

**BOUNDED THOUGHT: AREA STUDIES
AND THE FLUIDITY OF ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES**

*Robin Kietlinski
The University of Pennsylvania*

“One of the recent priorities for the Board and Program Committee has been to increase social sciences representation on the annual meeting program and, more generally, within the membership of AAS [Association for Asian Studies]...[T]o encourage the presentation of new social science scholarship at AAS annual meetings, the Board of Directors has created a special panel category, ‘Directions in the Social Sciences.’”

Asian Studies Newsletter, “Note from the Executive Director”¹

In a recent edition of the Asian Studies Newsletter, Executive Director Michael Paschal suggests that there is a recognized lack of attention to the social sciences within the rubric of “Asian Studies.” He goes on to talk more about the “directions in the social sciences,” discussing concrete measures being taken in order to incorporate those disciplines which have been underrepresented in the Association since its inception. This call for reform appeared in the fiftieth anniversary issue of the Asian Studies Newsletter, which begs the question: Why is it that now, fifty years after the Newsletter began its circulation (and sixty-four years after the founding of the AAS), does the organization believe that a broadening of disciplinary representation is in order?

Beyond the scope of the Association, this is an issue that seems to be nagging at the heels of area studies² departments nation-wide, which find

¹ Michael Paschal, “Note from the Executive Director,” *Asian Studies Newsletter* 50/1 (2005): 3-4.

² Throughout this article, “area studies” refers to those academic departments in which a geographical region is the main area of concentration. Whether the geographical area is broad (e.g., “Asian Studies”) or more narrowly defined (e.g., “Japanese Studies”), the general focus on the language and culture of a particular geographically bounded region is the defining characteristic of area studies departments. Those departments that tend to be structured on more theoretical foundations (over

themselves in a somewhat precarious situation – usually falling within the humanities, but often incorporating history classes and other social sciences among their course offerings. Often wanting to expand the reach of their research boundaries while still trying to maintain the integrity and coherence of the department can lead to a kind of identity crisis which does not affect the majority of other academic disciplines. The jackets of books produced from area studies departments have gone from being labeled as works of “Asian Studies” to being labeled as “Asian Studies/History” to “Asian Studies/History/Women’s Studies” and so forth, which reflects an increasing amount of disciplinary overlap and interaction that is taking place. The complicated and controversial issues of shifting roles and disciplinary overlap within area studies departments in contemporary academic institutions comprise the main subject matter for Miyoshi and Harootunian’s edited volume, *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies*.

This article will attempt a close and critical examination of the arguments in this book, bolstered (and contested) by the personal narratives of others within area studies, in order to provide a well-rounded perspective on the ways in which contemporary academic disciplines have been defined, sustained, and challenged. My hope is to draw attention to sometimes overlooked issues of disciplinary boundaries within a field of study that is overtly concerned with geographical boundaries.

Masao Miyoshi begins his article, “Ivory Tower in Escrow,” the first in the book, with the foreboding statement: “Higher education is undergoing a rapid sea change. Everyone knows and senses it, but few try to comprehend its scope or imagine its future.”³ The change to which Miyoshi refers is in the relationship between universities and industry, what he calls the “corporatization of the university,”⁴ and it is within this change that he believes a simultaneous “bankruptcy of the humanities”⁵ is occurring. He focuses on the postwar phenomenon of the gradual shift away

geographic regions) are referred to as “conventional disciplines” if not by their proper names (e.g., anthropology, political science, etc.).

³ Masao Miyoshi, “Ivory Tower in Escrow,” in H.D. Harootunian and Masao Miyoshi, eds., *Learning Places: The Afterlives of Area Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 19.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

from ideas of universality and totality towards the ideal of diversity in academic thought.

While Miyoshi sees the merit in this ideological shift, he also sees a correlated and potentially dangerous shift taking place towards the commodification of learning in today's rapidly globalizing economy. Referencing the shifting socio-political scenes of the twentieth century, Miyoshi discusses the major corresponding shifts in intellectual hegemony. From Sartre's humanism, universality, and collectivism to Lévi-Strauss' abandonment of these ideals, the stages paving the road to post-structuralism are laid out in order to explain the forces that have shaped the present-day ideological rejection of essentialism and collectivism.

The socio-political changes that went hand-in-hand with this ideological shift stemmed from the increased diversification of the global community. Because of the rise in globalization and border-crossing among individuals, Miyoshi warns that "multiculturalism is the urgent issue both of pedagogy and political economy in the university in the United States."⁶ He clearly acknowledges the need for social equalization and the inclusion of "marginals," but also believes that the paradigm of multiculturalism is promoting more than social equality and acceptance. He explains:

The principles of diversity and plurality demand that one's own ethnicity or identity be deemed to be no more than just one among many. If this requirement of equal limitation and discipline were accepted by all members of the "global community," multiculturalism would make great strides toward the realization of a fair and just human community. Self-restriction, however, is seldom practiced for the betterment of general and abstract human welfare – especially when it involves material discipline and sacrifice for the parties involved.⁷

The connection made between these multiculturalist ideals and the academic institution is through the resultant diversification of identity politics among scholars – Miyoshi asserts that dispute and disagreement have become the norm within departments, and that "agreement is ipso

⁶ Ibid., p. 43.

⁷ Ibid., p. 44.

facto suspect and unwanted.”⁸ He points out how various individual factions, be it feminists, Marxists, conventional disciplinary scholars, less-conventional interdisciplinary scholars, novelists, or formalists all believe that their own method is superior to all others. This often irreconcilable internal disagreement, coupled with the problem of faculty members having their own professional agendas to attend to, has led Miyoshi to fear that humanities departments are being placed in a state of academic bankruptcy – presumed to be incapable of handling themselves.

Miyoshi’s claims and concerns are not unfounded. He has extensive data to back up his points regarding the corporatization of the university (or the “conversion of learning into intellectual property”), and a lengthy career within the academy so as to justify his claims about the declining state of the humanities. Paula Roberts, Assistant Director of the Center for East Asian Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, corroborates Miyoshi’s fear of the marginalization of the humanities by pointing out the relatively meager funding available to their field. As part of her responsibility to acquire funds for the Center, Roberts has attended numerous meetings and conferences on the allocation of subsidies across the University. She recalls being surprised to hear that of all the government and private grants given annually to Penn, roughly ninety percent of the money goes to the medical school and the professional schools (including Engineering, Wharton, and Law).

Within the money that is allocated to the School of Arts and Sciences, around ninety percent goes to the “pure sciences” such as chemistry and physics.⁹ This means that about one percent of Penn’s annual government and private foundation grants go directly to fund research in the humanities and social sciences. Even if the monetary amount is not meager,¹⁰ the minute fraction of overall money which the humanities ever sees certainly seems to support Miyoshi’s claim that, “to all but those inside, much of humanities research may well look insubstantial, precious, and irrelevant, if not useless, harmless, and humorless.”¹¹

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁹ Paula Roberts, Personal interview, April 27, 2005.

¹⁰ This is similar to the case of Japan’s massive military expenditures, which are often stealthily cited as “only one percent of the nation’s GDP.”

¹¹ Masao Miyoshi, “Ivory Tower in Escrow,” p. 48.

Miyoshi's ultimate advice is for academics in the humanities to "restore the public rigor of the metanarratives,"¹² and to abort attempts to keep track of any one particular area, nation, race, age, gender, or culture. He provides convincing arguments that a continuation of the unbridled rivalry that exists between academic factions will result in further isolation and ill-defined scholarship, which will, in turn, do nothing to combat the corporatization of the university. However, beyond the acknowledgement that humanities research is regarded by some on the outside as being irrelevant and useless, he does not convincingly differentiate between humanities research and, say, social science research, which is also seen by some on the outside as lacking in practical value. The "academic bankruptcy" arising from the instability and lack of coherence of ideologically opposed factions within departments should ostensibly be occurring across the institution, and yet Miyoshi inexplicably focuses on the humanities as the site of a particularly acute crisis.

Furthermore, given that his article appears in a book sub-titled *The Afterlives of Area Studies*, it is somewhat surprising that Miyoshi makes no direct mention of area studies programs. Instead, his focus is on the academic institutions that house these departments. While his reasons for focusing on the larger institution of academia in the context of area studies programs are clear, the outcome of starting a book on area studies with this broad-sweeping article is that "area studies" becomes conflated with "humanities" which becomes conflated with "academic institutions." While these entities overlap in certain important ways, the differences between them are key to understanding what is meant by a "crisis in area studies" (i.e., the overarching theme of the book). How does the alleged deterioration of the humanities as a result of university corporatization pointed out by Miyoshi relate to a deterioration that may (or may not) be occurring in area studies departments? While Miyoshi does not broach this topic, many of the other contributors to the volume suggest ways in which area studies fits into the larger structures of "humanities" and "academic institutions."

Rey Chow's article, for example, complements Miyoshi's by providing a clearer breakdown of where precisely the supposed "crisis" resides with respect to area and cultural studies. Like Miyoshi, she seeks to "restore the public rigor of the metanarratives" in order to "overturn

¹² Ibid., p. 49.

existing boundaries of knowledge production that, in fact, continue to define and dictate their own discourses.”¹³ Unlike Miyoshi, though, Chow has a far more optimistic outlook on the future of the humanities, which provides an insightful counterpoint to Miyoshi’s point on the “bankruptcy of the humanities.” In her piece, “Theory, Area Studies, Cultural Studies: Issues of Pedagogy in Multiculturalism,” Chow draws parallels between the reaction to “theory studies” of the 1960s and 70s and the reaction to “cultural studies” today, in an attempt to defend cultural studies as a legitimate field.

In the ‘60s and ‘70s, she explains, critics of theory, particularly literary theory, argued that it introduced issues that were not about literature, but rather about philosophy, sociology, and other areas that fell outside “the intrinsic qualities of literature itself.”¹⁴ She carefully traces the similarities between theory and cultural studies, first pointing out four types of analysis that have developed and have had a great impact on discussions within North American cultural studies programs.¹⁵ She explains that in a poststructural sense, these analyses collectively demonstrate cultural studies’ close relation to “theory,” in that both have the chief characteristic of needing to challenge the center of hegemonic systems of thinking and writing.¹⁶

Of area studies, Chow says that they are similar to cultural studies¹⁷ in that they produce “specialists” who report to both the government and to the academic community about “other” civilizations and

¹³ Rey Chow, “Theory, Area Studies, Cultural Studies: Issues of Pedagogy in Multiculturalism,” in H.D. Harootunian and Masao Miyoshi, eds., *Learning Places*, p. 115.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

¹⁵ These four types of analysis are: 1) critique of Orientalism (of Western representations of non-Western cultures); 2) investigations of subaltern identities; 3) minority discourses (the most prevalent and productive conceptual model in U.S. cultural studies); and 4) focus on “otherness” as the site of opposition.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁷ Chow describes herself as “a literary and cultural theorist whose work straddles cultural studies and theory,” so the emphasis in her article is on cultural studies more than area studies. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

“other” ways of life.¹⁸ This “otherness” has in turn become the object of investigation in cultural studies. Chow explains that although cultural studies as a discipline is relatively new, it is in fact just a “new name for certain well-established pedagogical practices.” The problem that Chow sees with area studies, the “crisis” as it were, is that they tend to approach the study of “culture” in the name of cross-cultural understanding and scientific objectivity, which ultimately continues “to belie the racist underpinnings of the establishment itself.”¹⁹ While clearly in favor of the critical engagement with theory that cultural studies demands over the (practically caricatured) simplicity of area studies, G. Cameron Hurst III, Professor of Japanese and Korean Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, notes that work within area studies can be either pure theory or devoid of theory, but that the spectrum between these two extremes is huge.²⁰ Chow’s characterization of area studies, then, is ironically simplistic. However, her emphasis on the need to engage in critical theoretical inquiry in both area studies and cultural studies is well-founded and deserves consideration by those who choose to approach the study of a geographic area without utilizing theory.

Focusing on a different perceived shortcoming of area studies, Bernard Silberman’s article, “The Disappearance of Modern Japan: Japan and Social Sciences,” attempts an objective look at both the structure and the content of these programs from the perspective of a social scientist who has done extensive work on Japan. He writes, “In recent years...area studies have come under attack from several directions and appear to be in the process of dissolution.”²¹ His justifications for this statement come from the higher-ups of the Social Science Research Council, who have announced programs that are “largely intended to replace the Foundation’s support for area studies, as they are traditionally defined.”²² As a professor of Japanese

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 108.

¹⁹ Cultural studies on the other hand, she argues, “cannot similarly pretend that its tasks are innocent ones,” Ibid., p. 108.

²⁰ Cameron Hurst, Personal interview, April 26, 2005.

²¹ Bernard Silberman, “The Disappearance of Modern Japan: Japan and Social Sciences,” in H.D. Harootunian and Masao Miyoshi, eds., *Learning Places*, p. 303.

²² Stanley J. Heginbotham, “Rethinking International Scholarship: The Challenge of Transition from the Cold War Era,” *Items: Bulletin of the*

political science (who is not part of his university's Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations), he speaks from the vantage point of one who has a seemingly vested interest in retaining the study of Japanese social sciences in one form or another. His essay, as he states, "is an attempt to understand the increasing impatience of much of social science with the idea of societies such as Japan being the object of integrated holistic analysis – that is, as a *field*."²³

Touching on some of the same pragmatic points as Miyoshi, Silberman examines the role of fiscal interests in shaping academic disciplines. When university funds are low, he explains, the first departments to come under attack are generally those that are the least firmly anchored in departmental structures, such as area studies and cultural studies, because they are assumed to be inferior in terms of methodology and conceptual rigor. Importantly, though, he points out that the social sciences are arbitrary constructions that arose from "the eighteenth-century Enlightenment fascination with categorizing and the nineteenth and twentieth-century economic incentives and compulsion to draw professional boundaries."²⁴ Thus, with respect to the relationship between funding and disciplinary "credibility," Silberman draws attention to the arbitrary nature of disciplines in an attempt to write off the issue of whether or not funding is contingent upon a department's utility in an academic and political sense. By "arbitrary boundaries," Silberman means that they are arbitrary in the sense that they could have been constructed otherwise. Intellectually, then, you can deconstruct boundaries. In real life, though, boundaries come to have a very significant meaning.

In a discussion about area studies with Hurst, this issue of arbitrary disciplinary boundaries came up several times. Having been in the field for well over thirty years, Hurst has seen significant changes in disciplinary definitions, as the social sciences have become progressively more theory-driven. He cites the example of James Morley, who was one of the leading political scientists of Japan in his time. Because his work was not highly theoretical, though, his "political science" scholarship reads more like the

Social Science Research Council 48/2-3 (June-Sept. 1994): 33-40. Quoted by Bernard Silberman, p. 303.

²³ Bernard Silberman, "The Disappearance of Modern Japan," in H.D. Harootunian and Masao Miyoshi, eds., *Learning Places*, p. 304.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

“history” scholarship of today. Hurst has seen the disciplinary focus of his own field, history, change over the years as well. While history scholarship today is highly driven by theory, Hurst chose to enter the field partially because at the time it was *not* taught as a discipline in which some grandiose theoretical framework was necessary to analyze the information you gathered.²⁵

The very fact that there is a repeated mention of the importance of theory in both *Learning Places* and discussions with area studies scholars deserves attention. While all the arguments allude to it, Chow’s article is most explicit in addressing theory. She writes that for all the critics of area and cultural studies who claim those fields to be “untheoretical” and “empiricist,” there are also critics of theory who claim it to be “elitist,” “abstract,” and “universalist.”²⁶ One of the problems that this dichotomy points out, though, is that there is no unified “theory” in scholarship, and that different definitions of theory prevail distinctly within each academic department. Therefore, to say that scholarship is or is not “theory-driven” is a subjective statement in and of itself, as the theory used in History departments, say, is bound to be different from that which is used in a Philosophy or an English department. One could even argue that the decision *not* to use conventional theory is itself theory-driven, as such a decision would presumably be motivated by a desire to present material in the most (theoretically) coherent possible way.

While Silberman points out the importance of theory in its capacity as being something that defines fundamentally arbitrary disciplinary boundaries, the bulk of his essay focuses on the more pragmatic facets of area studies programs. Like Silberman, Bruce Cumings looks at the utilitarian relationships between area studies programs, funding, and the U.S. government in his article, “Boundary Displacement: The State, the Foundations, and Area Studies during and after the Cold War.” He writes, “It is now fair to say, based on the declassified evidence, that the American state and especially the intelligence elements in it shaped the entire field of postwar area studies, with the clearest and most direct impact on those regions of the world where communism was strongest: Russia,

²⁵ Cameron Hurst, Personal interview, April 26, 2005.

²⁶ Bruce Cumings, “Boundary Displacement: The State, the Foundations, and Area Studies during and after the Cold War,” in H.D. Harootunian and Masao Miyoshi, eds., *Learning Places*, p. 109.

Central and Eastern Europe, and East Asia.”²⁷ The end of the Cold War and the collapse of Western communism, he therefore implies, have threatened area studies programs and have brought to light the issue of the academy’s relationship to the government. Because of this changing relationship, i.e., the government having less of a need to obtain information through academics who speak the language and understand the culture, Cumings points out that “the provisioners of [area studies’] ongoing funding are stingy.”²⁸

Parts of Cumings’ article reads like an exposé of the U.S. government’s association over the years with academic institutions, as he argues that the ultimate force shaping area studies programs is economic and political power. As Hurst points out, though, the government is not attempting to conceal its link to academia or to coerce scholars into gathering intelligence to the extent that Cumings’ article would have you believe it was. Government-funded programs such as National Security Education Program (NSEP) scholarships make the link between academia and the government very explicit, stating in the pamphlet:

The NSEP encourages U.S. undergraduates to add an international component to their education, a feature that is becoming increasingly important in today’s interdependent world. The NSEP aims to build a strong base of future leaders with expertise in critical areas...who have the international experience and language skills necessary for competitive performance and visionary leadership in the global arena....The NSEP enhances opportunities for its award recipients to gain federal employment. All recipients of NSEP awards are required to seek employment with a federal agency or office involved in national security affairs.²⁹

Therefore, while Cumings’ point that the flow of funding may be less directed towards area studies programs than in the past is accurate, his portrayal of the relationship between the state and the academy as being a covert and potentially dangerous one appears to be exaggerated.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 261.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ 2005 NSEP Pamphlet.

(Further) Shortcomings

While *Learning Places* focuses on the disciplinary scenarios that are nearest and dearest to its authors, the concerns surrounding area studies are not unique to U.S. institutions. The issues facing academic institutions in other parts of the world where area studies are common, namely Australia and Europe, are hardly mentioned.³⁰ Even just a quick glance at the situations in these other countries can provide a significant comparative perspective that the book is lacking.

In a 2002 review of the state of Asian Studies in Australia by the Asian Studies Association of Australia entitled, "Maximizing Australia's Asia Knowledge: Repositioning and Renewal of a National Asset," the scholars who compiled the study wrote:

The need for the review grew from a sense of crisis felt throughout the Humanities and Social Sciences in Australian universities, especially among those who study and teach about the countries of Asia. More than 80 percent of ASAA members who responded to our survey believe that Australian universities face a "crisis of renewal" in the next five years.³¹

When asked about the problems endemic to area studies departments in Australian Universities, Rio Otomo, a professor of Japanese studies at the University of Melbourne says:

Because Asian Studies are interdisciplinary, the lecturers are often half associated with their disciplinary base such as politics, history or sociology. But the main body of Asian Studies is language teaching, which means the dept is full of language teachers who did their PhDs on applied (socio) linguistics. This is the main income of the department because of the sheer number of language

³⁰ Rey Chow mentions in a footnote that her perspective is based on those doing work in the United States, and notes, "Ironically, to those who work outside the United States, American Cultural Studies can appear to be – contrary to the charge that it is too empirical - already too theoretical," "Theory, Area Studies, Cultural Studies," p. 116.

³¹ "Maximizing Australia's Asia Knowledge: Repositioning and Renewal of a National Asset" (Asian Studies Association of Australia, Inc., 2002), p. 8.

students. But the professors and senior lecturers are usually “studies” people who lecture the subjects other than languages. There is a huge communication problem between the two sectors, and language lecturers often lack their representatives who can voice their concerns at the management level.³²

Brigitte Steger, a professor of Japanese studies at the University of Vienna who researches sleep in Japan, expressed similar concerns about area studies in Vienna. With respect to the Otomo’s point about the department getting the bulk of its income from language teaching, Steger notes an important distinction of Austrian universities – that they are free and open to the public. The result is extreme over-crowding in classes and a low retention rate. The Japanese studies department, which has only four faculty members, currently has over 500 students. In 2005, 180 new students were admitted, and about twenty-five students got degrees (mainly at the BA level, but a handful of MA and PhDs were also awarded).³³

Another issue which is under-explored in *Learning Places* is the factor of personal preference when it comes to academics’ choosing area studies over more traditional disciplines, and vice versa. The rigidly structured social sciences, for example, may seem too constraining for many scholars who wish to retain more personal autonomy and freedom within their “area” of study. These scholars, who may have equally strong interests in, say, literature and anthropology, might intentionally choose area or cultural studies because of the fuzzy boundaries and opportunities for disciplinary overlap that it can offer. Furthermore, the requirements for a degree in area studies might be more appealing and practical to a scholar than the broader, often theoretical, requirements demanded from the disciplines. Hurst, for example, focused on pre-modern Japanese history in his dissertation. In a conventional history department, he explains, he would have had to choose several other sub-fields to study in conjunction with Japanese history, like French or German history. The requirements demanded from his East Asian Languages and Cultures department, namely the study of other East Asian languages, proved to be far more germane and useful to his research.

³² Rio Otomo, “Re: Thanks so much!” E-mail to author, April 25, 2005.

³³ Brigitte Steger, Personal interview, April 27, 2005.

For all the benefits of flexibility that area studies allow, though, there are also institutional barriers that can be problematic for those in the field. As Steger has noticed over the years, there tends to be a distinctive split when it comes to researching and teaching within area studies. In the research and publication phase, it is an ostensible advantage to have multiple disciplinary tools at your disposal. You can get research funding from, say, a social science foundation and/or the Japanese government, and can publish in a variety of disciplinary journals. However, when it comes to getting a job, the problem is that each university is set up slightly differently when it comes to area studies, so unless you are lucky enough to find an institution whose disciplinary overlap is consistent with your own,³⁴ area studies scholars are more likely than those in the conventional disciplines to fall through the proverbial cracks. This underlying tension in scholarly goals – producing groundbreaking and interesting work on the one hand, and trying to maneuver the career path on the other, – is an easily discernible concern among many of those in area studies I have spoken with, particularly those who do not yet have jobs secured.

With respect to personal choice, Otomo's take on deciding to reside within an area studies department at the University of Melbourne encapsulates the sentiments of many of those in area studies with whom I have spoken:

Overall, I'm happier outside a conventional discipline, and Asian Studies is often a good hiding place for me to pursue what I want

³⁴ Steger points out the differences in disciplinary overlap between the U.S. institutions she has visited and the University of Vienna. She explains that the Japanese studies department in Vienna focuses primarily on ethnographic research in anthropology or sociology as opposed to the textual and literary focus of most U.S. departments. The history behind this disciplinary leaning, as Steger tells me, stems from the fact that the department was started in the late 1930s when Japanese anthropologist Oka Masao collaborated with Austrian Japanophile Alexander Slawik. The department went through several incarnations, being fully enveloped into the anthropology department at one point during WWII, but in recent years has seen a tremendous surge in popularity and remains a thriving field of study, especially at the BA level. Personal interview, April 27, 2005.

to do. Because all humanities disciplines are becoming more and more inclusive in the choice of topics, it seems disciplinary confinement is something that is doomed to disappear at some stage. Or am I too optimistic?³⁵

Conclusion

New York Times Op-Ed columnist David Brooks published a column in the *International Herald Tribune* entitled, “Reimagining Intelligence,” in which he strongly endorses the continued effort of area specialists. Explaining a specific case from the 1960s (using recently declassified information), Brooks discusses how the CIA’s conclusion in the ‘60s to abort attempts to improve relations with China was the opposite conclusion reached by Donald Zagoria, a China scholar. In short, Zagoria’s knowledge of Chinese culture and understanding of how the Chinese would respond to and interpret moves by the US led to his far more accurate and helpful analysis than did the “compilations of data by anonymous technicians” that did not “draw patterns based on an understanding of Chinese history.”³⁶ Brooks’ argument pulls together several of the central themes in this book, as well as the opinions of area studies scholars to whom I have spoken.

Throughout this article, a conscious effort has been made to remain neutral towards both sides of the debate, placing no greater emphasis on those arguments touting the merits of conventional disciplines than on those arguing for greater disciplinary fluidity. After a thorough consideration of why scholars either reject or endorse area studies, though, it seems that Brooks is accurate in deducing that there *is* a very real need for area specialists. The role of these scholars will remain controversial, though, as the varied positions expressed by the authors of this book can attest.

While some, like Cumings, believe that the problems of area studies reflect a dangerous connection between scholarship and the state, others see issues of academic boundaries as far less threatening and worthy

³⁵ Rio Otomo, “Re: Thanks so much!” E-mail to author, April 25, 2005.

³⁶ David Brooks, “Reimagining Intelligence,” *International Herald Tribune*, April 5, 2005 (<http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/04/04/opinion/edbrooms.html>).

of concern. If scholars in area studies are doing historical, anthropological, literary, economic, and theoretical research on a given geographical area, and scholars in the conventional disciplines are looking at the same area through historical, anthropological, literary, economic, and theoretical lenses, then does this argument get reduced to a question of semantics? Does the way departments label/organize themselves influence the scholarship that comes out of them, or do the scholars themselves have more individual agency than this paradigm would suggest?

It seems fair to say that the scholars comprising area studies departments tend to have more of an impact on the department than the department has on them, while in the conventional disciplines the reverse is true. Those in area studies choose a topic (related to a given country or region) to focus on and then have the freedom to choose the most appropriate methodology to approach that topic. So within our department, as Hurst points out, we have several professors working on “China,” but all approaching it in very different ways and thus offering varied perspectives and analyses. Those in the conventional disciplines, on the other hand, prefer to use prescribed theoretical methodology to approach a chosen topic in order to empirically verify certain claims. Cumings eloquently illustrates the tension that arose between the social sciences and the “Orientalists” beginning in the early postwar period:

Soon, a certain degree of separation which came from the social scientists inhabiting institutes of East Asian studies, whereas the Orientalists occupied departments of East Asian languages and culture. This implicit Faustian bargain sealed the postwar academic deal – and meant that the Orientalists didn’t necessarily have to talk to the social scientists, after all. If they often looked upon the latter as unlettered barbarians, the social scientists looked upon the Orientalists as spelunkers in the cave of exotic information, chipping away at the wall of ore until a vein could be tapped and brought to the surface, to be shaped into useful knowledge by the carriers of theory.³⁷

It is precisely these differences in focus – language for the area studies and theory for the social scientists – which underlie the irreconcilable

³⁷ Cumings, “Boundary Displacement,” p. 265.

differences that Miyoshi fears are draining the humanities, which Chow sees as causing certain fields to be more or less fair in their theoretical depictions of areas and cultures, which Silberman sees as creating arbitrary boundaries and tension within the academy, and which Cumings sees as relying on an antiquated association between the government and area studies scholarship.

While the overarching arguments of this book may be seen by many within area studies as a mere polemic against area studies created by a cliquish group of Chicago academics and their cronies, I believe that their arguments merit some attention from the field. Those who have decided to pursue the study of a geographically bounded region ought to read about the diverse controversies surrounding this decision. It is difficult to get a cohesive overview of area studies today, as those who speak about it tend to be so deeply invested in the arguments (either for or against it) that an objective perspective is difficult to come by. In light of the fact that disciplinary boundaries are constantly shifting and changing, a point on which everyone seems to agree, *Learning Places* provides a necessary call to attention regarding both the causes and the consequences of these disciplinary transformations. My hope is that this article has provoked those involved in these transformations to reflect upon the overriding themes of the debate and to consider the future direction of area studies programs.