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### Could Revisionism Be a New Form of Eurocentrism?

When Timothy Brook wrote “Shanghai was actually rather like Delft” in the first chapter of *Vermeer’s Hat*, he probably didn’t realize that he wasn’t making a fair comparison between the two cities, but instead, evaluating Shanghai in a European standard.

Revisionists such as Brook endeavor to deny the uniqueness of Europe and its leading role during the Seventeenth century, as against the orthodox Eurocentrism view. They argue, for instance, that the most developed region in the East – Jiang Nan, was at a similar level to West Europe before the industrial revolution. However, it’s actually worth reflecting whether revisionism itself was to some extent built on a Eurocentric foundation and aims at serving a Eurocentric purpose.

To challenge an existing theory, one common approach is to look for contradictions in it; that is, take its assumptions and follow its logic until the theory turns out to contradict with a new evidence or possibly with itself. Then, the dissenter can claim that the original assumption or logic is problematic, thus disproving the theory. In the meantime, however, the dissenter is also likely to fall into the framework of the theory and subconsciously admit some of its preconditions, since it’s much easier to show a theory is problematic

within its original framework than to build a brand-new framework and thoroughly overturn the old one.

Just as its name, “revisionism” exists to revise the orthodox Eurocentric theory; hence, revisionism somehow still relied on the basic framework of Eurocentrism – the orthodox value system. When revisionists praised the initiative of merchants in Fujian and Jingdezhen, they just assumed that liberal capitalism should be taken universally in the path to modernization, neglecting the exploitation it has caused in the next hundreds of years. When revisionists compliment Wen Zhenheng’s creation of Superfluous Things, they are also following the Eurocentrism theory and view consumerism as a sign of modernity, giving little care to the virtue of thrift in Chinese culture. When revisionists glorify the military achievement of Koxinga, they take military revolution as positive for granted, ignoring the misery that guns and cannons have brought to the world. In general, when revisionists try to prove how developed and modern a non-European country or region is, most likely they will still inherit the European concept of development and modernization, while overlooking other possible paths for human progress.

Another reason why people can get caught in the Eurocentric value system is that today’s world still features basically the same system. It’s hard to deny that modernization today is almost equivalent to “westernization.” The western modes of development have been set as examples everywhere, from the reform of Peter the Great in Russia to the Meiji restoration in Japan, from China’s new culture movement to Singapore’s switch of official language, let alone those colonized regions that are forced to westernize. Now that “westernization” has become a byword of modernization, the former’s value system also defines that of the latter. In other words, the definition of “good” and “bad” in the

modernization process depends on how close it is to the European's experience of development. To make matters worse, western schools and media have been dominating the discourse power for long both in academic and non-academic fields, allowing the western value system to constantly infiltrate into every corner of the world. Other scholars, under such circumstances, seem to have no choice but to accept this value system, so that their voice can be heard by the world, even though this means they are further solidifying this monopolistic system.

To clarify, here I'm not trying to overthrow the Western value system or to completely deny its contribution to human progress. In the previous examples, the non-Western countries did more or less benefit from referring to Western development experiences. The key problem here is that the revisionists, who claim to be opposed to Eurocentrism, often just take this orthodox value system for granted when benchmarking the other parts of the world, and their conclusion, to some extent, could even become more "Eurocentric" than the Eurocentrism itself.

One typical type of Eurocentric argument is that West Europe could dominate the world because of its unique advantages in race, religion, military, political system, social structure, etc. Revisionists, on the contrary, deny the uniqueness of Europe in the Seventeenth Century by emphasizing the similarity between European and non-European regions, just like Brook's comparison between Shanghai and Delft. At the same time, however, these arguments are actually denying the unique qualities of the non-European world as well, since they're exactly showing how "European" those regions were in the early modern world. Indeed, there were some rich families in Shanghai that liked to purchase paintings, there existed a well-trained army equipped with cannons and

warships in South-east China, and there developed a culture of smoking among the upper class of China, which is similar to the situation in Europe. Nevertheless, they are by no means the key properties that featured China at that time. Even though some characteristics such as feudalism and superstition may not be the best ingredient for modernization, it is the uniqueness within these characteristics that identifies a civilization, which is what revisionists often ignore. While Eurocentrism puts West Europe at the center of the world map, revisionism somehow tends to mark the entire world map as West Europe.

From a more radical point of view, revisionism can even be regarded as an elaborate and up-to-date version of Eurocentrism, which still serves a Eurocentric purpose in essence. For a long time, Eurocentric supporters have been criticizing revisionists' arguments as "only for political correctness." But one question to be asked here is "whose political correctness" it is. It's certainly not African's or South American's, nor is it East Asian's. Instead, it's still the Westerner's political correctness, which ultimately serves for Westerner's political interest. Westerners have been studying China for hundreds of years. Since medieval times, European churchmen have been learning Chinese culture for the purpose of preaching their religion. When the age of global trade came, European merchants started to research on the Chinese market to make a fortune from it. On the eve of the opium war, European politicians had investigated the military power of the Qing Dynasty, so that they could launch the wars of aggression with full confidence. Today, revisionist schools, which mainly consist of western scholars, are studying the history of Asian development. Do they all intend to help Asia develop better in the future? Probably not.

Thanks to the decolonization and equal-right movements in the recent decades, the non-Western race and culture have been attached with greater importance and power (at least it seems that way). Eurocentrism, under such a social background, becomes inappropriate and hence needs revising, as is what revisionists are working on. But revision is not a revolution; the former cannot change the essence of Eurocentrism – an ideology for the benefits of Westerners. During the colonization age, Eurocentrism prevailed because it provided an excuse for Europeans' global conquering – the so called “spreading civilization.” Via the propaganda of Europeans' superior position, the orthodox theory helped to consolidate the Europeans' rule over the indigenous peoples. Yet, when the colonized regions gained independence one after another and as their new generations started to blame Europe for the invasion – both militarily and culturally, it's time for the revisionism to speak out in the defense of Europe. By stressing a balance of power between Europe and non-Europe in the early modern world, revisionism reduces the severity of Europeans' intrusion during that period. With regard to the French in “Vermeer's Hat,” for example, their image as invaders seems to get weakened when the author underlines their compromise with the local tribes. Similarly, culture invasions would appear to be no big deal in the revisionism model, given the intrinsic similarities between the cultures, as well as the spontaneity and bidirectionality of global cultural exchange (as is shown in the case of Matteo Ricci). More generally, if we only attribute Europe's dominance to luck (e.g. the devastation of the European-Borne diseases) or the impact of nature, we are also pardoning the Europeans' subjective intent to exploit the world.

Again, to clarify, this is not to accuse any revisionist scholar of purposely serving western political interest. An academic sector should embrace liberty of thoughts, and the revisionists' attempt to challenge Eurocentrism is worthy of recognition. However, due to its various limitations, some revisionism theory could get interpreted as an elaborate robe which can cover the essence of the orthodox theories and suit today's social environment. This conclusion may also explain why revisionism gained popularity rapidly in the west during the recent decades, while the history textbooks in Asia still insist on an orthodox Eurocentric world view.

Actually, there's no need for people today in Asia, Africa, or South America to refuse the fact that West Europe once led the world. Nor should they seethe with the seemingly wonderful era that revisionists demonstrate. The greatness of a nation does not depend on the glories of its past, but rests with how its people build their future with what they've inherited from the past. In other words, history ought to be taken as lessons rather than something to brag about. Respect the strong, and one can learn from it; admit the weakness, and one may overcome it. Remembering the history of national humiliation promotes unceasing progress, while avoiding an unpleasant past merely shows one's lack of confidence and courage.

Objectivity lies in diversity rather than monopoly. Ideally, every nation should be able to decide how its history gets told; that is to say, there ought to be no absolute or universal standard in historical comments. Yet, this wish has been quite unrealistic till now due to the Westerners' monopoly on discourse. Luckily, today's world is witnessing a fall of the orthodox Eurocentric view, and its "revised form" hasn't yet gained a firm foothold. Also, as the Eurocentric age has passed away and a multi-polar world structure is

forming, people are gradually accepting the diversification of historical perspectives. Thus, historians of the non-western countries, at this critical moment, have got a precious opportunity to tell history in their preferred way, which may be built upon their own standard, value system, and national characteristics. Hopefully, when the countries that were once backward eventually find their distinct paths to modernization, those debates on Eurocentrism will become meaningless except in a pure academic setting. Probably in the not-too-distant future, some historians will write, “Delft was actually rather like Shanghai.”

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