

Southeast Asian Studies in Peking University

Maohong BAO
Professor, Peking University

THE DEVELOPMENT of Southeast Asian Studies in Peking University paralleled changes in China, and it has been characterized by an academic and teaching style unique to the university. Peking University is the top university in China, while its Southeast Asian Studies program ranks among the top four in the country.

China has had close relations with its Southeast Asian neighbors in the south. The Chinese, who come to and from Southeast Asia, left so many unique written materials on the geography and history of the region. After the 1911 revolution, contemporary scholars began to study Southeast Asia from the perspective of Sinology. Among them, Feng Chengjun, Zhang Xinglang, and Xiang Da are the most famous.

After graduating from the Université de Sorbonne with Law degree, Feng trained as a Sinologist under the strict guidance of Professor Paul Pelliot. During his involvement with Peking University in 1920, Feng published two books on Southeast Asia; one is *The History of Communication between China and South Sea*; the second is an edited book on textual research on the history and geography of the Western Region and the South Sea.¹ His research pushed the study of the South Sea to a new stage by using the historical material in the Chinese classics to supplement studies of Western scholars. Zhang Xinglang came back to China after the 1911 revolution. He planned to dedicate himself to his country by focusing on physiochemistry, which he studied in the United States and Germany for several years. However, political realities led him instead to turn to the study of the history of communication between China and the West. Affiliating himself in Peking, he compiled the historical

material collection on the communications between China and the West, and on the relations between China and Southeast Asia, which were based on his research of various versions of classics written in different languages.

Xiang Da understood European Sinology by copying the *Dunhuang* texts in some well-known libraries in Europe. His study on South Sea focused on the historical and geographical research of Zheng He's voyage down the Western Seas and reorganized and corrected classics on the South Sea written by the Chinese, such as *Textual Notes of the Customs of Cambodia*, *Notes on Zheng He's Nautical Chart*, etc.

Obviously, their research was marked by the features of their time. First, influenced by European Sinology and the spread of Western learning to the East, they sought to understand the customs of the South Sea by examining and correcting the historical and geographical facts in the classics. Second, their South Sea studies were viewed in the framework of the communication between China and the West. To some extent, this kind of study did not only supplement the Chinese historical studies, but also reflected the realities of China-Southeast Asia relations in ancient times. Third, contemporary arts and historical studies boosted national spirit to some extent. In line with the reappearance of the ancient glory of the Western Region or the South Sea,² their research played a unique role that science and industry could not do.

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Southeast Asian Studies in Peking University has been divided into three stages. Two turning points include the Cultural Revolution in 1966 and the establishment of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies in Peking in 2002. From 1949 to 1966, the framework for academic organization and the choice of research area in the university was affected by those in the former Soviet Union, by the rise of national liberation movements in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and by the spirit of the Bandung Conference (the First Asian-African Conference was held on 18 to 24 April 1955). In the framework of international studies in China, Peking University was chosen to focus on Third World Studies to explain and

enrich Chairman Mao's strategic idea of differentiating Three Worlds. Because it focused on a region geographically close to China and was a rising developing area, Southeast Asian Studies received unprecedented emphasis in the university. The Oriental Language School, which was set up in 1946 in Nanjing, was also integrated into the university, and brought in specialists and training professionals in Indonesian, Vietnamese, Thai, and Burmese languages. Some, led by the leading Orientalist Ji Xianlin, set up the department of Oriental Language and Literature and trained teachers and researchers of Oriental languages and cultures. In 1954, the teaching and research section of Asian History, chaired by the famous historian Zhou Yiliang, was set up in the History department, where professional Southeast Asian historians were trained and some Asian history courses were taught. In 1964, the Institute of Asian-African studies, chaired by the famous political scientist Zhao Baoxu, was founded. It set out to do research on political developments in Southeast Asia. Some of the institute's professors had experiences in and of Southeast Asia; some of them were overseas Chinese who came to China from the region and were educated at Peking; others were native Chinese who studied at universities in Southeast Asia as graduate students or as visiting scholars. With their professors, these scholars trained during the 1950s and 1960s and became the main luminaries of Southeast Asian Studies at Peking University after 1949.

This period produced some academic writings on Southeast Asian studies, albeit centered at the university. The main themes of this research were as follows: first was the history of Southeast Asian states and their relationships with China. Historian Zhou Yiliang published two books, *The Peaceful and Friendly History between China and Asian States* (1955), and *Ancient History of Asian States* (1958). In both of these are chapters on the history of Vietnam from ancient times to the end of the 16th century, and on the history of relations between China and its neighboring Southeast Asian states. The second theme dealt with historical processes of anti-imperialism and anticolonialism in Southeast Asia. Chen Yan published his book entitled *Malaya in Fighting* (1951), while Chen Yulong wrote *History of Anti-Imperialism of Vietnamese* (1951).

Third were the languages and grammars of Southeast Asia. Yan Bao, Fan Honggui, Chen Yan, Wu Shihuang, etc. wrote academic papers, some of which were translations of classical works on the culture, history, and politics of Southeast Asian states. Wu Shihuang translated the book, *History of Indonesia (Sedjarah Indonesia)* by the Indonesian historian Sanusi Panei in 1959; Chen Yan translated *History of Burma*, a book written by a Burmese historian in 1965. These academic achievements definitely played an indispensable role in helping Chinese leaders and ordinary people understand the relationship of China with Southeast Asian states and the national liberation movements there. The writings also served as essential references for students.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Peking University was actually one of the main academic institutions where Southeast Asian studies essentially stagnated. After the reform and open door policy in 1978, Southeast Asian Studies professors worked hard to bring it back to the university. They studied the region comprehensively, but mainly focused on history, language and literature, political development, and overseas Chinese and their relationship with China.

First, in historical research, the group of Liang Zhiming, Liang Yingming, Li Mou, Zhao Jing, Yang Baoyun etc., wrote and published a series of books, such as *Modern History of Southeast Asia* and *Dictionary of the History of Southeast Asia*. These works showed a unique understanding of the history of Southeast Asia that departed from Eurocentric, Indocentric, and Sinocentric perspectives and laid an initial foundation for further development.

Second, besides excellent academic work in grammar and literature, professors in the Department of Oriental Language and Literature also ventured into cultural studies. Two other exciting developments were the introduction of Filipino Language courses and the publication of books, such as *Practical Grammar of Vietnamese*, *Elementary Course of Vietnamese*, *The Developmental History of Indonesian Language*, *The Literature History of Indonesia*, *Dictionary of Indonesian Language and*

Chinese, The Latest Grammar of Thai, Dictionary of Chinese and Thai, The Literature History of Burmese, The Concise Narrative of Burmese, Dictionary of Burmese and Chinese, The Civic Literature of the Philippines, The Four Main Cultures in the World, and Literature in Southeast Asia, among others. Because of its outstanding teaching and research achievements, the department was named a National Training Base by the Ministry of Education. It is also the main part of the Center for Oriental Literature, which is one of the key institutions for humanities and social sciences of the Ministry of Education.

Third, in the area of international relations and international politics in Southeast Asia, Zhang Xizhen published a book, *Contemporary Politics of Southeast Asia* and translated another, *Governments and Politics of Southeast Asia*. He also produced some advisory reports on the future of ASEAN-China relations, and on international relations in Southeast Asia, to the ministries and local governments of countries that bordered Southeast Asian states.

Fourth, research on the overseas Chinese was also conducted; a group of professors, who themselves were former overseas Chinese and were financially supported by the Angelo King Foundation in the Philippines, published the *Dictionary of Overseas Chinese All Over the World, Encyclopaedia of Overseas Chinese* (12 volumes), and a series of books compiled by the Center for Overseas Chinese Studies at Peking University. This made it the global center of the study of overseas Chinese in the region.

Fifth, in the subject of Chinese relations with Southeast Asian states, the two most important books with the same title, *The History of Cultural Communications between China and Foreign Countries*, were edited chiefly by Zhou Yiliang and He Fangchuan. He was Zhou's student in the Department of History in the 1950s. Zhou's book was published by the Henan People's Press in 1987, while He's was published by the International Cultural Publishing Corporation in 2008. The chapters on Southeast Asia were written by the experts in the History department.

Other books, products of long years of research, include *Concise Theoretical Studies on Han Culture* by Chen Yulong; *Marine Silk Road and Cultural Communication of China and Foreign Countries* by Chen Yan; *The Splendid Historical Chapter: The Relationship of Malacca Dynasty and Ming Dynasty in 15th Century* by Liang Liji; and *Zheng He and Indonesia* by Kong Yuanzhi.

In terms of the quality and quantity of academic achievements at Peking University, its Southeast Asian studies program had its share, all of which were a definite result of hard work and international academic exchanges. When China opened its doors, the overseas Chinese became the bridge between China and the world; moreover, they themselves became objects of study. Through their help, professors from Peking University began to exchange with their counterparts in universities and institutes in Southeast Asia. These professors went abroad to present their own findings and publish their papers and books in the languages of Southeast Asian states. Their academic work and time in the field has reflected China's enthusiasm since the reform and open door policy in 1978.

Compared with other Chinese universities that shifted their focus to applied programs, the professors of Peking insisted on working in traditional and theoretical fields. Not only did they pave new approaches in gathering material and methodology, they also did some original research that paralleled the times. Besides providing a wealth of data in their studies, they also trained a lot of graduate students, who eventually became a major force in Southeast Asian Studies in the university.

At the turn of the century, Peking University attained significant developments in Southeast Asian studies. Stimulated by the plan of a free trade zone between China and ASEAN, which was sponsored by the Chinese premier in 2001, the demand to comprehensively understand Southeast Asia increased rapidly. In order to respond to the intellectual challenge posed by the government and society, as well as sensing the need to integrate researches across disciplines, many professors began to

specialize in particular fields within Southeast Asian studies. On 13 September 2002, the university set up the Center for Southeast Asian Studies, which aims to: (1) integrate teaching and research in the Departments of History, Oriental Language and School of International Relations, and study Southeast Asia comprehensively from a multidisciplinary and multilevel perspective; (2) promote Southeast Asian studies as a discipline in Peking University; and (3) train more multidisciplinary experts of Southeast Asia.

Since the establishment of the Center, a number of developments have been accomplished. First was the setting up of the Ancient History of Southeast Asia program, which is composed of researchers from different departments in the University. The program has been completed and its final output was published recently by Peking University Press, with the support of the National Foundation of Humanity and Social Science. Second was the support given to the Yuanpei School in the launching of the training program of Language and History of Foreign Countries, which aims to train multidisciplinary scholars who will not only become experts of Southeast Asian languages but also understand its history.

Third was the active promotion of academic exchanges inside and outside the campus. In spring, it holds the Southeast Asian forum wherein some specialists in Beijing are invited to discuss important issues in the region. In winter, it hosts a national conference on different themes whose proceedings are revised and published. Almost every year, it invites well-known scholars in the field, including Anthony Reid, Hamashita Takeshi, and others, to give lectures. This year (2014), Dr. Filomeno Aguilar of the Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines will be invited to give a talk on the latest discussions of historical studies of the Philippines. These also encouraged the members of the Center to attend academic meetings and share their own research, as well as to learn from their colleagues in and out of China. Fourth is the contribution to social and national policy through homegrown academic knowledge. Some scholars express their own views on particular issues that help the public understand the

international issues in Southeast Asia, while others contribute to policymaking by submitting advisory reports to governmental institutions.

At present, young scholars of Southeast Asian Studies in Peking University have obtained their Ph.D.s and have done fieldwork in the region. Their books indicate that they have assessed and evaluated the study of Southeast Asia by using an interdisciplinary methodology; moreover, they cover a wide variety of thematic studies, which differ from those of earlier scholars, who viewed the region through a historical perspective. Today's academics discuss the spread of literary texts, trade and cultural communication, military regimes and authoritarianism, overseas Chinese and nation-building, colonialism and separatism, the cooperation mechanism in ASEAN, ethnography and historical anthropology, and environmental history, among others. Following China's peaceful rise and its intricate relations with the Southeast Asian states, Southeast Asian studies in Peking University will definitely have a flourishing future.

Notes

- ¹ Western Regions is a historical concept that has different frontiers in different dynasties. In Han dynasty, it meant the area that was east to Yangguan Pass, west to Pamir mountains. In Qing dynasty, it meant the large area that was east to Dunhuang city, west to Balkhash lake, north to Russia and south to Lhasa. South Sea is also a historical concept. In Han dynasty, it meant the South China Sea, however its area was expanded to the large area that included the South China Sea and the Maritime scope in Southeast Asia and the east part of Indian Ocean in Ming and Qing dynasties.
- ² This means the historical review of some events, such as Han dynasty defeated the Xiong-Nu (the main nomadic nationality) and open the silk road that connected China and other Eurasian countries; and Zheng He Voyage in the Western part of Pacific ocean and Indian ocean in which the superiority and peace of Ming dynasty was showed to the countries along his sea route.