

**Yannan Roundtable III**  
**Functionalist Anthropology and Indirect Rule:**  
**Inspirations from Frontier Politics in 20th Century**  
**China**  
**May 27, 2021**

Underlying the promotion of “community research” before and the “study of frontier politics” during WWII by Wu Wenzao, a famous Chinese sociologist and ethnologist, is a coherent reflection on the attempts to combine functionalist anthropology with imperial politics, attempts that focused on the approach of indirect rule developed during the period from the second half of the 19th century to the interwar years.

Tian Geng, an assistant professor with the Department of Sociology at Peking University, was invited to deliver a keynote speech, in which he reviewed the theories of Henry Sumner Maine and Bronislaw Malinowski, two key figures in the initial and conclusive stages of the indirect rule doctrine respectively. In fact, the two scholars provided intellectual means to break the confrontation between primitive peoples and civilizations and brought the feelings of cultural contact back to center stage of anthropological and ethnological studies. The researches by Wu Wenzao and other scholars to engage in the study of frontier politics from a sociological perspective significantly expanded the potential approach and provided inspirations for understanding the evolution of China’s identity as a nation in the

second half of the 20th century.

Tian Geng pointed out that the 1930s witnessed the robust development of frontier politics studies in China. Academic societies and publications, whether established by the government or by scholars themselves, all thrived during the period. Among them, *Public Forum on Frontier Politics* was well known to the public with its quasi-official status, as it was run by the Mongolian and Tibetan Affairs Commission. In fact, the academic enthusiasm for frontier research reached such an unprecedented level at the time that it inspired a flow of frontier studies. For example, *A History of The Evolution of China's Frontier*, co-authored by Gu Jiegang and Shi Nianhai, was a part of frontier studies as well as a product of its influence.

In addition, the scholarly famous “Debate over Nation” in 1939 (The academic debate on “Chinese nation is one” in the 1930s, which epitomized the intellectual dilemma that nation-state building encountered during the transformation of modern China: Whether it was the “one Chinese nation” advocated by Gu Jiegang or the “ethnic pluralism” by Fei Xiaotong. The debate was essentially about how to understand the relationship between the state and the nation) was also under the influence of frontier studies.

### **The Three Representative Initiative Documents During the Development of Frontier Politics Studies in China**

During the period between 1939 and the end of WWII

when frontier studies in a narrower sense began to emerge as a discipline, three representative initiative documents were introduced, two of which were programmatic documents written by Yang Chengzhi, a founding father of Sun Yat-sen University. Yang Chengzhi was once assigned by the university and the Academia Sinica to investigate ethnic minorities in Yunnan Province, which pioneered the studies on Southwest China. At the same time, the then Ministry of Education instructed a group of universities, including Sun Yat-sen University, to institute frontier politics studies both as a discipline and as an academic department. As a founding father, Yang Chengzhi wrote the two programmatic documents.

The third document was Wu Wenzao's "Introduction to the Study of Frontier Politics" published in 1942, the most influential document in frontier politics studies in China for the complete system of levels it proposed for the development of frontier politics studies. In short, the article essentially argued that developing frontier politics studies was important to realizing the goal of "seeking national independence externally and national equality internally". The study of frontier politics should be extended to include Chinese people living in other parts of the world, which in Wu Wenzao's view, was the outermost dimension of the study. "Introduction to the Study of Frontier Politics" dramatically changed the narrow nature of frontier politics studies, making it not only a research subject on

frontier affairs with practical value, but also a tool for Chinese scholars to participate in world political changes, which would involve frontier politics studies in a broad sense.

### **The Study of Frontier Politics in a Broad Sense**

The study of frontier politics in a broad sense redefined the significance of developing frontier politics studies in China in light of the changes in world history, especially the changes of colonial systems, during the period from the second half of the 19th century to WWI. Three scholars in this period are worthy of more attention.

One of the three scholars is Liu Xian, an anthropologist who studied in Britain and mainly did research at Fudan University. As a frequent participant in anthropologic discussions in Europe while studying there, he was well versed in the relationship between European colonies and anthropologic studies. The second is Huang Wenshan, the founding president of the Chinese Ethnology Society which he founded at Zhongshan Cultural Center, the first high-level academic institution of anthropologic studies in China. The third scholar is Ma Changshou, Zhou Wei's mentor. The work that Ma Changshou did before the founding of China laid the foundation for frontier ethnological studies in China. After 1949, Ma Changshou became a distinguished ethnohistorian, who was also known for his sharp insight into the development of anthropology in the West in the 20th century.

## **Wu Wenzao's Contribution to China's Frontier Politics Studies**

Before Wu Wenzao joined Yenching University, the dominant social science theory in the university was location theory, which was the closest to Chicago School's agroecological approach. Location theory had a very prominent orientation between 1922 and 1930, which made it a fundamental approach of studying social issues at Yenching University. However, Wu Wenzao made a significant change: The Chicago school represented by Robert Ezra Park was not the most appealing research to him; one of the most important changes in his mind was to take the functionalist anthropological field work represented by Alfred Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski, instead of other forms of community research, as the paradigm of field work, which would involve three very important elements: time, space and people.

In respect of time, as a typical presentist, he viewed time in cultural contexts. Since culture is a living tradition, his historical view, therefore, was strongly contemporary in nature. In respect of space, he completely accepted the location theory of the Chicago school. As for people, the most important element, Wu Wenzao had not had a clear answer before he left Yenching University as to how to highlight the role of people in community research in a specific way. This was also the case with his arguments about nation in his earlier work.

The “Nation and State”, which Wu Wenzao wrote at the age of 25 when he was studying at Columbia University, was an important reflection on the Western thoughts between the two world wars. The article was not mature enough but very powerful, as it raised a direct question: Was the nationalist movement brought about by WWI only to be embodied in national state-building or national self-consciousness movement? The point of the question was that the creation of a nation-state was not adequately reflected in traditional thoughts ranging from that of Ernest Renan to Thomas Woodrow Wilson. Later, Wu Wenzao summarized the issue in China with benevolent governance in one of his articles in 1926.

In 1938, while on his sabbatical leave in the US, he went to Europe, where he came by an unpublished manuscript by Malinowski, *Forms of Culture*. Since the article was never published, what he got was an exclusive copy. When commenting on the unpublished manuscript, Wu Wenzao wrote a very long article, *On Forms of Culture*, in which he replaced benevolent governance with Chinese civilization, and by that time his thoughts had become clearer.

In Wu Wenzao’s view, the two dominant knowledge systems to promote the understanding of frontier culture in the 20th century were the Great Man theory and the former Soviet Union’s minority policy. One of Wu Wenzao’s most important academic directions after he left Yenching University in 1938

was to find out whether China was able to complete the transformation on its own from living between the two knowledge systems, and in what way he could expand benevolent governance or Chinese civilization into a new knowledge theory on frontier politics.

At that time, Wu Wenzao had two other important perceptions. First, the new internationalism after WWI was inevitable. Second, starting with the Netherlands, an important development trend of colonial empires was to reinforce their rule over colonies in a scientific rather than empirical way. It is worth noting that scholars such as Wu Wenzao, Ma Changshou and Liu Xian were all greatly interested in the whole knowledge system that ranged from the scientific cultivation of colonial rule first practiced by the Netherlands to the training of colonial officials in Australia and Cambridge. They attributed the delegated rule to the knowledge system which had been practiced in the colonies for almost 100 years, believing that delegated rule was closely related to the knowledge system.

It should be noted that functionalist anthropology played a transitional role in the transformation of the colonial British Empire. Since 1857 when indirect rule officially became a central part of the British colonial rule, it took as its utmost priority to transform the way of ruling that had previously been centered around the mission of civilization in the era of liberal empire. The transformation of governance was mainly reflected

in two aspects: first, reshaping custom in a way that it would become the core of a custom-based governance; second, transforming the colonial knowledge system with an anthropological approach.

### **Ideas on Indirect Rule: From Henry Sumner Maine to Bronislaw Malinowski**

In Maine's design, one important task of a colonial empire that would practice custom-based governance was to create a traditional society, that is, to shape a colony into a traditional society by civilization's standard. This is the key argument that Maine emphasized in *Ancient Law* and his lectures on India. In Maine's view, the most important role in constructing a traditional society was not to be played by aristocrats who controlled cultural resources in a traditional society, but by imperial intellectuals like himself, who had sophisticated understanding of and the so-called sympathy to the cultures in colonies.

In Maine's view, one of the key tasks in shaping traditional society was to break the gap between archaic society and primitive society. While a primitive society was an uncivilized society, or a barbaric society from the perspective of civilization, an archaic society would regard the society under the rule of a colonial empire as the legacy from ancient customs, languages and legal traditions, that is, fossils of an ancient civilization. There is an obvious distinction between the two in concept. In



fact, Maine is the confluence of three key transformations in the intellectual history: the rediscovery of archaic society, indirect rule of the British Empire, and reinvention of the early social mores that survived in India.

Maine's first major argument was that the Victorian view which regarded custom as an obstacle to the realization of liberty had to be rejected. In his view, customs should not be cultural codes controlled by aristocrats, such as Brahmans who possessed cultural resources, but be created by scholars and scientists like himself, who had mastered the tools of modern science and were able to reconstruct, re-collect and restore customs. It was a very important shift of view when he argued that customs should not be controlled by elites from the same nation. With this shift, he was able to strike back at the Victorian view that had separated liberty from custom, and to bring a series of materials and archives which had previously been neglected, such as administrative documents of government officials, back into the core of custom reconstruction.

Behind Maine's view was, in effect, a major doubt against the British colonial rule: Would Westernized or civilized locals be able to play the role of agents of imperial rule? He was strongly critical of this idea. In other words, Maine found that it was those Western-educated locals who posed the greatest threat to imperial rule in the 1860s. Maine believed it would be hopeless and impossible to incorporate colonies into a civilized

order of which the colonial power itself was a part through cultural importation and continuous assimilation. In his opinion, governance based on the triad of civilization, assimilation and autonomy would be highly problematic.

In Maine's view, customs are in effect bounded by strong or even insurmountable partition barriers. Hence, custom-based discourse, which appears to be open on the surface, actually strengthens such unassimilable boundary. In this respect, Maine went further than Edmund Burke, though he took colonies much more seriously than Burke. As a result, this divide-and-rule approach, which represented the idea that assimilation would be a dead end, finally began to merge with the openness and legitimacy of cultural pluralism in the early 20th century. However, its conservative root, the denial or disbelief in the possibility of realizing cultural pluralism that was implied by indirect rule, has often been neglected.

Maine was strongly opposed to viewing customs in colonies as uncivilized folkways. Rather he went to the opposite, believing that it was the rapid disintegration of primitive societies that threatened the imperial rule, not the other way around. Therefore, in Maine's view, what was important to building a traditional society was to find a way to separate the colonial society from the colonized society and preserve the customs of the primitive society so that they could keep developing in an orderly way.

According to Tian Geng, *Ancient Law* may seem to us a dualistic evolutionist view or one about social forms, but one particularly amazing part of it is about legal fiction, in which Maine argued that patriarchy, instead of being a legacy from primitive society or ancient civilization, was a regime in the sense of legal fiction. What he really concerned himself with was the real power of patriarchy, the power with which patriarchy brings non-family members under the rule of paternal lineage. So, the family, kinship and patriarchy he emphasized were all based on legal fiction. Therefore, he re-established the legal fiction-based patriarchy as the core of ancient civilization.

One important distinction between Maine and his contemporary classical scholars, such as Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, lies in the fact that Maine's form of ancient society is based on fiction, in which case, there is always a powerful law maker behind the social form. Maine's approach was to start with changing the way of collecting local customs, which means placing customary ethnographic evidences above long-established traditions, and codified customs above the classics exclusively accessible to people with the DNA of the civilization. For Maine, the real custom-based rule in India should not be based on the Indian traditions claimed by the Brahmins, but on the codes of law issued by the British Empire in India and the courts that made rulings according to such codes. Therefore, Maine turned to colonial archives and administrative

reports which were what he really wanted to prioritize and which transformed customs from their role as rituals to one as social structure.

Under the influence of Maine's theory, colonial officials of the British Empire in the late 19th century, including colonial governors who represented the British Empire in different parts of Eurasia, further developed the techniques and methods of colonial rule, and challenged the representation and ownership of the two core concepts of the liberal empire. In this sense, Maine ushered in an important shift in indirect rule, which allowed the colonized regions to take on new identities. Borrowing the concept of historians of international law, after Maine, colonies entered the world system through unequal integration rather than domination by colonial empires. This provided an opportunity for the generation of Malinowski to think about class rule.

When he returned to Europe in early 1920, Malinowski began to think about the ruling order of colonial empires represented by the British Empire at the time. Traditions in colonies were seen as a complex and delicate network, which in his view was seriously wrong. Colonial officials and missionaries, who were the intellectual architects of the colonial rule, destroyed its integrity. In fact, Malinowski was inspired by the task of transforming colonial knowledge system with an anthropological approach, which had been left unfinished from

Maine. Malinowski believed it was precisely some inappropriate colonial knowledge that was posing the danger that Maine had been worrying about in his time, that is, the disappearance of primitive societies.

In Malinowski's view, the British Empire emphasized indirect rule in its colonies on the one hand, while reserved some rights on the other, that is, even in some traditional tribes which had sovereign powers, the Empire still had the right to take back functional institutions when colonial officials found practices that violated human rights. There are numerous such examples in the legal decisions made by the British Empire or by the Americans against the indigenous peoples. However, Malinowski took a different view. He regarded the dismemberment of the integrity of traditions in colonies as a very dangerous start, and he saw colonial officials as the two sides of a coin.

One of the core ideas in his book *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* published in 1926 is that the law of primitive peoples is civilized law, of which the core is civil law, instead of primitive law. Why did he make such a shift? It is because traditional legal anthropological studies regarded the law of primitive peoples as a combination of customary law and punishment, the former representing blind obedience to traditions and the latter the fear of the consequences of severe traditional punishment. This was what Malinowski mainly

rejected in the book. He believed that laws of primitive peoples and modern civilized countries should both be regarded as civil law, or, state law. This definition is highly consistent with Maine's view in Chapter 3 of *Ancient Law*.

In Malinowski's opinion, law is what is legitimately required of a person by other people, the central part of which is the obligation of management. The point of law is not blind obedience to custom and fear of punishment, as believed by his predecessors, such as the French sociologist Emile Durkheim. Malinowski believed that laws of primitive societies should not be generalized as customary law, nor should laws of modern societies as so-called rationality. By doing so, Malinowski did not mean to make primitive societies as highly or equally rational as today's societies, but to make the rituals in primitive societies, or the witchcraft system, part of a rational order. This is an important application Malinowski introduced in the book.

From 1922 to 1936 when Malinowski wrote the book, the League of Nations, which was under the influence of Maine, attempted to keep colonies intact through isolation and maintain the integrity of customs and cultures in colonies with a divide-and-rule strategy. But Malinowski was strongly opposed to such tribe-based territorial governance. Malinowski saw a key point in the class rule Maine described in his book, that is, the impossibility to Westernize traditional societies. Malinowski pointed out clearly that the real task of anthropology today

should be to make cultural contact, rather than to divide and rule; should focus on the knowledge in cultural contact rather than that in governing with customs. Therefore, in Malinowski's opinion, what Maine had started but had not realized could only be advanced by functionalist anthropology. In short, it means to resolutely take the study of cultural contact as the core knowledge of anthropology, rather than the exploration of the origin and source of cultures in any sense, or cultural organization in the primitive sense.

Therefore, Malinowski's functionalist anthropology takes studies of the middle ground between cultures and cultural contact as its mission. In his opinion, anthropology should aim to study cultural contact rather than protect customs. This is well perceived by Chinese scholars from Wu Wenzao to Fei Xiaotong. In Fei Xiaotong's academic debate with Gu Jiegang and Fu Sinian, his underlying theoretical reference was Malinowski's functionalist research. Therefore, Fei Xiaotong's historical view reflects Malinowski's understanding of civilization contact or cultural contact.

According to Malinowski, indirect rule has no intention for self-governance at all. Only by recognizing this point can we see the significance of anthropology in today's societies. In addition, Fred represents the group of scholars that Malinowski would revolt against, as they wanted to turn customs to ancient classics, or to classicalize customs. Fred's studies on the *Bible* and the

spirit of Oriental civilizations were in effect intended to turn customs back to what classical knowledge system prior to the 19th century looked like. Although Malinowski had great respect for Fred, he believed he had to take the step to make sure that customs be established by Westerners themselves.

Malinowski was rather pessimistic about one thing of indirect rule which, in his view, was merely an intermediate ruling state with no way out and which had come to an end with its only feasible future lying in autonomy. However, Malinowski himself was very pessimistic about the future of such autonomy: Would it be cultural autonomy or a global outbreak of nationalism, nationalism to realize through armed struggle as he described. He did not want to see that happen, but rather would like the autonomy be kept at cultural level, which was very difficult. However, what Malinowski was not sure about was exactly the way-out that would emerge from a precocious critique in the study of frontier politics in China.

In general, there have been two turbulent trends in international politics since WWI -- nation-state building and indirect rule, the former emphasizing self-consciousness and the latter opposing the ideal of civilization. In fact, the two were on track to develop into the two sides of one same thing. In such a trend, indirect rule wielded its maximum political influence. A very important criticism and also an inheritance of public opinion by Malinowski is that he believed the path of turning



custom back to that of an ancient society would not go far. In other words, the core of custom is not to make it a relic of an ancient civilization, but the reality of cultural contact.

Malinowski revealed the last secret of indirect rule. Would it evolve into the autonomy at the culture level only without involving any political elements as he hoped, or an explosion of nationalism? Wu Wenzao and other Chinese scholars realized this question in their thinking in the 1930s. One of their important attempts was to continue Malinowski's research, in which cultural contact was placed at the core of frontier politics studies, but it did not have to be the nationalism of armed struggle that Malinowski was pessimistic about. Maine proposed indirect rule and Malinowski challenged it, while frontier politics studies by Chinese scholars in the 1930s looked to the path of people contact and multi-ethnic integration, which represents the third wave of development in frontier politics studies.

**Yannan Roundtable IV**  
**Decoupling: Why are Comparative Politics**  
**and Area Studies Drifting Apart?**

**June 11, 2021**

Comparative politics and area studies are both in the “Made-in-America” mode of the Cold War era. From the 1950s to the 1980s, comparative politics and area studies enjoyed three decades of “honeymoon” featured by mutual reference and intertwined development. However, they have increasingly diverged in terms of knowledge pursuits, disciplinary positioning, core concerns, and research approaches since the 1990s. Although scholars have been calling for more interaction and inclusion between comparative politics and area studies, not much progress has been made so far. Should this apparent “decoupling” tendency between comparative politics and area studies be translated into *jieou* (解耦) or *tuogou* (脱钩) in Chinese? The two words, although having the same English translation, have subtle differences in Chinese. This salon invites Associate Professor Wang Weihua from the School of International Studies of Peking University to start from the word “decoupling” to explore what different intellectual visions will be presented from the respective standpoints of comparative politics and area studies, and their implications on the studies of world politics and foreign issues in China.

According to Wang Weihua, the English word “decoupling” has become a buzzword recently, mainly because Trump attempted to “decouple” (*tuogou*) from China. “*Tuogou*” is a fixed translation of “decoupling” in financial and economic fields, and describes a situation similar to the disconnection of two carriages of a train. It implies the assumption that China and the US are two separate entities connected to each other, but do not constitute a complete whole. The English word “decoupling” is also used in the two disciplines of electronic circuits and software engineering, where it is translated as “*quou*” (去耦) in electronic circuits, and “*jiegou*” (解耦) in software engineering. Both expressions are derived from “*ouhe*” (耦合, coupling), which refers to the interdependence and mutual influence between two entities, and the degree of influence is called coupling degree. The implied presupposition is that although the two entities are independent, they constitute a system, and what matters is whether the system itself can work effectively and stably. “Coupling” is usually divided into seven levels in soft engineering: the higher the coupling degree, the weaker the relative independence of modules and the higher the degree of mutual interference. Software system design pursues “high cohesion and low coupling,” requiring components to be presented and distributed as individual modules, and when a module is engaged, not only will it perform its own function, but the entire software system will work together with lower energy

consumption and enhanced stability. In short, “*tuogou*” and “*jieou*” as two Chinese translations of “decoupling” suggest different imageries. Putting the two words together is intended as a metaphor of the situation where comparative politics and area studies are drifting apart.

In what sense do comparative politics and area studies constitute a system? First, they both study foreign-related issues. However, today’s comparative politics research is evolving toward theoretical narrative, while area studies, which takes geographic areas as its subject of study, assumes certain cultural significance. However, in real practice, area studies has only vaguely defined analysis units, which include regions, countries, and even civilizations. Second, since its birth, area studies has emphasized its multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary attributes, which, in a different light, could be interpreted as anti-disciplinary. Concerns about research subject and in what approach to study the subject are two issues. If the approach to study a subject is emphasized, then it is to emphasize the disciplinary attribute; but if approach is not emphasized, it is to say the studies are so-called anti-disciplinary, and is thus subject-oriented. Third, in area studies, everyone is working on different things, and different regions have different focuses. So, at the level of metatheory, area studies has no dominant approaches. In addition, as far as theories of the middle range are concerned, area studies has made little theoretical

contribution by the mainstream social science standards. Compared with the theoretical orientation and knowledge generalization in comparative politics, area studies is chaotic, thus has encountered obvious controversies.

### **Coupling (耦合): Hand-in-hand Experiences Between Comparative Politics and Area Studies in the Early Days**

Comparative politics and area studies went hand in hand between the late 1940s and the late 1960s, which could be described as “coupling”. Both started as research fields in the US, not disciplines.

In terms of practical motivation, the US’s concerns about global interests after the WWII directly urged it to devote resources to comparative politics and area studies, and determined the fact that today’s division of areas is based on geopolitical considerations. What’s more, comparative politics and area studies started to emerge in an important and widely accepted intellectual context, that is, the dichotomy between tradition and modernization. At that specific point in time, it took on profound ideological significance, as it held a different vision for the development of human society from that of the Marxist’s, especially from the one on five-stage development, making them two different historical views of human development. In this context, the theoretical consensus reached between area studies and comparative politics was modernization, a dominant paradigm around which the two

carried out early cooperation.

In terms of institutionalization, both comparative politics and area studies were purposefully established by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC). An important report in area studies was *Area Studies: With Special Reference to Their Implications for Research in the Social Sciences* written by Robert Hall in 1947, which planned how area studies should be conducted in the future, what to focus on, and how to divide areas. Afterward, the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) collaborated with SSRC and jointly established several area studies committees in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, inspired by the successful operation of the Political Action Committee, scholars such as Gabriel Almond and Lucian Pye founded the Committee on Comparative Politics with the funding of SSRC. The committee was a key academic institution for promoting the scientific transformation of comparative politics research in the US.

The early collaboration was established in the intellectual context of consensus reached on the level of metatheory. Gabriel Almond took structural functionalism as the foundation for constructing his comparative politics theory, while structural functionalism was easily accepted by scholars who were engaged in area studies from the perspectives of sociology and anthropology. In the history of disciplinary development in the US, the behaviorist revolution was related to the study of

American politics, while comparative politics had nothing to do with behaviorism in the first 20 years. In fact, as grand and generalized narratives, the farther structural functionalism was from American politics, the closer it was to area studies.

In terms of representative achievements, the early theoretical framework of comparative politics had nothing to do with the study of the third-world countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America at the time. The earliest research results, represented by Gabriel Almond's paper in 1956, Seymour Martin Lipset's paper in 1959, and Karl Wolfgang Deutsch's paper in 1961, laid the foundation for the discussions of political development issues in the discipline of political science from the perspective of modernization theory. It reviewed the early industrialization experience of Europe and the US in a language along the lines of system theory, analyzed the important factors in the transition process, and outlined a general template for approaching political modernization issues from the perspective of comparative politics and political development. A milestone that marked the formation of the template was *The Politics of the Developing Areas* edited by Gabriel Almond and James Coleman in 1960, in which Gabriel Almond systematically put forward in the introduction his functionalist viewpoint, though not clearly structuralist yet, with each subsequent chapter introducing the political situation of a region. In fact, this constituted an ideal in-depth integration of comparative politics

and area studies, that is, using a theoretical framework that was set up earlier to analyze different regions or key countries by area. This book shows to some extent the relatively high degree of coupling between theory-oriented comparative politics and area studies in early times, as they could at least converse with and inspire each other. In 1963, Lucian Pye took over as chairman of the Committee on Comparative Politics, and compiled nine volumes of the *Studies in Political Development Series*, in which a number of specific topics were supported by area studies. *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach* co-authored by Gabriel Almond and G. Bingham Powell Jr. in 1966 summarized the researches on political development and the early structural functionalist theoretical frameworks of comparative politics in the 1950s and 1960s. David E. Apter's *The Politics of Modernization*, though not a part of the series, shared the same theoretical style and structural functionalist approach. The existence of such a knowledge system means that a relatively complete discourse system based on the cooperation of experts in area studies and comparative political theorists had been established by the early 1950s and 1960s. Centered around modernization, the system focused on interpreting what politics modernization would be, what it should do, and in what ways it would approach issues.

In late 1960s and early 1970s, an important shift took place in the theoretical interest in comparative politics, marked by



*Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* by Robert A. Dahl in 1971. Dahl was a typical political theorist from a background in American politics, but his book made new classification of the existing forms of government in current world politics, which was soon widely accepted. This means that behaviorist approaches were influencing comparative politics, and the democracy orientation previously exclusive to American politics infiltrated into the research field of comparative politics.

To summarize, the coupling of comparative politics and area studies was based on four aspects: The first is their shared vision --- modernization and the fear of communism. Second, the metatheoretical consensus in structural functionalism. The third is the epistemological pursuit, that is, scholars, including experts in area studies, were not content with simply making descriptions, but aspired to making theoretical explanations. However, they were a bit disoriented about what theories to follow or how to develop theories. Therefore, what they did the best during this period was making classification, instead of making cause-effect explanation. Fourth, political science was still unconscious in methodology, and it was precisely this backwardness that provided opportunities for both to thrive.

### **Decoupling (*Jieou*): Consciousness in Methodology Created the Gap Between Political Science and Area Studies**

According to Wang Weihua, the relationship between political science and area studies between the 1970s and 1990s

could be defined as decoupling (*jieou*). The motivation for decoupling was simple, that is, comparative politics began to consciously distance itself from area studies for four reasons: First, the scientific view dominated by logical empiricism had established its absolute dominant position within political science, and the pursuit of generalized theories had become the core task of the political discipline. Second, the discipline of comparative politics was facing tremendous pressure from the application of quantitative methods in political research in the US, while cross-country comparative studies replaced area studies to become the main concern of the relevant academic field. Third, the shift of topical focus. With the end of the Vietnam War and the changing political situation in Latin America and Southern Europe, democratization gradually replaced modernization to become the core concern of comparative research. Fourth, the disintegration of communist movement itself reflected the fact that metatheoretical issues of social science were no longer as important as before.

Comparative politics became methodologically conscious in the real sense between the 1970s and 1990s. As a result, the relationship between political science and area studies started to show the tendency of high cohesion and low coupling: High cohesion in the sense that it was still a dialogue between political disciplines, and low coupling in the sense that political science, which also studies foreign issues, was to distance itself

from area studies due to its own higher methodological standards, while area studies was still in an anarchic state.

The academic shift to high cohesion and low coupling means that comparative politics research has shifted its focus from Asia, Africa and Latin America to itself. From the 1970s to the 1990s, a large quantity of theoretical contributions were achieved by reviewing European and American experiences and re-understanding Latin America. This could be clearly seen in the following aspects. First, political and cultural studies were relatively quiet at this stage in the so-called “data accumulation period.” Second, cross-country comparisons to review experience of Europe and the US became prominent. The most successful cooperation was among a group of scholars engaged in party politics research brought together by Seymour Martin Lipset and Stein Rokkan in 1968, who established a basic analysis framework of party politics that is still in use today. Third, the changing situation in Latin America and Southern Europe compelled the mainstream of political science to rethink the “Lipset hypothesis” (economic development leads to democratization) and to focus on the interaction between elites and the specific process of democratization. The fourth is the maturity of methodology. The iconic methodological textbook in the field of comparative politics was *The Logic of Comparative Social Inquiry* by Adam Przeworski and Henry Teune in 1970. The comparative methods of the most similar system and the

most different system, which are still in use day, have become the fundamental skills in comparative politics. In addition, with the development of statistical technology and maturing game theory, studies of individual events began to emerge as a method.

From the 1970s to the 1980s, two interesting debates in the circle of area studies drew attention from comparative politics. One was the debate over “moral economy or rational peasant”, or the “James C. Scott - Samuel L. Popkin debate”. Why did this debate in area studies over peasants in Southeast Asia draw broad attention from comparative politics? In fact, what the comparative politics scholars were concerned about was not area issues, but peasant issues and the methodological innovations involved. *States and Social Revolutions* by Prof. Theda Skocpol of Harvard University was also criticized almost unanimously by experts in area studies. But she said what she was trying to answer were mainly theoretical questions about revolution. More importantly, starting from this research, comparative historical analysis returned to the mainstream standpoint, as structured comparative historical analysis could be used to deal with macro historical phenomena and provide a causal explanatory answer. The commonality of the two debates lies in the fact that scholars of comparative politics were more likely to be drawn to answers to issues in area studies or those in obvious region- or country-specific contexts, if they involve broad and

general issues, especially when they were innovative in research method or thinking.

Why has decoupling taken place between comparative politics and area studies? What is the basic context of decoupling? First, it has been realized that they have fundamentally different knowledge pursuits. While comparative politics has always been keen on answering general theoretical questions, which it verifies with the most important empirical research materials, area studies emphasizes specific cases or local knowledge, and takes the presentation of differences as the worthiest pursuit. Second, the internal competition within a discipline. Individual researchers must make a choice between having a dialogue with scholars in their own discipline or those from area studies. From the 1970s to the 1990s, this was a dilemma faced by scholars not only in political science, but also in sociology, anthropology, and even all other established disciplines, that is, they had to talk more and more with scholars in their respective disciplines instead of with scholars in area studies. As a result, both disciplines have respectively moved toward a certain degree of high cohesion. Third, the contrast between disciplines. The sudden end of the Cold War struck a devastating blow to traditional Soviet and Eastern European studies in the field of area studies, posing a great challenge to the knowledge system of area studies as a whole. In contrast, the rise of economics imperialism during this period directly

impacted both comparative politics and political science, and rational choice theory and formal models flocked to political studies. Against this backdrop, comparative politics chose to advance in the direction of further scientification, taking it as the right bet.

### **Decoupling: The Standardization of Methods in Comparative Politics Leads to the Devaluation of Area Studies**

After the 1990s, comparative politics and area studies did show a trend of decoupling. Comparative politics began to deliberately distance itself from area studies and elevate itself, thinking that area studies was not scientific. From an objective perspective, the atmosphere of the entire era has changed. With the Cold War ended with the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the US losing its opponent, the social science discourse system was different. Liberalism-guided globalization seemed to be leveling the global playing field and looking for a universal explanation. The East Asian financial crisis dealt the final fatal blow to the theoretical contribution of area studies, and a heavy blow to the narratives of developmental states. Since then, no theoretical explanation in the discourse system of comparative politics has come from area studies.

On the other hand, political science experienced a standardization movement. After the publication of *Designing Social Inquiry* in particular, scholars of quantitative research

wanted to establish their dominance, while scholars of qualitative research in political science hoped to continue to debate with a different set of rhetoric in their method to make it more interesting. One exception in this period was *Making Democracy Work* by Robert D. Putnam, a work that was based on long-term research on a country and provided all political science practitioners with a theoretical and methodological stimulus that was too strong to ignore. However, it is an accomplishment that can hardly be replicated.

In 1996, as President of the Comparative Politics Section of the American Political Science Association, Robert H. Bates, an expert in African studies, published the Letter from the President, in which he mentioned that one of his predecessors “saw area specialists as fulfilling the role of, say, historians.” He intended for a “mutual infusion” between the two subjects. His opinion was reported by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 1997, and became a focus of debate in political science, in which he was criticized for having betrayed area studies and trying to transform comparative politics with the standards of formal models. Four years later, the anonymous e-mail incident of the American Political Science Association sparked an even wider debate between scholars in comparative politics who had area studies background and scholars who insisted on quantitative or formal model orientation. However, the debate was left unsettled.

In this period, area studies basically stayed out of the two-decade debate on methodology in political science, which did not mean the debate was totally lost on area researchers. Scholars in area studies basically responded in two ways. One was to keep a distance from quantitative research by adhering to hermeneutics and constructivism, and emphasizing consistent understanding, a choice that was particularly easier for scholars who were engaged from sociological and anthropological perspectives. Another was to redefine the subject of area studies, with Scott as a typical example. Area studies in the traditional sense concerned itself with areas defined in geopolitical framework as well as people and society in such space. Some scholars who were inspired by geographical science, a discipline that hosts such a branch as regional studies which emphasizes the interaction between people and space, were thinking if it was possible to devise a different way of defining areas, that is, to formulate a new set of agenda-setting questions and to seek answers to these questions. The most well-known research by such scholars is that of Scott's on Zomia. Another approach that has just emerged recently is comparative area studies. Traditional area studies was generally a discussion of individual regions and countries. Is it possible to remain sensitive to regions while at the same time resorting to qualitative research methods to approach cross-regional considerations and participate in dialogues on general theories? When doing a



cross-regional comparative area analysis, one must prove his methods and understand the characteristics of the region at the same time. Although the academic community have recently been calling for cross-regional comparative area analysis, there have been no particularly impressive results so far.

### **Maintain ‘Low Coupling’ Between Comparative Politics and Area Studies**

In Wang Weihua’s view, it would be inevitable for the relationship between comparative politics and area studies to be deconstructed, while impossible to be decoupled. Why is deconstruction inevitable? First, a discipline, as a basic academic unit, will ultimately thrive by engaging with the outside rather than relying on the engagement from the outside. Second, no metatheoretical consensus has been reached between comparative politics and area studies. Without a common way of thinking, there is no platform for communication. Third, it is difficult to reconcile the differences in knowledge pursuits. Last but not least is the standard of methodology, which involves a series of dilemmas. Therefore, there is an “impossible trinity” in reality, where researchers in political science can only take care of two aspects of theoretical methods, regional and country-specific studies, but could hardly take care of all three of them.

Due to realistic needs, decoupling is impossible. First, without the support of country-specific knowledge, comparative

politics will be dead water. Second, in terms of its own knowledge positioning, political science is about knowledge and wisdom from practice, which depends on specific situations. Third, it would be inevitable to make contextualized analysis which puts causal explanations in contexts. Most importantly, area studies emphasizes the impact of a specific context on a specific result, and specificity means inspiration, which could break stereotypes.

Wang Weihua believes that the ideal situation for China's area studies should be low coupling between comparative politics and area studies. First, we need to emancipate our minds. Given the different awareness on issues when looking at them from a Chinese standpoint and from an English context, it is important to consider the issue awareness and agenda-setting in area studies in China. Second, seek truth from facts. Currently, area studies has a nearly full coverage of the world, but is there a focus? Does comparative politics in China lack the most in methodology or epistemology? If both have a part of the blame, how can we make them better together and where should we start? Third, we must work together and look forward. Area studies needs to understand comparative politics, especially why comparative politics insists on answering general theoretical questions, while at the same time, comparative politics should branch out from its focus on testing specious general empirical theories, as there is a lot of inspirational work to do.

When doing specific studies, researchers should be mindful of linguistic differences. Language is an important reason why scientific thinking of the so-called logical empiricism is hard to comprehend for scholars with Chinese way of thinking. When doing area studies, researchers might set aside the differences in thinking temporarily, but they cannot avoid the differences forever as they shift between the Chinese and English modes. Researchers should also take an objective and neutral attitude, not God's perspective, in doing research. Finally, the knowledge system of comparative politics and area studies should be built from the standpoint of China.

After the presentations, the participants had an in-depth discussion.

Lei Shaohua: I have two thoughts to share. First, in the context of the Cold War, the US and the Soviet Union both supported the decolonization of the third world countries to a certain extent, but with different approaches. Samuel Huntington emphasized in his *Political Order in Changing Societies* that institutionalization precedes political participation, which seems to imply a position: Though it was the Communist Party that mobilized workers and peasants, it still would be better to rely on Chiang Kai-shek and Park Chung-hee to keep the order under control first. Second, the attention that area studies has gained in the academic community may have been sparked by the rapid economic development of a certain area or a great revolution,

but attracting attention and the ability to contribute some universal theories are two different things.

Wang Weihua: The rise of comparative politics and area studies has solved a fundamental question, which is to justify reality. Besides staging a revolution, good days could also come through incremental improvements. This is different from what the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary theory advocates. The revolutionary pressure later suddenly eased for a simple reason, that is, China broke up with the Soviet Union. At the time, the Soviet Union wanted to maintain the status quo, while China was seeking national independence, people's liberation, and national revolution. Against such contrastive backdrop, no political researchers would voluntarily admit that they were consciously catering to the trend of the times, although they were objectively exposed to external pressure. In contrast, social sciences in the US after the WWII had a basic consensus on values, which championed capitalism, liberalism, and pluralism as mainstream ideas, on which a set of formulaic knowledge framework was constructed to provide a platform for dialogues. The Marxist-Leninist theory of national liberation movement and China's theory of world revolution are mainly about outlining a vision for the future and finding ways to realize the vision, which is a totally different set of discourse system. The two ideological systems follow opposite paths of knowledge construction, which also affects the knowledge construction in

comparative politics.

Regarding the second question, all comparative theoretical knowledge is based on the generalized expression of specific experience, which is set to come from region-specific and country-specific experience. However, as to when this generalized expression based on specific experience could be widely accepted by the academic community, it is largely accidental. If there is any pattern, the necessary condition might be that the issue at study be a core issue of concern to the discipline.

Shi Yue: Could you explain in more details the differences in the way of thinking behind languages?

Wang Weihua: In social sciences and natural sciences alike, conceptualization is based on classification, which assigns a thing to an exclusive class. This is the most basic feature of classification. In the Chinese way of thinking, however, starting from the *Book of Changes*, there has been yang in yin, and yin in yang, which is an inclusive relationship. While the subject-predicate structure is the key to understanding Western languages and logic, Chinese language does not emphasize such a structure at all, instead, there is no clear indication of whether a word functions as a noun or a verb in a sentence, as there is no conjugation to show its part of speech. Chinese researchers emphasize inclusion relationship when defining concepts and scopes. The difference in the way of thinking has a direct impact

on the way of defining concepts and the scope of construction. Consequently, research papers in social science and humanities disciplines written in Chinese are prone to logic fallacy or vague meaning to the extent that different people may have different understanding of the same word, so one has to add parentheses or English explanation to clarify. And only when one knows both languages can he/she realize this problem.

Xie Kankan: Was Prof. Wang Weihua referring to area studies in a broad sense, or area studies defined by political science? Are area studies in a broad sense and comparative politics modules to each other? Is there a coupling relationship between them? In my opinion, they are more like the two identities of the same person at the same time, each having its own important disciplinary foundation. Relatively speaking, area studies is not a legitimate part of any discipline, whereas comparative politics is a part of political science. Perhaps area research has always been an active part of anthropology or history, but in the specific disciplinary context of comparative politics or political science, area studies waned in the 1970s, and even showed the sign of withering in the 1990s.

Wang Weihua: First, area studies in my understanding is as defined by Robert Hall in the report of Social Science Research Council. It was born out of humanities, but was not content with limiting itself to humanities. It hopes to promote the relevance of humanities to the real world and the conversation with social

sciences. From a disciplinary point of view, I tend to believe that area studies should not completely return to its previous status as a mere part of humanities or history, otherwise the space for dialogue with social sciences will become smaller. Area studies does not have to regard itself as a discipline, but it is necessary to clarify what makes it different by being a research field from being a discipline. In addition, I regard comparative politics as a field too, not a discipline. I think the reason that comparative politics is declining today is that it is too concerned about its own disciplinary attribute and too ambitious in having dialogues with mainstream disciplines. I don't want to see comparative politics and area studies getting too alienated. Instead, I hope they could maintain a low-coupling relationship as two knowledge modules.