

The 1st New Buds Salon
The BRI Through Our Eyes
December 16, 2018

Proposed in 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has received an enthusiastic response worldwide. Over the past five years of development, some measures of the initiative have taken root, and this has helped to reinvigorate the prosperity of regions and countries along the ancient Silk Road. On the fifth anniversary of the proposal of BRI, the Institute of Area Studies, Peking University (PKUIAS), Yenching Academy and School of International Studies (SIS) jointly held the first New Buds Salon on the theme “The BRI through Our Eyes.” The event invited students from more than ten countries, including the United States, Britain, Spain, Bulgaria, Hungary, Malawi, Egypt, Nepal and Uzbekistan, to make keynote speeches and contribute their personal views from the perspective of their own country about the BRI.

As Prof. Qian Chengdan, director of PKUIAS, pointed out in his opening remarks, conducting dialogue and exchanging ideas are crucial in academic research, and the New Buds Salon is a platform for young students and scholars to express their views and exchange opinions. The Belt and Road initiative is familiar to everyone, but what is the meaning of the BRI? What is its special significance to the people in the regions that it affects?

And what impact and role has this initiative brought to the development of the world? These issues, all deserving of in-depth consideration, formed the core of the discussions at the first meeting of the New Buds Salon.

David Moser, deputy dean of Yenching Academy, launched the salon by expressing his warm welcome to the participating teachers and students. He pointed out that this salon was the first event of the series of New Bud Salons, and four to five salons will be held each semester. The theme of BRI discussed by this salon is an evolving concept, which is reflected in its changing names, changing scope, and changing progress. Deng Xiaoping's model was to cross the river by feeling for the stones, and currently, the Chinese government is doing the same with the BRI. This salon is good practice for young scholars to prepare for their future academic road, he said.

Ankur Shah from the UK offered his reflections on how China can better communicate about the BRI.

In 2017, Ankur spent four months driving from Venice to Beijing with three friends from three different universities, visiting 16 BRI sites across 16 countries. On this 23,000 kilometer expedition—starting in Italy and proceeding through the Balkans, Turkey, and through the Caucasus to Iran, five countries in central Asia, and finally entering China—he met countless people from various cultures and documented the progress of BRI sites along his itinerary.

From his experience, Ankur found that there is much confusion regarding the “one belt one road.” Although many people have attended talks on or mentioning the BRI, very few people have a very clear understanding of what exactly the BRI is. When announced in 2013, it was called the Silk Road Economic Belt; subsequently, the name was changed to One Belt One Road, and now it has been officially renamed as the Belt and Road initiative. Yet, on the website of yidaiyilu.gov.cn—the official website of the BRI—there is an official document titled “Visions and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road,” which describes China’s vision of how it will build the BRI. However, this document was published in 2015, and, since then, both the names of the initiative and the situation have changed, and there is a lot to be updated. Second, the language throughout the document on the strategy is very vague and broad. Although it allows the BRI to take on different shapes as it evolves, the vagueness and ambiguity make it difficult to pinpoint the exact meaning of the BRI. One example is that BRI signing dates between the Chinese and Russian governments have been reported by *Global Times* as a success of the BRI.

Ankur listed several aspects of the BRI that he regards as worthy of being promoted. The first is the “Infrastructure First”-type project, which is usually simply expressed as “if you

want to get rich, build roads first”; this type of project should be better communicated. One example is the Baku central highway, which was built three years ago to connect Baku with Tbilisi and Kars; it is projected to double Azerbaijan’s national cargo transport infrastructure by 2034. The second idea is that BRI requires improving grassroots information. For instance, the Bar–Boljare Highway in Montenegro took the speaker days to locate during his expedition, and he deemed that the date was perhaps wrong and the project had not been implemented. Thus there would be a great benefit for BRI if a tangible database (one with maps that illustrate where these projects are) could be set up. The third suggestion is that transparent and reliable dates should be offered. One example is Isfahan, where is supposed to be home of a high-speed railway, but the speaker couldn’t find any sign of it within the railway station. Thus he suggested that transparency is needed to explain why certain projects are delayed, how much money has been spent on each project, and when the new expected date will be.

In general, Ankur offered three suggestions: first, stricter criteria on the scope of BRI projects should be introduced. For instance, should Sino-Russian marriages be deemed as a criterion of the BRI?; second, there should be more accurate grassroots information, for instance, maps, GPS coordination, and location, that would help people to see that these projects are very tangible; third, transparency is essential. All these

would allow the international community to gain a better understanding of the overall BRI project, as (especially, from a Western perspective) the more concrete and tangible the projects are, the more likely that the BRI will be perceived not as a threat, but as an opportunity.

Asmod Karki from Nepal shared his opinion in his presentation titled “News as Entry-points to Understanding BRI.” He pointed out that media is now the primary way for us to access information. Usually, media sources only tell us about the “what” but not necessarily about the “why.” He stressed that, to understand BRI, we need to dig into the “whys.”

Asmod took Nepal as an example, a country which has witnessed the changing flow of a BRI project called “Budhi Gandaki.” The Budhi Gandaki Hydropower Project, worth \$2.5 billion and expected to have a 1,200MW capacity, is a storage type project located in the central/western development region on the Budhi Gandaki River in Nepal. In May 2017, the Nepali government decided to award this project to Gezhouba, a Chinese company. Several months later, in September, two Cabinet Committees (the Agricultural and Water Resources Committee and the Finance Committee) directed the Nepali government to scrap the award. So, the Nepali government in November scrapped the deal with Gezhouba as it was directed. However, in September 2018, Gezhouba again received the contract from the Nepali government.

Asmod showed how Chinese and Nepali media reacted to this sequence of events. When the project was first awarded to Gezhoubu in May 2017, some Chinese media covered “this as a ‘win’ for a Chinese company,” while the Nepali media reported that “the Nepali government only accepted the project ‘under duress.’” When the deal was scrapped, in September 2017, the Chinese media asserted, “Nepal’s cancellation won’t affect the relations between Nepal and China.” However, they did not put forward exactly why. If we go beyond the media to dig into the whys, there will generally be another side to the story. Asmod then revealed the reason behind these shifts: Nepal changed governments three times between May 2017 and September 2018, and the changes of government brought different variables into play, which affected the cooperation projects with China.

Asmod expressed his belief that if we want to understand more about BRI via the media, one should conduct a horizontal and longitudinal analysis, compare the reporting from diverse media outlets, read “non-BRI related” news and, most important, refrain from drawing hasty conclusions.

Donasius Pathera from Malawi addressed the subject of OBOR-phobia or the fear of BRI. Pathera wrote two papers. The first paper, titled “One Belt One Road: Is it an Insomnia Destiny,” pointed out that BRI has not yet been fully put into practice, so many ideas are still not clear enough. The second paper was based on his speech at Cape Town University, in which he

described the fear of BRI in other countries due to the lack of transparency of information.

Pathera addressed the fear of BRI in various regions and explored ways to resolve these fears. He pointed out that Southeast Asian countries' fears of the BRI are rooted in the perception that China might want to become a superpower in this area or that China aims to benefit relatively more from the initiative or to monopolize all the activities. The fears of the Western countries, for example, are based on the perception of BRI as China's strategic gambit to establish Chinese hegemony in the region.

Pathera then explored the reasons behind misperception and misunderstanding toward the BRI. First, as many experts have pointed out, there is a lack of information about the BRI in English. Second, no available office or center is designated where people may obtain detailed information on the BRI; in particular, Chinese embassies, as the place most ordinary people would turn to for precise information, have been notably unforthcoming in providing it. Also, one expectation that African countries have of the BRI is that it should have a certain level of transparency crucial to any initiative or project, as well as checks and balances to prevent corruption.

In conclusion, Pathera pointed out that if one does not invest in information or provide a channel for local people to gain access to concrete information, misunderstandings are more

likely to occur and impede the success of the project. In the five years since the BRI was launched, people in Africa still have gained only a very vague understanding of it. Thus the Chinese side should invest more in providing information, in order to turn negative media coverage into positive momentum. Also, China could encourage scholars to research the BRI, provide more information to the international community, and ask for their feedback.

Liang Kun from China gave a presentation titled “Silk and Cultural Diversity.” She introduced the history of the Silk Road and discussed what is the “new” and what is the “old” of the Silk Road. Her presentation focused on how silk and cultural diversity interact together.

Silk was originally an invention of the Chinese, who then over history introduced it to different countries via diplomatic gifts or as trade commodities. When silk reached Rome and Persia, it was made into various products according to local traditions. This kind of adaptation can shed light on how a product that originated in China is subsequently welcomed by the world, interacts with local culture, and, in the process, becomes a new product. Silk is just one example of such cultural and commercial interaction.

The ancient Silk Road was not only a geographic connection between West and East; it was also a road over which ideas and wisdom of the West and East were exchanged. Multiple

civilizations were mutually enriched via this kind of human interaction. Although the ancient Silk Road eventually ceased to exist as such, China in 2013 initiated a plan to rebuild its economic roads and corridors, which also had the effect of reminding people to consider again the possibility of regional openness and cooperation. Accomplishments are not usually achieved by just one single country. Every country has its specialty and uniqueness and can bring its strengths to supplement those of other countries. It is the interaction of people, as President Xi said—the people-to-people bond—that is the essence of the BRI. China is merely the initiator of the BRI, but the benefits of and opportunities for innovation are open to all participants. The ancient Silk Road can also teach us how diversity contributes to the boost of civilizations.

Though the BRI has achieved positive results over the past years, it still has many problems, such as a lack of transparency and insufficient information regarding its projects. We live in a world full of diversity and the BRI is open to diversity. But how this diversity can contribute to the mutual enrichment of civilizations and encourage more innovation in this world is a question that needs further exploration.

The presentations by Kaloyan Georgiev and Davor Berov from Bulgaria focused on Bulgaria's role in China's cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe, and how Bulgaria has supported the goal of the BRI to create connectivity and a

community of shared destiny.

Europe is currently at a crossroads. The values that started the European project are under debate. Anti-establishment movements are cropping up under many names and colors across Europe, and they are all pushing the political elites to come up with a different set of policies that could offer a different future for Europe—for instance, a policy that fosters new economies through various approaches. Current turbulence in both Europe and Bulgaria is related: fragile economic growth has led to a high level of inequality and a lack of solidarity. One critical issue is that, although Bulgaria has been an EU member for 10 years, it still has a minimum wage of only \$200 per month, demonstrating that the neoliberal consensus has failed to satisfy and live up to the expectation of the people, and, instead, has left people with massive frustration with their own country or neighboring countries. It has also failed to bridge the gap between Europe’s “rich west” and “poor east.” Thus, countries have been left with only one option: to look for alternatives, other partners, and other opportunities.

Although questions have been raised regarding its legitimacy, communication, and efficiency, the BRI is a vision of the future. Although this vision seems abstract and unclear, its proposed concept and implementation plan are exactly what EU currently lacks. The scenario chosen for the future of Europe in the white paper of the European Commission published in 2018 prefers

the status quo, while only one of the goals is to encourage deeper reform and deeper thinking about the concept of Europe, and what the Union should be.

For a country such as Bulgaria, which is a member of both the EU and NATO, successful bilateral cooperation with China could bring massive benefits. It could boost the economy and provide tangible material benefits for ordinary working people and different groups in society. As Bulgaria's former foreign minister once said, if Bulgaria managed to sell a box of matches, a jar of yogurt, or a single drop of Bulgarian rose oil to every single Chinese annually, this would provide a completely new dynamic for the Bulgarian economy. Given the strategic geographic location of Bulgaria and its traditional friendship with China, Bulgaria could serve as a bridge between Europe and Asia, and between the EU and China.

In fact, EU–China relations don't have to be a zero-sum game. Given that the new position of the US is to favor protectionist isolation, Europe could move much closer to China. But both EU and China would have to compromise: China would have to pay more attention to observing market rules, and the EU would have to allow certain member states to pursue their own political agenda, based on their domestic conditions. As seen from the “16+1” achievements exhibition, which was held in Bulgaria in 2018, different ways of flexible cooperation between Europe and China can be pursued in the future so that a

win-win situation can be built. Instead of stoking alarm, which Brussels is doing now, Brussels should design a way to integrate its foreign policy agenda with that of China and the BRI. It should find a way to participate in a joint project in Eurasia, stop opposing, and find a way to cooperate—especially in areas that are environmentally friendly and financially and socially sustainable—with China’s vast resources and vast ambitions. The EU should be like water, change and be flexible, let its fears go away and make space for win-win cooperation.

Kakhrom Abdukadirov from Uzbekistan presented on Uzbekistan’s vision on the BRI. He suggested that Central Asia has wonderful transportation capacity as well as abundant natural resources. Relations between Central Asia and China are conducted through both bilateral and multilateral (UN, SCO) channels, and the BRI is coordinated through both bilateral and SCO relations. Currently, China has established either comprehensive strategic partnerships or strategic partnerships with various countries in Central Asia. SCO, consisting of eight countries, provides a broad platform for multilateral cooperation to coordinate actions of the BRI among the countries involved.

Uzbekistan is located in the central part of Central Asia and in the geographic middle of Eurasia. Since the Han Dynasty, Uzbekistan, rich in natural resources, has maintained good long-term relations with China. Uzbekistan was one of the first countries to support the idea of the BRI, considering it a

proposal with specific relevance to Eurasia. Currently, there is one project under construction by Uzbekistan and China: the China–Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan railway. After completion of the railway, transportation time through the region will be halved, and transportation costs will be reduced by \$10 billion per year. Also, the railway is expected to continue to push forward to Africa and Europe.

At present, the BRI still faces some challenges in Central Asia. Sinophobia in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan is still an issue. The possibility of becoming enmired in debt-trap policy also worries some countries involved, such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where a large portion of their external debt comes from Chinese investment. Also, these worries have been exacerbated by such factors as local political tensions in some parts of Central Asia, some Chinese companies' desire to gain local project contracts through bribery, and the fact that some external power actors have left negative impacts on corresponding cooperation. These are issues that cannot be ignored.

Abdukadirov expressed his belief that, given the size and population density of the country, China must be more proactive in its foreign cooperation. Moreover, China is still an export-oriented economy. Regardless of how high its foreign exchange reserves are, what advanced technologies are available, or how cheap its labor force is, China depends on the readiness

and ability of other countries to import its products, as well as on the possibility of their physical delivery.

Jose Rodriguez from Spain discussed the question, “In what aspects can Europe better integrate into the BRI?” He expressed his belief that, since 2008, a series of events such as the economic crisis, debt crisis, Brexit and the refugee crisis has made the EU lose some of its appeal. Given this situation, one view is that a new type of great power relations is beginning to take shape: a “G2,” in which China will share responsibility with the United States. Such a new power configuration will subject China to suspicions that it is seeking hegemony and is taking steps to maximize its interest in the international arena. Another view of China is the “New Normal,” in which China is viewed as trying to promote a multi-polar order in which the EU plays an equally important role. An appropriate view of China’s role in the international community will help people better understand the BRI.

Europe is the largest and most developed market in the world, as well as China’s main trade partner. Both Europe and China have become strategic partners, and, by 2017, China has had more than 20 railways leading to Europe and there were more than 15 working train routes between cities in China and Europe. At the 10th Asia–Europe Summit, held in 2015, Premier Li Keqiang emphasized the need to fast-forward connectivity between China and Europe and improve trade and investment to

accelerate the establishment of a single market and to build a single infrastructure connectivity network. In 2015, the two sides decided to incorporate the EU Investment Bank into the BRI as a part of the China–EU strategic agenda. This agenda facilitates trade and helps both sides to reach the goal of one trillion dollars] in bilateral trade by 2020. In recent years, because of the railroad connection, China–EU trade volume has increased significantly, which has strongly promoted economic and trade cooperation related to the BRI.

In terms of finance, China has been offering support to Europe ever since the financial and debt crisis. Thus BRI investment is an opportunity to strengthen financial security in Europe by providing access to new sources of financing. The Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) is currently under the joint operation of many European countries, and many of them are founding members. AIIB is also working with the European Investment Bank and other European banks on infrastructure development. China has given support to the European Investment Bank since 2015, thus becoming the first non-European country to announce its commitment to the plan.

What cannot be ignored is that the BRI is also facing many challenges in Europe. Some people think that the BRI is a strategy to split up Europe, and there is a potential risk of economic and trade friction between China and Europe in investment. However, it should be noted that the EU is currently

calling for more reciprocal cooperation. And Europe is currently in a period of fear of economic investment. As the EU plays an important role in world politics and is a major participant in international trade, the sustainable development of Europe is of great significance to the stability of a multi-polar world. To make the BRI succeed, there is a need for both China and the EU to cooperate on the issues and achieve mutual benefit.

Cao Mengyao from China delivered a presentation titled “Harmony in Diversity, BRI in This Era.” Despite China’s remarkable achievements in domestic economic development and the promotion of BRI in the past five years, some people still have trouble understanding why it is so important for China to initiate the BRI, and why it is so important to get facilities connectivity, policy coordination, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds with so many countries. Cao opined that “if you seek prosperity, build connectivity,” and posited that “connectivity” here can be understood as “*guanxi*” (关系), which means “relationships” in Chinese. Chinese consider relationships to be extremely important. Only when we have strong relationships can we get mutual benefit from each other’s comparative advantages. That’s why the BRI matters.

How has the construction of BRI been possible? Cao expressed her belief there are two reasons: humans’ natural need to connect and traditional Chinese thought. On the one hand, as individuals, people have an innate need to communicate with

others and establish contact. The world is made up of seven continents and five oceans. People living in different regions have different livelihoods, and they have respective advantages. Once they come together to interact with each other, these interactions can become the internal motivating force for individuals to develop themselves. On the other hand, Confucius is said to have once asserted, “Gentlemen seek harmony, but not uniformity” (和而不同), which has become an important precept of traditional Chinese thought. Braced by this underlying philosophy, in the Han Dynasty, China began the ancient silk road to Central Asia and the Arabs. Today, besides the BRI, China has initiated and participated in different regional and international organizations, such as APEC, SCO, and ADB. In the future, the BRI will be further expanded under the promotion of China and with the joint efforts of neighboring countries.

Peter Sczigel from Hungary discussed the political spillover from the BRI. His presentation focused on the effect of the BRI on global peace and security and its impact on European integration. He expressed his belief that the BRI covers many trade routes in Eurasia, so if the BRI is put in place, it will have a significant positive impact on relevant countries and regions, and even for all of Eurasia.

The influence of the BRI in the political area may be twofold: how China and the BRI are perceived and how China promotes

the rhetoric of the BRI. The BRI started with the idea of opening-up proposed by Deng Xiaoping, continued with China entering the WTO, and now involves China setting up economic connections with every power and strengthening its economic presence on the Eurasian continent. Yet, there are still some different understandings of China's intention to push forward the BRI. China has never sought hegemony and China is merely one of the main coordinators of the BRI; the project is for the greater good and would promote global integration and global peace and thus would benefit all the Eurasian powers. However, some Western countries still regard the BRI as China's means to pursue global hegemony, which is alarming to the West.

Robert Gilpin's global hegemony theory suggests that the world order is stable when there is a global hegemony. Hegemony here refers to a country that is militarily, politically, economically, and even culturally superior to all the other powers and can rule over the world and keep the international environment stable. Whenever there is a change in the hegemony, there is a greater risk of war. Therefore, according to the point of view of American decision-makers, what the US should do is not let China take over the global hegemony position to maintain the stability of the world order. Obviously, Gilpin's theory and China's position are entirely contrasting views, and the speaker expressed his belief that China is not seeking to achieve hegemony, but rather is trying to achieve a

multi-polar world and is working toward global integration.

Sczigel opined that whether China's goal is seeking a multi-polar world or whether global integration might be achieved also depends on the reaction of the US. There are three possible choices that the US is currently facing. The first option is containment—namely, containing China in the sphere of its global rise—that would include strengthening the capability of regional US allies, e.g., Korea and Japan; and it could also involve building its capacities, for example, in international organizations, to suppress China's rise. The second is engagement, which means engaging with China in WTO or related UN bodies and accommodating China as a global partner. This choice conforms with the US' national interest. The third option is a middle path, which can be referred to as “con-gagement,” with the US increasing its regional presence while at the same time engaging with China as an equal partner. However, the Trump administration has demonstrated that it is likely to adopt more and more containment approaches toward China in global politics, which is quite alarming. Trump believes that decision-makers on both sides should be clear about what the BRI is and mitigate the communication issues between them.

Current EU policy has three setbacks or three ‘no’s in terms of the BRI. The first is “no common European vision of the BRI,” which has resulted in the current deficit of communication. The EU doesn't have a clear idea of what the BRI is or how to

engage in it. The second is “no common interests” of member states, as some countries seek political support, while other countries seek economic cooperation with China and from the BRI. This has led to the third gap, namely, “no common initiatives” when it comes to China, which is also a problem that requires more communication between China and the EU, and within the EU itself.

When China reached a “16+1” cooperation framework with some new EU member states in Central and Eastern Europe, thus forming the basis of the BRI in Europe, it gave rise to a clear boundary between those countries that had BRI cooperation with China and those that did not have contact with China. Some people have asserted that this boundary is very similar to the “Iron Curtain” during the Cold War era. The current crisis in Europe involving the rise of populist governments, the migration crisis and Brexit has left the EU in a very fragile situation, and, under these circumstances, some people have expressed alarm that the BRI might be splitting the EU.

Sczigel concluded that there should be a unified vision among European countries and that the creation of an EU-level Belt and Road strategy is a must, as it could provide opportunities for both, and allow both sides to become real poles in the multi-polar world. Only then can the BRI be perceived by the EU side as a meaningful vision from which all different

member states can gain benefits.

Nancy Abdelghany from Egypt gave a presentation titled “One Belt and One Road—A Way for Prosperity.” After briefly introducing the content and vision of the BRI, Abdelghany elaborated on Egypt’s comparative advantages in participating in the BRI cooperation.

Over the past decades, China has been transforming its economy and playing an increasingly important role in international affairs. In this process, China saw Egypt as a regional power that could play a significant role in promoting Chinese relations with Arab and African countries. For Egypt, the “comprehensive strategic partnership” signed during President el-Sisi’s visit to Beijing in December 2014 constituted a significant shift in Egypt’s foreign policy orientation, after its decades-long, US-centric policies. On the other hand, China’s non-interventionist approach was welcomed by decision-makers in Cairo. More important, Egypt has emerged as a crucial component of the New Maritime Silk Road project due to its strategic location as the main transit point between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea.

Under these circumstances, Egypt has the opportunity to serve as the “hub” for the BRI into the Middle East and Africa. Some analysts believe that Egypt has become one of the countries along the BRI route with the greatest potential for commercial cooperation in the next five years. China and Egypt

have also elevated their relationship to a “strategic partnership,” which provides the political underpinnings to grow new commercial relationships.

Abdelghany expressed her belief that the BRI could make all participating countries better off with open trade. It is an engine for world economic growth, and it can generate peace by interconnecting markets and providing intangible benefits. Moreover, the BRI helps China build a positive image and gain international recognition. But when it comes to challenges, the BRI sometimes neglects the complexity of some less developed countries in Africa. Rather than mega infrastructure projects, what is desperately needed is better education and health systems. Also, there is a risk in that some African countries have unstable political regimes, which might increase the uncertainty for projects under the BRI. Additionally, China still needs to conduct feasibility studies to clarify what the BRI can accomplish in the countries involved.

Abdelghany suggested that coordinating policies with the development goals of institutions, including APEC, ASEAN, the African Union, and the European Union, will allow the less developed countries to benefit. The combination of Chinese capital, technology, markets, enterprises, talent, and rich experience in development with abundant African resources, the huge demographic dividend, and the as yet unrealized market potential can come together for an opportunity to create another

miracle of development. She also suggested that infrastructure projects should meet eco-sustainable standards and ought to have a clear vision on how to cope with climate change. The BRI should deal with opposing views with a clear prospective as India and Japan might have other ways to see this initiative. China still needs to conduct more feasibility studies and open up discussions to avoid such questions as “would BRI lead to conflicts or cooperation.”

Allison Lapehn from the US offered her insight on project delays in the implementation of the BRI, drawing points from case studies in Malaysia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Lapehn first pointed out that there has been a lot of buzz around the BRI in the Western media as well as the media from other parts of the world all focusing on project “failures” and offering one-sided perspectives. These articles have solely focused on the debt trap and the failure of the project from the prospect of China, and view China as being an irresponsible lender who cares nothing about the actual condition in the developing countries and is actually intentionally pushing project failure or delays. This viewpoint mainly comes from an academic study put out by the Center for Global Development (an American think-tank) on “debt trap” diplomacy published in May 2018; the study focused on Sri Lanka’s Hambantota port, which was given to China on a 99-year lease. The study gave each country a credit rating and talked about the ideal

GDP-to-debt ratio for that given credit rating. It then put the figures on a map to show what is actually happening in those countries just with the lending from China.

Lapehn pointed out that the perspective in the article is not very comprehensive, because the debates have only focused on agencies in the developing countries and only on China. If the article were to focus not only on the Chinese perspective but also the perspective of the host countries, it could be found out that, actually, more factors should be considered. In Lapehn's study of the subject, she focused on the better-known projects and project failures, but through the lens of the host countries, and concentrated more on the lack of transparency that surrounds the BRI projects, the domestic economy and project financing concerns. Her study also focused on the regime change of the host country and how that may have contributed to the delay and the eventual dissolution of project contracts.

Among research cases, the case of Hambantota port in Sri Lanka is one of the most representative ones, as China offered the most financing and also gained a 99-year operating lease for the port, which many viewed as impinging on Sri Lankan sovereignty. The case itself is fascinating, but no one is looking into how exactly Sri Lanka got to that point, how in fact it was actually the internal regime change in the country that led to this happening.

Hambantota is a port on the southern tip of Sri Lanka, and is

actually the hometown of the former president of Sri Lanka, Mahinda Rajapaksa. After taking office in November 2005, Rajapaksa took the time to launch several major infrastructure projects aimed at revitalizing his hometown economy. In 2007, after negotiations, the Export-Import Bank of China agreed to provide 85% of the cost for the first phase of the construction of Hambantota Port, and then provided a loan of US\$900 million for the second phase of the construction of Hambantota Port. However, due to poor management and inability to attract passing ships to dock at the port, the profitability of the port of Hambantota was not sufficient to pay off the loan. Therefore, Sri Lanka signed an agreement with China in July 2017 to transfer most of the operation and management of Hambantota Port to China Merchants Port Holdings Company Limited. China had kindly provided funds to help Sri Lanka build a port, but some Western media have accused it of putting a burden on Sri Lanka. The port of Hambantota has now become the oft-cited example of the “debt trap” under BRI.

Lapehn pointed out that there were also problems with the project in terms of transparency. Problems occurred during construction and led to debates as to whether there might be potential corruption within the administration. A specific case of this was in 2011, when it was found that a massive seabed rock was obstructing larger ships from entering the port, which made the port less profitable than it could have been. So they paid a

Chinese company 40 million dollars to remove the rock. Once the Sri Lankan news agencies learned that the work had cost 40 million dollars just to blast away a rock under the ocean, everyone began pointing fingers at the government and the presidential administration and said that there must be corruption going on. Lapehn highlighted the importance of this point: if there had been a transparent financial document showing what the deal was and how the money was being spent, both countries could have avoided being framed as connected to this narrative of corruption, and China would also have avoided having its name attached to this narrative.

As a result, in the 2015 elections, there was an actual regime change, and a lot of debate around this focused on China, not on China as an investor or an infrastructure builder, but as a reason for the corruption and how China was implicated in it. Under the Rajapaksa administration, ties with China grew close, so when Sirisena was elected, a lot of people predicted that the country would shift more toward India, but it turned out to be quite different. In October 2018, there was an unconstitutional move by the sitting President Sirisena to bring the former president Rajapaksa back to replace the Prime Minister. However, Sri Lanka's Supreme Court and Parliament both put their foot down and refused to accept this move. Some analysts believe that this incident reflects the strength of Sri Lanka's democratic system. However, it is yet to be seen where Sri Lanka is going, as a

recent poll for the next election shows that Rajapaksa is likely to be reelected and engage more deeply with China.

Lapehn opined that the failure of the BRI would impact everyone; therefore, everyone should be invested in its success. On the one hand, there is great need for infrastructure in these countries. On the other hand, both China and these developing countries have responsibilities to stick to the recommended GDP-Debt ratio and to adhere to transparency norms that will support development and stability in the host countries and also support the BRI as a whole.

Tang Xiaozhou from China gave a presentation titled “The Importance of the BRI in Terms of Energy Security.”

She began by introducing certain relevant statistics: China, in 2016, was the largest producer of coal worldwide, but only covered 4.6% and 3.9% of global production of oil and natural gas, respectively. At the same time, China was responsible for 13.1% of world oil consumption and 5.9% of global natural gas consumption. Countries that need to import energy are considered disadvantaged in that they would suffer an energy crisis if other countries blocked their energy imports. In the case of China, its production of coal and natural gas can cover a significant percentage of its consumption. But it is not the same situation when it comes to China’s need for oil.

Since 1993, China has become a net oil importer, and energy security, especially oil supply security, has become a major

concern of the Chinese government. For decades, China has been struggling to deal with its dependence. 80% of China's crucial oil imports pass through the Malacca Strait. If the chokepoint of the Malacca Strait were blocked by adversarial countries, China would face a crisis of oil disruption, which has been termed the "Malacca dilemma." Technically, the Malacca dilemma can be classified and divided into three categories: transportation capacity; risk factors in peacetime (e.g., piracy, terrorism, accidents); and the possibility of China's adversaries implementing a blockade and embargo against China's energy shipments passing through the Malacca Strait, which seems to be the most crucial problem.

Tang's presentation analyzed the third category primarily from the military perspective and mentioned five factors accounting for this situation: (1) the Malacca Strait is located too far away from China's coasts and naval bases;(2) China's navy lacks the experience of conducting a long-distance mission during wartime;(3) China's replenishment vessels are inadequate and crews are inexperienced for sustaining distant operations;(4) the ships of the Chinese navy would be too easily detected before the target enters the range; and(5) although the PLA could attack blockading vessels by air-launched anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), China would be highly vulnerable to surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), superior land-based air forces, and carrier-based aircraft.

Given such circumstances, the BRI is extremely important for China for opening up other routes and channels for oil transportation. China has conducted cooperative energy projects with other countries under the BRI, including the China–Myanmar oil and gas pipeline project, the Pakistani Gwadar Port project, and the Malaysian Malacca deep-water supply project. The first two projects have helped China bypass the Malacca Strait and bring oil through the Persian Gulf to China through Myanmar and Pakistan, respectively. The last project is to extend Malacca Port, enhance the presence of China in the Malacca Strait, and establish reliable ship docks in coastal ports. Even though the BRI cannot completely replace the Malacca Strait’s role in China’s energy security, to some degree, the BRI can ensure China’s energy security by creating diversified channels for importing oil.

In his closing remarks, Prof. David Moser spoke highly of all participants in the salon and suggested that this be only the first of many salons, so as to give more students opportunities to express ideas and communicate with each other. Noting that many speakers touched upon the question “What is the BRI?” during their presentation, he pointed out that China has sometimes been not so good at putting out its message, even in cases of good policy, which have been clumsily handled. More often than not, China’s messaging sounds like propaganda, so foreign media automatically discount it. This is a peculiar kind

of Chinese problem. Another problem is negative media and press. Moser pointed out that there seems to be a media hegemony in this. Western media, especially American media and the BBC, try to control the narrative, especially with issues involving China. And even Chinese state media sometimes parasitize on Western media, borrowing their explanations instead of cleaning the room and bringing out their own perspectives. He expressed his hope that unbiased people here would get out and fight against this tyranny of messaging on China.

At present, the global pattern is facing profound changes: the traditional hegemony of the US is declining while China is rising day by day, and a multi-polar pattern is beginning to form. The BRI is one of the key measures for China to push forward this transformation. Countries need to recognize the impact of changes in the global pattern and the advantages and disadvantages of developing a relationship with China, and, on this basis, make their best choice.

The 2nd New Buds Salon

Brief Discussions on the Silk Road and Area Studies

March 8, 2019

In recent years, research on the Silk Road has become an influential subject in China, while receiving increasing attention in the international world. Peking University's Institute of Area Studies (PKUIAS) held a new salon on the theme of the Silk Road and Area Studies, and invited Prof. Hsin-Kang Chang, former president of the City University of Hong Kong, internationally renowned scientist and educator, to attend the salon and communicate with students. Prof. Chang reviewed the early history of Oriental studies in Europe and area studies in the late 20th century in the US, and critically examined their experience and performance. He also shared his understanding and thoughts on academic frontiers from his long-term observation and personal experiences during his stay in countries along the Silk Road.

Prof. Chang first introduced the Silk Road through his eyes. The concept of the Silk Road sounds like a straight or single road, while in fact it consists of four different passages or routes.

The first passage was used by people in the northern frigid zone of Eurasia. The northernmost part of Eurasia is the Arctic, and south of it is an uninhabitable permafrost area and a difficult-to-access forest area. Farther south is a huge expanse of grasslands with a width of 200 kilometers that ranges from the

Great Khingan Mountains, in the east, to the northern shore of the Black Sea in Ukraine, in the west. These grasslands consist of only shrubs and grass tufts, and few mountains. Early human interaction may have started when tribes passed through these grasslands. Farther south is a temperate zone with a lower latitude. Temperatures there were higher and the rainfall richer, which was suitable for people to settle down and plant. Eventually, this gave rise to a string of oasis communities connected by trade linking the cities of central Asia while bringing together the peoples of cultivated land and desert—this trade route is what traditionally was called the Silk Road.

In addition to linking East and West, the interaction between North and South also contributed to form a transportation network; for example, the so-called southern Silk Road linked people living in temperate and tropical regions from Shanhaiguan in the East to the Yunnan–Guizhou–Sichuan region and then to Myanmar and Bangladesh. This was the road along which Zhuge Liang, in the *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*, is said to have caught and released Meng Huo seven times to subdue him. Early coastal people often used ships, and their trade routes formed a Silk Road near the coastal line. Around the 3rd century BC, Egypt, after the period of Alexander’s rule, was controlled by the Greek-speaking Ptolemaic Dynasty. These Hellenic Egyptians found that they could enter the Indian Ocean from the Red Sea. Indian Ocean winds blow from south to north

for half a year, then, for the remainder of the year, they blow from north to south. This is the monsoon, also known as the trade winds. From then on, maritime exchanges were no longer limited to ships along the coastline, but, via deep-sea routes, which could be extended to farther areas with the help of the monsoon. The grasslands route, the oasis route, the southern coastal route and the maritime route together formed the transportation network of the Silk Road.

In the 1st century BC, Zhang Qian of the Western Han Dynasty traveled from Chang'an (today's Xi'an) to today's Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. Cultural exchanges between the Han ethnic group and other ethnic groups were frequent, and the civilization of the Chinese central plain was quickly spread via the Silk Road. Seven hundred years later, Xuanzang made his way to India and further enhanced the influence of the Tang Dynasty in the western regions. Another 700 years later, the Moroccan Ibn Battuta traveled from home for the Hajj, passing through 44 countries on his 75,000-mile journey. Both Xuanzang and Ibn Battuta recorded their journeys after returning home. Their books, *Traveling Notes of the Western Regions in Great Tang Dynasty* and *Travels of Ibn Battuta*, were an important contribution for later generations to understand the Silk Road.

Prof. Chang explained that area studies originated in the US in the middle of the 20th century. At the time, it was called

Oriental studies. Our understanding of world history today is largely due to Oriental studies in Europe over the past 200 years, which can be said to have made six major achievements.

The first was the establishment of Egyptian studies. With the discovery of and 20-year effort to decode the Rosetta Stone, European scholars laid the foundation for the later study of Egyptian history.

The second was the exploration of Mesopotamian civilization. The earliest written materials and the earliest city-state groups emerged in Mesopotamia, where a civilization grew up along the banks of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in what is today's Iraq. This civilization arose a few hundreds of years earlier than Egypt. Later generations of European scholars gained a certain degree of understanding of the religious beliefs, astronomical studies and tribal political relations in Mesopotamia of that time by deciphering more than 30,000 cuneiform symbols. The database of knowledge they accumulated became one of the main achievements of Oriental studies.

The third was the exploration of the Indo-European language family. After Great Britain became powerful, the East India Company succeeded in occupying several important areas of India by formulating a series of agreements with local rulers, and sent judges to hear cases according to those agreements. One of the judges, who was proficient in several languages, was

very interested in Sanskrit. Through his research, he came up with a hypothesis of a proto-Indo-European language. He believed that human languages had a common source. Since then, after more than 200 years of linguistic research, some aspects of his hypothesis have been widely accepted.

The fourth was the discovery of the Indus Valley civilization. In the 20th century, British and German archaeologists discovered urban relics of streets, houses and even artworks in the Indus Valley. Although their creators are not known, it is undeniable that from 5,000 years ago to 3,500 years ago, the Indus Valley had a fairly well developed civilization, which was even earlier than the Indian civilization formed after the establishment of Brahmanism by the Aryans. If chronologically ordered, the Tigris and Euphrates civilizations were the earliest, appearing 6,000 years ago. The Egyptian civilization produced by the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt appeared around 5,500 years ago. The civilization of the Indus Valley began approximately 5,000 years ago, while physical evidence of the Chinese civilization is evident from about 4,000 years ago. It can be seen that the development of human civilization progressed from west to east. It is hard to tell whether these civilizations were somehow transmitted from one to another, or whether each developed independently, but one thing is clear: there were some interactions between the different civilizations during their history.. They interacted for different

reasons—some for trade, some for migration, and some for conquest. After conquest, trade became more developed, and people prospered. In this way, a tribe became a country, and a country became an empire. Oriental studies brought an understanding of this process to later generations.

The fifth achievement of Oriental studies was the discovery of the grassland empires. Horses were first tamed, roughly speaking, on the northern shore of today's Black Sea, and this was an accomplishment of the people of the local grassland empire in order to take advantage of the grasslands trade routes. Archaeological finds have shown that the grassland empire produced many exquisite metal decorations and war weapons; their descendants are the Scythians who live in today's Tuva Republic.

The sixth was the re-emergence of the Silk Road. Although the Silk Road is widely recognized as having once existed, there have not been many related systematic discoveries. In 1980, some German archaeologists found a well-preserved ancient corpse underground in Loulan, and some artists' sketches attempted to reconstruct the face of the corpse. As a result, it was concluded that the corpse was of someone from the Tocharian tribes, who are today considered European people rather than Mongolian people. In the holdings of the British Museum, there is a letter that was found under a beacon tower of the Great Wall; it was written in the early years of the Jin

Dynasty by the Sogdians. After decoding the Sogdian language, scholars learned that it was a letter home by a Sogdian who wanted to tell his family that everything was fine with him during the “Upheaval of the Eight Princes” during the Western Jin Dynasty. The letter also gives evidence of what the Sogdians’ lives were like when they lived along the Silk Road. In addition, the Nestorian Stele, dating from 781, records that Christianity was introduced to China from Iran during the Tang Dynasty.

Despite the great contributions of Oriental studies, after the US became the world’s strongest country, in the mid-20th century, the field declined. As a result, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation, and the Ford Foundation jointly supported the establishment of area studies disciplines in many well-known universities in the US. They were committed to cultivating a group of academics who were knowledgeable about a wide range of aspects of a given area, such as its customs, peoples, legal systems and social conditions, without necessarily focusing on one particular discipline. Although in the beginning this concept of talent fostering was not accepted by some universities, in time, area studies gradually came to be accepted by the academic community.

Some people have criticized area studies specialists as being jacks-of-all-trades and masters of none. In this regard, Prof. Chang pointed out that such an evaluation is not scientific. That is because those who are engaged in area studies must have

one arena in which they are the expert, while, at the same time, they need to know about other related knowledge. In other words, an area specialist needs to “know everything about something, while knowing something about everything.”

The perspective of area studies is very broad and its research methods are diverse. For example, when comparing the modernization processes experienced by China, India and Iran, and the respective cultural characteristics of the three, China alone among the three can be regarded as a continuous civilization. It is neither a nation state, nor an empire.

No matter whether you consider the ancient Chinese classics, such as the *Zuo Zhuan* and the *Spring and Autumn Annals*, or the belief systems of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism— and no matter what political power has ruled— Chinese civilization has existed in the land of the Yangtze River, the Yellow River and the Pearl River basins for thousands of years. It is our common spiritual home. India can be seen as a religious society that has been reborn several times but never successfully transformed its genes. No aspect of Indian life can be separated from religion, and the religious complex of Indians is also very strong.

Iran is different from the former two. Persia has always been a very important part of Asia. Being located on the east side of Mesopotamia, it quickly learned from the civilization of Mesopotamia. Similar to China, in Persia the duality of farming

and animal husbandry and nomadic life and agricultural life coexisted in its culture. Persia's essence has had great influence on human thought. Many branches or aspects of Persian religion have had a major impact on world religions, such as Zoroastrian cosmology, the worship of the sun god Mitra, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism and Nestorianism. It is worth noting that Islam did not enter Persia until 650 AD. After 650 AD, the Persian Sassanid Empire was wiped out by the Arab army, and the Persians were all forcibly converted to Islam.

Today, around 98 percent of Iranians believe in Islam. Although scientific works of mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, medicine and many other fields were written in Arabic, the authors were all Persian, and many social systems in the Arab world are a continuation of Persia's. It can be said that the Arabs assimilated the Persians religiously, but the Persians assimilated the Arabs systematically and ideologically.

Regarding the relationship between academic value and utilitarianism, Prof. Chang expressed his belief that today's Chinese scholars have both the need to serve a certain purpose and a personal love of academics and the pursuit of truth and goodness, just as did many scholars of Oriental studies in history. If we only regard area studies as a utilitarian academic field instead of pursuing truth, goodness and beauty, we might very possibly fail both in our academic research and our effort to serve a certain purpose.

In France, for example, the earliest university was the Collège de Sorbonne, which was founded in 1253 to serve the church. Around the time of François I (r. 1515–1547), the French Renaissance began. François I believed that the college was too utilitarian and served only the church rather than academics, so he built Le Collège de France near the Sorbonne to encourage creativity in academic research. From that point, the scientific exploration and creativity of Europeans entered a heyday, which saw the development of such fields as anatomy in the 15th century; double-entry bookkeeping in the 16th century; Newtonian physics and calculus in the 17th century; cytology, physiology, and the steam engine in the 18th century; the theory of evolution and electromagnetism in the 19th century; and quantum theory and the theory of relativity in the 20th century, among others. However, during the same period, countries in East Asia made little contribution in related fields. Was it because of insufficient economic strength, or lack of talent, or other reasons? This is something for area studies specialists to think about.

Prof. Hsin-Kang Chang went on to say that, in the new era, it is necessary to re-examine the new Silk Road and generate some new ideas. China is both a landlocked country and a maritime country. China is also a country with a shortage of energy resources besides coal, and therefore needs to import a large amount of oil. This requires that China's energy strategy

take into full consideration the safety and reliability of both land and sea transportation. Regarding the maritime route, especially in strategically important areas, it is necessary to coordinate with the maritime powers to ensure our right of navigation. In the “greater Central Asia” area, China also needs to cooperate with relevant countries for mutual benefit and make the “New Silk Road” stable and peaceful.

In terms of the New Silk Road and area studies, Prof. Chang raised several questions. First, Chinese people’s current understanding of the Silk Road is insufficient, and talent in related fields is also lacking. The implementation of the Belt and Road initiative requires that the cultivation of talent be accelerated. Second, some countries that are considered to be China’s “natural partners” actually have an insufficient understanding of China. Their reasons for joining the “Belt and Road” may be to address certain needs, but at the same time they are somewhat wary. Third, current projects mainly involve the construction of infrastructure, including seaports, airports, railways, highways and power plants. However, now the world has entered an era of network economy, and it is necessary to increase the number of cooperation projects in the fields of e-commerce and big data or artificial intelligence that are related to the “Belt and Road.”

The New Buds Salon also invited four PKU students to have a dialogue with Prof. Chang.

Hu Li: I searched the keyword “Silk Road” on CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) and found about 10,000 entries. But when I searched the keyword “area studies,” there were only some 90 entries. The discrepancy between the two is very obvious. While a web search may not be of academic significance, it still can show that people’s concern for the Silk Road is more intense, while less attention is paid to area studies. In addition, you feel that it is far-fetched to put the Silk Road and area studies together, but I feel that there is a deep significance in this.

Today, we talked about Oriental studies, and learned that Europe’s Oriental studies mainly concerned research over the “Orient” as they conceived it during the era of the British Empire. Then we talked about the US, which, as a superpower, proactively carried out large-scale institutionalized disciplinary research on the world. PKU’s establishment of the Institute of Area Studies shows that China is now more conscious of and active to know the world. Europeans did this once, and Americans followed later. Now China wants to do this. This is my understanding.

You mentioned that when Europeans got to know the world, they did so through direct contact and simple communication. For example, when missionaries came to China, they observed and recorded their experiences during different periods of China’s history, and then that knowledge spread to Europe. This

is a process of reflecting on practice. Today, we are studying the situation of other regions and countries from the perspective of a discipline. Such a research approach is very different from a historical approach, and the conclusions reached have both consistency and difference. With your experience of reading thousands of books and walking thousands of miles, how can we better combine theory and practice?

Hsin-Kang Chang: Both knowledge and practice are needed. It is impossible for everyone to have the opportunity to go to so many countries or to read all the materials. Shortly after the US began to promote area studies, President Kennedy proposed sending a large number of American youths with ideals and knowledge to work all over the world instead of only studying issues, which was similar to the missionaries in the 19th century, who volunteered or were assigned by church to go to other places to preach. Afterward, some of them also chose to conduct area studies on relevant areas after returning to the US. Therefore, knowledge and practice are never considered as two separate categories.

Qian Chengdan: The question that you just raised is very worthy of our attention. Should area studies be utilitarian or academic? Out of what purpose are we doing research? Shall we do utilitarian research out of political needs or shall we achieve academic goals out of ideals and interest? These questions are very important. We are not saying that conducting area studies

well means that our studies cannot have any secular or utilitarian tinge at all, but we should insist on a very firm academic direction. Only by doing academics well can we possibly serve certain goals.

Hsin-Kang Chang: I agree with Prof. Qian's point of view. First, we should have a nuanced understanding. Second, we should not do academics for a fixed goal. If we only want to study for a fixed goal, the spiritual motivation of doing research may not persist, let alone the achievements.

Lu Yujia: Prof. Chang, you made a point of talking about the Persian civilization. You have also pointed out in your books that the teachings of the Shiites are more acceptable than those of the Sunnis, and that they pay more attention to the legal principle of public resolution after deliberation; therefore, the Shiite teachings have no essential difference with modern democracy. My question for you is, how you think of the current political model unique to Iran?

Hsin-Kang Chang: Of course, I can't say I have no opinions about it. But I am actually not very confident about my opinions. I think Shiite theory and practice is more like Christianity. Internally, today's Iranian regime is both a succession of the Shiite spiritual tradition or its legal tradition, and an opposition to the previous Shah's desire to take the path of Westernization through the White Revolution. Externally, several Arab countries, as well as Israel and the US, did not

agree with it. Even so, Iran has implemented universal suffrage for electing the president and parliament on several occasions. Although the nominated candidates must be approved by the highest religious group, campaigning still exists, which would not occur in Saudi Arabia.

Qian Chengdan: Regarding the nature of the Iranian regime, it does involve the standards and models of the democratic system. According to many Westerners, the democratic system should be modeled on their own. Especially in the eyes of the Americans, Europe has not reached the level of democracy that they have. If we consider the issue in this way, how do we label the current Islamic Republic of Iran? Is it democratic or non-democratic?

Hsin-Kang Chang: I would say that it is a democracy under guidance. The highest religious group in Iran controls everything. There are religious committees in each ministry, and each province needs the approval of the committee when it runs a candidate for governor. Democracy is there, but the Ayatollah's consent is required. I believe that their democracy is much better than that of the countries on the east coast of the Persian Gulf.

Ding Yuting: You mentioned in your books that fluid dynamics research could be applied to study the development of history, which is inspirational. I am very curious—considering you have gone so many Silk Road countries and read so many books—what unique research perspectives did you gain in the

process?

Hsin-Kang Chang: My overall feeling is “same dream, same world.” Whether from the perspective of history or reality, there are both similarities and differences between people. If we only see similarities when travelling but not diverse cultures, such travel goes in vain. So we must see both similarities and differences.

Wu Qijun: I once read Prof. Chang’s “Reflections on the Greater Middle East.” The development model of the Middle East is a hot issue. You believe that the Islamic countries in the Greater Middle East which can produce a large number of scholars who could make judgments independently, and find an accessible modern path within the scope of the public’s acceptance of the teachings, could become the model of future development for countries in the Greater Middle East. You simplified this model as “Islam + Democracy + Science.” I have a question for you: As for your emphasis on the scholars who can judge independently, is it because you think scholars will play a greater role in this process, or because you yourself are a scholar? In addition, Iran, Egypt and Turkey are now considered to be the most likely models for imitation by other Middle East countries. Based on your years of observation, which country is more in line with such a development model?

Hsin-Kang Chang: It may not be quite precise for me to use the term “scholar.” I am not referring to scholars such as

mathematicians or astronomers, but to a group of well-recognized Islamic scholars in the Islamic region. For Islamic countries, it is difficult for them to give up their beliefs, which have endured for more than a thousand years. There was an attempt by Atatürk, but, in the end, even he could not manage it. I think that Islam is a community of people who have been Islamized for centuries, but it does not mean that they must be limited to one interpretation of the Shariah. Europe, under the guidance of the Catholic Latin Church, experienced a series of religious interpretations, but subsequently Martin Luther made a new interpretation of the teachings and the Bible. If there were to be one person like Martin Luther in Islamic society, then that would be what I referred to as “Islam + Science.” The “democracy” I use is only at the conceptual level—it does not refer to the application of some specific method of election. That’s because democracy itself does not have a precise definition. Therefore, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia will certainly have different political systems in the future that will be in line with their own reality.

Question from audience: How will area studies push forward the development of the Silk Road? What does area studies include? In terms of serving politics, how does area studies provide guidance to scholars from an academic perspective?

Hsin-Kang Chang: Area studies can help cultivate talent

but it is not a “mold” for casting talent. As the saying goes, a master can only lead you to the door, while practice relies on the individual. In addition, in history, academics can often serve social welfare and political rule, but if the starting point of academics is to serve a specific purpose, the result is often counterproductive.