

# INTERNATIONAL AND STRATEGIC STUDIES REPORT



DEC 14, 2018

ISSUE. 72

Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Peking University

## “Debate on Bridging Academic Studies and Policy Research in International Politics”: A Brief Summary

**Zhao Jianwei**

**Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Peking University**

On November 21<sup>st</sup>, 2018, the Symposium “Debate on Bridging Academic Studies and Policy Research in International Politics” organized by the Institute of International and Strategic Studies (IISS), Peking University (PKU) was held at the North Pavilion of Peking University .<sup>\*</sup> A total of 16 experts and scholars from Peking University, Tsinghua University, Renmin University of China, Lanzhou University, the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, Counsellor’s Office of the State Council, and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences attended the symposium. Participants engaged themselves in in-depth discussions on a

---

<sup>\*</sup>During June 27<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup>, 2009, the Center for International Strategic Studies, Peking University (now known as the Institute of International and Strategic Studies) held a youth forum under the theme of “Academic and Policy-related Aspects in the Studies of International Issues”. Participants had in-depth discussions on relevant aspects including the relationship between academic and policy research, existing problems and possible solutions with regard to the two following topics: “Relevant Theories and Policies in the Studies of International Issues” and “The Future Directions for the Development of China’s Research and Studies on International Issues”. During the next nine years, both the domestic and international environment of China has undergone significant changes. Therefore, it is of great theoretical and practical significance to re-examine the relationship between academic and policy research.

series of issues and topics including how to balance the relationship between policy and academic research, and exchanged valuable experiences and insights from various domestic and world-wide international political studies.

## **I. How to Balance the Relationship between Policy Research and Academic Research**

Participants agreed that good policy research practice in the field of international politics requires profound knowledge of and expertise in academic research. Some participants believed that academic research and policy research are two aspects twinned with each other. Some participants also argued that academic research should be cautiously critical of various policy-making departments along with their specific policy-making processes, rather than always speaking in their favour. Some other scholars also argued that academic research represents “more unorthodox and unrestricted” approaches, while policy research represents “more formalized and regulated” approaches, and recommended that there should be a clear division between “unrestricted academic research” and “the exercise of policy-making by relevant authorities”. It may not be impossible for researchers to take into account both academic research and policy research and strike a balance between these two; however, due to the apparent difference in the respective purposes of academic and policy research, scholars face certain difficulties and challenges to achieve such an objective.

Participants first discussed the relationship between academic research and policy research, as well as various aspects within policy research from different perspectives. Professor Zhao Kejin, Vice President of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Tsinghua University, believed that academic research and policy research are two aspects twinned with each other. The core issue in terms of resolving the lack of cohesion between academic research and policy research is how to balance the relationship between the authority system and the knowledge system. Ancient knowledge merely comes from the edicts of the Church or the imperial edicts of the monarchs, with the transcendental philosophy and the theology of religions serving as the main sources of knowledge. Since the Age of Enlightenment in modern history, knowledge has begun to come from scientific experience and empirical studies, rather than being defined by the authorities holding the power. The core of policy research is to resolve the problems concerning

the acquisition of authority and power as well as the distribution of interests and benefits. Despite a lack of theoretical support for such research, policy research is deeply grounded in profound political logic. The core of academic research, on the other hand, lies in the pursuit of truth and the distribution of values. How to achieve the mutual complementarity of the logic of power and authority and the logic of knowledge rather than the mutual confrontation of these two aspects should be the main focus of the discussion on these issues.

Zhao Minghao, a researcher of the China Center for Contemporary World Studies of the International Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, believed that policy research is divided into two sub-categories, i.e. the research on policies and the research for policies. Both types of research require and measure the competencies in the following four aspects: first, the ability to identify and grasp the main issues and problems, i.e. the ability to clearly distinguish the strategic issues (such as the explanation and illustration of globalization) from the short-term and medium-term issues (such as the resolution of the South China Sea Arbitration Case); second, the ability to capture relevant information, which includes the ability to read relevant materials, capture valuable information in short conversations, and build a wide network of connections; third, exceptional writing skills, i.e. the full mastery of all types and in all styles; fourth, the ability to identify trends. At present, the strategic planning has not received enough attention in relevant research on international politics and foreign policies in China. An important task of strategic planning is to conceive future trends, list all different possibilities and scenarios, and develop relevant policy contingency plans.

Participants then analysed the differences between policy research and academic research from different perspectives. Zhang Liping, Deputy Director of the Counsellor's Office of the State Council, and Wang Shuai, a researcher of the National Institute of International Strategy of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, pointed out that policy research is characterized by its political, public, target-oriented, timely and feasible nature, as well as its limitation in length, while academic research is characterized by its independent and objective nature. These characteristics result in various differences between these two types of research in terms of agenda setting, research content and methodology. Li Wei, a professor of the School of

International Studies at Renmin University of China, believed that the differences between these two types of research are mainly reflected in the following three aspects: first, the role of scholars shares many similarities with that of scientists, and scholars give higher priority to the scientific nature rather than the political nature of their own achievements; policy analysts partially assume diplomatic functions and need to adopt measured rhetoric in their diplomatic expression to serve the government or the public sector. Second, scholars place emphasis on abstract logic and sufficient reading, while policy analysts emphasize the use of intuitive perception. Third, while scholars do not bear the responsibility for predictions, they need to answer basic logical questions, and their works must stand the test of time and history; policy experts, on the other hand, place greater emphasis on resolving immediate problems.

Professor Wang Jisi from the School of International Studies, Peking University, along with Wang Shuai and Zhang Liping, also discussed the specific steps of policy research process.

First, researchers shall identify problems, and collect relevant information and intelligence. Second, researchers shall conduct scientific analysis and assessment to find the root causes behind the problems. Third, researchers shall analyse all possible situations from the previously deduced causal relationship, and propose the relevant objectives, steps, and supporting measures for the specific policies.

Participants also discussed and analysed the existing problems in current policy research, and in particular, in the current foreign policy research. Wang Shuai argued that the research conducted by professional policy analysts faces the following problems: first, research results often demonstrate a lack of varied and diverse options. Many policy options are basically single-choice questions, with a lack of proposals for the best, the second best and the last options, or a variety of options including options A, B, and C. Second, there is a lack of pre-assessment and post-assessment in the research process. Third, the research process demonstrates considerable path dependence and dependence on past experience. Fourth, the research demonstrates a lack of adequate analysis of academic background and in-depth analysis based on previous experience. Fifth, the research demonstrates a lack of respect for intellectual property rights. Sixth, there is a lack of spirit of independent

research, resulting in more repetitive and redundant research and studies. The policy research conducted by scholars is faced with the following problems: first, there is a lack of timeliness of the issues and topics discussed in the research. Some research topics fail to keep up with the needs of the ever-changing situation. Second, there is a lack of balance between the relevant supply and demand in terms of the research. Since scholars have proposed too many concepts in their research, and have oversimplified some basic situations, these ideas and concepts remain relatively difficult to be fully understood by people without relevant background knowledge. Third, scholars tend to argue with reason and provide principled proposals which lack sufficient feasibility. Fourth, the relatively limited information available to scholars has further resulted in the information asymmetry in the research process (though such situation has greatly improved).

Some participants also mentioned that the academic environment in China has undergone significant changes in recent years. Professor Yang Shu, Director of the Institute for Central Asian Studies at Lanzhou University, pointed out that while researchers and scholars have encountered considerable difficulty in publishing academic articles on anti-separatism and anti-terrorism issues in domestic journals in recent years, deepening the further research on these two issues is of considerable practical significance for China. Li Wei pointed out that the changes in China's academic environment and research topics are mainly reflected in the following five aspects. First, while the substantial increase in the Chinese government's investment in various think tanks appears to be a good phenomenon, the styles of academic research at all universities in China are, nevertheless, greatly influenced by these think tanks and are prone to the tendency of one-sided pursuit of quantity and approval from higher authorities, lacking adequate academic basis. Second, although the boom of Western theories in academic research in China has faded, it has had a profound influence on the Chinese academia. In the Western academia, there has been a clear division between research orientation and research paths. While the former represents a research path that places higher emphasis on causality test, proposes quantification methods and regards international relations as a "legitimate scientific discipline", the latter represents a more traditional research path that emphasizes theory construction, paradigms, and ideological orientation. Under such influence, China's academic research

has also seen a division in its own in terms of research orientation. Third, there has been a significant increase in practical and pressing policy issues and concerns facing China in the field of international relations. The strategic competition between China and the United States, along with the “Belt and Road Initiative”, have raised many relevant issues that need to be resolved urgently, and there has been a significantly growing demand of the Chinese government for more scholars and academic professionals to work on these issues. Fourth, policy analysts tend to be younger in age. Fifth, the emergence of new media platforms since 2009 has markedly lowered the threshold for people’s public expression of their personal opinions, resulting in the polarization of the current state of public opinions in China, featuring larger amount of information of inferior quality.

In addition, several participants also mentioned that there are a few existing problems in terms of the funding of research projects in China. Zhao Minghao, through his illustration of the past experience from relevant studies of the “Belt and Road Initiative”, pointed out that there has been a mismatch in the allocation of research funds in China, and that no adequate priority has been given to various practical issues. Professor Wang Yong from the School of International Studies, Peking University agreed with such concerns and pointed out that some funded research results have only focused on praising the positivity of relevant policies, and have had little positive effect on the actual improvement of relevant decision-making process. Professor Wang Yizhou from the School of International Studies, Peking University argued that if national resources are repeatedly occupied and exhausted by political judgment, it will be difficult for researchers and professionals to produce truly valuable research results demonstrating different and varied opinions.

## **II. Valuable Experience and Insights from Various Domestic and International Political Studies World-Wide**

A number of participants, through the illustration of their own experiences, mentioned the importance of field research for policy research, and agreed that field research can facilitate the collection of first-hand information and data and achieve a sense of “on-site authenticity”. Wang Shuai particularly mentioned that while conducting research at high level is equally important to conducting research at grass-roots level, many researchers currently have

placed too much emphasis on high-level research while rather ignoring the grass-roots level research. For example, when investigating the status of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, most researchers seldom conducted adequate research in the Midwestern United States and among the general public, and therefore misjudged the relevant situation of the election. Zhang Liping believed that policy research should be both “high-profile” and “down-to-earth”. Being “high-profile” means that all the recommendations proposed in the policy reports shall be approved by leaders of higher authorities, while being “down-to-earth” means that priority shall be given to field research. Associate Professor Liu Haifang from the School of International Studies, Peking University, through her illustration of his own experience of investigation and research in Africa, pointed out that the current research on China-Africa cooperation requires more front-line observations.

In view of the lack of cohesion between academic research and policy research, Wang Jisi believed that while these two types of research cannot be fully integrated, a bridge between them can be established. Scholars do not necessarily have to assume the roles of advisers, and vice versa. Li Wei also stressed that although these two types of research can complement each other, there are inevitable contradictions between them, thus making it difficult to completely bridge the gap between the two of them. Only a few scholars can make outstanding contributions in both types of research, while most scholars should make a clear choice between these two types of research and stick to either one type.

Participants also noticed that the domestic policy researchers in China tend to become younger in age. Both Wang Jisi and Li Wei believed that policy research relies on the perceptions and intuition of researchers, and this type of perceptions and intuition are largely based on profound relevant experience, as well as a considerable amount of practical experience. While elder researchers have more relevant experience, they lack sufficient time and energy to conduct micro-level research, giving them a disadvantage that may result in their misjudgment purely based on their own experience and intuition.

Some participants further stressed that the implementation and post-implementation process of relevant policies will generate some desired effects as well as corresponding repercussions. Therefore, relevant feedback

should be collected and evaluated in a timely manner. Policy-makers must bear in mind that unintended policy-related consequences are sometimes unpredictable, and are even undesirable for decision-makers themselves. Therefore, in order to achieve satisfactory results and further improve the decision-making capacity in order to be able to make sound decisions, policy researchers and developers should conduct relevant table-top simulations and training in advance with the aim of predicting all possible consequences of the implementation of relevant policies. Wang Yong recommended that more case studies should be conducted in the relevant studies of international relations. For example, researchers can learn from the approaches adopted by various business schools, and build a case library to provide insights and examples for future decision-making efforts.

Looking to the future, some participants expressed their hopes that in the future, China would establish a “revolving door” system among policy researchers and scholars, and establish more communication platforms for both sides. Relevant policy-making departments should respect the intellectual property rights when citing the original works by the scholars. Wang Yong believed that relevant government agencies should improve the mechanism for consultation and decision-making to improve the transparency of decision-making as well as the publicity of information. Zhang Liping, in particular, emphasized the importance of interdisciplinary research in the academic research process as well as the inter-sectoral practice in the policy research. Wang Yizhou also pointed out that at present, due to a lack of sufficient social awareness in China, scholars should always maintain a prudent, calm and reflective attitude when conducting relevant research, as well as objectively present various shortcomings and flaws related to their findings, which would benefit the government in the long term.

Edited by Dr. Gui Yongtao and Dr. Anastasiya Bayok

Tel: 86-10-62756376

Email: [iiss@pku.edu.cn](mailto:iiss@pku.edu.cn)

Fax: 86-10-62753063

Web: [www.iiss.pku.edu.cn](http://www.iiss.pku.edu.cn)

Address: IISS, Peking University, Beijing, China