Thirty Years of Research in American Politics in China

As in other disciplines, the study of American politics in China owes much of its progress to the country’s policy of reform and opening up to the outside world. In the past thirty years, the discipline has increasingly freed itself from ideological confines, making itself more academic and professional. For the sake of clarity and convenience, the past thirty years may be divided into three periods. The first was the years between 1978 and 1988, characterized by a narrow focus on case-by-case studies of specific events or phenomena and few theoretical analyses, so that though the number of academic papers and news articles produced in this period was large only a few monographs appeared. Chinese studies of American politics in this period can be subdivided into twelve topic areas, including American democratic institutions, the separation of powers, the presidency, executive institutions, state and local governments, the party system, the electoral system, schools of political thought, interest groups, Congress, the Constitution and the Supreme Court, the federal government, the federal system, and the civil service; in all, 141 articles and eight monographs were produced on these topics.1 The second period ran from 1989 to 2000, with 221 articles and eight monographs2 on American politics published. This was a transitional era, in which the range of topics studied expanded and the analytical sophistication with which they were treated improved significantly. In the third period, research became more specific, more academic, and more rooted in engagement with the real world. The US Congress, neo-conservatism, ideology, and elections became hot topics for Chinese scholars of American politics during this latter period. In this period more than 400 articles on American politics were produced, over one hundred of which appeared in academic journals, and the number of monographs rose to forty.3


Chinese scholars engaging in the study of American politics are widely distributed across universities and various governmental institutions. Currently, there are two specialized teams in

China researching American politics: the Section of American Politics under the Institute of American Studies, CASS (China Academy of Social Sciences), and the American Studies Center of Fudan University. In addition, there are also teachers and scholars doing research in this field at the Institute of World Economics and Politics, CASS, the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations and the China Institute of International Studies, Peking University, Renmin University, Nankai University, the International Relations College of Nanjing University, Hebei Teachers’ University, Shandong Teachers’ University, and the Luoyang PLA University of Foreign Languages. Yet another research team is housed in research institutes within government departments.

Over the past thirty years, new research areas in the studies of American politics successively emerged, attracting the interest of Chinese scholars and becoming the focus of discussion and research. These areas include: (1) Aspects of the American political system, such as the separation of powers, checks and balances, political parties, electoral systems, the presidency, decision-making mechanisms, administrative reforms, and political innovations by state and local governments. (2) Election studies, involving rules governing presidential elections and mid-term elections, election financing, the role of the media and interest groups, parties and election politics, transitions between US administrations, and the direction of US domestic and foreign policies. (3) Studies of interest groups, think tanks, and foundations, including interest group politics, the rise and fall of interest groups, the roles and functions of interest groups, interest groups’ impact on government decisions, interest groups and Sino-US relations; and the growth, roles, operating institutions, and impact of think tanks and foundations. (4) Studies of Congress, including congressional politics, congressional powers of legislation, investigation, and impeachment, congressional relations with presidents, and the influence of Congress on foreign relations, particularly its influence on US-China relations, American trade, defense and security, and arms control policies. (5) Research on the US constitution and the Supreme Court, involving the spirit of the constitution, constitutional reforms, and Supreme Court precedents. (6) Studies of schools of American political thought, including liberalism, conservatism, multiculturalism, and isolationism.

I Political System

During the past thirty years, the interest of Chinese scholars in the American political system has increased, with ever more topics and areas covered.

i Studies of the American democratic system and separation of powers (including introductory works and commentaries on this area, and research on constitutional reforms). Scholars have come to realize that the core of American democracy is the constitutional system of checks and balances, especially the separation of powers, the federal system, and other mechanisms that involve the division of powers. In specific terms, this area can be divided into three subareas: (1) The origins of American democracy. Chinese scholars have more or less reached a consensus, though with differing emphases, on the subject, namely, that American democracy originated from European thinking, grass-roots democratic practices, and the unique natural conditions in the North American colonies, all three of which were conducive to the formulation of the concept of the sovereignty of the people. (2) Assessments of the system of

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checks and balances. Fan Tining, Han Fuwen, and Xing Fuhua assess the foundations and practice of the system of checks and balances, while Zhang Dinghe analyzes the basic principles and historical evolution of America’s federal system.5 (3) Constitutional reforms. Since the 1970s, the recurrences of divided governments (that is, when the executive and legislative branches of the federal government are presided over by different parties) and competition for power between Congress and the president that is built into the system have combined to produce political impasses. This situation has led a number of Chinese scholars to debate America’s constitutional system of checks and balances.6

ii The presidency. (1) The American presidency. Huang Shaoxiang explores the formation of America’s presidency,7 and Li Changdao analyzes the system of presidential impeachment.8 Yuan Ruijun explores the process and causes of the rise and fall of powers between the White House staff and cabinet members.9 According to Lu Lin, the decline in power of the State Department has made US foreign policy more susceptible to domestic politics and American presidents have found it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to transcend party politics and interest group politics.10 (2) Presidential elections. Since the United States holds presidential elections every four years, Chinese scholars are relatively familiar with this subject, producing numerous papers and monographs on the topic.11 (3) The presidential veto power.12

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8 Li Changdao, “Presidential Impeachment in America” (《美国总统弹劾制研究》), Social Science Front, No. 4, 1980, p. 111.


Presidential executive privilege. According to Jiang Xinxue, executive privilege has become the talisman for American presidents. 13 (5) Executive agreements. Fang Yong and Cai Yongshun provide an introduction to the development and legal basis of executive agreements (where the President combines the roles of executive head, foreign affairs chief, commander-in-chief, and supervisor of the execution of laws), and point out methods the president can use to bypass the congressional power of appropriation (through appropriation of project funds, secret funds, and the power to dispose of surplus military supplies and surplus funds). 14 (6) Competition for power with Congress. Yang Shengmao approaches American presidential power in foreign affairs from the perspective of the Constitution. 15 (7) Competition for power with civil servants. Shi Qinghuan has published an analysis of this topic. 16

iii The administrative system. Studies in this area cover administrative law, administrative reform, and the civil service and its reform. 17 Wang Yukai demonstrates in his research that the objective of administrative reform during the Clinton Administration was to strike a balance between the executive branch and Congress by transferring certain welfare projects from the hands of the government to some independent agencies; meanwhile, the federal government also transferred part of its social functions to state and local governments. 19 When it comes to civil service reforms, scholars agree that, whether at the federal level or at the state level, there has been a trend towards job classification and performance-based pay systems. 20 Studies have also appeared on America’s federal system, and relations among the federal, state, and local


20 See references in notes 16 and 19.
Decision-making mechanisms. Research in this area includes analyses of America’s political decision-making process, the role of think tanks in decision making, and the role of the US elite and ruling class.

Studies of state and local governments (state governments, county governments, and municipal political systems). Wang Xu investigates the origins, external conditions, and internal forces for the growth of the urban managerial system, which accounts for about 47 percent of all municipal political systems in the United States. This system is characterized by the bipartisan election of the city council, separation of legislation and execution, and the employment, rather than election, of urban managers to ensure urban governance by experts and freedom from political disturbance. Su Pengfei uses the City Charter of Berkeley as an example to illustrate local autonomy in the United States. According to him, an autonomy charter is roughly equivalent to the constitution of a country or state, providing the legal basis for municipal management and helping to inspire popular confidence in the constitutional system.

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II American Political Parties and Electoral Politics

American political parties have been dubbed “parties that exist for the sole purpose of winning elections.” Given this close relationship, this author treats American political parties and elections as one category.

i Political Parties. Articles on this topic center on the formation, weakening, reform, and future trends of the American party system. Among them, Huang Keke and Liu Debin focus on the formation and historical characteristics of the American two-party system. Shi Fengyan translated *Parties and politics in America*, a work by the famous American political historian Clinton Rossiter, and introduced the major arguments in that book. After analyzing the birth and evolution of the two political parties, Fan Tining emphasizes the capitalist nature of both the Democratic Party and Republican Party; he points out that what divides the two parties is not their essence, but their specific policy proposals. Guo Dingping traces the historical trajectory of America’s party system, highlighting the weakening of American political parties. Some Chinese scholars have also explored the possibility of the rise of a third party.

ii Parties and Elections. Articles in this area focus primarily on competitive dynamics between the two parties, the reasons for their successes or failures in elections, differences in their electoral platforms, and their probable future development. On the whole, Chinese scholars have reached agreement on the rise and fall of the two parties’ political power in elections.
Some scholars note a decline in the role of political parties in American elections and a corresponding rise in the influence of interest groups. Others analyze the decisive factors in third parties’ recurrent failures in American elections. There are also scholars who examine the organizational structures of American political parties from an electoral perspective. In her study of American parties and elections, Zhang Liping finds that a core feature of America’s party system is its stable two-party system; among the many differences that divide the two parties, the most important is their psychological identities; America’s party and electoral system are integral parts of the American democratic system which fit in well with other components of the American political system, such as the constitutional framework, the separation of powers, bicameralism, and the federal system; while the American party and electoral system are largely conservative (for example, the inveterate two-party framework and the organization of the electoral college), even though reforms have also been attempted and effected (for example, the popularization of primaries, the emergence of political action committees, and reforms in election financing).

iii Electoral Politics. (1) Money and elections. Chinese scholars are well aware of the importance of money in American elections, but detailed and in-depth analyses are lacking, with the exception of Zhang Yi’s excellently written work, “Congressional Elections and Money.” Zhang explores the causes of ever rising election expenditures, the relationship between money and election results, congressional reform of election expenses and its results, the reasons for the failures of reform, and why there is only a slim possibility of solving the problem of money in elections. (2) Media/television and presidential elections. Chinese scholars have begun to realize the growing importance of the role of news media/television in American presidential elections. (3) Voter turnout. Many Chinese scholars are interested in the question

(《80年代美国民主、共和两党竞选之争》), Journal of Fudan University, No. 5, 1990, pp. 74-80.
38 Yan Xiaolu, “The Organizational Structure of America’s Two Parties from the Perspective of American Elections” (《从美国的选举看美国两党的组织结构》), Parties and Contemporary World, No. 1, 1993, pp. 34-36.
41 See the article by Zhang Yi cited in note 40.
why voter turnout is low in the United States. They normally focus on such reasons as Americans’ political apathy, complicated registration procedures for voting, and the weakness of political parties. General and midterm elections. Chinese scholars pay close attention to American general elections not merely due to their theoretical interest but also because of the practical implications of these elections. As a result, there have been a great number of studies on this topic in China. Especially with the popularization of the Internet, analyses and comments on this topic written by Chinese scholars surged, matching those by their foreign counterparts. Before 1994, Chinese scholars showed little interest in American midterm elections. Not only, however, did the 1994 mid-term election send seismic waves across American politics, it also had a great impact on American studies circles in China. From then onward, ever more Chinese people were involved in analyzing, commenting on, and predicting the results of American midterm elections, and many research institutes in China have held symposiums on the topic.

III Political Thought

Chinese scholars have conducted in-depth studies on the relationship between ideology and American foreign policy, two traditions of American political thought—liberalism and conservatism—and their expression in foreign policy, and idealism and realism. Some have also explored American Marxism, anti-Communism, and McCarthyism, feminism, the isolationist tradition in American foreign policy, and “American exceptionalism.”

Liberalism. Jiang Xinhao and Ni Feng explore liberalism in early American history, and Wang Enming has analyzed neo-liberalism. By analyzing the political thought of Thomas Paine, the “son of revolution,” and David Thoreau, the “hermit,” Jiang Xinhao highlights the
contributions of each of these two thinkers to liberal thought in the early stages of American history and their differing understanding of the relationships between state and society and freedom and equality. Ni Feng comprehensively assesses Thoreau’s political thinking, arguing that the uniqueness of his thought lies in his extraordinary emphasis on individual freedom and rights and his extreme disbelief in government. According to Ni, the idea of “peaceful revolution” and the political principle of passive resistance proposed by Thoreau are not only theoretically significant, but also carried great practical implications; the victory of the African-American civil rights movement was a case in which this principle was successfully practiced.

ii Conservatism. Over the past thirty years, Chinese scholars have done extensive research on American conservative thought and its practice and have reached the following consensus: (1) The development of American conservative thought is closely related to its political practice. The coming to office of Ronald Reagan symbolized the ascendancy of conservative over liberal thinking, and both the domestic and foreign policies of Reagan administration were influenced by conservative ideology. In a similar vein, the China policy of the conservative-supported administration of George W. Bush the Younger also bore the stamp of conservative thinking. (2) In post-Reagan conservatism, the “religious right” is a powerful force. (3) The major causes for the rise of conservative thinking were the difficulties faced by US domestic New Deal liberal policies and the cultural crisis of the 1960s and 1970s. Of course, Chinese scholars also disagree over two questions related to this topic. The first is the content of contemporary conservatism in America. According to Ding Yifan, the “neo-conservative revolution” comprises both economic conservatism and cultural conservatism (for example, anti-feminism). Yu Xiaoqiu distinguishes between neo-conservatism in its narrow sense and neo-conservatism in its general sense; the former refers to conservatives within the Democratic Party who have rejected their original New Deal liberalism and thinking, while the latter includes “neo-conservatives” who once belonged to the Democratic Party, traditional conservatives (the old right), and the “new right” coming out of the Republican Party. Jia Hao divides American conservatives into traditional conservatives, moderate conservatives, and neo-conservatives. The second question on which Chinese scholars differ is the development of contemporary American conservatism. According to some


scholars, the 1980s were a decade in which American conservative thinking registered tremendous growth, while in the 1990s its growth was arrested and even reversed, due to the coming into office of President Bill Clinton.\(^5^2\) Others disagree, saying that rather than being arrested the growth of conservatism continued in the 1990s; especially after the 1994 midterm election, even Clinton himself was swayed by conservative developments in the country and forced to take a “middle road” rather than the liberal road Democrats had traditionally favored.\(^5^3\) With the inauguration of Bush Jr. in 2001, the impact of conservatism on American domestic and foreign policies became one of the hottest topics in China, with numerous articles published on this topic.\(^5^4\)

iii Marxism and anti-Communism/McCarthyism. In his article “Marxism in America” (《马克思主义在美国》), Sun Jieyong introduces the historical development of Marxism in the United States. (Marxist influence played a role in the foundation of the American Federation of Labor in 1886, but was fatally weakened after the First and Second World Wars; labor unions have since virtually purged Marxist influences). Xing Jian presents a systematic narration of anti-communist hysteria in American history, and points out that at the height of anti-Communism during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, the US congress, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Supreme Court, and other bureaucratic agencies were all involved in anti-Communist activities.\(^5^5\) In his monograph, Liu Jianfei explores the origins and development of American anti-Communism; he believes that in addition to the ideological confrontation between capitalism and socialism, the unique American political culture and religious influences, and the errors of socialist countries in their foreign policies, were all important factors contributing to the birth and growth of anti-Communism in the United States.\(^5^6\)

iv Feminism. A latecomer in feminist studies, China entered the field around 1995. So far, most feminist research conducted in China is introductory, focusing on the thinking of particular feminist schools or scholars. Among these studies, Zhang Liping elaborates on the intellectual origins, background, and differences of the six contemporary feminist schools in America; according to her, as a theory, feminism is a conglomeration of various ideas, with different schools even contradicting one another, but, on the positive side, it not only provides scholars

\(^5^2\) See article by Ding Yifan cited in note 48 and article by Jia Hao cited in note 51.


with a new perspective or analytical tool to approach sociopolitical issues, but also offers a powerful intellectual weapon to promote human rights and women’s social position. In addition, Li Yingtao explores the influence of feminist thought on international relations.

Foreign policy ideas. Because of the close relationship between foreign policy ideas and general political thinking, it is commonly believed that idealism is the expression of liberalism in foreign policy while realism is the extension of conservatism in foreign affairs. (1) The influence of idealism and realism on American foreign policy. Wang Jisi believes that the core feature of American foreign policy ideology is the unity of opposites, or the dialectical relationship between idealism and realism; how the US government balances the contradictions between ideology and national interests depends on the American position in the global distribution of power, conflicts between the executive branch headed by the president and Congress, the president’s partisan background and intellectual disposition, and the domestic dynamics of political thinking in the United States in any given period. Other scholars also acknowledge that it is difficult to separate the American pursuit of national interests from the country’s beliefs and values. (2) The influence of “American exceptionalism” on its foreign policy traditions. According to Zhou Qi, the idea of “exceptionalism” in American political culture is the root cause of its idealism; Americans regard themselves as “the chosen people,” living in “the city upon the hill,” and therefore believe it their duty to spread the benefit of their values of liberty and democracy to the whole world; this sense of mission has its contemporary expression in the American promotion of human rights and democracy throughout the world. (3) Isolationism. In the first period (or first decade) of the last thirty years, Chinese scholars interested in American isolationism largely focused on isolationism in early American history and during the administrations of Franklin D. Roosevelt. During the second period, researchers began to distinguish and make comparisons between old and new isolationism. According to Zhang Yebai, isolationism is one of America’s policy positions as opposed to globalism or internationalism; isolationism does not mean isolating America completely from the rest of the world, nor is it equivalent to the United States paying no attention whatever to other countries’ affairs; what divides isolationism and internationalism is the difference between “global interventionism” and

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58 Li Yingtao, ed., Feminism and International Relations (《女性主义与国际关系》), Zhejiang People’s Press, 2006.
limited interventionism." In 1992, Yang Yonghong explored what was then current American isolationism and drew a distinction between new and old isolationism.

IV Interest Groups

Interest groups are an important part of American political life. Since the 1970s, the activities and influence of interest groups in the United States have been growing. Chinese scholars have upgraded their understanding of this topic and made great progress in their research. Chinese studies in this area can be divided into the following three subareas:

i Theory and practice of interest group politics. Zhang Dingzhun believes that interest group theories can be traced back to James Madison, the father of the American Constitution, who created a "neoclassical mode of administration." Other studies find that the American political system of the separation of powers and checks and balances constitutes the basis for its interest group politics and that the decline of political parties has also created important conditions favoring interest group politics. According to Li Shouqi, an open and competitive class society and continuing specializations in the social division of labor are two additional factors encouraging the development of interest group politics in the United States. For Qian Chunyuan, besides the causes of socioeconomic development and intensifying class conflicts, the continuing expansion of US governmental functions and the ongoing decentralization of congressional powers are also important reasons for the rise of interest group politics in America. According to Wang Yong, frequent elections, money politics, and the encouragement of competition among different views and interests are additional causes for the growing influence of interest group politics. Wang Shusheng believes that one important factor promoting American interest group politics can be found in the country’s stress on individualism, which entitles everyone to pursue his own interests; when this concept is extended from individuals to groups, the result is fierce competition among various interest groups. According to some, interest group politics has added one more power to America’s political system, that is, after the media, which have become the fourth branch of power, interest groups have become the fifth branch of power and exercise checks and balances on the three branches of the federal government.

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67 Wang Shusheng, “Political Action Committees’ (PACs) Organizational Control and Influence” (《政治行动委员会的组织管制及影响》), American Studies Reference, No. 7, 1989, p. 27; and also the article by
that the process of interest groups’ participation in politics is both a “process of public opinion flow” from the people to the government and the government’s “transparency process” towards the people.68 As to the role of interest groups, some scholars believe they play a positive role in American democracy,69 while others argue that interest group politics reduce the authority of the American government, exacerbate conflicts among different groups, and cause many problems in American politics.70

ii Interest group lobbying. Lobbying is an important aspect of interest groups’ political participation. Lobbying can be divided into two types: lobbying on domestic policies and lobbying on foreign policies. Lobbying on domestic policies can be divided into lobbying the Congress, lobbying the executive branch, and lobbying the Supreme Court, while lobbying on foreign policies can be divided into lobbying by foreign interest groups and lobbying by domestic interest groups. Chinese scholars have focused on the following aspects of interest group lobbying: (1) ways of lobbying.71 (2) Lobbying Congress. Lobbying Congress is the most important facet of interest groups’ lobbying activities. Chinese scholars have a bigger research interest in lobbying on foreign policies72 than in lobbying on domestic policies. In the first period of the last thirty years, some scholars studied the influence of the “China lobby” on the Truman administration’s China policy,73 and many others explored the reasons for the strength of the “Israel lobby” in American politics and its influence on American policy towards the Middle East.74 As time goes by, more and more scholars began to research the influence of American interest groups on American China policy or Sino-US relations.75 According to these scholars, major US interest groups that have a significant impact on America’s China policy include two opposing interest groups—the corporate interest group and the AFL-CIO labor organization—in
the field of economics and trade, the military industrial group and the Taiwan lobby in the field of security policy, and radical human rights groups and the religious right in human rights policy.  

(3) Interest groups and the Supreme Court. To my knowledge, only one article on this topic has appeared, written by Wang Shusheng. Wang points out that the influence of interest groups on the Supreme Court is realized not through lobbying, but through judicial procedures (lawsuits); to be specific, there are four channels through which interest groups can expect to influence the Supreme Court: acting as the plaintiff, as the prosecutor, and as “friends of the Court,” and influencing the appointment of judges.

iii Interest groups’ Political Action Committees (PACs). Apart from direct lobbying, another important way in which interest groups can influence congressmen is by making political donations to candidates in congressional elections.

V Research on the US Congress

Chinese studies of the US Congress in the past thirty years concentrate on four aspects: i Studies of Congress itself, including its operating mechanisms, congressional reform, and legislative procedures. Several monographs on these topics have appeared, including Jiang Jinsong’s History of the US Congress (《美国国会史》) and Sun Zhe’s Influencing the Future: The US Congress’s Institutional Innovations and Decision-Making Behaviors (《左右未来——美国国会的制度创新和决策行为》). In addition, a reference book, US Congressional Research Manual《美国国会研究手册》, compiled by Zhang Guang, has also been published. Jiang Jinsong’s book explores the creation and evolution of the American Congress, arguing that the Constitution influences Congress in four ways (congressional power, congressional structure, consensus principle, and open congressional records). Sun Zhe’s book introduces the US Congress and analyzes how power politics operate within it. Zhang Guang’s reference book is a guide for ordinary readers interested in the American Congress and congressmen. Ding Zhongzhu, Shen Rendao, and Yang Fangjie also elaborate on lawmaking procedures in the US Congress.

76 Monographs in this area include Wang Yong, MFN Rounds (《最惠国待遇回合》), Central Compilation and Translation Press, 1998.
Power relations between Congress and the presidency. (1) The Congressional legislative veto. According to Wu Xieying, the loss by Congress of its legislative veto power put it at a disadvantage in its competition with the president and Congress has gone to great lengths to make up for the loss.  

(2) The Line-Item Veto. Wang Shusheng elaborates on the definition and origins of the Line-Item Veto and the ongoing debate on the subject. 

(3) The War Power. It is generally believed that the source of the congressional-presidential conflict over war powers lies in the ambiguity of the Constitution on this matter. The congressional-presidential dispute over powers in foreign policy has also become the subject of many articles.

The US Congress and Sino-US relations. After the visit of Li Denghui of Taiwan to the United States in 1995, the role of the US Congress in Sino-US relations quickly became a hot research topic. Articles on this topic had indeed appeared before 1995. In “Ten Years of the US Congress and Sino-US Relations,” published in 1989, Zhang Yi pointed out the need to study congressional influences on Sino-US relations, for two reasons: firstly, the separation of powers within the American political system; and secondly, that “compared with its influence on American bilateral relations with other countries, Congress has a much greater impact on Sino-US relations.” In 1991, Zhen Yongping published an article entitled “A Tree May Prefer Calm, but the Wind Will Not Subside” (《树欲静而风不止》), analyzing the influence of Congress on American China policy after the 1989 Tiananmen Incident. In 1996, Su Ge took up the topic once more, concluding that after the normalization of diplomatic relations between America and China, Congress exercised its influence on their bilateral relations mainly through the enactment of the Taiwan Relations Act and arms sales to Taiwan; in the post-Cold War years, the influence of Congress was apparent in such issues as human rights, MFN status for China, and the Taiwan and Hong Kong problems. Undoubtedly, Chinese studies of the US Congress and Sino-US relations before the year 1995 were inadequate, a reflection of the fact that Chinese scholars had not been fully aware of the importance of the American Congress. The 1995 visit of Li Denghui to the United States threw into relief the great impact that Congress exercises upon Sino-US relations. After that, Chinese studies of the US Congress and Sino-US relations gained momentum. Especially since 2000, ever more subjects have been added to Chinese studies of the American Congress. In addition to the Taiwan issue, which continues to be a hot topic, the role of Congress in security, economic and trade, human rights, and nuclear nonproliferation issues.
have all become hot topics. Articles and monographs on them that met higher academic standards in both depth and scope mushroomed. As many as twelve monographs on the Congress, for example, have been published. Numerous articles in the press, with such titles as “Congress and Trade Policy towards China,” “Congress and American Nuclear Nonproliferation Policy,” and “Congress and American Human Rights Policy,” as well as doctoral dissertations and master’s theses, have been written on this topic.

iv The US Congress and state legislatures. Only one article has been published on this topic. Jiang Jingsong divides the history of the relations between the US Congress and state legislatures into three periods. The first period is defined by their fiscal relations under dual federalism (1789-1913). In this period, there was little contact between the two and they abided by the “fiscal constitution” to make both ends meet. The second period covers their fiscal relations under cooperative federalism (from the New Deal of the 1930s until Reagan came to power in the early 1980s). In this period, both Congress and state legislatures implemented deficit fiscal policies; Congress strengthened its fiscal powers by acquiring the right to levy income taxes and sales taxes, while state legislatures became increasingly dependent on Congress. The third period begins with Reagan’s federal reforms, which aimed at the devolution of power to the states but failed due to strong resistance from Congress.

VI The US Constitution/the Supreme Court

The Constitution is to the United States what the Bible is to Christians. Studies of the Constitution should be regarded as the key to the door of American politics. As a branch of government in the separation of powers mandated in the Constitution, the Supreme Court plays a crucial role in American social and political life. For a foreigner, however, to study the US Constitution and Supreme Court is no easy matter. The profound implications of the Constitution, the complexities in the Supreme Court’s adjudications, and the abstruse legal terms involved are all obstacles that foreign researchers must hurdle across. In addition, unlike American presidents and Congress, the US constitution and Supreme Court do not have a direct impact on China. For these reasons, few Chinese scholars do research on this topic.

The limited studies on this topic can be divided into four subareas: (1) Studies of the system of judicial review. Scholars agree that judicial review is an important method used by the Supreme Court (the judicial branch) to check and balance Congress (the legislative branch) and the presidency (the executive branch). Scholars diverge, however, in their assessment of judicial review. One perspective holds that judicial review represents a problem in the American political system because the conservative dispositions of Supreme Court judges impede progressive legislation; judicial review functions to defend the existing system and old institutions. According to the other viewpoint, rather than constituting a problem, judicial review is a good example of institutional innovation; on the surface, judicial review or “judicial tyranny” (Judicial

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87 See note 3.
Activism) seems undemocratic, but whether it is conducive to social progress depends on the composition of the nine Supreme Court justices, in other words, on their intellectual dispositions and political views.  

(2) Studies of constitutional amendments.  

(3) Constitutional problems caused by presidential executive privilege. Elaborating on the definition of executive privilege, the debate over its existence, and whether it is entitled to constitutional protection, Zhang Yi argues that executive privilege has a constitutional basis but that it is not absolute but limited; under the separation of powers, Congress has the power to investigate despite the president’s executive privilege.  

(4) Studies of the history and evolution of the Constitution and the Supreme Court.

VII Reviews/Issue Studies

Reviews refers to commentaries on and analyses of political realities, including political situations, policies, and political trends. Issue studies means case studies of certain issues in American politics. On the whole, Chinese scholars focus their commentaries and analyses on


such topics as new presidents’ domestic and foreign policies, competitions for power between the
president and Congress, party politics, and political trends.94

Issue studies revolve around the following five issues: (1) American policies on human
rights, the civil rights movement and the rights of black Americans, and US international human
rights policy. Over a dozen articles have been published on American human rights issues, the
civil rights movement, and the rights of black Americans.95 Two trends are easily discernible in
these studies: firstly, that the interest of Chinese scholars extends from the causes and process of
black Americans’ movement for civil rights to the achievements, influence and consequences of
the civil rights movement; articles by Li Daokui, Zhang Liping, Li Zhidong, and Ji Hong all
demonstrate this. The second trend is a shift in attention from American domestic human rights
problems to the US attitude towards the International Human Rights Conventions. Articles by Li

94 Jin Canrong, “The Political-Cultural Divide and the Evolution of the American Political Situation” (《政治-
文化的分裂与美国政局的演变》), American Studies, No. 1, 1995; Zhao Shenggan, “US Political and Policy
Trends after Bush Senior Took Office” (《布什入主白宫后美国的政局和之策趋勢》), Contemporary
International Relations, No. 1, 1989, pp. 26-29; Li Miao, “Political Trends in America”
(《漫谈美国国内政治动向》), American Studies Reference, No. 11, 1990, pp. 15-16; Ding Kuisong, “The
Composition and Policy Trends of the Clinton Administration” (《从克林顿政府班子看其政策走向》),
Contemporary International Relations, No. 2, 1993, pp. 15-17; Zhao Shenggan, “Relations between the New
Congress and President Clinton” (《新国会与克林顿总统的关系》), Contemporary International Relations, No. 4,
1993, pp. 6-11, and “The American Domestic Partisan Struggle after Clinton Took Office”
(《克林顿上台后美国国内的党派斗争》), World Economy Study, No. 5, 1993, pp. 56-59, 71; Bian Mudong,
“American Domestic Political Factors and the Clinton Administration’s China Policy”
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Lin and Zhou Qi fall into this group. (2) The Clinton impeachment. Articles on this topic include “The Political and Cultural Significance of the Clinton Impeachment Case” by Jin Canrong, and “American Congressional Supervision and Checks on the President: Thoughts on the Impeachment of Clinton” by Zhuo Yue and Yang Zhen. (3) The case of political donations. Sun Ru elaborates on the political donation case involving the Democratic Party in the 1996 presidential election, a case he argues had an impact not only on the ongoing reform of election financing but also on the future competition between the two political parties and the lobbying activities of foreign interest groups. (4) The 1995 budget war. Jiang Jinsong gives a detailed account of the respective positions of Congress and the president on the issue of the balanced budget, the focus of their dispute, and the nature of their conflict. (5) Religion and American politics. Wang Bo analyzes the separation of church and state in the United States.

Over the past thirty years, Chinese scholars have made indefatigable efforts to study American politics. Their endeavors have paid off in the form of fifty-six monographs and 464 articles in academic journals, through which scholars have attained in-depth understanding of American democracy, political thinking, the Congress, the presidency, the Constitution, the separation of powers, political parties, elections, interest groups, and the decision making process. Despite these achievements, problems and deficiencies still exist in this field: (1) When pursuing research, Chinese scholars have attached insufficient importance to the achievements of others, so that later researchers, for example, rarely quote or comment on previous studies of similar topics or titles that were published earlier, resulting in the repetition of poor research that cannot reach the heart of the issue. (2) Where studies of the American political system are concerned, many articles are introductory and very general, while the number of detailed and elaborate studies is very low. (3) When studying the American Congress, most attention has been directed to the power relations or the checks and balances between the Congress and the president, rather than to the operating mechanisms and processes of the Congress itself; and studies focus more on congressional influence on American foreign policy or Sino-US relations than on how congressional legislation influences America’s public policies. (4) In terms of studies of the US Constitution and Supreme Court, both the quality and quantity of research leave much room for improvement. (5) In the area of political thinking, the interest of research has been tilted towards conservatism, and inadequate attention devoted to new trends in liberalism. (6) When studying interest groups, scholars have emphasized the influence of lobbying activities by interest groups on American foreign policy, almost to the exclusion of their influence on US domestic policies. (7) Where political parties and elections are concerned, studies of the differences and similarities between the two parties remain on the traditional level of understanding; the fundamental differences between the two parties remain unanalyzed. In

election studies, a clear trend is a continuing stress on the analysis of results and a lack of research into process. (8) In issue studies, one positive development is that analyses and commentaries by Chinese scholars have become more timely and demonstrate clearer understanding of political trends, for example, the budget war and the case of political donations. The downside is that these studies of specific issues tend to obscure the ability of scholars to comprehend and view the bigger picture.

Apart from the research problems described above, China has not had a strong team studying American politics. Scholars of American politics are mostly concentrated in several research institutes and universities, such as the Institute of American Studies, CASS, the American Studies Center of Fudan University, the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, the China Institute of International Studies, Peking University, Nankai University, Shandong Normal University, and Nanjing University. One sign of this is that the number of Chinese academic conferences held on American politics has been small. During the last thirty years, the Institute of American Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences has hosted six conferences on American politics, five of which focused on American elections. The American Studies Center of Fudan University has held five conferences on American politics; again, three were on American elections and the other two on the influence of American domestic politics on Sino-US relations. Taking both together, in the past thirty years only eleven academic conferences on American politics, eight of which were devoted to elections, have been held in China, evidence that there are too few academic exchanges within those circles in China studying American politics, and even when such interchanges do take place, they focus on few topics other than American elections.

As in the other social sciences, Chinese studies of American politics have developed with a clear bias towards market-oriented and utilitarian research. Although the number of Chinese studies that “seek to analyze America’s political system from the perspective of political science” has increased, Chinese scholars must continue and upgrade their efforts if studies of American politics are to reach a higher level.

(By Zhang Liping, Institute of American Studies, CASS)

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100 When interviewed in 1988 by Yuan Xi, a journalist with Xinhua News Agency, Zi Zhongyun stated: “Chinese scholars have not yet done much in studies of the American political system. When it comes to American politics, most Chinese only think of who will be the next president, and on what platform. No Chinese have approached the American political system from the perspective of political science; and no studies have been dedicated to, for example, the formation and development of the separation of powers.”