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Exploration and Division: American Studies on Chinese History

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Abstract: Since the mid-20th century, American scholars have shown increasing interest in China, leading to the development of a series of theoretical frameworks through in-depth exploration of Chinese history. This paper systematically examines the evolution of American historiographical theories on Chinese history throughout the 20th century, emphasizing the academic discourse between Eurocentrism and the China-centered approach. It further analyzes how cultural perspectives have influenced historical interpretations, providing critical reflections for cross-cultural historical research.

Keywords: Eurocentrism; China-centered approach; American studies on Chinese history; New Qing history

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1. Introduction

Since the mid-20th century, American studies on Chinese history have gradually flourished, with successive generations of American Sinologists offering their own perspectives and insights into Chinese history. From the "impact-response" model to the "China-centered approach", it must be acknowledged that, compared to traditional Chinese historiography, these insights represent explorations of new perspectives, methods, and dimensions for understanding Chinese history, providing significant inspiration to Chinese historians. American studies on Chinese history quickly became the dominant force in overseas research on Chinese history, serving as a model for Chinese scholars to learn from, emulate, and ultimately surpass. However, these perspectives and theories proposed by American historians are not absolutely correct, and some "fallacies" arising from cultural differences between China and the West are equally worthy of critique.

2. Exploration of Chinese history research by American scholars

During the 1950s and 1960s of the 20th century, three models—the "imperialism" model, the "impact-response"

model, and the "traditional-modern" model—flourished under the framework of Western-centric theories and became the mainstream in American research on Chinese history. The "imperialism model" posited that imperialism was the primary driving force behind changes in modern Chinese history and the root cause of China's social development. Despite its popularity, the model sparked debates due to the ambiguous definition of "imperialism" and the unique semi-colonial and semi-feudal nature of Chinese society. The other two models were more prevalent. John King Fairbank was the representative figure of the "impact-response" model, while Joseph R. Levenson represented the "traditional-modern" model.

Fairbank believed that Confucian culture was "the most outstanding yet most isolated culture among great historical cultures", and as a result, Chinese society had become a "hyper-stable" society structured by Confucian hierarchical order, keeping it in a prolonged state of stagnation [1–2]. In this context, Fairbank argued that only "Western impact" could disrupt the inherent social order established by Confucianism. He viewed the history of China since the 19th century as a continuous series of Western impacts on Chinese society and the corresponding "responses" from that society.

Fairbank's theory leaned towards explaining social patterns, whereas Levenson placed greater emphasis on the "Western impact" on Chinese thought. Levenson used the terms "traditional" and "modern" to distinguish between different eras in China's long history, arguing that the periods before and after the influence of Western civilization on China in the 19th century were fundamentally different. From the 3rd century BC until the early 19th century, the political system established on Confucian principles kept China in a harmonious, balanced, and stagnant state. Confucian humanism could only create a fixed, static world order, which was incompatible with the modern society governed by scientific rationality. Fundamental changes could not arise from within China's social structure itself but had to originate from external stimuli. Therefore, Confucianism holds only historical significance. Levenson famously remarked that Confucianism "has only a way back but no way forward." Levenson believed that Western civilization could play a dual role in changing the direction of Chinese history: on the one hand, Western civilization contributed to the disintegration of traditional Chinese society; on the other hand, it provided a model for China's transition to a modern society. In short, in Levenson's "Traditional-Modern" paradigm, "Traditional" and "Modern" are absolutely opposed. For China to transition from a traditional to a modern society, it must undergo transformation under the influence of Western civilization [3].

After the 1970s, a series of domestic and international political events, such as the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal, occurred. Coupled with the United States' disadvantageous position in the competition with the Soviet Union, American historians of China began to ponder questions such as whether social development centered on Europe and the United States truly possessed universal applicability, and whether weaker nations, countries, and civilizations had the capacity to express themselves. Against this backdrop, some American scholars committed themselves to "discovering history in China", recognizing that Chinese history was primarily governed by its own developmental laws. Consequently, they argued that the impetus and relevant factors driving Chinese history forward should be sought within Chinese society itself. This new trend in studying Chinese history is commonly referred to as the "China-centered perspective" or "China-centered approach." The China-centered perspective, when applied to understanding Chinese history, "views this period of history not only as a product of external forces but also as a product of internal evolution that emerged in the final centuries of the imperial era" [4]. Paul A. Cohen is a representative figure of the China-centered perspective. Cohen advocates that "we can study modern Chinese history more from a Chinese internal perspective and less from a Western-centered viewpoint. In other words, we can at least place the starting point of this period of Chinese

history in China, rather than in the West" [4]. Cohen calls for a "sympathetic" approach, urging people to "reconstruct Chinese history based on the Chinese people's own experiences rather than Western perspectives" [4]. Building on the foundation laid by Philip A. Kuhn, since the 1970s, American scholars have achieved remarkable results in studying Chinese history through the "China-centered approach", which is prominently reflected in the following four collected works: Crisis and Prosperity in Sung China, edited by John W. Haeger; Conflict and Control in Late Imperial China, co-edited by Frederic E. Wakeman, Jr. and Carolyn Grant; The City in Late Imperial China, edited by G. William Skinner; and From Ming to Ching, co-edited by Jonathan D. Spence and John Wells [7]. These historians, starting from the "China-centered approach", have focused on conducting in-depth and specific re-examinations of Chinese history, emphasizing regional studies and "case studies" of local histories. In their studies of local history, they have placed particular emphasis on economic and social history. Through longitudinal analysis and adopting an interdisciplinary approach, they have unveiled a dynamic picture of Chinese society from within. During this research process, some scholars have recognized the vastness of China and the significant differences between its various regions. They have realized that throughout its long history, China has been in a state of dynamic development, both temporally and spatially. The macro-regional theory of G. William Skinner, the concept of social control proposed by Frederic E. Wakeman, Jr., and the cultural networks of local social power discussed by Philip A. Kuhn are all fruits borne from this research orientation.

3. Estrangement

Raymond Aron once remarked, "One of the greatest difficulties in historical understanding is determining how deeply people of one culture can understand those of another, and to what extent the use of one culture's conceptual system to translate another can ensure that the historian does not impart meanings different from those intended by those who experienced the history firsthand" [5]. The earliest models under the Western-centric paradigm, such as the "impact-response" model, the "tradition-modernity" model, and even the imperialist model, clearly fall short in this regard. However, has the study of Chinese history in the United States under the China-centered perspective resolved this issue? Actually, it has not. Under the politically correct stance of opposing "Western-centricism", some American scholars who adhere to the China-centered perspective have naturally developed a sense of intellectual and moral superiority. James Hevia once remarked, "Being born in a country and speaking its language does not mean having an innate ability to access its past" [6]. Considering his academic stance in postmodernist historiography, such an expression is already tantalizingly close to Western-centric thinking. The emergence of the "New Qing History" in the 1990s can also be seen as a reaction to Western-centricism, albeit concealed under the guise of a China-centered perspective. The "New Qing History" calls for a departure from the previous China-centered approach, which automatically centered on the Han ethnicity and relied primarily on Chinese-language historical sources. Instead, it emphasizes the distinctive Manchu elements and unique characteristics of the Qing Empire. American historians view the "New Qing History" as a significant breakthrough in the paradigm of studying China, even attributing to it a significance that surpasses the "China-centered perspective." Its leading figure, Mark Elliott, claims that the views of the "New Qing History" will inevitably "alter our fundamental conceptions of 'China' and 'the Chinese people'" [7].

However, in reality, the significance of the "New Qing History" may not be as groundbreaking as American historians claim. The Cohen-esque China-centered perspective already emphasizes "regionality", recognizing the vastness and uniqueness of different regions in China. Scholars like G. William Skinner often conduct research by

dividing China into regions such as South China and North China. Now, the emphasis on Manchu characteristics in the "New Qing History" is essentially a replication of this regional research approach. So, where is the breakthrough? The emphasis on the ethnic minority characteristics of the Qing imperial family, their "imperial identity", and the research on "anti-Sinicization" in the "New Qing History" essentially ignores the diverse yet unified Eastern characteristics of the Chinese nation. This represents a more subtle form of Western-centricism, reflecting the disconnect that American Sinologists have with Chinese history and culture.

Perhaps a deeper analysis of this disconnect can be achieved by examining specific texts. The works of American sinologist Tim Oakes, Reinventing Tunbao: Cultural Tourism and Social Change in Guizhou Province, and Historical Adornment by Cai Hanmo, illustrate that even American sinologists with exquisite historical skills, extensive knowledge, and rigorous logical structures can encounter numerous issues in their research when they lack an understanding of Chinese culture [8, 12].

In Reinventing Tunbao, Tim repeatedly emphasizes the military nature of Tunbao, viewing it as a military fortress and a "military colony of the Ming Dynasty" [8]. The term "colony" originates from the Latin word colonia, meaning "property." The ancient Greeks distinguished between apoikia and klerochia based on whether settlers retained citizenship from their homeland. Greek colonies typically referred to "a settlement far from home (apoikia)." Prior to the mid-19th century, terms like "colonialism" and "colony" were relatively neutral. However, in the latter half of the 19th century, with the rise of global nationalism, the concept of colonies became closely associated with imperialism, evolving into a term laden with "hostile connotations" that signifies the aggression of a powerful nation against weaker peoples or regions [9]. The Guizhou region has been documented since the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods: "It was the southern territory of ancient Liangzhou, annexed by Chu during the Warring States period, and later by Qin. During the Han Dynasty, it was divided among the Zangke, Jianwei, and Wuling prefectures, under the jurisdictions of Jing and Yi provinces. In the Tang Dynasty, it fell under the jurisdiction of the Qianzhong and Jingnan circuits. During the Five Dynasties period, in the fifth year of Tianfu's reign, it was attached to Chu. In the third year of the Song Dynasty's Daodao era, it was divided among the Jinghu, Jiannan East and West circuits; during the Yuanfeng era, it was reassigned to the Hubei and Kuizhou circuits. In the Yuan Dynasty, it was divided among the Huguang, Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guangxi provinces. In the early years of the Ming Dynasty's Hongwu reign, it was divided among the Yunnan, Huguang, and Sichuan administrative regions; later, a military command was established in Guizhou, overseeing eighteen garrisons and nine posts. In the eleventh year of the Yongle reign, the Xuanweisi of Guizhou was reassigned to the Guizhou administrative region" [10]. Throughout history, successive dynasties established local administrative institutions in Guizhou. While the degree of control varied, it is undeniable that Guizhou has been Chinese territory since ancient times. Therefore, the notion of it being a "military colony" is unfounded. The Tunbao settlements of the Ming Dynasty were typically associated with military garrisons (weisuo) and were widely established, not limited to border regions. The Ming History - Military Annals explicitly states: "The Ming Dynasty established its rule through military prowess, reforming the old system of the Yuan Dynasty. From the capital to the counties, military garrisons (weisuo) were established" [11]. Could it be that the Central Plains region and even the capital city were all "colonies"? This is clearly nonsensical. Tim's use of the term "colony" in defining the concept of Tunbao is incorrect and can even be considered a rather elementary mistake.

In The Ornament of History, Christopher M. B. Clark (Cai Hanmo) conducts rigorous textual archaeological research based on Chinese historical records, examining issues such as the construction of Qin Hui's image and the impact of Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism on the objective writing of Chinese history. The text discusses Zhu Xi's

criticism of Sun Di, a Song dynasty official who drafted the Northern Song Dynasty's surrender document. Zhu Xi evaluated Sun Di, stating, "During the Jingkang calamity, Emperor Qinzong was taken to the enemy camp. The invaders demanded a certain document, and Emperor Qinzong, out of necessity, ordered his court official Sun Di to write it, secretly hoping that Sun Di would refuse the order, providing an excuse. However, Sun Di did not decline and wrote it immediately, excessively degrading and flattering the invaders with exquisite and well-crafted language, as if it had been prepared beforehand. The invaders were delighted and even rewarded him with a woman captured from the Dazong City, which he did not refuse" [12]. Zhu Xi criticized Sun Di for drafting the surrender document for the Northern Song Dynasty as an act of disloyalty, meticulously composing a document that was excessively anti-Song to please the Jin invaders. The overly polished language of the surrender document proved that Sun Di must have prepared a draft beforehand. Cai Hanmo corroborates this by comparing Sun Di's 1127 resignation statement cited in the Xuanhe Record from the Compendium of the Three Dynasties' Northern Alliances with Sun Di's letter to the censor Zhu Zhuo, written thirty years after drafting the surrender document, as recorded in the Essential Chronicles Since the Jianyan Era. This evidence suggests that Sun Di accepted Emperor Qinzong's order to draft the document under duress, after the responsible officials refused, he himself refused, and Emperor Qinzong prohibited him from refusing again. Contrary to Zhu Xi's assertion that Sun Di's drafting of the surrender document was an act of disloyalty, Cai Hanmo argues that Sun Di demonstrated greater loyalty by accepting a task that his colleagues had vigorously declined. Moreover, Sun Di had little ability to influence the content and wording of the "surrender document", as the aforementioned historical records consistently attribute the determination of its content and some of its wording to the Jurchen side.

According to Cai Hanmo's research, Zhu Xi's criticism of Sun Di was unjustified. Zhu Xi's criticism, lacking historical evidence, was merely an attempt to promote his own "historical philosophy of righteousness", which emphasizes using history to expound on principles while neglecting the precise application and verification of historical materials. Cai Hanmo accuses Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism of emphasizing righteousness to the detriment of the objective tradition of Chinese historical writing since the Song Dynasty.

Is Zhu Xi's criticism of Sun Di justified? In fact, the answer can be found in the first sentence Zhu Xi said: "The enemy wanted a certain document written by me. Emperor Qinzong of Song had no choice but to issue an edict instructing his court official Sun Di to write it, secretly hoping that Sun Di would refuse the edict so that he could find a way out." As the emperor, Emperor Qinzong of Song obviously did not want to draft a document of surrender. As a prisoner, he had no choice but to issue the order, but he "secretly hoped that Sun Di would refuse the edict." He hoped that his subordinate would refuse to draft the document. Cai Hanmo's research indicates that Sun Di accepted the task that his colleagues had desperately tried to decline, demonstrating a higher level of loyalty. However, this kind of "loyalty" was precisely what Zhu Xi criticized. Zhu Xi recognized the individuals of integrity praised in traditional Chinese culture since the pre-Qin period and identified with the loyalty exemplified by figures like Li Gang, who refused to make deals with the Jin people and would not compromise or yield. Sun Di's "loyalty" was clearly out of place in this context. Criticism of Sun Di was clearly a consensus during Zhu Xi's time, as evidenced by the fact that after Sun Di returned from the north and served as an official in the Southern Song Dynasty, he was constantly impeached. Cai Hanmo's rebuttal clearly overlooks the background of traditional Chinese culture. Cai Hanmo believes that Zhu Xi was biased against Sun Di, but Cai Hanmo's view of Zhu Xi is not free from bias either.

4. Conclusion

This paper systematically reviews the theoretical evolution of American research on Chinese history since the 20th century, shifting from models such as "impact-response" and "tradition-modernity" dominated by "Western-centric" perspectives to an emphasis on China's internal dynamics known as the "China-centered view." It further critically examines research orientations such as the "New Qing History", which, while appearing localized, are still constrained by Western academic paradigms. This reveals the academic transformation and internal tensions within American Sinology studies at the theoretical level.

American historian Georg G. Iggers once said, "Science—and this includes the historical sciences—can never be reduced to an internal intellectual process of a set of isolated academic norms [13]; it always involves living people working within a certain academic and scientific institution and holding premise assumptions about the nature of reality shared by most of their contemporaries." Science always presupposes the existence of a community of scholars who are all engaged in research and various forms of communication. Therefore, it is impossible to separate a history of historiography from the various institutions and the social and intellectual contexts in which academic work is conducted" [13]. This is his observation and summary of the history, characteristics, and methods of Western historiographical research in the 20th century. In fact, American scholars have largely followed a similar approach in summarizing their own paths in Chinese studies. The exploration of Chinese history by American sinologists can be said to be highly fruitful, with a series of viewpoints proposed that have significantly expanded the horizons and fields of Chinese historical research. Prior to the introduction of these theories into China, Chinese historiographical research followed a consistent trajectory, spanning from the Spring and Autumn Period to the late Qing Dynasty, and from the Spring and Autumn Annals to the Draft History of the Qing Dynasty. The underlying spirit of these works was nothing more than "the relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, and the chastity of virtuous women." Such history is not much different from what Hegel referred to as "primitive history." During the New Culture Movement, Liang Qichao initiated a revolution in historiography through Western theories, marking the first attempt to program Chinese history using a Western model. This was undoubtedly a pioneering exploration. However, the introduction of Western theories does not mean that the history written by traditional Chinese historians is without value, nor does it imply that the ideas they expounded are necessarily outdated. To truly understand China, the Chinese people, and Chinese history, one must first understand Chinese culture. Of course, this is challenging. American historians studying Chinese history will inevitably encounter barriers, given that the East and the West are not only separated geographically by mountains and seas but also culturally by vast distances. Setting aside politics, seeking common ground while respecting differences, mutual respect, avoiding comparisons, and gaining firsthand experience may become the key to American research on Chinese history reaching new heights.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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