Asia Studies and the Discipline

by
Lucian W. Pye,
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

I begin with three general points about the relationship of area studies to political science, before turning to the specific contributions that Asia and China studies have made in advancing knowledge in political science.

First, much of what passes as wisdom in political science is really American area studies pretending to be universal knowledge. It is noteworthy that there is no Americanist in this symposium. Scholars working on China or India, for example, must constantly remind the reader that their findings are specific only to their particular country, but researchers with empirical findings about aspects of American politics can report them as scientific, and hence universal knowledge. Paradoxically, this problem has become more acute as the discipline has sought to become more scientific. Before the behavioral revolution it was common to speak of "American exceptionalism," for our practices were seen as distinctive and unique. With the behavioral revolution, starting with the University of Chicago's practice of treating the city of Chicago as a laboratory, scholars have routinely advanced findings about American political behavior as universal truths, thereby ironically turning American exceptionalism on its head. But does anyone really believe that American practices can be treated as the norm for all peoples? Or even for any other particular country?

To make matters worse, political scientists are generally uncomfortable when their theoretical generalizations, based at best on only the American case, are challenged by evidence from elsewhere, particularly some small, exotic country. A few years ago an MIT economist in line for a Nobel prize presented to a faculty seminar an elegant theoretical analysis, involving carefully crafted equations. When he had finished someone spoke up to say that his formulation was contradicted by the behavior in some distant country. The theorist responded, "Ah yes, reality, that is a special case."

Secondly, I must note that area studies got a great boost during World War II when political science seemed to have embarrassingly little to contribute to the war effort, while area specialists had a great deal to offer, from interpreting and intelligence work to conducting psychological warfare and preparing for military government in the enemy countries. After the war both the U.S. government and the leading foundations were anxious to provide funds for area studies in order to help bring Americans out of isolationism and to make them more effective international participants. Indeed, both the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) and the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) were in danger of going out of business in the 1950s, but they were saved by the interest that foundations had in supporting area studies.[1] This foreign policy concern meant that there was more money available to support foreign area work than pure discipline research. However, hiring and promotions stayed with the discipline, and thus the stage was set for tensions between the two.

Thirdly, I believe this tension is inappropriate because it arises from a false dichotomy. Instead of opposing each other the two need each other if there is to be true intellectual progress. Elegant theoretical formulations need to incorporate the substantive richness of area studies to give them the body and substance expected of true knowledge. As for the other side, area studies needs the challenge of generalized concepts and theories in order to escape being just a collection of esoteric facts. The subfield of political culture is an excellent example of how advancement in knowledge has come out of the integration of theoretical concepts from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and political science with field evidence from a host of countries. Currently some rational choice theorists are also enriching their studies by reaching out to include the diversity of cultural considerations (Bates 1998).

Regarding the specific contributions that Asia studies has made to the discipline, if time and space permitted one could elaborate a strong case that Asia studies helped to shape political philosophy from the time of the Enlightenment, and thus played a significant role at the very beginning of the modern discipline of political science. Leibniz, Montesquieu, and Voltaire not only contributed to the European craze for Chinoiserie but also skillfully used idealized versions of Confucianism and Chinese customs for comparative purposes, and more specifically, as a means for criticizing European practices they did not like (Spence 1998).[2] The majority of the Enlightenment thinkers had a positive view of Chinese political practices, but later, and especially with

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096501000725 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Marx and his "Asiatic mode of production," an increasingly negative view of Asia took over.

For our purposes, however, we pass over the story of Asia's contributions to political philosophy, and focus instead on the realm of social science knowledge. Asia studies has in recent years greatly enriched our understanding of two key relationships: that of the economy and the polity, and that of state and society.

On the economy–polity relationship, the general tendency in the discipline—perhaps reflecting a Marxist tradition—had been to see the economy as providing the foundations for the polity. This led, for example, to the simple but widely accepted model of economic advancement producing democracy. Asian developments have, however, challenged that theory with two cases: first, that of India, which proves that not all democracies need to be rich; and second, those of Singapore and Hong Kong, which show that economic advancement does not necessarily produce democracy. Asia studies has thus shown that ideas and cultural predispositions play a critical role in the relationship of the economy to the polity; therefore it is necessary to go beyond the search for gross statistical correlations.

As for the polity's influence on the economy, Asia studies has made a major contribution in advancing the subfield of political economy. The polity's influence has extended from the basic level of industrial organization to national industrial policies. Ronald Dore (1973), in contrasting the Japanese factory with the British factory showed how our traditional views about bureaucratic rationality were not as rational as we thought them to be (Dore 1973).[3] At the national level, the region has provided striking examples of the role that the state can play in accelerating economic growth, as in the case of the Japanese model, which in differing ways was followed by the East Asian newly industralized countries (NICs), consisting of Taiwan, South Korea, Singapore, and Malaysia, to create what has been called the "Asian model" (Johnson 1982, 1995; Vogel 1991).

The astonishing successes of the East Asian NICs in the 1970s and 1980s inspired the idea that Asian cultures might have distinctive values that operated to support economic growth and national development. It is true that a great deal of the "Asian values debate," involving the claim that Asian communitarian values were superior to Western individualistism, was foolish and quickly died away when the East Asian financial crises hit in 1997. The debate, however, had the virtue of highlighting the extent to which the discipline has failed to appreciate that the advancement of interests is almost always a form of collective activity and hence that the structure and organization of an interest group are factors shaping its behavior. This means that analysis must take into account such considerations as the nature and strength of the bonding sentiments that hold the group together, the power relationships within it, and the distribution of the payoffs.

This attention that Asia studies has given to intragroup relationships brings us to the realm of state–society relations. In recent years a key concept in the discipline for analyzing this relationship has been that of civil society. In the case of Asia studies the practice has been to look beyond civil society and to begin by looking at how the fundamental norms of civility of the society operate to determine social practices, and hence civil society.

In particular, Asia studies has made solid advances in examining how in different cultures the respective norms of civility dealing with deference, respect, obligation, and indebtedness operated to determine the character of the politically important relationship of patrons and clients. In many Asian cultures the relationship involves an exchange in which the patron receives deference and respect while it is the clients who receive material benefits. Hence there is an appreciation of the advantages of dependency. Western theorizing with its emphasis upon the advantages of power has little to say about the ways in which subordinates manipulate superiors, and how the "weapons of the weak" operate (Scott 1985).

This brings us to a significant area where Asia studies is probably a bit ahead of American studies, and hence is in a position to make another significant contribution to the discipline: the study of informal politics and the role of personal networks and factions (Dittmer et al. 2000). The studies of factional politics in Japan and Korea, of *guanxi* networks in China, and patron–client relations in Indonesia and the Philippines are all based on rich, concrete analyses about who is doing what to whom, with what effect. Paradoxically, we possibly have more detailed knowledge about factional alignments, and the structure of networks, in China's closed Communist system than we have about informal relationships in the open politics of Washington, DC. Indeed, what we know about the bonding powers of trust and loyalty in Asian cultures, and of the role of money in their politics, provides a useful comparative perspective for advancing our understanding of the relations among lobbyists, special interests, congressional staffers and elected officials.

All of this I hope adds up to the conclusion that the closer the interrelationship of area studies and the discipline, the better we all are in advancing knowledge.

Notes

1. Francis X. Sutton, former Ford Foundation official, at the Kennan Center Conference on the History of Soviet Studies, October 19, 2000, observed that: "The roles of the Councils [SSRC and ACLS] in promoting the rise of area studies are perhaps better remembered nowadays than that both Councils ran into financial crises in the 1950s and that area studies played a major part in their revival and present flourishing."

2. For a sophisticated study of the role of Chinese political concepts in the Enlightenment see Spence 1998.

3. In spite of the prolonged Japanese recession throughout the 1990s, which has made many one time admirers of Japanese practices change their views, Dore has remained a booster of Japanese capitalism and a critic of Anglo-Saxon ways. See Dore 2000.

4. The extensive literature on the rise of East Asia includes such significant works as Vogel 1991 and Johnson 1982 and 1995.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096501000725 Published online by Cambridge University Press

References

Bates, Robert H., et al., eds. 1990. *Analytic Narratives*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Dittmer, Lowell, H. Fikui, and P.H.S. Lee, eds. 2000. *Informal Politics in East Asia*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Dore, Ronald. 1973. *British Factory, Japanese Factory*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

——. 2000. *Stock Market Capitalism: Welfare Capitalism, Japan and Germany versus the Anglo-Saxons*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Johnson, Chalmers. 1982. *MITI and the Japanese Miracle*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

——. 1995. *Japan: Who Governs? The Rise of the Developmental State*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Scott, James C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Spence, Jonathan D. 1998. *The Chan's Great Continent: China in the Western Mind*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Vogel, Ezra. *The Four Little Dragons: The Spread of Industrialization in East Asia*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096501000725 Published online by Cambridge University Press