

## **The 9th New Buds Salon**

### **Confucius Institute in University of Edinburgh and the United Kingdom**

The Ninth New Buds Salon (新芽沙龙) of the Institute of Area Studies, Peking University (PKUIAS) was held on October 22 in the B102 Lecture Hall, No. 2 Gymnasium. Focusing on the theme “Confucius Institute in the University of Edinburgh and the United Kingdom,” Prof. Natascha Gentz, founding director of the Confucius Institute for Scotland at the University of Edinburgh, gave a presentation about why they are operating the Confucius Institute, how they are operating it within the university and how Confucius Institutes are different from other cultural institutes, like the Goethe Institute, from a UK perspective.

According to Prof. Gentz, the University of Edinburgh started the Confucius Institute in 2006, about the same time the university decided to have more engagement with China and set up infrastructure. The University of Edinburgh’s Chinese studies department was established in 1965, which was not very long ago compared to other Chinese studies departments in the UK and Europe. In 2006, the university opened a small representative office in Beijing, and in the same year, it opened the Confucius Institute, which was quite a prestigious project for the university.

Prof. Gentz said that the university's principal was greatly supportive of the Confucius Institute and actively engaged in it as well. He is also a member of the Confucius Institute Headquarter Council, which is the governing body of the Confucius Institute in the Ministry of Education, consisting of about 12 vice ministers from China and 12 international members. The University of Edinburgh also has a dean and assistant principal of China positions, who focus on the development of its China relations.

Prof. Gentz runs a strategic regional focus group on China, where they engage main stakeholders to discuss the university's China approach. The International Venture Group is a new development for the university that is responsible for business ventures and investment in China. She opined that it is a very new trend, and the university needs to be careful about what it does in that respect.

The University of Edinburgh hosts many university delegations from China, including Chinese government departments. When the program began in 2006, the University of Edinburgh had memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with five Chinese universities, including PKU. The University of Edinburgh now has MOUs at different levels with more than 50 Chinese universities. Part of the university's China strategy is to deliver training about China and China study programs to university staff in order to enhance familiarity with China and

interact with China and Chinese universities. The Confucius Institute runs conferences, seminars and outreach and public engagement activities within the Scottish community as well as academic training for the university's scholars, to raise awareness of the importance of China within the wider community.

The geographical range of Edinburgh University reaches across China, but is mainly concentrated on the east coast, with high density around Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Xi'an, Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Shenzhen.

In research, Edinburgh University mainly aims to deliver research excellence and create funding opportunities. In education and culture, it aims to develop cultural dialogues, connections and understanding, to have educational innovation in approaches to teach people and engage them with China and to create more interest in China. The Confucius Institute plays a very important role in that strategy to engage the community and partnerships through festivals and community events.

The University of Edinburgh hosts a popular program with PKU known as the Summer School of Arts. Through this program, each summer students from PKU's School of Art History travel to the University of Edinburgh for a week or 10 days to participate in the Edinburgh Festival, as well as visit galleries and museums and attend a lecture series. The university also holds alumni lectures and other events to foster education

about China. In this context, the University of Edinburgh already has a strong impetus to engage with Chinese universities and with China. Therefore, having a Confucius Institute is a quite logical step.

According to Prof. Gentz, the University of Edinburgh was one of the first institutes in the whole Confucius Institute network. When it began, there were about 30 or 40 institutes, which all met at the Jianguo Hotel on Chang'an Street in Beijing. The hotel was large enough to host the first conference, but now with global conferences of 2,000 to 3,000 people, larger venues are needed.

She said that in the beginning, the Confucius Institute network was a very small circle. Everything was new to everybody, including *Hanban*, the governing body. There were even no real structures or statutes. But now, the UK has 30 Confucius Institutes, the highest density in Europe. Since 2005, the UK has had 150 classrooms that work with schools to foster Chinese language teaching. The University of Edinburgh works with the community rather than schools, so it holds classes in the evening. The learners, each with very different backgrounds, are adults who attend for various reasons, and only very few are students from the university.

Prof. Gentz said that the increasing number of Confucius Institutes in the UK was followed by increasing diversification and specialization, and *Hanban* has encouraged institutes to

focus on certain areas. London is a good example as it has seven Confucius Institutes. Each has to develop a distinct profile to attract different students. The London School of Economics (LSE) has a business Confucius Institute, Goldsmiths has one for performance, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) has an institute for teacher training, and there is also one for traditional Chinese medicine. When the University of Edinburgh opened its Confucius Institute, there was no need to specialize, so the university has a comprehensive institute that covers the areas of education, business and culture. The university believes these three sectors can be interconnected, so it tries to build synergy among the three as a strategy to get people engaged with China.

The overall strategy of the Confucius Institute at the University of Edinburgh is to promote understanding of the forces which shape China today and to try to understand why Chinese developments are taking place as they are -- not to say whether they are good or bad, but try to understand why they are happening. The Confucius Institute encourages active engagement with China and highlights why engagement is beneficial, what it can bring to learners' careers and facilitates communication and exchanges of ideas. All of these contribute to the last stage -- to establish sustainable links and collaboration, setting up partnerships built on trust. This is one of the themes *Hanban* wants to promote as well.

Prof. Gentz opines that the Confucius Institute project is quite interesting in comparison to other national cultural institutions, like the Goethe Institute or the British Council. The Goethe Institute is an independent German institution, but Confucius Institute is a cross-cultural institution. She said this is a good idea, but also creates a lot of problems. The Confucius Institute is a kind of collaboration between a university in China and a university overseas. The University of Edinburgh's partner is Fudan University, and the partnership is governed by an advisory board, which has members from the Chinese government, consul-general, education section of the Chinese embassy in London, Scottish government, community organizations involved with China, for example the China-Britain Business Council, the Scotland-China Educational Network, and senior management from both universities. The board, quite large and diverse, has about 16 to 18 people, which brings a lot of different perspectives. The board meets once a year, during which the staff of the institute reports to the board, the board gives feedback and the staff discusses further strategies. This is not an operational board. They also have a board of directors, including Prof. Gentz, the head of the college, as well as the director and the registrar, who is responsible for the finances of the college. The University of Edinburgh only has three colleges: Arts and Humanities, Medicine and Engineering, so the registrar approves the budget for activities

of the Confucius Institute. The board of directors also includes a general manager and a co-director who is seconded from Fudan University and stays at the Confucius Institute for two years or four years. Language teachers from Fudan stay at the Confucius Institute for two years, and six student teachers are sent from Fudan every year. The Confucius Institute also has three administrators.

Prof. Gentz offered a few examples of activities of the Confucius Institute. She said the Confucius Institute at the University of Edinburgh is a small team but they want to organize large activities and events, so they work with networks and partners. The university works with a network of higher education institutions such as Fudan University, Beijing Film Academy, Glasgow University and Aberdeen University. The Confucius Institute also works with governments, not only through the participation of government institutions on the board of the Confucius Institute, but also in partnership on developing strategies for engagement with China and the preparation of visits to China. The Confucius Institute also works with community organizations such as the British Council.

The Confucius Institute operates education, business and culture programs, but within the education programs, language is not the main focus. Although Confucius Institutes were originally founded to teach language, language teaching is only a minor activity within the Confucius Institute at the University

of Edinburgh. The Confucius Institute does have a large language teaching program with 20 to 30 classes per week and hundreds of students per year, but its main focus is the organization of international conferences on topics from classical to contemporary China. The Confucius Institute brings senior business leaders to give business lecture series not only about business in economic terms, but also about how to engage with China from their professional perspectives. For the last three years, the Confucius Institute has also organized an annual Belt and Road conference. The aim is not to promote Belt and Road, but promote the understanding of Belt and Road.

She said that rarely covered by local media, the Belt and Road initiative (BRI) is not well-known in Britain. To make the British public know more about the BRI, they have organized the conferences for three years.

According to Prof. Gentz, this year, the conference had 40 speakers, 200 people in well-engaged panel sessions and five people from Fudan University. Prof. Liu Haifang from PKU was engaged in two panels on Africa. The aim of the conferences is to keep people updated on the BRI. There were also school children participating in the conference, including students from years 5 and 6, immediately before graduation. Prof. Gentz believes it is important for school students to know about the BRI, as it will affect their generation more than the current generation through its development over the next 20 to 30 years.



The Confucius Institute works with companies such as the Royal Bank of Scotland, Standard Life and Baillie Gifford and also with the government and the principal of the University of Edinburgh. The new principal is learning Chinese at the Confucius Institute, attending lessons every week. For other clients, the Confucius Institute provides cultural briefing and training, translation services and advice. For the University of Edinburgh, the Confucius Institute offers simple Chinese language classes, which are very popular during lunchtime. These simple classes include learning how to pronounce Chinese names, which she believes is a very useful thing to know. With some companies, the Confucius Institute also has regular one-on-one language classes where people are serious about learning Chinese.

As part of its culture programs, the Confucius Institute organizes big events such as the Cinema China Festival, which is only for Chinese films. The idea is to organize cultural programs that the Confucius Institute staff believe to be interesting and will make people ask more about China. The Confucius Institute also organizes lectures around these events, so attendees can get more information. They hope that participants will be interested in attending Chinese language classes at the Confucius Institute or attend other conferences and engage more with the Confucius Institute. She said that the Confucius Institute is very proud to have Maggie Cheung (张曼)

玉) and Xie Fei for this year's festival. In 2008, the Confucius Institute hosted an event to celebrate Chinese-Scottish relations, with 150 events and 70,000 people in attendance. The event was very helpful to the Confucius Institute. Held soon after the Confucius Institute's establishment, it was good marketing and branding.

At that time, Prof. Gentz thought the Confucius Institute at the University of Edinburgh would be the only one in Scotland, but others followed in Glasgow and Aberdeen. Another Confucius Institute followed in Edinburgh at Heriot-Watt University. However, it is very small and focused, so there was not much overlap.

The Confucius Institute also organized a photographic portrait exhibition at the City Art Centre in Edinburgh with the Guangdong Museum of Art and another exhibition of documentary photography of China from the 1950s to the 1990s. The exhibition displayed 600 photos over three floors and was attended by more than 10,000 people.

The Confucius Institute also organized a performance by the Beijing Film Academy at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The dramatic performance featured cutting-edge multi-media technology and computer animation. The Confucius Institute used the iconic graduation hall of the university which has images and murals on the walls with figures. The Beijing Film Academy made computer projections on the walls, so the figures

were talking to each other as part of the play, which was really exciting.

The Confucius Institute also organizes an annual fashion show with Donghua University. Graduate students come to showcase their products, and as part of the Festival Fringe, it attracts a large audience.

In summary, Prof. Gentz said that the Confucius Institute has certain limits and freedoms in the operation, as the institutions have a diplomatic status that represents China abroad in a similar way to other cultural institutions, such as the British Council or German institute, which are purely national institutions. This is something very much debated. Is it right to place this type of institute in a university if you are representing a country in a benign or positive way? The Confucius Institute staff thinks it is very important to have critical debates about China and not just present only good things, as that is usually the British approach to things. If you look at the British press, you will not find a single positive sentence about anything. So if the Confucius Institute only tells the British public how brilliant and nice China is, people would not be interested. The Confucius Institute is a cross-cultural institute with British colleagues and Chinese colleagues. For colleagues seconded from Fudan University, especially young teachers, they think that the Confucius Institute should not say anything bad about China. Prof. Gentz explained that she does not want to say

anything bad about China, but feels she must put things into perspective so that topics can be viewed from both sides with explanations of why things are done in a certain way. Otherwise, the Confucius Institute is unable to engage its audience. Limits and leeway that the Confucius Institute has led to negative press; not so much in the UK but more in America because they do not understand how Confucius Institutes operate in the UK. The UK and the US operate differently. They have an underlying assumption that Confucius Institutes are propaganda institutes for the Chinese government. Prof. Gentz does not agree with it. Although she likes China and has been working with China for a long time, she does not believe the Confucius Institute operates in that way, and does not believe the Confucius Institute could be effective if it did operate in that way.

She also raised the issue of the Confucius Institute having very limited resources in comparison to the Goethe Institute and British Council. The latter are well-funded institutions that have been in existence for decades, so they have a completely different authority and structure. The Confucius Institute is run by people who fly in for two years or one year with constant exchanges, and none of them are trained to be cultural managers. Prof. Gentz said if you go to the Goethe Institute, you will get three years of training and then continue to work in the Goethe Institute, while the Confucius Institute constantly has new people, and sometimes university professors are expected to be

cultural managers in the institute, or to do the budgets, for which they are not trained.

Long-term sustainability is also a question. It is a comparatively new program for the Chinese government. The Confucius Institute plans and operates with *Hanban* on an annual basis, and things can change every year regarding what the Confucius Institute is doing and what it can do with the budget. It was a quite stable and predictable sort of development. What the Confucius Institute staff does not like is increasing micro management from the Chinese government. They have a small team but want to play a similar role on a national platform to the other institutes. That is a struggle, since it's very much dependent on Chinese politics, changes of government and the government support of it. For Confucius Institute staff, they just trust that it will continue. But there is no legal guarantee. It is all built on mutual trust and understanding. What the Confucius Institute signs with Chinese partner universities, or *Hanban*, has no legal value.

After the presentation, four students from PKUIAS raised questions to Prof. Gentz.

**Zou Wenhui:** I noticed that, from your speech, the relationship between the Confucius Institute, local government and Chinese government (*Hanban*) is quite tricky. So my question is: Is there any possibility Confucius Institutes can be viewed by the local government as some kind of threat to the

local culture, or are they afraid that it is imposing some kind of Chinese values on the students there?

**Prof. Gentz:** I think, for the government, it's not a problem because it's an institution that is promoting its own country language, and internationally, that is a normal phenomenon. I think what is regarded as problematic is that it sits in the universities. It's not so much imposing values but limiting academic freedom because there are some topics we cannot discuss in the Confucius Institute, which *Hanban* would not support. It is usually not a problem for UK institutes because, opposed to the operation of those in the US, we have a Confucius Institute and a Chinese studies department. So, the Chinese studies department is the academic part and will conduct research and the academic conferences, and the Confucius Institute looks after the areas of outreach and knowledge exchange. We can do what we don't do in the Confucius Institute in the department because the department is independent from the Confucius Institute and *Hanban*. That's the balance we have. I think what people are suspicious about is whether we would teach, and that's what's happening in the US. Sometimes the Confucius Institute replaces the Chinese studies departments. Then the entirety of Chinese study is taught by teachers who came from *Hanban*. That of course is problematic for universities because they have different perspectives and

different education. So, I do not think it's a threat or it's too much from China.

**Zou Wenhui:** You mentioned that *Hanban* may restrict the perspectives you are allowed to offer. When this happens, do you think the audience believe you are disseminating propaganda? Is it a kind of misunderstanding by audience?

**Prof. Gentz:** It's actually not *Hanban* that gives us directives about doing things that way. What I am trying to explain is that my colleagues coming from Fudan University think I shouldn't say anything negative about China. I think it's quite a normal reaction. Everybody who goes abroad will become patriotic in defence of their own country. As a German, I would be completely critical about Germany. But if I go abroad and somebody said something bad about Germany, I would say, wait a minute, you don't know anything. It is these kinds of reactions. Then I try to explain that we need to have a critical approach and critical lectures because otherwise it doesn't work in the UK. So, we don't get materials from *Hanban*. We design our own programs and select our own speakers. For official film programs, we work with film festivals such as the Edinburgh International Film Festival. If we select films which do not have a *LongBiao* (龙标) form here, we can still show the film, but we would not show them in the Confucius Institute. The *Hanban* would not finance it. They don't support it. But we can still do it, and we get the money from somewhere else. That's fair enough.

If they don't approve it, of course they will not fund it. They don't have the Confucius Institute logo on the festival.

**Song Jiaxin:** How do you understand the difference between area studies and Confucius studies? And according to your understanding, can a person who understands Chinese literature and culture be called expert of China?

**Prof. Wang Suolao (Deputy Director of PKUIAS):** Interesting question. As you mentioned before, Edinburgh University has a Chinese studies PhD program. It seems to us that coordination between discipline studies and area studies is difficult. Perhaps your university has a different method of approaching this issue.

**Prof. Gentz:** That's an interesting question. When I arrived at Edinburgh, Chinese studies were about literature and culture. It was reading Chinese texts, translating and reading classical texts and modern texts in history, and that was the training. That was not our understanding of Chinese studies because we wanted to do Chinese studies as area studies. So, when we hired new posts, I hired one from political science, one from anthropology, one from media studies, and now we have multiple areas. We have eight or nine academics covering very different areas, so students can choose from a range of focuses. Chinese studies is not a subject. It's the equivalent of "European studies." It would be difficult to teach, and no one would choose to study it. But within that subject, students are able to choose



their own pathways, and lots of students also do it as a joint degree. So, for instance, students study economics and Chinese, or politics and Chinese, which really makes sense. So, the literature and culture expert you mentioned was something we were trained 20 or 30 years ago. For example, my parents studied Chinese studies and all they studied was classical Chinese. They didn't study any contemporary Chinese at all. They can't speak Chinese, but they can read Lao Zi or the *Dao De Jing*. We call them sinologist, *Hanxuejia* (汉学家) in contrast to Chinese studies experts, and that's very much based on philology and text-based reading. What we think we should do in area studies is language-based area studies. It's still important to know the local language. Otherwise, you end up with what they have in history. This is a very strange concept for me, especially when you consider it in a European context. For example, it's inconceivable to have a British scholar who specialises in German politics but doesn't speak German. But, for China, you have scholars who don't know the language but still think they can write about it or meaningfully interpreting what's going on. I don't think that's possible. That's why we call it language-based area studies. But none of this has to do with the Confucius Institute, because the Confucius Institute doesn't do research; we do language teaching. We did start a series where we thought we would teach about contemporary Chinese society, but it didn't get off the ground. People were not

interested. I think once you get to that level of study, it's something you would study at university. Chinese politics is not something people will choose to study in the evening, so all of the area studies are just in the department. Now we have two area studies centres in the university – East Asian studies (Japanese, Chinese, Sanskrit, and Korean studies), and Middle Eastern studies. Those are the two area studies approaches.

**Wangchen Haozhi:** We know that the Confucius Institute at the University of Edinburgh works together with many organizations and has many partners. I've read an article in which the author believes that some Confucius Institutes face difficulties in funding and teaching facilities. It seems that situation doesn't exist in the Confucius Institute at the University of Edinburgh. Could you tell me how the Confucius Institute at the University of Edinburgh maintains its operations?

**Prof. Gentz:** We just work very, very hard. We do have some problems with limited resources, but at Edinburgh it's a special situation because we have a dedicated team who are very enthusiastic. The people I work with, the administrators, have all been there for eight to 10 years, and we built the institute together. In the beginning, we had an entrepreneurial spirit because nobody knew what a Confucius Institute was meant to be, so we did things as we thought they should be done. There was much more freedom than there is now, which was a big advantage for us. So, we built up structures and discussed

everything together regarding the programs we wanted to run. People were excited about it and worked overtime and on weekends. We are kind of an exceptional institute in the network of the 550 Confucius Institutes worldwide. I'm not saying this to brag, but we are the only institute in the network that received 10 awards in a row from *Hanban* and other international institutions. We built this into a very big institute quite quickly. Some Confucius Institutes are just one office on a floor of the Chinese studies department, but we have three big buildings given to us by the university. So, there are a broad range of institutes with a whole range of levels of operation. Another thing is that there was very positive support from the university from the beginning. I think this is particular to the UK. As you mentioned, there are many more Confucius Institutes in the UK than in other places, and I think UK people are very positive about Confucius Institutes and take a very pragmatic approach. They believe engagement and collaboration are important, rather than to criticize, so in general, we have much less criticism and negative press. We do get some freedom of information requests, which is very British. If any person asks for information that could be in the public interest, we have to provide it. We are legally responsible to provide any information that is requested, including our salaries, budgets, agreement with *Hanban* or anything else they want to know. These requests usually come once or twice per year, or sometimes every two years. In general,

we provide the information, they read it, and if they don't find anything, there is no story.

Also, one has to say that these requests always come from Free Tibet groups or human rights groups, such as Amnesty International. So, the Tory MPs in Westminster's human rights group did an investigation of Confucius Institutes in the UK and came to the conclusion that they should all be shut down. However, this conclusion did not have any implications or other consequences. They didn't survey, apparently, and the problem is they didn't talk to us. I don't know who they talked to. Similarly, if there is a negative story in the press, journalists never come to us to talk about how we operate the institute. I'm not sure where they get their information or on what they base their assumptions, but their assumptions are confirmed by other assumptions. This is also what happens in America. There is one book about how evil Confucius Institutes are. I read it but was unable to find anything substantial in the book because that's not the way we operate. We have the *Hanban* conference every year, where we discuss various operational problems. Not many Confucius Institutes in Europe have been closed. The Confucius Institute in Stockholm University was closed. I am very familiar with the Confucius Institute in Stockholm University, and it was closed because of internal conflicts between the department and the Confucius Institute. The leadership had changed, the professor had retired; there was a new professor, and the new

professor didn't want to have a Confucius Institute. They wanted to have the students from the Confucius Institute in their department, so the university closed it. They also didn't manage it properly. They didn't apply for much money from *Hanban*. Every year we tell *Hanban* our plans and they approve them. Sometimes they cut a little bit of the budget, but they usually give us approval. Stockholm University's Confucius Institute never made these plans and never submitted any budget, so the university didn't see the value of the Confucius Institute and closed it. Another Confucius Institute in Spain was closed. The reason was that they didn't have enough teachers who speak Chinese and Spanish. In Europe, you need teachers who speak the local language as most people won't attend classes where they need to use English to learn Chinese. So very often it's pragmatic reasons for closure.

**Wang Kaihua:** I have two questions. First, will the ethnic minorities in Britain, for example British Chinese, learn Chinese in the Confucius Institute? Second, I've been learning Russian for 50 days, and I find it very hard to learn a second language. As we know, Chinese is a difficult language to learn. So, I wonder how British students learn Chinese language. Do they have any effective ways for learning Chinese?

**Prof. Gentz:** We don't have many such students. Sometimes we have some students of Chinese ethnicity who don't pick up Chinese from their parents. But generally, people

of Chinese ethnicity who grow up in the UK go to Saturday school to learn the Chinese language, characters and culture when they are children because Chinese parents want their children to pick up the language early in life. We can't teach children in the Confucius Institute. We aren't allowed to.

I am trying to explain to people that Chinese is not a difficult language. Very much like English, it is very simple to learn in the beginning. I am not talking about writing, just the language, because you have very simple grammar, and you can learn sentences very quickly in the beginning. It's very difficult to speak good Chinese, which is the same as English. If you want to say something properly, it gets to be difficult. I think other languages are more difficult because they have complicated grammar, which takes a long time to understand before you can say something. German, for example, is very difficult in the beginning. But when you know the grammar, it is really simple, because you can construct sentences.

**Ms. McKenzie:** I'm from Edinburgh, and I think Scotland is quite a homogenous society -- it's about 95% white. But I attended the Confucius Institute in London and the classes were very mixed. There were people from every country, people whose parents are Chinese mainlanders and also people from Hong Kong who couldn't speak Putonghua learning Chinese there.

**Prof. Gentz:** That's very interesting. That's a completely different perspective.

**McKenzie:** I'm quite curious about the reporting that *Hanban* asks you to do because I'm not sure how Confucius Institutes measure how successful they are.

**Prof. Gentz:** That's a good question. Our reporting is very quantitative. We have to report about the number of students, classes and events as well as the number of audience members, conferences and so on. These are tables and databases. We try to persuade *Hanban* and argue with *Hanban* that this quantitative approach is not really meaningful because each Confucius Institute is different in size and specialisation. So, if you just go for figures, they don't say much. Our Confucius Institute has become a model institute. In the beginning, Confucius Institutes could only apply to become model institutes on the basis of numbers -- how many square meters you have, how many staff you have, how many students you have, etc. But this doesn't indicate the quality of the program. It's a problem for *Hanban*, but they need to report their numbers to the government because they need to apply for budgets, and the Ministry of Finance looks at numbers. *Hanban* tells us quality is important, but they still need to report numbers to the government.

May I ask a question? What is the perception of Confucius Institutes in China? I can imagine there is criticism of the government spending so much money teaching the world

Chinese and giving money to many big overseas universities while there are large parts of China that are not educationally developed yet. Is there a general public view on what we're doing and whether it is right? What's your view on that?

**Prof. Qian Chengdan (Director of PKUIAS):** I know the government spends a lot of money abroad, but I think it's worth it.

**Prof. Gentz:** I also think it's worth it. It will come back as money to China because more people will know about China, learn Chinese and engage with China. That's good for the economy, but many people probably do not understand this.

**Prof. Qian:** Many people don't understand why the Chinese government spent such a big sum of money abroad on programs Chinese people know nothing about. Some people would say that we need this money for our own people. Yes, that's true. As far as I know, quite a few people think of the question in this way. But for me, I think it's worth it because it makes more and more people in the world understand what China is.

**Prof. Gentz:** You know Britain very well. But when you think about how many Chinese people know about Britain or the West, and how many people in Britain know about China, the imbalance is incredible. They know so little, and they teach very little about anything else but Britain, and for history, they only teach British history and little bit of global history. I also say this



in relation to Chinese studies. In comparison to the importance of China and the role China plays in the world, the size of Chinese studies departments is pathetic. Universities have 15 professors teaching Shakespeare and only two covering the whole of China. It's slowly catching up, but it has a lot of setbacks.

**Prof. Qian:** Also, my generation still remembers at the beginning of Chinese reform and opening-up, many foreign governments spent money in China to give Chinese people an understanding of foreign countries. For example, the German government spent a lot of money to give Chinese people an understanding of what Germany is like. The Japanese government spent a lot of money in China. The American government spent most of their foreign budget to give Chinese people an understanding of what America is like.

**Prof. Gentz:** Yes, that's right. The Goethe Institute made Deng Xiaoping their Man of the Year and opened a Goethe Institute in China in that period.

In the Q&A session, Prof. Gentz also answered questions from the audience.

**Q1:** When we speak of Chinese culture, we usually think about traditional culture and Chinese history. For example, I searched last week for what kind of teachers Confucius Institutes are looking for, and they usually want teachers who play Chinese instruments or practice kung fu, but now not

everyone plays traditional instruments or is good at Chinese kung fu. So how is the Confucius Institute connected with the Chinese reality, and when teaching traditional Chinese culture and history, how do they show the contemporary image of China?

**Prof. Gentz:** That's a very good question. I think technically the name is already misleading because it makes people think we talk about Confucius and we study Confucius' teachings, but we don't. I think it's probably difficult to find another name that is well-known enough in the whole world. For Germany, you have the Goethe Institute. It's similar. Goethe Institute doesn't talk about Goethe or German literature.

I think this is also an area where we slightly disagree with *Hanban* on how we should represent Chinese culture, but there are also different ideas within *Hanban*. So, this is moving forward as well. They set up cultural divisions where they select 12 institutes as model culture projects that should be developed by other institutes as well. We are one of those 12 model pilot cultural institutes because we don't do exactly what *Hanban* wants us to do, which is kung fu, traditional instruments and paper cutting. Our policy is to go beyond the dragon dance, or the lion dance. We don't like these things which are like stereotypes. The people I know in China and that I work with don't sit at home and do paper-cutting. What we want to create is a program that is relevant, so people can realize why they

need to learn something about China. We need to create programs where they see something that affects them or has an effect on their lives. We want to learn how the lives of people in Scotland are affected by China. It's not only political, but also cultural, like this fashion show. It's cutting-edge art technology from China. At the fashion show we had this summer, I am very proud to say we had the premiere of the world's first 3D-printed *qipao*, developed by Donghua University. It was designed around the concept of a magnolia, the flower of Shanghai, and had a Scottish tartan on it. So, the fashion show brought modern technology that was developed in Donghua University in Shanghai to Edinburgh. It's something that people haven't seen before, and they wouldn't have thought it was developed in China. That's part of our philosophy. It has to be relevant and at the forefront of what's going on, whether it is movies, arts, fashion or in any other respect.

The other reason we don't want people to do kungfu, paper-cutting or Guqin is because *Hanban* teachers are trained to do this in two or three weeks. So, if you have a disposition for being a kungfu teacher, you do three weeks of kungfu and then you go to teach foreigners to do kungfu. They expect foreigners would not notice the difference, but they do notice the difference. If we present Chinese culture, we have to do so at the highest standard and in a way that will attract and inspire people. We have a cultural division now that develops these new programs,

and we are having lots of discussions about this. We meet once a year and these 12 institutes have started to develop new things. *Hanban* organises some tours or cultural programs, but we haven't got that so far because we want to do our own programs. I think a big advantage for having Confucius Institutes partnered with local institutions is that you can develop programs that are attractive for the local community, as they have the knowledge from both sides.

**Prof. Wang Suolao:** During my National Day holiday, I went to Israel for a week-long visit. I went to the Western Wall and took pictures of many Jewish people. Those people with black hats and robes and long beards are the image we will immediately think of about Jewish people. However, these people don't work or go to the army. They just read their Holy Bible all day. When I sent the picture to my friends, they said, "All Jewish people are like this." But I said no. These people only make up 10% of the total population. In each country there must be some who try to do things typical and symbolic of their culture. Maybe in this regard, Chinese kungfu and Confucius studies have some value.

**Prof. Gentz:** I think classical studies is very important. We teach students classical Chinese at universities. I think you cannot understand contemporary China without knowing classical Chinese and history. You can't understand contemporary Chinese without knowing classical Chinese. And

we have a conference called “Many Faces of Confucius” that talks about different approaches of Confucianism and different narratives about his biography. We also have a conference called “Reading Chinese Manuscripts from Different Periods.” The main point is that it has to be done properly, and people have to really have the knowledge and expertise in whatever they do.

The other question is about traditional culture. You can teach traditional culture, but it should be done by people who really know how to do it. Then people can see the value of it. For instance, it’s very good to do kungfu in schools. In Scotland and in Glasgow for example, we have areas that are very deprived, where none of the kids ever go to university. We still want to allow them to learn Chinese, which is a challenge. But the kungfu classes are very good for that. It’s a martial arts sport, and they are interested, so you can teach kung fu along with Chinese words. It’s a way to engage. But again, the kung fu teacher we worked with is a professional and has been teaching for 20 years.

**Q2:** I am a visiting scholar here from Guangzhou teaching in a university. When we teach English, we tell students they have to learn English well so that they can tell Chinese stories to the whole world to help them learn more about China. My question is about the interest of the Confucius Institute in your university. My PhD is in higher education, so I am not sure what I can do for you. If I go to universities, I don’t know if local

people are interested in our education story, schools and universities.

**Prof. Gentz:** A lot of people in the university are very interested in how the education system is in China because we have an increasing number of Chinese students. That's why we want to know the education system behind them because students from different backgrounds have different expectations. We have to build courses and workshops that work with the Chinese students because they are the largest non-Western international student body. Previously, it was American students, who were easier to accommodate. It's not problematic, but it would make things easier for everybody if we have a more welcoming environment. In this sense, we need to understand where they come from and what their educational system is like. Our student numbers from China are going up immensely, but it creates problems for us. Students from China come, and they don't want to come to an international university to sit in a class full of people from their country.

However, we have so many applications, and we cannot reject applicants on the basis of their nationality. We are not allowed to do this. So, you have the imbalance in the numbers. It becomes a problem as to how to cope with it. At the same time, we are developing criteria about how to select students and how to place them so we don't have majority-Chinese classes. The university may want that because they want international student

fees, but for the teachers and students, no. They want a more international background. That's something we need to think about and develop further because it's a new phenomenon.

**Q3:** Two years ago, I studied in Moscow at Moscow Pedagogical University. There I participated in a lesson called "Methodology of Teaching Russian as a Foreign Language." In Russia or the Soviet Union, there is a very important principle of teaching language — you must take into account the different qualities of students, such as cultural background. I am wondering if there are any different teaching methods in the Confucius Institute of Edinburgh. Do you use different methods in teaching Chinese class?

**Prof. Gentz:** What is important for us is that all our teachers have a degree or are engaging in a degree of teaching Chinese as a foreign language so that they will be teaching Chinese in a professional way. Teaching methodology has developed over the last 20 to 30 years. When I was studying Chinese in Germany, we were reading Mao Zedong, and when we got a bit advanced, we were reading Deng Xiaoping because that was a bit more modern and contemporary. That's how we were taught Chinese, but this has developed quite a lot in recent years. You have all kinds of approaches, not only of pedagogical approaches, but also ways to explain grammar in different ways. You have lots of multimedia materials.

Both linguistic and pedagogical training is very important before teachers go into a classroom. This is not commonly understood yet in Britain, but it is something we are trying to promote. A lot of people think that any Chinese person can teach Chinese. I know this from my own experience. When I was in China, there was an American friend who wanted to learn German. I started teaching him German for two hours and then we stopped. There was no way I could teach German because I did not know the functions of the language, grammar or why we said things in a particular way.

In the UK, nobody would want me, as a German, to teach German. Of course, you need a professional German teacher. When it comes to China, it's the same thing. It's okay to have native speakers. But it is a kind of perception that you have there.

For the Confucius Institute, *Hanban* has a similar approach. They send teachers who teach economics or sports to teach Chinese language in schools. I do not think that is good. What makes them qualified to teach language? But they need these huge numbers to be sent out. Like to Scotland, they send 60 teachers every year. And that's only for the tiny Scotland. They don't have many trained language teachers, but that's not right. That still needs time to develop.

You need to build the capacity to run a professional Confucius Institute — directors and managers. It's amazing and



astonishing how quickly this network is growing. Within eight to 10 years, you have 550 institutes. It is a new thing, and it takes time.

Prof. Wang Suolao made a conclusion at the end of the salon. He said that Prof. Gentz gave many informative and impressive perceptions about the Confucius Institute in Edinburgh University. As he understands, this is typical area studies. The lecture focuses on Edinburgh and the UK's case, and in this regard, well serves the purpose to train area studies at PKU and in the whole of China.

**The 13th New Buds Salon**  
**Central Asia's Region-Building and the Transformation**  
**of its Perception of China in the Post-Soviet Era**

**May 19, 2020**

The five Central Asian countries, as newly independent states after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, have been burdened with the threefold strategic mission of nation-building, state-building, and region-building. These countries have attempted to coordinate their efforts in accomplishing these missions, and while nation- and state-building processes have advanced relatively smoothly, regional cooperation in Central Asia had suffered from multiple setbacks until Shavkat Mirziyoyev assumed presidency in Uzbekistan. China, as a significant external “other” for Central Asia, has been directly involved in the historical process in which the five Central Asian countries form and shape their regional identity. Along with the implementation of the “Western Development” strategy and the launch of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” initiative, China’s regional influence in Central Asia has been on a constant increase, while the Central Asian countries have also gradually become more sophisticated in their perception of China. This reality constitutes a key factor in the cross-cultural interactions between China and Central Asia.

On May 19, 2020, Peking University’s Institute of Area Studies (PKUIAS) invited Prof. Yang Cheng from Shanghai

International Studies University's School of International Relations and Public Affairs to speak on the topic "Central Asia's Region-Building and the Transformation of its Perception of China in the Post-Soviet Era" at the 13th New Buds Salon, hosted by the executive deputy director of PKUIAS Prof. Ning Qi.

#### I The issue of region-building

Prof. Yang Cheng argued that the issue of region-building was often neglected and received much less attention in existing studies compared with nation- and state-building. However, the significance of regional politics has increased profoundly in international relations after the Cold War. "Porous regions" are becoming critical features in post-Cold War world politics, argues American scholar Peter J Katzenstein in his *A World of Regions*.

Against the background of the turn toward regions, major powers now tend to secure their control of affairs of the regions to which they belong, consolidate their regional authority, and dictate the international order in the regions they are members of. Therefore, the future world may very possibly be a multi-order world consisting of numerous regions, each of which has its own order. Prof. Yang Cheng said that an ongoing shift toward a multi-region, multi-order world system can be inferred from the changes in the application of the terminology

“multipolar” in international politics. For example, Russia started to replace “multi-polarization” with “multi-centered world” after the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. According to various analyses, this is because the term “multi-polarization,” as Russia sees it, naturally reminds people of the European balance of power in the 19th century and indicates a zero-sum game and fierce competition. The term “multi-centered world,” on the other hand, is a comparatively milder expression that at the same time does not fail to imply Russian’s central position in the region it belongs to.

Prof. Yang Cheng also argued that another feature of the current international political situation, in addition to the turn toward regions, is the return of great-power competition. Since the 2003 Iraq War, competitions between great-powers have been growing increasingly modeled on zero-sum games, as can be seen in the China-US trade war starting from 2018 and the more recent jostling between the two countries regarding COVID-19. From a realist perspective, the return of great-power competition could be designated as a “Carr moment” (Edward Hallett Carr was a renowned realist scholar). The zero-sum logic represented by Mearsheimer’s “wars between great-powers are inevitable” concept still plays a crucial role in current international society. The tragedy of great-power politics is indeed visible in international politics.

Prof. Yang Cheng further suggested that the return of

great-power competition offers an opportunity for minor countries to choose sides or practice balance in their diplomacy, and argued that the tragedy of great-power politics might indeed be comedy for the political situation of minor countries. He maintained that the re-emerging great-power competition differs from its antecedent in the Cold War era in that unlike the bipolar order of the Cold War – under which minor countries could only join either the socialist bloc led by the Soviet Union or the capitalist bloc headed by the US – the current international political circumstances in which more countries have risen to regional power and started to vie with each other provide minor countries with more choices and a larger space for diplomatic maneuvering, thus enabling them to maximize their own interests – rather than having their interests sacrificed by the superpowers as they often were in the Cold War era.

Prof. Yang Cheng pointed out that this phenomenon can already be observed in Central Asia. The five Central Asian countries have all gained extra maneuvering space due to intensifying great-power competition and are each expecting their own impending political comedies. Empirically, Kyrgyzstan serves as a typical case. Though a minor country with a population of less than seven million, Kyrgyzstan has managed to remain “popular with all sides.” Great-powers such as China, the US, and Russia all scramble to offer it various kinds of aid. After the Afghanistan War began in 2001, the US

rented the Manas Airbase in Kyrgyzstan for transiting troops and military cargo. Since the US had to consume huge quantities of jet fuel while using the airbase, three consecutive presidents of Kyrgyzstan – Askar Akayev, Kurmanbek Bakiyev and Roza Otunbayeva – all pocketed tremendous sums of money by having their family set up shell companies that sold cheaply imported jet fuels from Rosneft Oil Company to the Americans at sky-high prices. However, although the US military paid inflated fuel prices in Kyrgyzstan, the US still defended the country at congressional hearings by arguing that the expenditure on jet fuel had been worthwhile. This case illustrates that in scenarios where a great-power requires the favor of a minor country, the minor country can extract more concessions by carrying out multidimensional diplomacy relying on its strengths such as geopolitical position, thereby gaining more diplomatic sway in the margins of great-power competition.

## II The issue of identity

Prof. Yang Cheng maintained that the politics of identity in the current international political arena are more prominent than ever before. Specifically in Central Asia, this involves not only the issue of identity but also that of the politics of recognition. Each of the Central Asian countries has been striving to pursue a certain level of international standing in every possible way.

Take Kazakhstan as an example. Its first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, put forward many international initiatives while in office for the purpose of earning for Kazakhstan higher international standing and wider influence, which minor countries in general do not have the strength to strive for. In Central Asia, however, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan can be considered as regional major powers compared to the other three minor countries. Therefore, they tend to aim at obtaining recognized international standing and international influence in order to highlight their significance in the regional politics of Central Asia.

As newly independent countries after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the five Central Asian countries all face three essential tasks: Nation-building, state-building, and region-building. As a result, they are all extra sensitive to the issue of identity. Prof. Yang Cheng mentioned that Vladimir Putin once casually commented in 2014 that “[Nazarbayev] has created a state on a territory where there has never been a state.” However, this comment, which was intended as a compliment to Nazarbayev, actually infuriated the Kazakh president and offended the sensitive Kazakh national psychology, provoking a public outcry in Kazakhstan. Prof. Yang Cheng said that the reason behind the Central Asian states’ hypersensitivity to the issue of identity is their rather short history as independent states and their fear of becoming part of Russia again after gaining

independence. They hence proactively seek to raise their status and strengthen their influence in the international arena, eager for the recognition of international society.

In order to highlight its independence and subjectivity, Kazakhstan held a special national ceremony in 2017 to celebrate the 550th anniversary of the Kazakh Khanate. Numerous international scholars and media representatives were invited to the ceremony. However, for the purpose of stressing the country's national character, the ceremony was conducted in Kazakh throughout and no simultaneous interpretation service was available for foreign participants. Even the Russian representatives delivered 60 percent of their speeches in Kazakh and 40 percent in Russian. Prof. Yang Cheng also attended the ceremony and used Kazakh in the beginning, the end, and the middle of his speech, which earned the affection of the organizers and led to his reception by a senior Kazakh government figure in the subsequent banquet. Prof. Yang Cheng mentioned that this senior official who received him expressed his dissatisfaction at the name of the Center for Russian Studies in Prof. Yang Cheng's university because he considered it only emphasized Russia. Instead, he suggested, it could be renamed the "Center for Russian, Kazakh, and Central Asian Studies," which on the one hand emphasizes Kazakhstan's independence from Russia, and on the other hand distinguishes Kazakhstan from the other four countries in Central Asia, thus accentuating



the influence Kazakhstan wields in the region. Prof. Yang Cheng said that this incident vividly manifested Kazakhstan's sensitivity to identity issues and exhibited its aspiration for international influence in the region.

Prof. Yang Cheng believes that Central Asian countries could not possibly balance the tasks of nation-building, state-building, and region-building by using identity politics. In fact, these countries all concentrated on nation-building and state-building after their independence, striving to strengthen the people's identification with the nation and the state by various endeavors such as rewriting national history, consolidating national language education, reestablishing national hero worship, and erasing Russia's historical traces in the social life. These countries have only accomplished the most part of these two tasks now, after more than two decades of effort. Why do nation-building and state-building take priority over region-building? These former two missions secure the country's survival and grant it membership to the international society – while highlighting its status as an independent member. Therefore, these missions naturally precede region building.

### III Attempts at Central Asia's region-building

Historically speaking, Central Asian countries attempted region building for the first time two years after gaining

independence. In February 1993, the then Uzbek president Islam Karimov invited the leaders of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to Tashkent to discuss region-building and economic cooperation in Central Asia. However, as the countries were all occupied in nation-building and state-building then, the first endeavor toward Central Asia's region-building soon failed. The Central Asian countries made another attempt at region-building toward the end of the 1990s with the aim of establishing a Central Asian alliance with features of regional integration, but this was of no avail due to Russia's intervention. Prof. Yang Cheng held that Russia, as a crucial "internal other" of Central Asia, possess critical national interests in the region and has always regarded Central Asia as within its sphere of authority, thus it does not want to see an independent regional integration project in Central Asia. Other than that, compared with "external others" such as China, the US, the EU, Japan, Korea, and Turkey, Russia is an influential "internal other" for Central Asia countries. Owing to the shared experience of Imperial Russia and the Soviet era, Russia is still linked to Central Asian countries in a wide range of aspects and continues to wield strong influence. The Central Asian countries are also more intimate with Russia, and instead of considering it as a completely "external other," they have maintained special relations with Russia.

Prof. Yang Cheng pointed out that Russia's influence over Central Asia is manifested in a variety of fields such as politics,

economics, defense and security, and culture and ideology. In culture and ideology, Russia exerts tremendous influence over Central Asian countries, incomparable with any other great-powers. Russian is still the universal language in the region. News media in these countries are mostly controlled by Russia. These countries' education systems still retain features of the Russian model. Although countries in the region have all been implementing de-Russification policies, their effects are far from satisfactory. For example, Uzbekistan has been promoting the Latinization of Uzbek, but currently only half of its population use the Latin script, while the other half still write using the Cyrillic alphabet. Kazakhstan has carried out a similar plan to de-Russify. On top of foregrounding the Kazakh language, the state encourages multi-lingual education, especially in English. All of the above demonstrates that the Central Asian countries have already embarked on the search for an alternative provider for identity politics, so to speak. Russia is not the only power that has authority in the region anymore, as other powers have started to see their influence take effect on the region. However, it should be noted that although Russia's strength and influence has been growing weaker, which has opened up new possibilities for Central Asia's region-building – possibilities that the countries in the region have purposefully and gladly taken — these countries nevertheless are always faced with immense obstruction while pushing forward their

region-building projects because of Russia's intervention. Thus, when the Central Asian countries attempted to build an integrated regional alliance toward the end of the 1990s, Russia was quick to intervene and managed to eventually incorporate this Central Asian alliance into the Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Community. This clearly proved that Russia still wields influence that dictates the regional order in Central Asia, and that Russia is to this day the most crucial core "other" in Central Asia's identity politics.

Prof. Yang Cheng also pointed out an interesting phenomenon. While Western countries have been encouraging and supporting the Central Asian countries' growing aspiration for an independent regional integration project in recent years, Singapore and other Southeast Asian countries have also been actively promoting Central Asia's integration. In 2015, the then recently retired permanent secretary of Singapore's Ministry of Foreign Affairs suggested for the first time in Astana, Kazakhstan, that Central Asian countries establish a union of minor countries modeled after the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), so as to not only help better connect and link great-powers together but also play a larger role in international affairs. This proposal was met with great interest by the countries in the region.

Following the death of Uzbekistan's first president, Islam Karimov, in September 2016, new president Shavkat

Mirziyoyev's coming to power provided an opportunity for Central Asia's third attempt at region-building. Shavkat Mirziyoyev has launched a series of bold and resolute reform initiatives since he took over the presidency. He abandoned the isolationism of Islam Karimov's era and has been forcefully advancing the third endeavor at Central Asia's region-building. He resolved most of the border disputes that Uzbekistan had always had with three of its neighbors — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan — over the past two decades or so in less than two months, thereby sweeping aside a large internal structural obstacle to the integration of Central Asia. In March 2018, the first consultative meeting of the heads of state of Central Asian countries took place in Kazakhstan's Astana. The leaders of the five Central Asian countries that attended the meeting discussed extensively and reached a number of agreements in areas of trade cooperation, water resource, regional security, and cultural exchange.

Central Asian countries have learned their lessons from former failed attempts and adopted an extremely low-profile, prudent approach in the meeting's publicity, dropping expressions such as "alliance" and "integration." At the same time, these countries themselves are also hypersensitive to the mentioning of "integration." Regional integration means transferring their sovereignty in some way to the regional organization. "Regional cooperation" is still a much more

preferable expression than “regional integration,” even for Uzbekistan under the leadership of a new president that actively promotes Central Asia’s region-building. Prof. Yang Cheng said that at the Astana Club meeting in 2017, Vladimir Norov – the then director of the Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies under the president of Uzbekistan (and incumbent Secretary General of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) – expressed explicitly in his speech that Central Asian countries do not wish to describe the ongoing regional cooperation as “integration.” However, it’s worth noticing that the president of Turkmenistan did not attend the first consultative meeting of the heads of state of the Central Asian countries, but was represented by the chairperson and the speaker of the Mejlis of Turkmenistan Akja Nurberdi ýewa. As a permanently neutral state recognized by a resolution of the UN General Assembly, Turkmenistan has largely been inactive toward initiatives regarding international cooperation mechanisms that involve region-building.

Why is Central Asia’s quest for region-building so laborious? Are there any other factors aside from Russia’s interference? Prof. Yang Cheng maintained that almost all current regional integration cooperation mechanisms in the world are modeled after the EU and follow the model of EU’s region-building, such as the Eurasian Economic Union under Russia’s leadership. Why is the EU the model of all? Because the EU’s region-building is the most successful of all. “The

Father of Europe” Jean Monnet has once commented that the greatness of the European Community lies not in its creation of a supranational body but in its provision of a method in which different countries and different peoples can be at peace with each other and participate in the development of the region side by side. However, the EU model isn’t fit for Central Asia. European integration started off from sovereign states, and unlike Central Asia, the formation of the EU did not involve the issues of nation-building and state-building. Europe witnessed a gradual increase in the region’s integration level until highly integrated regional cooperation was achieved. On the contrary, Central Asia’s Union Republics in the Soviet era had been exceptionally united under the Soviet Union’s unitary planned economy, which means that Central Asia had already been a highly integrated region before the dissolution of the USSR, which created separate, independent sovereign states and which in effect shattered the original integration mechanism. Therefore, the Central Asian countries have to first accomplish the tasks of nation- and state-building before they can re-embark upon the cooperative mission of regional integration as sovereign states. Prof. Yang Cheng maintained that the level of Central Asia’s regional cooperation on integration should look like a U-shaped curve, moving from high to low then high again in contrast to that of the EU. However, in the more than twenty years of independence, Central Asia’s regional cooperation level

for integration has only decreased and has not yet seen an ascending period. The expected U-shape curve has in effect become an L-shape bend, and because of this, problems in areas such as water resources and transportation that didn't exist before arose and have grown increasingly prominent after the independence of the Central Asian countries. A German scholar termed the EU-style regional integration "polymerization integration" and the Central Asian mode "maintenance integration." Prof. Yang Cheng added that another model of Russian-led regional integration could be termed "binding integration." He argued that because the Central Asian countries have completed their tasks of nation- and state-building in the main, the third attempt at Central Asia's region-building could yield significant progress from this new departure point.

In addition to this, Prof. Yang Cheng argued that one of the reasons why the Central Asian countries attach much importance to this third attempt at region-building is to rectify the problems and mistakes that derived from their overemphasis on nation- and state-building. In Kazakhstan, for example, the overplaying of nation-building in the past twenty-odd years has resulted in the fragmentation of identity. Many began to base their self-identification on the historical division in much of Kazakhstan between the Senior *zhuz*, the Middle *zhuz*, and the Junior *zhuz*, and a considerable number of young people even started to stress their tribal identity within the respective *zhuz*. If



things continued this way, the Kazakh society will be torn apart and the country will be fractured. In the meantime, Kazakhstan has witnessed an Islamic revival while exaggerating its own national character and role in history. The resurgence of some backward national or religious practices in the underdeveloped regions in southern Kazakhstan has impacted the implementation of Kazakhstan's secularization policy. In response to this, Nazarbayev proclaimed in 2017 the start of the "Kazakhstan's Third Modernization," a critical goal of which is to promote Central Asia's region-building and to facilitate its regional cooperation so as to eliminate the problems and faults caused by the overemphasis on nation- and state-building.

Another reason for the turbulent region-building process in Central Asia lies in the external political need of the Central Asian countries for self-protection in an international environment where they are surrounded by great powers. Minor countries have only two choices: one is to conform to a great-power's strategy and to seek alliance with one of the powers in exchange for its protection. The other is to ally with other minor countries for mutual protection and maintaining independence. Despite the fact that Central Asian countries hold special relationships with Russia, they are not actual allies with Russia. On the contrary, these countries prefer not to attach themselves to any particular great power but rather balance their diplomatic policies in an international environment where great

powers – China, the US, and Russia – compete with each other. Nevertheless, such an approach still couldn't ensure their own safety. They have to eventually settle for the strategy of allying with each other for better self-improvement. Therefore, the future model for Central Asia's cooperation and development will probably be closer to ASEAN's, in which the countries collaborate closely with each other and interact with great-powers as a whole to fight for greater agency in international affairs.

Prof. Yang Cheng contended that China will benefit from a future highly integrated with Central Asia. The largest gain will be that China will not need to conduct bilateral trade negotiations with separate countries in the region anymore. Entering the market of one of the regional countries means entering the whole Central Asian market, thereby lowering Chinese companies' cost in commercial intercourse, production, and management. Therefore, China should hold a comparatively indifferent attitude toward Central Asia's region-building without interfering with or obstructing Central Asia's regional cooperation.

#### IV The transformation of Central Asian countries' perception of China

After analyzing the impact of Central Asia's region-building on China, Prof. Yang Cheng went on to talk

about the transformation of Central Asian countries' perception of China. He held that in the almost three decades after the Soviet Union's dissolution, Central Asian countries' perception of China has gone through several phases of transformation. In the 1990s, the public perception of China among Central Asian countries was in general negative. As it was an era in which Central Asia was suffering from a shortage of commodities, many Chinese merchants shipped large quantities of low-priced goods of poor quality to Central Asia for sale, and therefore left a bad impression on the peoples of Central Asia. Thus, in the minds of the Central Asian peoples in the 1990s, China was synonymous with counterfeits and products of inferior quality. They would never choose to buy Chinese goods as long as they could do otherwise. As the "Shanghai Five" mechanism developed later on, the cooperation between China and the Central Asian gradually standardized, while in the meantime the quality of the public goods China provided to the Central Asian countries improved. The Central Asian countries' perception of China started to transform. Since the start of the 21st century, the relations between China and the Central Asian countries have gone through comprehensive improvements within the framework of Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The people in Central Asian countries have fundamentally changed their stereotype of China that was based on cheap merchandise and gradually established the image of China as a major power. After

September 2013, when China proposed to construct the Silk Road Economic Belt together with regional countries, the development of Central Asian countries' perception of China has entered the third phase. On the one hand, they hope to share Chinese economic development's dividends. On the other hand, they hold heightening misgivings about China's strength – China now has grown into a massive neighbor of the Central Asian countries, who have begun to worry that China's immense economic power would destroy their own markets and industrial chains. Actually, similar anxieties were manifested in the consecutive vetoes of Central Asian countries on the initiatives put forward by China on building an internal free-trade zone encompassing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and creating a Shanghai Cooperation Organization Development Bank at the beginning of the 21st century. After China launched the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative, the Central Asian countries have consolidated their sense of the threat posed by China and grown more vigilant toward China under the influence of Western media and some Russian media's negative propaganda.

Currently, all Central Asian countries except for Turkmenistan have joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In regard to issues within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Prof. Yang Cheng maintained that the “negative list” style regulations on cooperation and the

organizational principle of consensus have severely impeded the efficiency and development of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization's regulations only specify what the member countries cannot do but do not stipulate what they can do, therefore prompting widely divided opinions among the member countries on specific cooperation-related issues. Furthermore, the principle of consensus in effect grants each member country the right of veto. As a result, plenty of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's cooperation efforts were of little avail. In such a circumstance, where cooperation has already been hardly productive between China and four Central Asian countries plus Russia, acceding the membership application of India and Pakistan could only further weaken the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and impair its capability of execution.

Finally, Prof. Yang Cheng contended that Xinjiang-related issues also constitute a major factor that influences the Central Asian countries' perception of China. In recent years, the development of Xinjiang-related issues has had considerable "stimulating effects" on the Central Asian countries, who have been receiving only distorted and negative information regarding these issues due to the lack of understanding of China's Xinjiang policy and Western media and some Russian media's tarring and smearing reports, which have deepened these countries' misunderstanding of China and nurtured their

distrust of it.

Prof. Yang Cheng pointed out that because all information that has reached the Central Asian countries regarding China are distorted and negative, these countries have formed a faulty perception of China at both the governmental and the public level: The more powerful China is, the more likely the Central Asian countries will become dependencies of it. Moreover, there are numerous believers that China poses a threat among the populations of the Central Asian countries, a situation that requires China to perfect its external publicity in these countries, which demands China to first do well in cross-cultural communication. China should understand Central Asian cultures from an anthropological perspective and comprehend what and how these peoples and cultures think, and should not only focus on exhibiting its own powerful national strength and influence in external publicity, which is only self-defeating. China should tell its own stories well but from the viewpoint of the Central Asian, paying attention to storytelling techniques while also telling good stories about China, which is more important. China's reform and opening-up is the best story – it's about how China transformed from a poor, backward country into a great modern one, and how each and every Chinese person pursued and realized their own "Chinese dreams." Telling the story of China's reform and opening-up to the Central Asian countries and correcting their false perception of China should be the

direction of future Chinese external publicity.

After the speech, Prof. Yang Cheng engaged with staff and students present at the salon in discussions on topics such as Central Asia's history, Turkmenistan and Central Asia's regional cooperation, Kazakhstan's ethnic policy, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Central Asia's regional cooperation, international campuses of Central Asia and the region's international education, and the relations between Russia and Central Asia.

Concluding the salon, Prof. Ning Qi mentioned that the participant students have chosen to take the course "Cross-Cultural Communication" to build a fundamental knowledge base for future fieldwork on Central Asian countries or other countries of research interests. She pointed out that Prof. Yang Cheng's talk provided an alternative perspective that shed light on studies on the logic driving minor countries rather than great-power competitions, which is vitally important for conducting fieldwork and area studies. The salon looks forward to inviting Prof. Yang Cheng again to speak about case studies of minor countries' behavior and dissect the situation of each Central Asian country.