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Studying Chinese Politics in an Age of Specialization

KEVIN J. O'BRIEN*

The relationship between area studies and political science is fraught with tradeoffs. In particular, a danger exists that the field of Chinese politics is being hollowed out because (a) there are many islands of highly specialized research with few bridges between them; and (b) more and more Chinese politics scholars are engaged in debates in which the 'other side' is no longer a China scholar but instead a colleague in the discipline. At a time when China's economic growth and prominence in world affairs have generated remarkable interest inside and outside the academy, few scholars are willing to take a stab at characterizing the polity or addressing other, equally large questions. Further thought is needed about the 'terms of enlistment' for China scholars in political science, in an era when ever more-focused studies and greater participation in disciplinary debates have become the norm.

In American academia, two trends in the study of Chinese politics have intensified of late. The first is a growing disciplinary orientation, especially among younger scholars. Although it remains as vibrant as any area study in political science, the field of Chinese politics is being integrated into the examination of comparative politics (and international relations) to an extent unseen before. Second, researchers on Chinese politics tend to choose relatively narrow topics and display some hesitancy to link what they have discovered to larger questions about how the political system operates. Instead of making grand statements, they burrow into a topic and stick to close-to-the-ground generalizations about what it might mean for China.

As a result of this disciplinary and topical specialization, researchers are more deeply embedded in political science than was common a generation ago,¹ and

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1. Lowell Dittmer and William Hurst, 'Analysis in limbo: contemporary Chinese politics amid the maturation of reform', *Issues & Studies* 38(4) and 39(1), (December 2002/March 2003), pp. 11–48; Richard Baum, 'Studies of Chinese politics in the United States', in Robert Ash, David Shambaugh and Seiichiro Takagi, eds, *China Watching: Perspectives from Europe, Japan and the United States* (London: Routledge, 2007); Bjørn Alpermann, 'Political science research in China: making the most of diversity', *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 14(4), (December 2009), pp. 343–356; Allen Carlsen, Mary Gallagher, Kenneth Lieberthal and Melanie Manion, eds, *Chinese Politics: New Sources, Methods, and Field Strategies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

findings are more solid than ever, but we cohere less as a group engaged in the enterprise of understanding Chinese politics broadly construed.² This change is perhaps not of great issue for individual scholars, most of whom have either adjusted to it or are actively working to bring it about; it has, however, led to a certain hollowing out of the field of Chinese politics.

Disciplinary specialization

A hole at the center of the field became apparent while updating the syllabus for my graduate seminar on Chinese politics. For over a decade I had arranged weekly readings around a series of debates: memorable tussles over the reach of the state, neotraditionalism, the role of *guanxi*, peasant power, civil society, corporatism, and so on. But by the mid-2000s this structure was no longer tenable and I switched to a string of exemplary new books. Why? The old debates had largely exhausted themselves and there were few new ones to take their place. Yes, some lively areas of contention remain on issues such as state capacity and nationalism,³ but most current debates are somewhat polemical,⁴ narrow-gauge,⁵ or marked by agreement as much as disagreement.⁶ Could this be because we are in accord on the big questions about

2. On losing track of 'the bigger picture', see Baum, 'Studies of Chinese politics in the United States', p. 161, and Michel Oksenberg, quoted in Jean-Pierre Cabestan, 'Studies of Chinese politics in Europe', in Ash *et al.*, eds, *China Watching*, p. 121; also see Harry Harding, 'The evolution of American scholarship on contemporary China', in David Shambaugh, ed., *American Studies of Contemporary China* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993). On 'overspecialization', see Cabestan, 'Studies of Chinese politics in Europe', p. 99, and Alpermann, 'Political science research in China', p. 351.

3. On state capacity, see Wang Shaoguang and Hu Angang, *The Chinese Economy in Crisis: State Capacity and Tax Reform* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), and Barry J. Naughton and Dali L. Yang, eds, *Holding China Together: Diversity and National Integration in the Post-Deng Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). On nationalism, see Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), and Suisheng Zhao, *A Nation-State by Construction: Dynamics of Modern Chinese Nationalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

4. On democratization versus stagnation, see Bruce Gilley, *China's Democratic Future: How it Will Happen and Where it Will Lead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), and Minxin Pei, *China's Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

5. Valuable examples include: on voter turnout, Tianjian Shi, 'Voting and nonvoting in China: voting behavior in plebiscitary and limited choice elections', *Journal of Politics* 61(4), (November 1999), pp. 1115–1139, and Jie Chen and Yang Zhong, 'Why do people vote in semicompetitive elections in China?', *Journal of Politics* 64(1), (February 2002), pp. 178–197; on property rights and township and village enterprises, Jean C. Oi, *Rural China Takes Off: Institutional Foundations of Economic Reform* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), and Susan H. Whiting, *Power and Wealth in Rural China: The Political Economy of Institutional Change* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); on local people's congresses, Ming Xia, *The People's Congresses and Governance in China: Toward a Network Mode of Governance* (London: Routledge, 2008), and Young Nam Cho, *Local People's Congresses in China: Development and Transition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and on intellectual property protection, Martin Dimitrov, *Piracy and the State: The Politics of Intellectual Property Rights in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), and Andrew C. Mertha, *The Politics of Piracy: Intellectual Property in Contemporary China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005). The numerous mini-debates among analysts of villages elections can also be placed in this category; see Kevin J. O'Brien and Suisheng Zhao, eds, *Grassroots Elections in China* (London: Routledge, 2011).

6. On contemporary protesters and their rules or rights consciousness, see Elizabeth J. Perry, 'A new rights consciousness?', *Journal of Democracy* 20(3), (July 2009), pp. 17–20; Elizabeth J. Perry, 'Chinese conceptions of "rights": from Mencius to Mao—and now', *Perspectives on Politics* 6(1), (March 2008), pp. 37–50; Lianjiang Li, 'Rights consciousness and rules consciousness in contemporary China', *China Journal* 64, (July 2010), pp. 47–68; Peter L. Lorentzen and Suzanne E. Scoggins, 'Rising rights consciousness: undermining or undergirding China's stability?', unpublished paper, (8 December 2010), available at: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1722352.

Chinese politics at a moment when authoritarian resilience has become the consensus view, or is it more likely that we are not talking with each other as much, not meeting as often in area studies journals to hash things out, but instead aiming to engage disciplinary colleagues who focus on social capital or popular contention or corruption or political trust or production chains or the policymaking process in other countries? Our target readers, in other words, increasingly include comparativists and international relations scholars as well as China studies colleagues, and we often put our primary effort into delighting this new audience with the significance of our findings for theory or conceptual clarity rather than highlighting what they mean for understanding Chinese politics.⁷

Growing disciplinary orientation is not surprising for many reasons. To begin with, career incentives point in this direction. Chinese politics faculty at most American universities are evaluated in a way that privileges ‘hits’ in political science journals, even at a time when leading China studies journals continue to score high on the citation charts and rival the most prestigious disciplinary outlets for impact. The tendency to favor disciplinary publication is less strongly felt elsewhere, but in the United States salary increases, promotion, and mobility often depend on visibility in the discipline more than visibility among other China scholars.⁸ This is especially so in highly quantitative departments and formal modeling shops, but it is also the case in more qualitative departments and at universities that host area studies centers. This incentive structure affects faculty and is internalized by graduate students, who quickly notice which of their classmates are considered stars and often conclude that bringing knowledge from China to a disciplinary audience is the path to a marketable dissertation, a good first job, and rapid advancement.

But it is more than securing a position or tenure or career-mindedness that has drawn students of Chinese politics into closer contact with political science. Many of us do not want to be exotic zoo animals confined to an area studies pen.⁹ We wish to speak to disciplinary colleagues much as sociologists, for example, have for some time.¹⁰ Survey researchers have led the way into mainstream political science, but Chinese politics experts of all stripes are designing articles for *The American Political Science Review* or *World Politics*, or seeking to gain an acceptance in *Comparative Politics* or *Comparative Political Studies* or more specialized disciplinary outlets. This makes sense at a time when reform and opening up have made China look more familiar to those who study

7. Examples include Kevin J. O’Brien and Lianjiang Li, *Rightful Resistance in Rural China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), and the chapters in Kevin J. O’Brien, ed., *Popular Protest in China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). Some of the contributions to Carlsen *et al.*, *Chinese Politics*, also reflect this impulse.

8. Nearly 20 years ago, Lucian W. Pye [‘Social science theories in search of Chinese realities’, *China Quarterly* 132, (December 1992), p. 1161] wrote: ‘It is not enough to hold the respect of other area specialists. Tenure depends upon the judgment of those who guard the standards of each discipline’.

9. For similar thinking among political scientists who focus on Southeast Asia, see Erik Martinez Kuhonta, Dan Slater and Tuong Vu, ‘Introduction: the contributions of Southeast Asian political studies’, in Erik Martinez Kuhonta, Dan Slater and Tuong Vu, eds, *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region, and Qualitative Analysis* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

10. Andrew Walder and Victor Nee are prime examples from the senior generation, Ethan Michelson and Xueguang Zhou more recently. On reasons why sociologists and economists of China have found it easier to ‘transcend the perennial divide between area studies and social science’, see Andrew G. Walder, ‘The transformation of contemporary China studies, 1977–2002’, in David L. Szanton, ed., *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), p. 322.

other countries. Researchers on Chinese politics have much to say to political scientists who examine the political economy of development, the role private entrepreneurs play in political change, the effects of foreign direct investment, policy implementation, regulation, the rule of law, citizenship, legitimacy, popular support, property rights and many other topics. There is much low-hanging fruit to be harvested from the China case¹¹ and perhaps the time has come to put Chinese exceptionalism aside permanently and to associate ourselves not with a single country but with problems that can be studied in that country. This has already happened to a large extent for most area studies within political science: why should we be holdouts?

Topical specialization

Topical specialization also has unmistakable benefits and is a natural development, given the avalanche of information now available on Chinese politics. No one can begin to read everything that appears online or in the academic and popular press, and even trying to keep up with news filters and postings on listservs is a challenge. If depth is to be achieved in our research, some division of labor is inevitable and desirable.

Very fine-grained studies are also a result of field work opportunities that have opened up over the last 30 years. Particularly at the local level, researchers can go (nearly) everywhere and study (nearly) everything.¹² This had led to a flourishing of empirical investigations that explore political dynamics in single (or a small number of) settings. Much of lasting value has been learned by homing in on individual pieces of the puzzle of Chinese politics. This research strategy has also made China scholars more like other area specialists in political science and even natural scientists. Students of American politics, for example, have long ago learned to live with a high degree of topical specialization and clear lines have been drawn between what scholars, journalists, and pundits do. Natural scientists, for their part, tend to be even more specialized and have proliferated subfields at a swift rate.¹³ Nearly all academics are less conversant with subfields some distance from their own than was true in the past. Perhaps we are simply witnessing the maturing of the study of Chinese politics in an era when it no longer makes sense (or is feasible) to be an expert on more than a few aspects of political life in China. If this is so, specialization is the path to progress.

Islands of research

Advantages aside, disciplinary and topical specialization also have some troubling implications. First, narrow topics make it difficult for those who study other aspects

11. For a defense of this research strategy, see Kevin J. O'Brien, 'Discovery, research (re)design and theory building', in Maria Heimer and Stig Thøgersen, eds, *Doing Fieldwork in China* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2006).

12. For vigorous disagreement, see James Mann, *The China Fantasy: How Our Leaders Explain Away Chinese Repression* (New York: Viking, 2007); and Carsten A. Holz, 'Have China scholars all been bought?', *Far Eastern Economic Review* 170(3), (April 2007), pp. 36–40. There remain of course some 'forbidden zones', including significant parts of, for example, ethnic politics and elite politics. For a balanced treatment of fieldwork opportunities and constraints, see Heimer and Thøgersen, eds, *Doing Fieldwork in China*.

13. For growing signs of this in the social sciences, see the 20 subfields (and over 600 sub-subfields) into which research on economics is divided in the *Journal of Economic Literature* classification system [see http://www.aeaweb.org/journal/jel_class_system.php (accessed 22 January 2010)].

of Chinese politics to place the best new research and to figure out what it all adds up to.¹⁴ Topical specialization produces high resolution pieces of a puzzle, but little sense of how the pieces fit together and no boxcover that illustrates what the puzzle depicts.¹⁵ At a time when China's economic growth and prominence in world affairs have generated extraordinary interest inside and outside the academy, relatively few of us are willing to take a stab at characterizing the polity or addressing other equally large questions.¹⁶ When policymakers, citizens, and other scholars need maps of Chinese politics more than ever, we offer less insight than we might about what connects scattered islands of research.¹⁷

Disciplinary specialization also has some worrisome consequences, including discouraging interdisciplinary, China-centered discussion. Most of the debates I taught in my Chinese politics seminar involved Sinologists across the social sciences. These exchanges become less likely when immersion in political science is expected from sociologists or economists or anthropologists, who are understandably focused on their own discipline and China's role in it. Disciplinary specialization inevitably cuts off experts on Chinese politics from non-political scientists, journalists, and other China watchers who are more interested in China than in political science. It creates new islands of research, fenced off by disciplinary jargon and parochial concerns, which can inhibit interdisciplinary work and hamper efforts to develop a holistic understanding of Chinese politics, economics and society. In Alpermann's words, 'what looks like "integration" from a disciplinary perspective can be seen as "fragmentation" from the vantage point of China area studies'.¹⁸

Disciplinary specialization hives us off from other China scholars and also from each other. These days, experts on Chinese politics seem to discuss less as a group and share less common knowledge. This encourages agreement or, more precisely, deference to specialized knowledge, largely because there is not enough engagement to disagree or to appreciate fully what is at stake. Leaning toward political science makes researchers less visible to other students of Chinese politics who do not follow or find great relevance in some disciplinary debates. These debates may be pivotal in political science, but that does not make them so for China. The old debates that structured my syllabus had China scholars on both sides and exploring and

14. 'As we learn more about the minutiae of life in China, it is becoming more difficult to comprehend the broad patterns of change and structure' (Harding, 'The evolution of American scholarship on contemporary China', pp. 32–33).

15. On the jigsaw puzzle metaphor, and the need to assemble pieces into a full picture, see Elizabeth J. Perry, 'Trends in the study of Chinese politics: state–society relations', *China Quarterly* 139, (September 1994), pp. 712–713.

16. Exceptions, on the nature of China's authoritarianism, include Andrew C. Mertha, "'Fragmented authoritarianism 2.0": political pluralization in the policy process', *China Quarterly* 200, (December 2009), pp. 995–1012; Pierre Landry, *Decentralized Authoritarianism in China: The Communist Party's Control of Local Elites in the Post-Mao Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Teresa Wright, *Accepting Authoritarianism: State–Society Relations in China's Reform Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010). For a time, not long ago, when there were arguably too many characterizations of the Chinese state, see Richard Baum and Alexei Shevchenko, 'The "state of the state"', in Merle Goldman and Roderick MacFarquhar, eds, *The Paradox of China's Post-Mao Reforms* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

17. On, for example, the 'gap between studies of [China's] political economy and studies of contentious politics', see Sidney Tarrow, 'The new contentious politics in China: poor and blank or rich and complex?', in O'Brien, ed., *Popular Protest in China*, p. 6.

18. Alpermann, 'Political science research on China', p. 352. While lauding 'falling barriers between the area and the disciplines', Walder ('The transformation of contemporary China studies', pp. 337, 338) also sees fragmentation, as China scholars become 'more insulated in their respective disciplines, their work increasingly inaccessible to those without specialized training'.

adjudicating them touched on issues that virtually all researchers on Chinese politics agreed were important. In the new disciplinary debates, the 'other side' is often unknown to many China scholars and what the received wisdom maintains is clearly not the case in China. This creates a potential for theoretical and conceptual payoffs that are indecipherable or not overly revealing to students of Chinese politics: findings that are slightly disappointing, or obvious, or of abiding interest primarily to those who know little about China.

Finally, disciplinary and topical specialization affect teaching, in particular training the next generation of researchers on Chinese politics. My current graduate seminar does not add up especially well, generating mainly prosaic conclusions such as China is globalizing, international actors play a growing role in domestic politics, and it is helpful to disaggregate the state.¹⁹ It is also challenging to place a title above each week's assignments: to summarize what large issues have been addressed and how the readings relate to each other. Composing broad, overarching questions about China for the East Asian Politics Ph.D. exam has likewise become more difficult. In fact, I still return to and encourage anxious test-takers to consult my 2005 syllabus, which laid out a more organized and coherent field, packed with what seemed to be enduring questions and debates. Sharp graduate students have of course noticed the empty space at the center of the field, and more of them are designing dissertations that tackle questions drawn from political science (or other social sciences) rather than China studies. This promises further hollowing out of the field, as the next generation of researchers looks outward, toward interlocutors who are not fellow China scholars. This will bring much to political science, but also means missed opportunities in an era when so many want and need to know about China for its own sake.

Terms of enlistment

It is possible that the gains from disciplinary and topical specialization outweigh the costs. Chinese politics as a whole is too much to keep up with, especially for non-resident scholars; engagement with comparativists and international relations experts does bring knowledge about China to political science and reduces the paradigmatic role that European and American experiences still enjoy on too many questions. Students of Chinese politics, moreover, do not face a one-time, either-or choice between allegiance to China studies or the discipline. As Emerson aptly put it: 'a career is not a snapshot but a film'. Researchers can, across time and in different works, address distinct audiences and identify more or less with area studies or disciplinary colleagues.²⁰

Contemporary political science also allows for mixed and shifting loyalties. Since the heat in the area studies debate died down in the early 2000s, we less frequently

19. The conclusion nearly every week is: 'China is in transition, it is a moving target, a political hybrid that is unfamiliar and difficult to get our arms around'. With the reform era now longer than the Maoist era, this is unsatisfying. I am beginning to worry that for my entire career, from my first day of graduate school in 1979, we will be saying 'China is in transition'.

20. Donald K. Emmerson, 'Southeast Asia in political science: terms of enlistment', in Kuhonta *et al.*, eds, *Southeast Asia in Political Science*, p. 305.

hear statements like: ‘I have long regarded area programs as a problem for political science’ or ‘The idea of having a political science specialist for every piece of international real estate may soon seem as arcane as having a specialist for every planet in an astronomy department’.²¹ Instead, we are more likely to be told there is ‘no necessarily fatal tension between studying an area and doing political science’ or, as three young Southeast Asianists concluded, there can be ‘a synergy between region and discipline’ and a ‘complementary and mutually reinforcing relationship’ between area studies and political science.²²

Still, there are questions about what the ‘terms of enlistment’²³ should be for China scholars in political science. In my view, it would be a mistake to follow the example of the discipline of economics, where country-based studies are uncommon and area specialists are marginalized; nor would it be advisable to heed Yang Zhong’s call for students of Chinese politics to revive the search for a science of comparative politics that has little use for country names.²⁴ It may even be unwise to emulate the field of European politics, where many Europeanists have come to identify with political scientists who study the same topic (e.g. federalism, legislatures, political economy) or problem (e.g. multilevel governance, democratic transition, immigration) over area studies colleagues who conduct research on the same piece of ‘real estate’.

There are many reasons to produce country specialists on China. First, social science theories come and go but China will last. It is a sad truth that much social science knowledge disappears with little trace, because it is ignored or falls out of fashion and is supplanted by the next big thing. This is much less likely for China. Second, mainstreaming the study of Chinese politics may at times be wrong-headed or premature, if it springs from a belief that China is more familiar than it is. Using theories and concepts from political science to interpret protest or voting behavior or elections or bureaucracy may place findings from China in a Procrustean bed that slices off what matters most. Third, interest in Chinese politics is high. A large and growing demand for informed, broad-gauged, country-based analysis exists, both inside and outside the classroom. If scholars do not address this need, and instead limit themselves to ever more-focused studies and intramural disciplinary debates, others will step into the breach.

21. Robert H. Bates, ‘Letter from the president: area studies and the discipline’, *APSA-CP* 7(1), (Winter 1996), pp. 1–2; David D. Laitin, ‘Letter from the incoming president’, *APSA-CP* 4(2), (Summer 1993), pp. 3, 18.

22. Emmerson, ‘Southeast Asia in political science’, p. 305; and Kuhonta *et al.*, ‘Introduction’, pp. 2, 3.

23. Emmerson, ‘Southeast Asia in political science’, p. 304.

24. Yang Zhong, ‘The logic of comparative politics and the development of political science in China’, *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 14(4), (December 2009), pp. 335–342.