

0022-4634

Volume 52 | Number 2 | June 2021

# Journal of

# SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES



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*Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (ISSN 0022-4634; E-ISSN 1474-0680) is published four times a year in March, June, September and December. Four parts form a volume. Single parts are £60 (US \$94 in USA, Canada and Mexico) plus postage. The subscription price, which includes postage, of Volume 52 (excluding VAT) is £198 (US \$310 in USA, Canada and Mexico) for institutions print and electronic; £172 (\$286 in USA, Canada and Mexico) for institutions electronic only; £190 (\$297 in USA, Canada and Mexico) for institutions print only; £45 (\$73 in USA, Canada and Mexico) for individuals ordering print only direct from the publisher and certifying that the journal is for their own personal use. EU subscribers (outside the UK) who are not registered for VAT should add VAT at their country's rate. VAT registered subscribers should provide their VAT registration number. Japanese prices are available from Kinokuniya Company Ltd., P.O. Box 55, Chitose, Tokyo 156, Japan. Prices include delivery by air. Subscription enquiries can also be made to [journals@cambridge.org](mailto:journals@cambridge.org).

Orders, which must be accompanied by payment, may be sent to a bookseller, subscription agent or direct to the publisher: Cambridge University Press, The Edinburgh Building, Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge, CB2 8RU, UK; in the USA, Canada and Mexico, Cambridge University Press, Journals Fulfillment Department, 100 Brook Hill Drive, West Nyack, New York, 10994-2133, USA. Application to mail at Periodical postage paid at New York, NY and additional mailing offices.

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## Editorial Foreword

We introduce in the June issue a new type of article to mark the Diamond Jubilee Year of the *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* (1960–1961). More modest in length than our normal research articles, these essays will present how Southeast Asian Studies is defined, institutionalized, and pursued by scholars in different Asian intellectual contexts. Rather than treating Southeast Asian Studies as the product of a single canon or an orthodox tradition that was established at a particular place in a particular time, scholars are encouraged to reflect upon the career of Southeast Asian Studies as it emerged or as it is currently evolving in their particular intellectual, institutional, and national settings. Of special interest is how the poetics and practices of Southeast Asian Studies in these Asian settings are as much expressions of local dynamics as they are reflective of more global interactions. Like Sugata Bose’s vivid framing of the Indian Ocean world as an interregional space that was experienced and viewed from a ‘hundred horizons’, Southeast Asian Studies might be viewed in a similar way; not as a monolithic heuristic field of study, but as a genre of knowledge and form of intellectual pursuit shaped by “human agency, imagination, and action” from different vantage points in the region.<sup>1</sup>

The inaugural article by Kankan Xie presents an overview of recent developments in Southeast Asian Studies in China. Unlike in North America where Southeast Asian Studies mainly emerged as a product of area studies initiatives, Xie contends that the study of Southeast Asia in China developed earlier and independently of area studies conversations in the West. However, with the recent emergence of a newly configured ‘Area Studies’ trend in Chinese universities, Southeast Asian Studies in China is developing in ways that reflect a mixture of local, national, and transnational priorities. Xie’s essay provides an important assessment of the main factors behind these developments. Future installments of our ‘Southeast Asia in Asia’ series will feature essays from East, South, Southeast, Northeast, and West Asian settings.

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While Xie identifies the rise of a new ‘Chinese’ Southeast Asian Studies in China today, the study of East Asian–Southeast Asian connections are an established trope for scholars of the region. Coincidentally, four out of the five research articles in this issue examine various dimensions of Southeast Asia’s interactions with China.

Christian Daniels’ article, ‘Nanzhao as a Southeast Asian kingdom, c.738–902’, draws our attention to the early polity whose territorial jurisdiction straddled the borderlands of contemporary Tibet, Yunnan, Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia.

1 Sugata Bose, *A hundred horizons: The Indian Ocean in the age of global empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

Through a fresh look Nanzhao's integration of the upper Irrawaddy and Mekong regions, Daniels proposes that the early polity was a Southeast Asian kingdom with Sinitic state features that functioned much like Dai Viet, adopting Tang forms of bureaucracy and state practices. Like the early state in Vietnam, the administrative integration of Nanzhao was achieved through personal allegiances reminiscent of the region's 'classical' or 'charter' states of the ninth to fourteenth centuries. By referencing Dai Viet's administrative patterns and a case study of Mon-Khmer consolidation, Daniels' research reveals Nanzhao's Southeast Asian characteristics that in turn ask us to reconsider not only the scale and nature of classical Southeast Asia, but the heuristic devices that have determined its character.

Just as Daniels' article highlights the combination of Tang and Mon-Khmer contributions to Nanzhao's territorial consolidation, so too did external-internal cooperation facilitate economic integration for semi-local actors in Central Java several centuries later. Shifting to nineteenth and early twentieth century Dutch Java, Peter Post's article, 'Profitable partnerships: The Chinese business elite and Dutch lawyers in the making of Semarang', examines Dutch-Peranakan Chinese collaboration in the building of Semarang, a major port city in Central Java. Through a close examination of '*sumbangan*' relations of patronage and reciprocal relations between Dutch lawyer-entrepreneurs and Peranakan Chinese tycoons over time, Post demonstrates that the colonial economy was not merely based on rivalry and competition between foreign and local capitalists, but dependent on their cooperation and collaboration based on trust and status.

The next article by Xiaorong Han looks at three Chinese revolutionary organisations that were active in northern Vietnam during the early years of the First Indochina War, before formal aid was sent by the People's Republic of China (PRC). In 'Revolution knows no boundaries? Chinese revolutionaries in North Vietnam during the early years of the First Indochina War', Han argues that Chinese communist interactions with local Vietnamese revolutionaries began well before formal arrangements were made to support the Viet Minh. Han's article examines three different kinds of bodies set up in this period to show the varying bases for Chinese alliance with Vietnamese resistance fighters. Where Post's article highlighted the need for elite Peranakan Chinese to cultivate relations with Dutch lawyers, Han's article shows how both the Vietnamese communists and their French adversaries regarded the Chinese living in Northern Vietnam as potential allies. Han's analysis reveals that this period of Sino-Vietnamese interaction was characterised by cycles of confrontation and cooperation. Just as collaboration in Dutch Indonesia between the Dutch and the Chinese challenges conventional perspectives of anti-Chinese sentiment, so too does Han's analysis demonstrate the substantial history of Sino-Vietnamese collaboration before 1949.

Where Han's research draws attention to the role of communist internationalism as a basis for Sino-Viet relations, Matthew Galway's 'Red-Service intellectual: Phouk Chhay, Maoist China, and the Cultural Revolution in Cambodia, 1964-1967', shifts our angle of vision to examine how Cambodian imaginations of China shaped the political aspirations of the Communist Party in Cambodia. Focusing on the intellectual life and political journey of Phouk Chhay, Galway shows a fascination with the Cultural Revolution and Maoism in 1960s Cambodia, encouraged by the PRC, and

how it was localised in collective imaginations by figures outside the Paris-trained corp of communist leaders. Through a close examination of Sino-Khmer newspapers, two political associations and the writings and ‘confessions’ of Phouk and other key leaders prior to their execution by Khmer Rouge comrades, Galway charts the rise of a Maoism in Cambodia that developed independently of Pol Pot’s brand of communism.

Our final article by Charlotte R.A. Wittesaele takes us to contemporary Indonesia and examines the way artists there engage the rhetoric of urban development through ‘green discourse’. Situating her analysis within the broader history of modern Indonesian art, Wittesaele examines two artworks about land reclamation by Tita Salina and Teja Astawa, to show how environmentalism is presented in contemporary art as a means to engage with urbanism and challenge state messages of modernisation and development. Close analysis of the artists’ subject matter, techniques, activism, and humour reveal for Wittesaele the influences of the global upon local practices. By comparing artwork that focuses on Jakarta and Bali, Wittesaele shows that such artistic ‘green discourse’ has the potential for application in Indonesian settings beyond urban centres.

Finally, David J. Welch provides a review article of three volumes that focus on the findings of one of the largest archaeological digs in Southeast Asia, at Ban Chiang in Northeast Thailand. As Welch relates, the discovery of metal (iron) artefacts among a range of other items led to the establishment of the site as a UNESCO Heritage site. Welch’s review article is followed by a substantial number of book reviews. We offer our thanks again to our international reviewers, referees, and authors who made this issue possible.

Maitrii Aung-Thwin



## Experiencing Southeast Asian Studies in China: A reverse culture shock

Kankan Xie

*Southeast Asian Studies (SEAS) in China has experienced significant changes in the past twenty years. China's rising political and economic power has stimulated growing demands for better understanding of the wider world, resulting in the rapid development of area studies in recent years. Although SEAS in China predated the relatively recent notion of 'area studies' by at least half a century, the boom in area studies has profoundly transformed the field, most notably by attracting a large number of scholars to conduct policy-relevant research. Not only does the 'policy turn' reflect shifts of research paradigms in the field of SEAS, but it is also consistent with some larger trends prevailing in China's higher education sector and rapidly changing society in general. This article shows that SEAS in China has grown even more imbalanced, as indicated by the rapid growth of language programmes, absolute domination of short-term policy research, and further marginalisation of humanistic subjects. To respond, Chinese universities have adopted new approaches to SEAS depending on their distinct disciplinary foundations, language coverage, faculty interests, and local governments' policy preferences.*

After pursuing my postgraduate degrees in Southeast Asian Studies (SEAS) in the United States for almost a decade, including two years of fieldwork in Indonesia, Singapore, and the Netherlands, I returned to China in 2019 and took up a tenure-track position at Peking University's School of Foreign Languages. Of course, the idea of moving back to China was not as daunting as embarking on an unknown journey to the United States ten years earlier. But it would be an understatement to say that the decision was a no-brainer and my readjustment effortless. While abroad, I maintained intermittent contact with many of my Chinese colleagues who shared valuable insights about what was going on in China's SEAS. I had learned about the changes from such discussions, but it was not until I started my new job that I realised that the field had become drastically different from what it used to be a decade earlier. For me, it is not just a new working environment to which I am striving to adapt. More importantly, the transition has led to a set of fundamental questions that

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I keep asking myself: What is the current state of SEAS in China? What does it mean to be a Southeast Asianist in this context?

I find myself caught in between different academic traditions, and sometimes I am embarrassed that I am more familiar with Western scholarship than those produced in my home country. Meanwhile, I also noticed some trends and debates that are surprising to me personally, but which my colleagues often take for granted. Such epistemological uneasiness feels like a ‘reverse culture shock’ after extended multisite fieldwork overseas, which can be quite tricky to tackle in the initial stage of my career. On the bright side, however, it also pushes me to think critically about the field. Although trained as a historian, I have no intention of discussing the genealogy of China’s SEAS here; numerous articles have done so already.<sup>1</sup> What I want to do instead is to borrow wisdom from anthropology and reflect on the field’s recent development in China based on my ‘participatory observation’.

### The rise of ‘area studies’

SEAS in China has a long history, and its origins can be traced back to the emergence of ‘Nanyang studies’ in the 1920s. Since the outset, the diaspora community has been a major focus of Chinese scholars studying the region, primarily driven by the constant government demand for insights into handling *qiaowu* (overseas Chinese affairs).<sup>2</sup> Although Nanyang studies gradually evolved into what is known as SEAS today after the founding of the People’s Republic and Southeast Asian nation-states, the government remains one of the most significant driving forces propelling and shaping the development of the field in China.<sup>3</sup> What is particularly surprising to me is that despite the early establishment of SEAS programmes across the country, the rise of China’s ‘area studies’ is a relatively recent phenomenon. Serious academic discussions about area studies only emerged in the 2000s and most area studies centres are less than ten years old. In other words, the establishment of SEAS predated area studies by at least half a century. In many cases, Southeast Asia is the most well-developed concentration in, and thus an integral part of, area studies programmes. While many area studies programmes are essentially built on the foundation of SEAS, many new centres also chose Southeast Asia as the primary region to cover because of its geographical proximity and unmatched accessibility. This section explores the relationship between SEAS and area studies in the context of

1 Wang Gungwu, ‘Two perspectives of Southeast Asian Studies: Singapore and China’, in *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of knowledge and politics of space*, ed. Paul H. Kratoska, Remco Raben and Henk Schulte Nordholt (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2005); Saw Swee-Hock, ‘A review of Southeast Asian Studies in China’, in *Southeast Asian Studies in China*, ed. Saw Swee-Hock and John Wong (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2006); Liu Hong, ‘Sino-Southeast Asian Studies: Towards an alternative paradigm’, *Asian Studies Review* 25, 3 (2001): 259–83; Park Sa-Myung, ‘Southeast Asian Studies in China: Progress and problems’, in *The historical construction of Southeast Asian Studies: Korea and beyond*, ed. Park Seung Woo and Victor T. King (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2013).

2 Leander Seah, ‘Between East Asia and Southeast Asia: Nanyang studies, Chinese migration, and National Jinan University, 1927–1940’, *Translocal Chinese: East Asian Perspectives* 11, 1 (2017): 31–3.

3 Tang Shiping and Zhang Jie, ‘Zhongguo Dongnanya yanjiu xianzhuang: Zhiduhua chanshi [The current state of China’s Southeast Asian Studies: An institutional perspective]’, *Dangdai Yatai* [Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies] 4 (2006): 5.

contemporary China, especially with regards to what role SEAS plays in the newly emerged area studies, and how the rise of area studies has in turn reshaped SEAS in recent years.

A significant background for the emergence of area studies is undoubtedly China's rise as a global power. Decades of rapid growth have contributed to China's economic integration into the global market, bringing about significant changes to the country's relationship with the world. Echoing the Chinese government's 'Go Out Strategy' (*zouchuqu zhanlüe*) at the turn of the twenty-first century, more Chinese companies have started to invest abroad. The strategy evolved into the more ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, aiming to boost infrastructure development in nearly 70 economies worldwide. China's rising political prowess and tightened economic connections with the world have stimulated an increasing demand for protecting its interests overseas. Meanwhile, the international environment has also undergone significant changes, pressing China to assume a more proactive role in handling global issues and readjust its positions and policies in response to challenges such as territorial disputes, trade wars, and pandemics. More than ever, Beijing has sensed the necessity and urgency of understanding the world better. Still, there is a considerable gap between the kind of knowledge the government expects and what the country's policy and academic circles can produce under the existing system. Area studies emerged as an orchestrated response to such a need.

The most direct consequence of the response is the unprecedented government support for area studies with a clear preference for policy-related research. The last few years have seen a rapid growth of funding opportunities for area studies from a wide array of government bodies, including not only traditional fund distributors such as the National Social Science Fund and the Ministry of Education (MOE), but also functional agencies handling diplomacy, communication, migration, industrial development, national security, as well as religious and ethnic affairs. Lacking relevant expertise in conducting in-depth investigations into specific regional issues, government agencies often outsource research projects to various specialist think tanks. Institutions belonging to the Chinese Academy of Social Science (CASS) system used to be the main ones conducting such research. However, as CASS and other government think tanks can no longer keep up with the growing demand, university-based scholars have started to play a more prominent role in policy-oriented research projects.

The abundant funding opportunities in area studies have also attracted university administrators' attention. In hopes of securing policy support and financial resources from above, more universities have joined the game by establishing think tanks under the banner of area studies. By 2019, more than 400 area studies centres nationwide had registered with the MOE.<sup>4</sup> Considerably more are not yet 'recognised' officially or still in the making. However, it is worth noting that most of these centres are so-called 'virtual bodies' (*xuti*) with neither designated workspaces nor full-time employees. Unlike in Western universities where area studies programmes attract

4 Li Chenyang, 'Guanyu xinshidai Zhongguo tese guobie yu quyu yanjiu fanshi de sikao [Reflections on the paradigm of international and regional studies with Chinese characteristics in the new era]', *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics] 10 (2019): 146.

scholars from various disciplines, area studies centres in China are more like interest groups or working clusters within a particular discipline (most prominently international politics). In this sense, university-based area studies centres gather researchers with similar academic interests or policy concerns. Even before such centres' establishment, affiliated faculty members are already closely connected through their home departments. But the new centres are instrumental and beneficial because they justify the existence of area-specific research fields, which enable scholars to attract extra financial support designated for area studies inside the universities and from external funding agencies.

China's area studies have adopted a clear 'policy' connotation from the outset. Despite its relatively late emergence, this emphasis has been exerting a profound impact on the development of SEAS. Compared to other parts of the world, Southeast Asia stands out as a more 'accessible' region for Chinese scholars, thanks to its geographic proximity, frequent political interactions, deepening economic ties, and the existence of various linguistic, cultural and historical linkages. In recent years, several issues have emerged as pertinent to China's 'core national interests' such as the South China Sea, or as indispensable to China's long-term development, including cultivating a mutual trust with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), forming strategic partnerships with individual countries, as well as protecting trade and overseas investment in the region.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Southeast Asia has also become one of the most contested frontiers under the intensifying China-US rivalry.<sup>6</sup> The region's geopolitical significance has stimulated a growing demand for more timely, in-depth, and comprehensive studies from China's policy circles. As a result, policy-oriented research of Southeast Asia, especially those related to broadly-defined international politics, flourishes as one of the most active sub-fields in China's area studies.

The most direct consequence of this trend is the rapid growth of Chinese scholars working on Southeast Asia, as manifested by the skyrocketing number of conferences, workshops, lectures, and webinars in recent years. While the exact number of Chinese scholars working on the region is hard to calculate, the size and frequency of China's academic events on SEAS reflect the field's growing prosperity. In June 2019, for instance, 242 scholars, most of whom were full-time faculty members from across the country, presented their work at a three-day conference of the Chinese Association for Southeast Asian Studies in Guangzhou. In the same year, institutions in Beijing, Shanghai, Xiamen, Kunming and Nanning also hosted similar academic events directly related to Southeast Asia. It is important to note that active conference attendees only represent a tiny fraction of the academic community, not to mention the significantly larger student body studying the region.

5 The Chinese government often defines the five 'core interests' as: maintaining China's fundamental system and state security; state sovereignty and territorial integrity; stable development of the economy and society; peaceful development; and national reunification. However, the concept is rather vague and constantly subject to different interpretations. See Jinghan Zeng, Yuefan Xiao and Shaun Breslin, 'Securing China's core interests: The state of the debate in China', *International Affairs* 91, 2 (2015): 259–62; Jinghao Zhou, 'China's core interests and dilemma in foreign policy practice', *Pacific Focus* 34, 1 (2019): 33.

6 David Shambaugh, 'U.S.–China rivalry in Southeast Asia: Power shift or competitive coexistence?', *International Security* 42, 4 (2018): 86–7.

Meanwhile, conference organisers often intentionally limit the scope of participants to domestic scholars only. The main reason is to avoid unwanted bureaucratic hurdles in organising ‘international events’, where organisers need to go through prolonged review processes by university or government administrators, resulting in the event’s potential postponement or cancellation. As a result, universities are eager to organise large domestic conferences with vague and all-inclusive themes. Such events are not only politically and logistically low-risk, but also considered ‘presentable’ to funding bodies, as they often draw a large crowd of scholars. If the themes are too broad and vague, how do big area studies conferences attract participants? The most effective way to secure participation is through a reciprocal network, in which major institutions in the field form informal partnerships and scratch each other’s backs when necessary. Academics are keen to attend conferences organised by brother institutions (*xiongdì yuánxiào*) even if such events are unrelated to his/her research interests. The participants usually hope that the conference organisers would return the favour one day when the participants’ home institution hosts a similar event.

These frequent academic events have led to the formation of a more vibrant and cohesive academic community in the field of SEAS. As I will discuss in later sections, however, this conference culture reflects some worrying phenomena within China’s area studies circles. Chief among them is that the area studies community has become an increasingly self-dependent and self-sustaining system. Although China’s higher education sector as a whole has a strong drive to ‘go international’, area studies programmes are ironically inward-looking and do not particularly encourage international exchanges.

### **Southeast Asian Studies’ ‘policy turn’**

The rapid upsurge of interest in Southeast Asia has brought about significant changes in the field. Among them, two trends merit detailed discussion. The first is a discernible ‘policy turn’, where research on contemporary politics and economics has gained prominence among scholars working on the region. As a corollary, the second trend is the relative decline and marginalisation of humanities subjects. I will elaborate on both trends.

Having discussed the logic behind the rise of area studies in China, the ‘policy turn’ of SEAS is hardly surprising. With the most prominent demand — and thus funding opportunities — coming from policy circles, research projects with ‘contemporary significance’ (*xianshi yiyi*) have dominated the field. Between 2007 and 2017, 1,470 Southeast Asia-related research articles (16 per cent of the total) appeared in 12 of most important international studies journals in China.<sup>7</sup> Among these 12 journals, *Dongnanya Yanjiu* (Southeast Asian Studies) and *Nanyang Wenti Yanjiu* (Southeast Asian Affairs) specialise in Southeast Asia, with topics covering various studies of individual countries (38.3 per cent), ASEAN (15.31 per cent), the South China Sea (12.59

7 In 2000, the Institute for Chinese Social Sciences Research and Assessment of Nanjing University developed the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) database to help libraries manage journal subscriptions. However, university administrators now commonly use the index as essential criteria to identify reputable Chinese-language journals in each discipline and evaluate scholars’ work accordingly. CSSCI problematically categorises area studies journals as belonging to the field of ‘International Studies’, with a heavy emphasis on IR.

per cent), bilateral relations (11.22 per cent), sub-regional cooperation (2.11 per cent), Chinese overseas (7.14 per cent), and others (13.33). Within the country studies category, political issues account for 40 per cent of the total, followed by economics (17 per cent) and broadly defined social (17 per cent) and cultural issues (15 per cent). Vietnam, Thailand, and Indonesia are the top three countries receiving the most scholarly attention, partly because of their significantly large land areas, populations, and economies, which can be translated into possessing greater geopolitical influence — and thus more research-worthy — in the eyes of many policy-minded Chinese academics. Additionally, scholars have conducted extensive research on Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, and the Philippines, paying varying degrees of attention to issues such as domestic politics, economic development, democratisation, and governance. By contrast, Cambodia, Brunei, Laos, and East Timor appeal to a much smaller group of scholars due to their relatively limited roles in regional and global affairs.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to journal articles, the past decade has also witnessed a rapid surge of *pishu* (lit., ‘coloured cover books’), a policy-oriented book series published by the Social Sciences Academic Press (SSAP) under the tutelage of CASS. The idea of *pishu* derives from the Western notion of ‘white papers’, including official guides, technical reports, and working papers issued by government agencies. While traditional white papers often focus on articulating a clear official stance, SSAP’s *pishu* series has extended the scope significantly, now containing a myriad of reports, analyses, surveys, and appraisals by academics, industrial experts, and think tank researchers. The internationally-themed *pishu* usually have blue or yellow covers, primarily focusing on the latest political, economic, and social issues of a specific country or region. The objective of such *pishu* is to provide authoritative interpretations and up-to-date information to policy-makers, business leaders, and professionals working in relevant fields.

So far, SSAP has published dozens of Southeast Asia-related *pishu* with titles ranging from regional themes such as ASEAN development, Southeast Asian culture, and cooperation within the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), to country-specific themes such as political and economic developments in Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. The topics are predominantly contemporary, meaning that *pishu* require frequent updates and regular contributions from experts in relevant fields. Although the SSAP often outsources *pishu* projects to area studies specialists, it is almost impossible for any individual institution to complete such a book project alone within a relatively limited timeframe. Scholars have to rely on long-term collaborations to get such work done. *Pishu* scholarship is problematic, as it encourages academics to focus on topics with policy relevance instead of those requiring long-term fieldwork or heavy-lifting archival research. *Pishu* pieces are quick to produce but often lack academic rigour and their findings are often quickly out of date. However, it is also essential to acknowledge that the current Chinese system values such scholarship. Its popularity has enabled area studies scholars to access resources and gain opportunities to voice concerns that would not be otherwise available. As an

8 Luo Yifu, ‘Zhongguo de Dongnanya yanjiu xianzhuang (2007–2017 nian) [Status of Southeast Asian Studies in China (2007–2017)]’, *Zhanlüe Juece Yanjiu* [Journal of Strategy and Decision-Making] 9, 5 (2018): 82–91.



unintended consequence, the production of *pishu* has also connected scholars scattered around the country and fostered more cohesive SEAS communities.

SEAS' policy turn also coincides with the availability of abundant information online thanks to the rapid development of the Internet. Chinese scholars, especially those working on contemporary issues, have gained unprecedented access to myriad online research materials. Additionally, improved Internet infrastructure enables Chinese academics to promptly follow the latest Southeast Asian events with lowered language barriers. The flip side of this trend is that many scholars working on Southeast Asia lack native language skills and rely heavily on secondary Chinese and English sources.

Although SEAS academics regard language proficiency as a plus, the current system does not prioritise language training for several reasons. First, policy-focused academic circles do not regard the use of primary sources as a must. Scholars can get away with publishing in reputable journals without using any primary materials in native languages. Second, Southeast Asian language courses are only available at a handful of institutions with specialised undergraduate majors. However, such programmes often emphasise obtaining practical language skills over disciplinary training, and students are neither sufficiently prepared for, nor actively encouraged to pursue, an academic career. Conversely, students trained in disciplinary programmes have minimal opportunities to study a Southeast Asian language systematically. Nor are they encouraged to do so, as language learning requires considerable time and effort, but its cost-benefit ratio is low within China's current academic environment. Moreover, akin to many parts of the world, English-language scholarship is highly valued in China, caused by concerted institutional efforts to push academics to 'go international' (*guojihua*). As a result, Chinese scholars are increasingly preoccupied with reading, citing and occasionally writing and publishing in English, a language perceived as being more informative and authoritative than Southeast Asian ones.

Many scholars are well aware of the shortcomings of second-hand research and armchair scholarship. However, long-term fieldwork and intensive language training are still challenging goals in China's current academic environment. On the one hand, the distribution of funding resources is problematic and often unfair. Although many funding opportunities have become readily available for area studies, most of the programmes focus on international politics and economics. Not all institutions can afford to support their scholars, especially the younger generation, to stay abroad for an extended period. On the other hand, academics are under constant pressure to produce scholarship fast in an evaluation system that commonly values quantity over quality. Without a well-functioning peer-review environment, area studies scholars' reputations, incomes, promotions, and job security are closely associated with the number of policy memos that have received *lingdao pishi* (policymakers' comments and feedback), or research articles published in SSCI and CSSCI-indexed journals.<sup>9</sup> With their more significant influence and quick turnaround, policy-relevant journals appeal to many area studies scholars struggling to survive in China's current academic system.

9 Similar to their practices with CSSCI, Chinese university administrators use the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), a commercial product of Clarivate Analytics, as the basis to identify reputable international (esp. English-language) journals and evaluate scholars' outputs.

To put it more precisely, a large number of scholars *without* exposure to Southeast Asia have entered the field, mainly because of the growing funding and publishing opportunities in policy-focused area studies. Within a few years, their presence, influence, and particular scholarship genre have profoundly changed the field, causing traditional SEAS institutions and individual scholars to follow suit.

### **The marginalisation of Southeast Asian humanities**

SEAS' policy turn has also brought about profound changes to institutions with a long-standing specialisation on the region. After 2000, Xiamen, Jinan, and Sun Yat-sen universities, three major institutions with long SEAS traditions in southern China, established schools of international relations (IR) based on their SEAS programmes' infrastructure. This shift was not just a matter of changing names; more importantly, for all three institutions, it reflects radical changes in disciplinary and thematic focus.

All three institutions are located in Guangdong or Fujian, coastal provinces with strong historical connections with Southeast Asia, especially the vast overseas Chinese population. The three universities established their SEAS programmes in the 1950s, with the primary goal of studying the region's Chinese diaspora and rapid socio-political transformation. After a ten-year disruption during the Cultural Revolution, these universities reactivated their SEAS programmes, spearheading the field's revival and development in the following decades. Due to travel restrictions and financial difficulties during the Cold War, most Chinese academics working on the region remained isolated from the international scholarly community until the 1990s.

A notable feature of China's SEAS is that overseas Chinese returnees played a crucial role in establishing and running the programmes until the beginning of the new millennium.<sup>10</sup> Many returnees received their primary education in Southeast Asia, where they gained extensive knowledge of local circumstances and a good command of local languages. Although political turmoil from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s caused hardships in sustaining SEAS programmes, returnee scholars managed to train a modest number of students while maintaining personal ties to varying degrees with relatives and friends in Southeast Asia. After China's Reform and Opening Up, the returnee group was also essential in reviving SEAS in the country, especially by attracting financial support from the overseas Chinese community long before the state realised the necessity and urgency to develop area studies. Difficulties in travelling and obtaining access to up-to-date research materials, however, meant that returnee scholars and their early students often relied on accumulated materials to conduct research that was not time-sensitive. As a result, the humanities, especially history and literature, were the most developed field in China's SEAS when the returnee generation was active.

After 2000, however, China's SEAS took a 'policy turn' while the broader Chinese academia underwent some significant shifts, driven by the rapid expansion of the

10 Leo Suryadinata identifies China's first generation of Southeast Asianists as those who were born in Mainland China and completed their academic training before the PRC's establishment. Suryadinata regards the returnees as belonging to the second generation. See Leo Suryadinata, 'Southeast Asianists in China in the last three decades: A preliminary survey', in Saw and Wong, *Southeast Asian Studies in China*, pp. 34–7.

higher education sector. Before 2000, it was often the case that master's students could secure teaching positions at their home institution before pursuing doctoral degrees. Yet, this situation did not last long, as postgraduate education started to expand rapidly. China's domestically trained PhD holders increased by 25 per cent annually between 1994 and 2007, 4 per cent from 2008 to 2015, and stabilised at around 60,000 thereafter. In other words, Chinese universities granted more PhD degrees than their US counterparts throughout the 2010s.<sup>11</sup> While science and engineering programmes trained the overwhelming majority of these graduates, humanities and social sciences also saw steady yet imbalanced growth during the same period. People generally regard social science disciplines such as law, economics, and political science as more 'practical', thus entailing presumably brighter career prospects in the private and public sector. By contrast, degrees in history, literature, arts, and cultural studies are seen as having 'no particular value if [one is] not staying in academia'.<sup>12</sup> Even within academic circles, university administrators reacted to the government's call for 'training special talents that meet China's urgent strategic need' by pouring resources into the development of policy-relevant programmes, which further reinforced such perceptions.<sup>13</sup> As a result, while graduate students flock to programmes that emphasise practicality over the pursuit of intellectual curiosity, numerous policy-oriented IR schools and think tanks have mushroomed across China's university campuses.

In SEAS, such trends coincided with the returnee generation's retirement, resulting in abundant job vacancies in the field in the past twenty years. The returnees' students were too small a group to fill such a large number of positions, as the demand for expanding the broadly defined SEAS programmes was far greater than the supply of graduates from a handful of Southeast Asian humanities-focused programmes. Moreover, many view the returnees' research and teaching methods as outdated, and no longer keeping up with the rapid development of Chinese academia following the systemic 'opening up' efforts in the new millennium. Instead, Western-style disciplinary training with a strong emphasis on using 'scientific methods' (*kexue fangfa*) are playing a more prominent role across all fields. More and more Chinese scholars consider quantitative research methods superior to qualitative ones, and numbers more reliable than texts. It has become increasingly common for the younger generation to look down upon the humanistic scholarship produced by the returnees and their students, and to regard such works as 'descriptive rather than analytical' and thus lacking in 'scientific rigour'. As more people from applied social science backgrounds filled the positions in traditional SEAS programmes, China's SEAS' underwent significant changes, further reinforcing its 'policy turn'.

11 'Jin 40 nianlai, woguo leiji zhaoshou jin 130 wan ming boshi yanjiusheng' [In the past 40 years, China has enrolled approximately 1.3 million doctoral students], *Zhongguo Jiaoyu Zaixian*, [https://kaoyan.eol.cn/nnews/201909/t20190924\\_1684506.shtml](https://kaoyan.eol.cn/nnews/201909/t20190924_1684506.shtml) (accessed 28 Dec. 2020).

12 'Wenkesheng tai duo le, Zhongguo yanghang lunwen yiwai yinfa wenke wuyonglun zhizheng' [Too many students in the humanities, a working paper of China's Central Bank triggers unexpected controversies], *BBC News* (Chinese), <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-56800291> (accessed 21 May 2021).

13 Ning Qi, 'Shehui xuqiu yu xin wenke jianshe de hexin renwu [Social demand and core tasks in the construction of new liberal arts]', *Shanghai Jiaotong Daxue Xuebao* [Journal of SJTU] 28, 2 (2020): 14.

This development is also closely associated with the more fundamental shifts in China's higher education sector in the past two decades. Following the rise of China, government officials and influential educators have been ardently advocating 'going international' (*guojihua*) to strengthen Chinese universities' global competitiveness. In practice, however, university administrators have commonly interpreted such a call as a mandate to embrace Western — especially US — models to boost university rankings both domestically and internationally, while retaining firm control over ideological integrity on campus. In this process, science and engineering departments have encountered few obstacles. They are always leading the trend in terms of the numbers of students sent abroad, hiring of scholars trained in the West, encouraging publication in high-impact English-language journals, and cultivating close partnerships with Western universities. With quantifiable improvement, such efforts soon yielded encouraging outcomes reflected by different ranking systems, resulting in 'level of internationalisation' becoming a crucial indicator for measuring the success of academic programmes.

Social science subjects such as economics, sociology, and political science have been quick to follow suit. While an increasing number of students are pursuing PhD degrees in the West, Chinese institutions have also become increasingly eager to hire young scholars with international (that is, Western) educational backgrounds. By comparison, neither universities nor young scholars themselves value advanced degrees from Southeast Asia, except for Singapore, which has been primarily driven by the growing obsession with the controversial yet powerful international university ranking systems. With far greater financial resources at Chinese institutions' disposal, many universities outranked their Southeast Asian counterparts in recent years. As a result, it has become common to believe that if one could get into a prestigious institution inside China, pursuing graduate degrees at lower-ranking universities in developing countries is pointless. From the students' perspective, to do so was too risky and not helpful for their careers.

By contrast, humanistic disciplines reacted to this trend with a rather lukewarm attitude, as they feel less pressured to go 'scientific and international' by embracing Western models. An encouraging trend for SEAS is that a growing number of universities, especially those in southern provinces, have established undergraduate programmes in Southeast Asian languages. Thanks to increasing demands from the business, media, tourism, and public sectors, universities are eager to expand such programmes. The language programmes are also in line with government strategies to strengthen political and economic cooperation with the region. Additionally, graduates of such programmes could usually secure higher-paying jobs than other majors. In such programmes, students receive intensive training in a selected Southeast Asian language for four years, including a semester to one year at a partner institution abroad. By the time of their graduation, students trained in such programmes will have obtained advanced language proficiency and decent in-country knowledge, making them ideal candidates for conducting original research at the graduate level.

Unfortunately, only a tiny proportion of these students ended up furthering their studies on Southeast Asia due to several reasons. First, admission to China's graduate programmes is generally by examination instead of application, and it is difficult for students trained in Southeast Asian languages to compete with those trained in

disciplines. Second, graduate training does not lead to greater job prospects; one can easily secure a high-paying job related to Southeast Asia without earning a graduate degree in the field. Lastly, although Chinese higher education institutions have a constant demand for advanced degree holders, the job market in Southeast Asian humanities is relatively small and often unpredictable; the anticipated commitment has discouraged many young students from entering the field in the first place.

Moreover, due to China's unique social, political and academic environments, Chinese scholars have developed distinct interests, preferences, writing styles, and scholarly traditions in the humanities. Unlike social scientists who emphasise generalisability in their work and have developed a keen interest in 'contributing Chinese voices' to international dialogues in recent years, the primary concern of China-based humanists is still to fulfil the demands of a domestic scholarly readership rather than participating in international exchanges. As a result, the landscape of humanities departments has shifted significantly less compared to that of the social sciences.

Although a growing number of Chinese SEAS scholars have exposed themselves to Western academia by working and/or studying abroad, they remain a tiny proportion of the whole compared to the significantly larger communities in science, engineering, and professional programmes. Additionally, it is noteworthy that when working and studying overseas, the overwhelming majority of Chinese scholars, humanists and social scientists alike, tend to work on topics directly related to China. There are far fewer academics working on other countries or regions, and those who do often focus on broadly defined aspects of 'Chinese influence' in such places. Needless to say, Chinese scholars are often more knowledgeable about their home country than other places, and such knowledge constitutes their unique strength when researching China-related topics in the West. In fact, many Chinese students get admitted to graduate programmes abroad in the first place precisely because Western institutions value 'Chinese perspectives' and appreciate that the students usually possess a rare combination of language skills (English + Chinese + X).

However, such a trend has brought about an unintended consequence: to survive and thrive in Western academia, Chinese scholars have limited options but to work on China-related topics, often unconsciously or consciously encouraged by their academic advisors as a counterweight to prevalent Euro- and US-centrism. Within a tiny group of Chinese Southeast Asianists trained in the West, myself included, almost everyone's research touches upon China or the Chinese diaspora. The dilemma here is that Chinese scholars' efforts to 'go international' end up reinforcing a sort of 'situational Sino-centrism'. When studying and working in the West, many Chinese scholars feel both incentivised and pressured to observe Southeast Asia from the perspectives of China and Chinese overseas, as if this is the only viable path to joining the scholarly dialogue and make legitimate contributions to the field. Echoing Ariel Heryanto's classic piece 'Can there be Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian Studies?', a pertinent question to ask is whether a Chinese scholar can genuinely talk about Southeast Asia without relying on his/her presumably built-in 'Chinese perspective'.<sup>14</sup> Given the current academic climate in the West, I believe achieving such a goal is extremely difficult. For me, returning to China

14 Ariel Heryanto, 'Can there be Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian Studies?', *Moussons* 5 (2002): 5–7.

seems to open up some unintended possibilities. Although Sino-centrism is undoubtedly even more widespread inside the country, I have noticed that many scholars are well aware of its existence and have frequently problematised its shortcomings.

### New institutional approaches

Despite all the problems surrounding China's SEAS, one positive trend is that the field has experienced rapid development in recent years, thanks to the rise of area studies across the country. Many scholars no longer regard SEAS as a 'small, marginal, and insignificant' field, as evidenced by the increase of financial support, the establishment of new institutions, improvement of existing infrastructure, and growing public and intellectual interest.

Resonating with Deng Xiaoping's call for 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' at the beginning of the Reform and Opening Up eras, there have been heated scholarly debates on building 'area studies with Chinese characteristics'.<sup>15</sup> Unsurprisingly, Chinese academics commonly use the development of area studies in the United States as the most crucial frame of reference. Chinese scholars frequently write about the post-World War Two rise of area studies in America, arguing that China should follow the US model by establishing the necessary infrastructure to boost area studies. Specifically, Chinese academics urge central and provincial governments to increase financial support for area studies by referring to the National Defense Education Act of 1958 (NDEA), suggesting that area studies serve the country's national interests and strategic needs at multiple levels.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, advocates of area studies continually stress the necessity to engage the private sector by discussing the integral role of the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, and Social Science Research Council (SSRC) in the development of area studies in the United States.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, Chinese universities establishing area studies centres are keen to learn from their American counterparts' experiences. Many Chinese scholars regard institutions such as the Harvard-Yenching Institute (HYI), Chicago's Committee on Southern Asian Studies (COSAS) and Cornell's Southeast Asia Program (SEAP) as model area studies centres that uphold the highest levels of academic rigour.<sup>18</sup>

Genuine compliments aside, Chinese observations and appreciation of area studies in the United States is not without criticism. Chief among them is the belief that area studies is a Cold War product primarily serving the political agenda of the US government. Such criticism is often in line with the larger ideology-influenced discourse that area studies is an inseparable part of US expansionism and imperialism.

15 Qian Chengdan, 'Jianshe Zhongguo fengge de quyu yu guobie yanjiu [Develop area studies with Chinese characteristics]', *Quyu Guobie Yanjiu Xuekan* [Journal of Area Studies] 1, 1 (2019): i–v.

16 Ren Xiao, 'Zailun quyu guobie yanjiu [Area studies reexamined]', *Shijie Jingji yu Zhengzhi* [World Economics and Politics] 1 (2019): 69–72.

17 Niu Ke, 'Diqu yanjiu chuangsheng shi shinian: Zhishi goujian, xueshu guihua, he zhengzhi-xueshu guanxi [The first ten years of area studies: Knowledge construction, academic planning, and the relationship between politics and academia]', *Beijing Daxue Jiaoyu Pinglun* [Peking University Education Review] 14, 1 (2016): 37–46.

18 Gao Ziniu, 'Zuwei kaxueke sushi de yanjiu zhong xin: Yi Kangnaierdaxue Dongnanya yanjiu zhongxin weili (1950–1975) [Interdisciplinary research centre: A case study of Cornell University's Southeast Asia Program (1950–1975)]', *Beijing Daxue Jiaoyu Pinglun* 16, 2 (2019): 116–17.



With this logic, many Chinese academics believe that area studies is a particular mode of knowledge production that has facilitated the projection of US hegemonic power over the world.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, while Chinese academics show great enthusiasm in learning the US way of doing area studies, many also caution that transplanting the American model could entail enormous problems akin to the path of reforms in many other sectors. Leading advocates of the field thus emphasise that area studies in China must contain ‘Chinese characteristics’ to adapt to drastically different international and domestic environments.

One tricky issue facing China’s area studies is how to situate the ‘field’ within the country’s existing academic landscape, especially balancing area studies with the rigidly structured disciplinary hierarchy.<sup>20</sup> This problem may sound familiar to Western scholars. Indeed, ever since the emergence of area studies in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, there have been constant debates surrounding its relationship with existing academic disciplines. The common practice in America is that area studies centres serve as interdisciplinary hubs that connect scholars from diverse departments who have similar geographical interests. Nevertheless, some area studies programmes enjoy more independence than others in hiring research fellows, granting degrees, running publishing programmes, and managing library collections. Universities’ approaches to area studies may differ depending on faculty members’ expertise, student interests, administrative structures, financial resources, and the programmes’ development trajectories. In general, American universities enjoy the relative freedom to establish new discipline-based departments and area studies centres or decide whether it is necessary to restructure the old ones to meet changing demands.

In China, however, restructuring existing disciplinary departments or establishing new area studies centres is not as straightforward, mainly because the country’s higher education system remains public, and its configuration is highly centralised. On the one hand, Chinese universities enjoy the discretionary power to form ‘virtual research centres’ (*xuti*) by relying on discipline-based schools or departmental resources. Such *xuti* usually serve as extensions of a single dominant discipline rather than platforms that encourage interdisciplinary exchange. With disciplines functioning as the most crucial components of universities, *xuti* usually do not play a more significant role than interest groups with a plaque, a web page, and a handful of faculty affiliates. On the other hand, establishing the so-called *shiti* (entity) institutes, namely interdisciplinary research centres independent of existing disciplines, is far more complicated. To establish area studies programmes with *shiti* status, universities must strictly follow the Subject Catalogue of Degree Conferment and Talent Cultivation (SCDCT), an official guideline jointly promulgated by the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council (ADCSC) and Ministry of Education. Official sanction is critical as it is necessary for obtaining stable financial support from public sources, provides quotas for hiring faculty members and other staff, and the possibility of enrolling

19 Zhang Yang, *Lengzhan yu xueshu: Meiguo de Zhongguoxue (1949–1972)* [The Cold War and academics: Chinese Studies in the United States, 1949–1972] (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2019), pp. 156–63.

20 Wang Jisi, ‘Qiantan quyue yu guobie yanjiu de xueke jichu [The disciplinary foundations of area studies: A brief discussion]’, *Quyue Guobie Yanjiu Xuekan* 1, 1 (2019): 1–5.

students, which enable the programme to operate on its own. Notably, area studies is not an officially recognised ‘primary discipline’ (*yiji xueke*) in the Subject Catalogue. Therefore, universities need to identify area studies as a ‘sub-discipline’ under one of the existing primary disciplines such as Political Science (International Studies), World History, or Foreign Language and Literature.<sup>21</sup>

Compared to other area studies programmes, SEAS in China has a relatively longer history with a unique development trajectory. With the rise of area studies in recent years, universities approach SEAS differently depending on the interplay of many factors, including strengths of existing disciplines, availability of financial resources, government support, and even competition at different levels. Here, I am introducing three major types of institutional approaches.

*Approach 1: Independent area studies institute at major research universities*

The first kind of approach is to establish independent *shiti* area studies centres that cover various world regions. Only a handful of major research universities in Beijing and Shanghai could afford to build such comprehensive centres thanks to their decent disciplinary infrastructure, reliable funding support, long traditions of working on certain parts of the world, and close relationship with top policymakers. Such universities commonly treat SEAS as an integral part of their ambitious efforts to build all-encompassing area studies programmes, largely because the field has relatively decent foundations and great potential to grow in administrators’ eyes.

For instance, long before establishing its Institute of Area Studies (IAS) in 2018, Peking University (PKU) already had a long tradition of working on different aspects of Southeast Asia. The School of Foreign Languages (SFL) offers degree programmes in Burmese, Filipino, Indonesian, Thai, and Vietnamese languages and cultures at both undergraduate and graduate levels. At least two faculty members from History work on Southeast Asia, focusing on the environment and Chinese diaspora. The School of International Studies (SIS) has incorporated the Institute of Asian-African Studies and the Institute of World Socialism, both established during the Cold War. A good number of SIS faculty members and graduate students’ research projects now concentrate on Southeast Asian international relations and domestic politics. The primary objective of the IAS, like area studies centres in the West, is to serve as an interdisciplinary platform connecting scholars scattered around the campus, organising academic activities that appeal to area specialists, and pooling campus-wide resources into a more cohesive body. Unlike most of its American counterparts, however, the IAS also functions as a university-based think tank that frequently contributes policy reports and memos to fulfil the policy circles’ growing demands. Additionally, the IAS started enrolling graduate students soon after its establishment. To meet the SCDCT requirements, the IAS has ‘borrowed’ the degree-granting credentials from one of its primary patron institutions, the SFL, which created a sub-discipline named ‘International and Regional Studies’ under the officially recognised primary discipline ‘Foreign Language and Literature’. While both the IAS and SFL now enrol graduate students through the ‘International and Regional Studies’

21 Zhang Minyu, ‘Guobie he quyu yanjiu xuekeshi [A history of International and Regional Studies]’, Working Paper, School of Foreign Languages, Peking University, 2020, pp. 4–9.

sub-discipline, the two programmes adopt slightly different approaches to interdisciplinarity. The former provides students with greater flexibility to work with scholars across the campus irrespective of their departmental affiliations; in contrast, the latter emphasises more advanced language training and interdisciplinarity within the humanities.<sup>22</sup>

Comparable to PKU's IAS is Tsinghua University (THU)'s Institute for International and Area Studies (IIAS), which originates from the university's experimental Doctoral Program in Developing Country Studies (DCS) founded in 2011. Unlike PKU, THU has traditionally positioned itself as China's MIT, whose main strengths lie in its science and technology programmes. Since the 1990s, however, THU has built several small but strong departments in the humanities and social sciences by hiring leading Chinese scholars trained in the West and other Chinese institutions. Although hardly any of these leading scholars are area specialists and virtually none are directly working on Southeast Asia, they started to admit students with foreign language training or prior exposure to SEAS through the DCS. The expectation is that DCS students should have already gained decent language proficiency elsewhere before entering the programme. The programme also expects its students to receive relatively solid disciplinary training, be it in history, law, anthropology, or political science, before embarking on original research in the selected field. Thanks to generous financial support from the university and external sources, students in the DCS programme commonly spend a year in the country of their specialisation and an extra year as exchange students at a top Western university. Since its restructuring in 2017, the IIAS has offered DCS graduates the option of working as research associates at the Institute. While continuously working on existing research projects, they also provide their area expertise to newer cohorts, gradually transforming the experimental programme into a full-fledged area studies institute.

Similarly, Shanghai-based Fudan University established the Institute of International Studies (IIS), whose Centre for China's Relations with Neighbouring Countries (CCRNC) has made great efforts to conduct policy-relevant research on Southeast Asia. Unlike its PKU and THU counterparts, however, the IIS prides itself on its close working relationship with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and is explicit about the goal of becoming a 'world-class university think tank'. As a result, the IIS notion of interdisciplinarity is centred more on political science than any other fields.

### *Approach 2: The 'disciplinisation' of foreign language universities*

The second kind of institutional approach to area studies is the so-called 'disciplinisation' (*xuekehua*) of foreign language programmes. Following the Soviet model, China founded many universities specialising in teaching foreign languages (*waiguoyu yuanxiao*, literally foreign language universities) in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chongqing, Tianjin, Xi'an and Dalian between the 1940s and 1960s. The initial purpose of such universities was to train professionals for diplomatic and intelligence services and foster international cooperation within the socialist bloc and with Third

22 Ning Qi, 'Quyū yu guōbiē yánjiū réncai pèiyāng de lìlun yu shíjiān: Yì Běijīngdàxué wèili [Theories and practices for cultivating talents in area studies: A case study of Peking University]', *Wai Yu Jie* [Foreign Language World] 3 (2020): 38–42.

World countries across the globe. Thanks to the special historical and geopolitical linkages, many foreign language universities started offering degree programmes in Southeast Asian languages shortly after their establishment. With the growing demand from public and private sectors after the Reform and Opening Up, foreign language universities started to establish disciplinary departments such as Economics, Communication, Law, and Political Science. Despite such changes, most disciplinary programmes remained weak. At the same time, Foreign Language and Literature retained its dominance on campus in terms of funding distribution, faculty hiring, student enrolment, and degree-granting credentials. The rise of area studies in recent years has presented foreign language universities unprecedented opportunities to grow. While investing in disciplinary departments, many foreign language universities have also started to establish 'International and Regional Studies' programmes under the primary discipline of Foreign Language and Literature, in the hope that area studies and language teaching can reinforce each other.

Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU)'s School of Asian Studies, for instance, has further expanded its language programmes, and now offers bachelor's degrees in the national language of every Southeast Asian country. Additionally, the School has also founded an area studies programme, which houses historians, anthropologists, legal scholars, and political scientists who are not necessarily language specialists themselves, but teach and research on different parts of Asia adopting disciplinary approaches. Similarly, Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU) and Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (GDUFS) have also established their area studies programmes by utilising the infrastructure of their dominant discipline, Foreign Language and Literature, while combining the strengths of other disciplines. Shanghai International Studies University (SISU) has adopted a slightly different approach by creating a sub-discipline titled 'Regional and International Studies' under the primary discipline 'Political Science' instead while drawing resources from their language programmes. Nonetheless, one can easily observe the underlying trend: Chinese universities specialising in language teaching have actively embraced area studies through a two-way 'disciplinisation'. One way is to add disciplinary elements to language programmes, and the other is to rely on their strong language programmes to cultivate new disciplines.

### *Approach 3: SEAS with provincial characteristics*

The third kind of institutional approach to area studies is what I call 'area studies with provincial characteristics'. Unlike resource-rich national research universities in Beijing and Shanghai and foreign language universities with well-established programmes covering a wide variety of world regions, universities in the provinces are realistic about the resources they can pour into area studies and have no intention to build all-inclusive programmes. Instead, area studies in such universities often focus on a limited number of regions that reflect their competitive advantages and suit local policymakers' needs. For universities in China's southern provinces, developing SEAS is not only a logical choice but also a priority. As mentioned earlier, universities in Guangdong and Fujian have long traditions of researching Island Southeast Asia. Such traditions mostly originated from these provinces' close historical ties with the region, especially through the overseas Chinese population.

Meanwhile, universities in Guangxi and Yunnan prioritise studies of Mainland Southeast Asia, as geographic proximity and historically porous borders have facilitated the constant flow of people and goods in the area.

As described earlier, the rise of area studies has expedited the ‘policy turn’ of SEAS in southern provinces, exerting a profound impact on institutions with Southeast Asian concentrations and traditions. The SEAS programmes at Xiamen, Jinan, and Sun Yat-sen universities started as centres primarily researching overseas Chinese affairs in Southeast Asia. However, they have gradually shifted their focus to IR and economic issues in and beyond the region. Although the reincarnated institutions still house historians, anthropologists, and economists, they have been renamed as schools of international relations, and structured under the primary discipline of political science (international studies). Xiamen and Jinan still use their original names, ‘Research School for Southeast Asian Studies’ (Nanyang Yanjiuyuan) and ‘Academy of Overseas Chinese Studies’ (Huaren Huaqiao Yanjiuyuan), side by side ‘International Relations/Studies’ (Guojiguanxi Xueyuan) as reminders of their glorious past. Sun Yat-sen University’s IR school has abandoned the name ‘Institute of Southeast Asian Studies’ altogether.

Moreover, it is also worth mentioning that this ‘division of labour’ between area studies programmes in the southern provinces is less of a natural result of Beijing’s centralised planning than a vivid reflection of path dependency and fierce inter-provincial rivalry. For more than twenty years, Guangxi and Yunnan have been competing against one another for the status of ‘Gateway for China–Southeast Asia interactions’ (*Zhongguo Dongnanya Jiaoliu de Menhu*). While Yunnan met with initial success by attracting six Southeast Asian countries to set up consulates in Kunming, Guangxi’s capital city Nanning has also managed to do the same. Nanning also gained the upper hand by securing the privilege as the permanent host site for the China-ASEAN Expo.<sup>23</sup> Provincial governments are investing heavily in SEAS (especially language and IR) programmes, hoping that they will further strengthen their gateway status. As a result, universities in Guangxi have founded several SEAS centres with particular concentrations on ASEAN and Vietnam. By contrast, universities in Yunnan have established similar institutions with special emphases on the GMS and Myanmar. In recent years, Yunnan has repositioned itself as the ‘Bridgehead for China’s interactions with South and Southeast Asia’, stimulating South Asian Studies’ rapid rise in the province. The most intriguing sign reflecting the shift is perhaps the frequent and seemingly unnecessary name-changing of Yunnan’s flagship area studies journal. Within only ten years, the journal has changed its name from *Southeast Asia* to *Journal of Southeast and South Asian Studies* to *Journal of South and Southeast Asian Studies*.

### Conclusion

China’s SEAS has experienced significant changes in the new millennium. China’s political and economic ascendancy has stimulated demands for better

23 Li Xiuzhong, ‘Guangxi he Yunnan “jiaojin” 20 nian, shui jiang shi mianxiang Dongnanya de menhu?’ [The 20-year competition between Guangxi and Yunnan, who will be the gateway facing Southeast Asia?], *Yicai*, 29 Aug. 2019, <https://www.yicai.com/news/100313388.html> (accessed 17 Dec. 2020).

understanding of the wider world, resulting in the rapid development of area studies. Although SEAS in China predates 'area studies' by at least half a century, the boom in the latter has profoundly transformed the field, most notably by attracting a large number of scholars to conduct policy-relevant research. Not only does the 'policy turn' reflect shifts of research paradigms in SEAS, but it is also consistent with some larger trends prevailing in China's higher education sector and rapidly changing society in general.

On the one hand, China's opening up and the higher education sector's expansion have generated unprecedented opportunities for scholars and students to study Southeast Asia and make their work relevant to various fields and industries. On the other hand, however, SEAS faces enormous pressures from both within and outside of academia. Such pressures include, but are not limited to, universities' questionable assessment system that values quantity over quality, contradictory desires to go international while maintaining ideological integrity, and growing obsessions with ranking, prestige, and financial support. Additionally, SEAS also needs to cope with Chinese society's increasingly utilitarian atmosphere that prioritises practicality, profitability, and a particular kind of 'political sensibility'. As a result, the development of SEAS has become even more imbalanced, as indicated by the rapid growth of language programmes, absolute domination of short-term policy research, and further marginalisation of humanistic subjects. In response, universities have been adopting new approaches to SEAS depending on their distinct disciplinary foundations, language coverage, faculty interests, and local governments' policy preferences.

When writing about SEAS' current state in China, I cannot help but think of narratives about the golden years of American area studies in the 1950s and 1960s when the field was booming with abundant opportunities and resources. As Benedict Anderson writes in his memoir: 'The great charm of Southeast Asian studies in the 1950s and 1960s was that it seemed like something completely new, so that students felt like explorers investigating unknown societies and terrains.'<sup>24</sup> Like the US experience, China's SEAS has benefited enormously from the changing domestic and international environment in the past two decades. As a result, the field is currently full of buzz and hopes. Nevertheless, one of the most important features distinguishing SEAS in China from that of the United States is that the field is not exactly new. In other words, China's SEAS is new and old at the same time in the sense that the field is dealing with its old traditions while embracing many radical new changes. Will there be crises for China's SEAS akin to what happened in the United States after the Vietnam War? Or should we expect fewer ups and downs in the field, especially considering that the geographic proximity and historical linkages will ensure Southeast Asia is a forever relevant region in the Chinese context? While it is difficult to answer such questions with any certainty, what Chinese scholars can and definitely should do is to reach out and play a more active role in contributing their voices to the international SEAS community.

24 Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *A life beyond boundaries* (London: Verso, 2018), p. 53.