

Paths and Boundaries of Area Studies in the Foreign Language Disciplines: Reflections from the Perspective of Mutual Learning among Civilizations

Qi Guo, Ping Li*

School of International Communication, Wuhan Business University, Wuhan 430056, Hubei, China

*Corresponding author: Ping Li, 820535273@qq.com

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: The elevation of Area Studies to a first-level discipline under the category of Interdisciplinary Studies in China's 2022 catalog of graduate disciplines has placed the foreign language disciplines at the center of a nationwide debate: what can they contribute to Area Studies, and where should their involvement stop? Drawing on the international history of Area Studies and on the Chinese concept of mutual learning among civilizations, this paper argues that the foreign language disciplines possess a distinctive and irreplaceable foundation for Area Studies—direct access to primary sources, philological competence, and long experience of cross-cultural mediation—but that their participation must be disciplined by clear boundaries. From the perspective of mutual learning among civilizations, Area Studies should be conceived neither as intelligence gathering nor as the unilateral representation of an objectified “other,” but as a dialogic practice in which the knowing subject is itself transformed. The paper proposes four concrete paths for foreign-language-based Area Studies (language-anchored deep knowledge, text- and discourse-centered methodology, translation as knowledge production, and the cultivation of compound talents) and delineates three boundaries that should not be crossed: the disciplinary boundary against amateurish interdisciplinarity, the epistemic boundary against theory-less empiricism, and the ethical boundary against the instrumentalization of knowledge about other societies. Recognizing both the paths and the boundaries, the paper concludes, is the precondition for a Chinese Area Studies that is academically credible and civilizational self-reflexive.

Keywords: Area studies; Foreign language disciplines; Mutual learning among civilizations; Interdisciplinarity; Knowledge production

Online publication: August 31, 2026

1. Introduction

Few developments in Chinese higher education have generated as much discussion in the humanities as the

institutionalization of Area Studies. In 2013, “Area Studies” was formally listed as one of the five research orientations of the first-level discipline of Foreign Languages and Literatures, giving it, for the first time, a legitimate home within the foreign language disciplines. In September 2022, the Catalogue of Disciplines and Specialties for Graduate Education issued by the Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council and the Ministry of Education went a decisive step further, establishing “Area Studies” (code 1407) as a first-level discipline in its own right under the newly created category of Interdisciplinary Studies, with degrees grantable in economics, law, literature, and history ^[1]. What had been a research direction thus became a discipline, and a latent question became an urgent one: now that Area Studies has an institutional identity of its own, what is the proper role of the foreign language disciplines in it?

The question is double-edged. On one side, departments of foreign languages and literatures across China have embraced Area Studies as a strategic opportunity for disciplinary transformation, and hundreds of university-based country and region research centers are staffed predominantly by language-trained scholars ^[2–3]. On the other side, skeptics warn that language proficiency is not scholarship, that linguists-turned-commentators risk producing superficial policy briefs rather than knowledge, and that the foreign language disciplines may lose their humanistic core in the pursuit of policy relevance. Both positions capture something real. This paper therefore refuses the simple question of whether the foreign language disciplines should engage in Area Studies—they already do—and asks instead the more productive twin question: along which paths can they engage meaningfully, and within which boundaries must that engagement remain?

The argument proceeds in four steps. Section 2 examines the distinctive assets that foreign language scholarship brings to Area Studies. Section 3 revisits the international history of Area Studies, whose entanglement with geopolitical power offers necessary warnings. Section 4 introduces mutual learning among civilizations as an epistemological orientation that can inform a distinctively Chinese—and self-reflexive—Area Studies. Sections 5 and 6 then specify the paths and the boundaries, respectively, before a brief conclusion.

2. The linguistic and philological foundation

The case for foreign-language-based Area Studies rests on a simple epistemological point: access. Every claim about another society is mediated by texts, utterances, and archives in that society’s language(s). A scholar who cannot read the constitutions, newspapers, novels, and social media of the country under study is dependent on translations and on English-language secondary literature—a dependence that silently reproduces the agenda of Anglophone scholarship. Language competence is therefore not an ornamental skill but the infrastructure of independent knowledge production. This is the sense in which the foreign language disciplines hold what might be called a philological advantage: they are trained to work with primary sources in the original, to detect semantic nuance, register, and intertextual allusion, and to treat language not as a transparent medium but as evidence of how a society thinks.

A second asset is hermeneutic. Literary and linguistic scholarship in the foreign language disciplines has long cultivated close reading, discourse analysis, translation studies, and cross-cultural interpretation—precisely the methods needed to move beyond the behavioral and institutional surface of a society toward its self-understanding: its historical memory, its concepts of legitimacy, its hopes and anxieties. If Area Studies aims at what Clifford Geertz called “local knowledge,” then disciplines trained in interpretation are not peripheral to it but central ^[4].

Third, foreign language programs carry decades of accumulated country-specific teaching—survey courses on national histories, societies, and cultures—which constitutes an embryonic curriculum for Area Studies talent cultivation ^[5]. The widely cited training formula for Chinese Area Studies, namely to produce people who “know the language, understand the country, and master a field,” implicitly assigns the first two competencies to the foreign language disciplines.

None of this, however, licenses complacency. Assets become contributions only when they are organized into research questions and disciplined by methodology—and it is precisely here that the question of boundaries arises. Before addressing it, the authors turn to history, because the international experience of Area Studies shows with unusual clarity what happens when such boundaries are ignored.

3. Historical lessons: Area studies between knowledge and power

Modern Area Studies was born from war and consolidated by the Cold War. In the United States, the great expansion of the 1950s and 1960s—funded by the federal government and the large foundations—was explicitly premised on national security: the need to know the Soviet Union, China, and the decolonizing world. This origin bequeathed a productive tension. On the one hand, Area Studies produced an extraordinary body of scholarship and sustained the serious study of non-Western languages and societies. On the other hand, as critics from Edward Said to Immanuel Wallerstein have argued, its object of knowledge was often constituted as an object of policy: the “area” was the place to be managed, contained, or modernized, and knowledge about it risked becoming what Said called a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient rather than understanding it ^[6-8].

Two further lessons deserve emphasis. First, the epistemic lesson of the “Area Studies controversy” of the 1990s, in which rational-choice political scientists such as Robert Bates charged Area Studies with atheoretical particularism, while area specialists replied that context-free models mistook abstraction for science ^[9]. The durable insight is that Area Studies thrives only when thick contextual knowledge and explicit theoretical reflection correct each other; either alone is insufficient. Second, the institutional lesson: when Cold War funding priorities shifted, Area Studies entered a prolonged crisis, suggesting that a field wholly dependent on state demand is structurally fragile. Scholarship needs autonomy—questions generated by scholarly logic, not only by policy demand—if it is to outlast the moment that summoned it.

These lessons travel. A Chinese Area Studies that defines itself exclusively as a service industry for external policy would repeat the American mistake in a new key; one that reproduces an unexamined hierarchy between the knowing subject and the known object would reproduce the orientalist mistake. It is against this background that the perspective of mutual learning among civilizations acquires more than rhetorical significance.

4. Mutual learning among civilizations as an epistemological orientation

Mutual learning among civilizations is usually invoked as a policy discourse, but it can be read more rigorously as an epistemological orientation for Area Studies, with three implications.

First, it repositions the relationship between knower and known. In the classical model, the researcher studies a foreign area that remains a silent object; in the dialogic model implied by mutual learning, the other’s self-understanding is not raw material to be processed but a voice to be engaged. The aim is not

only accurate representation but comprehension in the strong sense—understanding how the world looks from within another civilizational horizon. For foreign-language-based research this is congenial: reading a society's own texts in its own language is the elementary act of taking that society seriously as a subject of thought.

Second, mutual learning entails reflexivity about the observer. Civilizations learn from each other only if each is willing to see itself through the other's eyes. Chinese Area Studies should therefore treat the study of other societies and the study of China's own modern experience as mutually illuminating, and should be alert to the reverse risk of orientalism—the tendency to essentialize “the West” or any other civilizational other as a monolith.

Third, it sets the telos of the enterprise. If the purpose of knowing other societies is ultimately to make coexistence and cooperation possible, then the criteria of good Area Studies include not only analytical accuracy but also the capacity to translate across civilizational vocabularies—literally and conceptually^[10]. This telos assigns translation, the home ground of the foreign language disciplines, a central rather than auxiliary role.

5. Paths: What the foreign language disciplines can distinctively contribute

From these foundations follow four concrete paths.

First, language-anchored deep knowledge. Foreign language units should concentrate their Area Studies effort where their competence is decisive: research that requires sustained work with primary sources in the object language—political discourse, legal texts, press ecologies, literary and intellectual production, and the conceptual history of key terms^[2, 11]. A research agenda built around questions that only language-fluent scholars can answer is both more defensible and more competitive than generic commentary on current affairs.

Second, text- and discourse-centered methodology. Rather than imitating the quantitative mainstream of the social sciences, foreign-language-based Area Studies should formalize what it already does well: corpus-assisted discourse analysis, close reading of foundational and contested texts, media and public-opinion analysis grounded in native-language sources, and ethnographic attention to everyday language use. These methods, made explicit and teachable, can constitute a recognizable methodological signature^[12].

Third, translation as knowledge production. The translation of the other civilization's classics, scholarship, and documents—and the retranslation of Chinese thought into the object languages—should be recognized as primary research in Area Studies, not as ancillary labor. A civilization is known largely through what of it is translated and how.

Fourth, cultivating compound talents. Curricular reform should link language training with country knowledge and a second field—history, law, economics, or international relations—so that graduates are simultaneously language-competent, country-knowledgeable, and methodologically trained^[5, 11, 13–14]. This is where the foreign language disciplines' contribution to the new first-level discipline is most institutional and most durable.

6. Boundaries: Disciplinary, epistemic, and ethical

Paths matter only if boundaries are respected. Three are fundamental.

The disciplinary boundary warns against amateur interdisciplinarity. Area Studies is genuinely interdisciplinary, but interdisciplinarity presupposes disciplines: a contribution is interdisciplinary only if it is first disciplinary. A literature scholar who writes on another country's macroeconomic policy without economic training is not doing interdisciplinary research but leaving his or her discipline unattended. The boundary rule is therefore: contribute from strength, collaborate for the rest. Foreign language scholars should enter joint projects as the guardians of linguistic and interpretive rigor, not as generalists competing with economists and political scientists on their own terrain ^[15].

The epistemic boundary warns against theory-less empiricism. The accumulation of country facts—however linguistically impeccable—does not by itself constitute scholarship. As the American controversy of the 1990s demonstrated, Area Studies earns academic standing only when empirical knowledge is organized by explicit questions, concepts, and arguments that can speak beyond the single case ^[9]. Chinese Area Studies, still young, is particularly exposed to the temptation of descriptive compilation and of moving “from concept to concept” without empirical mediation. Foreign-language-based researchers should therefore pair their philological strength with deliberate theoretical literacy, while resisting the opposite error of importing theoretical frameworks uncritically.

The ethical boundary warns against the instrumentalization of knowledge. Serving national needs is legitimate and, in China, constitutive of the field's public rationale; but knowledge produced solely to order—knowledge that tells the sponsor what it wishes to hear, or that casts other societies purely as objects of strategy—discredits itself both academically and ethically, as the Cold War history of Area Studies attests ^[16–17]. From the perspective of mutual learning among civilizations, there is also a positive formulation of this boundary: research on other civilizations should be conducted in a way that could be read by members of those civilizations without loss of scholarly dignity. Accuracy, empathy, and critical independence are not concessions to softness but the conditions of credible knowledge.

7. Conclusion

The foreign language disciplines did not choose the Area Studies turn; history chose it for them, first as a research orientation in 2013 and then, in 2022, as a neighboring first-level discipline that cannot be built without them. Their contribution is real and specific: direct access to primary sources, interpretive and translational competence, and the human infrastructure of country knowledge. But contribution requires self-limitation. The three boundaries sketched above—disciplinary, epistemic, and ethical—are not restrictions on ambition but the form that sustainable ambition takes. Read as an epistemological orientation, mutual learning among civilizations supplies the unifying thread: it explains why language-based interpretation matters (because civilizations must be heard in their own voice), why theory matters (because voices must be made comparable without being flattened), and why ethical restraint matters (because knowledge of the other is also a relation with the other). A Chinese Area Studies that walks these paths while honoring these boundaries would be more than a national knowledge project; it would be a contribution to the possibility of civilizations understanding one another.

Funding

This paper was funded by the Doctoral Research Foundation of Wuhan Business University under the project

“Dreyfus’s Technological Phenomenology Research” (Grant No. 2025KB007).

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] The Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council, Ministry of Education, 2022, Catalogue of Disciplines and Specialties for Graduate Education.
- [2] Guo YJ, 2023, Area Studies in Foreign Language Disciplines: Concepts, Connotations, Orientation, and Content. *Foreign Language Education in China*, 2023(1): 23–29.
- [3] Guo YJ, 2024, How Can the Foreign Language Discipline Make its Unique Contribution to the Construction of Area Studies? *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching*, 2024(5): 9–11.
- [4] Geertz C, 1983, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*. Basic Books, New York.
- [5] Zhai SL, Liu M, 2025, The Composition and Cultivation Path of Core Competencies for Area Studies Talents. *Contemporary Foreign Languages Studies*, 2025(1): 182–190.
- [6] Said EW, 1978, *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books, New York.
- [7] Wallerstein I, 1997, The Unintended Consequences of Cold War Area Studies, in *The Cold War and the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years*. New Press, New York, 195–231.
- [8] Rafael VL, 1994, The Cultures of Area Studies in the United States. *Social Text*, 1994(41): 91–111.
- [9] Bates RH, 1997, Area Studies and the Discipline: A Useful Controversy? *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 30(2): 166–169.
- [10] Xie T, Chen Y, Dai CZ, et al., 2022, Constructing Area Studies with Chinese Characteristics. *International Forum*, 24(3): 3–35.
- [11] Ning Q, 2024, Area Studies as a First-Level Discipline and Country and Area Research from the Perspective of Foreign Language Education. *Journal of Language Policy and Language*, 11(2): 1–10.
- [12] Fairclough N, 2013, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language*. Routledge, London.
- [13] Wang Z, 2023, The Integration of International Relations and Area Studies, *World Social Sciences*, 2023(5): 192–209.
- [14] Fan LY, Li J, 2022, General Situation and Challenges of the Education of Area Studies as a Discipline in China, in *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Education: Current Issues and Digital Technologies (ICECIDT 2022)*. Atlantis Press, Dordrecht, 467–475.
- [15] Chen Y, Yang LR, Xu YN, 2023, Area Studies as a First-level Discipline and Country and Area Research from the Perspective of Foreign Language Education. *Foreign Language Higher Education Research*, 2023(5): 89–97.
- [16] Miyoshi M, Harootunian HD, 2002, *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*. Duke University Press, North Carolina.
- [17] Szanton DL, 2004, *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*. University of California Press, California.

Publisher’s note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.