of international studies. In 2011, the Ministry of Education launched the “Area Research Cultivation Base” project, which has set up 37 research centers in universities such as Peking University, including 23 area research centers and 14 national research centers [4].

From the above-mentioned three stages of development, it can be concluded that China’s area studies are closely related to national demand. In the initial stage, China was blocked by the Western world and lacked information about other countries. At that time, in addition to focusing on the two camps of the Cold War, China’s area studies mainly focused on the Asian regions adjacent to China, and set up research centers in universities in border provinces. Due to the special social environment in China in the 1970s, area studies tended to stagnate. After the Reform and Opening Up, Chinese government attached great importance to social sciences and international exchanges, and area studies in China resumed its development. At this stage, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences played a vital role in establishing research institutes in important regions of the world. In the 21st century, the Chinese government has proposed to strengthen higher education. It requires that area studies should not only serve the current demands, but also improve the level of scientific research.

3 The Feature of Area Studies in China

While area studies definitely stem from the need to understand the outside world [5], area studies in China are quite different from those of Western countries. The rise of area

studies in modern Europe was mainly accompanied by colonial development, while the development of area studies in the United States was aimed at leading the world [6]. Compared with Europe and the United States, area studies in China are characterized by late start and governmental guidance.

First, China's area studies started late. Historically, China's research on foreign countries since modern times has mainly focused on politics, sociology and technology. Comprehensive area studies did not begin until the 1950s and 1960s. In 1956, China established the Institute of International Relations of the Chinese Academy of Sciences (renamed the Institute of International Relations in 1958, which was separated from the Chinese Academy of Sciences) [7]. In the 1960s, many area studies institutes were established in China, including the Asian-African Research Institute and the European Research Institute. In contrast, area studies in the United States emerged during the Second World War. In the 1940s, the United States established the Office of Strategic Services to investigate and search for regional intelligence. Various universities have also carried out regional research ("Table 3").

Second, national policy plays an important part in China's area studies. China's area studies were born out of national needs and supported by the government. In 1956, the Institute of International Relations of the Chinese Academy of Sciences was established at the suggestion of Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In addition, in 1963, Chinese central government presided over a meeting on how to strengthen the study of foreign work. The conference discussed and completed the Report on Strengthening the Study of Foreign Countries, which was regarded as a programmatic document for China to strengthen international studies [1]. Based on the report, China began to allocate funds to set up area research institutes nationwide ("Table 1"). Unlike the government-led approach in China, non-governmental organizations and foundations in European and American countries play a prominent role in the field of area studies. For example, as early as 1935, the Rockefeller Foundation of the United States funded the establishment of the Institute of International Relations at Yale University [6].

Table 3. American Area Studies Institutes in 1940s

University	Institute/Program	Founding time
Columbia University	The Russian Institute	1946
Yale University	Southeast Asia Studies	1947
University of Pennsylvania	The Department of South Asian Studies	1947
Harvard University	The interdisciplinary Russian Research Center	1948
University of California, Los Angeles	The Department of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Languages and Cultures	1948

4 The Significance of Area Studies in China

4.1 The Significance of China's Area Studies in the Field of International Relations

Area studies adopt interdisciplinary research methods, which could provide multi-angle knowledge for international relations. To establish good relations between countries, it is necessary to have a sufficient understanding of the national conditions of both sides, and area studies play an important role in this regard. Region is a geographical social and historical unit and the most important social practice field of human beings in the “post-international” era in the academic sense, regional knowledge is the summary and generalization of the local practical experience of people in a specific region from bottom to top [8]. The accumulation and production of regional knowledge have maintained the uniqueness of different regions for a long time, which is highlighted in foreign exchanges. With the proposal of China's “Belt and Road Initiative” in recent years, China's area studies have paid more attention to developing countries in Africa and Asia. Because these countries and China have similar historical and economic environments, they can find more opportunities for cooperation through area studies. As Liu Hongwu, a Chinese expert on African studies, said, “For quite a long time to come, the African continent will remain the most important external support for China's national rejuvenation and modern development” [9]. Every year, the China-Africa Institute summarizes the development of African countries in various aspects and provides more potential cooperation opportunities for China-Africa relations.

4.2 The Significance of China's Area Studies in International Trade and Investment

Area studies can provide reference for foreign regional investment choices, such as local politics, society and employment. With the rapid expansion of economic globalization, it is becoming a challenging issue to effectively protect the legitimate rights and interests of domestic enterprises and citizens. The threat of the global economic crisis has also made this issue increasingly prominent, and it has become an important proposition in the foreign relations of contemporary countries to do a good job in risk assessment and interests maintenance of overseas investment. From the economic point of view, promoting area research can better safeguard China's overseas economic and trade interests. According to the statistics of China's Ministry of Commerce and the State Administration of Foreign Exchange, in 2021, China's foreign investment developed steadily. The direct investment of the whole industry was 936.69 billion yuan, an increase of 2.2% over the previous year. Non-financial direct investment in countries along the “Belt and Road” route was nearly 130 billion yuan, up 14.1% year on year [10]. Foreign investment requires rigorous market research and risk assessment, which demands not only economic research, but also a series of information such as local social and cultural background and political situation.

5 The Achievement and Future of Area Studies in China

In 2013, the Belt and Road initiative was launched. It is a transcontinental long-term policy and investment program which aims at infrastructure development and acceleration of the economic integration of countries along the route of the historic Silk Road [11]. After China proposed the “Belt and Road” initiative, the urgency and importance of area studies have been further emphasized. In 2015, the Ministry of Education proposed to strengthen the training of area studies talents to better serve the national strategic needs. In 2016, Chinese government issued “Several Opinions on Opening Education to the Outside World in the New Period”, calling for “improving the layout of area studies bases and strengthening international research” [12]. Driven by the need of the situation, Chinese universities have set up many new area studies institutes. For example, Peking University regards area studies as an important part of the construction of first-class universities, and has established an area studies committee to formulate development plans, guide institutional settings and promote project research. In addition, great achievements have been made in the construction of new think tanks in China, and a considerable number of these think tanks are mainly engaged in area studies.

There are 437 departments, institutes and centers related to area studies registered by the Ministry of Education in China, and a large number of area studies libraries have become a trend. According to CNKI, the authoritative “Journal of Area and International Studies” was published in 2017, and there are 178 articles so far. Area Studies and Global Development were published in 2017 and currently have 294 articles. From the perspective of specific research, China’s current area studies mainly include Russian studies, China’s peripheral regional studies, European studies and so on. According to Liu Jin, Director of the Department of International Cooperation and Exchange of the Ministry of Education of China, the current cultivation work of area studies in universities has achieved partial goals, the research force has gradually grown, the research level has been continuously improved, the research management has become increasingly standardized, and the research influence has gradually expanded [13].

6 Challenges in China’s Area Studies

After decades of development, there have been many achievements in area studies in China. However, the world is constantly changing, and the knowledge sources of area studies are changing, and these changes are structural and revolutionary [14]. Under such circumstances, there are still challenges to be solved in China’s area studies.

6.1 Blurred Subject Classification

In the research fields of area studies, there are many different disciplines overlapping and competing in epistemology and methodology, including linguistics, politics, history, geography, ethnology, anthropology and so on. In this situation, the subject classification of area studies in China is not clearly defined. In the relevant papers, some of the authors put area studies under the study of international relations; in the classification of university disciplines, most of the area studies are set up in the School of Foreign

Languages. This may lead to problems of insufficiency and limitations in research methods, academic vision and research depth of area studies, which are not conducive to long-term development of area studies as a social science.

6.2 Imbalanced Curriculum Provision

From the perspective of area studies as a discipline in university education, excessive emphasis is placed on language ability in university course, which results in numerous language courses and limited professional knowledge courses [15]. As a result, students have mastered the language ability but lack a deep understanding of foreign countries. Specialty catalog and introduction of undergraduate course of common colleges and universities published in 2012 has incorporated the course of “Overview of English-speaking Countries” into the compulsory curriculum of English majors [16]. However, it only involves a few developed English-speaking countries such as the United States, Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, ignoring the social, political, economic, diplomatic and foreign trade of more than 60 other English-speaking countries and regions. The students trained know little about English-speaking countries, which makes it difficult to effectively serve China’s foreign strategy and find opportunities for personal development in China’s contacts with many countries.

6.3 Lack of Oversea Fieldwork

China’s area studies generally lack long-term and solid fieldwork [4]. Qian Chengdan, president of Institute of Area Studies at Peking University, proposed that area studies need to plunge into the target country, sink into the local society, take deep roots, and even melt into that society as far as possible [17]. Field investigation is an important method to obtain first-hand information, which is irreplaceable in the effectiveness and scientificity of original data collection [18]. Because of the lack of fieldwork, China’s area studies lack the accumulation of first-hand materials and rely more on English second-hand materials. As a result, China’s area research falls behind the United States and Europe. According to international relations scholar Tang Shiping, it is also difficult for researchers to form their own independent views and opinions [19].

7 Conclusion

In the 21st century, area studies are becoming increasingly important for its foreign relations and international trade, especially after the proposal of China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

In the foreseeable future, area studies in China will certainly become increasingly important for China’s foreign relations and international trade. While tangible development and remarkable achievements have been made over the last six decades, three challenges are still to be tackled with in subject classification, curriculum provision and overseas fieldwork for area studies in China to release the full potentials.

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