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Latin American Studies in China: An Overview

Introduction

Latin American studies in China have witnessed more than four decades of development. In China there are mainly five categories of people who are involved with Latin American affairs in one way or another:

1. Researchers. Most of them are from the Institute of Latin American Studies (ILAS), the only research institution in China devoted to Latin American studies. In addition, in the Division of the Americas at the Institute of Contemporary International Relations in Beijing there is a small group of researchers studying Latin America.
2. Teachers and students. Most of them are found in the Peking University, Nankai University, Fudan University and Hubei University. They offer graduate diplomas in doctor and master degrees on Latin American studies, mainly in modern history¹.
3. Officials in such organizations as the Foreign Ministry, the International Liaison Department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Cooperation, Ministry of Culture, the Chinese People's Federation for Friendship with Foreign Countries, All China Women's Federation, etc.
4. Business people who have investment in Latin America.
5. Journalists from the national Xinhua News Agency and several major newspapers.

Although most of the academic works in the field of Latin American studies are conducted by the people in the first two above-mentioned categories, namely, researchers and professors, government officials and journalists also undertake some researches from time to time.

The Chinese Association of Latin American Studies (CALAS) was founded in 1984 to promote academic research on Latin America. It also aims to coordinate the interest in Latin American affairs of the people included in the five above-mentioned categories. Each year CALAS organizes a seminar discussing issues relating to economics, politics, international relations, etc. Given the lack of interest in Latin America, however, its total membership is not very large.

China's Interest in Latin America

Latin America has been important to China for at least four reasons.

First of all, as a developing country, China finds it politically necessary to stand alongside Latin America in the struggle for the establishment of a just international order.

Second, in order to reduce trade dependence upon the United States and other developed countries, China has been attempting to develop economic relations

¹ As far as the author knows, they are the only universities in China that have graduate programs on Latin American studies.

with Latin America. No less important is the possibility that China wishes to gain access to the rich natural resources in Latin America for its own urgent needs.

Third, in the process of moving forward towards the market economy, China needs to draw lessons and experiences from Latin America.

Last, but not least, the Taiwan issue has yet to be resolved. Indeed, with the passage of time, this issue has become an increasingly conspicuous part of China's diplomatic efforts, and the Chinese government will never relinquish sovereignty over Taiwan. At present there are twenty-seven countries that have "diplomatic relations" with Taiwan, and fourteen of them are found in Latin America.

Early Stage of Latin American Studies in China

It is said that three thousand years ago a Chinese hero by the name of *Kuafu* led a large group of men and women to migrate to the Americas. Recently his trip is depicted in a well-publicized painting in China. While what is shown in the painting is somewhat legendary, it is true that two and a half centuries ago the French sinologist De Giognes proposed that the New World was discovered not by Columbus, but by the Chinese. Later on some Chinese scholars used classical Chinese writings and even some archeological findings to support their argument that, as early as the fifth century, a Chinese monk (or master) named Hui Sen arrived in what is now called Mexico, then known as Fu-sang in Chinese.

No matter who first landed in the Americas, proven contacts between China and Latin America can be dated back to the 1570s, when Sino-Latin American trade started to flourish across the Pacific. This type of bilateral trade lay down the historical foundation for the development of Sino-Latin American relations in the modern times.

After the new China was founded in 1949, one of its major tasks was to break through the western blockade imposed by the United States and other powers. To achieve this goal, it was highly necessary to win political support from the developing countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America.

This aspiration was certainly logical. After the World War II, the national liberation movement proceeded rapidly and many colonies became independent countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. However, China did not know much about their national realities. It was recalled that at a meeting in the late 1950s Chairman Mao Zedong pointed to the map of the world, asking if there were researchers studying the two large regions of Africa and Latin America. Several years later the Institute of Latin American Studies and the Institute of West Asia and Africa were established. From then on Latin American studies in China started to take shape.

Needless to say, the Cuban revolution gave an impetus for the Chinese leaders to recognize the importance of Latin America, the backyard of the United States. As a matter of fact, it was the Cuban revolution that encouraged China to take a new look at the revolutionary movements on the other side of the Pacific².

² Cuba's relations with China turned sour in the early 1960s and were not normalized until the end of the 1980s.

Although there was not much genuinely academic work on the Cuban revolution, many newspaper articles published in the People's Daily and others at that time played an important role in letting the Chinese people know what had happened in the Caribbean island.

In the early 1960s scholars at ILAS mainly focused on Latin America's revolutionary movement, agrarian reforms, and U.S. intervention in the region. However, many of the publications could not be seen as purely academic works, but introductory articles or commentaries. In Fudan University and Peking University courses on Latin American history were offered. As a matter of fact, graduates from these higher learning institutions were the pioneers in the field of China's Latin American studies. Some of them are still academically active in the field.

Latin American studies in China were brought to a standstill soon after the "Cultural Revolution" broke out in 1966. Universities and academic institutions were closed down. In 1969 ILAS researchers were asked to work in the countryside to get "ideological re-education".

The Period of Resurgence

ILAS was reopened in April 1976. After the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Party Congress of the Chinese Communist party in 1978, China entered a new stage of development in many areas. In the academic circle, scholars started to undertake research work in a different atmosphere characterized as "liberalizing the thinking" and "seeking the truth through facts".

With more enrollments of university students in both undergraduate and graduate programs, courses on international studies, including Latin American studies, were offered. Moreover, languages' training in Spanish and Portuguese was also initiated in many universities. As a result, relatively a large number of students majoring in these two languages were assigned to work in ILAS and universities.

In the early 1980s, however, Chinese scholars on Latin American studies were faced with many difficulties, one of which was the lack of understanding of what had happened and/or what was happening in the region of Latin America. This was mainly due to the fact that no research materials like foreign publications had been imported in the "Cultural Revolution" and many of the original library collections were lost in the ten years of turmoil.

In order to make up for the loss of what was called "the basic research", Latin Americanists in China wrote several handbooks in the early 1980s, depicting a general picture of the region's history, politics, economics, international relations, etc. These publications lay down the foundation for future development of Latin American studies in China.

The bimonthly, *Latin American Studies*, initiated in 1979, played a significant role in setting a new stage for the researchers to work on such "hot topics" as the Central American crisis and the Sandinista revolution as well as other general topics on Latin America's current affairs. To meet the needs of the rapid development of China's economic reforms, some scholars undertook researches on Latin America's economic development strategy of import substitution industrialization, the debt crisis and the U.S.-Latin American economic relations.

Starting from the late 1980s, academic exchanges with foreign scholars became more and more common, and a greater number of foreign books and journals were imported. These two factors gave impetus to Chinese scholars to look at the region of Latin America in new perspectives. Several research projects were undertaken to study dependency theory, use of foreign capital, agricultural development, Sino-Latin American relations, U.S.-Latin American relations, social problems, education, political systems, etc.

Progress and shortcomings

The past several years witnessed impressive progress in the area of Latin American studies in China. This is manifested in the following aspects: 1) More scholarly books and academic papers have been published (see Box 1). 2) More academic exchanges with foreign counterparts have been carried out. Scholars from Latin America and other parts of the world are invited to give lectures, and Chinese scholars go abroad to take part in international conferences. 3) More exchanges of views are conducted between the scholars and the government officials and business people. 4) With the help of Internet use, Chinese scholars have been following closely the developments in Latin America, including the Argentine crisis and the political instability in Venezuela.

At present, Chinese researchers on Latin American affairs are occupied with many projects covering a wide range of topics such as Latin American development prospects in the 21st century; Latin American economic reforms; Latin America's modernization path in the 20th century; Mexico after PRI's downfall; development of science and technology in Latin America; social security reforms in Latin America; and ethnic issues in Latin America.

Latin American studies in China are expected to serve as a "think-tank" for the party and the government in their decision-making process regarding policies towards Latin America³, and facilitate the Chinese people's understanding of Latin America so as to promote the friendship between the two sides.

However, Latin American studies in China still faces the following shortcomings: 1) As it is difficult to recruit more university graduates in the past decade or so, the size of the team of researchers is by no means large. 2) Since most of the publications are in Chinese, it is extremely difficult for the foreign scholars to know how their Chinese counterparts look at Latin America. 3) Due to financial constraints, it is not easy for the Chinese scholars to carry out field studies in Latin America. 4) Academic research is not well connected with the needs of the business community.

³ In the 1980s two prominent scholars suggested in an article that *lianbang* was not the proper Chinese translation of the English word "commonwealth" in the names of the Bahamas and Puerto Rico. They also suggested that Dominican Republic could simply be *duo mi ni jia*, and the island of Dominica, *duo mi ni ke*. After reading the article, a high-level Foreign Ministry official instructed that these names should be changed accordingly. Since then, all the Chinese publications have used the new translations.

A Brief Introduction to ILAS

ILAS was formally founded on July 4, 1961 as one of the institutes at the Division of Philosophy and Social Sciences of the Chinese Academy of Sciences. In 1964 it was transferred to the International Liaison Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. Since January 1981 it has been affiliated to CASS.

ILAS consists of four research divisions (Division of Economics; Division of Politics, History and International Relations; Division of Social and Cultural Issues; and Division of Country Studies). For the time being there are around 60 people, forty-five of them are researchers.

ILAS hosts the Department of Latin American Studies affiliated with the CASS Graduate School. Each year it accepts about 5 graduate students in Latin American economics and politics. It is a pity that most of the graduate students do not choose Latin American studies as their career after they get their degrees.

Box 1: Recent Titles of Books Published by the Chinese Scholars

Politics:

Political Stability and Modernization: the Case of Mexico;
Communist Movement in Latin America;

Economics:

Regional Economic Integration in Latin America;
NAFTA: An Attempt of North-South Relations;
A Study of the Latin American Development Models;
Trends of Economic Development in Latin America;
The Path of Modernization in Brazil.
Comparative Studies of the Development Models in Latin America
and East Asia;
Agricultural Development in Latin America;
Latin American Economic Reforms;
Economic Development and Social Justice;

International Relations:

U.S.-Latin American Relations;
Imperialist Hegemony and U.S. Intervention in Latin America;
Sino-Latin American Relations towards the New Century;

Others:

Latin American Education in the Post-war Period;
The Bitter Richness: Notes on Latin American Cultures;
Dictionary of Latin American History.