Journal of Contemporary Asia

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjoc20

Political Science and Chinese Political Studies: The State of the Field, by Sujian Guo

Ngeow Chow Bing

Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya
Published online: 25 Sep 2013.

To cite this article: Ngeow Chow Bing (2014) Political Science and Chinese Political Studies: The State of the Field, by Sujian Guo, Journal of Contemporary Asia, 44:2, 372-375, DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2013.839194

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2013.839194

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
However, beyond this small factual error, the article gives a good summary of the challenges in the EU–ASEAN partnership. The recommendations towards the end on how to step up EU–ASEAN relations, however, are rather weak and rhetorical and perhaps really confirm the analysis made by Webber on the structural constraints faced by the EU and ASEAN in their partnership.

Yeo Lay Hwee © 2013
European Union Centre, National University of Singapore
Email: eucylh@nus.edu.sg

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2013.839195

Political Science and Chinese Political Studies: The State of the Field
Sujian Guo (ed.) (Berlin: Springer, 2013)

This book collects essays by political scientists to address several themes related to the development of political science in China. Fourteen of the 15 chapters first appeared in three separate special issues of the Journal of Chinese Political Science. The editor, Professor Sujian Guo, provides the introductory chapter that has not been published before.

There are three main themes among the chapters of this book. The first is the debate about whether there should be an indigenous Chinese political science with theories and concepts developed from and applied only in China, as opposed to a universal political science in which Chinese (or Western) experiences do not appear to be unique and can be compared, theorised, generalised. On the one hand are the sceptics of the development of indigenous Chinese political science. Yang Zhong’s viewpoints are classically positivist. He equates social sciences with natural sciences, and since natural sciences respect no national boundaries, neither can the social sciences. Zhong does not dispute the necessity of building political knowledge based on Chinese realities, but that knowledge can and should be compared across different societies and cultures, in order to “elevate” them, to “develop universal political science theories,” rather than seeing them as knowledge for specific “local Chinese conditions” (131). “Removing proper names, not adding them” is the higher basis of knowledge (132). To that end, Zhong argues that political science in China should be developed along the explicitly “comparative politics” line. Baogang He similarly disputes the necessity to develop a “unique” Chinese political science that would most likely be interested in maintaining the present regime based on its “uniqueness” explanation, rather than developing truly useful knowledge about Chinese politics. He is much less positivist about knowledge than Zhong, but given the lack of academic freedom and bureaucratisation of scholarly community, the talk of constructing an indigenous Chinese political science can serve only the interests of the regime, not science.

Similarly, Guogang Wu contemplates “the contradiction between politics as a subject of social science scholarship and politics as a factor of hegemonic intervention in such scientific inquiries” (216). The lack of high-quality research output, the lack of appropriate course offerings on Chinese politics on university campuses, the mixing of political
science articles with pro-government (or outright propagandistic) pieces and policy research, are all signs that Chinese political science has failed to attain a truly proper professional standard. It seems that Wu does not reject indigenisation outright, but given the prevailing state of development, he considers talk of indigenisation premature. Without a professional political science, knowledge about domestic politics cannot really develop, and without such “indigenisation” can only be empty slogan.

The other side of the debate is represented by Shaoguang Wang. Wang attacks the presumption that Western knowledge is universal knowledge. In fact, such knowledge can act as “tinted lenses” which “can hinder our own ability to understand” China (239). Uncritical use of conceptual lenses, such as “democracy,” “trust” and “authoritarianism,” distorts our understanding of Chinese politics. The social sciences cannot be compared with natural sciences, because they are dealing with human variables. “Political laws and theorems do not just merely lack the capacity to be universally applicable; they also tend to wither in the passage of time” (246). In this sense, political science is supposed to be “indigenous” – it is supposed to be developed from, and reflect and theorise the political experience where it is grounded. That does not mean ruling out learning from Western or other countries. On the contrary, he suggests, “indigenisation” increases international dialogue, for acceptance of Western political science as universal political science can mean only Western hegemony in knowledge production and consumption, and hardly reflects the diverse political experiences of the world. Instead, indigenisation turns “the existing one-way road into a two-way road” (253). The road to a cosmopolitan political science is therefore “indigenisation.” Sharing Wang’s viewpoints, Jon Taylor also believes that it is indeed important for Chinese political science to “go it alone … by developing a discipline that fits the needs of the nation” (264) and echoes the view that political science should be “relevant, practical, applied, and useful” (268). Henceforth, political science should be less concerned with developing abstract general knowledge and more for developing knowledge that will be useful for public interest. Incidentally, he also argues that American political science also developed in a similar way. Hence, Chinese scholars should pursue “an indigenised, multi-method political science with Chinese characteristics” (268).

Between the two perspectives, and contributed by the only non-China specialist in this volume, is a chapter by Jeffrey Isaacs, a democratic theorist. Citing Weber, Marx and Kant, Isaacs contends that there is an academic ethic that constitutes scholars as members of a “cosmopolitan republic of letters,” a sort of shared “epistemological universality.” Such universality is profoundly “cultural and historical,” but the cultural and historical embedment is to be understood as the basis of exchanges and hybridisation of intellectual inquiries. Equally important is that this universal republic of letters is “regulated by a fallibilistic consciousness” that “knows no geographical and doctrinal bounds” (183–184). It is through this lens that Isaacs develops his observation – in dialogue with a piece by Yu Keping – about political science in China. He lauds Yu’s ambitious vision for Chinese political science and sees such vision as exactly fitting to his model of “republic of letters” – the vision that recognises the “situatedness” of Chinese inquiry yet conscious of general features of politics that make political science “an inherently comparative enterprise” (185–186).

Closely paralleling this debate is the second broad theme – what lessons from Western (primarily American) political science there are for Chinese political science? Here, Taylor, in another article, warns his Chinese colleagues against becoming like the quantitative, theory-driven methodological positivism of American political science. Instead, Chinese political science should embrace methodological pluralism, with a
mixture of problem-driven research and theory-driven research, and of qualitative and quantitative methods. Baogang He and Björn Alpermann share a similar viewpoint, with He discussing the necessity of a balance between humanities and science, and Alpermann noting the increasing diversity of methodological choice in American political studies of China. Shelly Rigger discusses the historic “Perestroika” movement in American political science, in which scholars rebelled against the “methodological totalitarianism” and “substantive irrelevance” of the heavily quantitative political science once fashionable in the field (it still is, by the way). The movement also exposed the serious fragmentation of the discipline. Rigger suggests that Chinese political science should remain normatively engaged and embrace methodological pluralism. More boldly, she seems to agree that China is, to a large extent, unique. The existence of “Chinese exceptionalism” should not be denied. However, this does not make comparison impossible or undesirable, the “challenge is to understand China deep enough to make wise comparisons” (170). Hence, Rigger – reflecting on an American debate – defends rigorously areas studies from comparativists.

While Taylor and Rigger discuss the probable lessons of American political science for Chinese political science, Guangbin Yang and Miao Li’s chapter and Yuejin Jing and Guoqin Wang’s chapter – the only contributions from scholars working within Mainland China – illuminate actually how American theories and methodologies are used in China. Yang and Li show that there are different degrees of acceptance of theoretical models, such as totalitarianism, system theory and historical institutionalism. Speaking overall, Western theoretical models do not enjoy hegemony in Chinese political science. The individualistic rational choice theory accordingly will struggle “in a culture with a long tradition of collectivism,” so is behaviouralism in a state in which quantifiable political behaviours, such as elections are absent (66). Chinese scholars hence have developed their own middle-range theories – theories that are relevant to certain aspects of Chinese realities only. Judging from this chapter, it does not seem that China is being heavily influenced by Western theories at all. Jing and Wang, however, appear to provide a contradictory picture. They survey Chinese political science articles in academic journals that explicitly discuss methodology, and they find widespread use of Western theories or methodologies and, most baffling of all, reportedly 42% of these articles used rational choice theory. Didn’t Yang and Li find China an uninhabitable place for rational choice? Granted that among these 42%, only about half were actual application whereas the others were mostly discussion of the theory, still, it is a lot more than what is expected. Behaviouralism also seems to enjoy a following, again contradicting Yang and Li’s viewpoints. The two chapters contributed by Mainland China scholars unfortunately are quite confusing.

The third broad theme is kind of like the “state of the field” survey. Lynn White reviews Western political studies of China, which he divides into four broad areas: legitimacy, political economy, leadership and equality. Remaining optimistic of the direction of the field, he however notes that “scholars of Chinese politics have naturally focused on salient issues about China, not on the efforts to find general laws of politics” (29). This issue of China-relevancy versus general political science plagues the American China Studies community as much as the debate about indigenous versus universal political science. Alpermann, apart from noting the increasing use of quantitative methods in the traditionally heavily qualitative China studies field, also notes the dilemma between disciplinary integration and the coherence of China studies. As more researchers aim for higher theorisation using quantitative techniques, there might be a danger of fragmentation of China studies. Nevertheless, he seems
to embrace all these tensions and uncertainties, as the title of his article suggest, “Making the most of diversity.” Peter Moody reviews the use of political culture in Chinese political studies. Although he notes that political culture has fallen out of favour within the political science discipline, he remains convinced that such an approach is still useful in China, and can be reconciled with its rational choice critics. He is, however, critical of the quantitative way of studying political culture, such as the “civic culture” project, and instead is sympathetic of the Weberian verstehen approach.

Moody, White and Alpermann review Western studies of Chinese politics, but there is no chapter here reviewing the state of scholarship by Chinese scholars in Mainland China. Guoguang Wu mentions it in his critique of Chinese political science, but does not provide a detailed review of the actual research carried out. Only Fengshi Wu’s chapter bridges the English and Chinese languages – it reviews studies of Chinese environmental politics in both languages. He notes three areas of research within this subfield – the state and environmental governance, societal activists and non-governmental organisations, and environmental diplomacy. Crucially, he also confirms Shaoguang Wang’s accusation that at present, “international dialogue” is usually a one-way street: “Chinese social scientists are reading and absorbing what is published in English-language journals … [but] it is very rare to come across English translations of Chinese scholarship on eco-political theories or detailed discussions of research findings that are first published in Chinese” (106–107). Also, Wu lists an extensive bibliography for both Chinese and English sources, and he discusses them together. Chinese scholarship does not appear to be of inferior quality than the English scholarship. Here, it seems to somewhat negate Guoguang Wu’s assertion that good political science is impossible in China’s politically-charged academic environment.

Despite the important contributions of the book, it suffers a serious deficiency, which is the lack of engagement with the Chinese literature on Chinese political science. As far as I know, there are at least three edited books published in Chinese, but outside of Mainland China, that deal with similar concerns. Apart from one footnote, none of the scholars in this volume cites from these books. Books on Chinese political science published within China abound too, but all of them are ignored here. It shows that the “one-way street” is, indeed, serious.

Ngeow Chow Bing © 2013
Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya
Email: peterngeow@hotmail.com

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2013.839194