Asian studies in China’s academia of social sciences: an introduction

In his progressive vision of a general Chinese history, the phenomenal Chinese intellectual Liang Qichao in 1901 claimed the modern period of China would be characterized by a transition from ‘China of Asia’ [yazhou zhi zhongguo] when “the Chinese intensively engaged and competed with various peoples of Asia” to “China of the world” [shijie zhi zhongguo] when “the Chinese united with all the Asian peoples in their negotiation and competition with the Westerners”. It came as no surprise that the Chinese President Xi Jinping quoted Liang in his recent keynote speech at the Conference on Dialogue of Asian Civilizations.

As argued by contemporary scholars, regions are imagined constructs that have historical specificity and reflect the existing international structures. In the case of Asia, it was first created as a socio-political construct to rethink political action and organization during the twentieth century course of anti-imperialism and nation-state formation in the West Pacific and Indian Ocean. The rise of the modern scholarship of Asia in China was a response to China’s frontier and identity crises from the mid-nineteenth century to the WWII era. After 1949, Asian studies in China also bore much strategic importance as the area studies in other countries. The best example is the development of Asian studies in the Chinese academies of social sciences.

Although modeled on the Soviet-style Academy, the Chinese academies of social sciences were established after 1978, when the Soviet influence had faded away and China re-embraced the world. Deng Xiaoping, the architect of China’s reform and opening up, underlined the significance of academic achievements to China’s course of modernization. Under his leadership, state-owned provincial level academies were re-established in the capital and each provincial seat. As government affiliated research institutes, all academies play both roles of academic research and advising function to the party-state. Hence, their research agendas are tightly bound to the missions of particular ministries, and the foreign analysts have learnt to observe China’s policy-making system through these ‘important windows’. This also smoothens their recent transformation into ‘think tanks with Chinese characteristics’.

In addition to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 7 out of 29 provincial-level academies have specialized institutes for Asian studies, largely in response to their geographical proximity to relevant Asian countries and sub-regions. As a result, the academic definition and scope of Asia and its sub-regions reflect the geopolitical dynamics as well as China’s interests and concerns. Prior to 1978, attention was given to Asian countries with either historical ties with China or belonging to the Communist bloc. In the 1980s, country surveys and comparative studies of economic development were emphasized, as China endeavored to learn from the ‘East Asian Miracle’. Since the 1990s, regional security and cooperation as well as sustainable development have become the common themes for the pursuit of a more integrated Asia. As China craves for a more substantial role in Asia, more academic resources have been poured into the studies of China’s national strategies and new regional/sub-regional orders.

Besides this introductory piece, three articles from different academies are invited to reflect on the development of their own institutes and their own research. It is the editor’s wish that these articles will offer the audience ‘windows’ to how China envisions herself in Asia and the world.

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