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Thirty Years of American Studies in China: An Overview and A Case Study

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American Studies in the People's Republic of China began in the 1960s when China found that it needed to know more about the changes and developments in policy of the main "imperialist" power, the United States of America. In 1964, American Studies groups were set up at Wuhan University, Nankai University, Beijing University, and Beijing Normal University to conduct research in American history, American politics, American economy, and education. Some other research units were also set up in government institutions to concentrate on the study of American foreign policy and strategy. Originally, the work was limited to a selected number of people and the product of research was sent to the top leadership for reference in decision-making. The real burgeoning of American Studies, in the scholarly and intellectual sense of the term, took place after the establishment of Sino-US diplomatic relations in 1979, a year which also marked the beginning of China's reform and opening to the outside world. In that year, the first cross-nation scholarly association, the Association

of American History Research in China was founded on the basis of the groups established in 1964 in Wuhan and Nankai Universities. Another important event that pushed forward American Studies in China was the initiation of the Fulbright project in China in 1981, which saw the first batch of Chinese researchers going to the United States to do research. Since then, over 500 scholars and many Ph.D. candidates have had a chance to study or do research in American universities. Many have now become the backbone scholars in their respective universities or research institutions in American Studies.

From the very beginning, China's American Studies has embarked on a path of development different from the American model. Instead of concentrating on American Civilization, American history, and literature, China's American Studies has broadened the field to include American politics, American economic development, American foreign policy, Sino-US relations, religion, American society, and culture. The argument is that unless we have a broad enough perspective, it will be difficult to have a deep enough understanding of how and why America has become what it is today.

In order to have a broad perspective and understanding of America, China's American Studies Centers adopt three different approaches. First, one center offers all courses dealing with different aspects of American life. It is a great variety of courses to graduate and undergraduate students, covering American history, culture, society, politics, economic development, foreign policy, literature, the American constitution, and American religion. This is the approach adopted by our university, Beijing Foreign Studies University, and a few other universities. Many research institutions also opt for this approach. For

example, the Institute of American Studies under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has four research divisions: American politics, economy, foreign policy, and society and culture. China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations has under its umbrella an Institute of American Studies, engaging in the research of American strategy, American foreign policy, and American politics. Second, American Studies center is run as a platform that brings in scholars from various departments to offer a combined introductory course of American Studies to undergraduate students. Beijing University has this approach. Professors from the departments of law, education, economy, international relations, literature, religion, and philosophy give lectures about America, giving the students a broad and general view of the United States.

Third, American Studies is placed in different departments, such as American politics in the school of political science, American history in the history department, and American society in the department of sociology. Such an approach is not as productive as the first two because not enough attention is given to the development of the discipline when the discipline is only one of the sub-divisions in the department. There appears a withering of the discipline under such a set-up. Besides, such an arrangement also reveals the problem of lack of coordination because it is difficult to build bridges between departments for the purpose of having a coordinated approach to American Studies. Unfortunately, this has been the arrangement in many Chinese universities.

After over 30 years of development, China's American Studies have developed a number of characteristics. The first is there has

emerged a marked difference between universities and research institutions in their research interests, with universities emphasizing more general and basic research while research institutions focus more on policy study or policy research. Broadly speaking, with the exception of Fudan University, Beijing University, Qinghua University, and Renmin University, most American Studies centers focus more on research in American history, society, culture, literature, politics, and some other disciplines. They do not go in for policy research. Their research products usually appear in journals such as *American Studies Quarterly*, *Fudan American Review*, *Historical Research*, and other history, media, or sociology journals.

The second is the emphasis of teaching and research varies from university to university, depending very much upon past tradition and the special qualification of the teachers there. For example, the Northeastern Normal University has a very strong tradition in American urban study, initiated by senior professor Ding Zemin. Nankai University is strong in American general history and diplomatic history because the founder, Professor Yang Shengmao, was a student of the American diplomatic historian, Thomas Bailey. This shows that the view and emphasis of founding scholars played a very important role in the orientation of the center.

The third is the torch has already passed onto the hands of the third generation who have very good professional training at home and abroad. Many got their Ph.D.s in the best American universities in fields other than history and literature. They have good-to-excellent command of English and have good relations with scholars and professors in the United States. Their expertise pushes the quality of

teaching and research in American Studies to a higher level.

The fourth is the past few years have witnessed a rapid growth in American Studies in many universities. Many of these centers are placed under English Departments. This has one advantage, that is, the students have a comparatively better command of English. The disadvantage is these centers lack qualified professors who can offer courses from diverse disciplines in English. But the rapid growth reveals one important thing, that is, the teaching of English is placing emphasis on country or regional studies. This is required as a result of the development of China in the world.

The fifth is that cross-disciplinary approaches have been stressed. The Chinese Association for American Studies, founded in 1988, took the lead in this approach. It now boasts of having over 60 member institutions, embracing researches in various fields on the United States. A more recent development is the setting up of the American Studies Network in 1998, which is supported by the US-China Education Trust, a program of the FY Chang Foundation. Ambassador Julia Chang Bloch, a Chinese American, plays a significant role in making the Network a success. The Network now has 53 member institutions. Starting from 2004, the Network has already organized 7 annual conferences and the 8th one will be held at my university at the end of November this year. The theme of the conference is Election 2012 and Beyond. These conferences usually cover a broad range of topics, making it possible for participants from different disciplines to contribute their insights and wisdom.

The last is Chinese professors have published a number of books of significance in the study and research of the United States. The

outstanding ones are the 6-volume *American General History* series, co-edited by Professors Yang Shengmao and Liu Xuyi, which came out between 1989 and 2001; the 10-volume *Contemporary America* series, edited by Professor Wang Jisi, covering American politics, foreign policy, economy, military affairs, religion, law, education, culture, science and technology, and society, which came out in 2001; the 4-volume *History of Sino-US Relations* by Professor Tao Wenzhao; the 2-volume *Postwar American Diplomatic History* by Professor Zhi Zhongyun; *History of American Foreign Policy (1775-1989)* by Professor Yang Shengmao; and the 4-volume series of *Religion and American Society* by Xu Yihua.¹⁾

Apart from these characteristics, there is still another aspect, which is unique in China's American Studies. That is the uniqueness of certain issues pertaining to China; for example, the life, experience, sufferings, and contribution of Chinese Americans in the United States. This has been the focus of many Chinese American scholars in their research. After Congress's recent apology for the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the role and contribution of recent immigrants

1) If you want to check what has been published in American Studies in China, the following publications may be of use: *The Catalog of Articles in American Studies in China (1979-1989)*, published in 1991 by Yang Yusheng and Hu Yukun; *Constructing A New Bridge for Understanding*, edited by Zhi Zhongyun and Tao Wenzhao, published in 1996, which covers books and articles published between 1979 and 1993 on Sino-US relations; *Understanding America: American Studies in Recent Years*, a conference collection edited by Professor Hu Guocheng, published in 2002; and *American Studies: China's Research in American Politics and Foreign Policy* by Professor Sun Zhe in 2008 which covers a period between 1979 and 2006. More recently, the Institute of American Studies under CASS has put out a blue paper on the United States of America. The 2011 and 2012 volumes are now available in bookstores.

to the United States, especially those who went after China's reform and opening up, will become an important topic for research. There is also the issue of American missionaries in China and the role of individuals like Leighton Stuart. What role did they play? How could we have a correct evaluation? Further more, the issue of return migration, including those Chinese nationals and Chinese Americans who came back recently, those we Chinese call "hai gui." Their role, their contributions, their experience in China in the 1950s and 1960s, their devotion and spirit are all topics worthy of study. Still more, there is the issue of mutual perception. Many American scholars have written on American perception of China and the Chinese, but not much has been written on Chinese perception of America. Two books stand out in this respect. One is *The Perception of America by the Chinese* by Professor Yang Yusheng and the other is *The Perception of America by Chinese Intellectuals, 1943-1953* by Zhang Jishun. However, these two books were all published in the 1990s; we lack more current analysis on Chinese perception of America. The study of many of these issues needs the involvement of Chinese scholars because they are more familiar with the environment, mood of the people, their concerns, and their worries.

In spite of the achievements, there are still major challenges facing China's American Studies. The first is English proficiency. The demand of English proficiency is high for teachers and students in American Studies. However, unless they are teachers and students in the English Department, their command of English is not admirable. Most of the courses in American Studies in quite a number of universities are conducted in Chinese. English texts may be required

for reading, but class discussion and essay writing are all done in Chinese. As a result, the students cannot communicate fluently in English with native-speaking people. This partly defeats the purpose of having American Studies. This can also be seen at the Network conferences. If we insist on English exclusively as the conference language, some scholars will not come because they feel their English is not adequate. If we allow the use of Chinese, American or foreign participants will complain because they cannot follow the Chinese presentations. Unless the host institution can provide adequate and capable interpreters, this will become a dilemma. Greater emphasis should be given to the mastering of the English language. For M.A. and Ph.D. students, this should be considered a prerequisite.

The second is the area of research. Today in China, too much emphasis has been given to policy research, especially the research in Sino-US relations. More basic research and teaching have been ignored. Because of the difficulty in publishing, people generally will shy away from disciplines whose research products are difficult to publish. People should not be blamed for this, but the issue has to be solved. Otherwise it will affect the quality of American Studies in China.

The third is that cross-disciplinary approach should be further stressed. When American history, economy, society are taught in history, sociology, and economics departments and taught in Chinese, there can hardly be any coordinated study under the umbrella of American Studies. Here we need to learn from the American approach, making it a multidisciplinary field and drawing on staff from other departments.

Fourthly, emphasis should be given to the changes in research

attitudes and learning styles. We should advise our young faculty members and students to settle down on one subject, dig into it, accumulate material over a period of time, analyze the material, and then finally produce a thoughtful paper. This should be carefully cultivated and requires senior professors to set an example.

After this brief overview and assessment of China's American Studies, we will now focus on one case study of the American Studies Center of our university, Beijing Foreign Studies University. We hope through a closer look, we can get more nuanced knowledge about the development of the field and find more specific answers for further improvement.

The research project, conducted by our faculty research team in 2009, was to provide an overall assessment of the 30-year-old Master degree program in American Studies and define its strengths and weakness for the sake of further growth and improvement. Initiated in 1979, our American Studies Center is one of the earliest and the largest American Studies graduate programs in the country; it has 12 full-time faculty members, 7 affiliated faculty members, and enrolls over 20 full-time M.A. students every year. It is also one of the only two American Studies programs in China that conduct all courses, all assignments, and all degree requirements in the English language. By 2012, it had graduated almost 300 M.A. students in the field of American politics and foreign relations, American literature, culture, history and society, American media studies, and Asian/Chinese American studies.

The evaluation project used multiple research methods, including

interviews with program directors, a survey with program graduates, content analysis of M.A. theses, as well as general evaluation research method. The findings in the following come from two major parts of the project:

1) A content analysis of 30 years of M.A. theses in American Studies: patterns & changes, accomplishments & problems. It analyzed a total of 171 available theses under the research question of “What are the major changes over the past 30 years in terms of topic, format, research method, and theoretical framework?”

2) A survey of 30 years of graduates from American Studies: expectations & results, satisfactions & dissatisfactions. It analyzed 81 questionnaires collected from 115 alumni on such issues as their motivation, their learning experience, their career development, and the long-term impact of American Studies.

The primary findings demonstrate that our American Studies program has its language strength and some pedagogical accomplishments. However, the growth has been uneven in disciplinary development and research training. The findings suggest that for further growth, the program should design more balanced curricula, stress more research training in teaching, and incorporate more interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary approaches into American Studies.

Due to space limitations, this paper will only address four major findings of our research in detail:

1) English language is the key in sustaining American Studies. The students know that in order to enter and survive our program, they should be strong speakers of English. They also expect to improve in their English significantly through the program so that they can

secure a desirable job placement upon graduation. Our survey reveals that an absolute majority of students in our American Studies M.A. program, 94% to be exact, majored in English language when they were in college. Only 6% in our survey majored in other subjects, such as history, education, and mathematics. Competence in English is also crucial for the students to locate a job after graduation. 55% of our survey respondents selected speaking skills in English as a major factor in locating their first job, 41% selected writing skills in English. Only 4% selected other factors as important to job hunting, including knowledge about the U.S., gender, and social connection.

The advantage of stressing a strong command of English for American Studies is that the students are always willing to approach all reading and research materials in English and to produce their reading and research results in English. The importance of English in the job market also enables American Studies to compete for the best graduate students and attract them into in-depth disciplinary training. The drawback, however, is that the students generally lack basic disciplinary training. The typical classes they took in English at college were “Intensive Reading,” “Extensive Reading,” “Listening and Oral English,” and “Writing,” instead of “Introduction to History,” “Introduction to Sociology,” or “Theories and Methods.” This places a heavy burden on the teachers and students at the stage of thesis writing and publication, which will be addressed more in the third finding.

2) Our American Studies program covers more disciplines than our counterparts in other Chinese universities and focuses more on social sciences than a regular American Studies program in the US. But the training within social sciences is unevenly distributed, leaning heavily

toward government politics and US foreign policy. The pie chart shows the distribution of topic selection in percentage among all the available 171 M.A. theses submitted before 2008. Culture is the most popular category among students, accounting for 20% of all the theses; politics & government has the second highest percentage: 17%. The study of US society ranks third at 16%. History only ranks fourth, at 16%. However, if we put together two other categories, US foreign relations and Sino-US relations, we get the highest percentage of 24%. If we combine that with politics and government, the percentage comes as high as 41%.

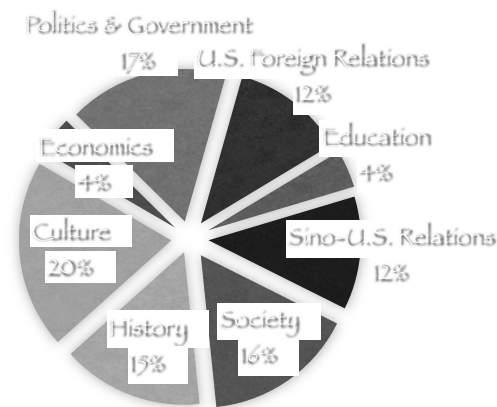


Chart 1. Distribution of Topic Selection for M.A. Theses (in Percentage)

3) Students' research interests are diverting from canonical studies to contemporary and popular culture studies. Like American Studies in the US, our program also demonstrates a de-centering from the old research interests in Puritan Studies or in looking for the

American national character. More and more students are showing interest in issues of diversity and multiculturalism and interest in contemporary issues over earlier history.

Chart 2 provides data demonstrating one example of the shift of student’s research interest from classic thinkers to popular culture over a course of 23 years. It shows clearly that the interest in popular culture rose sharply from 1990; this same year also witnessed a drop in thesis topics studying classic thinkers.

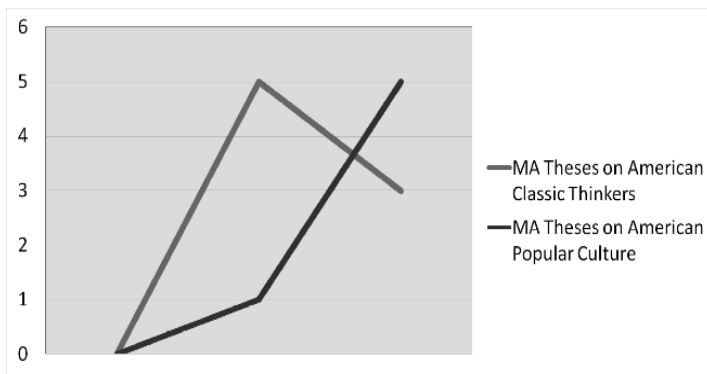


Chart 2. A Comparison of Theses Topics on Classic Thinkers and on Popular Culture

4) The biggest challenge our program faces is to improve the students’ research skills and grasp of theories within a short period of time. The survey showed that the major problems the students encountered in their thesis writing were a lack of research methods (32.5%) and a lack of theory (28.8%).

Table 1. Most Common Problems in Thesis Writing (in Percentage)

The Biggest Problem in Thesis Writing	%
Lack of background knowledge	13,8
poor writing skills	3,8
lack of theory	28,8
lack of methods	32,5
Lack of sources	17,5
Other	3,8
	100,0

In fact, research skills tops the list of all skills that the students think need the most improvement in our program. 44.9% of students participating in the survey chose research skills as what they think our program should emphasize the most in the future; 25.6% chose social skills; and only 12.8% chose English language. The category of “other” here included knowledge about the US, computer skills, and second foreign language skills.

Table 2. Skills That Need Improvement Through Teaching (in Percentage)

What needs to be improved	%
English language skills	12,8
social skills	25,6
research skills	44,9
other	16,7
	100,0

Not all graduates selected research skills as the most lacking, however. Only those graduates currently working in the field of

education and research were more likely to think their research skills needed improvement more than other skills.

Table 3. The Need for Research Skills as Affected by Occupation

What needs to be improved?	Current Occupation		
	Education & Research	Other	
Research skills	71%	28%	44.4%
other	29%	72%	55.6%
	100%	100%	100%

In sum, both our survey research and theses evaluation research demonstrate that our American Studies program has its most prominent strength in using English as the only working language and in situating American Studies in both the humanities and social sciences. It has also achieved a steady progress in moving beyond canonical studies to more diverse topics and in using international standards for formats and styles of thesis writing. Over half of the respondents in our survey reported that they had made “significant achievement” in their knowledge about American Studies, in their analytical skills, and in their English language skills

Table 4. Significant Progress Made in the Program (in Percentage and Multiple Answers)

significantly improved skills through the program	%
knowledge in American Studies	56.25
analytical skills	55
language skills	51.25

However, we still face some major challenges. The major two are to develop social science disciplines more evenly from within and to improve students' training in theory and research. We also hope to develop new perspectives, new topics, and new interdisciplinary methods in American Studies.

With this paper, we have first provided an overview of the development of American Studies since the founding of the People's Republic of China and highlighted some major characteristics of this field. In the second part, we used a case study, which is a program assessment of the 30 years of the American Studies master degree program in our university, Beijing Foreign Studies University, to demonstrate more specific features and challenges faced by American Studies in contemporary China. We hope our discussion can help provide a better understanding of American Studies in China and can also generate comparisons with American Studies in other countries and on other continents.

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Abstract

**30 Years of American Studies in China:
An Overview and A Case Study**

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This paper addresses the historical development and general characteristics of American Studies in China and examines its strengths and weaknesses with a case study of an American Studies graduate program in Beijing. The paper first provides an overview of the history of American Studies in China since 1979, the year that marked the normalization of the Sino-US diplomatic relationship and the institutionalization of American Studies as an academic field. Second, it summarizes the unique characteristics of American Studies in China and lists major challenges it now faces for further development. The third part uses the American Studies Center at Beijing Foreign Studies University, a flagship graduate-level study and research program in China, as a case study to examine more closely the accomplishments of the past 30 years and the challenges faced at the current stage. A questionnaire survey conducted among its alumni and a content analysis evaluation of all available M.A. theses demonstrate that the flagship program has its language strength and unique pedagogical accomplishments. However, the program has been uneven in disciplinary development and research training. The findings suggest that for further growth, the program should design more balanced curricula, put greater emphasis on research training, and incorporate more interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary approaches into American Studies.

Key Words

American Studies, China, characteristics, challenges, program assessment