

The 5th ‘All Under Heaven’ Forum
Research for Practical Use:
A Seminar on University Think Tanks Function in Area
Studies (II)
October 24-25, 2020

The 5th All Under Heaven Forum sponsored by the Institute of Area Studies, Peking University (PKUIAS) was held from October 24 to 15, 2020 at the university. Its theme was “Research for Practical Use: A Seminar on University Think Tanks Function in Area Studies.” The forum aims to break through the barriers to university think tank development, and promote better integration between area studies and the construction of new think tanks.

Over the two-day meeting, nearly 50 area studies scholars and think tank management staff from 17 universities nationwide shared their opinions. They discussed three topics: goals and methods of the work of area studies think tanks in universities; problems and solutions of the work of area studies think tanks in universities; and evaluation systems for the work of area studies think tanks in universities.

II. Problems and solutions of the work of area studies think tanks in universities

Prof. Huang Renwei, executive deputy director of the Institute for the Belt and Road Initiative and Global Governance at Fudan University, offered his views on the development of

area studies programs in China and the role of university think tanks.

He reviewed and summarized the overall development of China's area studies. China's area studies programs were initiated in the 1960s. They were represented by Asian, African and Latin American studies at Peking University, Japanese studies at Nankai University, American studies at Wuhan University, and European studies at Fudan University. In the 1980s, the structure of area studies in China entered a systematic formative stage. A lot of area studies societies were established at that time, especially in the field of national history studies. American, British, French, Japanese and German historical societies were established one after another. Studies on economics and literature began to appear. Taking American studies as an example, four smaller societies formed, focused on economics, literature, history and politics. Together these smaller societies formed the American Society. Huang Renwei said that area studies in the 1980s were focused on basic research.

However, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, researchers shifted to focus on hot issues in individual countries. Basic research was put aside.

Huang Renwei said that in the past five years, there has been a second upsurge in China's area studies. The Ministry of Education has set up hundreds of area studies centers to

maximize the role of area studies around the country. However, some institutions are rushing headlong into the field, and their quality is uneven.

In view of this, it is necessary to redefine the concept of area studies. Area studies should include three levels. The first level is the language, culture and history of a country. This is the basis of area studies. For the second level, social science should be incorporated. For example, when studying the US, researchers should look at the country's politics, economy, diplomacy, law and sociology. The third level is studying the country's major practical problems and important issues related to China.

These three levels together constitute the three major sections of area studies. However, taking the current domestic studies programs on the US as an example, area studies basically focuses on the third level, regional key issues with a focus on Sino-US relations. Similar problems exist in European studies, Japanese studies, Russian studies, and so on. This approach to area studies does not have vitality and potential.

It can be seen that China's area studies programs have experienced several surges and detours. It is necessary to seriously consider the nature, disciplinary logic and development direction of area studies right now. Huang Renwei said that there are three major advantages of university think tanks conducting area studies. First, their basic disciplines are

strong. This is the biggest advantage. Second, their comprehensive disciplines have great research capacity. This includes all disciplines and inter-disciplinary studies. Third, it is easy for them to form disciplinary talent echelons.

Their disadvantages are also obvious. First, they are relatively weak in coordinating with national strategies. Second, their front-line research ability is weak. Since few researchers live in the target country for long, they cannot become experts in studying the country. Third, many professors tend to do research independently and there is a shortage of research teams. Fourth, their rapid response ability is weak, and thus unable to meet the demands in decision-making and business. Fifth, there is an acute shortage of area studies talent, and a lot of personnel from target countries need to be invited to join the research.

Prof. Yang Shu, director of the Institute for Central Asian Studies (ICAS) of Lanzhou University, spoke about the working methods of university area studies think tanks. He shared three opinions with the audience.

First, the expansion of think tanks in recent years is not driven by the discipline's needs, but by government decisions and requirements. Generally speaking, universities have not been ready for this. Second, China's think tanks can be roughly divided into public and private. Public think tank builders can be institutionally defined as universities, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and government departments. Only university

think tanks are doing basic research. This is the unique character of university think tanks and should not be discarded. Third, the current goal of university think tanks is not consistent with the requirements of the Ministry of Education. University think tanks should all do basic research, except for the discipline of international relations.

Yang Shu believes that it is important to clarify the relationship between area studies and the study of international issues, international relations and international politics. Area studies focuses on “internal” studies, while international politics and international relations focus on “external” studies. In this way, the division of labor between international relations studies and area studies can be very clear. Of course, there is some crossover between the two.

Yang Shu also said that research on unpopular minor languages is closely related to government support. Universities need not to consider whether their minor language programs can survive, but whether the universities have the capacity to support the development of the programs.

The most necessary supporting discipline for area studies should be geography, since its sub-disciplines contain human geography and physical geography. Human geography covers many aspects, including traffic geography, population geography, industrial geography, agricultural geography, epiontology and zoogeography. Many of these research fields

coincide with area studies.

Finally, special attention should be paid to the disciplinary boundaries and methods of area studies. The experience of recruiting students for one language in a certain region is worthy of affirmation, because language is the most basic feature of a region. However, there is no fixed model for discipline combinations, and different countries and regions should follow different models.

At the end of his speech, Yang Shu stressed that basic research and multidisciplinary integration are the strengths of university think tanks. Universities should make use of their strengths to develop their own characteristics. They should innovate rather than imitate, and be pragmatic rather than grandstand. The development of university think tanks used to take the number of papers as a standard for success, categorizing journals into core and non-core, with grading criteria for both categories. Nowadays, the development of think tanks is directed by administrative instructions. The administrative level of certain officials is taken as the criterion for judging the quality of reports. This is a big problem, especially in basic discipline studies.

As a major country, China's global influence is gradually expanding, and basic research is the focus of area studies. Consultancy work can be done alongside basic research. Consultation is not limited to existing problems, and there are

still many places that need to be covered in area studies. As a result, researchers should not be too eager for quick success and instant benefits.

Associate Professor Yao Yuanmei of the Department of History of East China Normal University shared her previous research and thoughts on the current situation at the China-India border.

She took the Kashmir issue as an example to analyze the needs of times for contemporary area studies. She believes that India has undergone great changes since the Modi government came to power. India introduced a new national security strategy that led to the current confrontation on the China-India border. This national security strategy is based on the power games between China and the US, as well as India's domestic needs. When the Congress Party was ruling, India was a democracy and a lot of problems remained unsolved. The Modi government got support from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its parent organization RSS. In the name of national security, it carried out comprehensive reforms in India.

Based on the scientific frontier strategy of India during the British colonial period, India's new national security strategy is built around border and national security concerns. India's strategy is to use the Kashmir issue to jointly restrain China in cooperation with the US. In this way, India can retell its history and use this narrative to develop India's domestic affairs,

diplomacy, military, and national defense. Modi's ultimate goal is forging a new India and realizing the country's dream of becoming a great power. India mainly makes use of the Kashmir issue and infrastructure development to carry out Modi's policy of "advancing the frontier." Modi also makes use of Hinduism (because 70 percent of India's inhabitants are Hindus) and manipulates India's relations with great powers.

The British frontier strategy of Kashmir issue was introduced after the great rivalry between the UK and Russia and the Napoleonic Wars in the 19th century. The East India Company already established a firm footing in India, and North America was independent.

The UK set out a strategy to create a second British empire centered on India. In internal discussions, it was decided to move the Indian defense line to higher ground, where India could be better defended. The strategy was known as the "Kashmir region frontier strategy." This strategy consisted of three regions, the Sinduku Stone Mountains, Kashmir and the Himalayan Mountains. For 150 years, the British colonists deliberately and silently carried out this strategy. The strategy is known to use only from the contents of British archives. Little was known about it by the public.

The Indian government has made similar strategic attempts before, but the time has never been right. The Modi government has observed the competition between China and the US ever

since it came to power. India decided the right time has come. The Indian government seldom mentions the strategy publicly. Instead, it is discussed internally. Bharat Shakti, a think tank under India's defense ministry, outlined such a strategy. Yao Yuanmei said she learned about the strategy at a high-level think tank forum, where India's former deputy national security adviser was tasked with promoting the new security concept.

After playing the new national security card, India's internal affairs have changed. It is no longer a democracy, and the Modi government has a lot of power.

Diplomatically, India used to be a non-aligned, strategically independent country. S. Jaishankar, India's foreign minister, advocates a policy dubbed "engage America, manage China" in his new book. For this reason, India is active in many forums such as the quadrilateral mechanism and the US-India "2+2" dialogue.

A very complicated issue left over from the past, the Kashmir issue, is now dealt with by the Indians in the same way as the British colonists did. India can easily achieve multiple goals with Kashmir at the present time. In 2019, India "reorganized" the Kashmir region into two union territories, Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh. Also, it strengthened the blockade of China's Aksai Chin. Playing the Kashmir card helped the BJP win in the 2019 general election. The special status of Jammu and Kashmir was abolished, and the BJP

directly controlled Kashmir region.

The BJP further locked down the Pakistan-controlled Kashmir region and China's Aksai Chin, laying the groundwork in public opinion to further "advance the border." The Kashmir issue was adjudicated by the United Nations. Modi is trying to leverage the relationship between great powers in competition — between China and the US — to realize India's dream of being a great power. Modi is trying to leverage the relationship among major powers against the backdrop of the Sino-US competition to realize India's dream of being a great power.

Regarding the Kashmir issue, Britain carried out its strategy silently for more than 100 years during the colonial period, and succeeded, Yao Yuanmei concluded. The Modi government has also come up with a similar national strategy, which has resulted in the border confrontation between India and China. Academically, much of the historical knowledge in the archives is worthy of being made public. At the national policy-making level, the Indian government has made a strategy based on long-term studies and is moving forward step by step. So far, it is working well. The "Kashmir" maneuver has achieved its first and second level of goals, and India is moving toward its third and fourth levels. Every step it takes is to some extent at the expense of China's interests. China should think about how to respond. In a word, China's area studies have a promising future with a long way to go.

Based on the particularity of African studies, Associate Professor Liu Haifang, director of the Center for African Studies, Peking University, shared the objectives and methods of African studies in China. There is a crisis in African studies, which is under area studies, she said. A British scholar once pointed out that no discipline has ever questioned its usefulness as consistently as African studies. As the British Empire shrank, the UK no longer valued African studies.

Liu Haifang expressed estrangement from African scholars, and frustration over a lack of funds and not being able to travel to Africa for front-line research. A crisis in African studies has also emerged in the US. Prof. Hayden, director of the African Studies Association, noted in 1995 that African studies in the US aimed to support the country's Cold War strategic needs. That is why African studies and other area studies have been changing since 1990. Prof. Hayden argued that research must go beyond narrow national security strategy considerations and include more perspectives. In 2000, an Australian scholar caused an international sensation by writing an article explaining why he abandoned African studies. This article resonated with many scholars, which has led to a rethinking of the particularity of African studies.

The crisis in African studies is a global phenomenon with different meanings. The earliest British African studies emerged as colonial studies. The discipline developed starting in 1915

under the order of the British king. Early anthropological studies all aimed at supporting imperial colonization. These institutes then faced an identity crisis as Africans started nationalist movements. The institutes made changes by training Africans. A lot of Europeans and Americans went to teach in African research institutions and universities, which is often referred to as “the second colonial invasion.”

The colonial cause supported imperial rule in the beginning, but colonialism has become an ideological shackle. How to decolonize and deracialize European studies in Africa remains an important issue. A movement for Africans to reclaim ideaistic sovereignty plays an important role. US African studies programs have made great contributions to the field. But the most important problem is the influence of race-based politics. The most important resources and institutions are dominated by white scholars, leaving little support for African scholars. As a result, the so-called founders of the field of African studies — who had enjoyed a high reputation for a long time — are now held in very low esteem by African scholars.

Since the Bandung Conference, China’s African studies reflect both scholars’ initiatives and the needs of China. The studies on African history at Peking University predate the government call to do such work in the 1960s. Problems also remain in China’s African studies scholarship. For example, today’s studies of Sino-African relations seem to have replaced

the study of Africa itself. China's records and research on Africa go back far earlier than contemporary Europeans. However, the European racist views on Africa were blindly introduced into China, and have influenced the ideas of Chinese scholars today. In addition, there are many public misconceptions about Africa in China, and universities need to make more efforts to disseminate correct knowledge to the public.

Liu Haifang said that the day before the meeting, she attended the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women. This was a webinar co-sponsored by leading African think tanks on women. Many scholars thanked the US for its important contribution, and said they wanted to learn about Beijing's positions. Therefore, Liu Haifang believes that China, as a great power, should care about the world. Universities should take up part of the work, especially for regions that have been marginalized and oppressed for a long time like Africa.

Prof. Chen Dezheng, executive director of the Research Center for Pacific Island Countries at Liaocheng University, said in his speech that viewed from its educational level and location, Liaocheng University was not well suited for area studies. However, eight years ago, the university combined its own research with China's strategic plan of expanding into the oceans, targeted its research on Pacific island countries, and made progress. As a participant in the construction of the

research center for eight years, he shared some thoughts on building an area studies think tank in a local university.

First, a university think tank is different from an academic research institution. It is a systematic project. As long as an academic research institution has talent and research materials, it can concentrate on research. However, a university think tank is supposed to interact with not only academics, but also the government, enterprises and social groups. This means that a think tank cannot act blindly, but must connect with the government, enterprises and public groups. A think tank should connect with domestic parties, the government, and enterprises and public groups in target countries. It requires the think tank's leader to act more like a manager, organizer and coordinator than a traditional scholar.

Keeping this in mind, the center has urged the university to launch undergraduate programs in foreign languages and foreign history. Samoan experts were invited to teach the Samoan language. Pacific island countries studies are one of the majors for a master's degree, enrolling five students per year. In this way, a comprehensive system involving the think tank, teaching and research has been formed.

In terms of external links, the center holds high-level forums and diplomats' forums, regularly visits government departments, invites diplomats to give short-term lectures, and sends think tank members to island countries to support local

education and do research. The center cooperates with the Foreign Affairs Office of Shandong Province and has signed a strategic cooperation agreement with the People's Government of Liaocheng. If a university wants to build a good think tank, it should treat it as a systematic project. While doing research, it should establish good external relations and keep ties effective and smooth.

Second, a university think tank should be based on academic research, and go beyond this. Only through the base of a truth-seeking academic spirit and the accumulation of academic research can a think tank go far. An area studies think tank cannot be confined to conventional academic research. At present, the academic staff members of the center's think tank mainly focus on studies of world history, but history studies remain detached from the reality. The institutions that the think tank is responsible to only want to solve current problems. This requires that area studies think tanks based on world history studies break away from academic conventions and find their research topics in practical matters.

The center spent the first few years collecting as much research material as possible. It also developed a data platform, published books on island countries' histories, and published papers to establish an academic foundation. Based on this, the center has gradually expanded into practical matters, integrating the past and the present. The center has presided over four

National Social Science Fund projects, accounting for 70 percent of the total number of projects approved by the National Social Science Fund in this research field. The center used the media to publish videos documenting Pacific island countries, and presented research consultancy reports to superiors. The center's research team includes world history scholars and those from related areas such as international relations, international politics, tourism management, and foreign languages and literature.

Third, an area studies think tank relies on government support, but to some extent has to maintain independence. The center's development is inseparable from the approval and support of governments at all levels. Without such support, there is no start-up fund, no opportunity to go out for research, no exact information source, and even no full support from the university. Therefore, maintaining communication with the government is the foundation for a university think tank to survive. However, an area studies think tank is different. Apart from dealing with the domestic government, enterprises and social groups, it must also keep in touch with the government, enterprises and social groups in the target countries. Otherwise, doing research will be like making bricks without straw.

Preventing target countries from considering university think tanks as part of the Chinese government is the precondition for a think tank to keep in touch with foreign

governments, enterprises, and social organizations. In this way, foreigners can more easily accept a Chinese think tank's visit and research, and a think tank can play a more effective role in friendly people-to-people exchanges between China and the target countries.

Another implication of maintaining independence is that the conclusions made by a think tank should be based first on facts, then on value judgments. Only in this way can think tank reports be more valuable and provide better and more accurate decision-making and reference for authorities.

Prof. Han Dongyu, vice president of Northeast Normal University, said that a university think tank should stick to its academic nature, for its position is very important. For example, after the 2011 Kanto earthquake in Japan, a Chinese official received a report on using the occasion to bring Japanese scholars to China. However, the official who received the report had stayed in Japan for a long time, and understands Japan well, so the official did not submit the report to the central government. As the official predicted, Japanese scholars did not go abroad from the earthquake zone, and all overseas Japanese scholars came back to Japan.

Since the writer of a report may not understand the culture and psychology of a region or country, it is risky for the writer to consider area studies issues. In this case, the author did not understand the strong patriotism of the Japanese and the

country's development after the Meiji Restoration. Neither did the writer study the "traceless" patriotism of the Japanese. This resulted in a misjudgment.

Han Dongyu said that only by using academic research as basis to understand a country or region's history in depth can we understand its current situation. When developing diplomatic relations with neighboring countries, China should give top priority to understanding their mindset. In China's domestic academic circles, Prof. Qian Chengdan put forward a concept he called "garrison the frontiers or border region academically." This means defending and protecting the frontier with academic research instead of relying too much on politicians and the military.

The inherent problem of academic research lies in whether historians operate think tanks. President Xi Jinping pointed out that historical studies are the foundation of all human social sciences. Karl Marx said that there is only one science in the world, which is history. Ancient Chinese thought posits two learning methods. One is "studying the current situation to probe the past," an idea from the Spring and Autumn Annals. The other is "studying the past to unveil the future" in the Records of the Grand Historian, better known as Shiji. The two ideas are not contradictory. They must combine to represent a complete history and finally find the root and depth of a problem. Scholars should consider a problem with both macro and micro

perspectives.

Sun Tzu once said, “The matter of life and death for the people and the way to determine the survival of a country must be carefully studied.” Han Dongyu believes that it is very important to offer wide opportunities for airing views when developing a think tank. The conclusions of a think tank need not be made public, but should tell the truth. “Not talking to people who are worthy of communication drives away talent, and talking to people who are not is only a waste of words.” A person of noble character should neither drive away talent nor waste words. With the good wishes and deployment of the Ministry of Education, various area studies centers have been established all over the country. However, the Ministry of Education has to enforce certain messages and practices according to the will of the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China (CPC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and even the International Department of the Central Committee of CPC.

In this sense, the Publicity Department of the CPC, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the International Department of the Central Committee of CPC measure a university think tank against national needs. However, the most distinguished characteristic of a university think tank is its academic nature. Without its academic nature, its research will lack depth, breadth and intensity. So, a university must be given certain degree of

autonomy to speak freely. Without doubt, such autonomy needs to be disciplined by rules.

During a discussion, Prof. Yang Shu pointed out that the current research atmosphere and academic freedom outlook in Chinese universities is not optimistic. More and more research areas are forbidden on major national-level topics, such as Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan and Hong Kong issues. A university think tank should give play to its advantages to study important issues in history and culture. Prof. Qian Chengdan strongly agreed with Prof. Yang Shu on the relationship between area studies and international relations studies.

Prof. Yang Cheng, executive director of the Shanghai Academy of Global Governance and Area Studies at Shanghai International Studies University, delivered a speech centered on the “Kissinger syndrome” and the “disagreement between theory and practice.” The “Kissinger syndrome” is a term derived from the phrase “Kissinger symptom” put forward by Wang Yizhou. The phrase suggests that among international political scholars, the more engaged they are with political power, the greater their influence will be.

Prof. Yang Cheng did not want to describe a negative trend as a pathological phenomenon, but rather as a trend to be overcome, so he uses “syndrome” instead of “disorder.”

The strong link between “Kissinger syndrome” and area studies scholars is not new, but a worldwide phenomenon. It

may be more acute in China. “Western politics changes with academic ideas,” said Liang Qichao. However, the philosophy of China always changes with politics. There is a Chinese tradition that “officialdom is the natural outlet for good scholars,” and Chinese scholars “are proud of being a teacher of an emperor.”

If academia is to serve politics, it should make itself truly useful in supporting the national interest. If scholars all pander to their superiors, big problems will arise. Such cases are not rare. The essence of academic research is to pursue truth, while that of policy research is to seek application. Essentially, they follow different logic.

Yang Cheng analyzed the disagreement between theory and practice by sharing stories from his 7 years of work experience at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and his 5 years of experience at the research office of the Russian Embassy. He said that many articles contain long theoretical statements but little value for real practice. Decision-making departments also lack forward thinking. Many diplomats majored in foreign languages in university, but the logic of language studies is different from that of other disciplines. The former focuses on the ability of imitation, while the latter requires originality. Analyzing causes of serious disconnection between theory and practice in think tank research, some is caused by information asymmetry, while some may be due to a lack of local knowledge and solid fieldwork. As a result, major problems have emerged with many

research results.

Yang Cheng shared Shanghai International Studies University's solution to this problem. The university has expended great efforts to resolve the "Kissinger syndrome" and advocated combining policy studies and academic research. Policy studies should be supported by basic academic research. In order to solve the problem of disconnection between theory and practice, field investigations should be valued to stress a balanced supply of knowledge.

For example, graduate students studying European and Asian civilizations at Shanghai International Studies University need to learn at least three languages, Russian, English and the local language of the target country. If there were no epidemic, students would have spent a year and a half in Central Asia, Russia and Western academic centers for Central Asia studies for further study. In order to establish a "two-city perspective," they would focus on the target country and region's main ideas.

Prof. Chen Zhiqiang, director of the Greek Studies Center at Nankai University, shared his thoughts on solving problems he encountered at his center. He said that the center met a series of problems after its establishment. To solve them, staff first adjusted the structure of the center, and then brought in talent well versed in modern and contemporary Greek issues. Then, staff adjusted the teaching structure, increasing the number of part-time positions. They also created two standing research

fellowships in Greece. Scholars who initially did ancient Greek studies maintained their original research, while at the same time expanding their thinking and extending their research toward contemporary studies. It means that we did not give up our traditional research advantage although we added new fields and directions and intensified research on Greece in modern times. In addition, administrators made efforts to provide research resources for their staff, including offices, equipment and materials.

Prof. Chen Zhiqiang gave a summary of his experience in this process. First, we need to update our thinking. The older generation of scholars, including college and university presidents and department deans or institute directors, should change their thinking, which only focused on academic research, and realize the significance of policy research. He said that the development of their center is a gradual process which involves the transformation of scholars, university heads and department heads. Without the support of the university in human resources, funds and materials, it is hard for the center to move forward.

Second, we should raise the awareness of service. In the past, scholars only paid attention to their own research and teaching, at most participating in work of the department they belonged to or related social work. But nowadays these teachers have had a sense of urgency because China, at this critical moment, needs not only economic development to become a

strong power in the international stage, but also needs to learn, which takes time. Think tank development also needs patience and endurance. The current internet environment has mirrored the immature mind of the people, which is far from the national mindset that the people of a real big power should have. Research staff should improve their awareness of serving the country and actively participate in academic conferences and meetings relevant to political science and international relations. They should have good coordination with upper-level administration departments of the Ministry of Education. They should also proactively attend the exchange activities of each think tank and center.

Third, scholars should actively integrate with the national strategy. To grasp the opportunity of scientific decision-making in the early stage of national strategy, scholars should never stop learning, following up, or giving play to the advantage of universities in theoretical work. In this sense, the Greek Studies Center has made a series of achievements in practical work and has won two national major projects. Some disciplines have combined with academically advanced work on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Last but not least, we should try to create first-class think tanks. He suggested establishing university think tank alliances as well as institutions, and publishing materials for internal circulation, so that everyone can share their experience and

make advances together. Also, we should keep an eye on the international frontier and hold more seminars like this one and actively communicate with our fellows at home and abroad.

Prof. Wu Hao, executive director of the Belt and Road Research Institute (BRRI) of Beijing Foreign Studies University, introduced the practice of area studies think tanks in universities to promote people-to-people bonds in BRI countries and regions. He pointed out that universities are generally believed to have three major functions: talent training, academic research and public services. However, entering the new century, more and more scholars are tending to regard people-to-people exchanges as a new important function of universities. It is believed that people-to-people exchanges, political mutual trust, and economic and trade cooperation have become the three pillars of our country's foreign relations development. Nine high-level Chinese-foreign people-to-people exchange mechanisms, including China-Russia, China-US, and China-UK exchanges, have been established one after another.

Wu Hao believes that university area studies think tanks should practice this new function of people-to-people exchanges. He shared three cases. The first case was that before the First Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) in 2017, the BRRI launched a survey of international students from 20 "Belt and Road" countries and regions, asking them which part of their lifestyle in China would they like to

take back to their country? They answered high-speed rail networks, Alipay, online shopping and shared bicycles, which were vividly described as the “new four big inventions.”

In a sense, this was not major high-end technology, but the answers mirrored international students’ deep recognition of China’s innovation in lifestyle.

The second case was an online event jointly designed by BRRRI and PKU’s Prof. Dong Qiang during the epidemic, which attracted well-known figures from China and France in the fields of education, science and academia. The third case was an online interview with Wang Rongzu and Bernard Brizay to commemorate the 160th anniversary of the sacking of the Old Summer Palace.

Wu Hao put forward his views on the relationship between people-to-people exchanges and university areas studies programs. First, there are overlaps and complementarities between them. Area studies empowers people-to-people exchanges between China and foreign countries and provides academic support for people-to-people exchanges. Second, people-to-people exchanges between China and foreign countries enriches area studies. Four dimensions can be grasped in foreign exchanges – history; geography; an emphasis on the consciousness of the other country; and cultural consciousness, cultural subjectivity, innovation transformation and innovative development. At the same time, it is necessary to focus on four

areas when promoting people-to-people exchanges: non-governmental, academic, international and cutting-edge.

Prof. Wang Shiming from the School of Advanced International and Area Studies of East China Normal University elaborated on the role of academic societies in the work of area studies think tanks in universities. He believes that academic societies play an important role in the work of university think tanks. Academic societies, especially those related to area studies, clearly include the function of serving the country and society in their regulations. The development of think tanks has a very good opportunity, and think tanks have given full play to their own importance. In addition, although area studies institutions are now increasing in number, those with complete systems and wide influence like PKUIAS are very few. Many institutions have problems. It will be helpful for these institutions to connect with related academic societies. For example, the Research Center for Pacific Island Countries, Liaocheng University, is weak in research resources, but Prof. Chen Dezheng makes good use of academic societies to make up for the lack of research strength.

In Prof. Wang Shiming's view, the cooperation between academic societies and university think tanks is based on the following premises. First, the academic society must be open-minded. Traditional academic societies emphasize academics and the classification of disciplines, and have clear

boundaries of research fields. But in the current situation, think tank experts have a variety of professional backgrounds, which requires the academic society to be open-minded. Second, the work of think tanks must be placed in a prominent position by the academic society. In terms of cooperation methods, we should first establish a regular contact mechanism. For example, by setting up a secretariat and establishing a connection network, the person in charge can establish a meeting mechanism to communicate frequently on think tank development, teacher training, and topic pitching. Second, we should hold academic workshops. Third, we should commission some think tank projects to academic societies. In this regard, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies has done a good job by inviting a bid for some projects from members of academic societies every year.

III. Evaluation systems for the work of area studies think tanks in universities

Prof. Luo Lin, director of the Academy of International and Regional Studies of Beijing Language and Culture University, gave a detailed introduction to the development of the evaluation system for area studies in universities. He said that after eight years of exploration and improvement, area studies in Chinese universities has basically achieved full coverage of different countries and regions, and serves as an important part of a new type of think tank with Chinese characteristics. Based

on the country's overall requirements for the work of area studies in universities, it is essential to further improve the area studies working mechanism in universities by summarizing the evaluation ideas, methods and technologies of international and domestic authoritative think tanks, focusing on the five basic functions of universities, and using a scientific and accurate evaluation index system to comprehensively evaluate the effectiveness of area studies in universities.

In November 2019 and May 2020, the Ministry of Education evaluated 42 cultivation bases and 395 filed centers. The evaluation indicators and framework are based on the five functions of area studies centers and bases in universities: providing consultancy service in policy-making, discipline development, talent training, scientific research and international exchanges.

Judging from the results, the second evaluation was better than the first, because the goal of the evaluation was clearer, and the evaluation played a long-term role, clarified orientation, and screened out the best, which laid a scientific foundation for further optimizing the overall plan and set up more reasonable standards and methods to register new area studies centers in the future. At the same time, the second evaluation could be improved on some points, such as ensuring the relevance of evaluation indicators and data, and the selection criteria of evaluation data. The second evaluation made public the

evaluation index system and main observations of university area studies centers to each registered center. From the perspective of the impact of the evaluation, some centers and universities have reacted to the evaluations with too much effort. Overall, the results of this evaluation are positive. This evaluation is only an exploration and will continue to be improved based on various opinions in the future.

According to Luo Lin, the evaluation index system framework adopted in the evaluation work this year is divided into three layers, consisting of three first-level indicators, 10 second-level indicators, and 29 third-level indicators, covering the three dimensions of institution building, results, and influence.

The first dimension is entity construction, and the weight of this indicator is 0.3 points. There are four second-level indicators under the indicator. The first one is mechanism construction (weight of 0.3 points). It includes the entity's positioning, construction goals, development plans and other related programmatic documents and mainly observes the discipline construction direction of the entity via relying on the school, the overall goal of the entity construction, and the medium- and long-term development plan of the school and the entity, and understands the school's emphasis on the institution and the direction of future development.

The second is team building (weight of 0.3 points), of

which the weight of full-time teachers is 0.6 points, and the part-time teachers 0.4. The third is funding investment (weight of 0.2 points). Under this indicator is the government investment, societal investment, and school investment. The fourth is resource construction (weight of 0.2 points), which includes site construction, database, base website and base publications.

The second dimension is productivity, which is a comprehensive manifestation of the overall strength of an institution, with a weight of 0.4 points. It contains three second-level indicators and 11 first-level indicators: the consultancy service it provided in policy-making (weight of 0.4 points); scientific research results (weight of 0.3 points), including research projects, academic works, academic papers, scientific research awards and conference reports; academic development (weight of 0.3 points), including discipline construction, training programs, scientific research participation and student exchanges.

The third dimension is social influence, which refers to the discourse power and consensus guidance that the research results of the base have, with a weight of 0.3 points. It contains three second-level indicators and five third-level indicators: policy impact (weight of 0.5 points); media influence (weight of 0.2 points); international influence (weight of 0.3 points).

Regarding the future development plan of area studies, Luo

Lin said that in the future, it is very necessary, in terms of the overall plan for of area studies, to jointly promote the establishment of a first-level discipline under the interdisciplinary category. It can guide various universities' work in this field. Second, the feasibility of establishing nation-wide area studies academic societies led by the Ministry of Education should be explored. Third, high-quality textbooks that can guide the work of area studies teaching and talent training need to be complied.

Prof. Guo Yanjun, director of the Institute of Asian Studies of China Foreign Affairs University, discussed the research focus of the work of area studies think tanks in universities. As a research fellow who has been engaged in the think tank work for a long time, he deeply feels that there is a disconnect between think tank work and the main work of universities. Therefore, starting from 2017, under the help of the area studies center of the Ministry of Education, he has tried his best to achieve a balanced development between policy research, think tank work, academic research and basic research.

Guo Yanjun pointed out that think tanks are divided into three categories. The first category is independent think tanks, which have freedom and autonomy in opinions, and also a certain degree of professionalism and practicality. The second category is government think tanks or international organization think tanks, which are more policy-oriented with some

professionalism, and pay more attention to the operability of policies. The third type is university think tanks, which integrate the characteristics of the first two types, and are comprehensive, academic, basic, and ideological. The work of think tanks can also be divided into three categories: the first category is ideological achievements; the second is intellectual achievements, which is where university think tanks should focus their roles; the third is information achievements.

Guo Yanjun believes that universities should devote themselves to achievements, and puts forward several suggestions.

One is to stick to problem solving. The positioning of area studies centers is to solve problems, but at present, problem awareness in research at many universities is not strong.

Another suggestion is attaching importance to basic research, which is long-term and strategic research, while adhering to policy orientation.

Still another is to pay attention to the discipline and academic development laws while focusing on innovation.

A fourth suggestion is to focus on the interaction between government departments and think tanks while maintaining the independence of think tanks. In recent years, officials have paid more and more attention to think tanks. In the past, the interaction between government departments and think tanks mainly featured a one-way approach, namely, relevant

government departments assigned research tasks to think tanks. The model has nowadays gradually evolved into two-way interaction, in which think tanks take the initiative to put forward some opinions, suggestions or ideas for the government for reference, which is a good trend. On this basis, it is necessary to increase the independence of think tanks, allow the think tanks to provide more critical opinions, not just to be a voice for the government. This is where the importance of university think tanks lies.

The fifth suggestion is to adhere to the openness of area studies. Now that the shape of the domestic network has basically taken form, future work should focus on domestic and international interactions.

The sixth suggestion is to take into consideration both regional and country studies and promote the positive interaction between the two. A more successful approach currently is to discuss a topic from two perspectives. One is from the country-specific perspective of regional cooperation, and the other is from a regional perspective on an aspect of a country. Without a deep foundation in research about a country, regional cooperation may become empty talk; without in-depth regional research, it will be difficult to grasp the direction of a country's policy and strategy.

Prof. Lu Guangsheng, director of the Institute of International Relations, Yunnan University, shared problems and

solutions in the development of area studies think tanks based on the experience of Yunnan University.

He said Yunnan University's area studies started with the Southwest Asian Research Institute established in 1964. The International Relations Research Center was established in 1996, and the earliest School of International Relations in the western region was established in 2002. Since it did not cultivate undergraduates, it was then changed to the Institute of International Relations, which remains to date. Since then, some institutions specializing in think tank work have been established, such as the Peripheral Diplomacy Research Center. The Myanmar Research Institute, the Indian Research Institute, and the Belt and Road Research Institute have been established since 2015. This year, the original School of International Relations, Peripheral Diplomacy Research Center, Belt and Road Research Institute, Myanmar Research Institute, and Indian Research Institute have been integrated into the Institute of International Relations. The main institutions of Yunnan University's think tank have two parts. One part is the eight centers filed with the Ministry of Education, including institutes focusing on Myanmar, the Lancang-Mekong River, India, Africa, Bangladesh, and Iran, as well as the China-South Africa People-to-People Exchange Center and the Belt and Road Research Institute. The other is a collaborative innovation center approved by the Ministry of Education, which has made some

progress in recent years.

As a participant in the development of the Yunnan University think tank, Lu Guangsheng shared some problems he observed. First, the orientation of university think tanks is confusing. Second, there is a lack of special management methods, investment mechanisms, and evaluation mechanisms to guide the activity of think tanks. Third, an inherent structural contradiction exists in university think tanks' information acquisition, research channels, reporting channels, and results identification. Lu Guangsheng also emphasized the importance of "visibility," which means getting attention from government- and provincial-level leaders.

Lu Guangsheng expressed his view that, to solve these problems, university think tanks should first develop their own characteristics. He determined the focus of the Peripheral Diplomacy Research Center should be Southeast Asia and South Asia. The center is devoted to in-depth and practical research in these regions. It does what others cannot do, and does what government departments or other institutions cannot do well, such as cultivating international contacts, public diplomacy, fieldwork and conducting overseas research. The Institute of Myanmar Studies at Yunnan University once organized outstanding domestic experts and scholars to visit the Myanmar Parliament to promote China's policy concepts. In addition, the center seeks to recruit personnel from the government, military,

enterprises, Chinese media, foreign media and other fields to participate in research. It is important to cultivate talent who have truly mastered a target country's language, studied the target country's culture, and have overseas channels and networks.

He pointed out that the future direction of the Institute of International Relations, Yunnan University, is to become a high-level, distinctive area studies institution. At present, Yunnan University has more than 50 staff engaged in area studies. Most of them are young and energetic, and besides administrative staff, 40 people are dedicated to area studies. Currently, the center is advancing its postgraduate training program with area studies characteristics by recruiting undergraduates in uncommon languages, and training them in theoretical methods and abilities for international relations, international politics, and area studies, in the hope that the center can contribute in cultivating pure area studies talent in the future.

In view of the fact that sustainable development is also an important issue for think tank development, many people are worried about insufficient funding. To this end, they must seek government input as well as sponsorship and cooperation from other parts of society. Some think tanks are developing into market-oriented consulting companies, including Sichuan University's School of International Studies. Prof. Shen Haitao

from the Northeast Asian Studies College, Jilin University, discussed the problems, difficulties, experiences and practices of think tank construction and area studies from the perspective of think tank's internal participants and the grassroots micro approach. In addition, he also put forward his views and thoughts from the perspective of think tanks' serving the country's overall development strategy and diplomatic strategy.

Shen Haitao said that the core of think tank work should be clear. All work should serve national policy and overall strategy. Government policy research and basic academic research cannot be separated. Think tanks should position themselves between integration and independence. Jilin University is one of the earliest institutions to establish area studies. It has established many think tank-type institutions that share a common goal at all levels, which is to provide policy consultation and information support to the central government as much as possible. In terms of revitalizing the old industrial base in Northeast China, regional cooperation in Northeast Asia, and even linking the Belt and Road infrastructure to the Northeast China region, the think tanks of Jilin University, with different functions and with input from many efforts, have achieved results.

At the same time, individuals should determine their own positioning. As a university teacher, you should complete the tasks in the work evaluation system, but as a think tank staff

member, many research results are meaningless or even useless, and may not even be considered basic research. The research done by think tank staff inside a university is not basic research or applied research when compared to research done by think tank staff outside a university. There is a gray area in between. Shen Haitao said that the Northeast Asian Studies College where he works is called the Northeast Asian Studies Center as a think tank base of the Ministry of Education. But it is the same institution with the same group of staff members. With two different names, many teachers are confused about their positioning. Another problem is that basic research on the target country is seriously insufficient, and the results are too general. In addition, the organization and management models are not efficient, and everyone is doing research based on personal interests, which is very unfavorable to the development and evolution of think tanks.

In response to these problems, Shen Haitao put forward three specific suggestions. First, the coordination between university basic research and applied research needs to be further strengthened. The positioning of think tanks in universities is obscure, and it should be made clearer in terms of system design. The second suggestion is to organically integrate research and government applications, and coordinate problem awareness, research topics, and feedback on the utility of research. Third, the work of university think tanks should be

coordinated to address any cooperation issues.

Associate Professor Wang Xu, executive deputy director of PKU's South Asian Studies Center, analyzed the training of area studies talent in uncommon languages from three aspects. One aspect is the new requirements raised by the Belt and Road initiative and periphery diplomacy for the training of area studies talent in uncommon languages. Another aspect is the thinking on the current university area studies think tanks.

He expressed his belief that area studies needs technical professional experts, not great diplomats or strategic experts. Area studies talent in uncommon languages should be proficient in the target country's language, fluent in English, and have a comprehensive understanding of the target country, including its politics, economy, ethnic characteristics, religion, history, and society. Uncommon languages are very important research tools, but knowing a foreign language does not mean understanding the target country. There is a big gap between books and field work.

Wang Xu discussed the current situation of area studies in universities. First, people tend to simplify area studies and equate it with the studies of current issues. In fact, area studies is an interdisciplinary subject. Second, both university area studies think tanks and traditional think tanks have their own advantages. With a government background, traditional think tanks have long-term experience in tracking current issues.

University think tanks have poor information exchanges with relevant government departments. In addition, they have poor research capabilities and a limited support mechanism in terms of personnel, finance, scientific research performance, and project management. The advantage of university think tanks lies in basic research and interdisciplinary comprehensive research. It is research rather than the capacity to write advisory reports to government departments that is the strongpoint of think tanks in universities.

Wang Xu opined that the most important task of think tanks in universities is to cultivate talent. First, teachers should improve themselves and have a deep understanding of the actual problems of the target country. Second, think tanks should strengthen interdisciplinary exchanges at home and abroad. Third, think tanks should promote the cultivation of research teams with projects. Fourth, think tanks should make innovations in teaching reforms to increase students' participation in scientific research. The ultimate goal of talent training is to cultivate more "region- or country-specific skilled talent."

Jin Ge from the Publicity Department of Peking University, said that the Publicity Department has cooperated with PKUIAS since 2018 to jointly promote PKU's academic resources to serve central decision-making. In the process of participating in the work of think tanks, he discovered that the closer China

moves toward the center of the world stage, the more value results from think tanks serving central decision-making. He also felt that the evaluation work of area studies think tanks in universities still faces a significant gap compared with current mature subject evaluation and teaching evaluation systems. This gap is not due to the lack of evaluation systems, but due to the fact that think tank evaluation has borrowed a lot from evaluation systems in other fields. However, the borrowed systems do not work for certain problems. These borrowed systems sometimes may not be conducive to encouraging area studies in universities to stick to their initial purpose, but rather lead to distractions from their primary missions.

Therefore, he focused on analyzing problem awareness in the evaluation of the work of area studies think tanks in universities. Starting from the original problem that led to the establishment of area studies think tanks in universities, he discussed how to best construct the evaluation system and how to better evaluate to promote think tanks' development.

First, a think tank should adhere to a "decision-making" orientation. From the perspective of internal development needs and external development experience, the evaluation of think tanks must also adhere to this "decision-making" orientation. Whether think tanks are running well or not depends on whether their research solves the most urgent problems in economic, societal, diplomatic and other fields, whether they concern what

the people are generally concerned about, whether they are solving the urgent issues the Party and government agencies are concerned about, and more importantly, how the research results are finally transformed into decision-making. At the same time, based on both the requirements of the central government and the actual project, a think tank should provide good service for decision-making and write good academic articles and media articles, corresponding to its three functions of decision-making support, academic research, and communication.

Second, area studies should adhere to an “in-depth orientation.” International relations studies already has a relatively independent academic paradigm and way of thinking. Area studies is the advanced stage of international relations studies. In this sense, it cannot rely solely on reading English books or English newspapers, but must be supported by field work experience. Area studies should do a good job in three aspects: field work, interdisciplinary research, and historical research, so as to provide research and an academic foundation for the country to formulate relevant policies. In short, the evaluation of the quality of area studies think tanks should judge whether area studies is conducted in depth, rather than the quantity of its research.

Third, university think tanks must adhere to the “education orientation.” Think tanks of government departments, scientific research institutions, and universities have different

characteristics. The characteristics of university think tanks may not lie in new materials or research strength, but in the continuous force of graduate students and post-doctoral students in various disciplines. Think tanks do not think behind closed doors. The essence of the work of think tanks is to listen to opinions from all sides. To a certain extent, the participation of students helps open up horizons, and outstanding students can be trained as soon as possible and act independently, so as to build up strength for the work of various think tanks in the future. Now that think tanks have become an important requirement for national development, the work of think tanks in universities should become a part of the talent training system, which can not only cultivate students' academic ability, but also their devotion to family and country. A teaching reform plan integrating teaching, research and think tanks should be established. We should also introduce the concerns of think tanks in teaching, encourage students to carry out research driven by problems, submit high-quality results through think tank channels, and treat achievement feedback as an incentive for teaching.

In the discussion session, Prof. Yang Shu emphasized that there was a saying in the 1980s that “academics have no forbidden zones, and journalism has discipline” in the academic environment. Peking University can play a role model in this regard. The primary task of area studies is not think tanks, but

talent training and discipline development. In terms of the disciplinary boundaries of area studies, the subject combinations of different regions and countries will be quite different and complex and needs more discussion. Moreover, the secondary subjects under area studies or comprehensive disciplines should not overlap with international relations.

Prof. Luo Lin added that the special project of area studies in universities covers think tank development, talent training and scientific research. In other words, think tank development is part, not all, of the area studies project. Therefore, the main purpose of the Ministry of Education's two evaluations of bases and centers is to find out the actual situation. The evaluation, though complicated, is very necessary. In response to the discipline development mentioned by Prof. Yang Shu, he believes that it is now necessary to build a consensus that according to the new spirit of the State Council's Academic Degree Office, if the first-level discipline of area studies can be successfully established under the newly established interdisciplinary category, it will be conducive to the advancement of talent training, scientific research and discipline development.

In conclusion, Prof. Qian Chengdan, director of PKUIAS, said that the meeting discussed many problems in the function of area studies think tanks in universities and made many suggestions. It is not easy to solve these problems and requires

joint efforts and ideas from everyone. In the future, the work of area studies think tanks in universities can endeavor in the following aspects.

First, in terms of discipline development, the interdisciplinary category provides a ready-to-use platform. Second, individuals, schools, research institutes, and centers cannot fight alone. They should, with the establishment of a nation-wide mechanism, form a network to communicate with each other, make a voice together, and form a joint force. Third, the fundamental task of area studies is fostering talent. Fourth, area studies is new and needs time to grow. Although it is now not satisfying in various aspects, all parties should help it grow.