

Research for Practice:

A Tradition for Southeast Asian Studies in China

Research for practice has been a tradition for China's studies on Southeast Asia since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. This is primarily because China is a neighbor of the Southeast Asian countries and also due to historical tradition. I will focus on the recent 30 years since 1991 with the end of the cold war, and observe in particular the dynamics of the Southeast Asian studies in China in the recent 20 years since we came into the 21st century.

The presentation has 3 major parts. The first part is an introduction to the basic information on the Southeast Asian studies in China. The second part explains the development of the tradition of research for practice and its driving forces in the recent 20 years. The last part addresses the main challenges and problems we will face and the new development directions for the Southeast Asian studies in China.

A neighbor of this region, China has long been doing research on Southeast Asia and it has a long history of communication with this region. At present, the study of the Southeast Asian history, such as the study of Vietnam and of the Dynasty of Angkor, Cambodia, requires data support from Chinese ancient books and other historical literature. For example, more than 800 years ago, a Chinese official named Zhou Daguan from the

Yuan Dynasty made a record of the Dynasty of Angkor in his book *Zhenla Fengtu Ji*, which was translated as *A Record of Cambodia: The Land and Its People*. The research on Southeast Asia has never stopped in China.

The research on Southeast Asia in China shows a distinctive geographical structure. Southern provinces near Southeast Asia and Beijing in northern China are the main places conducting research on Southeast Asia. Historically speaking, compared with the north, Yunnan Province in the southern part of China may have had more exchanges with Southeast Asia. An interesting example is that it takes only 1.5 hours to fly from Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province, to Bangkok, but at least 3.5 hours from Kunming to Beijing. The key southern cities conducting research on Southeast Asia are distributed in Fujian Province, Guangdong Province, Yunnan Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. In the north, the research is primarily carried out by all kinds of official research organizations and high-ranking universities in Beijing, such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Peking University and the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations. In recent years, more and more research centers for Southeast Asian studies are rising in other parts of China because of the growing trade between China and ASEAN.

The Southeast Asian studies in China cover almost all dimensions. I think we have three categories of Southeast Asian studies.

The first is area studies in terms of country studies and regional studies,

which cover all the 11 countries in Southeast Asia, including Timor-Leste. Of course, very few scholars have made research on Timor-Leste, and generally, scholars who focus on Indonesian studies would examine Timor-Leste. In terms of regions, the whole region of Southeast Asia is covered, and sub-regional research has also been carried out, including Maritime Southeast Asia and Mainland Southeast Asia.

The second category of studies is also all-dimensional, involving history, geography, ethnic groups, religion, politics, economy, regional cooperation and international relations. In this category, there is a special kind of research, that is, the research on ethnic Chinese, which has clear Chinese characteristics.

The third category includes fundamental research and practical research. The Southeast Asian studies in China are often both academic and practical, instead of being pure academic or practical. For example, if we are studying the history of Vietnam, issues like the South China Sea will be involved. For the second part of my presentation, I would like to introduce the new development of the tradition of research for practice. As we came into the 21st century, research for practice has become more and more important for China's Southeast Asian studies. For example, scholars are increasingly providing Southeast Asia-related policy reports and policy recommendations to the central and local governments on a regular basis. They are also more motivated to do so. For example, at PKU, I have

attended important policy consultations concerning China and Southeast Asia, and I have also advised Chinese ministries and commissions and local governments on the issue of opening-up. Research for practice is mainly to satisfy the national strategic needs. Southeast Asia is very important for China to implement its foreign strategy and going-global strategy. In the recent 20 years, Southeast Asia has been recognized as a priority region by former Chinese President Hu Jintao in his “harmonious world” initiative and by President Xi Jinping in his “community with a shared future for mankind” initiative. This requires the full intellectual support of the academia. In this sense, a lot of research centers were set up as the Chinese government and the Ministry of Education supported universities in strengthening area studies, especially Southeast Asian studies during the reign of President Hu. These research centers are expected to deliver policy recommendations on the basis of academic research. At the same time, as the local governments, the ministries and commissions, various organizations and enterprises in China are showing a growing demand for Southeast Asia-related knowledge, the status of area studies has been continuously improved in the reign of President Xi. For example, the research centers are assigned with the main tasks of think tank research and international communication. In addition, national-level projects of area studies are also a good opportunity for scholars because if their research results are recognized by the top leaders, they could get an

academic promotion and new research budget, too.

Another important point is that China is promoting the China school, especially in philosophy and social sciences. China's academia should develop its own theories and paradigms according to China's practice, rather than directly adopting Western theories and paradigms. For example, in terms of international relations, which is my area of study, China has been successful in conducting diplomatic activities with its neighbors, especially with Southeast Asia. So, we believe China's foreign policy practice in Southeast Asia can be the origin of Chinese theories on international relations.

In the last part of my presentation, I would like to talk about the limitations and challenges as well as the future development directions concerning China's Southeast Asian studies.

In general, there is a great gap between supply and demand. The demand for policy research is high and increasingly involves multiple disciplines. Area study scholars need to provide very practical and professional policy recommendations in medical care, green development, digital economy and other respects, which can be really challenging.

Also, the level of Southeast Asian research in China is not high. We have the concern that if scholars focus too much on practical studies and writing policy reports on hot-spot issues, fundamental research will weaken. So, a new balance is needed between academic and practical

research.

In addition, there are many sensitive issues in China, such as the issue of the South China Sea, so the related publications in area studies and Southeast Asian studies are facing many restrictions.

Also, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, international exchanges and field research have significantly decreased.

In conclusion, I think in the future, we need some new balances. The first is the balance between knowledge demand and supply; the second is more international collaboration on Southeast Asian studies; the third is interdisciplinary talent training with Southeast Asian language support. Here, I would like to update you on the talent training in IAS. In 2021 and 2022, IAS has enrolled 8 PhD candidates in Southeast Asian studies. We will train them with a more comprehensive program, including one or two years of field research. Fourth, a more open environment for further research is needed.