

**The 26th New Buds Salon**  
**Syria's current economic and social conditions**  
**November 3, 2020**

The 26th New Buds Salon (新芽沙龙) of the Institute of Area Studies, Peking University (PKUIAS) was held on November 3, 2020 in No. 66 Yannanyuan, PKU. Focusing on the theme “Syria’s current economic and social conditions,” Bashar Kheir, an MPA (Master of Public Administration) graduate from PKU’s Institute of South-South Cooperation and Development (ISSCAD), who worked as an HR manager at the Ministry of Administrative Development in Syria, and Asma Katbeh, also an MPA graduate from ISSCAD, who works with Syria’s Planning and International Cooperation Commission, gave presentations about the topic from different perspectives.

The presentation made by Kheir was titled “Syria: The Core of Middle East is Suffering,” with the content covering Syria’s geographic position, humanitarian heritage, opening-up measures, the impacts of the war on Syria and sanctions, reconstruction, future challenges, and the “Belt and Road” Initiative (BRI).

He said that there are many concepts about what constitutes the Middle East. Some of these concepts are linked to Turkey. Historical Levant is Greater Syria comprised of “current” Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestinian territories, Egypt and the Arabian Peninsula. The extended concept and widened concept of the Middle East starts from Morocco. It’s called Maghreb, and is comprised of the north side of Africa, Egypt and extends to Afghanistan, Pakistan and the western borders of China. This

concept is emphasized by the “New Middle East” concept, which was coined by the “New Conservatives” of the US administration, in the first decade of this century, when they drew new maps for the Middle East. According to these maps, some of the states were shrinking, others were divided and people noticed the emergence of new states like free Baluchistan and free Kurdistan. This map divided Saudi Arabia into two states instead of one. This is the comprehensive wide geopolitical vision of Syria.

Kheir then briefly introduced the geography of Syria. Syria is located in the west of Asia and on the east coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Its area is about 185,180 square kilometers with 193 kilometers of coastline. The area of Syria includes the Golan Heights area, which has been under Israeli military occupation since 1967. It’s a very fertile and rich area, with a diversity of vegetation and many natural resources. The population of Syria was estimated in 2018 at 17.5 million. There are fluctuations in levels both of the population and economic indicators because of the situation of the war, so there is no precise number of population or economic indicators according to the current situation. The labor force is divided into three essential sectors, with agriculture comprising 11 percent of the labor force, industry 26 percent and services 63 percent. The urbanization rate is about 54.2 percent. But Kheir pointed out that urbanization is not accompanied with industrialization. There is an imbalance between urbanization and industrialization in Syria, which is a point of weakness.

Kheir said that in China, urbanization is accompanied with industrialization. But in Syria, they mostly have big towns rather than actual cities. Historically, Syria was called Levant and its

neighbor Mesopotamia (current Iraq) was the cradle of human existence and civilization to the world. So, around the fertile crescent, a lot of civilizations settled and their remains and ruins date back more than 7,000 years. The oldest continuously inhabited capital in the world is Damascus, the capital of Syria, which was established in the seventh millennium BC. Many other studies demonstrated that Damascus existed since 7,000 BC and maybe 11,000 BC. Culturally, they have the oldest alphabet, and the oldest music and notation, the “Hurrian Hymn.”

Kheir said that after the collapse of the socialist system in former Soviet Union and East European states, opening-up measures started in Syria in the 1990s. After 2000, these measures accelerated, and there are many legislative, political and administrative measures that endeavor to open up the Syrian economy and go toward further integration with the global economy. For example, Syria has an initiative to enter the process for joining the Euro zone, launched the social market economy concept in 2005, and established the Working Party on Syria’s accession to the WTO in 2010, but the accession of WTO had been disrupted by the war. Moreover, the Syrian government also created a lot of legislation to complete the opening-up process.

The Syrian GDP between the middle of the 1980s and before the war was growing. But after the war, the situation was different. In 2016, the impact of the war in Syria, according to the UN statistics, was about 400,000 dead, 6.2 million displaced and about 5.6 million refugees.

There are also other refugees, which are not registered by the UN. The unemployment rate was more than 50 percent in 2017. Now, it’s worse. The poverty rate in 2018 was more than

82 percent with wages shrinking to \$40 monthly in 2020. In comparison, in the period before the war, monthly wages were between \$400 and \$500. The damage to infrastructure in Syria created a lack of sustained access to health care, education and other services. Consequently, the conflict in Syria remains one of the largest humanitarian crises in the world. The cumulative GDP loss was estimated about \$226 billion in 2016, attributed to disrupted economic activity in all sectors. GDP shrank fourfold compared to 2010. Syria also suffered from hyperinflation and stagnation, or “stagflation” — high unemployment accompanied with high levels of inflation and economic recession.

The deterioration of economic indicators, especially in the last two years, was affected by illegal bilateral sanctions that have been imposed by the US, especially by the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, commonly known as the Caesar Act, in addition to other sanctions that have been imposed by the EU and the League of Arab States. GDP annual growth during the war was frustrated, with a little bit of improvement in 2017. But this improvement was crushed by stricter sanctions in place since 2019.

According to Fukuyama, the famous political philosopher, state building has three essential phases. The first one is post-conflict reconstruction, which must be followed by strengthening self-sustaining institutions. The second phase is concentrating on human capital capacity building and conciliation. The third phase is the strengthening of weak states to accomplish certain necessary state functions, such as property rights protection. There are three central challenges in the reconstruction era of Syria. The first one is economic recovery,

especially with unilateral and illegal sanctions that have been imposed on Syria, which is followed by reconstruction and state building, and institutional reform and anticorruption efforts. The Syrian president in 2017 launched a national project of administrative reform and the Ministry of Administrative Development is responsible for accomplishing and securing this national program. Now, there are three centers which are concentrating on institutional restructuring and human capacity building.

Kheir said that the BRI contributes to Syria's reconstruction. He said that historically, Syria was an essential station on the ancient Silk Road. There are many definitions that refer to the importance of Syria on the Silk Road. Moreover, the strategic and geopolitical importance of Syria to China especially can be derived from its geographic position. According to this geographical position, it can be an essential road for global trade and unimpeded trade, which is one priority of the BRI. There are many approaches for the BRI. One scholar pointed out the similarity between the BRI and the "Flying Geese" model, which was launched by Akamatsu, a Japanese economist. This model described Southeast Asian development and the intra-East Asian alignment of Japan. The BRI perhaps will be similar to this model, and transfer and transplant China's infrastructure overcapacity to other developing countries. Kheir thinks BRI projects are very suitable for Syria after an era of war, now that Syria is in an era of reconstruction. Another approach is the New Structure Economy. There are a lot of similarities between the BRI and the Marshall Plan (the post-war European Aid Program) and also a linkage between BRI and sustainable development.

Kheir concluded that there are a lot of benefits to accelerate Syrian integration into the BRI. The BRI can help transfer Chinese infrastructure overcapacity to the Middle East, especially to Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq, which have problems with their infrastructure. The BRI can support these countries with institutional reform and anti-corruption efforts, mitigate the severity of the economic siege and, finally, pave the way for electrified transportation, industrialization, unimpeded trade, and green cities and SEZs.

Asma Katbeh gave a presentation titled “China and Syria — From aid policy toward economic partnership in post-war reconstruction.” She said that economic diplomacy refers to the economic dimension of traditional diplomacy. It is the use of all communication channels and frameworks for cooperation with foreign countries in order to support those countries’ economies. One of the priorities of economic diplomacy is the promotion of investment by searching for new markets and attracting foreign business people and companies.

Katbeh gave a brief overview of the three stages of Sino-Syrian relations. First, before the war: limited economic cooperation. Second, during the war: aid policy. Third, after the war: looking forward to further economic cooperation. She said that Syria is among the first Middle Eastern countries that established relations with China. Diplomatic relations were officially started between the two countries on August 1, 1956. However, economic cooperation was limited compared to the rest of the Arab countries in the region, especially the Gulf countries with whom diplomatic relations go back to the 1980s and 90s.

Although diplomatic relations between the two countries began 64 years ago, economic cooperation did not reflect the depth of those relations. The Syrian Arab Republic and the People's Republic of China are linked by cooperative relations, and bilateral relations between the two countries are regulated by a number of agreements and memorandum of understanding which fall into four categories: (1) Signed and valid documents, which include 26 documents (19 agreements, 2 protocols, 3 memorandums of understanding, 2 executive programs) in the fields of economics and foreign trade; financial, agricultural and agrarian reform; communications and technology; oil and mineral wealth; tourism; health; culture; media; and irrigation. These documents were signed in the pre-war period and are in effect. (2) Signed documents under ratification, which include two in the field of economics and foreign trade and one in the financial and banking field. There is also a memorandum of understanding between the Foreign Trade Directorate of the Syrian Ministry of Commerce and the Foreign Trade Department of the Chinese Ministry of Trade. In addition, there is a memorandum of understanding between the Central Bank of Syria and the Chinese Development Bank. These documents were signed in the pre-war period. (3) Under study documents (proposed before the war). This includes 18 documents in the fields of economy and foreign trade, finance and customs, agriculture, communications and technology, transport, health, the environment, planning and international cooperation. Some of these documents are signed with initials and pending completion of the formal signature procedures, and some are under study by one of the two parties. These documents were proposed in the pre-war period. (4)

Documents under study (proposed after the war), which include two documents with the Ministry of Information and four documents with the Ministry of Justice. These documents are currently under discussion. Trade does not extend far beyond relatively limited economic cooperation, especially if it is compared with the size of the trade exchange between China and some of the Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates and the Sultanate of Oman. Ties with these two countries are considered relatively recent in terms of diplomatic relations. International trade in goods and services based on United Nations Comtrade data shows that bilateral trade is \$1.3 billion. China was trading in goods with Syria in 2019 as follows: exports of \$1.3 billion, and imports of \$1.4 million. It is a low-ranking nation on the China trade list, especially if compared with the trade exchange between China and Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates, whose diplomatic relations with China date back to 1984. Nonetheless, trade between the UAE and China is more active. Bilateral trade in goods between the two countries in 2019 reached \$48.5 billion, with exports of \$33.5 billion and imports of \$15.1 billion. Thus, the UAE ranked 21st on the list of China's largest export markets (representing 1.3 percent of China's exports) and twenty-ninth in the list of the largest import markets for China (representing 0.7 percent of China's imports). Oman's diplomatic relations with China go back to 1978. However, there is noticeable economic cooperation as the international trade in goods and services on the basis of United Nations Comtrade data shows that the bilateral trade between the two countries in 2019 reached \$16.4 billion, exports \$3.0 billion and imports \$19.5 billion, which puts Oman 73rd



among the largest Chinese export markets (representing 0.1 percent of China's exports) and 26th on the list of the largest import markets for China (representing 0.9 percent of China's imports).

She continued that the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic has been one of the most destructive since the Second World War. It has encompassed huge physical and societal damage, infrastructure destruction, a massive refugee crisis, and a severe economic downturn. The war in Syria left massive losses included private and public equipment and buildings, such as housing, schools, hospitals, factories, and the infrastructure for energy, water, sanitation, transportation and communications. According to the report "Syria at war, eight years on," which is a product of the collaboration between the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and the Center for Syrian Studies (CSS) at the University of St Andrews, the total economic toll of the crisis is estimated at \$442.2 billion. This is the sum of the estimated value of the physical capital destruction (\$117.7 billion) added to the estimated losses in GDP (\$324.5 billion). The damage accumulated in seven of the most capital-intensive sectors: housing, mining, security, transport, manufacturing, electricity and health. The hardest hit was housing, at 17.5 percent of the total, followed by the mining sector, at 16 percent. Traditionally, Syria has not been a strategic priority for China. However, this does not mean that Beijing has been indifferent to the wide-ranging adverse effects of Syria's disastrous war. China's approach to the Syrian civil war has been shaped by its longstanding declaratory policy of respect for state sovereignty

and non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations. In practice, China's diplomatic engagement toward Syria has been cautious. From the other side, there is clear evidence of China playing a larger role in providing humanitarian aid through bilateral and multilateral channels. In his January 18, 2017 keynote speech at the UN Office in Geneva, President Xi committed China to provide \$30 million in humanitarian assistance for refugees and displaced persons in Syria. The same year, China also funded a \$1.5 million World Food Program (WFP) initiative to feed newly-arrived Syrian refugees in Jordan. In addition, China donated \$1 million each to the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Food Program (WFP) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), to improve food security and health services in Syria. Chinese Embassy officials in Damascus and their counterparts from the Syrian Planning and International Cooperation Commission (PICC) signed many agreements during the year 2017. Many technical and economic cooperation agreements were signed with the Chinese side, through which the Chinese government provided humanitarian aid to the Syrian government, as follows:

An agreement to provide a free aid valued at 40 million yuan signed on Feb 5, 2017; an agreement to provide free aid valued at 70 million yuan, signed on Feb 5, 2017; an agreement to provide free aid valued at 200 million yuan, signed on May 13, 2017; and an agreement to provide free aid valued at 100 million yuan, signed on March 10, 2019. Discussions are currently underway to sign a new agreement to provide free aid valued at 100 million yuan.

From the Syrian side, officials in Damascus seek to move on to the reconstruction and redevelopment phases of the “post-war” period. As Western-imposed sanctions continue targeting Syria, China will be an increasingly important global partner for Damascus that can help to counterbalance Western pressure. In a December 2019 interview, President Assad expressed hope that Chinese firms could start looking at and studying the Syrian market, which is improving quickly and constantly in terms of security. President Assad said, “It is essential to start discussing investment opportunities, because it is well-known that rebuilding countries destroyed partially or totally by war is very profitable and has high returns on investment.” He added that officials in Damascus are in talks with Chinese companies about figuring out ways to evade sanctions and improve access to markets in Syria. He also explained that “support from China and other friendly countries in Syria’s reconstruction is as important as the military efforts for restoring stability in Syria and striking and fighting terrorism.” The BRI is considered one of the most important international cooperation initiatives, providing important opportunities for the Syrians and Chinese to achieve a strategic partnership to support the reconstruction process in Syria through supporting investment cooperation in the fields of oil, gas and renewable energies; expanding the participation of Chinese companies in establishing major projects that contribute to the rehabilitation and development of infrastructure (electricity, transportation, construction, communications, water resources, and so on); and taking advantage of training and specialized programs that contribute to strengthening and developing human cadres within the basic sectors. The important sources of funding

provided by the initiative include the Silk Road Fund, China Development Bank, Bank of Import and Export, and Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Syrian officials have not just welcomed China's involvement in the reconstruction process but have actively worked for it. In September 2017, Syrian Ambassador to China Imad Moustapha told Chinese investors, "Only China can play a leading role in helping Syria realize its reconstruction." China's Global Times reported him later as saying that Chinese companies would receive priority in the reconstruction. Based on the directives of the Syrian government and its keenness to revive the investment sector in Syria, the Syrian Investment Commission hosted a meeting with the Syrian-Chinese Business Council regarding investment in Syria. Hala Ghazal, director general of the Syrian Investment Commission, said that the meeting comes in light of the work plan developed by the commission under the supervision of the Ministry of Commerce, so that this plan depends mainly on promoting the investment map for reconstruction, in the forefront of which are the priority sectors, on top of which are the areas of support for production lines for affected projects and all reconstruction requirements. In this regard, Hala Ghazal explained that the focus was on China to play an influential and effective role on the economic side through its contribution to the reconstruction program, adding that the Syrian-Chinese Business Council was very responsive and cooperative and it will act as a partner and economic ambassador to China to promote investment in Syria in the coming period. Muhammad Hamsho, head of the Syrian-Chinese Business Council established in 2009, explained that the council

would be a bridge to regulate economic relations between Syria and China, in order to overcome the difficult economic stage that Syria is going through as a result of the sanctions imposed on it. With regard to the reconstruction phase, Hamsho said that a framework has been developed that includes a cooperative plan with the Syrian Investment Commission to enhance understanding and appropriate coordination to attract investments from China in order to start implementing the first reconstruction projects.

From the Chinese side, the World Bank estimates it could cost at least \$250 billion to rebuild Syria – four times the country’s GDP in 2010. China intends to play a major role in the process, and has much to gain by doing so. China knows that it does not face real competition from the West when it comes to rebuilding Syria.

Katbeh pointed out that several events highlight China’s interest in Syria specifically. Qin Yong, vice chairman of the China Arab Exchange Association, made four trips to Syria in 2017 alone. While leading a business delegation on a visit to Damascus and Homs on one of those trips, Qin confirmed that a number of major Chinese companies had expressed interest in participating in infrastructure projects in Syria. Three months later, Beijing hosted the “First Trade Fair on Syrian Reconstruction Projects” and pledged \$2 billion for the construction of industrial parks. The event was attended by 1,000 Chinese firms. Meanwhile, Chinese businesses were preparing to open representative offices across Syria and dispatching frequent delegations to the country to scout for possible projects in which to engage. A year later, during the China-Arab States

Cooperation Forum, Beijing announced a \$23 billion loan and aid package, some of which can be expected to be made available to Syria. In May 2017, Qi Qianjin, China's ambassador to Syria, announced that Syria will be a recipient of \$8.7 billion in humanitarian aid as part of the BRI. It is worth recalling that along with the BRI funding, at the July 2018 China-Arab States Cooperation Forum, Beijing promised \$20 billion in infrastructure loans to Syria. Included in this pledge was \$100 million in humanitarian aid to Syria and Yemen. Several months later, when the Syrian government held the 60th Damascus International Fair, over 200 Chinese companies attended the event. In February 2018, with the war winding down, Ambassador Qi Qianjin told Xinhua News Agency, "I think it's about time to focus all efforts on the development and reconstruction of Syria, and I think China will play a bigger role in this process by providing more aid to the Syrian people and the Syrian government." Based on the Chinese government's invitation, Syria has participated in The Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in Beijing in April 2019. Nevertheless, China faces challenges since the US has imposed many sanctions on the Syrian government over the past nine years. The US's Caesar Act cuts off all countries' economic dealings with the Syrian government. One of the provisions of this law stipulates the prosecution of countries, companies and individuals who deal with the Syrian government. Chinese companies will fall under this prohibition. American sanctions under the Caesar Act will extend to individuals, institutions, countries and companies that deal with any Syrian government entities. This affects the contract signed by Chinese company

Huawei with the Syrian Ministry of Communications in 2015 to maintain communications infrastructure, as well as entities that export materials for building and reconstruction.

Katbeh concluded that, under Deng Xiaoping, Chinese foreign policy was governed by the dictum “hide your strength and bide your time,” but under Xi, China is no longer hiding anything, nor is it biding its time. It wants to achieve its place in the sun, and it wants to do so soon. Beijing’s strategy, nevertheless, is careful, emphasizing non-interference coupled with a commitment to developing economic relations. Across the Middle East, Arab regimes are reaching out to Beijing, as these governments see value in working with China, especially as the US is regarded as an unreliable ally and Europe lacks the capabilities required to project itself in the region. As the BRI gathers momentum and American foreign policy remains in flux, China’s advance into the region is likely to continue with Syria’s reconstruction at its forefront. According to a report published by the Center for Global Politics, a letter written by Qi Qianjin to the Syrian government on August 5, 2018, was an indication of a Chinese turn toward greater cooperation. Qi confirmed China’s intention to expand its economic, political presence in Syria. In that message, which was published by the Syrian newspaper Al-Watan, the ambassador mentioned the features of his country’s new strategy toward the region, announcing the start of injecting funds into reconstruction and infrastructure. He said, “The Chinese government appreciates Syria’s important geographic location in relation to international strategy ... and considers Syria a natural cooperation partner for building the Belt and Road project... and we are preparing to conduct more

cooperation with Syria in the political, military, economic and social fields, and actively participate in economic reconstruction.” A deeper look at Sino-Syrian relations and Beijing’s policies vis-à-vis Syria is long overdue as this bilateral relationship is set to become increasingly important to both China’s ambitious foreign policy as well as the Syrian government’s vision for reconstruction and redevelopment.

After the presentations, two PhD students from PKUIAS offered their comments and questions.

**Shen Xin (PhD student of PKUIAS):** Mr. Bashar Kheir mentioned that state-building is one of the most important issues of the reconstruction of Syria. It reminds me of a political concept — “state capacity.” It refers to a state’s ability to make and effectively implement decisions in domestic and foreign policy. I’d like to ask: do you think Syria has been equipped with strong state capacity to lead the reconstruction? And what affects the ability? Also, you mentioned self-sustainable institutional reforms. Could you please give us a more detailed explanation of that? Thank you.

**Bashar Kheir:** For the reconstruction era, state capacity of Syria is really not sufficient. But in the other hand, the situation now is almost safe and stable. So, the Syrian state government can launch its reconstruction era, which actually has begun, and there are not a lot of restrictions to beginning this era more effectively, except the sanctions imposed especially from the US, which prevent any imports from entering into Syria, such as food stuffs, energy or oil derivatives. A lot of essential goods are prevented from being imported by the Syrian government, and



the sanctions punish all persons, governments, or companies dealing with Syrian government. So, this is the main restriction that we have faced. On the other hand, for institutional reforms, the level of corruption in Syria has been very high, especially during the war era. So, the political decision was taken to mitigate corruption by strengthening institutional capacity to face and deal with this problem. So, since three years ago, the National Administrative Reform project has been launched by the Syrian president to fight corruption and build strong institutional capacity, especially in the public sector, and also the services and the production sector of Syria.

**Shen Xin:** I also noticed that both of you have mentioned that over six million people are displaced because of the war. So, I'm concerned about whether the lives of the Syrian people have improved with the reconstruction process, and how their mental state is now? Do they have confidence in the reconstruction of the country? How do Syrian people feel about the reconstruction?

**Asma Katbeh:** The reconstruction of the country is the only hope that we have. Because of the eight years of war, everything is destroyed. And after the war, we have a very bad economic situation. So, the reconstruction process includes many categories, but the economic recovery comes first. Certainly, it will take a very long time for people to recover from the trauma. When you are living in a country with war and suffering from a bad economic situation, there's nothing to do but to work in order to live. So, we hope that it will not take a long time. But we need support from friendly countries. And that's why we are concentrating on cooperation with China as we have a good relationship with China. China is the only country that can

support us in this situation of a destroyed country with a bad economic situation, and also there are sanctions imposed on us. So, we need a superpower to support us. Domestic savings are not sufficient for the reconstruction. The Syrian people are enthusiastic about the reconstruction process, but the capacity, especially the financial capacity, is limited, so the aid and partnership with our friends is very essential and critical. Thank you.

**Shen Xin:** Some studies indicate that Syria's "reconstruction landscape" is geographically fragmented and marked by deep political discord, localized violence, nepotism and corruption, and bureaucratic dysfunction, all of which will adversely affect economic activities in the future. Besides, Chinese firms will also risk running afoul of US sanctions against Syria while engaging in reconstruction projects. What do you think of these problems? How do you improve the security and investment environment for long-term and stable cooperation?

**Bashar Kheir:** Syria is now secure and safe, almost, except in some northern areas. The main obstacle is the sanctions. In the media they said that our president announced that there is an agreement with China, but we don't know if it included the sanctions part. We don't have details about that. But yes, you mentioned that there is a fraction of the Syrian area out of control of the government. But more than 80 percent of the Syrian area is under the control of government and safe.

**Prof. Wang Suolao:** Three years ago, your ambassador in Beijing was invited to attend a seminar at Peking University. At that time, I asked him the same question. And he positively invited all Chinese to rush over to Syria, trying to get the

so-called the first golden opportunity. But actually, now it's much better than three years ago. But I think there are still many Chinese entrepreneurs who have their worries. For them, there are so many countries in the Middle East, especially countries in the Gulf area, so why should they go to Syria? There are still conflicts with Turkey. Sometimes, should opportunity and risk live together?

**Asma Katbeh:** The risk can be mitigated, especially now that the security situation is stable. Our challenge now is the economic situation.

**Yin Jinqi (PhD student of PKUIAS):** My major is international relations, and I'm interested in Japan, and the relations between Japan and the Middle East. I know the Japanese government from the Abe Shinzo administration began changing its Middle East policy from negative to positive, from energy and the economy, to energy and political balance, so that it can improve its status in international relations. And I know the Japanese government is eager to compete with China in infrastructure projects all over the world, especially the high-speed railway projects or others, and they have many advantages, maybe the technique, financial results and others. So, my question is, do you think it is possible for other developed countries, like Japan or other Western countries, to participate in the reconstruction of Syria? And compared with the developed countries, like Japan, what do you think is the advantage of China and China's BRI project? Thank you.

**Asma Katbeh:** We are suffering from a very bad situation. So, we welcome all the countries that are interested in participating in the reconstruction process in Syria. But the

problem is the sanctions. This is the big obstacle in the cooperation between Syria and other countries. So, from the Syrian side, we would like to work with other countries. But the sanctions are the main obstacle.

**Yin Jinqi:** But I think maybe Japan's government, especially the past government, has a better diplomatic relation with the US government, especially the Trump administration. For example, Japan's government played a more important role between the Iranian and the US governments in 2019. Maybe the Japanese companies or other private investors can get more resources to get rid of the threat from the sanctions.

**Asma Katbeh:** We hope so. But for example, we don't have that relationship with Japan as I work at the planning and international cooperation commission. We don't have any file of cooperation between Syria and Japan because till now we don't have that cooperation between the two countries. But we hope, of course.

**Bashar Kheir:** Another issue is that the Japanese foreign policy is related to American policy, so it's not separated and Japan cannot conduct this cooperation without complete approval by the American administration. So, we have another additional issue. That is, the Japanese policy is dependent on and tied to the American one. It's different from the Chinese policy which is independent. The sanctions imposed on Syria put any countries that have a relationship with Syria in opposition with America. So, it's somehow complicated. That's why we concentrated on attracting Chinese companies because they have this power to have this decision.

**Luo Anli (PhD student of PKUIAS):** How did the Syrian government unite the country again in the post war period? Will the sectarian problem or the tribalism, or the ethnic problem be a problem impeding the economic reconstruction of Syria?

**Bashar Kheir:** Maybe the media enlarge the sectarian and ethnic diversity problems in Syria. The main reason of the war on Syria essentially was external, but internal diversity was a fake reason for the Syrian crisis. So, what to see in the media is not compatible with the facts. For many thousands of years, we have had this diversity, and there wasn't any problem with that. So now, there must still be no problem. But a lot of challenges are faced, especially for constitutional reforms. And there're some committees assigned to discuss constitutional reforms and the new constitution for Syria. I think that many issues will be of its concern: this diversity and the special and imperative need to strengthen decentralization. We have a former experience with decentralization, but it failed because we don't focus on fiscal decentralization. So, the decentralization was just administrative, but not fiscal. In comparison with China, the main reason for the decentralization success is focusing on fiscal decentralization. So, to secure and to guarantee a comprehensive development and balance development between regions, provinces, regardless of ethnic or sectarian diversity — if you can secure this balance, the development, I think, will be no problem in the future. And one of the internal reasons of crisis, the high levels of unemployment, was caused by that drought that happened after 2005. A lot of internal migration happened from rural areas to cities and asylums. So, there are a lot of asylums around the main cities,

Damascus, Aleppo, and these areas were the cradle of the protest actions against the Syrian government.

**Luo Anli:** Another question is about the Ba'ath Party. I wonder what the role of the Ba'ath Party is in Syria's society or government?

**Bashar Kheir:** Prior to the 2012 constitutional amendment, the Ba'ath Party was the commander of the community and the state, but now, it is a ruler among the many parties, but the other parties are not effective. So, we have many parties in the right and left wings. But these parties are not effective and the Ba'ath Party is the strongest one. Some parties and attitudes are prohibited in Syria, like the Muslim Brothers Party, which was established in Egypt in the past century and then spread out to Syria and other Arab and Islamic countries. So, it has popularity in some areas, but allowing it to expand will be very dangerous and very destructive.

**Student questioner:** Thank you for your presentation and I am curious about the attitude of Syrian media toward the BRI. I wonder if there are more positive or negative words? How do Syrian media report the BRI?

**Bashar Kheir:** As we mentioned, our government and people are very enthusiastic toward the BRI, and we have participation in the second forum for the BRI, and there is a Syrian application to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank in session. But this application has been denied by the Western countries, some of which are founders of this bank. But our public and formal attitude is very positive for the initiative and we don't have any negative attitude toward it. I think cooperation between Syria and China, especially under the BRI, is very

related to future stability in Syria, including its political and economic stability. There are a lot of sectors that can be a focus, especially infrastructure and labor-intensive industrialization like garment and other kinds of industries, that demand a high intensity of labor instead of capital. So, this sector, specially infrastructure with trains, transporting energy and, for example, renewable energy, was my concern. In my thesis, I focused on renewable energy and the BRI in the reconstruction era of Syria. Other sectors, construction and housing, transportation, and industrialization, especially in the high labor-intensive sectors, are the main sectors. We hope that the cooperation will extend to more sophisticated levels in high technology and other sectors, but essentially infrastructure and labor-intensive industries are the main sectors of cooperation.

**Prof. Wang Suolao:** What about weapons?

**Bashar Kheir:** The main source of Syrian munitions is Russia. I am surprised about the cooperation between China and Pakistan to develop aircraft. So, I think cooperation in this sector is very impressive for future corporation between China and Syria.

**Prof. Wang Suolao:** Before the war happened, and before ISIS seized the oil fields in eastern part of Syria bordering the Iraqi territory, China's oil giant (CNPC) was working there. Unfortunately, now the oil fields are under American control or Kurdish troops' control. So, can the Chinese oil workers go back to Syria?

**Bashar Kheir:** There was, as you mentioned, the previous investment only in this sector, before the war. So, this is the only Chinese FDI in Syria. We hope that we can develop that sector

but it's really difficult because the infrastructure has been damaged, also the pipelines. Reconstruction of it is very hard and takes a lot of years. So, I focus on renewable energy because we can reap more rapid benefits by developing this sector, instead of conventional and other kinds of energy, which take a lot of time to reap its benefits and revenue.

**Student questioner:** My question is the cooperation between Russia and Syria in higher education. I want to know that in the current context of cooperation between Russia and Syria, are there many Syrian people, young people, going to study in Russia?

**Bashar Kheir:** We have an ancient relationship, especially in the higher education sector, with Russia. Even before the collapse of the Soviet Union, we had a lot of scholarships that were provided from the Russian government to Syria. The two countries are political and military allies. A lot of scholarships are still offered from the Russian government to Syria, and we have a strong cultural relationship and a lot of alumni that graduated from Soviet Union universities and currently from Russian universities. And this is a continuous process. We hope that this situation can be reflected in the Chinese-Syrian relationship, too. China supports the higher education sector effectively in Syria.

**Yang Guang (a student going to Syria):** I'm a PhD student from Tsinghua University. Hopefully I can go to Syria next year to conduct my field research. My question is about the COVID-19 impact on Syria. What are Syria's preparations for the virus coming again?

**Asma Katbeh:** We are suffering from a bad economic situation in Syria and procedures to prevent the virus from



spreading need high financial capacity, which is very limited in Syria. But the Syrian government is trying to make it not spread too much using available equipment, taking measures like not going to work or going to schools. And it's not too bad there. And I think it's somehow safe because all the people and the students are going back to school or to work now.

**Yang Guang:** Is it safe to go there, to the rural areas like the rural areas around Damascus and other places?

**Asma Katbeh:** In the north, it's not that safe. But the rest of Syria is very safe. We live like normal.

**Bashar Kheir:** Yes, Aleppo is safe. All other cities are safe except some areas in the Northwest and Northeast — Idleb, Hasakah and DerA'zor — are not safe but other provinces are very safe. You are welcome to visit Syria and we are ready to help you.

**Prof. Wang Suolao:** Are there foreign students now in Syria? Is Syria open to foreign students now? Are there Chinese students now in Syria?

**Asma Katbeh:** I think these kinds of program, stopped during the war, are still not activated, because others thought, as they see from media, that it's still not safe in Syria and they are worried about it. But it's not true.

Following the Q&A session, Prof. Wang Suolao concluded the salon by saying that, in Syria's efforts to improve its economic situation, if Syria can continue to share political stability, that's good news for both Chinese entrepreneurs and other countries to invest in Syria. He delivered his hopes that Syria can enjoy internal political security, political stability and

economic growth. He also hopes to have another chance to hold a salon with the two guests in the future.

**The 27th New Buds Salon**  
**From Campus to Field:**  
**Case Studies and Academic Planning in Area Studies**  
**December 10, 2020**

Area studies is an interdisciplinary field of research focusing on specific countries or regions in the world according to their geography, culture, economy, politics, society, folklore, organization, institutions, religion, ethnicity, and many other kinds of phenomena. The various issues in human societies, behavioral patterns of the human activities, human mind and intelligence as well as people's lives and production, all fall under the scope of area studies. In order for researchers to better acquire knowledge of their area of focus, gain deeper insights into local situations, and formulate more accurate research approaches and perspectives, area studies require researchers to have the capability to carry out immersive fieldwork.

The Institute of Area Studies, Peking University (PKUIAS) invited Duan Jiuzhou, an assistant research fellow at Tsinghua University's Institute for International and Area Studies, to give a presentation on case studies and academic planning in area studies. The salon aims to expand the academic horizon of students in area studies and related fields, tackle the questions they face in their research journeys, and assist them in converting their role from students on campus to researchers in the field and preparing themselves before, during, and after carrying out fieldwork. The salon was moderated by Prof. Wang Suolao, deputy director of PKUIAS.

Duan Jiuzhou laid out the key points and difficulties in each phase of fieldwork based on his own experiences in his doctoral studies and fieldwork. According to him, three main aspects need to be addressed before initiating fieldwork: language training, research planning, and gaining access to the field. Once in the field, there are also three points to pay attention to: psychological preparation and becoming accustomed to local life; broadening social contacts and constructing relationship networks; conducting interviews and collecting data. The conclusion phase of fieldwork demands sorting out data collected, reflection on the literature, and maintaining relations established in the field.

Preparation phase for fieldwork:

1. Learning and mastering languages is an inevitable part of research in area studies. Nowadays, we live in a globalized world where English is an indispensable language for a researcher due to its being spoken widely across the globe, and it can be used by the researcher as a key for first contact with the field. More crucial for researchers in area studies is acquisition of the local language. Those with sufficient energy can learn the vernacular used in that part of the country or the region. Within Arabic-speaking regions, for example, each country has its own dialect, such as the Egyptian dialect and the Syrian Damascene dialect. Moreover, researchers can make full use of body language to assist their communications.

2. A research plan must be formulated and assessed for feasibility before a researcher heads out for fieldwork. The process of formulating a research plan comprises several stages. A comprehensive understanding of background literature is

required. It is necessary to accumulate a large amount of literature in advance, and to avoid touching on sensitive issues both domestically and in the target country or region, you will need to read a lot of literature to find your own research direction and breakthrough point. Regular communication with your supervisor will help you adjust the direction and goals of your research; at the same time, you need to consider the availability of funding to improve the feasibility of your fieldwork. When selecting your research topic, try to determine two or three alternative topics and several alternative research countries so that when unexpected situations occur, you can be prepared and reduce time and costs. The final step is to settle your research topic and planning with the guidance of your supervisor.

The contribution of one's research topic to the wider audience is also one issue that needs to be addressed. Duan Jiuzhou expressed his belief that area studies in China aims to achieve two goals. The first one is to learn from the experiences of other countries and regions to better advance China's own development. The second is to facilitate the relations between China and the countries and regions in question by increasing our knowledge of the other side. One issue often overlooked while choosing one's topic of research is how one's research would contribute to the countries or regions in question as well as their people. Topics of great significance to China might not appear similarly meaningful to the local communities. For example, research on ethnic communities in Indonesia out of pure curiosity about their "exoticism" would probably be of little relevance for Indonesians, who would most likely be more interested in their own lives and improving their living standards instead of ethnic

identity. Taking a comprehensive view of all aspects when planning one's fieldwork helps save time and hugely lowers the probability of having to form a substitute research topic while in the field.

3. Finding a better, easier pathway to establish oneself in the country or region where one's field sites are. There are many ways to do this. For example, a relatively more time-efficient and trouble-saving way is to get connected to faculty members in universities of the country or region in question through your supervisor and teachers, then ask them for help in finding local resources. Students of foreign languages may already know native speakers from the country or region they are working on, and can thus utilize the resources of these local friends. However, by choosing this method, one may risk getting allotted to departments of Chinese language or China studies centers which are only remotely connected to area studies that one is focusing on. Similarly, reaching out to researchers in local Asia studies or China studies departments is another way to establish a foothold in one's field site. Researchers in these centers may be interested in taking in researchers from China. A less efficient way is to apply to a lot of institutions indiscriminately, as it is likely to take more time and you might hear little from any one of them for a long time.

Actual fieldwork phase:

It is crucial for researchers to adjust their own perspectives and mindsets and get accustomed to local life as soon as possible once they arrive in the field. Field sites might not always have a desirable academic environment and your academic capability

and writing skills might decline if you are separated from a close-knit group of professional academics. However, a prime academic state of mind can be maintained or regained by building a healthy attitude and keeping in touch with supervisors and colleagues back home. Once settled down, the researcher should promptly resume studying and researching. Daily life in some countries is less pleasant than it can be in China, especially in countries that are enduring wars or epidemics. Researchers themselves are also separated from their family and friends, living away from their familiar environment back home, and some may not even be able to return for years. Moreover, one should always be prepared for physical discomfort due to difficulty in acclimatizing to local weather or cuisine, no matter what the local medical circumstances look like. An easy way to get accustomed to the new environment and blend into local society is to mingle with the local Chinese community, so that one can expand one's connections through the connections to local Chinese people to other social circles and thus better engage with the local people.

Engaging in various circles and building local networks in the effort to become part of the local communities is another vital aspect of doing fieldwork. First, researchers must keep a professional relationship with their local supervisor, who usually is their sponsor and the one that invited them to the local institution. Since the local supervisor plays the same role as the researcher's own supervisor back in China and is responsible for the student, failing to maintain a professional relationship would have a direct impact on the local institution's impression on the researcher. Expatriates from other countries are also a useful

source of information. Colleagues from the same institution and academics met at local events can all benefit researchers and contribute to their networks. Other than that, researchers should keep in regular contact with the local Chinese embassy and inform embassy authorities of one's doings in case of emergency. One should also not neglect the importance of hosting visiting groups of Chinese scholars to building up network connections within China and establishing one's own reputation in area studies.

When collecting data, researchers in area studies can conduct interviews focusing on multiple subjects, such as scholars, journalists, government officials, people in case studies and relevant authors. Researchers should be vigilant to the sensitivity of interview questions and interviewees to avoid getting involved in local political crisis. As for textual data, most countries have their own databases, libraries, newspapers and journals. Databases of some developing countries may be less comprehensive, but newspapers and journals are usually readily available in all countries, so researchers should pay attention to gathering these data.

Keeping fieldnotes of local life is also important. Researchers may find signs and symbols peculiar to the locality of the field site, which are worthy of photographing. For example, in Egypt, due to the political and economic turmoil, Egyptians feel strongly that they need to support domestic products and local industries' development, and often call for boycotting foreign products. Therefore, one can often see Arabic signs reading "Support Made in Egypt" in supermarkets. Researchers



should pay attention to typical signs like these and make a record of them.

Conclusion phase for fieldwork:

The focus of this phase is to organize the data collected during fieldwork, including data integration, digitalization, and backup in case of device or data loss. Researchers should spend time reflecting on the academic literature when sorting out fieldwork data, since it may be difficult for them to objectively evaluate the local situation while at the field site due to the localization of their perspective. Once away from the field, researchers should take on the perspective of an “outsider” when reviewing and reflecting on existing literature, analyze the extent of truthfulness in the literature’s depiction of the local circumstances, and thereby deepen their understanding of their research project. Researchers can also utilize the experience they accumulated during fieldwork in finding new directions for future projects.

Researchers should also make efforts to sustain the relationships they built up in their field site. Keeping up a close relationship with their local supervisor and friends in academic and everyday life lays the groundwork for the researcher’s return to the field. As the fieldwork phase may not be enough for the researcher to collect comprehensive data needed for their project, returning to the field may become necessary for the researcher to complement specific data for writing up.

Duan Jiuzhou also elaborated on the interrelation between area studies, fieldwork, data organization and writing, using his research in Egypt as an example. First, text reading and literature

review is the crucial precondition of doing research in area studies. Going directly into the field without reviewing previous research often produces outcomes that have little difference from a journalistic account. Scholars must be equipped with knowledge of the existing literature on relevant topics and their own hypotheses before entering the field to more efficiently collect data and analyze actual cases.

The outcome of fieldwork is threefold. First, it means the acquisition of knowledge. By reviewing literature and following the news, researchers should already have a certain degree of knowledge of their field site. Going into the field and experiencing life there first-hand enables the researcher to verify hypotheses and refine their own understanding of the local situation. Second, it involves updating ones' knowledge, i.e., rectifying one's hypotheses. Some perceptions of the country in question might have been inaccurate before entering the field, and there might be different degrees of inaccuracy. Fieldwork can verify what is correct, complement what is missing and rectify what is faulty in the researcher's perceptions of the field. Third, fieldwork can help the researcher refute established knowledge. Researchers in area studies may find existing hypotheses or knowledge wrong while doing fieldwork and should therefore overturn previous findings and form new hypotheses, redo analyses and provide new updated knowledge. These new hypotheses and research concepts should be rooted in solid fieldwork data and might well be a great opportunity for the development of the researcher's own academic career.

Take Egypt as an example. Influenced by the Jasmine Revolution, the Egyptian people's January 25 revolution

overthrew the Mubarak regime, which had been in power for more than 30 years. After the downfall of Mubarak, Egypt experienced even greater chaos, witnessing a power struggle between the military and the Muslim Brotherhood. The situation only started to calm down when former military leader el-Sisi was elected as president in 2014. Despite the turmoil, Egypt avoided collapse and fracture due to the strong social cohesive and integrative forces of Egyptian history, traditions, and cultures. Duan Jiuzhou elaborated on two cases in Egypt: the Coptic issue, which was related to conflicts between minorities and the majority, and the relationship between the military and government.

The Coptic issue resonates with the second type of fieldwork outcome: the update of knowledge. Most research on the Coptic issue done within China contained factual errors, and, while some was detailed, other research was general and rough. Because existing research done in China was comparatively coarse, researchers had to develop their own understanding of the situation based on investigation and observation once they got into the field. The Copts, most of whom are Orthodox Christians, make up the largest ethnic minority in Egypt. Previous studies tended to hold the view that ethnic conflicts in Egypt mainly existed between the Copts and the Muslims and maintain that Egyptian society and government, in which Muslims are a majority, widely discriminated and oppressed the Copts. They argue that the conflict arose mainly from the divergence in religious beliefs and a general clash between Christian (Western) civilization and Islamic civilization. The fieldwork experience and data collected during it corroborated part of these arguments

and amended the inaccurate perceptions. The representation of the conflict between the two ethnicities and of the discrimination against the Copts was generally correct. For example, during Ramadan, Muslims have their days off while Copts must work overtime. During the recruitment process of the military and police system or the government, there were indeed discriminative biases against the Copts, but rather than not recruiting Copts at all. They were only recruiting them at a much lower rate.

Some views were not precise. For example, the main cause of inter-ethnic conflict is not always the clash of civilizations. A higher identity — an Egyptian one — exists above religious and civilizational identities. One can therefore delve into the question of where exactly lies the root of the conflict: the clashes between the groups may have arisen out of neighborhood quarrels or may revolve around local governance and traditional customs. Meanwhile, we shouldn't neglect that the outbreak of conflicts has institutional roots — first is the ambiguities in the procedure for gaining authorization for construction projects; second, the jurisdiction of personal status laws in Egypt is highly fragmented.

Duan Jiuzhou began by describing the systemic problems reflected in the ambiguities in the procedure for authorizing church construction in Egypt. Combing through the databases of the local news report on ethnic conflicts, Duan Jiuzhou retrieved all the news coverage on the conflicts between the two ethnicities that was published in the decade between 1997 and 2008. Among the 256 cases of conflict between Copts and Muslims, most were related to church construction. After consulting government documents and relevant court files, Duan Jiuzhou discovered that

the roots of these conflicts possibly lay in the relevant laws and regulations on church construction. Laws and decrees on mosque construction lay out standardized procedures with detailed and specific parameters and requirements to follow and meet, whereas those on church constructions are deliberately obscure, which has resulted in a lack of concrete legal basis for church construction. The construction of many Coptic churches required personal connections of Copts to get a permit, which in turn may have led the Muslim community to believe that the projects were established on shaky legal grounds or that they gained permission through illegal means. Churches built in such contexts could thus easily provoke the Muslim community. Conflicts as such are therefore clearly systemic and have their roots in the Egyptian system.

As for issues related to personal status laws, Egypt retained the autonomous religious system (the millet system) from the Ottoman empire for non-Muslims and allows Christians to hold on to their own religious beliefs and customs and follow their own laws — even in the Nasser era in the republic, this system stood unshaken. The Coptic Orthodox Church has a ban on divorce, but some Christian Copts want to be able to divorce by way of converting to another belief. Therefore, sensitive issues such as cross-confessional marriage and change in belief may induce conflicts between the ethnicities. Examples of this include the 2004 Constantine incident, in which the wife of a Coptic priest fled from her home and converted to Islam to seek a divorce, which resulted in a conflict between the two communities. Similarly, the 2011 clash between the two

communities in Cairo reportedly also resulted from a Coptic woman's conversion to Islam.

The case of the relationship between the military and government focuses on the role the Egyptian military plays in the national system. Plenty of research done in the West contends that the 2011 revolution broke out owing to the president and Egypt's political system. They also argue that the Egyptian military is the unwavering founder and defender of the political system in Egypt and, since the Egyptian president usually has served in the military before taking office, the military always steadfastly supports the president. However, Duan Jiuzhou offered another explanation after conducting interviews and social observation in Egypt. First, the opinion that the Egyptian political system causes discontent across the society comes from external observations done by Westerners. From a micro perspective, one should not lose sight of Hosni Mubarak's personal conduct when looking at the 2011 revolution in Egypt. Many of the people's dissatisfactions were related to police violence and Mubarak's intention to have his second son to succeed him as president. Police brutality and violence, after being exposed and spread on social media, caused widespread discontent among the public; meanwhile, the police force has various connections to the military. A father-to-son succession of power in contemporary Egypt would not be accepted because the election of a president is closely linked to the military and that would disallow dynastic rule.

A question thus arises from the Egyptian popular protest in 2011 — what role does the military play in Egypt's political system? The research method and data collection process for

tackling this question is relatively complex, involving textual data collection, observation, interviews, and so on. Historically, the relations between the president and the military have not always been like what the literature depicts — that is, the military unwaveringly supports the president. The four major social crises in the republican history of Egypt happened in 1977, 1986, 2011, and 2013. The military supported the president, albeit to varying degrees, in 1977 and 1986, but opposed the president to a different extent in 2011 and 2013. Such factual evidence disproves the previous point of view and confirms that the military is not always a steadfast supporter of the president.

On the other hand, the issue of police brutality is also somehow related to the tension between the military and domestic security agency in Egypt. The tradition of ruling the military with the police emerged in the Nasser era; the president embarked on building domestic security agencies, intelligence departments and the police to constrain the military's power. As time passed, and the possibility of war decreased and threats to national security changed, the state's needs in the military lessened and the size of police force thus started to expand. The practice of ruling the military with the police grew so deep-rooted that the police system became the primary ruling tool of Hosni Mubarak in his later years, and the Ministry of Interior rose to the status of a de facto state within a state. The emergence of police brutality was closely related to these developments.

The third axis is the relations between the military and big businessmen. The military also plays an important role in technology and production in Egypt. Since the Nasser era, the military provided great numbers of engineers and technical

personnel, who mostly participated in production and construction in factories and state departments. The military was, in this sense, a production force of the state. After its reconciliation with the US, Egypt embarked on privatization of its economy, and as a result giant business groups (similar to commercial brokerage) appeared, intertwined with overseas capital, who later developed into coalitions of powerful businessman in international capital, as represented by the second son of Hosni Mubarak. These businessmen then entered the core of state management and began to wield impact on the state capital and production-oriented powers in Egypt. Therefore, the businessman groups and the military also conflicted in both terms of production and power, since the military as the founder of contemporary Egypt's political system is both the core of the system and a producer in the state.

The above case exhibits how fieldwork results can refute existing knowledge. Although the foundation of the republic in Egypt was the military, the military itself had been marginalized toward the end of the Mubarak era. It had been marginalized, foremost, in terms of capital by powerful domestic capital holders such as the business corporation of Mubarak's son, as well as by international capital and transnational corporations. Second, the military, as the founder of contemporary Egypt's national system, had been marginalized by the police force. The marginalization of military in these two aspects led to the fact that the Egyptian political system was not sustainable anymore and that the state was not able to respond to the public's demand in the country's development and a rise in their living standards, eventually resulting in the 2011 mass protests.



Multiple perspectives are available when conducting research in area studies. One option is the state-society relations approach, which is perhaps more suitable for observing developing countries. The reason is that the state angle has been largely neglected in previous studies. Samuel Huntington, in his *Political Order in Changing Societies*, stressed the importance of a state's ability to construct a ruling and management order. He listed both the US and the Soviet Union as excellent and strong states based on state governance capability instead of ideology. This differs significantly from Western discourse after the 80s, especially in the post-Soviet era, which holds that democratization, de-nationalization and privatization are the general direction of development in the world but disregarded the assessment of state capability to a great degree.

Joel Migdal's *Strong Societies and Weak States* provides classic case studies for research on state-society relations. It places Egypt in between a weak and strong state, categorizes Israel as a strong state, and Senegal as a weak state. Nasser attempted to carry out land reform in Egypt in the hope of reforming the society by way of it but failed in the end and is thus classified as a state that could be either strong or weak. The "Arab Spring" brought about regime change and incessant social unrest in a lot of Middle Eastern states, which now face the challenge of rebuilding their state capability. Other than state capability, the state-society approach can also explore state autonomy — the state's ability to make decisions independently as well as its ability to avoid corrosion by businesspeople groups or transnational corporations.

In Egypt, for example, the state building and development process has been similar to that of many developing countries; it first went through the process of achieving independent nation-state building by revolution in the mid-20th century, then underwent mandatory reform imposed by transnational capital, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund due to the overwhelming power of the West after the collapse of the bipolar world pattern. After the US rose to become the single superpower and the start of the neo-liberalization of the market, Egypt's state capacity and autonomy began to decrease. China, however, while maintaining rapid economic growth, has retained its state autonomy and has been strengthening its governance ability. Egypt, along with other countries, has started to reflect on how to rebuild state capability using China as an example.

Duan Jiuzhou finally argued for the necessity and inevitability of re-proposing the state-society relations approach as well as the concept of state capability and autonomy when studying developing countries in the contemporary world. There are also other relevant sub-perspectives for research, such as the relationship between politics and religion, government-business relations, military-government relations and central-local government relations. Diverse research perspectives also help in making academic research more compatible with the "One Belt & One Road" initiative. As multiple developing countries suffer from political instability, dealing solely with the government means higher risks due to the potential of regime change. Answers to questions such as how to blend into the local society, how to protect one's own interests, how to handle commercial relationships with local businessman groups or families could all

be found in the research outcomes of relevant state-society relations and government-businessmen relations in the country in question. Research on general state-society relations as well as government-businessmen relations in the country in question also facilitates the “One Belt and One Road” initiative’s endeavor to be more practical in local settings.

During the Q&A session, students asked how one should strike a balance between the universality of theories and the particularity of area studies. Duan Jiuzhou commented that researchers in area studies should contribute to advancing theories on top of conducting area studies. For example, one can do comparative studies between regions or countries. Demonstrations and protests that recently arose across different regions in Thailand, Peru, and France could be juxtaposed with each other to arrive at better developed universalist theories, which can be difficult to reach from a single-country focused study. Area studies is able to not only contribute to theories but also address classic assertions or topics such as the aforementioned state capability building and state-society relations. Classic topics that were first brought up decades ago might have already fallen behind the world’s development; and, although the aforementioned Joel Migdal used Egypt as an example, researchers in area studies can still renew and contribute to classic theses and theories with their first-hand observation in the latest fieldwork, since Egypt is certainly different from what it was at the time Migdal published his book.

Toward the end of the salon, Duan Jiuzhou encouraged students to deepen their knowledge of the country they’re focusing on and strengthen their disciplinary background. He

advised students to root themselves in actual case studies and practical issues and delve into theoretical debates. He inspired students to expand the scope of area studies based on facts while keeping their aspirations and goal unwavering.